Africa Transport Technical Notes

Sub-Saharan Africa Transport Policy Program (SSATP) Road Maintenance Initiative (RMI)
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# Media Dissemination of Road Sector Reforms

Over the past five years, the “second liberalization” of Africa has liberalized the local media in turn. The explosion of media outlets and the diversity of their outreach provide excellent opportunities for the dissemination to, and ownership of development policies, programs, and projects by the stakeholders and beneficiaries.

While the practice of participatory development in Africa is relatively new, the practice of using the media as a development tool, especially as a means of facilitating discussion, is even newer. Policymakers view exposing development programs and projects in the public domain via the media with some trepidation. This fear arises, not so much from a fear of public debate, as from the view that “experts” already know all the answers, in the form of feasibility studies, technical and analytical reports, and participatory rural appraisals.

## Inviting Public Debate

The media are traditionally viewed as “outsiders” to the development process, and their potential impact on policy is uncertain. The opinions and positions of the “development community” are usually well-known, but the media is capable of reaching a much larger audience, some of whom may not have a development mind set. Asking the local media to contribute to the reform process means going beyond key informant interviews, field visits, participatory rural appraisals, analytical reports, and dissemination seminars. Discussion that was once limited to insiders now becomes a subject of national, regional, and even world-wide debate.

Development professionals may feel that by allowing the media to play a more active role in the reform process, they are relinquishing control of the debate, possibly to the detriment of their intended objectives. When controversies are debated under the public’s eye, there is much less chance that an issue will be relegated to the back burner, dropped, or quietly altered. Indeed, close public scrutiny could result in the proposed or ongoing development interventions being suspended, or cancelled all together. The

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This series is intended to share information about issues raised in various SSATP reports. The views expressed in the paper, and in this note, are those of the author, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the World Bank Group,UNECA, or any of the RMI stakeholders.

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fear that media-led public debate extends beyond the manageable interests of the development agencies that initiated them has led to a wariness of involving the media too closely in many reform programs.

### Paying for media interest

The easiest but most expensive method of getting media attention is to buy newspaper space, radio or TV air time. By this method, one prepares all the material beforehand, and simply buys dissemination . Getting advertisers to buy space in the supplement, or sponsor the air time, reduces the cost sharply. The topic and content of the program is chosen by the producer. The producer has to be sufficiently knowledgeable and interested in road sector issues, and be able to find someone who is widely known, in a policy making or influencing position, articulate, and capable of advocating for reforms. The challenge for development professionals is in getting the producer sufficiently excited about road sector reforms so as to make him or her essentially sell the material on behalf of the promoters of the reform.

### "Shotgun"approach to dissemination

Programs that have limited budgets often look for cheaper means of achieving the same end. One of the most common methods, known as the "shot-gun" approach, is to include the media as part of a wider dissemination strategy. Dissemination reports, press releases, memos, and executive summaries can be sent to the media, with the hope that sufficient interest will be generated for them to disseminate the material. This approach can have large payoffs if the subject has human interest and drama. In other words, if the media can see their audience relating to the subject matter directly, see it as newsworthy, and spot a position that they can take in the ongoing debate, especially while making money, they are more likely to embrace the story.

The media must be fully informed as to why changes are necessary, and why those who lose political, administrative or economic control must do so, and why those who will gain should do so. More important, they must be convinced that the intended reforms are going to improve society's well-being.

The rule of thumb here is simple. Old subjects which are already in the public domain and which have created sharp divisions in public opinion can easily be disseminated. New subjects that have not been in the public domain, or that have only recently been introduced, need to have sufficiently controversial or seminal findings for the media to air the story. In other words, do they provide easily "buyable" conceptual and pragmatic content to the stakeholders? Do they challenge the existing order, and enable and empower previously impotent stakeholders, thereby "broadening" and "deepening" power distribution?

Unless some journalists take a personal interest in the story, the material will lie unused and the story untold, unless there is a need for "filler material". Road sector reforms that have critical impacts on the national economy cannot afford to wait for editors and producers to run out of column inches and footage. Policy makers must take a more proactive approach.

### The media as advocate for reform

A third method of getting the media interested is to identify them as a stakeholder, or as the spokesperson for voiceless stakeholders. The inherent danger in this is that the media is no longer a disinterested party, and now identifies with the final outcomes of the proposed interventions. This can be an unsettling experience for many governments and development agencies. Their justification, however, is that the media is performing a public service, and helping contribute towards the overall well-being of society.

How does one make the media "buy-in" to the reforms process? The media must be fully informed as to why changes are necessary, and why those who lose political, administrative or economic control must do so, and why those who will gain should do so. More important, they must be convinced that the intended reforms are going to improve society's well-being. The political economy within which the changes will take place must be easily understood, so that the winning coalitions are seen to be representative of all of society's diverse groupings and long-term interests.

Informed reporting and well-informed analysis can both catalyze and fertilize public debate. Media persons with whom transport policy makers interact should be able to understand the intellectual and technical principles and goals of the activity.

Just as the media can be partisan for the well-being of society, so can it be partisan on behalf of the interests of other groups. In cases where these special interests fear the loss of political or economic control as a result of the proposed programs, and are powerful enough to control or buy access to the media, partisan media may attack the reforms.

The impact and potential of the media to be "negative stakeholders" should not be underestimated. In cases where independent access to radio and TV broadcasting allows for the airing of special interests, sufficient public momentum can be generated to stymie or even roll back the desired reforms. The probability that today's advocate may become tomorrow's adversary and vice versa often makes both the policy makers and the special interest groups wary of employing media advocacy.

### Communicating with the public

Before transport policy makers can enter into a collaborative effort with the media to disseminate road sector reforms, some basic homework is required. To whom should these reforms be disseminated? Which media outlet will be most effective in reaching these target groups? What will the message be, and how must it be articulated so as to be clear and direct to the target audience?

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While very few households own vehicles in Sub-Saharan Africa, virtually everyone uses public service vehicles for travelling or transporting their goods. Thus, financial instruments such as fuel levies, vehicle licences, road tolls, and other types of tariffs are peripheral issues to such a target group. Their core interests lie instead in cheaper, more efficient, and safer public transport. Road sector reform should be linked directly to such specifics as reduced fares and tariffs, shorter travel times, greater rural outreach, and reduced road hazards and carnage.

The dissemination strategy should inform the constituency of progress being made by the reforms, in particular as new systems are put in place. TV footage and radio air time documenting actual improvements should provide concrete evidence that the public's support of the programs was well-placed. Feature articles, together with critical opinion pieces, all contribute to the public's awareness of how the reforms continue to benefit them. One thing is certain, however, and that is, that neither technical jargon nor development lingo should be allowed to creep into the media campaign.

### Vested interests

Vehicle owners are the stakeholders whose pockets bear the brunt of road sector financing, and the brunt of poorly maintained roads. They are at once the most sceptical of any reforms, while also being potentially the most effective public opinion lobby for reform implementation.

This group pays the fuel taxes, vehicle licences, road tolls, and other tariffs that might comprise the reform. They form the core of national taxpayers,thereby contributing indirectly to national programs through income and value-added taxes. They are the most vocal interest group, and have the most media exposure. They are also the opinion-makers, policy analysts, project officers, professionals, farmers, businesspersons, and policy makers. They are owners, editors and writers in the papers, magazines, radio stations, TV stations, and on the Internet. The public opinion battle for road sector reform is probably most fiercely fought for, and won or lost because of, this constituency.

This group will want to know why they must pay more money in order to keep a "public good" (roads) in good shape. They will want to know just what their role, influence and authority will be if they do agree to join administrative bodies such as a roads advisory board or road funds board. They will need to be convinced that roads can be a "market good", and that "commercializing" roads will provide them with good value for money.

The Road Maintenance Initiative (RMI) was launched in 1988 by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) and the World Bank, under the auspices of the Sub-Saharan Africa Transport Policy Program (SSATP). The countries taking part in the RMI are Cameroon, Kenya, Madagascar, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Others receiving assistance from the program include Benin, Ethiopia, Ghana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, and Togo. RMI is administered by the World Bank's Africa Region, and is co-financed with the governments of Denmark, France, Germany, Japan, the Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland, and the European Union. France, Japan, and Norway provide senior staff members to work on the Program.

The media is most interested in whatever this target group is interested in, since they are traditionally the most important market segment. What this vested group is interested in, is what the media will sell. If there is no discernible interest in the reform among this group, whether it be in favor or opposed, the media will most likely ignore the story all together.

## The constituency of policymakers

Finally, policy makers may be the most difficult target group to reach. They may personally believe the need for reform, but they are also keenly aware of public opinion, and the socio-political costs of reform. They know that efficiency is not the only criteria by which society's are governed. Policymakers are interested in knowing the trade-offs that must be made in order to satisfy as broad of an array of special interests as possible, while at the same time maintaining the coalitions of power that already exist, and keeping the political costs at a minimum. If public opinion is solidly behind the road sector reforms, public policy reluctance to implement these reforms must be read in the socio-political context.