

Corruption Reporting in the Eyes of the Suffering Masses in Nigeria

So, what are members of the suffering masses saying in respect of the very scanty reflection of their views in corruption reporting by the media? It is considered a big question to be answered by them because who gets to speak is also about who gets to decide what is done about corruption. Hence the paradox if those who most suffer the effects of corruption exercise little or no discursive power over its elimination, going by what Prof Sam Oyovbaire revealed in the lecture we have already referenced. Oyovbaire's point has been aggravated by the hostility of the power elite to the little leverage the social media has given to ordinary people in terms of voice. All manner of laws are being cooked up to block such openings in the name of fighting 'fake news', 'hate speeches' and similar stuff. This report is, therefore, at the heart of the strategy of amplifying 'voices from below'. So, it is important asking the question of what the masses say on what do about systematic exclusion from corruption reporting, its impact and how it might be corrected?



A recent reminder about the poverty menace and the security implications, logically

Answers to the above questions form the subject matter of this Special Report whose correct title should have been "Echoing Professor Oyovbaire's Bombshell in Nigeria's Corruption Conundrum, (2)" because it is a continuation of **Echoing Professor Oyovbaire's Bombshell in Nigeria's Corruption Conundrum, (1)**. It is only being published under the current title because it is a better capture of the content in the wisdom of the editorial team that superintended synthesising this round of the interviews involved. It is the synthesis of views of randomly but carefully picked members of the 'voices from below' in equally selected poverty ridden slums in and around Abuja, Nigeria's Federal Capital Territory. Taken as microcosm of Nigeria, Abuja and its slum dwellers are assumed to embody the broadest sentiments of the suffering masses across Nigeria.

It bears repeating that the sampling process here has little or no bearing with criteria of positivist representativity. In terms of selection of settlements for this round of interviews, there is Mpape 1 & Mpape 2. Mpape in Abuja is a sprawling but oppressive and disgusting slum that only a very myopic ruling class would allow its existence, seeing as it is a breeding ground for conditions of possibility for all imaginable and even unimaginable outcomes. *Intervention's* interviewer tells us that the Mpape 1 and Mpape 2 distinction is strictly her own convenient creation.

Chika/Tungwa Maggi is the third settlement while the fourth is Mararaba, another sprawling slum whose diversity in whatever sense of the word is mind boggling.

The old problem lingers in terms of resistance among the masses to being interviewed at all, to speaking on tape and for pictures to be taken. While some do not give a damn and actually want it, it is out rightly prohibited by others who cannot overcome the suspicion that danger may lurk in granting such interviews. For quite a number of others, a translator has to be found. In a few cases, the interview ended abruptly as the interviewee would go no further. It all speaks to the practical problems of operationalising inclusivity for those suffering spatial, class, gender and social services exclusion in Nigerian capitalism.

The employed/unemployed divide in the sixteen interviewees in this report is four unemployed, (which is what we write down for all those who said "I am not doing anything") while 12 are employed, in the sense that they are doing something at least. The distribution of those who are employed is as follows: bricklayer -1; housewife – 2; car washer – 1; petty trader – 3; tailor – 1; cattle rearer – 1; shoe maker – 1; hair stylist – 1 and trader – 1. There was no consensus on what distinguishes a trader from a petty trader. The gender distribution is five females and eleven males. The coverage in terms of states is Adamawa, Benue, Niger, Plateau, Delta, Nasarawa, Anambra, Imo, Osun, Enugu, Ogun and Kebbi.

The first question is whether they think their voices are heard in corruption reporting. Reading through the interview shows confusion that was difficult to be resolved as to whether it was the interviewers who posed the question wrongly or it was the interviewees who didn't hear the question well. Seven were responding to a completely different thing. The issue was not about whether the government is allowing the masses to air their views but about whether the media as a constitutionally anointed caretaker of democracy is including the masses in doing that, specifically in reporting corruption.

In spite of this confusion, there are very clear standpoints. Simon Amase is a graduate of the Benue State Polytechnic, Ugbokolo. His interviewer describes him as a 38 year old Christian from Konshisha Local Government Area of Benue State who has decided to better his life in buying and selling food stuff since jobs are hard to come by. His response to the question, for instance is "Yes, our voices do not always count because journalists and those in authority usually feel we are less important".



Standing by the car of her interviewer is Mr Simon Amase, the Benue born, Abuja based graduate trader

Similarly, Calistus Moghalu, the 27 year old unemployed graduate has a different argument. Although he agrees that the media is selective when it comes to who is reported, his thesis is that the voices of the masses are actually being reported but the wrong voices. He speaks: the voices and opinions about trivial and entertainment matters is what one is more likely to see or watch. A lot of the times, issues of great importance are being ignored and the media feign ignorance. So, I will say our voices are being heard but not the right opinions”.

The third such distinct standpoint is certainly that of Hamma Maliki who spoke through a translator. He captures a different concern altogether but did speak to the question. He subscribes to the “our voices are not heard in the media” but he is more worried about the representation of cattle rearers such as himself “as bad people”. Asked how he knows about this, he produced an argument that this would not be an unfair translation of: “I can understand a little English and I have common sense. Besides, there are people here, (pointing at a shop close by owned by a Muslim). I stay there a lot because he has Television. I watch movies and also see news there. So, I understand better than people think I do. Besides, we have radio and we know anything that happen in the country through not always”.

One puzzle is the casual ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ type of responses that characterise the answer to this question from the women. This applies to almost all of them except Esther Okonkwo, the petty trader on the Mararaba list who added that “nobody cares about the masses”. Could this suggest a gender dimension to operationalising inclusivity arising from too deep an internalization of domination?

No less puzzling but distinct is the sort of reply typified by Emmanuel Egbede, the bricklayer in Mpape 1 who says he is not aware of exclusion of ‘voices from below’ in corruption reporting because he is “tired of anything that concerns Nigeria”. And this is to the extent that “a lot of activities in this country, I don’t bother reading or watching”. Trouble in Form Six!

There is a categorical voice that though doesn’t watch television much “but the times I do, I hear views and voices of the masses...So, I feel the masses are represented in the media”. She concludes that there is pretty good amount of information reported about the masses rather than a deliberate exclusion of the voices of the masses.

Interestingly, she is from the same Mpape 1. Hers is no less an interesting submission to the extent that she problematises Oyovbaire's bombshell because it is, indeed, true there are radio programmes dedicated to the masses through instant listenership response systems. While it is true that most GSM users in Nigeria either have no data most of the time and/or no electricity to keep their handsets functional at all times, voices of the masses can be heard on a number of radio programmes. It points to whether Oyovbaire's bombshell is not due to reframing even as solid as it stands.

What the above synthesis points to is that even as small as the number of respondents, it is not possible to speak of a univocal conclusion to the question. Rather, there are different standpoints as has been summarised above. And each one counts for the purpose of policy, irrespective of the percentage of respondents who stood on such position. Over to policy makers on the issue of whether or not the masses are excluded from corruption reporting in Nigeria.

There is this question whose importance has been diminished by the multivocal nature of the responses to the first question. It wanted to know why respondents think the masses are excluded or not excluded. Since there is no one answer to that, we can only note some of the sharpest responses by those who believe the masses are excluded. It may not be a fair summary but, in terms of deeper meaning, the totality of the submissions can be reduced to three:

- The media is afraid of the government
- It is because "they" want us to continue suffering
- They cannot control "us" if "our" voices are heard

The deeper meaning of the key direction of these sort of answers takes us back to the correctness of the position that the masses are not intellectually or mentally poor but only poor in material terms.

The second broad question was on what sort of things they would most likely have been saying on corruption if they were always being interviewed and if they think such views would have mattered.



Mrs Amaka Christian during the interview

To get a feel of the tension, contradictions and yet central sentiment in the minds of the respondents, we take the option of summing up the key trends of thought in the responses to this question. That is, we are keener in showing all the meanderings, angles and complications involved rather than achieving a synthesis. This proceeds in no order. And it is not all the respondents, some of whom are named while others are not. That was the agreement.

Peter George Hope would have been talking about embezzlement and lack of effective implementation of budgets. His position is that his views would have mattered

Blessing Bawa Joseph would have been saying to the media that people are suffering, that the leaders do not care about people dying of hunger and even the “small minimum wage” increase is not being paid. Her voice, she says, would have mattered because “a problem that is constantly in your face will get solved”. She believes that if more people get the chance to speak, people in government will start listening.

Rotimi Kareem Hamza would have been hammering “on the need for the leaders to pity us and build good roads, schools and hospitals” although she doesn’t believe her voice will change anything. “If you like, talk from today till tomorrow, nothing will change unless you have money”. That is her conclusion.

Florence Ugwu will talk about the need for government to better the lots of the masses, how disgraceful it is for leaders to travel abroad for holidays and for their health concerns “when the country is in trouble situation”. It will matter if we continue to talk is her own position.

Suleiman Usman will continue to challenge the leaders to act better and stop looting funds meant for the benefit of the masses. He will emphasise how people are suffering and cannot feed three times a day while someone may have stolen billions s/he may not use. There is nothing recorded for Usman on the question of whether his voice would matter.

Aisha Amusa doesn’t believe she can say anything new. “It gets worse everyday”, she says, because, in her own words, nobody to check each other in power and because they are, in her view, all in government for selfish interests.

On the contrary, **Edoka James** will talk no end on how what he calls the unrepentant ways of our leaders have crippled the economy; how the prices of goods and services have increased. But he will also attack the masses because market men and women, to use his phrase, have already increased prices even when workers have not started to collect the minimum wage. As for the power of his voice, he says his voice has it. We shouldn’t keep quiet, he says because “our opinion makes them uneasy”.



Mohammed Ali, Yoghurt seller is among those who describes himself as 'doing something at least'. He talks to another interviewer

Esther Okonkwo would be emphatic on governments fixing the road because, as a trader, that is her concern as far as moving her stuff from one space to another. She believes in the power of her voice following how a petition about a road project worked wonders as the government got the road done in no time.

Hamma Maliki says he does not have a lot of information about corruption but he knows that leaders steal funds meant for the community. He thinks they can do better in government. He argues that speaking up would matter but, again, he veers off to relating that to the image of cattle rearers. For him, speaking up will also show that "we are not monsters".

Simon Amase would be a strong advocate of death sentence for corrupt political office holders because, as he says, "sometimes, to get there, we need stringent laws to back us up". Secondly, he will advocate doing away with this or that religion and "man know man" so that employment and admission would no longer be based on "who you know" or who your godfather is but strictly on merit.

Esther Baba would privilege severe punishment for perpetrators of corruption if she gets media speaking opportunity. She believes in the power of the voices of the people.

For **Nancy Dimfa**, the necessity to curb corruption menace for national transformation and development and taking the fight against corruption to the grass root would be the two key issues to speak about. She puts the question of the power of her voice on what her views may be and how consistent they are.

Calistus Moghalu would start by speaking on why the various projects politicians embark upon should be monitored by independent group of individuals, selected discreetly and with no affiliations with the government. These groups will be charged with the responsibility of keeping tabs on all the projects, providing detailed report on how the funds were spent, if the projects were executed excellently or not, who spent the funds and when. In doing so, a lot of politicians as well as their personal construction companies will be identified and held accountable if they don't perform well. "If we follow up with committees on several projects across Nigeria and shame those in charge, I

believe a lot of corrupt activities will reduce” Although he believes the average Nigerian is equally corrupt, he also believes there are honest individuals in the country, people who he says have shown exemplary leadership and have influenced their communities positively. Moghalu believes his voice would matter if they are given the platform to air their views but to do that anonymously. In that case, he believes that a lot would have changed. He cites the incident involving the Senator from Adamawa who was caught on video assaulting a lady in a store somewhere in Abuja. That singular act, in his argument, showed that if we share instances of where politicians abuse their power, our voices will be heard and, slowly but surely, they will face the full weight of the law.

There is the last question about what can be done to more systematically include voices from below in reporting corruption in Nigeria. That will form the third and concluding part of this series.