

Deployment of Solutions Journalism to Promote Rural Development in North-Central Nigeria



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Abstract

This paper explores the potential of Solutions Journalism in overcoming prevailing challenges and contributing to rural development by spotlighting successful initiatives and bridging the urban-rural divide. Grounded in the Agenda Setting Theory, this research employs qualitative methods, specifically a Focus Group Discussion (FGDs) study design, to gather stakeholder perspectives on deploying Solutions Journalism in North-Central Nigeria. The population of the study consists of participants who meet defined inclusion criteria: Journalists who cover rural development issues and have knowledge or experience with solutions-oriented reporting, rural residents in regions of North Central Nigeria, development workers involved in rural development initiatives within the same region, and lecturers of Journalism and Media studies. Considering the diversity and distribution of these groups, determining the exact number of eligible individuals within the study area proves to be impractical. Therefore, the investigation concentrated on identifying individuals whose experiences and professional engagement closely correspond with the aims of the study. A total of 30 participants were selected through the purposive sampling technique: 13 journalists, 8 development workers, 5 rural dwellers, and 4 lecturers. The selection prioritized significance and thorough understanding rather than statistical representation. Through the focus group discussion, the research explores key objectives, such as assessing the level of rural development in North Central Nigeria, ascertaining the impact of solutions journalism in rural development, and examining the challenges and opportunities of solutions journalism in

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North Central Nigeria. The findings revealed the challenges rural areas face, such as poverty, unemployment, deplorable road networks, lack of improved farming techniques to enhance farm work and improve agricultural produce. The study also revealed the challenges journalists face when reporting rural development issues, including lack of training in reporting solutions-oriented news, funding constraints, security risks, and language and cultural barriers, hindering effective reporting on rural issues, intimidation by politicians, bribery (brown envelope), media organization ownership influence, yellow journalism, poor road infrastructure limiting access to rural areas, poor network coverage, insufficient transportation for journalists, media illiteracy among rural residents, and a lack of reliable data. Despite these barriers, the research points out the opportunities Solutions Journalism presents which ranges from helping the voices of rural communities to be heard, holding leaders accountable, and encouraging development initiatives among those who live in rural areas, by emphasizing stories of resilience and ingenuity by members of rural communities, solutions journalism can change public opinion about rural areas, improve policy advocacy, and support sustainable development projects. The study recommends that policymakers prioritize funding and support for Solutions Journalism, ensure journalists receive adequate training on solutions-oriented reporting, and the use of equipment, ensure the protection of journalists, and advocate for ethical communication practices, transparency, and accountability to foster development and build public trust.

Keywords: *Solutions Journalism, Rural, Development, North-Central, Agenda-Setting*

Introduction

Journalism has been marked by notable changes in its approach and principles over the years. Traditionally, Journalists adhered to a code of conduct that gave precedence to the societal impact of news stories and the presentation of a balanced view (Lowes & Ferguson, 2021). During this time, Journalists were not explicitly responsible for addressing the issues they uncovered, and there was no inherent motivation for them to take on that responsibility (Sarikakis & Winter, 2021). When print media was criticized during the era of "yellow journalism", the focal point was on refining journalism practices rather than completely revolutionizing the profession, emphasizing the implementation of established principles (Kuznetsova, 2015; Campbell, 2019).

In contrast, the emergence of Solutions Journalism represents a noteworthy shift from traditional reporting practices. Solutions Journalism goes beyond the typical role of Journalism, which essentially highlights problems, but instead focuses on finding and presenting solutions to societal challenges. This approach emphasises innovative and constructive approaches that communities and individuals take to address pressing issues (Murthy, 2015). Unlike the historical pattern of Journalism, Solutions Journalism critically emphasises examining and showcasing potential solutions alongside identified problems.

Solutions Journalism originated in a more recent journalistic approach that transcends conventional, conflict-oriented reporting. While civic journalism, in the 1990s, promoted a more participatory role for journalism in democratic processes, peace journalism from the 1960s and 1970s urged reporters to investigate non-violent solutions to conflicts and to study their underlying causes. Journalists started to understand by the late 1990s the limits of merely highlighting issues and the possibility of public disengagement and "news fatigue" from this strategy.

As noted by Dū (2024) and Krüger (2017), Solutions Journalism, also called Constructive Journalism, is not a new approach but a return to what journalism used to be decades ago, an era of proposing solutions to longstanding and pressing societal problems. The scholars further stated that this approach originated from the viewpoint expressed in the Journalist's Creed (1914) by Walter Williams (University of Missouri School of Journalism, USA) and later in 1948 by the Good News Bulletin news service in New York.

In 2010, the launch of the 'Fixes' column in the New York by David Bornstein and Tina Rosenberg marked a turning point in the development of Solutions Journalism. By 2013 in US, they established the Solutions Journalism Network (SJN) (Bro, 2023).

Solutions Journalism Network (SJN) has a presence in Nigeria, known as Solutions Journalism Africa Initiative (SJAI), launched in 2021 to expand the practice of Solutions Journalism across the continent. This initiative receives support from Nigeria Health Watch, which helps in the implementation of the program and training of Journalists on Solutions Journalism (Nigeria Health Watch, 2024).

In recent years, as Esser and Umbricht (2014) explained, the role of journalism has evolved significantly, extending beyond traditional news reporting to encompass advocacy, community engagement, and problem-solving. This transformation in the media landscape highlights the need for innovative approaches to address the complex issues impeding rural development. Traditional journalism often points out the wrong and harmful issues in society, including the challenges in rural areas, often leading to a narrative of helplessness and despair. However, the deployment of Solutions Journalism represents a strategic shift by prioritising constructive and innovative approaches to solving problems (Mahamed *et al.*, 2018; Thanh *et al.*, 2023). This shift adds a new dimension to journalism, contributing to an impactful portrayal of societal issues. Journalists can be pivotal in inspiring positive change, fostering a sense of action among local communities, and encouraging collaboration among various stakeholders by focusing on success stories and best practices (Curry *et al.*, 2014; McIntyre, 2019; Lough & McIntyre, 2021).

The deployment of Solutions Journalism to promote rural development in North Central Nigeria is rooted in the recognition that rural areas face many challenges that hinder their progress and well-being. While the region is endowed with rich diversity in cultures and agricultural landscapes, it is also faced with challenges that call for targeted interventions to guarantee inclusive and sustainable rural development (Badewa & Dinbabo, 2023; Yunusa & Owoyemi, 2025). As an essential component of sustainable societal progress, rural development contributes to economic growth and addresses issues related to poverty alleviation and improved quality of life (Sobczyk, 2014).

In North Central Nigeria, where challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, limited access to education and healthcare, agricultural constraints, and socioeconomic disparities persist, the deployment of Solutions Journalism becomes imperative. This approach aligns with the need to empower local communities and stakeholders, encouraging them to actively participate in their development processes.

The deployment of Solutions Journalism requires a collaborative effort by media organizations, researchers, and policymakers, working together to create an environment conducive to innovation and sustainable progress. In essence, the goal is to further encourage a media-driven approach that amplifies the voices of rural communities, inspires collective action, and accelerates the pace of rural development. By fostering a

culture of solution-oriented reporting, this study aspires to contribute to the broader discourse on effective strategies for promoting sustainable development in rural areas, with potential application in North Central Nigeria. This research set out to investigate how Solutions Journalism can be used to promote development in North Central Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

Rural areas in developing countries such as Nigeria, being an agrarian society and characterized by diverse agro-ecological conditions, make the production of a wide range of agricultural products possible. Therefore, agriculture is one of the most important areas of the economy (Orji et al., 2017). However, these rural regions in Nigeria grapple with significant socioeconomic disparities, characterised by the prevalence of subsistence farming, absence of basic human needs, and underdevelopment (Aku & Hassan, 2021; Abdulrazak *et al.*, 2016). Olorunfemi (2016) adds that a lack of essential amenities, healthcare facilities, and limited access to education are also challenges these areas face.

The region is also faced with social unrest, which hinders its progress in development (Mbah *et al.*, 2021); the escalation of tensions and violence between farmers and herders has reached alarming levels, mainly characterised by brutal and barbaric acts perpetrated by the herders including the destruction of hundreds of lives and properties worth millions of naira in states like Nasarawa, Benue, Taraba, Plateau, Kogi, and Kaduna state (Anyansi, 2021).

These social conflicts between these two groups (farmers and herders), who were mutual neighbours in the past, have equally led to the outright destruction of farms, farm produce, loss of innocent children and women, loss of livestock, and displacement of many from their homes, for instance, the Agatu massacre in Benue state, where over 70% of the farmers in the community had to run away, leaving their community and farms due to the attacks from herders (Mbah et al., 2021). As documented by Ajibo *et al.* (2018, p.157), "the death toll in Benue State exceeded 1,878 between 2014 and 2016". The International Organisation for Migration (2019) recorded a startling displacement of 238,102 people as a result of the hostilities in North Central Nigeria.

The mutual neighbourhood was based on the symbolic relationship of farmers' crops (remnants) providing feeds to nomads' animals and animals supplying excreta as manure for crop production (Ejim & Gani, 2023). Interestingly, this implies that crop production and animal husbandry, being the two main branches of agriculture, depend on each other both positively and negatively since animals can destroy crops and the environment (land, water, air) if not adequately controlled, thus constituting the origin of conflicts between farmers and herders (Osolafia, 2021; Cee-Henning & Harvey, 2014). Similarly, Adama *et al.* (2022) opined that a security infrastructure deficit triggers tension between sedentary farmers and pastoral herders, thereby endangering food production.

As noted by Raheem and Bako (2014), most rural dwellers in Nasarawa state are involved in as well as rely on farming and other agricultural activities to earn a living. A study by Yusuf *et al.* (2015) revealed that 10 villages in Nasarawa state, namely Shuwa, Jigwada, Keffi Shanu, Ginda, Campani, Tilla, Sabon Gari, Keffi, Yelwa Sabo, and Gauta, have 44% poor farmers whose regular income per month is N2,455.40. Farmers exposed to various kinds of risk are over 94% of the farmers affected, and 47.4% of farmers are with the highest poverty incidence.

Climate change, as seen in desertification, drought, and inadequate rainfall, has affected the availability of grasses for animals in the far north. Such scarcity further negatively impacts pastoralists' social status and economic demand as the population increases. This triggers aggressive competition for scarce resources, stirring up conflicts with local farmers (Okoli & Atelhe, 2014). According to Oluyemi *et al.* (2017), the traditional media, which is mostly focused on the urban areas, either overlooked or described these issues ineffectively, which makes the dichotomy that exists in the socioeconomic life of privileged and underprivileged populations. Similarly, Parks (2019) asserts that the traditional style of journalism focuses on negative reports that paint and present a situation of hopelessness amongst the people, but also leads to such a state in the real sense. This is particularly challenging in regions where there is a continuous underreporting of initiatives and interventions taken, which can in turn hinder development efforts (Kediehor & Ekwok, 2019). Which, therefore, makes it important to examine how Solutions Journalism can be used to promote rural development as well as offer a route to tackle the issues affecting underserved rural communities and bridge the socioeconomic gap.

Research Objectives

The research-specific objectives are to:

1. Assess the current state of rural development in North Central Nigeria.
2. Ascertain the impact of solutions journalism on rural development in North Central Nigeria.
3. Examine the challenges and opportunities of journalism in promoting rural development in North Central Nigeria.

Literature Review

Solutions Journalism

Solutions journalism is a method of news reporting that emphasizes not just the issues but also the possible solutions and positive actions being taken. Its goal is to offer a more comprehensive and proactive view of intricate matters by showcasing successful measures, inventive tactics, and effective remedies (Aitamurto & Varma, 2018). This type of journalism, as described by Ireton and Posetti (2018), involves comprehensive reporting on societal responses to challenges, highlighting promising methods, and conducting thorough assessments of their impact. In addition, Lowes and McIntyre (2018) and Usey (2022) defined Solutions Journalism as a journalistic approach that rigorously reports on responses to social problems, focusing on investigating and understanding the effectiveness of the solutions implemented to address these issues (Rosenberg, 2014).

In the words of Fink and Schudson (2014, p. 5), Solutions Journalism is a more comprehensive kind of journalism that has also been called "interpretative reporting, depth reporting, long-form journalism, explanatory reporting, and analytical reporting". It is thought to be in line with the contextual function of journalism.

Furthermore, McIntyre (2015, p. 9) opined that Solutions Journalism can also be situated within a similar but more specific category called constructive journalism, which "involves applying positive psychology techniques to news work to create more productive, engaging stories while holding to journalism's core functions". McIntyre

(2015) also describes constructive journalism as a "continuum," rather than a dichotomy. This shift in focus moves away from contrasting reporting styles (such as peace vs. conflict, oppressor vs. oppressed) towards a focus on comprehensive investigative journalism for societal betterment.

Rural Development

The term "rural," often defined simply as the opposite of urban, is a concept that undergoes debate and interpretation. It typically refers to areas outside of cities, characterized by open spaces. While it shares similarities with terms like "country" or "countryside," it is predominantly used in the realm of public policy. Moreover, "rural" carries connotations beyond mere geographical location, often associated with agriculture, farming, and inhabitants residing outside urban centers. (Atkinson, 2017). While the term 'Development' is not purely an economic phenomenon but rather a multi-dimensional process involving reorganization and reorientation of the entire economic and social system (Mohamed & Lamichhane, 2020).

In essence, rural development involves enhancing the quality of life and economic prosperity of inhabitants in rural regions by supplying infrastructure, creating employment opportunities, delivering social services, and promoting environmental sustainability (Atkinson, 2017). It also refers to improving the economic, social, and environmental conditions of rural areas to enhance the well-being and livelihoods of rural populations. It involves various interventions to reduce poverty, improve infrastructure, promote agricultural productivity, and enhance access to essential services such as healthcare, education, and clean water. (Requena, 2015).

Furthermore, rural development is an approach towards creating sustainable and inclusive growth in rural communities by addressing their key challenges and leveraging development opportunities. By providing targeted initiatives and support, rural development can unlock the potential of rural economies, improve living standards, and promote overall well-being for all individuals residing in these areas. (Klemens *et al*, 2013)

Rural development is not simply about the merits of processes and projects themselves; the possibility for success profoundly weighs on awareness of context. Rural business is unique – it may not just be about making money for those who seek to make a living in rural spaces.

In the words of Steiner and Atterton (2015, p. 43), rural life can invoke a sense of community, of working together, and social change. These efforts exhibit holistic traits, such as "sustaining local services, maintaining the local population, reducing negative climate impacts of long car journeys through providing local services and employment, and sustaining local community events, social capital and a strong sense of local identity".

North Central Nigeria

North Central Nigeria often referred to as the Middle Belt is a geopolitical zone in Nigeria comprising six states (Benue, Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Niger, Plateau), including Federal Capital Territory (FCT) Abuja (Omachonu & Dalhatu, 2021). The region covers an area of 242,425 square kilometers, encompassing 114 Local Government Areas (LGAs), whereas the FCT, which is the hub of the region, comprises 6 council areas. According to the National Population Commission and National Bureau of Statistics

Estimates, the North Central region is estimated to have 25.4 million people (Ogundari *et al.*, 2017).

The North Central region is predominantly rural, with agriculture as the primary economic activity. The fertile lands in North Central Nigeria make it ideal for farming, and crops such as yam, maize, and cassava are grown in abundance. Livestock farming is also prevalent in North Central Nigeria, with cattle, goats, and poultry being raised for both domestic consumption and commercial purposes (Eeswaran *et al.*, 2022). The region's strategic location at the center of the country makes it a hub for transportation and trade, further contributing to its economic growth and development (Majekodunmi *et al.*, 2016).

In addition to agriculture, the region is also rich in mineral resources such as tin, limestone, and coal, which have attracted mining activities to the region (Bamidele, 2018). Despite its diverse natural resources, the region suffers from a poverty rate of 67.5%, contrasting with the rates of 77.7% in the North East and 76.3% in the North West regions of Nigeria (Jaiyeola & Ochoga, 2021). The region is faced with various challenges, including poverty, inadequate infrastructure, environmental degradation, and social unrest, which hinder its progress in development. (Mbah *et al.*, 2021). In various states across North Central Nigeria, including Kogi, Benue, Plateau, and Nasarawa, farming communities have suffered repeated attacks by herdsmen, resulting in a devastating toll on human lives and livelihoods.

Human Rights Watch (2019) reported that approximately 1,600 people have lost their lives, and another 300,000 have been displaced due to the violence perpetrated by these herdsmen. These attacks, characterized by burning and destruction of homes and food stores, have emerged as one of the most significant threats to national security in recent years, as noted by Mbah *et al.* (2021). Research by Olaniyan and Yahaya (2016) highlights the alarming frequency of conflicts between herders and farmers in the North Central region, aggravating the already dire situation. The International Organization for Migration (2019, 2020) authenticates this, indicating the region's disproportionate share of such conflicts. It is evident, as noted by Olaniyan and Yahaya (2016), that the actions of herdsmen present a more pressing threat than any other security challenge currently facing the nation. Furthermore, the surge in cattle rustling and banditry has emerged as a significant internal security issue, particularly in the North Central region (Mbah *et al.*, 2021). Consequently, local communities have suffered immense destruction, displacement, and disruption to food production, leading to heightened levels of disability, hunger, and malnutrition, as documented by Fajonyomi *et al.* (2018), Okigbo (2018), the International Crisis Group (2018), and Chiluwa and Chiluwa (2020).

Moreover, these ongoing conflicts and resultant displacements pose a severe threat to the developmental gains achieved in recent decades, as highlighted by Mshelia *et al.* (2020). The vicious cycle of violence and displacement not only jeopardizes lives and livelihoods but also undermines the progress towards sustainable development in affected regions.

Solutions Journalism as a Catalyst for Development

Solutions journalism, as recognized by Ngwude (2019), goes beyond problem highlighting to spotlight effective responses and interventions. By amplifying success stories, it inspires action and aids rural development in Nigeria. This reporting style focuses on showcasing successful interventions, innovative solutions, and positive

outcomes, aligning with journalism's role to provide insights and explore actions taken in response, as noted by McIntyre *et al.* (2016).

Historically, journalists focused little on solution-oriented content, rarely referencing non-profit organizations or using terms like advocate or environmentalist that might spur action (Powers & Curry, 2019). However, a study by the Engaging News Project found that readers of solutions journalism articles felt "more informed and interested" compared to non-solutions readers (Curry, 2014). While many news organizations haven't fully embraced solution-oriented coverage, scholars recognize the importance of countering sensationalism and negativity (Lowes & Ferguson, 2021). By highlighting success stories and offering potential solutions, news organizations can shape a more optimistic public discourse (Krüger, 2017).

As Anon (2015, p. 1) opined, "To ensure the daily issues faced by rural poor people and their communities are acknowledged, it is important that their stories are heard and their voices are amplified." A disturbing trend, however, is that media coverage is restricted to urban areas with little or no coverage of rural areas and their issues (Yarde *et al.*, 2014).

The significance of the mass media, often regarded as the fourth estate of the realm alongside the executive, judiciary, and legislature, in addressing societal issues and bringing them to the attention of the government cannot be overstated (Okocha *et al.*, 2021).

A commitment to solutions journalism means informing the public on both problems and potential solutions, with communication playing a crucial role (Wenzel, 2019). Solutions journalism can uncover the genuine causes and, by disseminating this enhanced understanding, facilitate enduring solutions to issues masked by alternative descriptions (Dodd, 2021). Overall, it fills a void in coverage left by traditional news outlets by leveraging accessible resources (Lowes & Ferguson, 2021).

Challenges of Rural Development Reporting

Rural areas, often than not, are ignored by the media in almost every part of the world (Riaz, 2015). This lack of coverage means that important issues and events in rural areas often go unnoticed by the general public, which can lead to significant implications, such as hindering the access of rural communities to necessary support and resources for their development (Kadiri *et al.*, 2015). Despite the universal recognition of freedom of expression as a fundamental human right, individuals in rural areas are frequently deprived of the opportunity to express their opinions and viewpoints. Issues related to healthcare, education, and infrastructure in rural areas are not highlighted by the media. This disparity in coverage can have serious consequences for the well-being of rural communities. By shining a spotlight on these inequalities, the media can play a crucial role in advocating for more equitable distribution of resources and opportunities for all individuals, regardless of their geographic location. A lack of media coverage in rural areas has led to significant implications, with many communities lacking access to necessary support and resources for development (Nikade *et al.*, 2019).

The media must expand its coverage to include the voices and stories of those living in rural areas. For example, a group of rural women in a farming community may be facing challenges with accessing resources for sustainable agriculture practices. Without media coverage, their struggles and innovative solutions may go unnoticed, hindering their ability to advocate for necessary support and resources. This lack of visibility not

only impacts the women themselves but also the overall development and progress of their community as a whole.

Scholars note various challenges in rural development reporting in Nigeria, including limited access to information, infrastructural constraints, and cultural barriers (Odubanjo & Olaniyan, 2017). Journalists face difficulties in accessing rural areas, gathering information, and building relationships with local sources. Limited resources and funding further hinder comprehensive coverage of rural stories. Despite these challenges, scholars suggest that solution journalism can overcome them by highlighting innovative approaches and community-led initiatives driving rural development. A multi-platform approach integrating traditional media with digital technologies and community engagement strategies is advocated. Partnering with local organizations and investing in capacity-building for rural journalists and citizen reporters can strengthen local media ecosystems, empowering rural communities to share their stories effectively (Lewis *et al.*, 2014).

Through attentive consideration of the perspectives of rural individuals, a more equitable society can be established where every voice is acknowledged and esteemed. In this manner, we not only advocate for social justice and democracy but also foster a sense of unity and solidarity among all members of society. (Egbe, 2014). Through collaborative efforts towards a shared goal of inclusivity and understanding, a world where every individual has the opportunity to prosper and contribute to the enhancement of society as a whole can be established.

Opportunities of Rural Development Reporting

In a country such as Nigeria, where there are development issues that need to be addressed (Owolabi & O'neill, 2014), the media has the responsibility to highlight the problems and the challenges faced by the people at the grass root level; use its power to influence the people in a manner which would lead to social welfare and contribution towards the upliftment of the poor and the rural people (Murthy, 2015).

The application of Solutions Journalism can empower local communities by providing them with information, knowledge, and resources, enabling them to make informed decisions and drive change, foster community engagement, participation, and ownership, promoting collective action and social change (Mahamed *et al.*, 2018).

Reporting rural development stories and contributions of community members to the progress of their community provides an avenue for marginalized voices in these areas to be heard (Dutta, 2014). Reports of rural development can hold government, organizations, and stakeholders accountable for their actions (Kosec & Wantchekon, 2020), ensuring transparency and effective resource allocation, promoting inclusive growth, and reducing disparities between urban and rural areas. Favorable opportunities abound for Journalists, such as enhancing media capacity, skills, and knowledge, improving the quality and impact of reporting.

Theoretical Framework

Agenda-Setting Theory

Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw originally formulated the Agenda Setting Theory in 1972. They undertook a seminal study during the 1968 presidential election in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, which laid the foundation for this theory. The study found that the

media significantly influenced the public's perception of which issues were necessary during the election, thus shaping the public agenda. (McCombs *et al.*, 2018).

The theory posits that the media play a crucial role in determining which topics gain attention from both the public and policymakers by emphasizing specific subjects and framing them in particular ways. It contends that the media have the power to shape public priorities and discourse by influencing what people perceive as important, rather than directly dictating their thoughts (McLeod *et al.*, 2017).

Agenda-setting theory introduces concepts like inter-media agenda-setting, recognizing the impact of various media forms on public agenda-setting and agenda-building, which suggests that the media not only reflect but also shape the public agenda over time (McCombs & Stroud, 2014).

Despite its wide acceptance, the Agenda Setting Theory has faced criticism (Barbehön *et al.*, 2015). Critics argue that the theory oversimplifies audience engagement, assuming passivity, and fails to consider other factors influencing public opinion, such as personal beliefs and experiences (Pingree *et al.*, 2013). Moreover, it does not address how the media choose topics for coverage, potentially influenced by factors like political pressure or commercial interests (Spoorthi, 2024).

Critics also highlight the challenge of accurately measuring agenda-setting in media, as surveys and studies can be subjective and need to consider various variables. Furthermore, the rise of social media and online news sources has empowered audiences to actively participate in shaping the news agenda, leading some scholars to question the continued relevance of agenda-setting theory in the digital age (Weimann, 2017).

Nonetheless, others argue that the fundamental principles of agenda-setting theory still apply, albeit within a more complex and fragmented media landscape (Russell *et al.*, 2014).

The Agenda-Setting Theory highlights the role of media in shaping perceptions and agenda, which is pertinent to understanding how solution journalism can promote rural development in North Central Nigeria. Through agenda-setting principles, solution journalism can raise awareness of rural issues, shape public discourse, and influence policy priorities, facilitating positive change and development in the region.

Research Methodology

The study is qualitative research and utilizes Focus Group Discussion (FGD) as its primary research design. The approach is adopted for investigating the deployment of Solutions Journalism to promote rural development in North Central Nigeria. It applied focus groups as a primary means of data collection to ascertain perceptions, experiences, and potential impacts of Solution Journalism initiatives within rural communities. The population of the study consists of participants who meet defined inclusion criteria: Journalists who cover rural development issues, rural residents in North Central Nigeria, development workers involved in rural development initiatives within the same region, and lecturers of Journalism and Media studies. Considering the diversity and distribution of these groups, determining the exact number of eligible individuals within the study area proves to be impractical. Therefore, the investigation concentrated on identifying individuals whose experiences and professional engagement closely correspond with the aims of the study. A total of 30 participants were selected through purposive sampling: 13 journalists, 8 development workers, 5 rural dwellers 4 lecturers. The selection prioritized significance and thorough understanding rather than mere

statistical representation. To facilitate all-inclusive discussions and note-taking convenience, participants were labeled as D1-D30 to maintain anonymity and divided into various groups: two groups of five, three groups of four, two groups of three, and one group of two.

This sample size was considered sufficient for achieving data saturation and for capturing a diverse range of insights within the study's scope. A structured discussion guide, carefully crafted to align with the study's objectives, served as the primary tool for data collection. This guide was designed to assess the participants' views on the deployment of Solution Journalism to promote rural development in North Central Nigeria.

These discussions took place between March 26 - April 9, 2024, with each discussion lasting an average of 30 to 40 minutes. The Explanation Building Model was utilized for the data analysis.

Data Analysis and Findings

Table 1: Demographic Details of Discussants

North-Central Nigeria States	Frequency	Percentage
Benue	6	20
Kogi	8	26.7
Kwara	1	3.3
Nasarawa	5	16.6
Niger	2	6.7
Plateau	6	20
Abuja	2	6.7
Discussants Affiliated to the States	Frequency	Percentage
Journalists	13	43.3
Community Development Workers	8	26.7
Lecturers	4	13.3
Rural Dwellers	5	16.7
Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	17	56.7
Female	13	43.3
TOTAL	30	100

Source: Field Data (2024)

RO1: The Current State of Rural Development in North Central Nigeria

Through focused group discussions, the researcher observed a range of perspectives regarding the state of rural development in North Central Nigeria over recent decades. Discussants used adjectives such as "little," "fair," "very slow," "retrogressing," and "non-existent" to characterize the extent of development. Notably, four discussants (D4, D5, D14 and D15) asserted the complete absence of development, while Ten Discussants (D1, D2, D3, D18, D21, D8, D6, D30, D20, D19) described it as little. Conversely, three Discussants (D9, D11, D12, D28) noted a regression in development, and four (D26, D16, D17, D7) deemed it fair. Also, nine discussants (D10, D13, D22, D23, D24, D25, D26, D27,

D29,) characterized rural development as progressing at a very slow pace. Similarly, D12 acknowledged some degree of development but criticized its sluggishness relative to allocated resources. On the other hand, D14 expressed dissatisfaction with the current state of rural development in their locality, characterizing it as negligible. D14 said, 'the current state of rural development in my local government is nothing to write home about.'

Discussants identified key indicators of rural development such as agriculture and education. D7 highlighted the importance of both human and infrastructural development in fostering enlightenment and progress, stating:

I personally see development from the human and infrastructural aspects. My own area, Akwanga, in Nasarawa state is developing to an extent, infrastructurally, we have educational institutions which implies that the people are being enlightened and this will lead to more development.

Participant D20 mentioned the economic activities stimulated by the Ajaokuta Train Station, stating that, "the Ajaokuta Train Station in Itakpe has opened up economic activities in the area, people do not just engage in transportation but they also buy and sell, also, cashew plantations have attracted investors to the state." D22 on the other hand stated that "the cashew plantations have been left to charlatans, the poor farmers have no support, the market has no regulations, those who come to buy exploit the people".

Regarding hindrances to development, consensus among discussants identified various factors including bad leadership, insecurity, terrorism, conflicts between farmers and herders, illiteracy, lack of proper education, poverty, lack of good road network, lack of access to clean water, poor health care facilities, selfishness, thuggery, political factors, resistance to change, and disunity. D3 highlighted the dire state of health care facilities and roads, attributing them to the rate of casualties in the region. On the other hand, D7 attributed inadequate infrastructure and human resources in their locality to a mindset solely dependent on the government responsibility for development.

The findings demonstrate that, while a complete absence of development in the North Central region of Nigeria is not accurate, the present level of development remains minimal compared to available resources in the region. Progress is hampered by multifaceted negative factors, necessitating comprehensive strategies to overcome obstacles and foster inclusive development in rural areas of North Central, Nigeria.

RO2: The Impact of Solutions Journalism on Rural Development in North Central Nigeria

In discussing the role of Solution Journalism in impacting rural development, D19 stated that Solution Journalists possess the capacity to amplify the voices of rural communities by sharing their stories, efforts, experiences and perspectives. By so doing, create awareness about the circumstances faced by these communities and foster encouragement for positive change.

D19 illustrated this point by citing an example from their Television programme 'You Were There' which serves as a platform for marginalized voices to be heard. This visibility has garnered support from stakeholders and catalyzed the emergence of community-driven development initiatives. Participant D19 also stated that Solution Journalism can hold leaders responsible stating that "reporting successful initiatives by

rural community members and highlighting areas where progress is lacking, it can encourage greater accountability and transparency from those in power, this will hold policymakers and the government accountable for their commitments to rural development”

Similarly, D1 highlighted the significance of showcasing community efforts through reports, noting that this exposure can elevate the community's profile and instill confidence among its members in their ability to effect further change. D1 supported this assertion with an illustrative example involving two communities that actively sought the attention of Operation Blessing, the Humanitarian arm of CBN Africa to construct a community hospital and schools. When reports of these efforts reached the United Nations (UN), it resulted in substantial support, including the creation of a significant water source servicing the entire village.

From the findings, the discussants highlighted the role of Solution Journalism in promoting rural development by amplifying success stories and inspiring action. By shining a spotlight on the achievements and initiatives of rural communities, Solution Journalism has the potential to catalyze positive change and foster development in these areas.

RO3: Challenges and Opportunities of Journalism in Promoting Rural Development

D1-D30 identified numerous obstacles hindering journalists reporting on rural development in North Central Nigeria. These include a shortage of trained journalists, inadequate reporting equipment, funding issues, insecurity, intimidation by politicians, bribery ("brown envelope syndrome"), media ownership influence, yellow journalism, poor road infrastructure limiting access to rural areas, insufficient transportation for journalists, language and cultural barriers, media illiteracy among rural residents, and a lack of reliable data.

Furthermore, the departure from ethical standards, as highlighted by D2 and D13, where some journalists prioritize personal gain over professional integrity, poses a severe threat to the credibility and effectiveness of journalism in promoting rural development.

D13 stated that:

Journalists would prefer to go to places that are already in the eyes of the public and places where they can get brown envelopes than go to rural areas where there is lack of clean water, lack of good roads and can't get easy access to and because of this there will be lack of adequate coverage of those areas.

This departure from ethical standards poses significant challenges to the credibility and effectiveness of journalism in rural development promotion. Furthermore, D8 emphasized the conflict of interest arising from journalists' affiliations with political parties, undermining the neutrality and independence of journalistic coverage also as a challenge

Discussants stressed the potential benefits of deploying Solution Journalism in rural areas of North Central Nigeria. They outlined opportunities for rapid development, including industrial establishment, infrastructure improvement, agricultural advancements, education, provision of basic social amenities, and economic growth. They also underlined the crucial role of accurate reporting in shaping perceptions and empowering communities.

D10 emphasized showcasing community-led initiatives to tackle issues like flooding, promoting community empowerment. D8 further emphasized the potential of journalists to act as watchdogs for development. D6 emphasized the capacity of Solution Journalism to stimulate cooperation among NGOs, stakeholders, and policymakers, exemplifying the statement with the case of the response to the Mangu attack, during which the humanitarian division of CBN Africa, extended aid to distressed communities. D6 emphasized that such reports by the media illustrates how Solution Journalism can lead to more collaborations with various stakeholders to address challenges in rural regions. Similarly, D30 emphasized that deploying Solution Journalism could catalyze positive change. As D30 stated:

The deployment of Solution Journalism will aspire and mobilize people at all levels to work together for an inclusive development outcome, it will foster collaboration and bring stakeholders, Government, private sectors together to work towards the development of the community.

From the findings, Discussants outlined the prevailing challenges of Journalists in reporting rural development issues and the opportunities that Solution Journalism could bring if effectively deployed.

Discussion of Findings

The first objective was to assess the current level of rural development in North Central Nigeria. It was observed from the responses of the discussants that, while some degree of development exists in rural areas, it remains significantly below its potential. Key indicators cited by discussants included modest agricultural expansion and limited infrastructural improvements. However, a multitude of factors were also identified by the discussants as hindrances to further progress, including issues such as bad leadership, insecurity, terrorism, clashes between farmers and herders, illiteracy, poverty, and political discord. These challenges contribute to a cycle of underdevelopment, resulting in a lack of essential services, economic opportunities, and an overall diminished quality of the life of rural inhabitants as Mbah *et al.* (2021) asserted. The underdevelopment in the rural areas has deep societal implications that affect the well-being of the people; the lack of essential services, economic opportunities, and quality of life perpetuates a cycle of poverty and limits social mobility. Also, issues such as ineffective leaders, insecurity, terrorism, conflicts between farmers and herders, and illiteracy, hinder progress and aggravate existing challenges. Addressing these obstacles is crucial for the region to achieve sustainable development and enhance the well-being of its residents. Policymakers could focus on creating strategies that address these challenges comprehensively to improve essential services, create economic opportunities, and eventually improve the quality of life for rural inhabitants.

Secondly, this research identified the role of Solution Journalism in impacting rural development by showcasing the accomplishments and potential of rural areas, enabling the media to bridge the gap between urban and rural development initiatives, fostering collaboration and progress for all regions of a country. This type of reporting not only benefits the communities themselves but also helps break down stereotypes and misconceptions about rural life, as discussed by Lewis *et al.* (2014). This finding is firmly supported by the Agenda-Setting Theory, as the media's focus on success stories can influence public discourse and policy priorities and eventually drive societal progress

(Krüger, 2017). The findings also suggest that policymakers should prioritize funding and support for media outlets that focus on Solution Journalism in rural areas. This can ensure that positive stories and successful initiatives from rural regions are highlighted and shared with a wider audience and can also result in heightened awareness, support, and investment in rural development projects, thereby benefiting the entire country.

The discussants revealed some underlying challenges of journalists in reporting rural development issues or stories which include a lack of trained professionals, inadequate equipment and funding, insecurity, intimidation from politicians, bribery, media ownership influence, yellow journalism, poor infrastructure, language barriers, and media illiteracy among rural dwellers, the findings align with prior research by Odubanjo and Olaniyan (2017). These challenges result in inadequate coverage of rural areas, hindering their development. Kadiri *et al.* (2022) further emphasizes that this lack of coverage can lead to significant implications, such as rural communities being deprived of necessary support and resources. Overcoming these challenges requires policymakers to prioritize journalist training, provide necessary equipment, and ensure access to rural areas. This would enhance reporting quality, accountability, and contribute to societal development. It is imperative for policymakers to allocate increased funding and implement security measures to safeguard journalists against external pressures, thereby preserving their independence in reporting. This reinforces the perspective of Lowes and Ferguson (2021), who argue that solutions journalism, utilizing readily available resources, possesses the potential to bridge gaps in coverage often left by traditional news outlets. Furthermore, addressing issues such as bribery and media ownership influence is crucial in upholding the integrity of journalism and nurturing public trust.

The results indicate that effective implementation of Solution Journalism offers a unique reporting approach prioritizing solutions over highlighting problems. By showcasing successful strategies and initiatives, journalists can inspire positive change and empower communities to address pressing issues. This discovery is firmly supported by the Agenda-Setting Theory which emphasizes the media's influence in shaping public perceptions and determining policy priorities. By emphasizing specific topics and framing them accordingly, the media can set the agenda for public discourse and policymaking (Lowes & Ferguson, 2021).

Embracing constructive journalism enhances societal engagement and social progress. This empowers journalists to contribute to rural development and broader societal advancement, yielding significant positive outcomes.

Conclusion

The study investigates the use of Solution Journalism in North Central Nigeria to improve rural development, identifying challenges such as governance issues, insecurity, and inadequate infrastructures, negatively affecting rural livelihoods. Solution Journalism is deemed crucial for advancing rural development by showcasing success stories and encouraging collaboration. However, journalists face obstacles like insufficient training, resources, and media organization ownership influence, impacting the credibility of their reporting. Policy interventions are necessary to address these challenges. Stakeholders, including policymakers and media entities, must collaborate to support Solution Journalism through investments in training, resources, and security measures, enhancing transparency, accountability, and overall rural development. The

study underscores the media's role in shaping public perceptions and policy priorities, stressing the significance of constructive journalism for societal progress.

In conclusion, stakeholder collaboration is vital to surmount obstacles and drive positive change in North Central Nigeria's rural development initiatives.

Recommendations

This study recommends the following:

1. Policymakers and stakeholders should prioritize funding and support for rural development initiatives, focusing on agriculture, education and several infrastructural developments.
2. The Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ) should encourage Journalists to shift towards constructive journalism, focusing on solutions rather than just highlighting problems, this can inspire positive change and empower communities to address challenges effectively.
3. Policymakers and stakeholders should provide Journalists with adequate training programs, funding, equipment and other resources, which will address some of the challenges journalists face in covering rural areas issues.

Limitations of the Study

This study was centered on a small group of 30, carefully chosen through the purposive sampling technique. While the use of qualitative method, particularly focus group discussions, provided depths, the insights offered by the participants may be subject to dominant voices within group and limits the generalizability of the findings to broader populations. The absence of quantitative data limits the ability to measure the extent of identified challenges and the impact of Solutions Journalism numerically. The study was limited to North-Central Nigeria, which has its unique economic, cultural, and infrastructural features which may not be typical of other regions. The focus on the region alone restricts the applicability of the study's conclusions to other areas with different rural development issues.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research could cover other geopolitical zones in Nigeria, or even comparative studies with other rural regions in Nigeria, to get a wider range of issues and experiences in rural development. Applying quantitative methods, such as surveys, with a larger sample size would provide more solid and generalizable data on the impact of Solutions Journalism in rural development. Longitudinal research could help in the evaluation of the continuous impact of Solutions Journalism on rural development. Future research could also evaluate the effectiveness of targeted training programs for journalists in Solutions Journalism, assessing how such interventions improve the quality and frequency of rural development reporting.

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