

The Media and Social Mobilization for Development: A Study of *Abiye* Safe Motherhood Programme in Ondo State, 2009-2017

Lijoka, Akinboyede

*Department of Political Science and International Studies,
Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Kaduna State, Nigeria*

Abstract

The media is an important stakeholder in policy implementation that results in development. This paper x-rays the mobilization role of the media in the implementation of the *Abiye* Safe Motherhood Programme in Ondo State under the administration of Olusegun Mimiko between 2009 and 2017. The paper largely focuses on the media outfits that are situated in the state such as *The Hope* newspaper, Ondo State Radio-vision Corporation (OSRC), etc. It relies on the qualitative approach for its methodology, using data obtained from the primary source of an in-depth interview, and secondary source from newspapers, textbooks, journal articles, etc. Data collected were content-analyzed. The theory of developmental journalism was adopted. The results showed that the (relative) success of the policy which had attracted both national and international accolades was due not only to the political will of the state government to rid the state of infant and maternal mortality but also to the collaborative work of the media. Based on the findings, the study recommends the sustainability of the policy by the administration of Oluwarotimi Akeredolu. The media should continually be at the forefront of sensitization and mobilization of people towards government policies. Also, the paper suggests the use of mother tongues in media sensitization of members of the public, and the need to expand the scope of the media to the rural areas for adequate information and easy comprehension of government programmes in the state. The paper concludes that with improved funding and resuscitation of OSRC, it is hoped that the public and privately-owned media would live up to expectation in mobilizing the people towards effective implementation of government programmes.

Keywords: *Abiye, Healthcare, Media, Programme, Public Policy.*

Corresponding Author: **Lijoka, Akinboyede**

Background to the Study

The role of the media in effective mobilization, campaigns and advocacy are central to the implementation of any government policy. In Nigeria, with the establishment of *Iwe Iroyin*, a bi-lingual newspaper, by Rev. Townsend (1859) at Abeokuta, the media became a crucial instrument of social mobilization. Before independence, the Nigerian media played the role of “espousing nationalism and awaking racial consciousness in the context of colonial rule” (Agbaje and Adedayo, 2010: 94). It offered political awareness and provided platforms to criticize colonial policies and provided policy alternatives. Shortly before and after independence, the media became a mouthpiece of political warlords; they were bifurcated along with the interests and convictions of their owners or paymasters who were largely First Republic politicians. Thus, the mobilization role of the media at the time was to promote the political visibility of their sponsors – who were mainly politicians.

With its flourishing in the Second Republic (1979-1983), one would have thought that the media would stand tall and provide the much-needed mobilization of people towards the political process. On the contrary, media practice was “coloured by partisanship as media outfits were pre-occupied with the political success of their sponsors” (Agbaje and Adedayo, 2010: 94). However, the almost thirty years of military rule saw a new twist in media activities. Even in the face of oppression, repression and persecution, the media was at the heart of the struggle to re-democratize the country. Amidst jailing and killing of journalists as well as shutting down „irritant“ media stations, the media stood against the military rule till 1999, when the country got back to the path of democracy. Interestingly, the return of the country to democratic rule in 1999 again opened up the public space for virile media practice. Additionally, the influx of social media has significantly broadened and enlivened the work of journalism. And with the passage of the Freedom of Information Bill into law in 2011, journalists now have unfettered access to information.

Regardless of what cynics might say about the influence of the media on attitudes and behaviour, researchers and mass communication experts believe that although the media may not be all-powerful, they do have effects on published or tabled national issues, including policy implementation. These effects are the products of their activities or functions which include social mobilization of the citizenry by promoting such issues or programmes, the frequency of publication, as well as the type of coverage and direction given to stories (Ojobor, 2002).

This paper attempts to x-ray the mobilization role of the media in the *Abiye* Safe Motherhood Programme of Ondo State Government, Nigeria since 2009. The paper is divided into five sections. Section one introduces the study. The second section focuses on conceptual clarifications and theoretical framework. The third section presents an overview of the *Abiye* Safe Motherhood Programme in Ondo State. The fourth section assesses the mobilization role of the media in the implementation of the *Abiye* Programme, while the fifth section gives a summary of findings, draws the conclusion and makes recommendations.

Clarification of Concepts and Theoretical Framework Healthcare

Healthcare services are an important component of governance in any political society. According to Alma Ata Declaration of 1978, health is “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”. Healthcare encompasses the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of disease, injury, illness and other physical and mental challenges in persons. Medical practitioners such as dentistry, midwifery-obstetrics, medicine, nursing, pharmacy, etc., deliver healthcare. The delivery of healthcare could be through primary, secondary and tertiary care. The World Health Organization (WHO) remarks that a well-functioning healthcare system requires a robust financing mechanism; a well-trained and adequately-paid workforce; reliable information on which base decisions and policies; well-maintained facilities and logistics to deliver quality medicines and technologies. For this paper, healthcare is the diagnosis, prevention and treatment of illness or diseases through the services of medical and allied health professionals.

Media

Donald and Jim (1986: 24) see the media as “radio, television, newspapers, magazines and all other news-gathering and disseminating agencies that deploy modern technology to communicate simultaneously to a large number of heterogeneous audiences located many miles apart”. In Okunna's (1999: 42) view, the mass media presents “the messages communicated through a mass medium to a large number of people”. But for Folarin (1998: 14), the media or mass communication “is that form of communication whose delivery system permits the flow of information to large, diverse and scattered audiences which may also be far removed from the message source..., at the mass media (radio, television, newspaper, magazine) establishment, the message is mediated by trained intermediaries referred to as gatekeepers (writers, sub-editors, editors, producers or even reporters)”. For this paper, the media stands for the sources of information and news such as newspapers, magazines, radio, television, etc., that reaches and influence large numbers of people simultaneously. The media is classified as publicly-owned and privately-owned, and it is divided into print (newspapers, magazines, etc.), electronic (radio, television, etc.) and increasingly digital (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) media.

Public Policy

It is axiomatic that the government is by no means malevolent, that is, governmental actions ought to create and promote values that are for the common good. The primary means of creating and promoting common good is through public policy. The term “public policy” has been variously defined. We shall attempt to examine a few of them. For Anderson (1979: 3), public policy is a “purposive course of action followed by an actor or set of actors in dealing with a problem or matter of concern”. In his own, Dye (2001: 2) defines it “as whatever governments choose to do or not to do”. In the same vein, Olugbenga (2013: 1) sees it as “a well-thought-out statement and coordinated plan of action by the government to address and solve identified problems facing members of the public”. In the analysis of Vig and Kraft (2000) on constitutional democracies, public policy is a means of fulfilling electoral promises or campaign manifestoes by political officeholders. Drawing from the above definitions, it is believed that public policy is a means through which government impacts the lives of the people. For this paper, public policy is a set of actions undertaken by the government which is intended to solve certain or identified problems and challenges facing the people.

Theoretical Framework: Developmental Journalism Theory

The theory of developmental journalism posits that the relevance and usefulness of the media is a function of the extent to which it can contribute to the social-economic and political development of the society that it serves. This perspective essentially implies that the media should position itself as a tool for national development by striving to promote social, political and economic goals of the society. McBride (1981) writes that developmental journalism is an integral part of development planning and an instrument for ensuring policy success. He holds that the media is a powerful tool or resource for visible development. For Linden (1989), the media takes the front role in the execution of development programmes using its capacity to disseminate messages rapidly over wide areas to promote social change.

However, the theory has its shortcomings. For example, the theory significantly underplays the impact of ownership and the role of government regulatory bodies on media reportage of political events and activities. Media organizations that are owned by political opponents of the incumbent governments may not be supportive of public programmes and policies for various reasons. Also, incumbent governments may clamp down on private media organizations if they promote ideas or programmes not supported by the government. This denies such organizations to promote programmes that may otherwise be beneficial to members of the public or capable of promoting development.

Despite its criticisms, the theory is useful as it saliently acknowledges the socialization and mobilization roles of the media to educate and inform the general public about political events around them and the need to support the government in the implementation of its policies. In this connection, whatever gains the Mimiko-led administration recorded in healthcare development through the *Abiye* Programme, could not have been possible without the corroborative support of the media.

The *Abiye* Safe Motherhood Programme in Ondo State

Ondo State, created on 3rd February 1976, is one of the six states in Southwestern Nigeria. Until 1st October 1996, it originally included Ekiti State. It has a population projection of 4, 021,000, as of 2011 (NPC, 2012). The state with its headquarters located in Akure has eighteen local government areas. It took the path of democracy following the disengagement of the military from politics of Nigeria in 1999. The state is currently under the leadership of Governor Oluwarotimi Akeredolu but has since 1999 been ruled by Adebayo Adefarati (1999-2003), Olusegun Agagu (2003-2009), and Olusegun Mimiko (2009-2017) respectively. This paper focuses on the *Abiye* Safe Motherhood Programme of the Olusegun Mimiko administration as a case study.

Olusegun Mimiko, a medical doctor, who hails from Ondo town in the Central Senatorial District of Ondo State, assumed office as Governor of the state on February 24, 2009, and was re-elected on October 20, 2012. On October 2, 2014, he officially decamped to the People's Democratic Party (PDP) from the Labour Party.

In 2008 before the administration came on board, the state, according to the National Demographic and Health Survey (DHS, 2008), had the highest maternal mortality rate in the Southwest region of the country. Worried by this situation, on the assumption of office as Governor of Ondo State, Mimiko embarked on the aggressive repositioning of the state's health sector. One of the giant strides of the administration was the initiation of a home-grown safe motherhood programme called *Abiye*.

The philosophy of the project is the belief of the state government in grooming healthy people as the major engine of productivity and development (Olugbenga, 2013). On a practical note, the project was designed to provide free health services for pregnant mothers and under age 5 children with the view to combating infant and maternal mortality. It was envisaged that the policy would help to meet the Millennium Development Goals 4 (reduce child mortality) and 5 (improve maternal health) targets (*The Guardian*, February 25, 2016).

To have a practicable and implementable policy agenda, the administration embarked on in-depth interviews of residents of the state and found out that a handful number of women were given birth in the state health facilities; whilst majority preferred to patronize the Traditional Birth Attendants (TBAs) called *Agbebis*. But when complications arose in the course of childbirth, the *Agbebis* lack the skills to respond swiftly, and this resulted in infant and maternal mortality. Consequently, the *Abiye* project aimed at addressing the following “three delays” that predisposed pregnant women and their children to death:

1. Delays in seeking care when complications arise
2. Delays in reaching care when eventually, decisions are taken to seek care; and
3. Delays in accessing care on arrival at a healthcare facility (Ogundipe, 2011).

In a bid to tackle the above delays, at the official kick-off of *Abiye* Projects and *Kaadi Igbe Ayo* (residency card) in Ifedore Local Government Area of the state, the then Commissioner for Health, Adeola Adegbenro, remarked:

The state government has promised to upgrade all basic health centres in the state and staff them with qualified doctors, midwives and community health extension workers who will serve as health rangers in those communities. The programme is a practical demonstration of the determination and commitment of the present administration to develop facilities at many locations in the 18 local government areas in the state to reduce child and maternal morbidity and mortality. (The Hope, Nov. 4-10, 2009: 5).

On a remarkable note, the state government embarked on salary increment of its health workers for maximum productivity. In a headline of *The Hope* newspaper captioned: *Improved Salary for Health Workers*, the then Chairman of Ondo State Hospitals Management Board, Tunde Ogunsusi, affirmed that:

“With the improved package and recruitment of additional staff, a high level of productivity is being expected by the state government. He said the board will soon constitute monitory teams who will ensure the board's rules and regulations among health workers. He stated that the Mother and Child Satellite Hospitals

established in the state by the state government will not only decongest the existing hospitals and reduce infant and maternal mortality rate but also offer services in counselling family planning and obstetrics and gynaecological health care (The Hope, October 7-13, 2009)."

To promote close monitor of pregnant women throughout their pregnancies, cell phones were gifted to them in the early stage of *Abiye* to enable them to receive appointment reminders via SMS and regular updates. Similarly, Health Rangers were recruited to help provide surveillance of pregnant women through cell phones that were procured for them by the state government. Equally, a fleet of ambulances was stationed in strategic places in the state to assist in transporting expectant mothers to the health facilities. On referral cases, two Mother and Child Hospitals were established, one in the state capital, Akure, and the other in Ondo town.

Furthermore, the state government committed 12 per cent of its overall budget to health. In 2014, the administration evolved a new programme called *Agbebiye* (Safe Birth Attendant, SBA), a partnership with *Agbebi*, Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs) and Mission Home Birth Attendants (MHBAs) to consolidate on the achievements of *Abiye* project. The programme was meant to engender safe delivery and to redefine the role of *Agbebis* on maternal health. According to the former Special Assistant to Governor Mimiko and later Commissioner for Health, Dayo Adeyanju, "the SBAs are offered token whenever they bring a mother to a health facility for delivery. They were equally trained on alternative source of income" (*The Guardian*, February 25, 2016).

The Mobilization Role of the Media in the Implementation of the *Abiye* Programme

The mobilization role of the media in the implementation of public policy for development is summed up in the report submitted by the Political Bureau of Babangida's administration in 1987: "the mass media should play a vital role in the collection, dissemination and promotion of ideas in mobilizing opinion and enlightening the people on their rights, duties and obligations" (cited in Ojete, 2008: 69-70).

While acknowledging the mobilization role of the media in policy implementation for development, Governor Mimiko, at an investiture to honour him by the men of the pen profession (journalists) as Grand Patron of Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ) Ondo State Chapter, "solicited their collaboration in the area of dissemination of information about his government's policies and programmes designed for the good of the people of the state" (*The Hope*, Dec. 16-22, 2009: 2).

In the implementation of the *Abiye* Programme, the mobilization role of the media included such publications (in the newspapers, magazines, etc.), visual and voice broadcasts (in the televisions, radios, etc.) and other media networks, aimed at sensitizing and educating pregnant women on the benefit of the project; to ginger, encourage and motivate them to register their names and deliver their babies at any nearest public health facility.

In a bid to elicit public support and popular participation in the *Abiye* Programme, the state government, on the assumption of office in 2009, embarked on vigorous mobilization and sensitization campaigns via the state-owned media stations – OSRC (radio and television) and the *Hope* newspaper – as well as other media stations like Lagos Television (LTV), Channels TV, etc. on the need for pregnant women to patronize any nearest public health facility. For example, when the programme was inaugurated in Ondo West Local Government, few weeks after its flag off in Ifedore, *The Hope* (Dec. 2-8, 2009: 16) went to town with a caption: *Abiye: Expectant Mothers Urged to Register in Ondo West*. It reads: “Mimiko expressed the state government displeasure with the rate of infant and maternal mortality in the state. He, however, advised pregnant women to register with the health centre nearest to their homes”. Similarly, when the state government flagged off the registration of people for National Health Insurance

Scheme (NHIS) at Oka Akoko, *The Hope*, in a caption tagged: *Mimiko Enrolls 6 LGs for NHIS*, wrote in part:

The governor pointed out that under the scheme, pregnant women and children under age 5 years would enjoy free health services. And the governor, however, advised all pregnant women in the local governments to register their names in maternity health centres chosen for the implementation of the scheme (The Hope, Nov. 11-17, 2009: 17). At the occasion, the then Commissioner for Health of Ondo State, Adeola Adegbemiro, was quoted to have said that: The project will provide quality and accessible health care services to the targeted members of the public where they live and work. He appreciated the federal government for including Ondo State in the project and advised the people of the area to come out en-mass to register for the programme, adding that the programme was designed with a focus on Primary Health Care (PHC) (The Hope, Nov. 4-10, 2009: 2).

It is important to stress that Ondo State Ministry of Information played a key and leading role in the area of publicizing various laudable programmes of the state government. According to former Deputy Director, Electronic and News Media Department, Ministry of Information, Ondo State:

The purpose of the Ministry of Information is to promote and project the image of the state government. We attempted to key into the policies of government by sensitizing and mobilizing the people for their support. One of such policies was Abiye Safe Motherhood programme, which attracted accolades from both national and international communities. To start with, we went out to interview people about their impressions about government facilities and thereby gave feedback to the government. The ministry employed the services of the OSRC, Lagos television and Channels TV to create awareness on government policies and equally got feedback. Given the fact that the policy was a homegrown one, students from the United States left the shore of their country for Ondo State to study the programme. The United Nations acknowledged the efforts of the state government on healthcare and therefore set the Abiye Programme as a policy benchmark for Africa on infant and maternal mortality reduction (personal interview, July 10, 2019).

An appraisal of the impact of the project in the eight years of Mimiko's administration confirms a significant improvement in the state's maternal health. This informs Adeyanju's submission that "with the collaboration with *Agbebis* the state government has been able to reduce MMR by 84.9 per cent that is from 745 per 100,000 live births in 2009 to 112 per 100,000 live births in 2016" (*The Guardian*, February 25, 2016).

However, it was observed that the first four years of the administration witnessed virtually free prenatal and postnatal cares. But that could not be said of the second four years, as a beneficiary of the programme informs:

When I gave birth to my twin baby boys at a General Hospital, Ode-Irele, Irele Local Government Area of the state, nine years ago, I did not pay a dime and all the needed drugs for me and my children were given to me. But things changed five years ago when I gave birth to another set of twins (a boy and a girl) at the same hospital. The only pad was gifted to me, the doctor asked me to buy the drugs he prescribed at the pharmacy (personal interview, July 29, 2019).

Furthermore, even though the project was designed for pregnant women and children, rural dwellers were not adequately informed about it due to illiteracy and poverty on one hand, and poor signal of electronic media (radio and television), in the other hand. A nurse at a General Hospital Igbekebo, Ese-Odo Local Government Area, informed that a lot was needed to be done in the area of media advocacy and sensitization of pregnant women and *Agbebis* in the state, particularly in the rural areas. She narrated a pathetic story of a pregnant woman to the researcher:

An expectant mother used to patronize an *Agbebi* in Igbekebo before she was referred to our hospital. Having examined her, we realized that her unborn baby was dead. We then induced her to deliver the remains of the baby. In the end, we found out that she was carrying two baby boys. When she was briefed of losing her twin baby boys, she started weeping profusely (personal interview, June 12, 2019).

Even though the project was not as successful as the media would want us to believe, it had largely reduced infant and maternal mortality in the state. And that the achievements recorded in the policy did not go unnoticed as it attracted global supports and accolades. For example, Former World Bank Africa Region Vice President, Obi Ezekwesili, at a point in time remarked that "Ondo State had provided a role model and benchmark for the African continent in tackling infant and maternal mortality rate" (*Saturday Magazine*, July 9, 2016). The state also got Award of Excellence in healthcare delivery by the Pharmaceutical Society of Nigeria, and several others.

Findings

To be sure, *Abiye* Programme would not have been successful without the corroborative support of the media. However, it was observed that the media outfits which partnered with the state government in the course of implementing the project, overblown it to elicit global recognition and commendation for the government; the media under-reported negative

things about the programme. Similarly, after securing the second term in office in 2012, there was no remarkable commitment to the programme by the state government. Drugs like syrups which were earlier given to nursing mothers for free were no longer available in the public hospitals; ambulances were no longer available to transport pregnant mothers to the hospitals, as they had become rickety without repair; and there was the poor state of rural roads.

Again, ownership is a critical factor in media practice. It was observed that only the state-owned media outfits and those patronized by the state government were at the forefront of mobilizing the people towards the programme; whilst other outfits downplayed the programme for reasons best known to them. Similarly, there was a low level of media presence in the remote areas.

Given the fact that policy instability – a practice in which an incumbent government jettisons the programmes or policies of his/her predecessor – is a common play in Nigeria, it was also observed that the new government in Ondo State led by Akeredolu is not favourably disposed to the project. Today, there is nothing like free health services for pregnant mothers and under age 5 children in Ondo State. Five thousand naira and twenty-five thousand naira are now charged for normal delivery and Cesarean Section delivery respectively.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Interestingly, *Abiye* Programme had largely reduced infant and maternal mortality in Ondo State. But there was poor sensitization in the hinterland. Therefore, sensitization and mobilization should involve the use of mother-tongues by the media, especially community radios like Eki FM in Ondo Town, and the need to expand the waves of OSRC to the rural areas. Also, all the media outfits in the state and its environs should attempt to report all activities leading to the continuity of the programme.

Instructively, given the fact that the baton of leadership in the state had been changed from the People's Democratic Party, PDP (formerly Labour Party, LP) to All Progressives Congress (APC), in February 2017, the media, more than never before, has to involve in investigative journalism – by providing surveillance on public health facilities and gets information from health practitioners and pregnant mothers, and whatever lapses discovered, they should be brought to the doorsteps of government via news reportage. It is on this note that the media can set an agenda for the new administration. The agenda-setting implies that the media pre-determines what issues are regarded as important at a given time in a given society (Folarin, 2005: 95-96). The sustainability of the policy lies in the prominence given to it by the media. It is hoped that the policy will not be discarded and that the successes recorded will not be a tale in the state.

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