Assessing the Effectiveness of Participatory Communication and Community Development in Mpape Community of Abuja, Nigeria

Audu Liberty Oseni
Institute of Strategic and Development communication,
Nasarawa State University Keffi, Nigeria.
Email: libertydgreat@gmail.com
Twitter: @libertydgreat

Abstract
A good number of development programs in Nigeria fail due to the inability of the state and non-state actors to facilitate active community participation in decision-making on issues affecting them through a participatory communication process. In a sample representation of an estimated 18,000 population in the Mpape community of Bwari Area Council, Federal Capital Territory - Abuja, Nigeria's capital city, North-Central Zone, the study was conducted to provide an understanding of the role of participatory communication in community development using the Mpape community as a case study. Using participatory communication theory and primary sources of data gathering and analysis methods through Focused Group Discussions (FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), the study found that participatory communication facilitates full community involvement in addressing issues affecting them through a communication process. Also, the study established that community development initiatives that embraced participatory communication are more successful and sustainable than those that excluded participatory communication. The study concluded that participatory communication plays a significant role in community development. It facilitates a process that enables community members and all stakeholders to be actively involved in dialogue and negotiation of locally driven solutions on issues impacting them through a communication process. The study recommended that development intervention programs by the state and non-state actors should deploy a participatory communication approach to achieve success and sustainability.

Keywords: *Communication, Community, Development, Participatory, Role, Mpape Community*

Introduction

The inability of state and non-state actors to effectively facilitate active participatory communication that will enable community members to fully participate in decision-making on issues affecting them continues to be a challenge facing community development interventions, their success, and sustainability in Nigeria. However, community development is steps taken by community members for unified action on matters that are significant to them. Hence, a fundamental part of the community development process is the ability to mobilize members to be part of the development agenda. Mobilization can only be effective and successful if community members are

engaged through an effective participatory communication process that will enable them to have a good understanding of the issues.

Effective participatory communication results in fruitful partnerships in community development pursuit. Therefore, development interventions targeted at addressing community issues need participatory communication involving beneficiaries and stakeholders to dialogue and negotiate on the issues affecting them. This underscores the vital role participatory communication plays in the facilitation of social change and development.

Participatory communication is central to community development because it offers remedies that are locally acceptable and locally owned. It resists the imposition of ready-made remedies that are not fit for the community. At the same time, it creates an opportunity for community members to actively engage in dialogue and negotiation in proffering solutions to issues affecting them (Mawa 2024).

Emphasizing the importance of participatory communication in community development, Akpan (2024), asserts that all community development programs require effective participatory communication to mobilize community support and ensure the program's success and sustainability. The community members who are the program beneficiaries must be well-educated and informed about the program so that they can participate and support it fully.

The people must be at the centre of all development communication, and communication is an effective tool to deploy for community mobilization and active participation in decision-making on issues affecting them. Communication facilitates knowledge sharing, behavioural change, and trust-building among community members (Mawa 2024).

In his argument in support of the role of effective participatory communication in community development, Anyanwu (1999), notes that the success of community development relies on the effectiveness of participatory communication to facilitate knowledge sharing and formulate locally made solutions that are suitable to the local people. Beyond knowledge sharing it creates a platform that enhances active community participation in development issues that affect them. Manyozo (2006), observes that participatory communication mobilizes community members and stakeholders for negotiation and dialogue on development issues with homegrown solutions at the centre of the dialogue.

Active community participation in the development process will be fully achieved through effective participatory communication facilitating knowledge sharing among the people. Participatory communication is vital in the community development process because it improves members' knowledge and facilitates participatory focus goal-oriented action. It has proven to be one of the most effective ways to bring communities together on issues affecting them. It addresses misunderstanding among the people and puts them under a common knowledge and understanding that facilitates participatory action (Braimoh 1988).

A huge amount of resources has been expended on development programs across communities in FCT-Abuja. However, development issues such as health, education, water, electricity, and access roads just to mention but five continue to be a challenge in many communities in FCT. It is within this context that the study's objective is to examine the role participatory communication plays in community development using the Mpape community of FCT as a case study.

Therefore, within the context of the study, it is expected that development intervention programs targeting FCT communities and Nigeria as a whole should prioritize participatory communication in the design and implementation. That will enable targeted communities to be fully involved in decision-making on issues impacting them. Fundamentally, a better understanding of the issues through a participatory communication process will guide community participation in the developmental issues affecting them. Key lessons from the Mpape community will serve as a standpoint in the debate on participatory communication's significant role in community development.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopts Participatory Communication theory propounded by Paulo Freire as a framework of analysis. Freire (1973), in his explanation of the theory, notes that communication is not just the transfer of information from one person to another, but a process that allows for the active participation of people in dialogue and negotiation on issues affecting them for solutions that will improve the quality of their lives. Anaeto, Onabajo, and Osifeso (2008) assert that participatory communication theory facilitates effective knowledge diffusion. They pointed out that it allows community members to design homegrown solutions that are suitable

Mefalopulos (2008) outlined attributes of participatory communication theory as (1) it lays emphasis on the people (2) guides and views development from indigenous and local perspectives (3) empowers the people to actualize their rights. The theory has brought a different view to development, it favours active engagement of people and stakeholders and attention paid to real development issues to solve their unique problems and does not allow for the imposition of foreign readymade solutions. Also, Mishra (2017), notes that 'participatory communication theory facilitates active participation of people in a face-to-face interaction through consultation and dialogue on issues affecting them.

It is based on the Participatory communication theory supports for active participation of people in the communication process on issues affecting them that informed its adoption as a theoretical framework of analysis in the study.

Conceptual Analysis of Participatory communication
Scholars such as Pellizzoni, et al. (2020), note that participatory communication is fundamental in the development process, pointing out that it allows for the active involvement of stakeholders in determining development intervention, its

implementation, and evaluation. The stakeholders are individuals or groups who play a key role in making decisions that influence the process of designing intervention programs, their implementation, and their impacts.

Udo, Shefiu and Favour (2021) in their study "Participatory Development Communication: An Audience-Centered Initiative" note that participatory communication is a communication process that mobilizes community members to participate and make decisions on how to attract interventions that will bring development that is suitable to the community needs.

Participatory communication is most fundamental in the development process; it facilitates a process that allows for dialogue from the community members to actively participate in the design and implementation of development interventions targeting them. It embraces community involvement in the development programs and rejects a top-down approach where government and development practitioners design programs for the communities without engaging them for their input and identifying what is most suitable for them (Alakwe and Okpara, 2022). A properly facilitated community involvement through a participatory communication process is vital to achieving a generally acceptable sustainable development among the community members (Dendler 2022).

In the arguments in favour of the application of participatory communication in community development, Novianto and Wulansari (2023), pointed out that development intervention fails in its implementation, success, and sustainability because the elite (those in the government bureaucracy) do allow active participation of the locals through a participatory communication process. They observed that the absence of community involvement in the program design and implementation by the state and non-state actors contributes significantly to why many rural intervention programs fail.

Scholars such as Sulaiman et al. (2023), pointed out that state and non-state actors, often design and implement development programs that are not suitable and align with the community's actual problem and need. This happens because the development process lacks full stakeholders' participation that will felicitate dialogue and negotiation to enable the discovery and agreement on what is best suited for the intended beneficiaries. Participatory communication facilitates a process that allows community members to advocate and aspire to attain a better society through a communication process. It allows for participatory and collective development program implementation, monitoring, and evaluation (Winowatan and Pricilia 2023).

Mawa (2024), analysis of participatory communication, identified disregard for local knowledge in community development planning as a challenge to development. She advocates for an effective participatory communication process that will create a platform for information, knowledge, and experience sharing. she argues that will build trust among community members, strengthen their commitment to development pursuit, and guarantee sustainability.

Although community involvement in the decision-making process on issues involving them plays a key role in development, one of its challenges is that it has not been effectively deployed for community development as a result of the local elites who frustrate its application by making sure they maintain a dominant voice. This restricts community access to information and participation which further impedes their understanding and contribution to development programs targeting them as beneficiaries. This leads to insufficient community support and poor engagement in the design and implementation of development programs targeting them (Kurniadi 2024).

Scholars have in different arguments pointed out the importance of participatory communication in community development. However, the success of participatory communication in community development depends largely on the sincerity of the facilitators to allow sincerity, fairness, and inclusivity. When the facilitators exclude the involvement of all stakeholders and allow for selected community or local elites with a domineering voice, that breeds resentment among the people that affect full participation and acceptance, failing the development intervention programs.

Conceptual Analysis of Community Development

Scholars have given their perspectives on community development, for instance, Malta (2024), sees community development as a process that plays a significant role in realizing sustainable development and considers improvements in the social and economic environment of the people as the utmost priority. Community development is a process for improving the life and living conditions of the people. It is a process of bringing community and individuals' sole problems impacting them (Ramsey and Blessing 2021),

Also, ElMassah and Mohieldin, (2020), assert that community development is a structured program to enable people to get involved in solving issues impacting them through training and empowerment. Through this process, the community works together to realize a common goal with everyone being a driver of social change. Similarly, Nseabasi (2012), asserts that community development is an approach where members of the community put ideas and resources together to address problems impacting.   Situating the importance of community development in addressing development issues, Anam, (2014), notes that community development is a carefully planned intervention that allows community members to gain control in making decisions on issues that impact their lives.

Materials and Methods for the Research

The study adopted Mpape community located in the Bwari Area Council of Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, Nigeria's capital city as a case study. Qualitative methods involving Focused Group Discussion (FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were used for data gathering and analysis. The FGDs and KIIs discussions were focused on how effective is participatory communication to community development in line with the study objective.
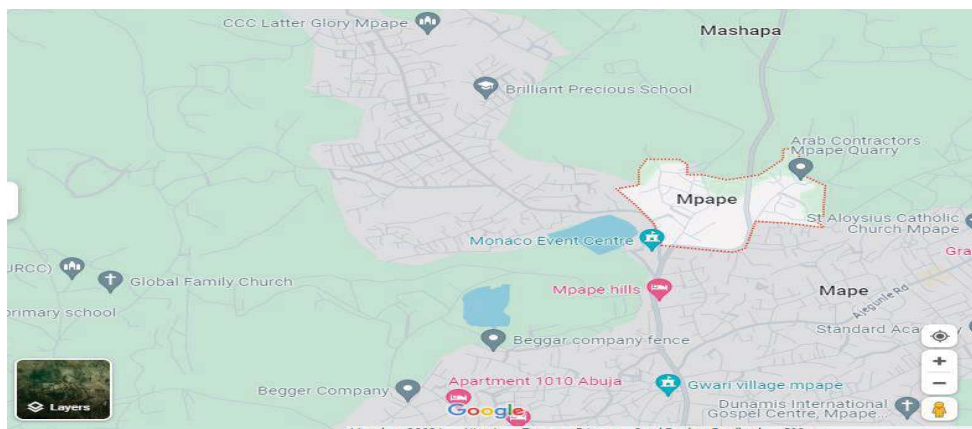
Figure 1: The Study Area

Study Sample

Mpape community has an estimated 18,000 populations, covering a land area of 44.325 hectares. The study held two different Focused Group Discussions among 24 participants from the community, 12 males and 12 females. Key Informant Interviews among 10 members of the community, 7 Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), and 2 Bwari Area Council officials. Overall, 43 participants took part in the study.

Results and Discussion

Although the case study, Mpape community in FCT-Abuja, North-Central zone is not a full representation of Nigeria, the study gives an understanding of primary accounts of how participatory communication plays a key role in community development.

29 out of the 34 participants in Mpape community said participatory communication plays a fundamental role in community development. 27 of the participants pointed out an example of how the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD), a Non-Governmental Organization, leveraged participatory communication to mobilize active community involvement in the dialogue and decision-making in their "Housing Rights Project". 25 of the participants pointed out how the participatory communication process made it possible for them to mobilize the community for a collective action to sue the Federal Capital Territory Authority (FCTA) where they won the case in the court that stopped a demolition exercise by the government.

24 out of the 34 participants gave different narratives of how they had in the last 10 years deployed participatory communication to mobilize capital and human resources for community development without any help from the government. They explained how they have deployed participatory communication to hold different dialogues and

negotiations that enabled them to mobilize residents and raise money to fund electricity provision in the community without the help of the government.

Twenty eight out of the 34 participants explained how Non-Governmental Organizations working in Mpape in healthcare delivery have deployed participatory communication to educate both men and women on the importance of ante-natal care, family planning, and child spacing a situation they said led to improved healthcare in the community. 29 out of the 34 participants, said that the failure in government intervention initiatives such as the COVID-19 vaccine, family planning, and community policing is a result of the state's failure to actively engage the people in the design and implementation through a participatory communication process. For them, people's involvement through the communication process will enable them to have a better understanding of the issues and will enable them to embrace them with full support which will result in success and sustainability.

All 34 participants from both the Focused Group Discussions and Key Informant Interviews agreed that participatory communication is the most appropriate way to mobilize people for community development. They all agreed that development programs that deployed participatory communication were more successful when compared to those that did not. They, however, warned that participatory communication can only be effective and successful if those who facilitate the process are trusted by the community, it is transparent with all parties actively involved, and are allowed for equal participation.

Seven of the Non-Governmental Organizations interviewed said the success of their community interventions in Mpape is dependent on their adoption of participatory communication approaches. Four of them say their health intervention programs failed because they did not actively engage the community members in its design and implementation. They affirmed that since they had begun the adoption of participatory communication as part of their operational policy, they have continued to record success in all their community intervention programs in Mpape and other communities in FCT-Abuja.

Two Bwari Area Council officials interviewed, said that participatory communication has proven to be the most effective approach to community development. According to them, successes recorded in agricultural extension and health immunization programs happened as a result of participatory communication approaches that were adopted by the local council authorities. They perceive participatory communication as the best approach for implementing community intervention programs. According to them, participatory communication is the surest way to record success in mobilizing community members to actively participate in decision-making on issues affecting them. For them, community intervention programs can only be effective and successful if a participatory communication approach is adopted to educate and mobilize the people to actively participate in the design and implementation. They, however, pointed out that the failure of agricultural extension and vaccine programs by the government is a result of the government's inability to facilitate a sincere and

inclusive participatory communication process that will enable dialogue and empower the farmers and community members to understand and support the programs.

Findings from this study bring new knowledge and thinking about how the state and non-state actors, especially (NGOs, media, and government) perceive communication. For many NGOs, the practice is that communication is about bringing journalists together to cover their events and report the same on the pages of newspapers, attend press conferences, or issue press releases. Also, about the level of engagement on social media, however, within the context of development communication, social media engagements only translate to awareness among smaller groups and do not achieve effective communication and proper education of the issues being discussed.

For the government, communication is about information sharing and exchange using popular mainstream media, and social media, facilitated by trained Public Relations (PR) professionals and influencers with little or no attention paid to a participatory communication process that will facilitate full citizen involvement in the communication process and outcome.

However, the media sees communication as the dissemination of information to the public. The implication therefore is that many of the targeted population do not have an understanding of what is being discussed in the media because the media does not give room for participatory communication.

This study has shown the need for a change in the practice of the way we plan and execute communication. Communication is not only about information dissemination, but dialogue, negotiation, and empowerment that gives the community and the citizens a voice to make decisions on issues affecting them. And this is only achievable through a participatory communication process.

Conclusion

The study was conducted to provide an understanding of the role of participatory communication in community development using the Mpape community in FCT-Abuja as a case study. The study found that active community involvement through the communication process plays a vital role in community development. Also, development intervention programs that deployed participatory communication were more successful while those that did not failed and were unsuccessful.

In addition, many development programs failed as a result of the inability of the state and non-state actors to facilitate active community involvement in the design and implementation through a participatory communication process. Participatory communication facilitates a mechanism that allows community members to be fully involved in the discussions and to formulate generally acceptable remedies in addressing developmental issues impacting them. It also serves as training and empowerment for the community members by giving them a voice and allowing them to make decisions on issues impacting them.

Although participatory communication plays a significant role in community

development, its facilitation must ensure transparency and inclusiveness for it to be generally accepted and successful.

Recommendations

The study provides the following recommendations

(1) State and non-state actors should ensure that participatory communication is adopted in all community development interventions. This will allow community members to understand the issues better, participate actively, mobilize support, build trust, and guarantee success and sustainability.

(2) Participatory communication should be integrated into development programs across Nigeria's 36 states and FCT. If well implemented, it will facilitate dialogue and negotiations that will help the government design people-oriented programs.

(3) Participatory communication should be deployed as a means of tapping into the community's existing local knowledge that will broaden state and non-state actors' knowledge on how to work with community members to design effective and sustainable development interventions.

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