

Media matters in poverty and starvation matters



By [Thabani Khumalo](#)

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Poverty is currently humanity's greatest scandal and scourge and one of the top challenges of the century. It is the primary cause of hunger, anger, misery, desperation, frustration, disease, death, violence and wars. As a result it poses the greatest threat to global democracy, development, peace and prosperity.

Hence global communities, through 16-17 October are united in the struggle against poverty. In 1980, the General Assembly endorsed observance of the World Food Day (16 October) in consideration of the fact that "food is a requisite for human survival and well-being and a fundamental human necessity" (resolution 35/70 of 5 December 1980). The International Day for the Eradication of Poverty (17 October) has been observed every year since 1993, when the General Assembly, by resolution 47/196, designated this day to promote awareness of the need to eradicate poverty and destitution in all countries, particularly in developing countries - a need that has become a development priority. Notably, this year's events come amid a global warning about the threatening global food shortages and the rise in food prices.

A call for development journalism

The days (October 16 and 17) aim at promoting the importance of a truly global anti-poverty movement where both developed and developing countries, global rich and poor citizens, urban and rural areas, business and governments, and traditional and modern institutions can work together in pushing back the frontiers of poverty. Another important player that is expected to make a significant contribution in heightening public awareness of the world food problem and strengthening solidarity in the struggle against hunger, malnutrition and poverty is media.

Coincidentally, on 19 October, South Africans observe the "Black Wednesday", the day when three country's newspapers - the *World*, *Weekend World* and the *Voice* - were banned by the apartheid government. Increasingly, this presumed role of the media calls for the encouragement of investigative journalism on poverty matters, and a guaranteed media space free from interference, influence, threats and coercive regulations.

Media crucial for development

A number of major international conferences have stressed the important role of media operations in their action plans of achieving sustainable development and a poverty free society. The Earth Summit (1992), International Conference on Population and Development (1994), World Summit for Social Development (1995), Fourth World Conference on Women (1995), and World Food Summit (1996) all called for the strengthening of information, education and communication activities concerning population and sustainable development issues. In short, they advocate a people-centred approach to development, in which free media operations is a crucial component. Against this presumed role of media in the poverty war, it is logical to expect the South African media to play an active role in raising awareness of all evil actions by our society that exacerbates poverty, as well as successful poverty alleviation initiatives delivered so far.

Free media and poverty inseparable

There is a strong evidence to indicate a connection between a free media and the elimination of poverty. In his book *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (1981) Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen argues that no famine has ever taken place in a country with a democratic constitution and free media. He argues, "Famine occurs not from lack of food, but from inequalities built into its distribution. Fix that reality and half the famine problem is resolved".

It is on record that his work on the causes of poverty led to the development of practical solutions for preventing or limiting the effects of real or perceived shortages of food. This is an important lesson that our government, business, media and

civil society movement would do well to learn. We therefore need to ensure that the constitutional right and the power of a free media are utilized as an important tool for the alleviation and eradication of poverty. Cosatu is correct that any attempt that is aimed at "intimidating the media into not exposing crime, corruption, incompetency, or waste of money" (all causes of poverty) needs to be challenged, resisted and defeated. Simply put media matters most when it comes to poverty and starvation matters.

Questions about media

The current resistance by civil society organisations against the Protection of State Information and Media Appeal Tribunal are an indication that citizens embrace media as of strategic importance in sustaining democracy, accelerating development, fighting poverty, and in promoting enlightenment and civilization. Such a strong endorsement of the fundamental role of the media within a democratic society demands that we:

- aggressively protect the media's constitutional guaranteed freedom, and
- deliberately, regularly and consistently seek answers to a variety of questions to determine whether our media is succeeding in delivering its Constitutional mandate.

If we aim to push back the frontiers of poverty and underdevelopment afflicting a sizeable number of citizens, there are crucial questions that need to be asked time and again. Are sufficient media resources devoted to poverty reporting? Do media expose those responsible for perpetrating poverty? Do media put enough pressure on leaders to account on poverty afflicting citizens?

Reporting poverty thoroughly

Media is an important player in the fight against poverty. It is therefore duty-bound to report this major public interest issue objectively, consistently and thoroughly and without fear or favour. Studies have proved that government and public responses to poverty depend on how media report the issue. Given the media's constitutional mandate and societal responsibilities, poverty should be at the top of its reporting priority. The media, through sustained and consistent coverage, can prompt government, business and privileged citizens into more substantive action by bringing the weight of public opinion to bear on them. But the media's role is not widely understood and is often overlooked by some media houses. Some believe that reporting on poverty is part of their businesses' social investment programs whereas this responsibility is the core mandate of media's constitution right.

Media's crucial contribution to poverty

While poverty includes lack of access to basic human needs, such as decent shelter, clean water, power, nutrition, health care, education, opportunities, choice, clothing and food, it also includes lack of information and knowledge. The media's crucial contribution to poverty reduction can include:

- mainstreaming poverty news, such as features involving new angles and hard-hitting human and regional stories, alongside core issues of interest to the media such as politics, economics, business, governance, conflict, corruption and crime.
- empowering disadvantaged people and regions by bringing their plight to the notice of the government, business and aid agencies,
- informing a wide range of audiences on poverty reduction issues,
- providing an open debate to reflect different public views, including those of affected people,
- scrutinising and holding responsible institutions and individuals to account, and
- exposing abuses and issues within society that cause or exacerbate poverty. These include maladministration, corruption, unequal distribution of resources, extreme income and wealth inequalities, insufficient provision of basic services, environmental destruction, employees' exploitation and others matters.

There are instances where governments, business and aid agencies are unable to help those who needed help because

they are unaware of the gravity of poverty, particularly in remote rural areas.

Empowering the downtrodden

It is my hope that October poverty awareness campaigns would encourage our media to move away from being purveyors of sensationalism, private agendas and scurrilous gossip that could only deceive, confuse and mislead citizens - and go back to being the custodian of enlightenment, democracy and public trustees of society. Media should focus more on becoming a valuable and indispensable stakeholder in the global and country's efforts to fight the scourge of poverty. By doing so, the media will truly be empowering the downtrodden, providing an immense service to society, and creating a peaceful and prosperous planet. An old adage says, "The duty of media is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable." But this seems sadly out of date in today's media context which is pre-occupied with inculcating and defending the interests of the elite.

Despite political and commercial pressures

It is an open secret that key challenges and constraints facing the media are political and commercial pressures and resource limitations. As much as media has a responsibility to generate revenues to sustain itself, media has an even higher responsibility to serve the constitution and society - and to help those who are not wealthy, glamorous, fortunate nor famous.

The poor society has been ignored for the most part by the media because poverty reduction may not be seen as an 'attractive' and 'selling' subject. Unless it is a disaster of epic proportions, the media generally tends to ignore the plight of the poorest of the poor. For government, it is crucial that it allows the media to perform its constitutional duty without pressure, influence or interference. As Media Studies Prof Tawana Kupe puts it "The freedom of the media should never be undermined by political power, economic imperative or journalistic excesses because when it is lost, everyone will be a loser."

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