

## COMMERCIAL IMPERATIVES AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS ON THE COMMUNITY NEWSPAPER GROUP: THE CASE OF *THE TIMES* AND *MASVINGO STAR*

By

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### Abstract

*The paper explores principles that led to the birth of Zimbabwe Mass Media Trust [ZMMT] in general and its subsidiary, the Community Newspaper Group [CNG]. The identity and performance of CNG's newspapers is examined. With special focus on **The Times** and **Masvingo Star**, the paper's thrust is CNG's transformation from being a rural public sphere to that of urban dwellers. Within the context of critical political economy of the media, and making references to forces that shaped the British working class press, the paper argues that, before its restructuring, the CNG had been an ailing group because of its weak capital base and managerial incompetence. Inadequate funding forced the CNG to operate with minimal provisions and a revised philosophy tilted in favor of urban readership that interests advertisers. Such commercial imperatives undermined the newspapers' endeavour to create a rural public sphere. Acceptance of business/commercial logic excluded rural folks in both coverage and distribution. The paper concludes that future rural press projects must have proper levels of initial capital, equipment and staffing so that there is no desperate craving for advertisers' revenue for basic sustenance. This raises important questions about the role of the media in society generally and community media specifically in facilitating development support communication in a country like Zimbabwe.*

### Introduction

Like most former colonies, at the attainment of independence, the Zimbabwean government formulated and implemented policies geared towards establishing what can be described as a pro-people media system. This was mainly pronounced with reference to print media as part of country's endeavor to consolidate the newly attained self rule status. The agenda was to decolonise the media and democratise the flow of information within the country and in relation to the international community. This led to the establishment the initial rural press project and subsequently, the creation of the Community Newspaper Group [CNG] in 1988. This paper explores how this noble media project fared in terms of performance with specific reference to *The Times* and *Masvingo Star* with some intermittent comments on the rest of the CNG titles.

### The Zimbabwe Mass Media Trust

The ZMMT [hereafter referred to as the Trust] was established by the government through a Notarial Deed of Donation and Trust in January 1981 as part of the government's larger

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project to localise both ownership and control of the nation's media. The policy thrust was for the Trust should to insulate the media from political manipulation and become mass-oriented and nationally accessible. The Trust, which was formed as a public entity to "safeguard the welfare of the people of Zimbabwe as a whole" was supposed to be a non-government, non-party and non-profit making [ZMMT's 1986 information brochure].

### **Zimbabwe's Media Policy at Independence**

At the attainment of independence, Zimbabwe's largely undocumented media policy was a pro-people and development oriented. In line with such policy aspirations there was a lot of talk about "taking newspapers to the people." For example, the then managing director of Zimbabwe Newspapers, Elias Rusike said, "it was the company's wish to see its newspapers getting to every village, every growth point and every town because Zimbabwe's population is predominantly in the rural areas." [*The Herald*, "Taking papers to the people" 03-08-1984].

He added:

Our policy in Zimbabwe Newspapers is to make sure that the people and the peasants in the rural areas are kept informed of what the Government is doing, what the leadership is doing and to inform them of what people like themselves are doing (Ibid.)

Such thinking was at the core of Zimbabwe's media policies in the early 1980s. It should be noted that just like in broadcasting, the government during that time dominated and still dominates the ownership and control of mainstream print media and the ZMMT was, and is, still at the center of the administration of the public print media.

### **Early Attempts at Rural Newspaper Project**

Initial efforts to establish community newspapers were made first by the government, through the then Ministries of Information and that of Local Government. The ZMMT began its own rural newspaper project in May 1983 with the launch of fortnightly *The Murehwa News* with a print run of 4 000 copies. The Canadian International Development Agency funded the procurement of assets while the Trust covered the cost of the editor's salary and other recurrent expenses (Saunders, 1991: 91). The *Mutoko News* was their next publication and plans were under way to expand the project to all the country's fifty-one districts (*The Herald*: 'District papers planned for 51 areas' 17-09-1983). The objective was to set up a rural public sphere and democratise the domestic information order hence initiate and support development.

The editorial thrust and philosophy of the planned rural newspaper empire was announced by M. A. Marere, the then executive secretary of ZMMT. He said:

The Mutoko rural press must be able to convey to the government and the people of Zimbabwe the views of Mutoko on national issues and issues that affect Mutoko. The press in any developing country has a major role to play in national development ... The press has the duty to inform the people of what the government is doing and to tell the government what the people want. Let **Mutoko News** do this for people in Mutoko. We are sure you will want to read this paper because it relates to you and your environment. The press should be used by the people of Mutoko, for the people of Mutoko (*Mutoko News* No. 1, 12 July 1983. [insert] 'A Message from Cde M. A. Marere.'

However, the project did not expand beyond the two newspapers because of financial viability problems. In any case, there was little likelihood of the *Murehwa News* attaining commercial viability and financial self-sustenance, as long as its production quality and management was maintained at subsistence level, and its cover price held down to keep it affordable. The advertising support attracted by the paper came irregularly, and in insufficient volumes to finance the paper (Saunders, 1991: 92). As a result, when the ZMMT withdrew its financial support in 1986, the *Murehwa News* folded, two years after its sister paper, *Mutoko News* had ceased publishing.

By 1985 ZMMT and the then Ministry of Information had already mooted another rural press project at provincial level. This was the genesis of CNG.

### **The Community Newspaper Group**

In line with the noted media policies of the 1980's, the government unveiled a proposal to set up a group of rural newspapers that would fulfil its long cherished dream of covering the whole country. At the core of the proposal was the establishment of rural newspapers in each of the country's eight provincial administrative capitals. The proposal, that was referred to as The Zimbabwe Rural Press Project, was supposed to be implemented in phases largely supported by donor funding and the ZMMT co-ordinating the project on behalf of the government. The project was funded from Germany, the Netherlands and Switzerland through UNESCO (Lundby, 1997: 88).

The project was anchored on the following justification as stated in the project document:

The main development objective of the Government of Zimbabwe, as enunciated in the first five-year development Plan (1986 - 1990), is the development of a "domestic, egalitarian and socialist society in Zimbabwe". In pursuit of this long-term objective, the government has declared its commitment to the development of the rural areas of the country where 80% of the population live, to the provision of education to all sections of the population and to the raising of the standard of living of all, especially for those living in the rural areas of the country.... The establishment of rural newspapers is a vital element of the strategy for the development of effective communication in rural areas. Rural communication is seen as being crucial to the rural development process [UNESCO 1988: 5].

Stated more categorically, the role to be played by the conceived rural newspapers would be to:

1. Develop a permanent two-way flow of communication between the government and all sections of the society as well as between communities and among individuals within those communities
2. Provide active support for development projects
3. Provide suitable reading materials for new literates ( UNESCO 1988:5)

The project's objective of establishing rural newspapers in each of the country's eight provincial administrative capitals was realized between 1988 and 1992. Table 1 below sums up dimensions of the project at the time of its completion.

Name of Newspaper	Established by ZMMT	Year bought by ZMMT	Province covered	Frequency
Chaminuka News	1988	-----	Mashonaland East	Fortnightly
The Nehanda	1988	-----	Mashonaland Central	Fortnightly
Indonsakusa	1988	-----	Matabeleland North	Fortnightly
The Times	-----	1989	Midlands	Weekly
Ilanga	1991	-----	Matabeleland South	Monthly
Masvingo Star	-----	1991	Masvingo	Weekly
Manicaland News	1992	-----	Manicaland	Monthly
Mashonaland West Telegraph	1992	-----	Mashonaland West	Fortnightly

[Source: Lundby, K. 1997]

The rural press project had been fully complimented by the end of 1992 as all the eight planned newspapers were on the streets by the end of that year. Two of the eight newspapers, *The Times* and *Masvingo Star* were acquired while the rest were actually established.

### The Changed Identity of CNG

From 1993 the CNG was significantly different from what it was in 1988. The following is an exploration of forces that activated the organisation's mutation. As noted above, at its inception in 1988, the CNG was financially propped-up by donors. The shared understanding was that donors would support the CNG's take-off, and it would develop to be a self-sustaining business organisation between three and four years. However, CNG was operated as an information service to the community with no emphasis on business viability.

In fact, the donor support was withdrawn in 1993 thereby leaving CNG operating under the ZMMT's wings. According to official documents, CNG was loss making and became a drain to ZMMT because it required substantial financial support in the form of grants for it to remain operational. In a bid to bring in commercial viability, management of the group was revamped in 1996. These changes saw the recruitment of Senior Manager and Sales and Distribution Manager. This significantly increased operating costs but had little, if any, impact at all on revenue. In fact, the changes worsened ZMMT's financial strain. As a result, six of CNG's newspapers were collapsed into three titles and were published fortnightly from 1998 as a cost-cutting measure.

Table 2 below shows the resultant CNG's newspaper stable after the above-noted development.

**Table 2: Newspapers under the Community Newspapers Group by June 1993**

Name of Newspaper	Province covered	Frequency
Indonsakusa Ilanga	Matabeleland North & South	Fortnightly
Manialand Chaminuka News	Mashonaland East & Manicaland	Fortnightly
Nehanda Guadian-Telegraph	Mashonaland Central & West	Fortnightly
Masvingo Star	Masvingo	Weekly
The Times	Midlands	Weekly

[Source: Lundby, K. 1997]

The poly-dimensional implications of this development are discussed later in the paper. Since the performance of the CNG has something to do with the credit line of its parent, the ZMMT, it is important to provide the organization's income statement. Table 4 below is a synopsis of ZMMT's income statement of from 1997 to the year 2000 inclusively.

**Table 4: ZMMT's income statement [1997 - 2000]**

	2000	1999	1998	1997
	Z\$000	Z\$000	Z\$000	Z\$000
Dividends income-quoted	3 907	5 638	14 344	8 613
Unquoted	376	378	430	215
Interest income	6 764	8 973	9 990	2 722
Rent received	902	863	1 184	699
Sundry income	140	12	20	7
Disposal of assets	5 997	-	48	-
<b>TOTAL INCOME</b>	<b>18 086</b>	<b>15 865</b>	<b>26 016</b>	<b>12 255</b>
Grants	11 360	8 531	3 865	4 448
Salaries	5 206	3 807	3 834	1 562
Other expenses	10 015	11 458	13 595	10 719
<b>TOTAL EXPENSES</b>	<b>26 581</b>	<b>23 796</b>	<b>21 294</b>	<b>16 729</b>
<b>NET (DEFICIT) / SURPLUS</b>	<b>(8 494)</b>	<b>(7 931)</b>	<b>4 721</b>	<b>(4 473)</b>
<b>Grants / income</b>	<b>63%</b>	<b>54%</b>	<b>15%</b>	<b>36%</b>
<b>Total expenses / total income</b>	<b>147%</b>	<b>150%</b>	<b>82%</b>	<b>137%</b>
<b>Employee costs / total expense</b>	<b>20%</b>	<b>16%</b>	<b>18%</b>	<b>9%</b>

[Source: Organization's Financial Records - 1997 to 2000]

As reflected in Table 3 above, ZMMT incurred a net operating deficit of Z\$ 7 931 000 and Z\$8 498 000 in 1999 year 2000 and respectively. According to official records of the organisation, this resulted from a significant fall in dividend income from subsidiary companies and under performance of its operating agencies, which were funded by the Trust through grants. While dividend income fell by 70% between 1998 and 2000, grants paid to CNG and ZIANA for the same period increased by 267%.

Related to this, an analysis of ZMMT's balance sheet reveals another sad financial story. By the end of the year 2000, capital reserves of the organisation had been completely wiped out by operating losses. The net asset value of ZMMT was -Z\$78 000 thus denoting insolvency. Current liabilities exceeded current assets by over Z\$18 million.

Given such an unpleasant financial situation, the most appropriate question to ask is what went wrong. The depleted nature of ZMMT's financial base is often accounted for with direct reference to the kind and level of support the organisation has been giving to the under performing ZIANA and CNG. At this point it is worth noting that the financially unviable way of operation of these two organisations is because they were never meant to be profitable in the first place.

It is essentially because of this realization that the ZMMT has undergone corporate restructuring to the effect that the organisation is expanded, diversified and commercialised. Besides the information on the financial position of the ZMMT given above, it is equally important to do the same for the CNG itself and Table 5 below sums up the CNG's financial position from 1997 to 2000.

**Table 5: CNG's Financial Position**

	2000	1999	1998	1997
	Z\$000	Z\$000	Z\$000	Z\$000
Turnover	21 827	11 801	11 067	4 433
Total expenditure	30 960	15 504	13 135	6 149
Employee costs	24 006	9 287	5 387	2 347
Net profit / (Loss)	(18 669)	(11 843)	(2 068)	(1 715)
Capital employed	(5 288)	(1 883)	(1 429)	(413)
Total expenditure/Total income	141%	131%	119%	139%
Total salaries/ Total Expenses	78%	60%	41%	38%

**Source: Organization's financial records - 1997 to 2000**

From 1997 to 2000 operating costs of CNG exceeded total income by between 119% and 141%. As reflected in Table 5 above, employee costs contributed the largest part of the operating costs ranging from 38% to 78% of the total expenses. This was unconventional in light of the fact that in media economics the highest costs of any print media organisation are normally incurred in the procurement of newsprint and not the salary bill. According to the organization's financial documents, the CNG was technically insolvent. The documents also state that shareholders' funds have been wiped off to a debit of Z\$5.2 m in 2000. Current liabilities as at the end of 2000 exceeded current assets by Z\$8.8m. As a result, the CNG cannot pay its obligations without support from the Trust which is equally in financial dire straits.

The issue of how the CNG's individual titles have been performing needs to be explored. Table 6 below reveals the position of the CNG's individual titles for the period January to December 2000.

**TABLE 6: Financial position of CNG's individual titles Jan - Dec 2000(Z\$Million)**

	Head Office	The Times	Masvingo Star	Super Print <sup>1</sup>	Indonsak usa	Chaminuka	Telegraph	Total
Sales	0.077	6.7	3.8	9.1	0.8	0.7	0.7	21.8
Cost of Sales	0.077	3.3	2.1	2.6	0.6	0.5	0.5	9.6
Gross profit	(0.000)	3.4	1.7	6.5	0.2	0.2	0.2	12.2
Total Expend	10.6	5.9	4.8	4.1	2.0	1.8	1.8	30.9
Operating Loss	(10.6)	(2.5)	(3.1)	1.5	(1.8)	(1.6)	(1.6)	(18.7)
Gross profit	-	50%	45%	71%	25%	29%	29%	56%
Expenses/Sales	-	88%	126%	71%	250%	257%	257%	141%

**Source: Organization's Financial Records - 1997 to 2000**

Table 5 above compiled from the organization's documents indicate that all the five community newspapers operated at a deep loss position in year 2000. It should be noted that the average gross profit margin for the six enterprises (including the printing press) of 56% could be referred to as reasonable as it compares well with the industry. However, operating expenses that average 141% of total revenue indicate a low revenue base. Head office expenses that constitute 34% are troubling since there is no production that takes place there. It was so because the head office had redundant posts that did not have direct impact on production such as sales and distribution management. The financial position of the CNG impacted negatively on the group's performance in a number of ways.

### Current Rural Coverage

Among other things, the area that is covered by any media organization's performance has something to do with the organization's financial strength and editorial will. With the noted financial constraints of the CNG, it was not surprising to discover that the organization's news catchment area drastically shrunk. There was a clear bias towards the urban and its immediate environ in both news coverage and the papers' distribution.

Taking the typical example of *The Times*, one notes that on average, at least 60% of the paper's stories cover Gweru urban and its vicinity that comprise Lower Gweru and Shurungwi. These two settlements are within 25km distance from the city of Gweru where the paper's

<sup>1</sup> Superprint is CNG's printing press for all its publications. It is not run commercially hence is also part of organization's financial problems.



main offices and printing press are situated. Other areas covered include Kwekwe, Redcliff and Gokwe urban. *The Times* had a sub-office in Kwekwe manned by one reporter and an advertising representative. *Masvingo Star* is housed in Masvingo town and has a similar sub-office in Chiredzi.

It is important to note that when the two newspapers carried stories from deep rural areas they normally use Zimbabwe Information Service copies or stringers. The problem with stringers is that the majority of them lack the most basic journalistic training hence believe that “news is bad news.” This wrong conceptualization of journalism is abundantly apparent in stories written by stringers. Such stories centered on the bizarre that revolve mainly around witchcraft, incest, murder, homosexuality, bestiality, famine, rape and others of similar editorial inclination.

The papers’ reporters rarely covered rural stories if there is no high profile government ritual taking place there. Normally, events in remote areas are covered when a senior government official goes there on an official tour, something that rarely happens unless there are national elections looming or in progress. This point is evidenced by one of the stories, ‘Governor makes historical visit to Gokwe remote area,’ (*The Times*, 3-9 March 2000).

This is in line with Okimbo’s comment that government and business leaders are more newsworthy than ordinary citizens and that journalists go after them. Not only do they make news by what they say, they make headlines by what they do not do (Okimbo, 1994: 315). One can safely conclude that *The Times* and *Masvingo Star*, just like the rest of CNG publications, fell into the traditional limitations of mainstream media of being both urban and official centered.

Why was it like that? The CNG had the following total staff complement. Head office had 9, *The Times* 13, *Masvingo Star* 10, and *Chaminuka* and *Telegraph* had 3 each. Out of 13 staff members employed by *The Times*, only four (4) worked in the editorial department constituting the editor, deputy editor and two reporters, one at the main office and the other at their Kwekwe sub-office. The advertising department had five staffers. *Masvingo Star* had four editorial staffers and an equal number of advertising personnel. With this low editorial staffing level little that could be expected in terms of coverage of the entire or larger part of the vast administrative provinces they were supposed to cover according to their policy at inception. This handicap was worsened by lack of transport. The CNG had one vehicle for each newspaper. Each newspaper’s vehicle was supposed to be used in the accomplishment of all journalistic, administrative, distribution and other assignments. Besides the vehicles being inadequate, they were said to be old hence both inefficient and unreliable.

It is worth mentioning that these problems are also typical of mainstream media and Ziana. *The Herald*, *Daily News* and Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation, just to mention a few, have one reporter each per province while they have at least fifteen reporters to cover Harare and its vicinity. The immediate result is that there is undue emphasis on the organisations’ immediate environments and massive use of information subsidies from private sector’s public



relations departments together with the government diaries. This excludes a vast array of more newsworthy developments in rural areas where about 80% of the country's population reside.

In a way, the operations of mainstream media in Zimbabwe is similar to that of Kenyan English dailies, weeklies and magazines that are said to be very elitist in their content as they address issues at a level unlikely to be of interest to the ordinary peasant. "In fact, the weeklies and magazines are distributed in Nairobi only and any copies reaching the rural areas do so fortuitously" (Mboroki, 1997: 143).

With reference to the CNG, gravitation towards urban environments has been a result of a financial base that is too weak to support the recruitment of enough reporters and also the purchase of enough equipment for use by those reporters. Also, in media circles, there is an argument that rural folks are of little interest to advertisers hence investing in their substantial coverage constitutes an unnecessary expense.

In fact, rural communities generally have a low net worth. Their low buying power makes them unattractive to most advertisers. Advertising patterns are largely driven by the value of potential business to be transacted with the market segment covered. What counts is not, as is often thought, the sheer size of the audience, but the kind of audience it is, and whether the medium is able to find advertisers who want access to that audience (Williams, 1979: 19). Curran (1977) elaborately develops this point and argues that the British working class press was undermined by the changing economics of the newspaper business whereby the less politically inclined middle-class papers turned to advertisers, instead of readers, as a central source of revenue for sustenance.

It is argued that advertisers avoided the British radical press for economic reasons. Radical newspapers appealed largely to working class readers and in spite of the fact that the papers were widely read, advertisers did not perceive the readers to be a valuable market. To advertisers, reaching smaller numbers of upper or middle class readers seemed to be a better sales strategy than reaching large numbers of working class readers who did not have the necessary resources to buy many of the advertised goods and services (Croteau and Hoynes, 1997: 56). In line with this argument, the British working class can be analogized with the Zimbabwean rural populace.

In line with this, Curran says:

...attention needs to be given to ways in which advertising as a concealed subsidy system has shaped the mass media; and to ways in which the media have adapted to the marketing needs of advertisers in order to compete for those subsidies (Curran, 1981: 44)

Further developing this argument, Sinclair posits that advertisers increasingly have come to seek markets appropriate to their particular products and have so chosen their advertising media according to whether they can give access to the desired 'target' audiences (Sinclair, 1987: 72). He adds that this has had profound effects upon today's patterns of media

development thus largely accounting for the rise and fall of different communication media. A conclusion from these observations is that, “large advertisers do operate as a latterday licensing authority” [Golding and Murdock, 1996: 21]

These observations are central to the understanding of the forces that effected changes in the CNG. What has to be noted, however, is that while some media proclaim and implement changes to attain profitability, the CNG titles have effected numerous changes not for the same goal but to remain afloat in the first place. They have drifted from rural folks to concentrate on the urbanites, the “most wanted” market, to keep their noses above the water. Some of their tactics have been keeping low staffing levels, covering their geographical vicinity, collapsing two publications into one per province and reducing their papers’ print-run.

### **The Newspapers’ Distribution Network**

In the year 2000, the five newspapers published by the CNG had the following circulation: *The Times* 4000, *Masvingo Star* 3000, *Indonsakusa* 2000, *Chaminuka* 2000 and the *Telegraph* also has 2000 while as in 1991, the then six newspapers of CNG had a circulation of 6000 each (ZMMT and CNG Records, 1991). This significant fall is explicable in terms of cost cutting measures.

The shrinkage of the areas covered by newspapers under discussion has been, to a certain extent, directly proportional to the reduction of their distribution network. For example, *The Times* had the following distribution network, 25 selling points in the city of Gweru, Kwekwe 7, Lower Gweru 4, Redcliff 2, Chivhu 2, Nembudziya 1, Zhombe 1, Gokwe growth point 1, Shurugwi 2, Zvishavane 3, Mataga Growth point 1, Mberengwa 1 and Mvuma 4. In terms of rural - urban ratio of the paper’s selling points, rural areas had a total of 14 while urban areas have 39. This makes the ratio 1 : 2,7. This is a general trend in the newspapers group. Newspapers that covered two provinces were even more urban centric because of the vast areas they are supposed to cater for in terms of coverage and distribution.

As alluded to above, the CNG had very poor distribution infrastructure. The one vehicle each title had was grossly inadequate given that on average it took at least three days to deliver the newspaper to selling points throughout the province[s]. In light of the vastness of the provinces and poor state of Zimbabwe’s rural roads, the distribution was by any standard both expensive and irregular. Lack of regularity following logistical inefficiencies and inevitable delays in delivery, negatively impacts on core values of newspaper publishing industry, namely timeliness and reliability. Advertisers are not normally eager to support publications with such ‘notoriety.’ Also, irregularity undermines loyalty among readers.

Besides that, since the circulation of the newspapers is generally low, small numbers of newspapers delivered to remote areas (i.e. Nembudziya Growth Point in Gokwe North about 350km from *The Times* offices) make the organisation incur more costs than revenue. Moreover, no advertising revenue is drawn from there and very few copies are sold there. Distribution problems were worse with regard to the six newspapers that were collapsed into three.

The group's printing press, SuperPrint, is said to be obsolete and incessantly breaking down thereby making the publishing of the newspapers irregular. For example, *The Times* could not be published on September 25 1998 because of a breakdown of machinery. It was only printed five days later [*Zimbabwe Independent*, 'Community Newspaper Group faces collapse' 16-10-1998:].

### **Final Remarks on CNG**

If the rural newspaper project was established to develop a permanent two-way flow of information between the government and all sections of the society as well as between communities and among individuals within those communities; provide active support for development projects together with suitable reading materials for new literates as presented earlier on, then the project flopped. It failed because it was undercapitalized in the first place and devoid of a business approach. In an effort to chase the precious advertisers' dollar, the project derailed from its rural thrust thereby narrowing CNG's field of public discourse and representation.

The CNG's public cultural space shrunk considerably from what it was at the organization's inception thereby undermining its original mandate of providing a public sphere for the rural folks to the effect that they fully exercise their citizenship. Due to economic imperatives, the rural populace was slowly marginalised from the core concerns of the CNG to the inconsequential periphery. Such commercial dynamics are central to the concerns of critical political economy which, "sets out to show how different ways of financing and organising cultural production have traceable consequences for the range of discourses and representations in the public and for the audiences' access to them" (Golding and Murdoch, 1996: 11). Economic dynamics that impact on the range and diversity of public cultural expression, and its availability to different social groups constitute what one scholar referred to as "the conditions of a practice" that deserve our focus and scrutiny (Williams, 1980: 48).

### **ZMMT's Corporate Restructuring**

Corporate restructuring of ZMMT and the CNG that started in 2002 was based on the fact that the two were commercial failures although the latter was worse. Management failed to run the CNG project on a commercial basis and consistently incurred losses over years. ZIANA, which also fell under ZMMT endured similar administrative and financial failures. Something needed to be done. The CNG could not be left to fold and could neither be sold given the potential they have in terms of mobilizing the all-important rural populace. In any case, the current Zimbabwean government does not entertain any ideas leading to their desertion of rural publics given their pivotal importance in the outcome of the country's electoral processes. If anything, access to the rural populace is guarded jealously.

In light of the noted perennial problems of the ZMMT and related problems of the CNG, from 2002 the two organisations started being restructured in order to accord them corporate identities that could possibly revive their financial fortunes. Although ZMMT remained the ultimate holding Trust the process led to the creation of New Ziana [Pvt.] [Ltd.] with Ziana

News Agency (ZINA), Community Newspaper Publisher (CNP), and Ziana Radio and Television (ZiRT). These ZMMT's subsidiaries will be run as business units.

The [supposedly] commercially driven CNP is the successor of CNG. In spite of the CNP's business thrust, it is supposed to cater for the needs of rural communities in terms of their access to community newspapers. According to the project's papers, in case the project flops again, the government is tasked to finance the CNP's social obligation of bringing newspapers to rural communities.

In line with traditional thinking that people want to read about themselves, the CNP, which is already in operation, was tasked to have newspapers whose editorial content is sensitive to the news needs of local communities as a way of ensuring their relevancy to readers. According to the organization's papers, Zina News Agency is going to be the main news feeder, not only to the CNP, but also to New Ziana's other business units. The news agency will also supply news to international and regional news agencies as well as to other interested local media organisations.

### **Conclusion**

As argued above, it is now public knowledge that the CNG project failed. This was because of economic and administrative reasons. This conclusion is, to a great extent, in line with Saunders' observation that:

Although the ZMMT's original brief included reference to the opening up of the rural areas by promoting the establishment of locally-based media in the countryside, it was not a goal which could be realised by the Trust itself, given its shortage of capital and personnel, and nearly complete lack of experience in the field of rural press (Saunders, 1991: 91).

In fact, the CNG suffered the fate of its predecessor. The CNG was so fragile that it nearly collapsed in 1998 due to mass exodus of its employees when the Associated Newspapers of Zimbabwe was launched. The CNG lost most of its key and experienced editorial staff including its editor in chief and chief executive, Wilf Mbanga.

Current attempts to revamp ZMMT and the CNG should seek ways of balancing two factors, that is, making the group commercially viable without compromising the proclaimed editorial stance of servicing the rural publics. Huge capital injection is needed.

If the problems of capital and business approach are not adequately addressed, the planned Community Newspaper Publisher will just be an old baby dogged by the same financial handicap that go deep to constrain operations in fundamental ways similar to those discussed above. That will be Zimbabwe's third Rural Press Project that dies from the same commercial and managerial ailments. Managerially, the government must learn to make appointments to organizations in which it has controlling stakes that are based more on merit than political correctness. Even a balance of the two would work. The current practice where editors are

hired and fired merely on political grounds breeds disaster because of obvious negative repercussions on quality of the media product. Also, the media organization's relationship with the private sector will be affected because the private sector's giants, with large sums of money for advertising, may not be comfortable in being associated with the political policies pursued by the ruling party and hailed in the media where the ruling party/government has a controlling stake.

The death of the rural press has massive implications given that at least 80% of the population are rural. The need to democratize access to information and enhance political participation cannot be over-emphasized hence everything should be done so that the majority of Zimbabwe's citizens, who are rural based, also have their own vibrant public sphere for them to fully practice their citizenship.

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