

## ISSUES AND TRENDS IN COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND REDUCTION OF SOCIAL VICES AMONG YOUTHS IN NIGERIAN COMMUNITIES

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### **Abstract**

*This article examines community engagement as a strategy for reducing social vices among the youths in communities in Nigeria. Social vices which have eaten through the fiber of people's characters and behaviours, especially among the young generation pose a greater threat to the safety of lives and properties of people in the communities. Unfortunately, social vices are of greater harm to the perpetrators as they become outlaws haunted by authorities eventually leading to waste of life. Social vices can be attributed to the collapse of social institutions such as families, schools, and faith-based organisations in upholding and promoting moral values and virtues in the community coupled with the challenges of bad governance and poor leadership. To salvage the dire situation, community engagement is critical and should be embraced by communities. Such engagement involves all concerned stakeholders in the fight against social vices in the communities. Community engagement stresses togetherness, commitment, community consensus, shared values, and interest to achieve a common goal and tackle developmental challenges. The indices and principles of community engagement discussed in this article offer strategies for strengthening and tackling social vices in the communities. Nigerian communities and the young generation need to embrace community engagement as a strategy to combat social vices through collective efforts and collaborations. Social institutions should also work in synergy with the community members to promote community engagement, mobilisation, good value system and common interest to ameliorate social vices within the communities.*

**Keywords:** *Community, engagement, collaboration, social vices*

### **Introduction**

The destiny of a community lies in the capacity of her people because a community is created by people who share common ideology, common interest and mindset with

the capability to create the right kind of ecosystem and development they so much desired. However, this development cannot manifest in the absence of proper

engagement. Through engagement, community members cooperate and collaborate to surmount challenges being faced so as to achieve common goal and desired aspiration (Oyelami, 2017).

Community engagement has been primed to be a powerful tool for achieving community growth and development because it plays critical role in shaping the community, fostering unity and well-being as well as combating the prevalent social vices that often plague communities. Social vices such as crime, substance abuse, thuggery, rape, cultism, betting, hemp smoking, and violence do significantly hinder progress and disrupt the harmony within the community. These social vices, in the words of Oyelami (2019), are often caused by dysfunctional families, poor parental care, lack of discipline, ungodliness, sloth, and greed. They are also caused by poverty, peer pressure, unemployment, inferiority complexes, unhealthy imitations of the developed world, economic slump, and social pressure. The prevalence of social vices in present-day communities which has made a lot of people live in constant fear and trepidation without a tangible solution in sight, suggests that perhaps, community members are waiting on the government to tackle the menace of social vices in the community; or maybe community members are yet to realise that through collective efforts and proactive participation, they can significantly reduce these social vices and create a safe, inclusive, prosperous environment for all. It is against this backdrop that this article explored the importance of community engagement in addressing social vices and the potential impact it can have on transforming communities for the better. It will examine the concept of community engagement,

indices of community engagement, the concept of social vices and the root causes of social vices in the community. Finally, the paper examined challenges that hinders community engagement towards reduction of social vices and suggested ways forward.

### **Conceptual Clarifications:**

#### **Community Engagement**

The concept of community engagement has been described by scholars and international organisations from diverse lenses but with a holistic end goal which is to improve the well-being of community members. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2011), community engagement is the process of collaborating with groups of people who share geographic proximity, special interests, or similar situations to address issues that affect their well-being. In the same vein, Born (2012) believes that community engagement is a tool to achieve community prosperity. Born (2012) further describes community engagement as an avenue through which community members work collaboratively and have been inspired by collective action and learning to create and realise bold visions for a common future. Both definitions emphasise collaborative efforts of individuals towards solving common issues and securing a future that will be beneficial to the community. Hence, community engagement aims to build trust, establish harmonious relationships, and create long-lasting collaborations that positively impact the lives of community members.

Accordingly, community engagement according to Anyanwu (1999) can be termed as a development activity in the community whereby community members with or without the support of government or non-governmental agencies identify and make a collective decision on matters that are of

great concern to them. It is worthy of note that community engagement is democratic in nature and the process allows equal participation of community members including the young and old to join forces towards the successful implementation of developmental projects and eradication of community problems as the case may be. It is a dynamic process as well as an outcome-based approach that tends to mobilise resources, foster trust, and enable long-lasting partnerships for the betterment of community members. (Oyelami, 2013).

Finally, community engagement involves the active participation and collaboration of individuals, organisations, and institutions within the community to address various challenges and issues that it faces. This assertion coincides with the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2009) views of community engagement that connotes a process of developing relationships among stakeholders to address common issues, promote well-being, and achieve positive outcomes. As such, it is about developing relationships and harnessing the collaborative effort of individuals to achieve pre-determined goals and aspirations.

### **Concept of Social Vices**

The contemporary community we live in is now full of uncertainties as one can never predict what may happen next owing to the level of social vices ravaging the community. Social vices are happenings orchestrated by humans to torment themselves and the community they live in with or without minding the corresponding consequences. In the view of Jacob and Athanisus (2019), social vices are those events that defy societal norms and values — beliefs, attitudes, integrity, diligence, conventions, traditions, ideals, skills, and taboos — that a community loves and

transmits from one generation to the next through official and informal schooling. In the era of systemic failure characterised by a high level of moral decadence and disdain for good virtues and characters, one wonders what community passes on to her younger and next generation.

In the same vein, social vices are regarded as social problems that scuttle individual, societal, and national development. Abubakar-Yusuf-Dutse (2018) sees social vices as any sudden violence or malicious acts, epidemics, or disorderliness that disturb the progress of human beings and cause damage, disturbances, and loss of lives and properties. These social vices are often seen as abhorrent, damaging behaviours and actions that stray from the accepted norms that the entire community approves.

Similarly, social vices refer to behaviours that violate cultural norms and rules of conduct in Nigerian society, under certain circumstances or locations (Omonijo, Nnedum, Fadugba, Uche, and Biereenu-Nnabugwu, 2013). These researchers state further that the origin of social vices is tolerating bad behaviour or socially awkward people in the communities without being properly brought to the book. As Oyelami (2019) posits, social vices are detrimental to the growth of nations like Nigeria, and are characterised by improper conduct, negative attitudes, and unbecoming personalities. Unfortunately, these vices remain prevalent in Nigerian communities today, manifesting in various forms such as cyber fraud (also known as yahoo-yahoo), prostitution, indecent dressing, robbery, cultism, petty theft, drug abuse, academic dishonesty, unruly behaviour, violence, gambling, smoking, sexual assault, and the use of illicit substances.

In Nigeria, social vices are now rampant in

the nooks and crannies of the communities, most especially among young people. As Kayode, Arome, and Silas (2014) rightly noted, young people engage more in social vices than any other age group. These individuals engage in immoral and despicable behaviour, leading to collapse in moral values, terrorism, kidnapping, and dishonest business dealings. Unfortunately, these individuals will grow and rule Nigeria in the near future, if the society fails to curtail and control teens' involvement in social vices. It may also lead to corrupt rulers parading themselves as leaders.

### Indices of Community Engagement

Indices of community engagement can vary depending on the specific goals and objectives of the engagement initiatives. When it comes to combating social vices, measuring the level of community engagement through the following indices becomes even more crucial. However, according to Egenti (2018), there are some common indices that can help measure the level of community engagement:

- **Participation Rates:** The number and percentage of community members actively participating in community engagement activities can be a significant indicator. Such engagement includes attendance at meetings, workshops, and events, and involvement in decision-making processes as well as participation at felt needs identification.
- **Level of Collaboration:** The extent to which community members, organisations, and stakeholders collaborate and work together in addressing community issues can indicate the level of community engagement. This can also be measured by the number of partnerships formed, joint projects

implemented, and the willingness of different groups to work collectively to achieve the desired goals.

- **Diversity and Inclusivity:** Community engagement should strive to involve diverse individuals and groups representing various backgrounds, perspectives, and demographics. Measuring the level of diversity and inclusivity within community engagement efforts can help gauge the effectiveness of reaching and engaging a broad range of community members for goals accomplishment.
- **Empowerment and Ownership:** Community engagement should empower individuals to actively participate in decision-making processes, take ownership of community issues, and lead initiatives. Indicators can include the number of individuals who have taken an active role in community projects and the degree to which their ideas and contributions are valued.
- **Sustainability:** Maintaining engagement in the community necessitates an ongoing commitment rather than a one-time event. To accomplish this, community leaders should integrate the process into the existing committee/task force framework. A varied committee comprising residents and local leaders from different sectors of the community should be formed. Their aim would be to formulate innovative ideas and strategies to promote greater participation among community members with respect to the critical concerns that impact the community.

### Common Social Vices in Lagos Communities

Lagos state government through the needs assessment report of the Lagos Island

Connect in 2021 identified sexual harassment, street truancy, drug and alcohol abuse, prostitution, hooliganism, routine robbery and depression as the common social vices perpetuated by youths in the state. Similarly, Akwa Ibom state government in 2019 has identified cultism, bribery and corruption, examination malpractice, indecent dressing and prostitution, and drug abuse as some of the common social vices among the youths which are hampering peace and stability of the state. Some of these social vices are discussed further:

**Indecent Dressing and Prostitution** – This form of social vices is very common among the young adults in these contemporary times. The virtue and respect accorded to individuals who dressed decently back in the 1970s and 1980s is long gone. It is often said then that you dress the way you want to be addressed. Young men and women do not care about these moral decency and virtues any longer. They wear immoral dresses that expose all their bodies including their buttocks, breasts, and cleavages. It is common to see young men wearing earrings, sagging to reveal their boxers, crazy jeans, and all sorts of indecent dressings which are a reflection of what they are exposed to in Western cultures and ways of dressing. Furthermore, indecent dressing encourages prostitution among young ones. According to Mezieobi, Jerry-Alagbaoso, Nwosu, and Onyeagoro (2015), prostitution involves exchanging one's body for money or goods. This behaviour often stems from poverty, peer pressure, a desire for wealth, or idleness. Unfortunately, these social issues have held many Nigerian communities back.

**Drug Abuse** – It is a serious problem that occurs when an individual excessively uses drugs, leading to negative impacts on their

health and social functioning. This can involve overdependence or misuse of a particular drug, even without a prior medical diagnosis from a qualified health practitioner. It is often described as an unlawful overdose. Young adults may experiment with drugs due to various reasons, such as curiosity, peer pressure, poor parenting, drug availability, attention-seeking behaviour, or stress. However, addiction is a brain disease that cannot be predicted or planned for. As the brain is still developing, young adults are at a higher risk of getting addicted. Various drugs, including Tramadol, Refnor, cocaine, marijuana, gegemu, madras, valium, and alcoholic beverages, are frequently abused by young people. The resulting side effects can include reduced perception, memory loss, low self-esteem, contempt for established authority, mania, aggressiveness, and even untimely death (Hassan and Abdulkareem, 2023). This social vice has cut short the promising lives of many young people in the country.

**Internet Fraud** – Engaging in illegal activities such as cybercrime, phone hacking, and theft of bank information through the use of a computer is a serious offense. These acts are also commonly referred to as internet fraud or yahoo-yahoo, and unfortunately, it has become prevalent among young people. In fact, it has become so common that those who do not participate in this behaviour are sometimes viewed as anti-social or weak. Nigerian youths have even taken it a step further by using local charms to mesmerise victims through rituals, known as "Yahoo plus". There are various types of internet fraud, including cyber stalking, social engineering, attacks, potentially unwanted programmes (PUPs), identity theft, phishing, unlawful or restricted online content, online scams, and

exploit kits, as stated by Panda (2018). These illegal activities are often used to launder money and make illegal profits both nationally and globally.

**Violence and terrorism** – Currently, it is common among young people in Nigeria to experience restlessness. This phenomenon, known as youth restlessness, is believed to be linked to the political, social, and economic issues of the country. Such restlessness among the youth may stem from a sense of hopelessness and disillusionment with their life aspirations. It is a cry of sorrow and anger caused by the cruelty of humans to each other, the constant pain, ongoing injustice, exploitation, and poverty.

#### **Causative Factors of Social Vices**

Several factors have been attributed to be responsible for the prevalence of social vices in Nigerian communities. These include lack of parental involvement, dysfunctional family dynamics, poverty, peer pressure, unemployment, feelings of inferiority, unhealthy emulation of wealthier countries, economic downturns, societal pressure, impatience, or a desire for quick wealth, indiscipline or lack of morality, laziness, and greed (Hassan and Abdulkareem, 2023). A few of these factors are discussed as follows:

**Poor parental care and guidance** – One of the probable factors responsible for the prevalence of social vices in Nigeria today is the lackadaisical attitude of some parents towards guiding and training their children in a moral and responsible way. Their level of negligence towards raising a responsible child is detestable. Studies have shown that young adults who engage in social vices, such as committing crimes and using hard drugs, may have experienced a lack of parental attention during their upbringing. Some parents may have neglected their children and failed to provide them with the

necessary domestic training to become responsible and law-abiding citizens.

**Unemployment** – Another factor deemed responsible for the high level of social vices in the communities is unemployment. Over the years, Nigeria has been a victim of bad leadership and corruption at the highest level which played a critical role in the exacerbating youth unemployment in Nigeria. Youth unemployment hit a record high of 40.6% in the final quarter of 2022, leaving a large number of young people unemployed and living on the streets (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023). "An idle man is the devil's workshop," as the proverb goes. If these youth do not find something meaningful to do, they turn to crimes and engage in nefarious activities that pose a significant threat to people's lives and properties.

**Dysfunctional home** – A dysfunctional home is one in which parents have failed in their duties to raise a good, responsible, and happy family. The activities and actions of a dysfunctional home negate the accepted norms and values of society. It is characterised by a home where the father beats up the wife in front of the children, where the parents engage in drug abuse, alcoholism, and adultery, where the children are victims of a broken home, a child being raised by one parent instead of both parents, where unwanted pregnancy and abortion is tolerated, and children are encouraged to engage in betting, and illegal business activities to survive. A home where all these exist, harbours social vices and the children from these homes grow up to torment people in the rural and urban communities.

From the foregoing, it is clear that there is a need for holistic action that will tackle the root cause of social vices as well as the perpetrators of social vices in the

community. To achieve this, there are some community engagement principles that must be considered.

### **Principles of Community Engagement**

Engaging community members in discussions about relevant topics increases awareness, allow for advocacy, and gathers valuable advice from experts. In reducing social vices in local communities in Nigeria, the following community engagement principles should be observed:

- **Community characteristics** – This is a function of determining the make-up of the community members. Who are those that constitute the community and how well do they know themselves? In the olden days, it was very easy for a household to describe in detail an individual from another household. For example, an older adult in a particular household can describe a young adult from another household in-to-to. “The older adult goes by saying are you not the son of Lagbaja from Lagbaja household whose grandfather is a carpenter and married from Lagbaja household.” This simple illustration depicts that community members know themselves very well in terms of history, culture, social networks, demographics, and experiences. An understanding of these features enhances communal bound, a strong value system, and consensus building. This principle of community engagement upholds that community members should know who they are before they can come together to solve their challenges.
- **Defined purpose and goals** – Community purpose and goals must be such that it encapsulates the ideas, views, and interest of each community member so that issues that bound them together will be collectively ameliorated. Community members having understood who they are and what they represent can easily be bounded by a unified purpose and be goal-oriented.
- **Everyone is a stakeholder** – This principle maintains that each and every community member should be actively involved in the process of community development. In this case, the community members, the perpetrators of social vices, and the victims must be involved in the fight against social vices in the community. One may be wondering how the perpetrators of social vices will join hands in the fight against it. There is a Yoruba proverb that says “It takes a thief to identify another thief” This is where real engagement begins. There must be a concerted effort to end the menace of social vices in the communities. For a community to succeed, its members must be involved in the development and implementation process.
- **Shared self-determination** – This principle emphasises the importance of both individual and community self-determination in the process of engaging in problem-solving within the community. A community that exhibits collective determination is better able to recognise its own problems, articulate the issue, establish goals, create action plans, carry out plans, and assess results. The engagement development is likely to achieve a high participation rate from the community members if issues are clearly known and the process to go about solving it were clearly defined.

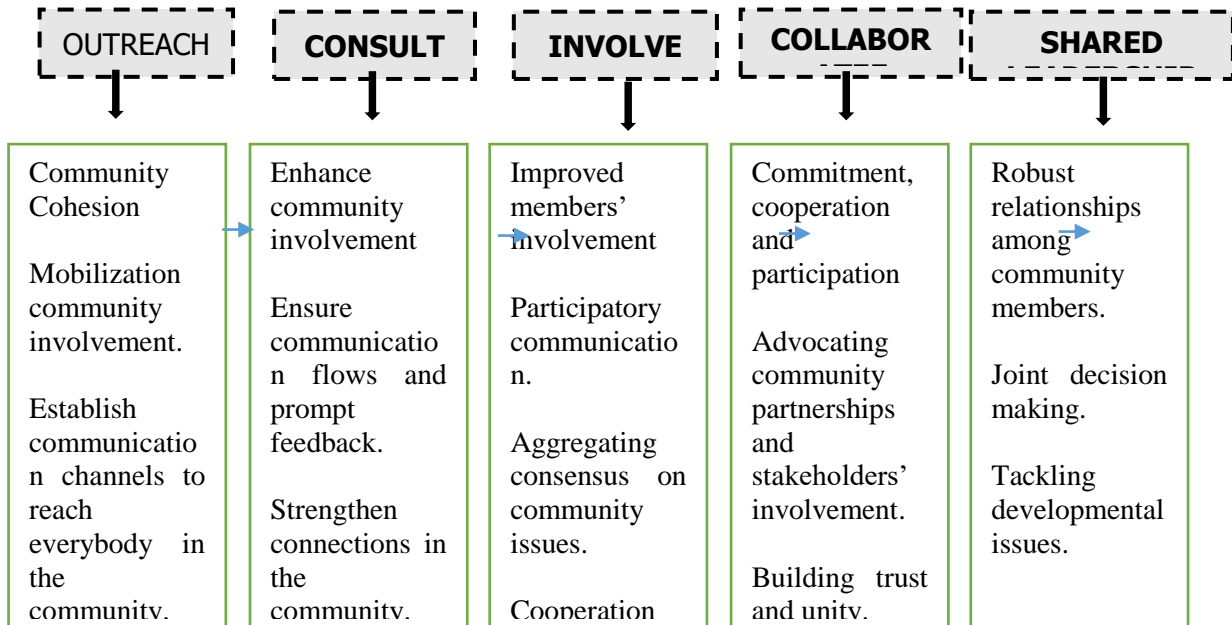
- **Community partnerships** – The principle of community engagement stresses the need for community partnerships. It is critical for effective engagement and honest discussions on issues affecting members’ well-being and exploring alternative options to tackle the issues. Community partnerships extend beyond community members to groups and social organisations that can support ameliorating issues affecting the growth and development of the communities.
- **Mobilise community members and raise capacities** – Community engagement is about raising the capacity of individuals to deliver the task ahead. Here, community members who are an asset to the community can use their network to mobilise others to tackle developmental challenges.
- **Maintain flexibility** – To tackle developmental challenges such as social

vices, the community should embrace flexibility in handling initiatives or programme implementation and conduct of their lives. They should be able to adjust to the present happening and face the project or issues headlong through commitment. Here, resistance to change is no option as the community tries to salvage issues that affect their development.

Community engagement principles, therefore, advocate for continuous involvement and collaboration among members towards developmental projects for community sustainability. Through this, there will be improvement in addressing complex problems in the society.

From the cross-examination of the community engagement principles, information in Figure One can be employed in strengthening community engagement in tackling social vices in the communities.

**Figure 1:** Strengthening Community Engagement in Tackling Social Vices in the Community



*Source:* Adapted from Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2011)

## Community Engagement and Reduction of Social Vices

The key to community engagement lies in actively involving community members, organisations, and stakeholders in decision-making processes, problem-solving, and the implementation of various interventions. This collaborative approach encourages individuals to take ownership of communities and work towards finding sustainable solutions to social vices.

One of the significant benefits of community engagement in the words of Oyelami (2017) is the sense of belonging and cooperation it fosters among community members. By bringing people together and creating spaces for open dialogue and collaboration, community engagement activities thus build relationships and strengthen social bonds. This, in turn, leads to increased trust and cooperation among individuals, making it easier to address social vices collectively.

Here are a few ways according to Born (2012) in which community engagement can contribute to the reduction of social vices:

- **Awareness and Education:** Community engagement initiatives often prioritise raising awareness and educating individuals about the consequences and impact of social vices. Through workshops, seminars, and community-led campaigns, people are empowered with knowledge and information to make informed choices and understand the negative impact of their actions on themselves, their families, and the community.
- **Collaborative Problem-solving:** Community engagement encourages collaborative problem-solving, where community members, organisations, and stakeholders come together to identify the underlying causes of social vices and collectively develop strategies to address them. By involving all relevant parties, solutions can be more comprehensive and effective.
- **Building Support Systems:** Community engagement initiatives focus on establishing support systems within the community. These can include mentoring programmes, counseling services, rehabilitation centers, and community centers that provide a safe and supportive environment for individuals at risk of engaging in social vices. Having these resources readily available helps individuals navigate challenges and seek necessary assistance.
- **Strengthening Social Bonds:** Engaging community members in activities that promote social interaction, positive values, and a sense of belonging are critical to strengthening social bonds. Social bonds are developed over time through the coming together of community members to address issues and needs that concern them in the community.
- **Addressing the root causes of problems through critical thinking and consensus:** Community engagement serves as a powerful tool in reducing social vices by addressing the root causes of these issues and implementing preventive measures. Simply addressing the symptoms of social vices without addressing the underlying root causes can be an effort in futility.
- **Embracing diversity:** It empowers individuals to become active participants in creating positive change irrespective of status, class and tribe. Involving community members from various backgrounds, experiences and perspectives, ensures that diverse voices

are included and taken into account when developing and executing community development projects and programmes.

### **Community Engagement Challenges in Reducing Social Vices**

While community engagement holds significant potential in reducing social vices, it is important to acknowledge and address the challenges that may arise during this process. Challenges to consider according to Akande (2016) and Anyanwu (2002) when it comes to reducing social vices through community engagement are the following:

- **Lack of trust and apathy:** One major challenge is the lack of trust and apathy within the community. Building trust among community members and between the community and external organisations can be a time-consuming and delicate task. Overcoming skepticism, fostering open communication, and demonstrating tangible results are essential in gaining the trust necessary for effective community engagement.
- **Limited Resources:** Community engagement requires an allocation of resources, both financial and human. Limited funding and personnel can hinder the implementation of comprehensive programmes and initiatives. Adequate resources are necessary for community engagement efforts to be sustainable and impactful in the long run.
- **Failure to address the underlying causes of social vices:** Social vices often stem from deep-rooted issues such as scarcity, inequality, and dearth of quality education and healthcare. Addressing these underlying systemic issues requires collaborative action and involvement from various stakeholders, including governmental bodies and institutions.
- **Coordinating efforts and aligning interests can be challenging, but it is essential to create lasting social change.**
- **Cultural and societal norms:** This can also pose challenges in reducing social vices. Some communities may have deeply ingrained practices, beliefs, and attitudes that perpetuate negative behaviours. Sensitivity and cultural awareness are crucial in navigating these complexities while implementing effective interventions.
- **Resistance to change:** Some community members may resist efforts to combat social vices due to fear of disrupting established norms, fear of change, or a lack of awareness about the negative consequences of these vices. Overcoming resistance requires effective communication, education and creating a compelling case for change that highlights the benefits and positive impact it can have on the community.
- **Lack of coordination and collaboration:** Successful community engagement relies on the collaboration and coordination of multiple stakeholders, including community leaders, non-profit organisations, law enforcement and government agencies. However, coordinating their efforts, establishing clear roles and responsibilities, and ensuring effective communication and collaboration can be challenging. Overcoming these challenges requires strong leadership, effective collaboration mechanisms and shared goals and objectives.
- **Sustainability:** Creating long-term, sustainable solutions to reduce social vices requires ongoing commitment and resources. Community engagement initiatives run the risk of being short-term

and lacking continuity if they are not sustained over time. Securing long-term funding, ensuring community ownership and participation, and building capacity within the community are crucial for sustained efforts.

- **Participating in a community may nurture a struggle for control and recognition:** This need for power may result in challenging behaviour in group settings. Some participants may arrive with an egocentric bias in which they prioritise their own contribution over listening to other participants. Engagement is dangerous when individuals believe they are losing autonomy over their vision or control over their territory, whether it be space, knowledge, or ideas. In the end, a lack of trust and confidence in the process or in the other participants will undermine any endeavour (Lazarus, 2008).

### Conclusion

This article gives a detail discussion on community engagement and how it can reduce social vices in the community. It explains the concepts of community engagement and social vices with the former serving as a remedy for ameliorating the menace brought about by the latter. The paper emphasises the need to consider the indices and principles of community engagement in reducing or/and if possible, eradicating social vices in the community through concerted efforts of all community stakeholders. The article proposes a figure on strengthening community engagement strategy towards reducing social vices in the local communities. In addition, the paper described some challenges that may hinder community engagement in reducing social vices with brief suggestions on the way

forward. It is important to acknowledge that overcoming risks leads to abundant rewards. This includes increased knowledge, discovery of new resources, strengthened relationships, and the establishment of an environment that enhances the community's problem-solving abilities through effective community engagement strategies. It is, therefore, suggested that since social institutions (family, faith-based organisations, local government, schools, and non-governmental organisations) are part and parcel of the community, they should work in synergy with the community members to promote community engagement, mobilisation, good value system and common interest that will eradicate social vices within the communities.

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