

Customs Media Partnership: Building Synergy Towards National Development

By Gbenga Adefaye

It is an honour and privilege indeed, to be here talking to the leadership and men of the Nigerian Customs Service (NCS), one of the most modern organizations in Nigeria today - thanks to the years of reform. I have called the Nigerian Customs Service (NCS) one of the most modern for good reasons.

It is a natural thing today, when you are challenged to initiate or participate in a discourse of the type that we are here assembled, to check up facts, figures and viewpoints about the subject or individual on the World Wide Web. And if it is about a subject with fiducial responsibility like the Nigerian Customs Service, to seek to know its mandate and how that is being met. It is all about finding out the commitment to openness, transparency, accountability and global best practice.

I did exactly that in this instance, having taken in a whole dosage of the critique of the system by the Coordinating Minister of the Economy and Finance Minister, Dr. Ngozi Okonjo Iweala in her book: REFORMING THE UNREFORMABLE- Lessons from Nigeria.

The Finance Minister had a lot to say about the Nigerian Customs Service reform programme, lethargy and the progress report. Her conclusion was that with commitment to modernisation, there are promises of greatness, especially with a progressive minded leadership, conscious of the important role that the Customs plays in trade and economic development of the country.

To Google up the Nigerian Customs Service on the World Wide Web was interesting. What was the yield? The extent of the Open Data regime was as impressive that one may conclude that you can almost get all you need to know- about what you need to do concerning Excise And Duties and the revenue to the state at the touch of a button.

Perhaps, conscious of the people's perception, the Nigerian Customs Service of today is sufficiently proactive in telling its own story through a deliberate and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between self and its publics or stakeholders. We see in its several media programmes on the electronic platforms and the print media, not the ad hoc, knee jerk, reactive event but a process- a planned programme of action of attention, deliberation, research, anticipation, analyses to achieve a positive perception of the Nigerian Customs Service. It is a collaboration with the media that also economically empowers the media.

Here, we are talking about engaging the various publics - government, businesses, etc; about engaging for value. Not about lying and selling falsehood, denying every statement that does not favour your Organisation or prevarication but about telling the truth, even if on a need-to-know basis.

Putting in the public domain all the facts, the rules, the processes and the procedures, in your own words, choosing the appropriate register and NOT being reactive to a bad press, the Nigerian Custom Service can be said to be running a 'newsroom'. Still as a work-in-progress I believe, the NCS website is what we call a stand-alone which may be very helpful only to the stakeholders who know of its existence. Yet, the site can still do with some more interactivity and back link to some very popular websites; if only to make the information contained therein go viral. It can be such that the media may become dependent on it for major information, at critical times.

I think that the Comptroller General of the Customs, Alhaji Abudullahi Dikko Inde deserves some accolades for the revolutionary open data regime around the Nigerian Customs Service. On the site, I saw trust and confidence and came out with a conviction that perhaps the Nigerian Customs Service really has nothing to hide and so would not obfuscate the facts. I saw compliance with global best practice about openness and disclosure which should confirm that the reform is working for the Customs.

I have read together with the milestones of achievements, the six-point agenda of the Controller General: capacity building, moral rebirth for discipline and integrity in the service, improved welfare for officers and men, consolidating on the current e-Customs

through Asycuda for International Best Practices especially upgrade of the Asycuda project via

e- SGD (DTI Direct Trade Input), e – Manifest , e – Payment ,e – Notification to Government Control Agencies , e – Government Platform for single window to stakeholders in International trade, ASYCUDA, warming up to immigrate from 3.0 to ASYCUDA World, e - Release ,e – Provision of Nigeria Customs Service National Private Telecom Network; Continued collaboration and partnering with stakeholders and international organizations and a very robust public relations practice

But I am not too surprised though. If a CGS Abdullahi Dikko Inde with the right education in economics and finance, and an eclectic industry experience, is leading a charge under a World Bank experienced supervisory Minister of Finance and Coordinating Minister of the Economy of the the stature of Dr. Ngozi Okonjo Iweala, you can only have a model for an open data regime that makes the application of the Freedom of Information Act the easiest of assignments.

The Nigerian Customs Service had a history. And it used to suffer a negative perception which saw a lot of its inadequacies celebrated by the government, the public and the press. Being a creation of the law without any ambivalence about its mandate, the public and the press are always able to come to certain conclusions about the Nigerian Customs Service.

The media also has a history and own prejudices. Progressive, for the people, NOT necessarily against the leadership, but questioning enough to the point of irritation. Nigeria has never had a pliant press, although like the NGS, some of it is also often accused of corruption. Some would even describe its vibrancy and progressiveness as aggressiveness, and in the days of closet regime, abrasive. But that is not to say that the media here cannot be biased towards those who, generally, trust its integrity and are positively disposed to a good governance regime. The media can be your regular partner, once there is an agreement on the common interest- the national interest. Having been established under the Fundamental Rights section of the 1999 Constitution in section 39: [\(1\)](#) Every person shall be entitled to freedom of expression, including

freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart ideas and information without interference.

(2) Without prejudice to the generality of subsection (1) of this section, every person shall be entitled to own, establish and operate any medium for the dissemination of information, ideas and opinions:

Provided that no person, other than the Government of the Federation or of a State or any other person or body authorised by the President on the fulfilment of conditions laid down by an Act of the National Assembly, shall own, establish or operate a television or wireless broadcasting station for, any purpose whatsoever.

(3) Nothing in this section shall invalidate any law that is reasonably justifiable in a democratic society -

- (a) for the purpose of preventing the disclosure of information received in confidence, maintaining the authority and independence of courts or regulating telephony, wireless broadcasting, television or the exhibition of cinematograph films; or
- (b) imposing restrictions upon persons holding office under the Government of the Federation or of a State, members of the armed forces of the Federation or members of the Nigeria Police Force or other Government security services or agencies established by law.

The media, governed like every other business by the Companies and Allied Matters Act (CAMA) got explicit mandate from the Constitution in Section 22 of the 1999 Constitution to ensure compliance of the non justiciable Fundamental Objectives and Directive Principles of State Policy thus:" The press, radio, television and other

agencies of the mass media shall at all times be free to uphold the fundamental objectives contained in this Chapter and uphold the responsibility and accountability of the Government to the people"

This is a direct charge to enforce compliance with the economic objectives which cover the operation of Nigerian Customs Service as an important agency of the government in Section 15(5) The State shall abolish all corrupt practices and abuse of power.

16. (1) The State shall, within the context of the ideals and objectives for which provisions are made in this Constitution.

- (a) harness the resources of the nation and promote national prosperity and an efficient, a dynamic and self-reliant economy;
- (b) control the national economy in such manner as to secure the maximum welfare, freedom and happiness of every citizen on the basis of social justice and equality of status and opportunity;
- (c) without prejudice to its right to operate or participate in areas of the economy, other than the major sectors of the economy, manage and operate the major sectors of the economy;
- (d) without prejudice to the right of any person to participate in areas of the economy within the major sector of the economy, protect the right of every citizen to engage in any economic activities outside the major sectors of the economy.

(2) The State shall direct its policy towards ensuring:

- (a) the promotion of a planned and balanced economic development;
- (b) that the material resources of the nation are harnessed and distributed as best as possible to serve the common good;
- (c) that the economic system is not operated in such a manner as to permit the concentration of wealth or the means of production and exchange in the hands of few individuals or of a group; and
- (d) that suitable and adequate shelter, suitable and adequate food,

reasonable national minimum living wage, old age care and pensions, and unemployment, sick benefits and welfare of the disabled are provided for all citizens.

The operation of the press - either as a business for profit or as a social service as exemplified in public ownership, is particularly interesting because its plurality, is especially reflective of the diversity of the our dear country Nigeria.

So like it is with the Customs, which derived its mandate from the law, the media also has an explicit mandate given it by the grundnorm - the Constitution.

Unless there is a clear understanding and respect for the roles of each and there is a concrete effort to build a partnership, the relationship can be adversarial. The good news here is that the sixth point of the CGS agenda has been successful to the point of massive gains in the Customs/Media partnership.

Back to the profile of the Nigerian Customs Service, (see the [www](#).) since its coming into being in 1891, Nigeria Customs Service has been saddled with the responsibilities of revenue collection, accounting for same and conducting anti-smuggling activities. This is a daunting charge because of the temptation inherent in such mandate and attendant suspicion that goes with handling money.

Today trade facilitation has become a fundamental role, progressively seen by government as an important element of economic policy, with Customs having a unique position within the hub of the international supply chain of goods and services. Consequently, one of the challenges to Nigeria Customs Service is the proactive management of the seeming contradictory role of ensuring improvements in speedy delivery of services, while maintaining systematic and effective intervention controls, necessary to meet the demands of complex and growing international trade, characterized in recent times by economic crime, money laundering, menace of terrorism, threatening weapons of mass destruction, violation of intellectual property rights, and dumping of toxic and hazardous substances.

It is apparent therefore, that Nigeria Customs Service that has for long been a steward

of the nation's trade and border management is not only under pressure like never before, but now has an enlarged role to perform at the highest levels, to facilitate legitimate trade in a global environment harbouring a litany of threats. Nigeria Customs Service has the mission to provide services in ways that maximize efficiency and promote trade competitiveness wherein declarations are promptly processed.

Now if the NCS is to excel in the efficient and timely collection of and accounting for Import and Excise Duties as well as prevention and suppression of smuggling; Implementation of and advise on Governmental trade and fiscal policies; Promotion of trade facilitation; Protection of Nigerian society, generation of accurate and precise statistical data for planning purposes by developing a professional, transparent administration that implements international best practices and obligations, it certainly needs a trusting platform in the media that engenders a people's buy- in and not opposition to progressive accomplishments. A critical yet focused media, MUST be cultivated both as a management function because the CGS is the No 1 image maker of the Organisation as well as a service-wide function. Everyone, officers and men, by their deeds impact on the relationship and perception project.

If the NCS must Implement Government Fiscal Measures; Implement bilateral and multilateral agreements entered into by government; perform Collaborative functions with government Agencies including CBN, Police, NDLEA, SON, NAFDAC, FIRS, etc. supports the combating of Illegal commercial activities and trade in illicit goods, e.g. import of fake and sub-standard goods, Infraction on Intellectual Property Rights, Illegal international trade in endangered species, Illegal trade in arms and ammunitions; fight Money laundering and Traffic of illicit drugs; Illegal trade in cultural Artifacts; Importation of pornographic materials and Importation of toxic and hazardous substances, then the media which is charged with the responsibility of holding accountable the NCS, like the National Assembly, must be on same page with it in an enlightened relationship.

I can understand the leadership of the Nigerian Custom Service being conscious of its

paramilitary status and therefore avoiding making itself a victim of media overreach, yet it must work with the media, service-wide, as a constitutional demand as well as a good business positioning.

The NCS has done very well with its several media outreach Programmes. Over the years, I believe it has generated a near captive audience that can only be attentive to its messages. It has built a most interesting website. But it can do more more: To maximize buy-in for national development through the media, the service must up its ante with two distinct but related strategies of pull and push marketing. First, it must acquire new prospects and build stronger relationships using push marketing strategies. Afterall, the NCS is like the business arm of government. These strategies use e-mail, e-newsletters, direct mail, telemarketing and other channels to push a message of modernity, increased revenue drive for the nation. Where there is a mandate, there must be milestones of achievement.

Pull marketing is very different. This focuses on attracting prospects who are already active in the "Electronic Ethernet". It integrates community website landing pages, Search Engine Optimization [SEO], partnership Programmes , banner ads, RSS Newsfeeds, Blogs, Forums, and other strategic elements to attract prospects to pages specifically developed to engage them online. The traditional media can take benefits from this. Because these people already have an identified need, success depends on your ability to give them the tools, information, expertise, and products they need to address their desires.

Do I add that there is also the need to add that direct mail, handouts, brochures and advertising to complement the above.

At the end of it all, that synergy would help in the realization of the most formidable input-output-outcome process that puts all the facts on the table and provides model for tackling challenges as they come would be the model for Customs media partnership.

I am happy to be here. I wished that more people in the leadership of the media have been privileged to join in this interaction on a one-on-one basis, to put faces to the work being done in NCS, appreciate the work that you are doing and the premium that you place on the positive roles that the media can play in making a reality of the mandate of the NCS.

Thank you for your attention.

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