

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN NIGERIA'S DEMOCRATIC PROCESS

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Abstract

This paper discussed the role of community engagement in Nigeria's democratic process. It explored the different ways in which local and regional communities are participating in decisions about their nation's governance and how these methods are influencing the broader political system. It discussed the benefits and potential strategies for promoting community engagement in Nigeria's democratic process. It analysed the roles citizens adopt to make their voices heard and shape government policies. It further examined the challenges that are associated with community engagement in Nigeria's democratic process and provided solutions to these challenges as well as suggestions for the advancement of community engagement in Nigeria's democratic process.

Keywords: Community, Engagement, Democratic Process

Introduction

Community engagement refers to the active involvement of individuals, groups, and organisations in the affairs of their community and society at large. It involves citizens' taking part in decision-making processes, contributing to public initiatives, and working together to address common issues and improve the quality of life in their community. Community engagement is essential for promoting democracy, social cohesion, and sustainable development. Community engagement is a vital component of a democratic process in Nigeria. Encouraging citizens to actively participate in decision-making process, community development and governance strengthens democracy, promotes inclusivity,

and ensures accountability. When people are involved in their own affairs or developmental programmes by utilising the abundant natural resources, there is bound to be positive change as they address such issues and other indices of underdevelopment. According to Okirika (2022), the development of natural resources attracts investments capital and increases incomes and employment. Hence, economic and political resources need to be made available to the communities in order to increase their engagement in Nigeria's democratic process. It is also essential for the stakeholders to be deeply engaged in the promotion of community participation in democratic activities in order to ensure good

governance and the protection of citizen's basic human rights.

Community engagement in a democratic process has benefited the community in diverse ways. Government has reciprocated the communities with the dividends of governance for their active participation and support by casting their votes for their victory during election. This reward could be in the form of empowerment. Lazor in Oyebamiji and Adekola (2008:48) perceived empowerment as "a process of acquiring, providing, and bestowing, the resources and the means or enabling the access, to take control over such means and resources". Empowerment is a process of extricating one from impoverishment. The government at all levels have established companies, provided job opportunities, social welfare services and vocational training centers. This will help to eliminate or reduce inequalities in the society and provide opportunity for the people to effectively contribute to socio-economic and political development of their community and the nation at large. The citizen's participation in a democratic process serves as check and balance to political activities. Waide in Uzoha, (2014) affirmed that participation allows fuller access to benefits of democratic society.

Other social services that the community benefits from government include public education, welfare infrastructure, mail, libraries, social work, safe water, quality education, sanitation and other services that reduces the burden of poverty. Okirika (2022) noted that UNICEF works with local governments in many countries to find lasting solutions for governance challenges by generating geographically disaggregated data to show how children in different communities are faring in health, education and other areas; ensuring local government

funds are equitable and allocating funds to benefits of children most in need. UNICEF (2023) supported the development of budgets in municipalities that include birth registration, educational infrastructure, youth empowerment and employability, civic engagement, resource mobilization and climate change, public health facilities, water systems and sanitation facilities. The establishment of various educational institutions by government in various communities has given the populace easy access to education and manpower development which serves as the propelling force for national growth and development. It will become an avenue to reshape and restructure the individual and community (Omedia, 2019). Uzoha (2014) stated that rural communities have benefited from government in the areas of school building, road construction projects, palm oil processing industry, garri processing industry, rural electrification and transformer installation, community town halls, retail outlet project, etc.

The community is also politically empowered by the government. This is obvious in the appointment of top politicians of the same party in their various communities into respectable positions in government. These politicians attract government attention and projects that suit the needs of the various communities. The political empowerment enables the politicians who are representatives of the people in government to partake in political decisions and present their challenges to the government. These empowerments will help them to eradicate poverty and ensure their full participation in any programme that will promote their welfare; comprehend government laws and activities that foster development in their areas and the larger

society, improves output and get rid of social disparity.

Community Engagement

The fundamental notion of community is typically the presence of people in group distinct from a person. It is made up of inhabitants existing in a precise geographical boundary showing general cultural values and having a nature that shows sentiment of oneness and belongingness that facilitates collective efforts to pursue and actualise common goals. Community is described as a social group occupying a more or less defined geographical area and based on the feeling that people have for one another. It is further defined by Oyebamiji and Adekola in Kajuru (2016) as a localized population which is interdependent and which develops and nurtures specialized institution that provides on a day-to-day basis, a full range of goals and services necessary to meet the common goals and perpetuate its existence on the surface of the earth.

Engagement simply means “being involved”. Engagement is a rich concept that varies with its application and definition. The way engagement is defined also depends on the context in which it occurs. Armitage in Uzoha (2014) defined engagement as a “process by which citizens act in response to public concerns, voice their opinions about decisions that affect them and take responsibility for changes to their community”. Engagement is the act of including stakeholders in activities and communications and allowing them to contribute in a meaningful way.

Community engagement is a doctrine by which beneficiaries or people affected by an intervention are made to take active part in all aspects of the processes that affect their lives and the environment intended to transform the context and conditions within

which they live, and upon which their wellbeing depends. Community engagement enables people to play active role in community decisions, knowledge of local issues, attendance at public meetings, related attempts to influence proposed measures through individual and group actions, belonging to groups and committee and financial contribution towards community programmes (Ekong in Obi, 2016). Other terms used interchangeably with community engagement include civil engagement, public consultation, public participation, community consultation, community collaboration and community management. The United Nations Community Engagement Guideline on Peace Building and Sustainable Peace (2016) presents a definition for what community engagement is: “community engagement is a strategic process which directly involve local population in all aspects of decision-making and implementation to strengthen local ownership, capacities and community structures as well as to improve transparency, accountability and optimal resource allocations across diverse setting”. The principle of community engagement stipulates that people should be involved in the planning, execution, utilisation and assessment of developmental projects designed to improve their welfare. The integrated efforts in accomplishing or realising this need guarantees collective property ownership. According to Uzoha (2014) engagement of people occurs throughout community development process. There are several important aspects of engagement. Firstly, it involves understanding the existing concern of community members. Secondly, it is important to ask citizens how they would like to participate. Thirdly, some community

members may wish to pursue a particular idea they have passion for such as new business, streetscape and a shop local campaign technique for engagement and issue of identification. Community members can better mobilise existing skills, reframe problems, work cooperatively and use community assets in new ways through community engagement. According to Bridges in Uzoha (2014), the citizens can bring about desired change by expressing one's desire, either individually or through community group. The people learn to understand and appreciate the needs and interests of all community groups.

Strategic Aspects for Promoting Community Engagement in Nigeria

The Nigerian government has prioritize promoting engagement in recent years due to its potential contribution to economic growth, social capital, and political stability. The primary focus here is to analyse the strategic aspects for increasing community engagement in Nigeria. These aspects include:

1. **Voters' Education:** Educating citizens about their rights, the electoral process, and the importance of voting is crucial. This includes providing information on voter registration, voter identification, pooling procedures, and the significance of participating in elections. According to Ezimah in Oji and Okirika (2023), the significance of civic participation will awaken people's consciousness to the social, political and economic realities of the moment.
2. **Civil Society Organisations (CSOs):** Civil Society Organisations play significant role in mobilising communities, promoting civic

awareness, and advocating for citizens' rights. They can organise workshops, seminars, and public campaigns to educate people about their rights and responsibilities, as well as monitor government activities.

3. **Community Based Organisations:** Community Based Organisations are grassroots organisations that focus on addressing specific needs within local communities. They can facilitate dialogue, organise town hall meetings and engage citizens in decision-making processes at the local level (Okirika, 2022).
4. **Media and Information Dissemination:** Ihejirikain Oji, Elekwa and Okirika (2022) stated that the media, including traditional media outlets and social media platforms, play a crucial role in informing, educating, and mobilising the public. Accessible and unbiased reporting helps citizens make informed decisions and hold their elected representatives accountable.
5. **Youth Engagement:** Nigeria has a large youth population, and their active participation is crucial for sustainable democratic processes. Encouraging youth involvement through youth organisations mentorship programmes, and leadership development initiatives can foster a culture of civic engagement among young Nigerians (Okirika, 2022).
6. **Strengthening Local Governance:** According to Imhabekai (2009), enhancing local governance structures and empowering local government bodies can promote

community engagement. Local governments should actively involve citizens in decision-making processes, such as participatory budgeting, community development planning, and public consultations.

7. **Transparency and Accountability:** Ensuring transparency and accountability in governance is essential for citizen trust and engagement. Implementing measures such as open data initiatives, whistleblower protection, and effective anti-corruption mechanisms can foster citizen participation and confidence in the democratic process.
8. **Legal and Policy Framework:** A supportive legal and policy framework is crucial for community engagement. Laws should protect freedom of expression, assembly, and association, while policies should promote citizen involvement in decision-making at all levels.

It is important to note that community engagement is an ongoing processes that requires continuous efforts from both citizens and government institutions. By promoting inclusivity, dialogue and active involvement, Nigeria can strengthen its democratic process and ensure that citizens' voices are heard and valued.

Various Ways in Which Community Engagement Shapes Government Policies and Creates a More Equitable and Effective Administration

Community engagement is a component of a healthy democracy. This principle gives citizens a voice in the process of government and policy formation, allowing them to shape the policies of their government and create a more equitable and effective

administration. In doing that, this concept assume the following roles:

1. **Public Awareness and Education in Shaping Government Policies.** By raising awareness of the issues and challenges that government face, citizens can create a more informed electorate and this can lead to greater demand for policies than better reflect their interests. Furthermore, citizens can also be educated about the role of government in developing policy, which can provide them with the tools to evaluate and comment on policy proposals, helping to shape the ultimate form of policy.
2. **Mobilization and Protest in Shaping Government Policies.** Through protest and mobilization, citizens can directly mount pressure on the governments into making policy changes that better reflect their interests. Protest has potential to create a tangible political pressure, which can make governments to address the issues raised by protesters. In addition, protest can also help to raise public awareness on the issue and bring about mass public support for the policy changes demanded (Worgu in Zuma, 2010).
3. **Political Actors in Shaping Government Policies.** The actions of political actors, such as lobbying for change, can produce concrete changes in policy. Lobbyists with strong connection to government can influence policy formation, while those with lesser links to government can still create a political atmosphere that makes certain policy changes more likely. This influence can help to shape government policies.

Benefits of Community Engagement in Nigeria's Democratic Process

In recent years, Nigeria's democratic process has seen a dramatic increase for community engagement. This has had positive implications for the country's political landscape, resulting in more open government initiatives, increased civic engagement and more inclusive political system. The benefits of community engagement in Nigeria's democratic process include:

- 1. Inclusive Decision-Making:** Community engagement ensures that diverse voices and perspectives are considered in decision-making processes. It allows citizens to have a say in issues that affect them directly, such as local policies, urban planning, and public services.
- 2. Strengthening democracy:** Active citizen participation is fundamental to a functioning democracy. It promotes transparency, accountability and good governance by allowing citizens to hold their elected officials and institutions responsible and accountable.
- 3. Building Social Capital:** Community engagement fosters social connections, trust, and cooperation among individuals and groups. It strengthens the social fabric of a community, leading to increased resilience, mutual support and a sense of belonging.
- 4. Empowering Individuals and Communities:** Engaging citizens in civic activities empowers them to take active role in shaping their own lives and the future of their community. It enhances their skills, knowledge, and leadership capacities,

enabling them to become agents of positive change.

- 5. Addressing Community Needs:** By actively participating in community engagement initiatives, citizens can identify and address local issues and challenges. They can collaborate with others to develop innovative solutions, promote social justice, and improve the overall well-being of their community.
- 6. Promoting Social Innovation:** Civic participation encourages the generation of new ideas, approaches and solutions to societal problems. By involving citizens who bring diverse experiences and expertise, community engagement can lead to innovative solutions and transformative change.
- 7. Bridging Divides:** Community engagement can help bridge social, economic and cultural divides within a community. It provides a platform for dialogue, understanding and collaboration among individuals and groups with different backgrounds and interests.
- 8. Enhancing Public Services:** Citizens' involvement or civic participation can lead to more effective and responsive public services. By actively participating in the design, implementation, and evaluation of public initiatives, citizens can contribute their knowledge and insights to improve service delivery and outcomes.

To promote community engagement, governments, civil society organisations and community leaders can adopt various strategies, including public forums, participatory budgeting, citizen advisory

boards, community-driven projects, volunteer programmes and digital platforms for citizen feedback and collaboration. These initiatives should aim to be inclusive to diverse community needs and interests.

Challenges of Community Engagement in a Democratic Process

There are many challenges that arise from community engagement in a democratic process. These challenges include:

1. The difficulty of creating an equitable system where all citizens can participate in decision-making and the potential for unequal access to political resources such as education and media.
2. Policies enacted through citizen involvement can become mired in partisan agendas and special interests, leading to an uncompetitive and corrupt system.
3. Lack of public trust and other factors, which can reduce engagement rates and impede democratic decision-making.
4. Lack of resources available to citizens seeking to engage with their local government. This is often due to inadequate funding for community engagement activities.
5. The lack of staff to engage with citizens and lack of training or support for community leaders. As a result, many citizens feel disconnected from their government, leading to a decrease in public participation and engagement.
6. The unequal access to resources. This can be seen in the unequal access to education, technology, and other resources, which can prevent citizens from engaging in their community. This can lead to feeling of exclusion and powerlessness among citizens who

feel they have no say in their government's decision.

7. Decrease in public interest in local issues, the lack of access to information, or a general sense of apathy. This is a significant issue that can lead to citizens feeling disconnected from their government and their voices not being heard.

Osuji and Ogolo in Oyebamiji and Adekola (2008) included the following challenges: inadequate government assistance for communities embarking on self-help project; poor governance at all levels of government, selection of projects that do not meet immediate community needs and refusal by project initiators to involve certain persons in some aspects of project development process.

Conclusion

Increased community engagement has helped to build the legitimacy of Nigeria's democratic process, with citizens now feeling more connected to the political system. The active involvement of citizens in the democratic process has helped to create a sense of ownership and responsibility, further strengthening the country's commitment to democracy.

Suggestions

In order to address the challenges associated with community engagement in Nigeria's democratic process, the following suggestions are made for community leaders and stakeholders:

1. To set up local civic education programmes. This will enable the people to be acquainted with their civic responsibility, encouraging citizens to vote in local elections, and advocating for increased access to reliable information on political processes.

2. To develop cooperative partnerships between political parties, and the creation of community action plans to encourage greater citizens' engagement.
3. To encourage public dialogue on topics related to democratic process. Through the facilitation of forum, group discussions, debates, and other public conversation, citizens can be encouraged to express their opinions and share their perspectives on critical issues. The public discourse can also be used to identify areas where additional support, resources, or education is needed.
4. To establish partnerships and working relationships with both local and national governments. By doing so, stakeholders can ensure that the voices of the community are heard and that their concerns are addressed before actual policy is implemented. This collaboration ensures that all interested parties are connected and, thus, more likely to work towards outcomes that benefit the community as a whole.

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