

COMMUNIQUE OF THE STAKEHOLDERS REVIEW MEETING ON MEDIA AND THE 2015 ELECTIONS HELD AT PROTEA HOTEL, IKEJA LAGOS ON JUNE 9th AND 10th, 2015.

Preamble

A two-day stakeholders review meeting on Media and the 2015 elections was held at the Protea hotel, Ikeja Lagos on June 9th and 10th, 2015. The meeting was convened to review the performance of the media in the 2015 electoral process with the objective of documenting lessons learnt, best practices and challenges to provide unique points of entry for future interventions. The meeting was also to contribute to setting an agenda for the consolidation of democracy in Nigeria. The meeting was convened by the Democratic Governance for Development (DGDII) project of the UNDP with support from the European Union

Participation

The meeting was attended by media and electoral stakeholders from the Independent Electoral Commission(INEC), Media Unions, media regulatory agencies; media support groups; academic institutions; media professionals; non-governmental organizations (NGOs); advocates of development communication; gender advocates; international development partners and other stakeholders. The meeting also heard presentations and discussions by electoral and media experts in plenary sessions over the two day period. Among the topics covered were: the Media, Electoral Management System and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria; Voter Education and Media Coverage of the 2015 Elections: an Assessment, the Nigerian Media Code of Election Coverage and other legal/professional frameworks; Capacity Building Initiatives: Relevance and Results; Online and Social Media; what value added to the integrity of the elections and the Media, Elections and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria: Roadmap towards 2019.

OBSERVATIONS

The participants observed as follows:

INEC

- The Use of ICT (card readers and PVCs) significantly contributed to the integrity of the 2015 elections. However, the absence of a robust synergy between INEC and the security agencies, inadequate communication with citizens at the grass roots and gaps in knowledge of electoral processes and roles by some security agents and INEC ad hoc staff deployed for elections impeded citizen participation in the elections at several locations.

Voter Education

- The timelines for voter education was not strictly adhered to, resulting in late commencement of voter education efforts. Although there were voter education outreaches at the LGAs, much of the voter education efforts were concentrated in the urban centres, to the detriment of Nigerians in the rural areas.

Political Parties

- Political parties neglected the task of voters' education to other stakeholders and the political campaigning was mostly not issue based, focusing on personalities.
- Only the major political parties had robust access to the media.

Media

- Although there was a reduction, some media practitioners were attacked in the course of their duties during the elections.
- Some media gate keeping and editorial judgment manifested a lack of understanding of electoral processes.
- Sources for election related stories are skewed in favour of men and the major political parties, to the detriment of other political parties, women, youth and people with disabilities.
- Some media personnel who worked as trainers in the capacity development initiatives in the lead up to the 2015 elections did not walk the talk in their practice.

- Social media can have a huge impact on events offline as manifested during the 2015 elections. Additionally, social media provided global access to election related data and contributed to the integrity of the elections with attendant positive perceptions of Nigeria's electoral process. However, there was a prevalence of dangerous speech on social media and the use and spread of unverified information.
- A high level of impunity and deliberate contravention of legal frameworks and ethical codes was noted in the conduct of some media houses.
- The current sanctions, fines and penalties for contravention of codes and ethics of the profession are inadequate.
- Poor remuneration in the media resulted in a lot of unethical practices with ownership structure affecting professionalism, promoting commercially inclined media with little allegiance to the public interest.

Academia

- There is a dearth of study materials and texts on political communication in the curriculum of mass communication in Nigeria.
- Lacks of funds impede research on key issues like media influence, voters' education, and electoral behaviour and the impact of capacity development initiatives on the performance of media practitioners. However, lessons learnt from the trainings were incorporated into the teaching of Mass Communication students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The participants therefore recommended as follows:

INEC

- Government should sustain the gains of the 2015 elections by ensuring the appointment of core electoral staff and the next leadership is based on proven competence and integrity.
- Key INEC technical staff should be retained to provide institutional memory.
- INEC should continually update the Voter Register and PVC production/distribution to avoid 11th hour rush.

- Electoral reform efforts should include the strengthening of INEC's operational control over security during elections, including the use of surveillance cameras in collation centres.
- INEC should digitize the collation of election results and improve on its logistics management and contingency planning ahead of future elections.
- INEC should decentralize and improve all its information and communication structures for better outreach.

Media

- Publicly funded broadcasters should be established in a manner which effectively guarantees their independence from political or other partisan influences, especially in editorial matters.
- All state owned broadcasting stations should be removed from the direct control of the Minister of Information (at the Federal level) or the Commissioners for Information (at the State level).
- Existing laws establishing state-owned media should be abrogated and replaced with new laws which reflect the principles of broadcasting independence.
- Media practitioners should develop their capacity to understand existing processes and procedures relating to elections to enable improved reportage of the electoral process.
- The Media should engage in investigative reportage of parties/candidates/issues to support informed decision making by the electorate.
- The Media should provide equal access to all political parties/candidates as well as underrepresented groups including women, youth and people with disabilities.
- Media practitioners should advocate for a Code of Conduct for Media Owners which would include mechanisms to ensure that media owners do not interfere in editorial matters.
- The media should collectively address the challenge of ownership in the editorial content of privately owned media outlets, especially in the light of the current environment where a large number of media organizations are owned by politicians or business persons with clear political interests and affiliations.
- Regulatory authorities should properly define and monitor the structure, ownership and purpose of community radios.

- Legal redress should be encouraged for any infractions by offline, online and social media.
- Civil society should join efforts to counter hate speech online and on social media.

Voter Education

- Better funding of voter education efforts should be secured by all stakeholders.
- Voter education should begin early; deliberate efforts should be made to target Nigerians in the rural areas.
- INEC, political parties/candidates, security agencies, CSOs and other relevant institutions should be collectively involved in voters' education.

Regulators

- Media regulatory institutions should review extant codes to provide stiffer penalties and sanctions for violations of regulations.
- It is recommended that an Independent Fund for media development be set up.

Academia

- The Academia should conduct researches on media and elections and develop educational material on political communication.

Political Parties

- Political parties should run issue- based campaigns, effectively contribute to voters' education and develop media engagement skills/strategies in order to reach the grassroots.
- Political parties should make deliberate efforts to include underrepresented groups as party candidates