The Companion to Communication and Development Issues

Essays in Honour of Prof. Des Wilson

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Poverty, Community Dialogue and Participatory Development in Nigeria

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Introduction

Nigeria is both a community- and development-conscious country. Its citizens are quick to identify themselves with their community of domicile or that of birth, and many of their discussions are done within the context of community, either as residents or indigenes. Hence, the desire by many Nigerians to attract 'development' to their communities.

In the context of this article, we define community in line with Ekong (1988), cited by Anaeto and Anaeto (2010, p.14), that a community is, "an aggregation of families habitually living together within a geographical location, more or less rooted in the soil they occupy, having a state of mutual interdependence, supporting some basic institutions and having some measure of political autonomy in relation to other communities". Thus, in a typical community, people live together and

interact, do things in common, share the same cultural values, norms, beliefs, and have their own leadership which confers on the community some level of political autonomy.

It is within this geographical space called community that development occurs. Before now, development was narrowly assumed to be synonymous with economic growth which, "refers to the increase in output of goods and services that a country produces over an accounting period, normally one year" (Thirlwall, 2008, p.37). In recent times, development is considered within the context of three core values, according to Goulet (1971). These are life sustenance, self esteem and freedom. "Life sustenance," to Thirlwall (2008, p. 38), "is concerned with the provision of basic needs...self esteem is concerned with the feelings of self respect and independence...(while) freedom refers to the ability of the people to determine their own destiny."

Udoakah (1998, p.13), citing African leaders at the First General Obasanjo Farm Dialogue, defines development as a, "process concerned with people's capacity to manage or induce change. That is, to predict, plan, understand and monitor change and reduce or eliminate unwanted change." This, ultimately, informed the construction of alternative measures of economic and social development, notably the Human Development Index (HDI) and Human Poverty Index (HPI) by the United Nations Development Programme, UNDP. The UNDP's HDI is based on the variables of life expectancy at birth; educational attainment measured by a combination of adult literacy and combined primary, secondary and tertiary school enrolment rates; and the standard of living measured by real per capita income (Thirlwall, 2008).

Salawu (2008, p.14), citing Suld and Tyson (1978), categorises development goals as follows:

- Physical and mental health which also involves proper nutrition, shelter and housing, work safety, recreation and leisure, and community participation;
- Security, dignity and freedom which entail equal protection under law, equal respect and dignity, freedom of expression, communication and peaceful assembly, security against crime, etc;
- Education and training; and
- Culture and leisure.

Central to these notions of development is the desire for changes that will affect citizens' welfare positively as well as the acknowledgement that human beings are the most valuable resources of any nation, and are at the centre of concerns for sustainable development.

This discourse is therefore concerned with how dialogue as an aspect of Communication for Development, can be used to encourage and enhance development within different communities and consequently reduce poverty among the people.

Concept of Poverty

There is as much poverty in the rural communities in Nigeria as there is in the urban settings. This explains why many development experts are tempted to describe poverty being endemic. Poverty is seen as being synonymous with shortage of income, hence the most common measure of poverty is household consumption and expenditure. Stretched further, households which lack assets – physical, human, financial, social or political – that they can mobilise in the face of hardship are more vulnerable to impoverishment (Rakodi, 2008).

Beyond the above, however, poverty is also seen as deprivation – deprivation in material consumption, health, education, social life, environmental quality, unemployment, spiritual and political freedom. White (2008, p. 25) is very forthcoming on this: "Deprivation in any one of these can be called poverty."

Poverty can be measured by identifying the things that matter to the poor, such that once any of those things is lacking, poverty can be said to have occurred (White, 2008). This approach is essential in measuring poverty, as it lays emphasis on the things which are of real value to the people. It is contrary to defining poverty solely in terms of income where emphasis in terms of poverty reduction is placed on economic growth. This is a faulty measurement of poverty since economic growth is not as reflection of income distribution or the standard of living of the people.

Poverty still exists in the rural communities of the country in spite of the introduction of development programmes there. However, these efforts do not sometimes meet the needs of the primary beneficiaries, having been concieved from outside and by outsiders who may not have, from a distance, understood the culture of the beneficiaries as well as the magnitude and nature of the issues to be addressed. Lack of involvement of the communities is largely an outcome of the failure to engage the

communities in communications that border on the development issues at hand.

In the face of the multi-dimensional nature of poverty in Nigeria, particularly in the rural communities, the community dialogue offers a platform for the people to collectively address their poverty concerns with a view to finding solutions and ensuring positive change and sustainable development.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation for this discourse is the Participatory Development Theory which is a fresh and alternative approach to development in the rural communities, and has come as a response to calls for a more active engagement of the rural communities in their development in order to tackle poverty among them. If people willingly participate in the process to achieve development, there is the likelihood that such development programmes will be effective and efficient (Cornwall, 2002).

Participatory development addresses "'normal' development characterised by Europeanism, positivism and top downism – which are disempowering" (Chambers, 1997). Its focus is the grassroots level which permits a plurality of developmental goals to be realised, as well as giving communities the self determination they need. Chambers (1997, p.103) captures the essence of participatory development thus:

> The essence...is change and reversal of role, behaviour, relationship and learning. Outsiders do not dominate and lecture; they facilitate, sit down, listen and learn. Outsiders do not transfer technology; they share methods which local people can use for their own appraisal, analysis, planning, action, monitoring and evaluation. Outsiders do not impose their reality; they encourage and enable local people to express their own.

Parnwell (2008, p.113) corroborates the above:

> It is argued that large scale, universal, government–driven national programmes of (especially rural) development frequently fail to meet the particular needs and wants of local communities, and are only rarely tailored to local conditions and contexts. Centralised development decision making, often involving city-based 'experts', is generally too detached from local contextual realities. It is frequently encumbered by a 'planning arrogance', where technocrats think they know best what is in the interests of people at the grassroots level.

Community dialogue being a bottom up approach offers the communities the platform to be involved in their development process according their needs and wants, without imposition from outsiders and 'city experts'.

Communication for Development

Communication for Development is a development strategy that uses communication techniques, activities and media to guide and make people experience and sustain positive change within their communities. It is an intensified exchange of ideas among all sectors of the society to encourage the greater involvement of people in a common cause.

It uses dialogue, participation and sharing of knowledge and information. The communication involves people who are the drivers of their development and takes into consideration the needs of all players. Communication for development is community specific, hence it respects local contexts, values and cultures, and facilitates participatory processes to address negative components.

It is because it targets the ultimate beneficiaries of a development package, that communication for development increases support for a programme among people of influence, brings about desired changes in behaviour, and sustain practices over time. It establishes public support for a programme and empowers communities and individuals to make informed decisions and take effective action about their social development.

The United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF), citing Collin Fraser and Jonathan Villet, states the rationale for communication for development thus: "If development can be seen as a fabric woven out of the activities of millions of people, communication represents the essential thread that builds them together."

It is within this context that community dialogue is seen as an essential ingredient of communication for development that can effectively engage communities on issues of development for effectiveness of development programmes.

Community Dialogue

Community Dialogue has arisen in response to calls for more active engagement of the rural communities in development, that is, involving the rural people in their own development. It is an offshoot of the challenge to the direction of development decision making.

Community dialogue is the process of engaging everyone in community initiatives that will lead to desirable and sustainable change. It is a forum that draws participants from many parts of the community to exchange information face-to-face, share personal stories and experiences, honestly express perspectives, clarify viewpoints and develop solutions to community concerns and opportunities.

Community dialogue is a bottom-up approach that centres on, and emerges from, the communities themselves, and enables the people to appreciate their problems and design appropriate solutions. As Parnwell (2008, p.113) puts it, "the decision making role of the community yields a greater sense of ownership and identity with the process of development, and people are more likely to contribute the enthusiasm, commitment and endeavour that require it to succeed."

Hence, community dialogue addresses the issue of social exclusion in the development process. Social exclusion, though, depends on the society, what participation entails and the conditions for individuals to participate. Burchardt, Grand and Piachaud (1998) state that an individual is socially excluded if he or she does not participate in key activities of the society in which he or she lives. Guista (2008) lists several indicators of exclusion: economic circumstances (income, wealth, land, etc.), health (both physical and mental) and well being (including emotional dimensions), access to education, training and work, access to services such as housing, transport etc.

In order for individuals to be included, then such should be able to participate fully in the activities of their society, including decision making on the pattern and direction of activities aimed at inducing and sustaining change that leads to a reduction in poverty level. The void in participation in the development process is partly filled by community dialogue which emphasises listening to others, deepens understanding, develops common perspectives and allows participants to express their own interest. A properly organised community dialogue expands the base of voices/constituencies that bring in varying expertise and interests.

Inherent in dialogue is the identification of common goals and the means to achieve them. Thus in community dialogue, common issues are identified as well as the resources - human, material and knowledge - to address them. Impediments to poverty reduction are identified and discussed, and solutions found. The participation of target beneficiaries of a development programme eases the burden of implementation and enhances the effectiveness and efficiency of such programmes (Cornwall, 2002). Without the involvement of the beneficiaries, even valid goals of development may not be achieved. The goals of such a development package may be misunderstood or may not be appreciated. Community dialogue therefore provides a template, to break down hitherto thorny, confusing issues and the enabling environment to persuade, convince and involve the beneficiaries for the efficiency and effectiveness of development programmes. As a participatory development process, community dialogue seeks out diversity for consensus rather than treating everybody as uniform objects of development.

Community dialogue is an integral part of community participation in development, which Desai (2008, p.115) observes, "is an indispensable part of many development programmes and projects encouraged by national governments, the World Bank, UN agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs)". The United Nations Report (1979, p. 225) defines participation as, "sharing by people in the benefits of development, active contribution by people to development and involvement of people in decision making at all levels of society."

Effective Dialogue

Critical to effective dialogue is the organisation of the forum. Community dialogue can be organised by leaders of the community, development partners, community-based organisations, civil society groups, non governmental organisations, etc. Dialogue should tackle specific development problems in the community such as increased maternal and child morbidity and mortality, drop in school enrolment, failure to adopt and adapt to positive changes, teenage pregnancies, increase in HIV/AIDS infection, low level of income, etc.

Community dialogue is not a forum for political brinksmanship; it is not a platform for the advertisement of the credentials of the organisers of the forum who may have some ulterior motives; it is not a session for frivolities, neither is it synonymous with a town's union meeting. It is not a town hall meeting usually stage-managed for visiting government officials, but an opportunity to address specific issues of development where the people willingly appreciate the problems at stake and volunteer solutions which may, however, be fine-tuned depending on the current conditions.

Community dialogue sessions are not emergency sessions; hence they must be planned for, diligently. Groups of participants have to be broadly determined and informed in advance. It is very necessary for the facilitators to be persuasive with facts to convince the expected participants to attend the dialogue sessions. The place, date and time for the dialogue should be known by all stakeholder groups. While it is difficult to satisfy every interest within the community, all expressed concerns and/or reservations of the invited participants should be addressed.

At the start of the dialogue, the goals of the session should be clearly explained by the facilitator who should be deeply knowledgeable in the development issues at hand. Groups and individuals present should be identified before commencing dialogue. Those who are absent should also be noted. The process of dialogue should also be explained to the participants who should be encouraged to voice their concerns. The dialogue should be recorded both electronically and manually for future use. Hence some persons should be designated to take notes and summarise important points at the end. It is also important for the session to agree on the summary of the points raised as these may likely form the basis for action. If the dialogue is not concluded, or if it is heading towards inconclusiveness, it is necessary to agree on an adjourned date which should not be too distant, so as to sustain the spirit of dialogue and so that solutions to the problem(s) at hand would not be retarded.

In the event that dialogue has been successfully concluded, it may be desirable to develop an action plan and set up committees for its implementation. Whatever are the resolutions of the dialogue session, implementation should be as immediate as possible. This gives credibility to the process and sustains its integrity. It will encourage participants to respond to invitations to dialogue in future, with a conviction that the dialogue session is not a time-wasting, diversionary venture!

Drawbacks in Community Dialogue and Participatory Development

The centrality of community dialogue in participatory development not withstanding, there are some weaknesses which are located not in community dialogue itself, but in factors external but related to it. These include:

i) The problem of tokenism: Those who are invited as participants in the community dialogue may either be handpicked to ensure agreement or are brought in too late to change anything (Hickey and Mohan, 2005).

ii) Sometimes participation in dialogue may be unduly taken as an end in itself and not a means to an end. Hence, dialogues must yield tangible benefits.

iii) Bretts (2003) warns that simply participating is meaningless unless there is some institutionalised accountability.

iv) Participatory development seeks to give local people control over the process of development in their community, but many processes affecting their lives are often not readily tackled at the local level.

v) Emphasis on civil society can create competition among local organisations, particularly as development partners channel aid/assistance through them. Financially, intellectually and politically, many partnerships are anything but participatory, with some NGOs in developing countries acting as a delivery mechanism for a predetermined agenda.

vi) Some participants in community dialogue may fail to appreciate the essence of the dialogue. There is a tendency by some to regard the dialogue as a forum sponsored by government to propagate its political ideology or canvas political support, particularly if the dialogue session is taking place during an election period. The facilitators may be accused of having received money on behalf of the community. They also face the possible accusation of self aggrandisement.

vii)   There is always the possibility of government hijacking the process of community dialogue to subvert and manipulate the local people. Gilbert and Ward (1984) speak of community participation as a means of social control, saying that the state co-opt leaders and deflect opposition by making concessions or through repressions. Desai (2008) also states that government uses co-optation and clientelism to gain the support of groups and individuals in the communities.

Conclusion

Community dialogue allows communities to exchange a vision, share information and build consensus on issues, communicate new ideas for collective decision making, collective responsibilities and community actions; it ensures the inclusion of the voiceless and vulnerable in development and enables the community to identify and mobilise resources within and without the community to address the issues of poverty, positive change and sustainable development.

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