
MAXIMIZING COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT THROUGH STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION IN DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS IN RIVERS STATE

Lorretta Nkechi Orlu (PhD)

lorrettaorlu@gmail.com

**Department of Adult Education and Community Development
Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rumuolumeni, Port Harcourt**

&

Dr. Emilia John Andorshiye

shara4me.ej@gmail.com

**Department of Curriculum Studies
Faculty of Education
Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rumuolumeni, Port Harcourt**

Abstract

This study investigated how strategic communication can be optimized to enhance community participation in development projects in Rivers State, Nigeria. It aimed at identifying effective communication strategies that facilitate greater involvement from local communities, assess their impact on project outcomes, and offer practical recommendations for development practitioners. Two research questions and two null hypotheses guided the study. The study adopted the descriptive research design with a population of 1,530 respondents, which comprised 124 members of Community Development Committees and 1,406 members of registered Community-Based Organizations whose thematic focus is on community development activities. The sample for this study was determined using Taro-Yamane formula and a sample size of 230 was drawn using a simple random sampling technique (83 CDC members and 147 CBO members), respectively. The instrument for data collection was a self-developed questionnaire titled “Maximizing Community Participation through Strategic Communication in Development Projects Questionnaire (MCPCDPQ)”. The instrument was duly validated by three experts. The reliability of the instrument was established using the test-retest method and was correlated using Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) which yielded a reliability index of 0.76. The data collected was analyzed using mean and standard deviation to answer research questions while null hypotheses were tested using Z-test statistics at 0.05 level of significance. The findings of the study revealed among others that regular community meetings among relevant stakeholders promote community involvement/participation in development projects to a high extent. Hence the study concluded that community involvement in development projects is encouraged through dialogue and creation of opportunities for idea exchange among pertinent parties. The study went on to conclude that by having conversations with pertinent stakeholders, beneficial ideas for community development are shared, members of the community gain a deeper understanding of their current circumstances, and they recognize their responsibility to bring about change and find solutions to problems that impede development initiatives in their communities. Based on the findings of the study, it was recommended among others that

deliberation and discourse with community stakeholders should be explored widely in promoting significant community involvement in development programmes. That way, these stakeholders will gain a chance to exchange key facts and opinions that will quicken people's enthusiasm and active involvement/participation in development projects among engaged communities.

Keywords: Community involvement, community engagement, strategic communication, development projects, Rivers State

Introduction

Most success in people's involvement and execution of community development programmes can be ascribed to effective communication. Community participation is crucial for the success and sustainability of development projects. Strategic communication serves as a key tool in fostering this participation by ensuring that communities are well-informed, engaged, and invested in the development process. Rivers State, with its diverse population and development challenges, presents an ideal context for investigating these dynamics. Effective communication takes place when the actual content and essence of information is successfully conveyed from one person (source) to another (receiver). Communication is an important tool for people's active participation in community development process. It is the lifeblood of an organization and the lubricant that keeps the intricate machinery of organization going (James et al., 2004). In other words, to communicate is to organize one's thought and without communication, human organization, institutions and associations cannot operate effectively. Communication is the exchange of ideas, facts, feeling and opinion by two or more persons by the use of words, letters or symbols. It involves the interplay of the sender of the message, message itself, the channel, the receiver and feedback. Similarly, Oyebamiji and Adekola (2008) opined that through communication, members of the community can reach understanding of one another; build up trust in themselves; coordinate their actions and work out strategies for the achievement of set goals of the community.

To Apuega & Esuefieni (2015), communication is very crucial in bringing members of the community to get involved in community development processes because:

- i. People need to be convinced of what is in their best interest to be involved in a given development programme or activity;
- ii. People need to be adequately informed about the desired goals and objectives of a development process and as to what is required of them to achieve the goals and objectives of the project or programme;
- iii. People need to be made aware, equipped, skilled, organized and utilized for effective involvements and participation in any programme;
- iv. To build good interpersonal relations;
- v. To obtain a favorable response, actualized through positive change of attitude to the community development programme;

Consequently, Batchelor (2010) further asserts that effective communication as a basis for promotion of good working relationships is very important for stimulating productive team working in the community. The implication of this is that communication provides an opportunity for people to engage in promotion of good relationships that stimulate group action which usually leads to productive community development initiatives that help to

improve people's living conditions. Effective communication is very vital for the success of any community development programmes in various participating communities in human environment. Without which, it will be difficult to achieve good results in such development programmes to improve people's living conditions in the society.

Communication is described as a veritable tool that enhances community cohesion and brings out good social working relationship. Okwor (2009) defines communication as a process and the activity of passing information from an individual to another person in the society. Fasel (2014) also defines communication as the ongoing interchange among people of thoughts, ideas, opinions, impressions, information and data by speech, writing or signs. Interestingly, communication is an ongoing interchange process which involves expression of thoughts, views, ideas, opinions, information and data in human environment to influence people's action for an improved living condition in the society. Schramm (2011) states that communication is a transaction where the communicator and receiver are active and information is exchanged. Therefore, community development as a social development project requires effectual communication for effective participation and service delivery in any given community.

Community Development is not a new matter, but its existence is in line with human civilization (Community Development Exchange, 2013). However, Frank and Smith (2013) view community development as a process where community members come together to take collective action and generate solutions to common problems. It ranges from small initiatives within a small group to large initiative that involves the broader community. Community Development is defined as the combined efforts of the community members, governmental, non-governmental authorities and philanthropists in other to bring about positive or progressive change, growth in social, economical, cultural and political problems of the community (Dokubo, 2015). According to Ezimah (2009), community development is seen as a process of special action in which the people of the community organize themselves for planning, define their own common/collective and individual needs and problems, make group or individual plans to meet their needs and resolve problems, execute their plans with maximum reliance on the community resources and materials from both governmental and the non-governmental agencies outside the community. Community development can also be defined as a movement aimed to promote better living for the whole community with active participation, and if possible on the initiative of the whole community (Dogle in Onyeozu 2007). This definition as a movement according to Onyeozu (2007) implies that community development always involves groups of peoples who share the same plight and beliefs and work together to achieve a particular aim that brings progress or socio-economic and political development in the community.

Communication in the execution of community development projects is a group concern, where members of the engaging communities get to achieve their objective by enabling community members get involved in the matters of development programmes aimed at improving their own living conditions. Here, communication goes beyond interpersonal concerns to be more of a group concern in various communities in human environment which requires provision of opportunities for deliberation and discourse and provision of opportunities for sharing ideas to facilitate member's involvement in community development programmes.

A crucial component of communication in the community development process is face-to-face community meetings since they are engaging and direct, which promotes trust and quick feedback. In dialogue and discussions, word-of-mouth terms are frequently used to communicate with the target population. Okwor (2009) stated that this indicates that ideas

and opinions are exchanged among the participants in speech and in the course of discussion, new ideas and opinions emerge. The exposure of new suggestions and opinions in certain cases positively impacts the views of the target audience during the period of discussion. People in various communities cannot be engaged in dialogue and discussion to facilitate their involvement in the resolution of community development issues without communication between members of the participating communities, groups working to stimulate community development in the communities, corporate organizations' community development workers, members of the host communities of the concerned companies, funding agencies and field workers who work with project participants in various participating communities. Communication can be used in community development in dialogue and discussion session, especially during community consultations, community engagements and meetings to sensitize members of participating communities to understand the realities of the problems in their localities. Dialogue and discussion are guided by the disposition of the audience in the meeting. Through the process of discussion, new ideas and opinions are highlighted to entrench the new ideas and opinions or sometimes to change views and attitudes in the meeting (Okwor, 2009). The development partners, corporate organisations and funding agencies engaged in the community development process usually employ dialogue and discussions during community engagements as a means of reaching the project participants at local community level to resolve issues which hinder community development in the concerned communities.

Further, local and social media opportunities for sharing ideas among people of various communities are also an important aspect of communication, which people receive to facilitate people-oriented community development projects. Local and social media are powerful tools for communication and community engagement. In Rivers State, where diverse communities face various development challenges, leveraging these media platforms can significantly enhance participation in development projects. Indeed, community development depends greatly on community involvement through effective communication through local and social media, especially in sharing relevant information and ideas necessary enough to enhance community development activities in the communities. Peters in Garrison (2011) sees communication as a process of shared experience which is undertaken voluntarily. Local and social media communication provides people with opportunities to share information and experience relating to community development activities such as participatory rural appraisal (PRA), explanation of community development process; community needs identification and prioritization, community development planning, implementation, management and evaluation. To guarantee the sustainability of community development projects, the community members must be adequately involved at all the stages of the projects beginning from project identification and conception to implementation. The sharing of information, ideas and experience among various communities encourage other communities to address similar situations in their localities (Imhabekhai, 2009). The sharing of information, ideas, and experience is part of human culture which must be used adequately to address prevailing similar problems in other social environment in the society.

Furthermore, the purpose of communication is to influence action toward the welfare of any development programme (Dambo 2001). It is essential for both the internal and external functioning of the programme, internally it integrates the managerial functions to:

- a. establish and disseminate goals of the programme
- b. develop plans for programme achievement
- c. organize human and other resources most effectively and efficiently
- d. select, develop and appraise members of the community

- e. lead, direct, motivate and create a climate in which people want to contribute
- f. control performance.

Communication also relates the development programmes to their external environment through information exchange.

Statement of the Problem

In many communities throughout the human environment, effective communication is essential to community involvement and the success of any community development effort. Without it, it will be challenging to accomplish successful development projects aimed at enhancing the standard of living for members of the community. Thus, it is always beneficial and frequently necessary to establish discussion among the involved stakeholders, regardless of the type of project—agriculture, infrastructure, fisheries, water, governance, or health. Regretfully, the majority of Rivers State's development initiatives are designed and carried out without community participation through strategic communication, which causes some of these programs to fail. Many projects in Rivers State were declared "white elephants" in 2009.

Even though enormous sums of money were spent on their implementation, these initiatives died a natural death since the local populace did not own and support them through communication, and as a result, they were unable to last past the departure of sponsors. Even though a number of tactics have been put out and put into practice over the years, the intended outcome has not yet been achieved. For community development projects to be executed successfully, it is necessary to appropriately create communication among the involved stakeholders. Therefore, the question is whether communication can offer the information required to encourage community participation in Rivers State development initiatives. The investigation was necessary to find the solution to this query.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

This study aimed to investigate how strategic communication can be optimized to enhance community involvement in development projects in Rivers State, Nigeria. Specifically, the objectives of this study are to:

1. Investigate the extent to which Community dialogue and creation of opportunities for idea exchange among relevant stakeholders promote community involvement in development programmes in Rivers State.
2. Determine the extent to which offering local and social media platforms for idea exchange encourages community involvement in development programmes in Rivers State.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. To what extent does community dialogue and creation of opportunities for idea exchange among relevant stakeholders promote community involvement in development programmes in Rivers State?

To what extent does offering local and social media platforms for idea exchange encourage community involvement in development programmes in Rivers State?

Hypotheses

In line with the objectivities of this study, the following formulated hypotheses were tested:

Ho₁: There is no significant difference in the mean rating of CDC and CBO members on the extent to which community dialogue and creation of opportunities for idea exchange among relevant stakeholders promote community involvement in development programmes in Rivers State.

Ho₂: There is no significant difference in the mean rating of CDC and CBO members on the extent to which offering local and social media platforms for idea exchange encourages community involvement in development programmes in Rivers State.

Methodology

The study adopted the descriptive research design with a population of 1,530 respondents, which comprised 124 members of Community Development Committees and 1,406 members of registered Community-Based Organisations in Rivers State, whose thematic focus is on community development. The Taro-Yamane method was used to determine the study's sample, and a simple random sampling technique was used to select 230 participants (83 CDC members and 147 CBO members, respectively). The study was conducted using a self-created survey called the "Maximizing Community Participation through Strategic Communication in Development Projects Questionnaire (MCPCDPQ)". There were two sections in the questionnaire: A and B. Respondents' demographic information was collected in Section A, and their answers to the questionnaire items derived from the study's research questions were obtained in Section B. A four-point rating system consisting of Very High Extent (VHE), High Extent (HE), Low Extent (LE), and Very Low Extent (VLE) was used to structure the responses to the questionnaire's items. Three specialists duly validated the instrument. The test-retest procedure was used to determine the instrument's reliability. A sample of 20 respondents outside the study area were given copies of the instrument, and two weeks later, the identical questionnaire was given to the same group of people. The reliability of the instrument was then ensured by employing Pearson Moment Correlation (PPMC) to correlate the initial scores of the sample findings, which produced a reliability value of 0.76. The study's research questions were addressed by analyzing the data using the mean and standard deviation, and the null hypotheses were examined using Z-test statistics at the 0.05 level of significance.

Results

Research Question 1: To what extent does dialogue among relevant stakeholders promote community involvement in development programmes in Rivers State?

Table 1: Mean Analyses on the extent to which community dialogue among relevant stakeholders promotes community involvement in the development process.

S/N	Statement	CDC MEMBERS N=83			CBOMEMBERS N=147		
		Mean	S.D	Decision	Mean	S.D	Decision
1.	Through dialogue, useful ideas are exchanged for community development.	2.68	0.52	High Extent	3.29	0.71	High Extent
2.	Stakeholders get to understand their prevailing realities.	2.93	0.57	High Extent	2.68	0.52	High Extent
3.	Community members get to realize that they must initiate change.	3.53	0.93	High Extent	3.52	0.92	High Extent
4.	Issues which hinder community development are resolved.	2.81	0.55	High Extent	3.20	0.69	High Extent
Grand Mean		2.99	0.64	High Extent	3.17	0.71	High Extent

Analyzed data in Table 1 above on research question one, revealed that both respondents agreed that discourse among relevant stakeholders promotes community involvement in development projects. With grand means of 2.99 and 3.17 for CDCs and members of Community Based Organizations (CBOs) respectively which are greater than the criterion mean of 2.50, the answer for research question reveals that through community dialogue, useful ideas are exchanged for community development among relevant stakeholders promotes the community involvement/participation in development programmes to a high extent in several ways as listed above.

Research Question 2: To what extent do local and social media opportunities for sharing ideas among relevant stakeholders promote community involvement in development programmes in Rivers State?

Table 2: Mean Analyses on the extent to which local and social media opportunities for sharing ideas among relevant stakeholders promote community involvement in development intervention programmes.

S/N	Statement	CDC MEMBERS N=83			CBOMEMBERS N=147		
		Mean	S.D	Decision	Mean	S.D	Decision
5.	Local and social media opportunities for sharing ideas, provides relevant stakeholders with new ideas on how to facilitate people-oriented community development projects.	3.47	0.88	High Extent	3.55	0.94	High Extent
6.	Sustainable community development projects are guaranteed.	2.93	0.57	High Extent	3.32	0.77	High Extent
7.	Prevailing similar problems in other social environments are addressed	3.64	0.99	High Extent	3.60	0.98	High Extent
8.	Enables community members to understand that their active participation is paramount in planning, implementation, management and evaluation of development projects.	3.28	0.74	High Extent	3.20	0.69	High Extent
	Grand Mean	3.33	0.80	High Extent	3.41	0.85	High Extent

Analyzed data in Table 2 above on research question two, revealed that both respondents agreed that the provision of opportunities for sharing ideas among relevant stakeholders promotes community involvement in development projects. With grand means of 3.33 and 3.41 for CDCs and members of Community Based Organizations (CBOs) respectively which are greater than the criterion mean of 2.50, the answer for research question two is that local and social media opportunities for sharing ideas among relevant stakeholders promote promotes community participation in community development projects to a high extent in several ways as listed above.

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant difference in the mean rating of CDC and CBO members on the extent to which dialogue among relevant stakeholders promotes community involvement in community development programmes in Rivers State.

Table 3: Test of hypothesis one using Z-test Statistics

Respondents	N	$\bar{X}$	S.D	SL	DF	Z-cal	Z-tab.	Decision
CDC Member	83	3.30	0.88					
				0.05	228	0.88	± 1.96	Accepted.
CBO Members	147	3.20	0.85					

Table 3 above shows that the z-calculated value of 0.3 is less than the z-table value of ± 1.96 for degree of freedom (228) at 0.05 significant level suggesting that there is no significant difference between the responses of CDC and CBO members on the extent to which discourse among relevant stakeholders promote community involvement/participation in development programmes in Rivers State. Therefore, the null hypothesis of no significant difference in the mean rating of respondents on the extent to which dialogue among relevant stakeholders promotes community involvement in development programmes in Rivers State is thus accepted, while the alternative is rejected.

Hypothesis 2: There is no difference in the mean rating of CDC and CBO members on the extent to which a local and social media opportunity for sharing ideas among relevant stakeholders promotes community involvement in community development programmes in Rivers State.

Table 4: Test of hypothesis two using Z-test Statistics

Respondents	N	$\bar{X}$	S.D	SL	DF	Z-cal	Z-tab.	Decision
CDC Members	83	3.33	0.80		228	0.63	± 1.96	Accepted
CBO Members	147	3.41	0.85	0.05				

Table 4 above shows that the z-calculated value of 0.6 is less than the z-table value of ± 1.96 for degree of freedom (228) at 0.05 significant level suggesting that there is no significant difference in the mean rating of CDC and CBO members on the extent to which a local and social media opportunity for sharing ideas among relevant stakeholders promote the execution of community development programmes in Rivers State. Therefore, the null hypothesis of no significant difference in the mean rating of respondents on the extent to which provision of local and social media opportunities for sharing ideas among relevant stakeholders promotes community involvement in development programmes in Rivers State is thus accepted, while the alternative is rejected.

Discussion of Findings

The result of the findings in research question one on the extent to which community dialogue among relevant stakeholders promote community involvement/participation in development programmes revealed that majority of the respondents agreed to a high extent that during dialogue, useful ideas are exchanged, thus enhancing community identification of felt needs, as well as active involvement in development programmes to ensure execution and achievement of identified needs, community members get to understand their prevailing realities, and members of the community get to realize that they have to initiate change and get to resolve issues which hinders community development in their community. This is in line with the opinion of Okwor (2009), who mentioned that through the process of dialogue, new ideas and opinions are, indeed, highlighted to entrench the new ideas and opinions or sometimes to change views and attitudes in the meeting. These problems are identified and tackled at the root.

The result of the findings in research question two on provision of local and social opportunities for sharing ideas among relevant stakeholders to promote community involvement in development projects revealed that majority of the respondents agreed to a high extent that through provision of media opportunities for sharing ideas, relevant stakeholders receive new ideas on how to facilitate people-oriented community development programmes, sustainable community development projects are guaranteed, prevailing similar problems in other social environment are addressed and enable community members understand that their active participation is paramount in the planning, implementation, management and evaluation of development projects. This is in line with the opinion of Peters in Garrison (2011), who sees communication as a process of shared experience which is undertaken voluntarily. Similarly, the study supports the idea of Oyebamiji and Adekola (2008) who opined that through communication, members of the community can reach an understanding of one another, build up trust in themselves, coordinate their actions and work out strategies for the achievement of set goals of the community.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study and the discussion made, it is impossible to overestimate the importance of effective communication as a means of encouraging community participation in development initiatives in Rivers State. Community involvement in development projects is encouraged through dialogue and creation of opportunities for idea exchange among pertinent parties. The study went on to conclude that by having conversations with pertinent stakeholders, beneficial ideas for community development are shared, members of the community gain a deeper understanding of their current circumstances, and they recognise their responsibility to bring about change and find solutions to problems that impede development initiatives in their communities.

Additionally, by giving members the chance to exchange ideas with pertinent stakeholders, members are given fresh perspectives on how to support people-oriented community development projects, sustainable community development projects are ensured, similar issues that are currently plaguing other social environments are addressed, and community members realize how important their active involvement in the planning, execution, management, and evaluation of development projects is to their success.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, it was recommended that:

1. Community development practitioners should be encouraged to focus more attention on communication because it is found to be a better option for community involvement in development projects.
2. The community's active participation/involvement is vital for the achievement of any development projects. Thus, the use of an effective communication system should be widely explored. That way, community stakeholders will gain a chance to exchange key facts and opinions that will quicken effective service delivery in development projects among engaged communities.

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