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RESEARCH BRIEF



# CHINESE DIGITAL SATELLITE TV: EXPORTING PROPAGANDA TO RURAL NIGERIA

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JANUARY 2024



# Table of Contents

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Executive Summary .....	2
Introduction .....	3
Digital TV project Implementation in Nigeria .....	4
Winning ‘hearts and minds’ in rural Africa .....	4
Beneficiaries retain favorable views of United States over China .....	5
Subscription lapses .....	5
Lack of Nigerian government oversight .....	6
Conclusion and Recommendations .....	7

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## Executive Summary

This research brief discusses the African Satellite Digital television project which was officially launched in Nigeria in 2019 by the People's Republic of China (PRC) highlighting its exportation of propaganda into rural Nigeria. Although government officials in Nigeria have lauded the for its potential to change the fortunes of rural dwellers across the country, there has been no account of beneficiaries' perception of the satellite TV project in Nigeria as well as its implementation across the continent.

The author explored the implementation of the Chinese sponsored project which involved each selected village receiving two StarTimes Projector TVs, one 32-inch Digital TV set, and 20 decoders and satellite dishes. He structured the paper to ask the following questions: Has StarTimes implemented the project as promised? What has been the impact on local villagers' access to information and views of China? What challenges, if any, has the project encountered in achieving its aims? What role have Nigerian officials played in overseeing or advancing the project?

The brief suggests that beyond the initial footprint of the launch which witnessed lauds, the project had been poorly monitored with major oversights from the government, media, and civil society organisations.

The author argued that despite most of the satellite TVs in public places in these villages having collapsed and very few of these still being in use, the Chinese government has continued to receive commendation and applause for its contribution to a project poorly implemented and hardly sustainable. This continuous applause has further made local audiences in villages across the African continent indebted to the PRC for giving them access to satellite TV which serves the purpose of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) ambition to make gains in people-to-people exchange in Sino-Africa relations.

## Introduction

The African Satellite Digital television project was officially launched in Nigeria in 2019. The African satellite digital television project is one of the outcomes of the 6th Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) Summit in Johannesburg, South Africa in December 2015.<sup>1</sup> At the Summit, President Xi Jinping promised to launch access to satellite television for 10,000 villages in 25 African countries including Nigeria aimed at expanding digital media to rural villages in the continent. The essence of the project was captured in the Johannesburg Action Plan, 2016-2018, “The Chinese side will, in conjunction with African countries cooperate to implement village-community-level comprehensive development projects, help implement satellite TV projects in 10,000 villages in Africa.”<sup>2</sup> Subsequently, the digital satellite project was launched successfully in twenty-five African countries. The project involves each selected African village receiving two StarTimes Projector TVs, one 32-inch Digital TV set, and 20 decoders and satellite dishes. Projector TVs and Digital TV sets will be equipped with solar power systems and DTH access units. The Projector TVs and Digital TV sets will be laid out in the public area of the village such as a school, village square, or clinic for access to all villagers.

At the official launch of the project in Nigeria in 2019, Lai Mohammed, Nigeria’s Minister of Information and Culture emphasised that the project would positively affect the lives of rural dwellers and provide an opportunity for them to see the world beyond their village.<sup>3</sup> While the digital Satellite TV project has been lauded by government officials in Africa for having the potential to change the fortunes of rural dwellers across the continent, there has been no account of beneficiaries’ perception of the satellite TV project in Africa as well as its implementation across the continent.

This policy brief aims to fill this gap, addressing questions such as: Has StarTimes implemented the project as promised? What has been the impact on local villagers’ access to information and views of China? What challenges, if any, has the project encountered in achieving its aims? What role have Nigerian officials played in overseeing or advancing the project?

The findings outlined below are based on fieldwork conducted in three rural communities in Nigeria in November 2023. The rural communities include *Hulumì* and *Kpaduma* villages within the federal capital territory of Abuja (FCT-Abuja), and *Igogo Ekiti* in the Moba Local government area of Ekiti State, southwest Nigeria. These locations were chosen because they are the only known communities where the Satellite TV project was implemented in Nigeria. While StarTimes claimed to have implemented the Satellite TV project in 1000 villages across Nigeria, there is no available data to support that this is the situation on the ground.

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<sup>1</sup>Xi Jinping, (2015, December 15), Open a New Era of China-Africa Win-Win Cooperation and Common Development, Embassy of the Republic of China, (section 4.4.4), [http://ls.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zgsy/201512/t20151209\\_6679866.htm#:~:text=In%20the%20new%20era%2C%20we,greater%20contribution%20to%20the%20development](http://ls.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zgsy/201512/t20151209_6679866.htm#:~:text=In%20the%20new%20era%2C%20we,greater%20contribution%20to%20the%20development)

<sup>2</sup>The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation Johannesburg Action Plan(2016-2018), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2015, December 10, [https://web.archive.org/web/20160227034517/http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjdt\\_665385/2649\\_665393/t1323159.shtml](https://web.archive.org/web/20160227034517/http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/t1323159.shtml)

<sup>3</sup>Michael Eboh, Emmanuel Elebeke & Tochukwu Maxwell, Replicate China’s 1,000 villages digital project in Nigeria, FG tells StarTimes, Vanguard newspaper, January 16, 2019, <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2019/01/replicate-chinas-1000-villages-digital-project-in-nigeria-fg-tells-startimes/>

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## Digital TV Project Implementation in Nigeria

The African satellite TV project was implemented by StarTimes across the continent. In Nigeria, the project was first implemented in *Hulumi* in 2017 and in *Kpaduma* and *Igogo Ekiti* in 2019. In *Igogo Ekiti*, fourteen sets of digital satellite TVs were distributed to the people through the royal father of the village. Two sets were allocated to the federal teaching hospital annex in the town and the town hall for the viewing of the public while the remaining twelve sets were allotted to chiefs and other important personalities in the village. In *Hulumi*, twenty sets of Digital satellite TVs were allocated to locals and the village square while *Kpaduma* also got twenty sets. The King of *Igogo Ekiti*, Oba Barrister Sunday Adewunmi acknowledged that Chinese Satellite TV has become a window to the world for his subjects: “The satellite TV has mentally equipped them to be more technologically dependable, learn about other people's culture and know more about other people in the world.” While beneficiaries in *Igogo Ekiti* prefer to watch local stations such as Orisun TV,<sup>4</sup> and Africa Independent Television (AIT)<sup>5</sup> that show local programs, those in *Kpaduma* and *Hulumi* prefer to watch Chinese stations, AIT and the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA)<sup>6</sup> and Ecwa TV.<sup>7</sup>

### Winning ‘hearts and minds’ in rural Africa

All the beneficiaries interviewed in the three communities agreed that the Chinese-funded Satellite TV has had an impact on how they view the PRC. One beneficiary in *Igogo Ekiti* said that his perception of the PRC was as a manufacturer of substandard products but noted that through the Satellite TV project, his notion about the PRC has been altered:

*I do not see China as a country that is helping African countries before now because they are known for manufacturing substandard products. However, through this Satellite TV, I later discovered that China is not what I thought they are. I am highly indebted to them because of their good gesture.<sup>8</sup>*

Another *Igogo Ekiti* beneficiary added, “My access to this Chinese satellite TV has changed my personal opinion about China because my thought was that they never meant well for us here in Africa.”<sup>9</sup> The above comment is significant when measured against the perception of Chinese products in rural communities as being of inferior quality and substandard. Hence, through their exposure to Chinese Satellite TV, rural dwellers tend to see a different side of the PRC that contravenes long-held notions about Chinese products in a segment of Nigerian society. Similarly, Chief Yusuf Deo of *Kpaduma* village said that he is indebted to the PRC for bringing the Satellite TV to his community: “I feel a debt of gratitude to them for what they have done in my community, and I thank them for bringing the Satellite to us.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Africa Independent Television, <https://ait.live/>

<sup>5</sup>Nigeria Television Authority, <https://nta.ng/>

<sup>7</sup>Evangelical Church of West Africa Television, <https://www.youtube.com/c/ECWATelevision>

<sup>8</sup>Interview with a Chinese Digital Satellite TV beneficiary in *Igogo Ekiti*, Ekiti State, Nigeria, November 2023.

<sup>9</sup>Interview with a beneficiary in *Igogo Ekiti*, Ekiti State, Nigeria, November 2023.

<sup>10</sup>Interview with a community leader in *Kpaduma*, FCT-Abuja, Nigeria, November 2023.

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For his part, the king of *Igogo Ekiti* described the content on Chinese Satellite TV as “interesting content that will have a direct impact on the people in the local areas”.<sup>11</sup> Beneficiaries are also attracted to *Kahoo* a Chinese station that offers a variety of programs. Chief Deo said, “They have a station called *Kahoo*, a Chinese station I enjoy watching because it shows Chinese films and cultural programs.” Another beneficiary in *Igogo Ekiti* added, “I do love some of their programs like documentaries, films, and sports through which I later discovered that China is not what I thought they were.”

## **Beneficiaries retain favorable views of United States over China**

While many beneficiaries in the three rural communities acknowledged that exposure to Chinese-funded satellite TV has shifted their perception of China from negative to positive, they nonetheless said that the United States remains preferred to them because many of their relatives have prospered in the United States of America. One of the beneficiaries explained that:

*I still preferred America, because a lot of our people from Nigeria and Africa as a continent have benefited a lot from America more than China. China cannot still be measured with the US. Many rich Nigerians made their money in America or through American US dollars.<sup>12</sup>*

Another beneficiary in Kpaduma said he could not say much about the United States because he has not had any dealings with the United States in the rural community: “What the Chinese are doing is helping rural communities like us. On the Americans, I have not had a dealing with them, so I can’t say anything about them. I can only speak on the people I have engaged with.” The influence of the United States in Nigeria is attributable to the long-lasting relationship between both countries in terms of cultural affinity, language, and economic opportunities.

## **Subscription lapses**

Despite the gains that the StarTimes project has arguably made in improving villagers’ opinions of China, the benefits may be short lived, as initial free subscriptions provided by the company lapsed, and locals were required to pay for the service. In many cases, they have been unable to or have chosen not to do so. In two of the three villages, the satellite TV service has collapsed in public venues and some individual beneficiaries have abandoned it. In Hulumi, some beneficiaries are no longer using Chinese Satellite TV because they have been unable to afford to paid subscription fees after the end of a one-year free subscription provided by the Chinese government. The situation in Hulumi is complicated by the absence of electricity (electricity was recently restored to Hulumi) and the inability of villagers to afford power-generating equipments. Joshua Ezra, a beneficiary of the Chinese-funded Satellite TV in Hulumi explained:

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<sup>11</sup>Interview with Oba Sunday Adewunmi of Igogo Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria, November 2023.

<sup>12</sup>Interview with a beneficiary in *Igogo Ekiti*, Ekiti State, Nigeria, November 2023.



*I only used it for one year. After one year, I stopped using it. They gave me a decoder and battery. When they brought it, we had no electricity. So, I was only using it with the solar they brought, but after one year, it stopped working.<sup>13</sup>*

In *Kpaduma*, beneficiaries are struggling to keep up with subscriptions after enjoying a free three-month subscription. Steven Chazhiba, a beneficiary in Kpaduma noted that Satellite TV is good but added that the challenge of subscription fees remains: “The challenge we have is an increase in the cost of the subscription, which is due to the current economic crisis. It is not easy to raise N3,000 (\$3) or N4,000 (\$4) to watch programs.”

In the third village, Igogo Ekiti, people are still enjoying free subscriptions, but these are set to expire soon. These findings indicate that the limited purchasing power of villagers in rural Africa and the absence of electrical supply present a challenge to the long-term presence and impact of Chinese-funded satellite TV.

### **Lack of Nigerian government oversight**

In November 2019, StarTimes in conjunction with the Nigerian government organised a completion ceremony for the Chinese Satellite TV project in Nigeria. At the ceremony, StarTimes received a completion certificate indicating that the project has been completed in one thousand villages across Nigeria. However, it remains an open question whether StarTimes has indeed implemented the satellite TV project in one thousand villages across Nigeria. When StarTimes was confronted with this question in its Abuja office, an official explained that the project is not one-off but ongoing: “The project is still running because it's not a one-off project”.<sup>14</sup> This response implies that the project has not been completed in one thousand villages across Nigeria.

At the completion ceremony in 2019, David Zhang, chief executive officer of StarTimes in Nigeria, told newsmen, “This achievement is a significant milestone in the exercise of digital television service in Nigeria. Over the past year, we have gone across the country in different states, working with local leaders and communities to successfully implement this project. It is a true testament of what is achievable when there's cooperation between governments.”<sup>15</sup> For his part, Honourable Dokun Odebunmi, the then Chairman of House of Representative Committee on Information National Orientation, Ethics, and Values, corroborated that the completion of the project is an investment in the people: “The completion of the project, which we are celebrating today, is an investment to the people because it concerns the masses and enables them to connect to the digital world. The people of Nigeria are sincerely appreciative and will continue to be grateful to China.”

Yet, questioning of Nigerian officials reveals an absence of independent confirmation that the project was actually completed. The Chinese Satellite TV project was launched in Kpaduma in 2019 by Lai Mohammed, the then Minister of Information and National

<sup>13</sup>Interview with a beneficiary in Hulumi, FCT-Abuja, Nigeria, November 2023.

<sup>14</sup>Interview with PRO at StarTimes office in Abuja, Nigeria, November 2023.

<sup>15</sup>Chinese company completes China-aided digital TV project for 1,000 Nigerian villages, Xinhuanet, November 2, 2019, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-11/02/c\\_138523731.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-11/02/c_138523731.htm)

Orientation.<sup>16</sup> When the Ministry of Information and National Orientation was confronted on the completion of the project, an official said that the “Ministry had no hand in the project but only honored an invitation to be at the ceremony.”<sup>17</sup> Additionally, a government source who requested anonymity said that the Ministry of Information does not know the number of villages where the Chinese-funded Satellite TV project has been implemented in the country and advised that “you go back to StarTimes and question them about the project.”<sup>18</sup> Similarly, the Ministry of Digital Communication said that they have no information about the implementation of the Satellite TV project in Nigeria neither does the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC).

Hence, StarTimes has been able to claim unquestionable completion of the satellite TV project in one thousand Nigerian villages in the absence of any form of monitoring and evaluation by state actors, civil society, and the media.<sup>19</sup>

## Conclusion and Recommendations

The influence of Chinese-funded satellite TV in rural Africa cannot be wished away. Local audiences in villages across the African continent are indebted to the PRC for giving them access to satellite TV. One of the most significant benefits for the PRC of the Satellite TV project is that it serves the purpose of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) ambition to make gains in people-to-people exchange in Sino-Africa relations. The excitement with which rural dwellers embrace the project is also an indication that they may openly welcome the PRC’s propaganda or misinformation without filtering it. The lack of monitoring and evaluation by government officials, civil society, and the media in countries like Nigeria exacerbates this risk.

However, there are challenges confronting the sustenance of the project in rural Nigeria, and likely other countries in Africa, and one of these is subscriptions. Most of the satellite TVs in public places in these villages have collapsed, although some of those given to individual beneficiaries are still in use. Nevertheless, StarTimes has been able to score cheap propaganda victories as officials and media uncritically offer credit for wide-scale service provision. If StarTimes sincerely wishes to benefit villagers, it would be well-advised to find a sustainable way for rural dwellers to maintain their subscription to satellite TV at the end of the free subscription period offered by the Chinese government.

At the same time, local and federal Nigerian officials should conduct oversight of the project and avoid giving credit or acknowledging completion of such a project unless confirmed by the government or if the implementing company provides a detailed list of locations where services have been activated. Civil society groups and local media should be wary of

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<sup>16</sup>Michael Eboh, Emmanuel Elebeke & Tochukwu Maxwell, Replicate China’s 1,000 villages digital project in Nigeria, FG tells StarTimes, Vanguard newspaper, January 16, 2019, <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2019/01/replicate-chinas-1000-villages-digital-project-in-nigeria-fg-tells-startimes/>

<sup>17</sup>Interview with a government official at the Ministry of Information and National Orientation in Abuja, Nigeria.

<sup>18</sup>Interview with a government official at the Ministry of Information and National Orientation in Abuja, Nigeria.

<sup>19</sup>Ogechi Onuoha, StarTimes Completes Its Digital TV Project for 1,000 Nigerian Villages, Africanews, October 30, 2019, <https://africanews.space/startimes-completes-its-digital-tv-project-for-1000-nigerian-villages/#:~:text=StarTimes%20Completes%20Its%20Digital%20TV%20Project%20for%201%2C000%20Nigerian%20Villages,-By&text=The%20federal%20government%20of%20Nigeria,project%20for%201%2C000%20Nigerian%20villages>



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uncritically repeating such claims. Rather, conducting investigations of the actual progress of the project and its limitations, then publishing such reports, may create incentives for StarTimes to improve its service provision. Lastly, Nigerian authorities should consider other options for improved regulation—including requiring StarTimes to offer more diverse programming—or incorporating content related to China and Chinese government propaganda into rural education and media literacy programs.

Extending satellite TV to rural communities across Nigeria is a laudable cause but the Nigerian government cannot be derelict in its responsibility to monitor the project of StarTimes. It behooves the Nigerian government to ensure that the implementation of the Chinese-funded satellite TV does not compromise the Nigeria Broadcasting Code or channel the PRC's propaganda messaging in Nigeria.

## ABOUT CDD

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The Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) was established in the United Kingdom in 1997 as an independent, not-for-profit, research training, advocacy and capacity building organisation. The purpose was to mobilise global opinion and resources for democratic development and provide an independent space to reflect critically on the challenges posed to the democratisation and development processes in West Africa.

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The author would like to thank Freedom House for making this research possible through its Beijing's Global Media Influence Project

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