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## THE ROLE OF MEDIA: CONTRIBUTIONS OF NGOS/CSOS TO DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT

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### **Importance of Media to Democracy**

One of the prerequisites of the transition towards democracy was a free and independent media system. It has been argued that one cannot be without the other. In other words, there can be no democracy where the media is shackled, and where there is democracy, the media cannot be shackled.

### **Constitutional Mandate**

Ghana's constitutional framers were keenly aware of the important link between the media and the political, social and economic transformations that would be required in a democratic dispensation. Chapter 12 of the Fourth Republican Constitution is devoted to ensuring that the media are unencumbered in the discharge of their duties and helped to live up to their responsibilities.

### **Media Pluralism in Ghana**

Ghana took a giant step towards democratization with repeal of Newspaper Licensing Law in 1991. The media environment was further improved by the liberalisation of airwaves in 1996. The result is more than 130 FM radio and at least five free-on air TV stations operating currently. There are hundreds of print media, newspapers and magazines on the market, more than 60 of which are fairly regular. Majority of these media are privately owned.

### **Why Media Pluralism is Important**

- Media are the pre-eminent institution of the public space/sphere where public discourse can freely take place.
- Pluralism brings about:
  - Divergent voices,
  - Opportunities for different perspectives
  - Opportunities to hear marginalized voices
  - Makes it difficult to suppress dissenting voices.
- Without strong, free, viable media, the country's developmental and democratic aspirations will be deficient because,
- In a democracy, they are one of few institutions outside government that have structural rights;
- They therefore function as surrogates for the citizenry.

## **Media's Varied Roles**

Media play a central role in democracies mainly because they are one of the key institutions that can challenge government. They make abuse of governmental power less likely if they do their job well. Strong constitutional and legal protections on freedom of expression enhance journalists' ability to act as "intermediaries between the public and those in power.

## **Inspector General Role**

One of the most important roles ascribed to media is that of serving as Inspector General to the entire political system in order to provide the necessary public criticism to ensure some degree of political integrity among the power holders. In new democracies, this role calls for a balance between providing objective and free criticism, and a dynamic role of inspiring change and influencing the minds of people.

## **Information Providers**

In modern society, the media provide the easiest and most efficient means by which information flows between governments and their citizens, and between different strata and sectors of society. Information is a prerequisite for good governance; it supplies the oxygen that energizes citizens to participate more meaningfully in the processes of governance. Information helps civil society and the media to better monitor the actions of government.

## **Media as Pillars of Integrity**

In anti-corruption language free and independent media are included in the list of key conditions and institutions that are important in the fight against corruption. The media are considered one of eight Pillars of Accountability and watchdogs over the public purse.

## **Media as Watchdogs**

The media act as watchdogs by:

- informing the public of what government is doing
- holding government accountability to people by exposing wrongdoings in government,
- bringing to light and making transparent government dealings
- ensuring that justice is done
- ensuring that people's social needs are met by government.

## **Promoting transparency and accountability**

Even in difficult information environment, media have been relatively successful in obtaining relevant information on issues and policies and have put it out in the public domain for debate. Increased media scrutiny over transactions such as the privatization of state industries and services, the contracting of loans and agreements has helped citizens keep a more watchful eye on government and increased their ability to challenge government policies they consider detrimental to their interest. Regular media coverage of key arms of government such as the Executive, Parliament and Judiciary, contributes to culture of transparency. Timely information alert the public about impending bills making it possible to lobby. Media leaks have also forced government to be more candid with the public about some of their more sensitive actions.

## **Inducing responsiveness from government**

Media monitor power and act as instruments of discipline with the capacity to get response from government on issues that are raised in the public domain. Government ministers and spokespersons on radio stations feel compelled to respond to policy questions or allegations of wrongdoing. Phone-in programs make it possible for citizens to have direct interactive access to public officials. In some instances combined media and civil society pressure has forced government to rethink policies.

## **Providing useful information**

There is a multiplicity of channels to be used for public service announcements.

On a daily basis, the media publish or broadcast extremely useful information on everyday happenings, on lost and found persons or items of value, on people in need of philanthropy, on security alerts, on street closings and openings, traffic flashpoints, and new laws and policies that require immediate compliance.

## **Promoting participatory citizenry**

Citizens can now discuss political and social issues at a time and in a space of their own choosing without being tele-guided by government. Journalism provides a regular forum for public criticism and comment and helps citizens exercise their speech rights without fear of reprisals. Perhaps media's greatest achievement is the manner in which they have enabled people to participate civically by energizing the public sphere, especially through radio call-in programs, talk shows, and vox pops, etc.

By providing show formats that allow for citizens participation, the media are helping to establish better, more empowering lines of communication between politicians and citizens. The increased use of indigenous languages in the public sphere and in the discussion of national affairs has fostered the growth of Ghanaian language and helped to preserve, and revive languages whose use in the media was on the decline.

Increased indigenous language use means more unlettered citizens can participate in public sphere. Often conflicts come from people feeling marginalized and misunderstood.

By giving voice to the marginalized the media help them vent their frustrations and in so doing prevent the kind of blow-up that comes from groups feeling that they have no stake in a nation.

Relationship between radio and newspapers has also contributed to more information flow and consequently increased citizens' participation in governance. In a country where illiteracy rates are still relatively high (50%) and the cost of print media unaffordable to many working citizens, radio has extended newspaper accessibility by reporting news from newspapers and making them the subject of radio discussion.

## **Promoting Democratic Culture**

Media have been central to helping to ensure credible elections. Ghana has had four successful presidential and parliamentary elections (1992, 1996, 2000 and 2004) during which the media have demonstrated their contribution to fostering multi-party democracy. Media have played a crucial role in elections by:

- Gathering and disseminating information about candidates and parties,

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- Questioning and criticizing political forces, including incumbents and contenders,
- Creating opportunities for citizens, civil society, candidates and political parties to express themselves freely within the media.

### **Promoting Democratic Culture and Institution Building**

Media is expected to champion democratic state reform and deepen democratic culture. Democracy is entrenched where political and civil liberties are ensured; there is rule of law and a respect for human rights by the state and by individuals. Media can monitor, highlight and promote these values and in many instances they have done so.

Media can boost civic education and explain difficult policy decisions to a skeptical citizenry. This is best done if the media forge alliances with various civil society, NGO and activist groups who work in areas that strengthen democracy, development and human rights. Media can advocate for the improvements in the quality of governance of modern and traditional kingdoms.

### **Promoting Democratic Culture and Reform**

Media can help make sure public pronouncements are translated into public actions. Media can champion legal and constitutional reform, and also champion reforms in their own institution. Media can help create a new government and new rules for political, social, economic life in a country.

### **Threats to media's effectiveness as pillars of good governance**

Having discussed all the positive roles that the media can play, I would be remiss in not ending by discussing the challenges that media face in playing the multiplicity of roles outlined. These include:

#### **External Threats**

- Proprietorial interference
- Lack of independence from faction
- Disabling laws and regulations
- Excessive damages in law suits
- Fear of recrimination
- Hounding by security agencies
- Stone walling
- Lack of adequate information
- Journalists limited in their access to information
- Inaccessibility to public and official information
- Subjection of public officials to oaths of secrecy.
- Official Secrets Acts used as cover to deny information..
- Fear of reprisals for giving out public information or reporting wrong-doing to media.
- Whistleblowers bills enacted but Freedom of Information is still caught in limbo

#### **Internal Threats**

- Low capacity to gather information professionally, investigate and report
- Lack of professionalism



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- Weak ethics; un-enforced codes of conduct
- Corrupt practices
- Excessive politicization and sensationalism
- Public interest not always high priority

All the above threats notwithstanding, media plays a very pivotal role in Ghana's democracy and the sustenance of good governance.

Thank you.