

Chapter 11

Participatory Communication and Digital Media in Africa: A New Paradigm

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ABSTRACT

Digital media has had an unquestionable impact on participatory communication. The use of digital media has become a part of the community development framework for inclusive participation. Premised on the foregoing, this chapter sought to examine how digital media, an emerging development in Africa, has changed the status of participatory communication across the continent. Furthermore, it reviewed how this new phenomenon has paved the way for empowerment journalism and digital participation, thereby making participatory communication a community development tool in the 21st century that heightens collaborations. The study was anchored on theories of new media and development communication. The methodology employed a desk review. Findings showed that aside from vitalizing participatory communication for rural development, community journalists needed to be conscious that they create a new twist that clashes with what the mainstream media professionals do from a community's viewpoint, which can impede participation.

INTRODUCTION

Community Participation in Primary Health Care, Community Participation in Tourism Planning and Development, infrastructure development, education and agriculture have been sustainable development strategies between development agencies and the government intended for the government and the community especially in low-income countries. There is, however, evidence about the nature of some

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partnerships that lacks the perspective of community members. Through participatory communication, communities experience development because community member who are involved in problem-solving and decision-making not only improve the community but also gain new skills, change behaviour, and adopt change.

What Africa has been long subjected to have been the rise of a small number of persons tagged as key stakeholders deciding for the entire local government area, state, regions, province, or nation. For example, the Nigerian Constitution enacted in 1999 starts with a phrase

We the people of the Federal Republic of Nigeria Having firmly and solemnly resolve, to live in unity and harmony as one indivisible and indissoluble sovereign nation under God, dedicated to the promotion of inter-African solidarity, world peace, international co-operation and understanding And to provide for a Constitution for the purpose of promoting the good government and welfare of all persons in our country, on the principles of freedom, equality and justice, and for the purpose of consolidating the unity of our people Do hereby make, enact and give to ourselves the following Constitution- (Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999).

Indeed, the question an individual will be asking will be “when was I even consulted for this? How? Even after being enacted, except in some formal education settings where the Nigerian constitution is taught as part of a topic in subjects such as – civic education, government, and history or then in the university for Political Science, Mass Communication and International Relations Students, the researcher is not aware of any other system that has been deliberately employed to breakdown or dissect the sections in the constitution to the citizens. What we have proliferating the internet are fragments and misinterpretations of the constitution on social media which has significantly turned sour in the mouths of Nigerians for example.

According to a World Bank and African Development Bank (AFDB) estimate from 2013, Africa had 650 million mobile users, far more than the United States or Europe. Africa had 507.9 million Internet users in 2021, accounting for 10.9 percent of web users globally at the time of this study. West Africa is one of the three leading regions with the highest Internet penetration rate, at 42 percent. In terms of social media, Africa accounts for 6.6 percent of the world’s active users, or over 277 million across 200 miles on the continent. Digital media have had an unquestionable impact on participatory communication: from the community town hall meetings to community radio, participatory documentary, and social media platforms. The use of digital media has become a part of the community development framework for inclusive participation. A small group meeting that could only host 50 community members with a projector slammed on a wall has translated to use of transferrable message platforms where a whole community can be connected with live from a remote location via the internet.

Premised on the foregoing, this paper reviewed how this new phenomenon has paved the way for digital participation thereby making digital media a community development tool in the 21st century that is not only increasing participation but also promoting mass literacy and awareness.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

1. To examine how digital media has changed the status for participatory communication in Africa.
2. To highlight the use of digital media in participatory communication in selected African Countries.

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3. To identify factors affecting participatory communication in Africa

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**New Media Theory**

New media theory, broadly speaking, conceptualizes the implications of digital technologies: from the novel sociopolitical configurations fostered by computer-mediated communication to the aesthetic and cultural significance of digital culture. New media are enabling development agents to accomplish their goals in peculiar ways never before seen. Videoconferencing, teleconferencing, e-mail chat areas, and podcasting allow people like to provide teams with the opportunity to share and react to great amounts of information simultaneously. Development agencies can now decide what information is necessary to aid their responsibilities or seek extra information that will be needed in the future thanks to the availability of digital media. The introduction of new technology into organizations is clearly changing conventional organizational structures and activities (West & Turner, 2010).

In addition to the aforementioned, new media theories, like any theories, have their detractors. In research on Critical Theory and Social Media published in 2018, Philippe E. Becker Marcano presented the alternatives and new sensibility that new media consumers require. He claims that social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and others are technical communication tools that have taken over our social lives. New media theory has been chastised for its dominance and for giving users little control over these platforms and their impact on human behavior.

Development Communication Theory

Leading scholars such as Daniel Lerner, Wilbur Schramm, and Everett Rogers championed what is called the development communication theory. Rogers is regarded as one of the founding fathers of development communication due to his pioneering effect. By gauging the needs and views of local communities that should be improved and seeking to build a consensus about development project plans that are to be carried out, participatory development seeks to ensure that attention is paid to enhancing the benefits to local people and lessening negative consequences. Information transmission and education, behavior change, social marketing, and social mobilization are all examples of development communication approaches. Other components of development communication theory incorporate media advocacy to create a homogenous entry for implementation with key stakeholders - including communication for social change, and community support.

However, critiques have contended that development communication hypothesis limits the media to be subordinated to only political, financial, social, and social needs subsequently constraining their scope. Scholars argue that too often, development communication implements westernization more than modernization because it draws in a culture of authority in its execution.

For the purpose of this study, the researcher will be focusing on communities, agencies, and government's use of the media for participatory communication to stabilize and homogenise views within a community around socio-economic and other developmental issues.

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Conceptual Framework

Mefalopulos (2007) describes participatory communication as a relevant theory and practice that involves individuals in the growth process and decision-making. Participatory communication, which is distinctive from other forms of communication allows for a horizontal flow of communication based mostly on dialogue and is becoming a more important part of development efforts around the world. Participatory communication necessitates a shift in emphasis from communication as a dissemination or campaigning tool used to inform and persuade individuals to change their behavior or attitude to communication as a tool for empowerment (Haider, Mcloughlin, & Scott, 2011).

Traditional media is defined as media that existed before the rise of the internet. That includes newspapers, magazines, billboards, radio, and broadcast TV and direct mail. Digital media is any digitized content (Including digitalisation of traditional medium) that can be transmitted over the internet or computer networks. This can include text, audio, video, and graphics (Sikarwar, 2016). This means that news from a television network, newspaper, magazine, or other source that is available online via a website or blog is considered digital media. There are a wide range of digital media applications that allow for accessing digital images, digital photography, digital video, digital audio, computer games. Another form of digital media is what can be described as multimedia productions, animations, digital video film making, e-books, web pages, data, and databases. Digital media practically mean everything you can view digitally. It can also be transmitted such as online advertising, search engines, social media, video streaming services, and websites.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Emergence of Participatory Communication in Africa

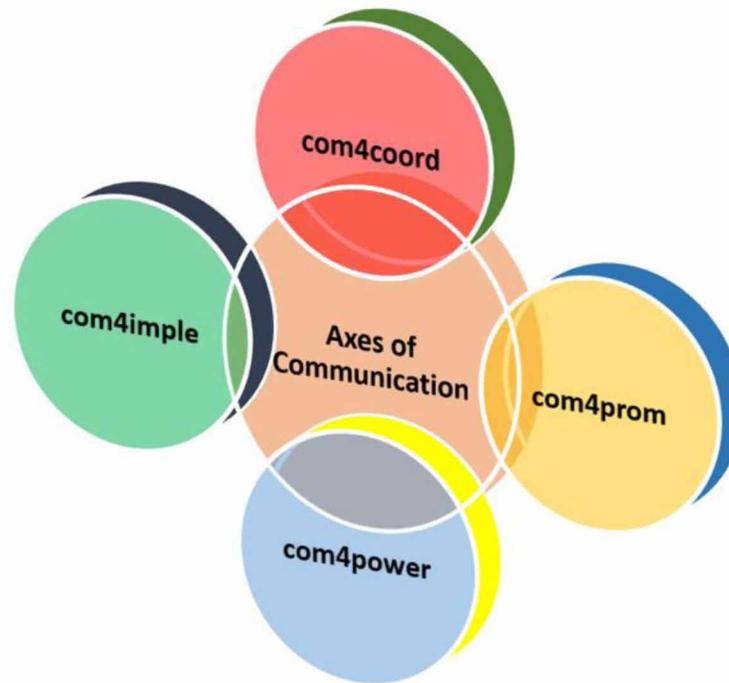
Participatory communication is a dialogue-based technique that provides an avenue for various stakeholders to share information, perceptions, and opinions, thereby facilitating their empowerment. This includes Communication for Development also known as C4D which refers to the exchange of information, ideas, knowledge, and concepts in order to improve a people's well-being particularly the rural poor. Communication for Development is built around four axes as shown in the diagram below:

1. **Com4Prom:** Communication for Promotion is a strategy for promoting development aid in donor countries by demonstrating how and why funds are utilized. This can be accomplished through some form of social marketing, in which the agency can use communication materials such as activity and project reports to highlight its cause or idea, as well as how the support received has aided or will aide a key program or project. Careful study needs to be carried out on the models adopted by other development or humanitarian agencies to have a clear understanding of what differentiates them and continue to persuade the donor of what is the unique proposition in terms of benefit to the beneficiary or what they could stand to lose otherwise.
2. **Com4Imple:** By explaining development programs to local populations, Communication for Implementation enhances the implementation of development aid in developing countries (Drouet, 2014). This can be accomplished also with the help of social media marketing where commercial marketing tactics are used in social marketing to promote public health, agriculture, educational and

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Figure 1.

Source: Researchers' construct, 2021



social campaigns. On a population level, social marketing is effective, and farmers, for example, can be sensitised on peculiar issues. In the book 'Marketing Social Change', Andreassen defines social marketing as "the application of proven concepts and techniques drawn from the commercial sector to promote changes in diverse socially important behaviours such as drug use, smoking, sexual behaviour, nutrition and even child labour. This marketing approach has an immense potential to affect major social problems if harnessed (Evans, 2006).

3. Com4Power: This refers to a situation where the local populations are given the ability, platform, or opportunity to speak or report on the implementation of development aid received from donor countries. Without factoring Communication for Empowerment various problems in project execution, such as inadequate communication between agencies and community people, might have a negative impact on project outcomes. Hence specific communication characteristics such as transparency, fairness, and understanding can be used by Com4Power to ensure that community buy-in is increased so that the intermediate and ultimate outcomes are achieved. Furthermore, by emphasizing empowerment, development communication professionals must visit the communities where interventions are supposedly taking place. and where they are not to allow community members the chance to evaluate the projects by institutions and agencies such as education, governance, healthcare. In this dimension, community reported outcome measures the indicators, then takes centre-stage in implementing strategies to increase their empowerment. With a consideration of community members' empowerment this can serve as a directly measurable community reported outcome for targeted issues to be addressed. An example is the case of patient empowerment in healthcare that provides them with an opportunity and tool to evaluate the kind of care they are

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- receiving this in turn will allow for healthcare providers to quickly attend to these issues when adopting the patient empowerment paradigm (McAllister, Dunn, Payne, Davies, & Todd, 2012).
4. Com4Coord: Communication for Coordination allows donor entities to coordinate their activities on a global scale through a series of coordination tools and rules. In case of implementing partners, to ensure proper coordination means promotional and communication material such as the websites, social media platforms, and also proposals and annual reports can play role in promotion of the cause. Experts point out that non-profits are using new innovative approaches to promote social causes, such as Facebook, Talking Books, blogs, and many others; social media campaigns raise awareness, which in turn reaches a larger global audience, increasing the agency's chances of generating more funds or supporters, as the case may be (Arora 2016)

C4D takes several forms like Top-down (a development catalyst disseminates information from development agencies to the general public). In top-bottom approach, the communication is usually one way with one source that thinks for all. This shows the relationship between communication, government accountability and responsiveness, and state-society relations in developing countries (Scott, Haider, & McLoughlin, 2011). A variety of case studies have shown that when a development programme tries to exclude the beneficiaries from decision-making processes, it leads to nonparticipation, and exposes itself to risks that lower the project's chances of success. This becomes a Top-down approach. Parks (2021), duly notes that bottom-up approach which is a development catalyst means that information is disseminated from the general public to development agencies

The evolution of communication for development (C4D) has mirrored broader shifts in theories and models of economic and social development. From the ground up (the people are the agents of development and development agencies only prime the people up). What C4D does is to employ a participatory approach for transmission of attitudes, practices, and technologies. When this type of participation is encouraged among community members, it also supports in promoting local stakeholders' sense of ownership, which improves sustainability of an initiative. Correspondingly, communication for development initiatives adopt a diffusion approach, which uses communication tools to carry out a transfer of information such as large-scale media campaigns, social marketing, and dissemination of printed materials, 'education-entertainment' and other forms of one-way transmission of information from the sender to the receiver (Scott, Haider, & McLoughlin, 2011).

Participatory methods employed by media and development agencies enables better identification of WHO is affected in WHICH ways and proffers WHAT can be done. In particular they enable the voices of the very poor, women, children, and vulnerable groups to be heard (Mayoux, 2018).

Types of Participation

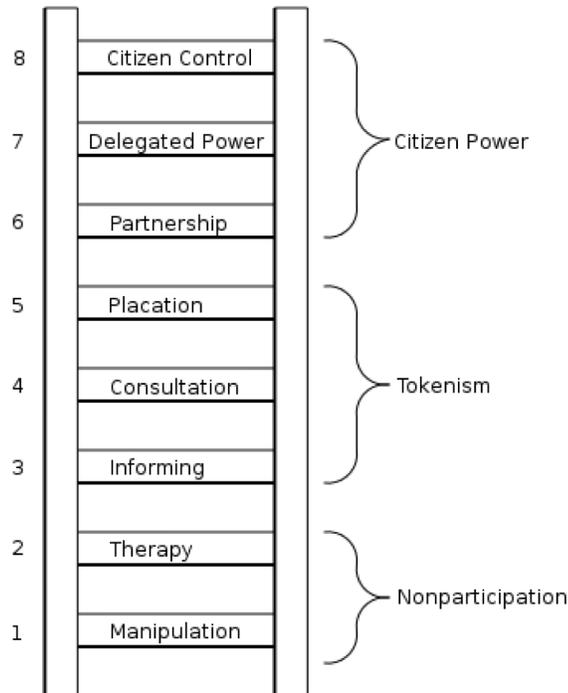
There are different types of participation and reasons for them. Millington (2012) notes that every type of community can be classified by the purpose that brings them together along five areas: interest, action, place, practice, and circumstance. To ensure inclusive participation, community members must be segmented into the following categories and addressed accordingly.

However, through the ladder of participation as illustrated by (Cousins & Friedman, 1993) one can see the eight steps in the citizen contribution ladder, each demonstrating a different level of involvement. The ladder explains the level of public participation and how much real power the citizens have over the process and outcomes from bottom to top.

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Figure 2.

The Ladder of Participation. Source: Cousins & Friedman (1993)



The ladder is a valuable tool for figuring out what ‘participation’ means in programmes and regulations. For the citizens to have power, they need to be treated according to their heterogeneous needs, and that each grouping contains people with varying degrees of authority.

Powerful actors use forms of non-participation at the bottom of the hierarchy to enforce their objectives.

The ladder above illustrates how powerful actors use forms of non-participation at the bottom of the hierarchy to enforce their objectives. When community members can discuss an intervention and decide to share their views, this is referred to as ‘input’ by power holders. Community members not voicing out, on the other hand, will have no impact on the project; consequently, that lack of involvement will not result in transformation.

METHODOLOGY

This is a descriptive study that took a look at a variety of community participations and cases of inter-active participation with spontaneous mobilisation in Africa which includes: Sudan, Ghana, Ethiopia, Uganda, Burkina Faso, Kenya. Through the mass media and digital media tools, development agencies are effectively finding ways to include community members voices or their stories in a project. This section takes a look at some of the case studies across the African continent.

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On-Air Dialogues Making Participatory Communication Audible Through Community Radio

When decisions come from community members, the goal of a project has a higher chance of being achieved. In Sudan, the IFAD Project did employ a participatory communication methodology. Radio can inform people, and it is also a two-way medium that brings people into the conversation who would not otherwise be heard, like women in areas where they are prevented from speaking publicly. She further notes that confidence is built for community members as on radio, identities are protected as such they can speak openly. When people are listened to, they have hope, they have agency. When it comes to issues of climate change for example, Helene Papper, IFAD's Director of Global Communications and External Advocacy explains the need to hear the voices of people in remote rural areas, especially women and youth and this is because they are at the first to be displaced by the changing climate yet have not been equipped to weather the impacts (Raja, 2021).

Purchase for Progress (P4P) was a World Food Programme (WFP) pilot project in Ghana that aimed to connect small-scale farmers to formal markets. The project attempted to guarantee that rural residents in the Ejura-Sekyeredumase district received timely and appropriate information about optimum agricultural methods. The research was able to uncover 16 farmers' organizations because farmers are frequently organized in small groups or cooperatives. Farmers were compelled to use information to enhance agronomic techniques as a result of the market opportunity, which resulted in much higher yields and higher quality crops. The process for delivering market and business information radio program, which projects the voices of farmers through the community radio program, was spelled out in an interactive session. Educating community people about the information collected by a project can be done through films, community theaters, and news programs. Of course, these community members may have heard other radio programs previously, but they have never handled a responsibility like providing frequent market reports to other farmers, as seen in the Ghana case study. To continue to expand, they will want technical assistance to keep them informed about the best ways to conduct business.

Community radio has also aided in the provision of services and amenities for numerous parts of society's development, such as education, health, water and sanitation, disaster relief, addressing social concerns at the community level, and connecting rural populations with the government (Khan, Khan, Hassan, Ahmed, & Haque, 2017). This is due to the fact that community radio stations can be managed, owned, and influenced by the people who live within. It operates through a non-profit organization that aims to create a platform for individuals, groups, and communities to tell their own stories and share their experiences in a media-rich world. Community radios have been used by community members in various Ghanaian communities who have become creators and contributors within the media space. For example, in a study that explored the contribution of Simli Radio to the livelihood improvement of the people in the Tolon-Kumbungu and Savelugu-Nanton Districts of the Northern Region of Ghana, Al-hassan, et.al. (2011) describes that the activities of the radio have promoted the decentralisation of government improving accountability and transparency. This is made possible through an interactive session provided by the station for local authorities to explain government policies and programmes and then the people get the opportunity to question certain actions and commissions of the authorities through the "listeners' comments" sessions. So not only are the authorities speaking but community members are offered a chance to also participate.

Gender sensitivity in participatory communication is key as it allows for community members to be aware of how gender plays a role in their lives through their treatment of other members of the community

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especially the generally marginalised groups. In the course of ensuring participation by community members, care must be taken to also include the voices of the minority groups of women and youths. Gender sensitivity trainings should also be included to educate especially community leaders, gatekeepers, and major actors so they become more aware of and sensitive to gender as it plays out in their communities.

Participatory Communication also involves the use of the media as an initiative to increase the involvement of vulnerable groups such as women in the media. This is referred to as Gender Sensitive Participatory Communication which projects the activities women are involved in, showcasing their strengths, and promoting them as reliable assets. Allowing for vulnerable groups such as women to contribute to the media content can change the perception the community has about them (Pavarala, Malik, and Cheeli, 2006). Through some of such participatory communication through the media, women and girls have been encouraged to venture into technical areas taking key decisions including determining the direction for others to try. A similar synthetic world appears to exist on community radios according to the facts of cultivation theory. Whatever is shared on community radios informs an opinion and might end up with a judgement.

Community Health Promoters in Uganda

Recognising the value of community members in addressing health issues and preventing ill health at the grassroots level, living Goods a nongovernmental organisation whose mission is to decrease maternal child mortality from preventable diseases in low-income countries initiated a Community Health Promoters platform in Uganda. These CHPs serve as the first point of access to the health care system. These CHPs were recruited based on referral from community members, religious leaders and subsequently existing CHPs who then go through a 13-day training programme that will equip them to continue to serve their communities. The project recognised that the advantages of a community participation approach in primary health care (PHC) are a cost-effective way to extend a health care system to the geographical and social periphery of a country. And when communities are well sensitised to begin to understand their health status, they may be moved to take a series of preventive measures (MacCormack, 1983)

Water Solutions in Ethiopia

Individuals, groups, and institutions who are stakeholders are participating in identifying and addressing local concerns that influence water supply functions in Ethiopia through community-based watershed management approach. The watershed management project was developed to reduce harsh water constraints affecting local stakeholders by introducing ways to direct any surface area from which rainfall runs off then it is collected and drained through a common convergence point.

In executing the PWSD in Ethiopia, the Ministry of Agriculture principally did seek to ensure that the watershed communities were involved in all stages of planning, implementation, and management of watershed development activities. Through a user guideline, it also factored the process was a continuous type and not a one-time exercise. Different participatory techniques were used based on existing and innovative experience with a gender consideration because women were the most affected by environmental hardships, for example, they need to walk long distances to fetch water which is gradually becoming more and more scarce by the day. Their involvement in watershed development planning, implementation and management were also key to ensuring that they equally benefit from the various measures that were put in place (Ali, 2013).

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Subsequently, the community members were also involved in what is referred to as Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation (PM&E) which is different from the conventional monitoring and evaluation because this style involves participation. An effective PM&E makes use of a participatory planning approach so the community can achieve sound resource management in any watershed development or natural resources management.

According to the report by the Ethiopia Ministry for Agriculture, various African countries, including Kenya, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali, have successfully implemented, and expanded participatory conservation and watershed-based approaches. Such programs have been realized within the context of combating desertification and poverty reduction efforts (Debebe, 2017).

Although referring to infrastructure development, Wattam (1998), opines that not only would community participation in project maintenance be more cost effective, but it would also have significant developmental implications. These findings on community engagement obtained over three years from research in Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya included enhanced cash and income options, skill development, and a higher sense of ownership (Wattam, 1998). This, according to the researcher, is applicable and can be gained in any region where community members participate.

Burkina Faso Youth Participating in Improving Reproductive Health

Through participatory communication in Burkina Faso, the locals were encouraged to initiate action, set the agenda, and work towards a commonly defined goal. This is because involving communities in development is good practice, as the community members know their own needs and understand issues that influence their health. Youth from Burkina Faso offer a practical definition of community participation (Hause, 2002) in an example of collective action these youth were mobilised to work with organizations in their communities to improve adolescent reproductive and sexual health. It is one of the principles of primary healthcare, a way in which members of a community are organised, sensitised, and mobilised towards participating in health programmes affecting their health and existence. It is a very important component of the health and development of every community

Participatory Communication for Community Budgeting

Since 2012, Fahamu Networks for Social Justice, has been working with communities in Kenya to engage in participatory budgeting processes to help guide and direct public spending. Working with local government representatives, community activists, and existing social movements, citizens collectively identify priorities and make decisions about public monies. The projects are working in Kajiado, Kwale, Makueni, Kakamega, and Kisumu counties (The Communication Initiative Network, 2015). In a 30 minutes documentary, Fahamu describes the process so far and how Kenyans have been allowed to set the agenda as a way of democratising democracy. In a district like Kwale, the documentary revealed that they lacked basic amenities including education and clean water. The video also served as a tool to educate the people about their constitutional rights and provisions for their participation. Through 5 stages, community members get the chance to list out their priorities and vote with one voice.

The Constitution of Kenya (2010) calls for citizens to participate in the governance management and decision-making socially, economically, and politically. One of the demands arising from citizens during the Fahamu-led Change Initiative forums was for citizens to be involved in this governance and to be part of determining their own development path. The Participatory Budgeting (PB) project was created

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in response to these demands, as a way of ensuring that agenda setting begins at the community level. The Participatory Budgeting process allows communities to work collectively at smaller community levels to decide how to allocate part of a municipal or public budget. Report shows that the practice did allow for the citizens to identify, discuss, and prioritize public spending on projects, and support them to make actual decisions on which projects to undertake as a matter of priority. Community wards delegate members who will be in charge of developing specific spending proposals which will later be presented to the community for validation. If the community then approves of the proposals, they are then forwarded to the county government to be considered for implementation.

According to Fahamu, participatory budgeting is a more in-depth and meaningful technique to include local citizens in decision-making than typical consultation processes. This entails including residents and community groups who represent a varied cross group of the population in developing expenditure proposals based on the needs of the community and collectively deciding on budgetary allocations. Furthermore, the method involves citizens in the inspection and monitoring of the process and the implementation which is intended to inform annual or periodic decision making. The initiative has created a manual, 'Facilitating Participatory Budgeting in Kenya', to aid communities and guide them through the process.

Social Dialogues as a Form of Participatory Communication

In Uganda, community social dialogue served as a participatory communication tool to address the issues of Child abuse when UNICEF partnered with Save the Children International (SCI) to fund their programme for training community members on knowing and protecting children's rights and creating Child Friendly Spaces (CFS) for children to enjoy their rights safely (Asobora, 2021).

To ensure success, organisations, and their partners, will need to engage in a series of community and social dialogues, beginning with a comprehensive assessment through meetings with influential leaders, chiefs, social groups, political leaders, community meetings, etc. This builds expands and deepens the dialogue process to include more groups and people for example with what happened in Ghana, it led to the signing of the "Kumasi Accord".

The programme also includes capacity-building elements and establishing institutions, structures and networks that help to respond to emerging issues.

CSDs are now avenues in which knowledge, norms, and traditions are examined, rather than places where cultural authority is asserted. During CSDs, gatekeepers and stakeholders collaborate in the making of meaning reviewing existing practices against social and economic implications. These community leaders have lived through a particular time, the process enables those involved in the dialogues to explore images of themselves, their histories, and communities. This shift within the participatory communication has resulted in the continuous implementation of community social dialogues among community members through Town hall meetings where issues in the community are sometimes presented in the form of dramas, songs, and diagrams. This shift within the community has resulted in participatory cultural communication. Through CDSs also, more people are motivated to participate in planned activities by participatory communication, which changes their behavior and attitudes and empowers them to focus on getting results

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Community Engagement Solving Water Crises

Generally, the demand for a water project comes from one of two places - either the community themselves or by an external agency that uncovers an unmet need. Often times, people who are coping without access to clean, safe water actively go out and try to find someone who can help them. When a community chooses to organise their water project. This is known as community demand because the local village is the initiator. They have a desire to get clean, safe water and have organized enough to begin the process of finding it.

Sometimes though, those with the greatest need have not yet found their voice. It's necessary to go out and find these communities - by talking to local people, driving out into remote areas, or using government data. Then, our partners work with them to develop a plan together so that they too are engaged in a shared process from day one. Regardless of how we come to meet the communities we serve, and before anything else happens, a lot of talking needs to happen. We require our partners to open and maintain a dialogue with each community. We want to be sure everyone has answers to questions like: Who are you? What do you want? Why are you here? What is it like living here? What do you need? and then hopefully, how can we work together? When these kinds of questions are asked, by both sides, the community and the NGO build a strong foundation of cooperation and respect by seeing each other's points of view. It's an important step that takes time. In the long run it pays huge dividends.

Community Participation Bridging Financial Access and Transforming Communities

In one of the most remarkable stories so far, Village Savings and Loans Agents (VSLAs) in the Sanaag region donated \$USD1,000 of their social fund to support the most vulnerable people in the drought-stricken region. The model is for interested participants (mostly women) to come together to form groups of 19 to 25 members, who pool in money by buying an agreed number of shares at an agreed time that creates a fund from which members could borrow with minimal and agreed interest rates. It usually runs for an agreed cycle of 9 – 12 months after. Throughout the cycle, shares are bought, loans are disbursed, and members pay back loans with agreed interest within a certain period. At the end of the cycle, members would have also earned a return on their savings which is shared to all according to the shares purchased all through the cycle. The result has been seen across communities in Ghana, Malawi, and Uganda where VSLAs have led to increased savings and access to finance, improved micro-enterprise performance, and increased community empowerment (IPA, 2011).

Participatory Rural Communication through Digital Media

Major projects worldwide employ the use of digital media because they can be created, viewed, distributed, modified, Listened, and preserved beyond the paper and the pen. Through the use of digital electronics devices, social media also such as blogs, podcasts and other content sharing devices are used to engage users via participatory communication. This marks a shift in how digital media is playing a publicly communicative role so that community members can continue to be custodians of their cultural content and share their concerns through the media. It also signifies a new possible direction for community learning through a wide range of initiatives that demonstrate how participatory communication through digital media can be integrated into community development practices. The use of digital media tools

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presents an ideal opportunity for community members to provide authentic cultural information, that will receive media attention.

Development projects are increasingly open to cultural diversity, local knowledge, and popular memory. Participatory Communication approach helps the projects to connect with the identities, and socio-cultural issues that exist within them. This approach has supported the deconstruction of grand narratives and have affirmed the role of audiences in social learning and development. Experts on the field can tap a form of community intelligence that will certainly create a path from top-down approach to community networking which demands an engagement with the people. This is also changing the ways that the media are responding to the challenges of providing authentic and authoritative information within the increasing participatory environment.

In 2016, Mzwandile Makhanya conducted a study around Using the participatory mode of documentary filmmaking for knowledge exchange and empowerment exploring the usefulness of a participatory video approach to facilitate knowledge exchange and community empowerment in the uMgungundlovu district of South. This shows how media tools can support participatory communication research project. Makhanya's goal was to enable positive communication between Willowfontein (a peri-urban1 community of South Africa) and numerous other stakeholders through the participatory video project. The documentary was used to examine and address issues around food security/insecurity in this community which served as an empowerment tool for the community which did not have usually have the opportunity to participate in a decision-making process and to communicate at a constructive level with persons such as governmental practitioners, and agricultural and academic experts. With the video captured, this can be extended to these key stakeholders who are usually recognised in decision-making processes. Why do community members participate in film projects such as this? According to Kolanisi (2013), People become interested in participating in such (film) initiatives because it provides them hope that someone will finally hear their tale.

In Ghana, Farm Radio International (FRI) collaborated with commercial radio stations Obouba and Akyeaa FM to improve the knowledge and skills of small-scale farmers in the sustainable production and post-harvest handling of high-quality staple foods. Research informed their design of a comprehensive programme to produce and broadcast participatory Farm Radio programmes, in collaboration with partners such as the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) and Ghana's Ministry of Food and Agriculture. This programme is reported to have reached a total audience of one million farmers, including those directly supported by P4P. The project also provided selected farmers' organizations with a mobile phone including technical support to encourage participatory communication. Through the digital device, they are able to foster interactivity between the radio station and the rural populace who are often isolated, farmers. Additionally, these phones, is supporting them to receive weather forecasts and market information on a weekly basis.

Mzwandile (2016) states that In South Africa, there have been many interventions and projects from the government and other community out-reach organisations in an attempt to assist such communities with crop production. However, most of the projects are consistently unsuccessful. The government had been employing the top-bottom conventional strategies through community out-reach which does not facilitate collaboration that encourages the contribution of community members. As a result, the community development projects had all failed since they lack this most fundamental component of community development. Participatory video, though a process works in collaboration with the community, offers an appropriate approach to explore any community development cause, including food security/insecurity. The documentary film, *Freedom from Hunger, Hunger for Freedom*, produced with

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the community supported the examination, the factors that were contributing to failing crop gardens in this community which the government had struggled hard to solve because the root of any community development can only come from positive participation between different stakeholders, including the community. But then how does Mzwandile's project and others become digital? Through streaming platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, blogs, and digital news channels.

Another example can be seen in December 2007 the BBC launched its online streaming and download service, the iPlayer. By the end of 2009, over 729 million requests to view programs had been made via the service, which offers U.K. viewers a chance to watch programs screened on the BBC's television channels in the last seven days or listen to radio broadcast over any BBC radio station over the same period via their computer or a range of mobile media devices. The BBC Pidgin is a language service for digital platforms in English-based Pidgin for West and Central Africa which was launched in 2017 by the BBC World Service. This is an example of inclusive digital participation offering a platform that can serve a younger audience and women with social media playing a key role.

Citizen Journalists and New Media Participatory Communication

Citizen Journalism can be defined broadly as the dissemination of information through facilitated online communication, networking, and/or collaboration. Citizen journalists are employing social software, social networking and Web 2.0 as tools and platforms that enable user interaction. With this kind of facilitation which not new what makes the difference are the tools in their hands. While social media technologies such as Facebook were designed primarily as network communication tools to connect with friends and family, citizen journalists are currently employing the use of these social media applications—including blogs, podcasts, and vlogs to facilitate a participative cultural, community and communication experience by a number of people.

The information and communication technology (ICT) and digitalization innovation is providing more platforms and empower people opportunity to voice out and engage actions to issues that they felt worth advocating for and long been neglected by the mainstream media by utilizing new media platforms including among rural communities and their sustainability. Citizen journalism is making an attempt to address this problem by enabling rural communities to obtain and report news, and, to facilitate coverage of their concerns and interest, by connecting those communities and a virtual news outlets prospect to ensure their voice is also heard to initiate actions and mobilization towards a more sustainable rural community.

What was ordinarily aired or broadcasted by mainstream media with limited timeslots, can now be streamed online with the convergence of multiple mainstream media now available. Digital media facilitates social interaction and empowers people. Through digital media community members have a voice which is increasing their civic participation and facilitating the creation of communities with a purpose. Among the benefits of digital media is the way it is changing how work can be done, boosting productivity, and enhancing flexibility for workers and employers. It has enabled unprecedented levels of communication, community building, and social interaction, breaking the barriers of location, time, and social context. The spread of digital media has made possible the rise of new methods of learning, providing underserved communities with better opportunities.

Digital technologies like social media have allowed us to communicate and share in real time around the globe and across traditional cultural boundaries. The digital divide, however, may in fact create an even greater separation between cultures that are connected from those that are not. The social media

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space has created a platform for a variety of participatory communication as a platform for social change, political action and e-governance including on the spot polls/surveys to gauge users' perceptions and opinions. The widespread availability of low-cost information and communication technology, such as cell phones and the internet, has expanded the media landscape and relocated it from the institutional to the modern communication arena. What we have seen is how civil society and the public sphere around the world today have taken advantage of platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to operate independently of political institutions. As seen in the ENDSARS protest of 2020 where Nigerian Youths took on to the street to speak against police brutality, social media is serving as a tool for organizing and mobilization, as well as a forum for discourse, interaction, and democratic decision. Quasi political actors are also relying on channels of communication and mass media networks such as Channels News Television, The Sun Newspaper and ThisDay newspaper who all have all converged online to influence public discussion, shape opinions, and promote social change.

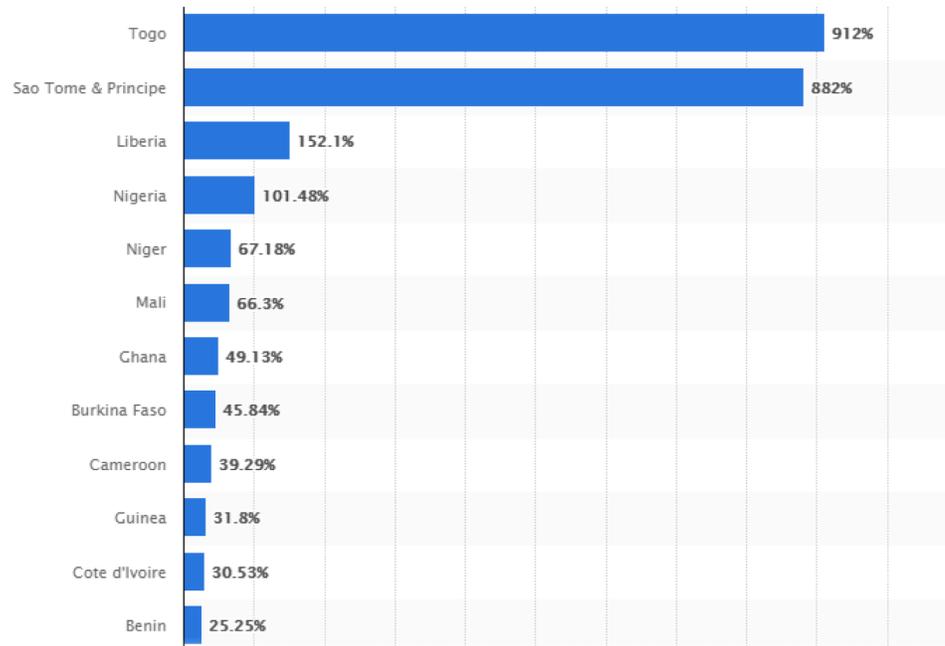
One such instance in Nigeria is how influencers and activists such as Aisha Somtochukwu Yesufu who is Nigerian activist and businesswoman along with the former vice president of the World Bank Oby Ezekwesili together championed the #BringBackOurGirls movement, on Twitter which was used to draw the attention of the public and the world at large to the abduction of over 200 girls from a secondary school in Chibok, Borno State Nigeria. Through social media, they rallied students and other civil based organisation who marched to the National Assembly to seek for action from the government (Nwabufo, 2020). A report by Statista, an online global research website, did reveal the percentage change in internet usage in West Africa between 2000 and 2021. The chart below shows the access by country:

The chart above shows data on the internet usage in West Africa which rose rapidly between 2000 and 2021. Togo's growth rate was 912 percent, making it the fastest-growing country in the world. Internet usage increased by 882 percent in So Tomé and Príncipe. While Cabo Verde, Mali, and Nigeria, according to data on internet users in Africa, have the highest rates, with web density of over 60%. The internet is providing for participation in a new sort of public realm that is impossible for the state to govern which has been enabled by new media technologies as seen in the chart from the growth of the internet.

Mobile phones and other new media technologies are supporting displaced persons in Nigeria who are typically excluded from the social, economic, cultural, and public system of their new locations. Internally displaced people were utilizing their phones to earn money, obtain emotional and psychological support from family and friends, study online, and follow political news and participate in discussions, according to The Conversation a News Blog. They were also able to solicit financial assistance from the general public via social media. (Sikhakhane, 2021).

Empowerment Journalism

Community-based form of reporting that seeks to not just gather, sort, and tell stories but seeks out community member's perspectives to telling the story is referred to empowerment journalism. This includes the use of Media advocacy which is as the strategic use of mass media to advance public policy initiatives (Wallack, 1994). Heywood (2021) describes access to information as the route to empowerment. She points out that in a country like Mali, where there are 170 private radio stations, 121 of which are volunteer-run community stations, radio remains the primary source of information. Heywood discovered that Studio Tamani, as a radio studio, was normalizing dialogue on women's concerns by broadcasting women-related programs through a content analysis of a series of women-related radio programmes produced and broadcast by Fondation Hirondelle's Studio Tamani in 2018-2020. This is the first step toward

Participatory Communication and Digital Media in Africa**Figure 3.**Source - <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1139345/internet-growth-in-west-african-countries/>

utilizing radio as a powerful tool for creating an empowered environment. However, women must not be removed from their web of associations in order for this to be effective for communal empowerment.

Empowerment journalism can be achieved through media advocacy actions. The purpose of media advocacy is to promote good public policy, which is fundamental in community empowerment. There are several ways in which it differs from standard mass media techniques. Wallack notes that the focus of media advocacy goes from discussing and promoting personal interests to that of the society in general. Hence empowerment journalism is not about the individual but the socio-political, socio-economic behaviors that should translate into development policies for the environment. Now while the traditional media attempts to bridge the “knowledge gap,” media advocacy seeks to bridge the “power gap” (Wallack, 1994). It means that getting the community members to have more power over the environmental policy by speaking collectively about their issues, would serve more than merely trying to inform the people about their development issues.

In 2010, Futhi, et al., did try to ascertain to what extent the local governments in South Africa were following accepted participatory communication principles and practices to communicate with the community particularly in the Kungwini Local Municipality. The findings showed that although the participatory approach and the role of effective communication were well acknowledged and appreciated at the local government levels as being critical for facilitating, enhancing, and driving development yet the communities were not empowered to take full responsibility for driving the development process and the evaluation of the development. This leads to mistrust between the community and the municipality as the community is often not satisfied with the manner in which the identified projects are implemented.

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Another tool is employing a documentary strategy such as the video produced in Zambia – done in the framework of aquatic agricultural systems program it aimed at diversifying diets and improving livelihoods through use of locally available seasonal foods. Although women organised themselves into cooking groups to showcase their recipes and knowledge around food processing the documentary approach allowed for better understanding of what the community was used to. In participatory communication, it is a continuous process to find out what the community wants to say. Through this initiative, the women in the community discovered that they had been getting it all wrong from the way they were processing their staple food which was majorly maize.

Working within the communities allows for the media to project the shortcomings, important lessons around health, agriculture, and general empowerment of members of the communities.

Gender Sensitivity in Participatory Communication

A 2021 report by world Bank, disclosed that women in Morocco have continued to face obstacles in social, economic, and political participation. The report notes that Women’s economic participation in Morocco was at 26% which is among the lowest in the world and has not changed since 1990. But then through the Morocco WID Sector Strategy, poor rural and urban women were given the opportunity to articulate their needs and priorities through a participatory rural appraisal (PRA) process which provoked discussion among community members about development and gender issues and sought their views in formulating national policy objectives. By engaging the local populations in development projects, it provided the opportunity for even women to become a part in initiatives designed for their benefit which drives sustainability (Cornwall, 2002).

They have the potential to develop the capacities of women as sociopolitical actors. They also have the potential to promote a balanced and non-stereotyped portrayal of women in the media and to challenge the status quo. In Zambia, women who took part in a participatory video project presented themselves as active citizens who made significant contributions to their families and communities. These recorded images improved the status of women in the minds of government bureaucrats.

Gender sensitivity is the process by which people are made aware of how gender plays a role in life through their treatment of others. To ensure participatory communication is effective and complete, gender sensitivity trainings should be deliberate used to educate people, usually employees, to become more aware of and sensitive to gender in their lives or workplaces. This is also called inclusive participation. To be effective, development agencies and the media must be deliberate in identifying the marginalised groups, build relationships with them, conduct a needs assessment, and then conduct group action meetings. Through a gender-sensitive approach various agencies can employ tools for understanding and assessing the impacts, of their methodologies and practices to ensure that both men’s and women’s concerns, aspirations, opportunities, and capacities are considered.

Another case was in the Amhara Region of North Ethiopia where a project run by Search for common Ground intended to promote gender equality and increase the participation of women in decision-making on food security at the household and community levels. The communication strategy included the design of a series of interactive, multimedia communication tools such as radio spots, participatory theatre, image boxes, comic books and a video documentary to be screened using mobile cinemas. Also, through the provision of technical assistance to staff of their partners in Amhara the goal was to achieve an equitable participation and benefits for both women and men in addressing food security issues at the community level.

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Similarly, the UN project in Lebanon which provided a platform between May 2019 and December 2020, where the Centre for Professional Mediation held trainings—including on active listening, building positive relations, mediations, and negotiations—for members of the network. Under the project “Fostering Stabilization and Social Cohesion in Lebanon through Women’s Engagement in Conflict Prevention and Management” some women participated in a training of trainers’ programme where others are now part of the legal support unit that trains armed personnel in all 12 Palestinian camps on international human rights and humanitarian law. The final phase of the project involved bringing together women trained on conflict resolution to brainstorm ideas for peacebuilding, with the aim of developing a plan to prevent conflict within the community.

Participatory Research Communication

According to Ewa Hermanowicz, a Communications Specialist at EUFORGEN, who shares her thoughts and stories about the relevance of participatory communication describes it as a relevant research tool for reaching out to external audiences and feedback-it to the communities with which an agency has worked with. Hermanowicz (2016) adds that through a research project, community members can be the source of primary first-hand data validating the exercise. Though it is worth proper planning and budgeting in a project there are 3 reasons which makes it key – it serves to achieve impact, relevance, and outreach because it is constantly seeking to increase communication between different parties within the community.

Factors Affecting Participatory Communication

While the researcher was able to pull out various initiatives that have been able to strengthen accountability, human rights, and most of all citizen participation, it is worthy of note that there are also some factors mitigating participatory communication such as technological constraints and institutional constraints as discussed below.

Technological Constraints

The use of participatory communication in development remains limited because informational approaches such as the Top-Bottom are still favoured across Africa where a few determine the kind of technology to deploy without proper consideration for how many community members have access to or can afford it. The presence of new technologies which the community members may not yet be conversant with becomes a major hindrance for effective participation. Some beneficiaries or community members become still or mute in the face of a microphone, tape recorder or even a video camera.

Institutional Constraints

This is quite a major setback for development communication as development agencies tend to choose communication approaches based on a perceived expectation, rather than on their systematic value which should target the people. Hence there is a slow acceptance by the communities they work in. Communication is usually taken as a last option without prior consideration for the tasks. Ali & Sonderling (2017) notes that institutional decisions such as adopted by some development agencies like Organization for

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Rehabilitation and Development in Amhara (ORDA) will mean that development projects are designed without the dynamic engagements of the local community. Where this approach is employed, then the local needs and concerns of the community members will be rarely prioritized. Some agencies have only one communication officer who is burdened with the responsibility to draft strategies, implement these strategies, and equally report on the outcomes. As opposed to other units which have teams that collaborate to make the field programmes a reality.

Others includes local resistance to monitoring, the need for constant resource investment, and the difficulty of ensuring sustained community engagement. These challenges centre on a concern that plagues participatory approaches as a whole – that is, why should people participate?

Liquid Democracy: A New Frontier for Participatory Communication

Aside all the dimensions and tenets of participatory communication, there is an additional concept that emerged elsewhere in Europe referred to as liquid democracy. The concept at the moment is still fluid and evolving. Liquid democracy is a type of delegative democracy in which a community member can participate directly in collective decision-making through dynamic representation and direct engagement with other members. This democratic system incorporates both direct and representative democracy aspects. This paradigm has created new potentials for social interaction and decision-making among diverse communities.

Through liquid democracy, communities are getting involved in meaningful and consistent participation across activities as they are free to delegate those, they are confident would work to support and improve their social wellbeing. Unlike conventional democracy where delegates run for a particular tenure, the representatives can be changed at will especially when the community members are no longer satisfied with the outcomes. Community involvement examples include mobilising youths, working with community volunteers to manage projects to ensure sustainability. This approach equips people with the knowledge and skills to be their own best advocate. In view of the World Economic Forum Report, Sub-Saharan Africa risks landscape, which shows that communities across Africa are faced with a variety of issues such as unemployment/underemployment, underinvestment in infrastructure, Fiscal crises, Political change, and Climate change. The researcher believes that in the near future the concept of liquid democracy will be adopted even in Africa this is because, where liquid democracy is present, a community has the ability to present even liquid feedbacks at any time. There are established standardized protocols that will allow community members to adjust even their delegated authority without compromising the main aim they seek to achieve through mutual agreements. This implies that the system is participatory and encourages open dialogue. As a result, when liquid democracy is applied, community-based socio-economic issues as noted by the WEC and others such as water, sanitation, maternal health, poor healthcare systems, weak educational systems, and access to market knowledge and financing can be appropriately addressed.

DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

From the voices of people in Simli community radio in Ghana, to the Water Solutions in Ethiopia, Community Health Promoters in Uganda and the Community Budgeting in Kenya, this study was able to scrutinise the use of digital media, in participatory communication across the African continent. It

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is important to reiterate that participatory communication cannot be complete if it becomes a one-way communication approach because it is a dialogue-based technique that provides an avenue for various stakeholders to share information, that leads to empowerment. The implication as argued by the new media theory is fostering digital based communications where community meetings are not just notes but also voices recorded and transferred over the phone through participatory call-in community radio programmes. The four axes of Communication for Development shows that Communication for Empowerment can give power to local population when they are allowed to function as a part of the project and also report on the implementation of the development aid received from donor countries.

The game has changed as communication tools such as phones, cameras and recorders are no longer serving as mere dissemination or campaigning mechanisms that simply inform and persuade people to change their behavior or attitude but more of an empowering tool. People are empowered by digital media because it enhances wider social interactions which is not limited by time or space. In many cases, members of the community have a voice thanks to digital media, which is also expanding civic participation and supporting the formation of purpose-driven communities.

Another advantage of digital media is how it is changing the way people work, increasing productivity, through multimedia products, journalists and development agencies now have more freedom to produce engaging documentaries like what was done in Zambia where women organised themselves to share what they had learned around balanced diets. Here they can relay the needs and choices of the communities they serve. Citizen participation through digital media has permitted unparalleled amounts of communication, community development, and social involvement by removing geographical, temporal, and social context restrictions.

The growth of community participation means new platforms are enabling learning by the proliferation of digital media, offering improved chances for underserved areas such as can be seen with the BBC Pidgin News Service which has a segment that projects activities within various communities across west and central Africa which can be streamed and is uploaded online for viewers across the globe. Digital technologies like social media have allowed us to communicate and share in real time around the globe and across traditional cultural boundaries.

Findings also revealed that media cultivation is evident in the way communities, agencies and government make use of the media for participatory communication to stabilize and homogenise views within various communities around socio-economic and other developmental issues. This shows that that the use of digital media has become a necessary part of the community development framework for inclusive participation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Apart from vitalizing participatory communication for rural development, there are major constraints around technology, institutions and finances that are factors hindering the actualisation of effective participatory communication. The following are some recommendations drawn from the study:

1. Media practitioners to be conscious in recognising that they are responsible for birthing a new twist around development communication from the community viewpoints, which can further improve cultivation of innovations.
2. Participatory communication should not be ignored when planning any programme.

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3. Social media as a platform for participatory communication should be well harnessed to facilitate change for the larger society.
4. Community members should be introduced early enough to the project's goal for easy collaboration with all levels of stakeholders.
5. Development agencies must be intentional about projecting issues of community interests and fostering community participation through interactive, educative, and informative media platforms. The more community voices are heard, the quicker issues will be solved in a practicable and sustainable way.

CONCLUSION

What we have seen from communities in Africa is that participation could be voluntary or co-opted. In any way, community members serve as token representatives who eventually take part in making decisions or a collective action. The Project Evaluation and Monitoring process for example what was done in Ethiopia, enhances skills and confidence of local people on management of development projects. It is also evident that although social media technologies such as Facebook were designed primarily as network communication tools to connect with friends and family, but it is now shifted to being utilised by citizen journalists who are currently employing the use of these social media applications through blogging, podcasts, and vlogs to facilitate a participative cultural, community and communication experience by a number of people. The participatory communication platforms can be seen in the ways social media platforms are used to mobilise and facilitate social and political events such as was seen with the #EndSARS and the #BringBackOurGirls in Nigeria.

As development agencies strive to be more intentional about projecting issues of community interests and fostering community participation through interactive, educative, and informative media platforms, the more marginalised voices will be heard, and the quicker issues will be solved in a practicable and sustainable way.

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