

Exploring the Potentialities of Participatory Communication by the Print Media in Agricultural News Reportage in Ghana

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Abstract

In spite of the many interventions rolled out since independence, Ghana's agricultural sector has not been performing well regardless of the fact that the country's economy is hinged predominantly on the sector. The role of communication recently has focused on the transmission of messages by agricultural technicians to farmers, and the creation of a common platform intended to bring together both groups in order to share information among themselves for the purpose of ensuring a win-win situation where both groups learn from each other. This step is an acknowledgement that rural people are at the heart of development; therefore, seeking their views and involving them from scratch in project developments is the most appropriate thing to do. This study was therefore, a qualitative investigation that employed a focus group discussion between farmers and selected journalists in Ghana to find out if participatory communication has any potential for the agricultural sector. The findings of the study revealed that journalists in Ghana are hampered by many organizational problems. These difficulties have affected media reportage of agricultural news negatively. The findings of the study however, revealed that participatory communication offers a lot of hope for the for media coverage of the agricultural sector.

Keywords: Participation; Dialogue; Participants; Collaboration

Introduction

The concept of participatory communication gained acceptance as far back as the early 1970s, and now many donor agencies that initially opposed the concept have embraced it as a way of lending moral authority to foreign funded projects [1-7]. Several scholars have written in favour of the power and future of participatory communication and have argued that the fact that most NGOs and other development agencies continue to see the concept as the alternative remedy to overcoming several years of communication challenges is enough reason for its sustenance. They advise that scholars continue to find solutions to some of the challenges that bedevil the participatory approach, such as the time-consuming nature of the concept, the laborious evaluative criteria, and bureaucratic tendencies [8-11]. The overarching belief of many scholars is that the best energising factor for stimulating development and reducing poverty amongst rural communities is to improve access to information, education and knowledge [12]. More importantly, a participatory project attempts to offer a place for participants in some aspects of project implementation and design in order to provide an avenue for engagement with stakeholders. Participation has other advantages for project management. For example, even the most limited community involvement can reduce costs for benefactors, resulting in effectiveness of cost sharing and long-term sustainability of community projects [13,14].

Literature Review

O'Hara [15] defines economic development as "the relationship between gross domestic product (GDP) and growth in productivity, consumption, investments, and spending of a country". In effect, development should engender growth and bring about the needed change in the life of a society or a people. The latter author further defines institutional development as "the building of progressive institutions for the promotion of human integrity and freedom, the provision of education and health, open systems, and productive relationships associated with industry and business (p.17-18). Although, many scholars have cited various reasons for the lack of development in many countries, much emphasis has been placed on the role of the media in

facilitating development in recent years. Most debates about the role of the media in development focus on strategies to secure media coverage of poverty related issues; however, the extent of coverage is not the only factor. Rather, the manner in which the perspectives of those living in poverty are reflected in the public domain, including in the media, is becoming increasingly important. Under the modernisation and cultural imperialism approaches to development, more attention was paid to how the media could influence the attitudes and the thinking of mostly disadvantaged groups in society. Little focus was given to how the mass media could mobilise poor people towards development through the provision of appropriate feedbacks. The result was that mass media efforts had more effects "on the more endowed educated, higher income and more urban section of society to the detriment of the poor" [16]. Dennis McQuail argues that, whether intended or unintended, all humans may be affected by mass media messages in one way or the other. This author points to some of these effects as "changes in the culture of people in society, changes in the opinions and beliefs of institutions and society, changes to the collective expressions of a people, as well as the measure of the relationships of those occupying various roles, and the structure and content of these roles" [17]. Dennis McQuail further observes that differences in the effects of mass media have a direct relationship with time. He also notes that these changes in culture and society occur slowly and are quite difficult to notice or trace to their original source. However, changes affecting individuals occur more rapidly; they are relatively easy to notice and easy to trace to a source [17]. This position was earlier identified by Everett Rogers

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[16] calling for a shift in the role of the mass media from one-way communication by a communicator to passive receivers under the new dispensation. This author stresses that development communication should be viewed in a more holistic manner in which efforts are made to understand the needs of the audience. He urges for the design of relevant communication strategies, the selection of appropriate messages that could generate the desired effects, and the provision of opportunities for feedback between communicators and their audience [16].

Theoretical Framework

Participatory communication approach has become extremely relevant in recent times and many scholars have noted that only a small percentage of contemporary development projects run without some type of participatory component [4,8,10,]. Dialogue constitutes the central principle of participatory communication for development [18-20]. Freire opines that, during dialogue, it is impossible to distinguish between the powerful and the powerless, and therefore collective decisions do not emerge by accident but through conscious effort by both groups. Dialogue should therefore be devoid of manipulation and the imposition of people's will on others; rather, it should embrace trust, truth, and the feeling that humans can transform the world together in a positive manner [21]. Freire's major concerns are a shift in power; giving voice to marginalized groups; time and space to articulate their concerns; the definition of their problems; the formulation of solutions; and the ability to act on them. It is therefore important that structures are put in place to support members of the community during the process of dialogue to ensure that the most marginalized groups have a platform for which to voice their concerns, engage in public debate, and solve communal problems [21]. Freire observes that, "in working towards liberation, one must neither lose sight of passivity nor overlook the moment of awakening". Therefore, "critical and authentic dialogue, which presupposes action, must be carried out with the oppressed at whatever stage of their struggle for liberation" [21]. Freire believes in the collective power of humans to critically reflect on, to conceptualise, to critically think of solutions to human problems, to make decisions, and to implement those decisions to achieve social change. In essence, old-fashioned development approaches of understanding social reality through the autarchic definition of problems, objectives and solutions violate the very spirit of communication and must be discarded. This research was therefore an initial and authentic effort to explore the extent to which participatory communication affected audience participation opportunities in terms of relevant Ghanaian newspapers, with specific emphasis on agricultural news coverage. However, although this research did not undertake to offer solutions to the constant failing of the agriculture sector in Ghana, I believe that the results of the inquiry will throw light on some of the key challenges affecting the agriculture sector.

Methods

This study brought together news reporters from the four sampled newspapers and farmer representatives from the two selected districts who were purposively selected for a focus group discussion. The aim was to understand the causes and effects of some issues that had been identified in first stage of the research. In total, 24 participants comprising 16 farmers and 8 journalists were selected to participate in the focus group discussion. Of the latter group, both private and government newspapers were represented. With the permission of all the participants, the entire discussion was audio taped and transcribed in English. Themes were inductively generated for analysis. The

methodology that was employed ensured that the views of farmers and journalists were solicited within a non-threatening setting where both groups would feel comfortable and safe to openly and frankly speak to the various issues at stake.

Research question: What are the potentialities of the media if journalists and rural farmers in Ghana adopted a participatory approach to news gathering and reporting?

Results

The organisational constraints faced by journalists: This emerging theme refers to the difficulties that prevent Ghanaian journalists from increasing reportage of agricultural news. The discussions revealed that the print media in Ghana was faced with many organisational challenges that hindered effective reportage of agricultural news. Due to the frank and open nature of the discussions, vivid and thick data were obtained that foregrounded this shortcoming. To remain true to the views of the participants of this study, their comments (in italics) are reported verbatim as far as possible, without undue language editing.

Participant #J2 disclosed that he was unable to travel long distances to rural areas to authenticate a story or to obtain information due to logistical constraints. According to this participant, the situation affected his and other journalists' ability to travel to rural areas where farmers lived to interview them. He was therefore excited about the partnership that could develop from these discussions because this could reduce the burden of travelling far from the urban centre where he was stationed to authenticate stories. Participant #J2 commented as follows:

One major problem is that we are unable to get to the rural areas due to logistical challenges and resources. If something is happening in Afram Plains for instance, one needs about three days to go [there] and come back. It is not easy to make your budget to go on such assignment. Therefore, this teamwork will reduce the burden of travelling and spending unavailable resources. (#J2 interviewed on 27-11-2015).

The above disclosure implies that the journalist either lacked transport or lacked money to travel to rural areas for the acquisition of agricultural news. This challenge could result in the situation where news pertaining to the agriculture sector is written in the comfort of a journalist's office, or the news could be sourced from secondary sources. The journalist might therefore not be in the position to get the full details of the news or the views of other interested parties. Again, relying on secondary sources of news could result in journalists missing very important elements or facts that need to be generated by the newsmakers themselves. Such style of reportage may not be effective enough to generate the needed response from policy makers. One-sided news articles may not be objective, truthful or accurate representations of the facts on the ground [22]. Moreover, the above disclosure suggests that the interest of journalists to follow up on agricultural news could be severely limited, thereby reducing the quality and frequency of coverage. The challenge that the journalist experienced was further complicated by his lack of financial support. This comment highlighted the poor remuneration of media representatives in Ghana, which appeared to be a situation that would push many fine journalists out of the profession.

Participant #J4 openly complained about the lack of adequate remuneration for journalists in Ghana. This resulted in a lack of resources, energy and the enthusiasm to give of their best. Those who did go the extra mile did so purely out of love for the profession, but it was not due to any other motivation, as was reflected in the comments of Participant #J4:

Journalism in Ghana is a sacrificial job, and most of us do it for the fun of it. When I started journalism, I was doing daily collection of stories. I published and pasted them on the notice boards of the various ministries. One day, I had a call from the minister of finance inviting me to his office. He asked if I was being paid for it and I said no! So he dipped his hands in his briefcase and gave me 120 dollars at the time. I was very excited, and went home thanking God for his mercy! If one really wants to look at the rewards or pay, one is bound to abandon the job and walk away. So anytime our brothers (i.e., farmers) need us, they should call us. We are willing to go and give them adequate coverage (#J4 interviewed on 27 November 2015).

The above exposure is indicative of the fact that journalists in Ghana were not adequately paid and thus relied on windfalls for survival. It is argued that a lack of adequate remuneration could demoralise journalists and causes them to show minimum commitment to their job. The situation where a journalist works in anticipation that his good works will be recognised or acknowledged one day is not enough encouragement because such future expectation is not guaranteed. His efforts could go unnoticed or he could fail to catch the attention of a 'philanthropist' in a position of authority. If such efforts go without recognition, the worker may give up and adopt a lukewarm attitude.

Another major problem facing Ghanaian journalists that was exposed was the lack of vehicles to convey personnel to and from official assignments. Some journalists recalled that, in the past, the state media had logistical support that made the work of reporters a bit easier. However, all this support seemed to have stopped. As a result, it was reported that most journalists had to make their way to assignments by relying on their own resources or via public transport. Naturally, this state of affairs made newsgathering very difficult. This frustration was expressed in the following comment:

We are not able to go to the rural areas to collect news due to a lack of logistics. In the past, we had official vehicles that conveyed us to assignments and brought us back, but all that has been cancelled due to a lack of budgetary support. These days, one has to make his own trips to the news source to gather news for which we are paid nothing. Those of us in the state owned media have been asked to fill in a form for refund from the Ministry of Finance, but that never comes, so we have all stopped. This affects our morale to strive or do more in the sense that, when one gets to a function and there is little delay, one becomes impatient to wait. Most of us are busy running from program to program hoping to get a handshake or 'soli' [money given to journalists for attending programmes] and if the program does not look promising we are not ready to waste the time. So at times we miss important information because when we call our friends later to get details of the stories, we do not get the actual details. We also buy our own equipment like recorders and cameras because the office will not buy it for us (#J2 interviewed on 27 November 2015).

It may be argued that situations such as those described in the above comment could have negative effects on the frequency and standard of agricultural news reportage. Many reporters may not have the time or energy to go through all these struggles just to report agricultural news. It is therefore no wonder that agricultural news appears scanty and lacks the necessary depth. These challenges clearly affect the quality of agricultural news, particularly because most of the agricultural news items emanated from government sources. Clearly, most agricultural news was written without the journalists actually going to the field to verify the authenticity and the severity of the events that affected farmers. The revelation also showed that farmers' inputs in the news were generally not considered. The over reliance

on government sources for news could result in pure propaganda that could render the news ineffective in addressing the challenges facing the sector. This over-reliance on the government for news could also make journalists susceptible to corruption or manipulation by powerful people in society who may want the news twisted to favour certain people in government or the society [23], leading to a strong risk of nepotism. The fact that a journalist commented that he was compelled to buy his own equipment to do his work suggests a major disincentive. Journalists who have no money may rely on pen and paper only, thereby missing important information and visual evidence to support powerful messages emanating from the agriculture sector. These challenges will of necessity affect the morale of journalists in a negative way. Hollings et al. [24], journalists in New Zealand, also faced numerous challenges such as lack of counselling, lack of mentoring and training, low staff numbers, and poor pay, which seems to top the problems of journalists. Anya Schiffrin [25] argues that many African journalists are performing below the benchmark due to poor working conditions and undue pressure from both political and commercial interests. The latter author observes that this phenomenon seems to threaten the value of the journalistic profession and has also rendered many journalists vulnerable and isolated. Based on the findings of this study, I must stress that journalism in Ghana has been relegated to a 'second class job' and that journalists abandon the profession to work for those they were supposed to 'watch'. Many journalists therefore use the profession as a springboard, hoping to catch the attention of politicians. Perhaps this explains why, in my experience and from personal observation, many journalists in Ghana seem not to have the nerve to hold political office holders accountable.

Lack of accuracy in news reportage

This section focuses on the concerns expressed by farmers regarding the lack of effective reportage by the media. Many farmers were of the view that the reportage by the Ghanaian print media on agriculture was far different from what was happening in their communities, and they wondered where reporters were getting their news from. The farmers also complained of misrepresentation of facts or overhyping of truth and requested that, instead of journalists sitting in the comfort of their offices and relying on government spokespersons for news, they should travel to the rural communities or speak to farmers to get the actual news on the ground, which they should then report. Participant #F5 expressed his frustration in the following comments:

Almost every Ghanaian knows that agriculture is the backbone [of society], but most journalists are influenced by political parties. They are not realistic because they do not do research before writing stories. Those who come to the remote areas have a better idea about what is happening on the ground, and report with accurate figures and facts on agriculture. Those who are influenced by political parties to twist the facts are not helping us farmers. So journalists must come to us, and listen to what is important and report that (#F5 interviewed on 29 October 2015).

The exposure above is an indication that the perception existed among farmers that journalists were influenced by considerations other than a strict adherence to the basic tenets of journalism. Again, this exposure points to the fact that journalists tend to obtain their news from secondary sources and are not consulting farmers before writing their reports. (It is noteworthy that only 24% of agricultural news came from farmers. This practice could result in journalists reporting on less important issues that affect farmers rather than the serious issues that require urgent attention.

Again, this revelation could point to a deliberate twisting of facts by certain elements of society just to score political points. Participant #F6 observed that the phenomenon was particularly predominant during election periods when many journalists twisted facts or overhyped news to favour one political party. Farmers lamented the fact that many journalists painted a good picture of the agriculture sector during election periods as though all was well, just for some people in the ruling government to get elected or re-elected. This participant lamented that such practices hurt the very foundation of the economy, which was agriculture:

During election or political seasons, it is common to see that the news is twisted to favour one political party or the other. It looks like many journalists are influenced by partisan politics. So sometimes you see that they write, 'There is bumper harvest' somewhere, but when you read the whole story, you find that it is political news and not agricultural news; those journalists report on what is favourable to their parties. Though they do not come to farming communities, they manage to write reports that make the government look good. I wish that they will speak to us, the farmers, and report exactly what we have said (#F6 interviewed on 29 October 2015).

The exposition above points to farmers' experiences of the lack of objectivity, fairness and truth as enshrined in the journalistic profession. Again, the revelation means that journalists are being influenced financially to tilt news angles or stories in favour of political parties or representatives. Such practices may not help the nation to develop. Politicians would always want to influence news in a positive way to favour their parochial interests; however, the public's interests should be paramount. This resentment was echoed by Participant #F3 who felt that journalists were reporting news which was far from the truth. He requested that better attention be paid to farming news so that farmers' problems would be adequately reported:

What I see personally is that Ghana is lacking behind because Ghana is an agricultural country, but farmers are not treated well. Farmers are not given the needed attention. What I also see is that what journalists report is quite different from what is happening on the ground. They need to come to the field and talk to us, listen to our problems so that they can report it to government for support (#F3 interviewed on 29 October 2015).

Lack of accuracy in news reportage could affect the quality of the news and, by extension, make it unproductive. However, these accusations by the farmers were countered by a journalist who observed that reporters were not directly responsible for what the newspapers decided to print. He was of the opinion that their duty was just to file the stories and the editors decided which of the stories to select for their papers. Another journalist believed that news reporters could not be blamed for the gap in news coverage on agriculture. He blamed editors for a general lack of commitment towards agriculture related news. The reporter's frustration was evident in the following comments:

I believe the major challenge is lack of commitment from management towards agriculture. If we tell editors that there is a political event in one place or the other, they quickly dispatch a car or give us money to go and cover such stories. However, if we tell them that there is something happening in a farming community in one region or the other, they tell you that there is no vehicle to send you there. So, although logistics comes in, the fact is that most editors are not as committed to agricultural news as they are to political news. Maybe political news help their newspapers sell faster (#J6 interviewed on 27 November 2015).

The above comments could mean that editors are more interested in political stories than in agricultural news. This could also mean that many editors would choose to print less important political stories over important agricultural news. This phenomenon could have been responsible for the situation where it was found that most newspapers preferred to display political stories on the front pages of their newspapers and kept agricultural news mostly in the middle and on the back pages of their dailies. The overconcentration on politics by editors could be a great deterrent for reporters who might be asked to go and gather agricultural news. The publication of news filed by reporters would be enough motivation to push them to work harder. Situations in which a journalist spends time to work on agricultural stories only for such news to be placed on hold because an editor chose a political story could be demoralising. This phenomenon could push such reporters to also go for the stories that interest their editors, and the end result could be that agricultural news may not be reported frequently or accurately due to disinterest by reporters and editors. Again, the comments above could mean that newspapers propagate a special agenda or serve the interests of certain powerful people in society. This belief was corroborated by a participant from the private media. Participant #J5 observed that most private newspapers projected a certain ideology of the sponsors of the newspapers and therefore, if the paper's ideology was to help party B or A to win an election, there was no way they could dedicate their pages to agricultural news which they were not paid to cover.

For us, newspaper business thrives on ideology. And our paper's business is to propagate a political ideology, and agriculture is not part of our interest. There is nothing that will push me to go for agricultural news because that will not bring food to my table. We are paid to help a certain party come to power but I will not mention that here; so that is exactly what we do (#J5 interviewed on 27 November 2015).

The above comments revealed journalists' perception that certain media houses had been established solely to champion the political ideologies of certain political elites. Such newspapers may therefore ignore important news, such as news that affect farmers and the agriculture sector as a whole, because such news may not inure the interests of their paymasters. This could have been responsible for the situation where most private newspapers were more interested in politics than in agriculture. The study found that most newspapers neglected agricultural related news and presented a shallow image of the agricultural business. This practice could affect the frequency of agricultural news reportage because farmers do not have the kind of money controlled by politicians to enable them to wield the power to determine how their news should be covered. However, the positive side of this group discussion was that both parties agreed that agriculture was an important sector of the economy that must not be marginalised under any circumstances. In this context, Schiffrin [25] observes that many journalists tend to compromise their journalistic principles just to please the powerful in society. He also notes that journalists who attempted to be critical in their writings against such authorities often had their stories changed by their editors or had their scripts completely abandoned.

Regardless of the challenges that the journalists experienced, they ensured the farmers that, moving forward, they would amend their stance and reverse the situation. This was confirmed by participant #J4 in the following comments:

Journalism in Ghana is a very difficult profession now because the reward is very small, and so most of us are doing it for the love of it. Again, if one is performing a task, and the person does not get feedback

from others, it becomes difficult to evaluate one's own performance. But today, we have heard a lot and we have also learnt a lot from our farmers. We all know how farming is important to the survival of our parents, especially those in the rural areas, and even those of us in the towns and cities. We also buy food so if farmers do not produce, the prices either go high or we do not even get the food to buy at all on the market. So anytime our brothers (i.e., farmers) need us, they should call us, and we are willing to go and give them adequate coverage. They should call us at night or day, and we shall respond promptly (#J4 interviewed on 27 November 2015).

The above revelation was an admission by journalists that they had not done much towards the advancement of the course of farmers and that they promised to do a little more. This position was further strengthened by participant #J1 who emphasised the influence of the media. He advised farmers never to sleep on their problems, but to call on journalists to come to their aid, stressing that those who called on them got results:

I also want to add my voice to the call made by my colleague, and to tell farmers never to hide their problems. They should draw our attention because we do not have the resources to go round. So now that we have established this contact, please make good use of it. Just recently, I got a call from Korle-Bu hospital burns unit to interview them on their needs. I published the story and GNPC came to their aid and gave them US\$1 million. So if we make use of their media, we will get rewards, but if farmers do not draw our attention to their problems, we will not know. They should draw our attention anytime (#J1 interviewed on 27 November 2015).

Another journalist expressed deep satisfaction about the discussion between the two groups and stated that, moving forward, there would be a greater exchange of ideas between the two groups to help improve coverage:

This forum is very useful because some of us are getting to know the farmers for the first time, and I believe some farmers are also meeting some of us for the first time. I must say, I am very moved by the challenges expressed by the farmers. From today, there will be better collaboration between us in order to bring their problems to light (#J5 interviewed on 27 November 2015).

The revelation above explains the seeming ignorance of journalists about the challenges facing Ghanaian farmers. The forum marked the beginning of a new turn for agricultural news coverage. Another journalist also espoused the power of the media and advised farmers to form a bigger association, because that would enable them to have a stronger voice and to be able to attract the needed attention:

I want to advise the farmers to form bigger associations so that they can have a stronger voice. As I said earlier, I was working with DAA, an NGO working with fish farmers and fish vendors. Their seeming unity helped them to push for the fisheries bill to be interpreted into local languages so that everyone could understand. So I want to advise farmers to come together and have one common agenda so that journalist can also help them send their messages across to relevant authorities (#J3 interviewed on 27 November 2015).

In Ghana, many splinter groups of associations exist such as the Tomato Producers' Association, the Cocoa Producers' Association, the Palm Oil Producers' Association, and many more. However, the apparent divisions within these farmer associations make it difficult for them to pool their financial resources to enable them organise big programmes worthy of media attention. The farmers therefore

welcomed the call for better collaboration between themselves and journalists and the two diverse groups promised to keep in touch. The farmers accepted the call made by journalists for them to form a bigger association instead of the amalgamated groups which existed currently. The farmers were of the view that agriculture could help reduce Ghana's unemployment rate, and they were therefore ready to work closely with journalists. This satisfaction among the farmers was expressed in the comment by Participant #F1:

I am happy that we have met our journalists today. We know the problems they are also facing so we shall do better collaboration to bring the many challenges facing agriculture to light. There are a lot of young men and women loitering in the capital who could benefit a lot from agriculture, but due to bad publicity and lack of government support, the citizens do not even appreciate that agriculture is a good job. So we shall work together from now. But when we give you the story and it is 'A', please do not change it to 'B'! (#F1 interviewed on 27 November 2015).

The revelation above was a commitment by both groups to work closely to overcome their respective challenges. The farmers felt that they were not getting fair reportage, while the journalists felt that they were doing their best under the circumstances. However, the discussion offered opportunities for both parties to learn useful lessons; the need for farmers to form bigger associations that would be capable of setting a common agenda, and the establishment of mutual relationships between groups that could mark a good starting point for improved reportage for agricultural news.

Lack of interest in agricultural news

The next theme that emerged was the apparent disinterest in agricultural news by journalists. Most farmers observed that attention was paid to the problems facing the agriculture sector only on 'Farmers Day', which is a day that is set aside to honour farmers and other industry players, but the farmers seemed unimpressed with this initiative. They were of the opinion that setting a day aside to, in the words of one farmer "make noise about the agriculture sector", was merely a deception, because one day could not highlight all the problems the sector faced. The farmers further indicated that most of the problems that were highlighted during these celebrations often failed to be solved, only to be revisited the following year. The following sentiments reveal the frustrations that the farmers experienced:

It is only during occasions like 'farmer's day celebration' that we see journalists coming to ask farmers about problems facing the agriculture sector. But right after the celebration, they are gone and they never come back until the next year, when they come again to speak to us asking us about the same problems we have spoken about during the previous celebration. We think that the celebration is a waste because we do not benefit from it (#F16 interviewed on 6 November 2015).

This assertion was echoed by Participant #F7 who observed that journalists did not pay the same attention to agricultural news as they did to politics. He further noted that journalists followed politicians around and reported news from various parts of the country, but when it came to agricultural news, nothing seem to happen. The comment below reveals the frustration of the participant:

The media follow politicians around to gather news, but when it comes to agriculture, they only sit in the cities and speak for farmers. Most of what they say is totally different from happenings on the ground. Journalists do not speak to us before writing news. They focus more on politics and football than agricultural news; meanwhile they

all come back to eat food produced by farmers (# F7 interviewed on 29 October 2015).

The quote explains the complaints by farmers about the lack of adequate attention to agriculture compared to politics and other news categories. The farmers also expressed great concern about journalists following politicians but failing to come to farming communities. However, Participant #J2 explained that politicians usually make requests to media houses to assign reporters to political actors during political campaigns. Such journalists were fed and transported free of charge to rural and urban communities, and were obliged to report on these events. This could be the reason why it seems easy for journalists to follow politicians to report political stories whereas the same arrangements do not exist for agricultural news. Participant #J2 further stated that, if an organisation could establish similar arrangements for journalists to tour farming communities and report agricultural news, the situation would be different:

You see, politicians request for reporters when they go on campaigns round the country. So when it comes to that time, we get excited because if you are picked to follow party 'A' or 'B', then your problems are solved during the period that you follow that politician. They feed you; give you money for your pocket so you have to report their news. Farmers do not request such services. So where are we going to get money to travel on our own accord to farming communities? (#J2 interviewed on 27 November 2015).

The above comments revealed that journalists were exposed to monetary influence during assignments that had a political motivation. This practice could affect the quality of journalism; in the sense that very important information could be withheld or obscured just to paint a favourable picture of influential governing authorities. Schiffrin [25] observes that journalists in Africa are often rewarded in financial terms by those whom they cover in their stories to represent them in a favourable light. The former may thus ignore stories that do not promote the interests of their paymasters. In this context, Participant #F4 observed that the over concentration on politics by many media houses was responsible for Ghana's under-development and poverty. He noted that agriculture could turn the fortunes of the country in a positive manner, but that the media was shunning this important sector of the economy. In light of the positive relationships that were established during the focus group discussions, he stated that farmers would endeavour to strengthen the financial position of the association so that they would be in a position to invite journalists more frequently to listen to their concerns and to give the agriculture sector adequate publicity. For instance, he said the following:

I have seen that politics are rather drawing us back because we are all running away from what can change the economy over a five-year period. As an association, we shall try and make a contribution so that whenever journalists come, we shall at least pay their transportation so that they can always come to our aid, otherwise we shall continue to suffer (#F4 interviewed on 27 November 2015).

The above statement points to the fact that it is journalists and not farmers who generate the news that is disseminated to the population, and if journalists do not set much store on certain sectors of a country's economy, it is the country as a whole that suffers. The over concentration on politics and news such as sport could overshadow important sectors of the economy such as agriculture.

Another journalist was critical of the position of #J2 and argued that a country that does not value agriculture risks running into food crises. He was of the view that, in most developed countries, farming inputs

were heavily subsidized by governments, but in Ghana most farmers struggled to raise their own capital to secure inputs. He thus agreed that if farmers drew their attention to their problems, journalists should be willing to respond positively to tell their stories. However, he was quick to add that most farmers preferred to keep their problems close to the chest; as a result, they did not generate much news to capture the attention of journalists. Moreover, he felt that most farmers did not even know how and where to contact journalists:

A country that does not place value on agriculture will soon start importing food, which means a lot more people will go hungry and become poorer. The major problem we have is that the policies are not helping the farmers at all. If one goes to developed countries, almost all farm inputs are subsidized by their governments, but in this country the situation is the reverse. What we can do to help the farmers is that they should tell us their problems, and we will help to send the message to governmental and other stakeholders for help. Farmers themselves do not generate enough news because they think people do not value them, but commercial farmers should know that they are able to make use of journalists. Some farmers do not even know how to make contact with journalists (# J4 interviewed on 27 November 2015).

The revelation above is an indication that journalists will be willing to help farmers drive home their concerns to relevant stakeholders. However, this should be a two-way relationship as farmers should be bold enough to furnish journalists with news concerning farming challenges. The apparent lack of regular interaction between farmers and journalists obviously led journalists to believe that all was well in the farming sector, and therefore not much was done to write exposes on this sector. Participant #J4 further realised that farmers faced numerous challenges, because the country as a whole was not place much premium on agriculture. He encouraged farmers to contact them now that they had established this relationship so that they can draw government's attention to the many challenges that were experienced in the farming industry. This assurance was expressed in the discussion as follows:

As a country we do not value agricultural news; we do not have good roads to farming communities, we do not have irrigation systems, no ready markets, so most farmers sell their farm produce cheaply. But when there are problems, farmers need to tell us; otherwise we journalists cannot know their problems. It is just not possible for a journalist to inform an editor of his decision to travel far away to another region to chase agricultural news. Management will even be suspicious of us, so we encourage the association to invite us through management so that we can be released properly for such assignments. Again, such invitations help us to have direct contact with those who invite us; those who will host us where we can sleep (#J4 interviewed on 27 November 2015).

In the comments above the journalists acknowledged that agriculture was not getting the needed coverage; however, the situation was not totally hopeless. Reporters affirmed that they were interested in agricultural related news, but were confronted with genuine difficulties such as the lack of resources. They therefore reiterated that the needed the assistance of farmers to be able to deliver to their expectations. Farmers were advised by journalists to meet regularly to identify a common problem facing the association and to invite journalists to cover the news. This was another positive sign that Ghanaian journalists did not intentionally to shun the agriculture sector.

Although the journalists seemed as concerned as the farmers about the over concentration on politics and other news categories,

they appeared helpless to change the status quo due to the need for newspapers to generate increased profits that can only be derived from publishing more appealing news items such as politics and sports. The quote above also points to the fact that Ghanaian journalists were not foregrounding any agenda on agriculture as they were chasing news in this sector only as and when it came up. One participant therefore suggested that the government or private newspaper owners should consider launching a newspaper solely for agriculture so that those who are interested in such news would know exactly where to read about it. A separate newspaper could also reduce the competition between agricultural news and other news items:

I think we must have a newspaper solely for agricultural news with enough sponsors who will sponsor the newspaper. Such a paper could maybe seek sponsorship from dealers in farming implements, NGOs and other stakeholders such as banks who support farming activities. I feel that it will help because then the structure and the focus of the paper will be on agriculture and nothing else (#J4 interviewed on 27 November 2015).

However, in my view such exclusivity would keep the issues in the agriculture sector obscured from the general population. This might limit efforts to inform the populace of agricultural issues and thus, in the long run, do the economy more harm than good.

The above discourse between farmers and journalists exposed some challenges faced by both farmers and journalists. The first major challenge that was exposed was the inadequacy of media attention by journalist on issues in the agriculture field. The second issue was that there seemed to be an over concentration on politics and sports at the expense of agricultural news. If a greater awareness of agricultural issues can be stimulated among the general population through the print media, it has the potential to reduce poverty amongst farmers and unemployed youths, as many opportunities for job creation may be created through a heightened sense of awareness. Additionally, the discussion revealed that the agricultural sub-sector did not generate adequate news on its own, and therefore obtaining news on this sector that would interest readers was a challenge.

In the final analysis, the outcome of the discussion indicated that the journalists had been sensitised to and thus appreciated the role of agriculture in the Ghanaian economy. Through awareness creation that occurred during the discussions, the journalists were eager to help the farmers by exposing their challenges in the print media. Again, the journalists admitted that they had not done much to advance the course of farmers, and promised to do more in the future. An important outcome was therefore the willingness of the media to respond positively to farmers in order to propagate their news if they were invited.

Selective reportage

This theme that emerged exposed the frustration of farmers that the Ghanaian media was over concentrating on commercial farmers and marginalised the small-scale farmers that, in their opinion, were the backbone of sustaining rural communities. The farmers were of the opinion that most journalists in Ghana paid too much attention to cash crop or commercial farmers and ignored food crop farmers. The farmer participants maintained that the phenomenon was impacting negatively on the majority of farmers who were mainly subsistence farmers. Participant #F7 was of the opinion that journalists were discriminating against subsistence farmers because they were considered poor and unable give handouts to journalists:

I have noticed that journalists in Ghana do not value food crop farmers because we are considered poor; they only focus on cocoa, cashew, oil palm and coffee farmers, but we feed the nation. No one eats raw cocoa or drinks only oil; if these crops give foreign exchange to the country, the citizens and the politicians eat food to survive, so they should come down to the villages to see the problems we face and report to the government for appropriate attention (#F7 interviewed on 6 November 2015).

This position was strengthened by participant #F9 who observed that journalists failed to come to the aid of subsistence farmers, but attended regularly to programmes organised by NGOs. He further observed that such stories received banner headlines but that the actual challenges of such farmers in the rural areas were ignored:

I do not like the way journalists report on agricultural news. Maybe they come to visit district agricultural officers and pick the news from there and report on it. At times when an NGO or group is coming to organise a programme at a place, journalists follow them, and then write a big headline for that news. But, they fail to seek the opinions of those of us who produce food in the villages for their consumption. Maybe they get their things [rewards] or money from there, which is why they always want to follow such organisations (#F9 interviewed on 6 November 2015).

The above criticism reveals that subsistence farmers were disenchanted with journalists as subsistence farmers (or small-scale farmers) did not seem to receive the attention of journalists. This could mean that journalists were withering deliberately ignoring important issues affecting farmers, or they were only reporting issues that favoured the government or their paymasters. The over concentration on cash crop farmers, particularly cocoa farmers, to the detriment of food crop growers could result in a situation where subsistence farmers could lose interest and switch to cash crop farming. This could cause scarcity of food crops which would in turn cause the prices of food items to rise sharply, particularly in rural areas that are populated by some very poor communities. In Ghana, many farmers shift from the cultivation of certain crops to those that earn better prices and are in high demand. Therefore, in seasons when there may be a high demand for a particular crop, there may be an over cultivation of such a crop during the next season, leaving farmers quite out of pocket because their crop won't sell, or will be virtually worthless. Agro processing is very low in Ghana, so any time a particular crop is over produced, prices drop considerably, resulting in the loss of revenue for farmers. Farmers do not really specialise in the cultivation of particular crops in Ghana, as they produce crops that may attract high prices.

Participant #F9 complained about journalists reporting untruthful news that is intended to mislead the public and farmers. In Ghana, it is common to find newspapers carrying banner headlines of the support by the government of farmers, but during the discussions the farmers, as the supposed recipients, maintained that they had hardly received any such assistance. A classical case was a directive from government to farmers to access fertilisers from certain locations, but farmers got to those centres only to find that there were no such farm inputs available at the stores. Unfortunately, the farmers had no means of communicating their frustrations to government because journalists were not in touch with the local farmers. Anya Schiffrin [25] observes that, in many African countries where the media is dependent on the state for direct financial support and indirect supports in the form of advertising revenue, it is almost dangerous to publish anything damaging about those who support the media. He maintains that oil companies and business moguls have a huge influence on the

media in Africa, and Ghana is no exception. Newspapers must thus kowtow to these pressures or risk crushing out. The participants were therefore, very excited about the forum and observed that farmers had many challenges that were difficult to expose. They believed that the interaction created by the group discussions could improve the relationship between farmers and the media by bringing both groups together in dialogue to help improve media reportage on the sector for better assistance from relevant stakeholders:

I am very happy about today's forum because I have been farming for 20 years now, but have never received any help from anyone, not even government. For instance, there are farmers in my district who grow rice a lot but how to transport the rice to a market centre is a big problem, and no one seems to care. But from today we shall always get in touch so that you journalists can help us to send our message across to government for support, because we need it very much (#F9 interviewed on 27 November 2015).

The above comment points to the fact that, perhaps for the first time, trust was created between small-scale farmers and the media, which is a positive relationship that may turn their respective situations around. Also, it points to the fact that continued and sustained dialogue between the two parties could yield positive results in the sense that farmers, who had tended to keep their problems to themselves, may now speak about their needs so that relevant stakeholders will be sensitised to their plight. Such knowledge could build the confidence level of farmers to want to do something about previously hopeless situations confronting agriculture in Ghana. The journalists assured the farmers of their support, citing the results of a publication on the challenges of one of the biggest hospitals in Ghana which attracted instant response from one of the institutions in Ghana. A journalist therefore noted that if the media was properly utilised, they could provide positive results:

I assure our farmers that they should just draw our attention, and we shall help them. Just recently, I went to Korle-Bu hospital burns unit to interview them about their needs and they told me, and I published the story and GNPC came to their aid and gave them \$1 million. So if you use the media well, you get rewards, but if you do not prompt us we will not know. They should just call and we shall come (#J1 interviewed on 27 November 2015).

The above exposé encouraged the farmer participants to trust the media to be able to influence and draw the attention of relevant stakeholders to problems facing them. Again, the revelation explained the point that the media was ready to help farmers; the assurances made by journalists to farmers was also refreshing in the sense that they gave the farmers hope that the media was not deliberately shunning their problems but was faced with genuine concerns which the dialogue between the two parties could help resolve.

Difficulty in accessing information

This theme exposed another pertinent challenge that affected journalistic practice in Ghana. The journalists all complained about the difficulties associated with the gathering of news related to general news, but particularly to obtaining news on agriculture due to a lack of access to information. Access to information could be one key issue in ensuring transparency in governance and may also empower citizens to follow how their resources are being used in a country. Unfortunately, the rights to information legislations in many parts of the world are still in their consideration stages.

In Ghana, the Right to Information Bill was drafted in 2010 and tabled before parliament as far back as 5 February 2010. However, to

date, not much work has been done. Ghana therefore has no legislation on the right to information. The absence of this law makes it extremely difficult for journalists to access news from organisations regarding agriculture. One of the participants shared the frustrations of Ghanaian journalists during official assignments in the following words:

This is a personal experience. During an outbreak of bird flu, my paper asked me to go to the ministry to follow up on that story. When I got there, none of the people, including the technical staff, were prepared to talk to me. They said that the only person who could speak on issues like that was the Deputy Minister of Agriculture. When I finally made contact with him and asked what the ministry was doing about it, he asked me what was wrong with that. He then declined to speak about it (#J1 interviewed on 27 November 2015).

The same apparent frustration was expressed by another participant who also spoke about the difficulty he had encountered while trying to access information on a story related to the diversion of fertilisers meant for farmers to neighbouring countries. According to Participant #J4, every official he spoke to decline to comment on the story and, in some instances, officials were quite rude. In Ghana, most public officials refuse to speak on issues which seem embarrassing to government for fear of being victimised or reprimanded. In some cases, some public officials may even lose their jobs if they fail to manage information that might be considered injurious to the reputation of certain government officials; hence many people decline to speak entirely on such issues or, in some instances, they become extremely hostile to journalists. A journalist who had experienced such animosity commented as follows:

When the fertiliser diversion issue came up, the Association of Peasant Farmers raised a red flag before government came to know that the fertilisers were not even available to local farmers. When I tried to follow up on the story, all the people who could give me information were tight-lipped. So I submitted a one-sided report but my editor refused to publish the news, stating that he did not want to answer queries from people in authority. So tomorrow when an issue like this occurs I will not be motivated to follow it. So a united front will help send a common message for a better attention than fragmented groups. Farmers must therefore be able to hold a press conference on issues like this, and invite a lot of media houses so that we can all publish the news and give it a bigger platform (#J4 interviewed on 27 November 2015).

Lack of access to news on very important issues such as the outbreak of a disease or the diversion of farming inputs that should have reached farmers instead and apparent intimidation could cause journalists to lose interest in following up on such stories. It could also lead to a situation where a journalist files a one-sided story if he/she insists on carrying the story. Journalism thrives on objectivity, fairness, balance, truth and accuracy; therefore, a situation such as the one in which the journalist was denied access to information could jeopardise the professionalism and enthusiasm of personnel. Farmers should therefore be empowered to be able to marshal their collective energies to combat such situations. They should be trained on how to write press releases and to organise press conferences attended by representatives of numerous newspapers to drive home their concerns. Another participant advised that, if they wanted to make a difference in the lives of the public and farmers, their attitudes and thoughts of journalism should change. He reiterated the point that the usual style of journalism according to which news decisions are made depending on the ability to sell news to the public must change to a more developmental agenda. The participant further stressed that journalists had an enormous role to play to ensure that critical development areas were addressed to optimise their full potential.

Discussion

The interaction between the farmers and the journalists revealed that the Ghanaian media was fraught with serious organizational constraints ranging from poor remuneration, lack of adequate staff, and lack of support from editors to lack of logistics to enable journalist to deliver good reportage. As a result, most journalists admitted that they had not been motivated to travel to rural areas to follow agricultural news. In Ghana, most farmers live in remote parts of the country where land is more fertile, while journalists live in urban and semi-urban areas.

As a serious constraint, journalists stated that they were hampered by a general lack of equipment such as recorders and cameras to enable them to go about their day-to-day task in a professional manner. Most journalists therefore relied on traditional materials such as small notebook and pen to collect news. This phenomenon seemed to have affected the quality of news reports, as salient information that should have been captured was mostly lost due to the inability of journalists to capture all that the newsmakers said. This finding corresponds with that of a study conducted by Isaac Obeng-Quaidoo [23], in which it was established that journalistic practice in Ghana was adversely affected by an unhealthy economy, the lack of financial resources to support journalists, and the general lack of equipment. In the current study, most journalists noted that media houses of earlier years had had access to vehicles that conveyed reporters to locations to cover important news. However, such modes of transport were no longer available to journalists in Ghana. As a result, many journalists travelled to assignments using public transport which was mostly inefficient. Due to this drawback, many important assignments were missed due to delays caused by having to rely on unreliable public transport. This problem in particular affected the morale of the journalists and they admitted to losing interest in striving further to seek coverage of agricultural related stories.

Another major setback was the lack of adequate staff at the various media houses. The journalists observed that, due to under staffing at the various media houses; it was difficult for an editor to release journalists to travel to rural communities to follow particular agricultural news. They observed that travelling on assignments to farming locations could take about 2–3 days in some instances and so most news editors were unwilling to release their staff in search of news in rural areas. Secondly, it was expensive to fund reporters to travel to rural communities to investigate agricultural related news. To compensate, there was over concentration on obtaining news in urban and semi-urban areas, resulting in a proliferation of sports and political news reportage.

Furthermore, there was general lack of accurate news reportage on agriculture. The majority of the farmers stated that most of the news items reported on agriculture were either based on propaganda, or were divorced from what had actually been happening on the ground. They also observed that there was lack of adequate news reports on agriculture events or challenges in the newspapers. This observation was accepted by the reporters, but they stated that they were not to be blamed in all instances, as most news editors were not very interested in agricultural news because of some of the challenges enumerated above. They also observed that most of the papers were profit oriented and would naturally be attracted to stories that would enable them to sell their newspapers.

The journalists explained that it was extremely difficult for a reporter to ask permission to travel to rural Ghana in search of

agricultural news, and that no editor would allow such a request. However, if the farmers wrote or made calls to the editor requesting for reporters to cover their events and report on them, they would be allowed to do so. The farmers were therefore advised to extend their association organisations so that these larger bodies would be capable of holding press conferences to speak about the challenges facing agricultural business for the attention of the media. The farmers were assured of prompt response if they called any journalists.

The lack of a general will by Ghanaian farmers, civil servants and politicians to divulge information also came up strongly. Most journalists noted that this phenomenon made newsgathering very difficult in Ghana. There was currently no freedom according to a right to information Bill in Ghana to protect Ghanaians against victimization, hence most people were afraid to speak to journalist even if they had genuine concerns. Also, it seemed that there was too much control of the media by politicians. Most journalists observed that the majority of the media houses were funded by politicians, which is an indication that most news agendas are established by politicians for journalists. This implies that most media house kowtow to these politicians in fear that they might withdraw their financial support, which is an act which smacks of the manipulative use of the media as a tool for their nefarious purposes by politicians.

Although, the discussions between the farmers and journalists demonstrated that the journalists were not doing enough to advance the course of farmers, the situation was not completely hopeless. Both groups experienced their own challenges. For example, the farmers seemed to be unaware of important benefits that they could derive from the media. They were also unaware of how they could reach the media. Also, they did not generate or perhaps did not know how to generate enough news for journalists to report. The journalists on the other hand had serious challenges, but these challenges may easily be overcome through regular dialogue, collaboration and consensus building.

The above findings reiterate the need for collaboration between the two groups to stimulate healthy relationships for the advancement of society in general and for the growth of the agriculture sector in Ghana in particular [26]. Discussions of farmers' problems must be stimulated at community level through active interactions with other communities to find lasting solutions that people can own [27]. Participatory communication brings about discussion between groups and the exchange of information through dialogue to bring about the empowerment of local people [19,28]. Dialogue is therefore a cardinal principle of participation [29]. Additionally, participation necessitates listening and the building of trust, thereby reducing the social distance between participants who have a common goal. It also facilitates a more equitable exchange of ideas, knowledge and experiences to help advance the condition of the poor or marginalized in society [12]. In the current study, an additional achievement of this important interaction was the creation of an appropriate platform for farmers and journalists to learn about the need to form bigger associations to generate a stronger voice. Also, through their discussions, both groups gained an awareness of how each group's actions affected the other, and therefore capacity building occurred in both groups. Capacity building is an important principle of participatory communication and it has everything to do with local people coming together to deliberate on finding solutions to common societal problems [30,31]. The engagement of groups in useful discourse is central to the building of capacity of local people [32-34].

During their deliberations, there were instances when each group

tried to lay blame on the other. However, after a series of discussions and negotiations, there was mutual agreement on possible areas of cooperation between the two groups to overcome the shortfalls that had been identified. Raelin [35] observes that deliberations during participatory processes have a close link with dialogue, except that the focus is more on decision making through collective processes. He states that dialogue “supports democratic leadership at a core interpersonal level in which participants learn to engage through a reflective practice that allows them to observe and experiment with their own collective tacit processes in action” [35]. Participatory communication has been touted to have the potential of facilitating dialogue between groups in a bid to understand each other’s setting. It has also been utilised to reach common ground for mutual benefit [36]. In this context, interaction gave a voice to farmers who seemed to be a marginalised group and therefore reluctant to speak up. Giving voice to marginalised people does not only involve the capturing of these people’s concerns, but making conscious efforts to address their concerns [37]. Participatory communication also has the potential to bring groups together to identify their problems and to plan on how to overcome those bottlenecks [38].

Another important element of participatory communication that was encouraged by this study was the space that was created for diverse interest groups to engage in dialogue. Through this exercise, both groups got to understand each other better, and they managed to reach agreement on ways of identifying and overcoming challenges that hinder their progress [18,19]. Dialogue also allowed both groups to develop important skills such as cooperation, respect for one another, conflict resolution processes, and consensus building for the advancement of each group [39-41].

Conclusion

The extent to which the interaction through dialogue between the two groups exposed the inadequacies that plagued each party, and the subsequent agreement to work collaboratively in order to overcome their respective challenges, suggest that participatory communication holds great potential for the Ghanaian media in terms of agricultural news coverage. However, before the envisaged full potential can be reached, certain conditions must be met. One is that there should be regular workshops where farmers and journalists interact so that both parties may engage in deliberations on the improvement of news coverage by the media in terms of the agriculture sector. Such a workshop will also aid both groups to review possible areas of cooperation or conflict. Moreover, because it seems impossible to have journalists visiting farming communities regularly, farmers could be taken through basic journalistic procedures to learn how to identify newsworthy stories and do some brief write-ups of about a paragraph or two. They could then forward these stories to reporters using social media applications such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, and Instagram. There should also be serious advocacy to ensure that agriculture is placed on the priority list of media houses in Ghana. Farmers should also form bigger associations instead retaining smaller associations so that they can pool financial resources to organise development and awareness programs and hold press conferences. These activities will naturally draw media attention. Newspaper owners should also be encouraged to dedicate a page in dailies to agricultural news coverage and to employ beat reporters solely for agriculture. Such reporters should be supported financially to travel to rural communities or market centres in search of agricultural news. Some journalists suggested that a separate newspaper could be launched solely for agriculture. Countries like the US, Canada, India and other African countries like Kenya, Uganda and Botswana have

separate newspapers for agriculture, and in this way agriculture could be getting more attention.

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