

EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES THROUGH SENSITIZATION VISITS FOR ACTIVE CIVIC PARTICIPATION IN RAFI LOCAL GOVERNMENT OF NIGER STATE

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Abstract

Civic participation is a cornerstone of effective governance and sustainable development, yet many communities in Rafi Local Government Area, Niger State, Nigeria, face significant challenges in engaging actively with local governance structures. This paper explores the implementation of sensitization visits as a strategic approach to empower these communities and enhance their civic participation. The initiative involves creating awareness of citizens' rights and responsibilities, promoting active engagement in decision-making processes, and addressing barriers such as lack of information and apathy. Through a combination of community workshops, dialogues, and participatory sessions, this study examines the impact of sensitization on fostering civic awareness and involvement. The findings highlight the role of grassroots engagement in strengthening democratic values, improving local governance, and contributing to the overall socioeconomic development of the area. This paper concludes

by emphasizing the importance of sustained community empowerment initiatives as a means to ensure inclusive and participatory governance in underserved regions.

Keywords: *Community, Sensitization, Visits, Civic Participation*

Introduction

A community sensitisation visit is one of the important activities through which community members are engaged and empowered to take ownership of and acknowledge the government fully. It creates awareness of government programmes and policies, as well as bring together the various stakeholders within community such as, local community leaders, local organisations, government agencies to work together towards meeting common goals and also enhance the community endowed resources. It aims at engendering solutions to support good governance, accountability, representative participation, peaceful change that is in tandem with pace of time.

Meaning of Community

Community refers to the group of people who share common characteristics, interests, or goals and are often connected by geographical location, culture, profession, religion or social ties. Shitu, (2024) viewed community as all the people living within a specific geographical area of land such as village, town, city, a neighborhood or even a whole state.

In identifying some ways of looking at the concept of community, the variety of definitions of community can easily be illustrated by the different classificatory schemes adopted. (Lindeman, 1921 in Akande, 2016). Some of these classifications are: geographical Community which describes community in terms of area of land; political community which describes

community based upon the group which maintains a system of social intercourse. The economic community describes a community founded on a common economic process, while community developers also align with sociologists and economists in visualising community as any process of social interaction that gives rise to a more intensive or extensive attitude and practice of interdependence, cooperation, collaboration and unification.

According to Shitu (2024) a community must possess certain criteria for it to remain sustained. They are as follows:

- i. Consciousness
 - ii. Sentiments
 - iii. Feelings of influence
 - iv. Sense of cohesion
- a. Consciousness: The community members have to develop a right type of attitudes, attachment and feelings towards one another. This should be based on consciousness of living together i.e. consciousness of attachment to each other. These are determined by sense of mutuality, solidarity and feeling of togetherness.
 - b. Sentiments: This has to do with feeling of the community members to feel belonging to the community and being trained to depend on the community. Also, the feelings of being important to oneself and others for the community sustenance.

- c. **Feelings of Influence:** The community members should feel influenced and they should be influenced. In effect, we should feel that every being around has a role to play. According to this, it is wrong of any one to see himself as the being the only or the most crucial force for the community change or survival. This may propel one to revolt or form an opposing force to fight or work against the community.
- d. **Sense of Cohesion:** This is also formed by understanding the values of the points highlighted.

Characteristics of a community

Broadly speaking, a community is known to have the following features:

- i. **Shared territory**
- ii. **Share belief**
- iii. **Bond of fellowship**
- iv. **Standard/ Pattern of behaviour**
- i. **Shared Territory:** This implies that people occupying a community they have a way of life within which they are known with.
- ii. **Shared belief:** This connotes to the people's belief system that they developed and are really cherished by the people around.
- iii. **Shared bond of fellowship:** This refers to what helps people to be able to differentiate one member of the community from another.
- iv. **Standards:** This has to do with culturally prescribed mutual actions and reactions or behaviours of its members (Bichi, 2014). The members are always expected to comply with the ideals.

Empowering Communities: Concern with the act of equipping individuals in the community with effective information, and with equipped education, finance and relevant skills to take decision without any external influence (Akande, 2016) the desire for the empowerment of community, is generally necessitated by the belief and appreciation of substantial contributions of every being to community development.

The actual instigation that necessitates empowerment of communities, are issues that depicts a phenomenon of deprivation, illiteracy, poverty, death of basic social amenities such as electricity, good road among others.

The community empowerment programme could be as:

- i. **Educational**
- ii. **Economical**
- iii. **Political**
- iv. **Capacity building**
- i. **Educational Empowerment:** This is the type of empowerment that centres around enlightening people educationally for better life changing or living condition, through education programme.
- ii. **Political Empowerment:** It deals with giving people information about the governance skills of leadership and training them to understand political structure and process in the country and by allowing them to take political decisions. The major target or recipients of this information are the marginalised and the illiterates due to their wrong thoughts and perception.
- iii. **Capacity building:** This deals with participating in leadership, skills, resources, knowledge and

tools of individual communities and organisations that enable them to address and have greater control over conditions and factors that affect their quality of life. The focus of capacity building in community development, is making people performing better in their daily works and activities (Oyebamiji & Adekola, 2008 in Ademola, 2016).

Community sensitisation

Community Sensitisation literally means making people and community sensitive about an issue or government policies in a community. Shitu, (2024) opines that community sensitization is one of the paramount keys that spread awareness to the community members on the issue of governance, government expenditure, and helps in making the government an acceptable one to all, and thereby making active civil participation of the community members into the issues concerning governance.

What is civic participation?

Active civic participation: This connotes the interests, activities and involvement of the people in the running of government of the community or state (Oyediran, Nwosu, & Takay et al, 2003). The civic participation may be involvement of the people of a community in running/ implementing government programmes in a community. The task, is one of civic responsibilities of every community member to carryout for the good governance in a community. This active civic participation in community plays the role of a watch dog over how community development projects funds will be utilised by the gatekeepers or political office holders. Poor active civic participation in running

community projects is one of the giant obstacles that creates loop-holes of siphoning funds earmarked for community development projects and programmes (Shitu, 2024).

Active civic participation, can be in the following forms;

- i. Political participation
 - ii. Community development engagement
 - iii. Activism/Advocacy
 - iv. Community services
- i. Political Participation: This deals with involvement of community members in issues of governance. This takes many forms which includes holding political office, being candidate for an election, taking part in political campaigns, attending political rally; contributing money towards party activities, taking part in political discussions, among others for the purpose of good leadership in community. Oyediran et al, (2003) in Akande (2016) opine that political participation refers to those voluntary activities by which members of a society share in the selection of rulers and directly or indirectly, in the formation of public policy in the community.
 - ii. Community Development Engagement: This deals with engagement that seeks to engage community to achieve sustainable outcomes, equitable decision-making process for future prosperity.
 - iii. Advocacy: This deals with staging of a campaign in a community with the view of

achieving or protecting a particular course. It could be an advocacy against diseases, illiteracy, good governance, informant etc.

- iv. Community Services: This has to do with the act of partaking in activity that can result to positive changes that will better the community. The services rendered by people that are passionate to community development.

Benefits of Community Visits in Promoting Civic Participation

People in rural community settings used to be left behind and develop negative perceptions about government and its systems due to lack of adequate information about the plans and policies of government towards the rural communities.

This trend, result to a situation, where the rural community inhabitants are feeling or developing bad feelings about government at all levels, thereby feeling not interested on issues that concerns governance and politics.

This role of community visits in encouraging active participations are:

- i. Building social support
- ii. Changing attitudes
- iii. Improving knowledge
- iv. Fostering social cohesion and understanding among diverse groups
- v. Triggering the subconscious nature of the rural communities
- vi. Aiding the community members in understanding the plans, policy of government towards them and
- vii. Helping the community to know more about some of the rights and privileges.

- a. Building Social Support: This implies, through community visits, the community members are informed with the knowledge and skills of encouraging them to be active participants in governance decision making and support and also accept government policies.
- b. Changing Attitudes: One of the greatest ingredients of changing rural community members' wrong perception and understanding is through community visits. The visit should be accompanied by pep and informative talks on very paramount issues that will prompt the community members to jettison wrong and inimical ideas, perceptions and thoughts.
- c. Improving Knowledge: The knowledge about what is happening in government settings, systems of government, plans of government in place for the common man, can reach the rural area through sensitization visits.
- d. Fostering Social Cohesion and understanding among different social groups, different interest social groups that can be found in the community, representing different members are made aware about government policies, systems and plans, which later on, go back and educate their people, thereby resulting to social cohesion.
- e. Triggering the community's sub-consciousness: The community's consciousness are triggered on the issues of governance or leadership and government policies, through productive and quality enlightenment

programme that covers governance issue.

Importance of active community participation and sensitization

- i. It creates a platform through which citizens bring about desired change by expressing their desire, either individually or through community groups.
- ii. It makes community members to learn how to make desired change.
- iii. The citizens learn to understand and appreciate the individuals' needs and interest of all community members groups.
- iv. It gives ways to community members to learn how to resolve constrictive interest for the general welfare of the groups.
- v. Group dynamics as it applies to mixed groups are appreciated through active participation.
- vi. It allows fuller access to the benefits of democratic society.

Moreover, Akande (2016) states that community capacity building has been believed to be one of the fundamental tools of poverty alleviating strategies, hence it occupies a unique position in the national poverty alleviating policy of Nigeria. In his view, capacity-building empowerment consists of the following:

- a. Identification of the coping ways of the poor and
- b. Building of the poor masses in the rural area through:
 - i. Grassroots participation in decision making
 - ii. Access to productive inputs and assets, such as credit, loan et cetera
 - iii. Relevant and effective training and education

- iv. Exposure to and adoption of appropriate technology
- v. Access to adequate infrastructure and social services
- vi. Annexation of the informal sector into the main stream of economic activities

Problems of lack of community participation in community visits for sensitization

1. It results to absence of development
2. It makes the society to remain primitive
3. It results to opposition against government
4. It makes the community to remain in contact with primitive cultural practices

Importance of capacity building for community participation

- ❖ Poverty Alleviation
- ❖ Reduction of Social Vices
- ❖ Changes People Mindset

- i. **Poverty Alleviation:** Capacity building as earlier stated, centres around making people performing better on their daily activities. This may take many forms. In relation to this, it centres on teaching people entrepreneurship skills or creating a way of given them functional education that will make them independent individuals.
- ii. **Reduction of Social Vices:** Through capacity building for community sensitization, people with wrong belief and practices are introduced to acceptable attitudes and activities that will make them to jettison bad attitudes; owing to the fact that some attitudes are products of

lack of contact with socialized individuals.

- iii. **Changing People's Mindset:** The mindset of community can also be changed from negative to positive if there is a capacity building programme to community people. Particularly if the community has a high number of illiterates and misguided people.

Determinants of active community participation

As stated by Moh'd, Otiene and Kisimbii, (2018) the determinants of active community participation in community sensitization and developmental programmes are:

- a. Level of education of the community
 - b. Change agent
 - c. Leadership
1. **Level of Education:** Moh'd Otiene and Kisimbii (2018) have quoted the Department for International Development in (2014) in portraying the criticality of education in influencing adequate active community members to participate in the community developmental projects. In effect, education gives or empowers the community members not only to participate in community development projects implementation, but it gives them the sense of wanting to participate in community development issues. Consequently, this means that community members who are educationally advance, tend to have more passion, desire and tenacity for active community participation in sensitization and mobilization programme.
 2. **Change Agent:** A change agent is a community development officer or is a trained programme officer who helps in

stimulating the process of development. A change agent as a trained catalyst, must come from within the community and after training, returns to his community. A change agent should hold thorough dialogue and discussion to help poor men and women to become critically knowledgeable of their needs, which can alone be attained through active participation. According to Anyanwu (1992) in Shinge (2010) a community development officer is a multipurpose worker or a catalyst of the change process. His experience and training in wide spectrum of his areas of interest makes him a worker in different parts, in the promotion of change and facilitation of meaningful and sustainable development. It is in view of that, he/she is needed to be unique in personality and knowledgeable, so that he can play his role as an educationist, health personnel, agriculturalist or recreational officer. Agencies must realise that the community development worker is even more important than the programme, this is because, it is his/her quality, attitude to the people as well as his skills in working with people within the community, that determine the success or otherwise of the community members' participation. Essenjor (1992) in Jaec, (2010) identifies some qualities of community development officers as follows:

- i. He must be acquainted with the national problems and cultural background
- ii. Honesty, sincerity and high intelligence
- iii. Sympathy
- iv. Self confidence

- v. Prompt able to influence the people in positive way
- vi. He should encourage growth of leadership ability and promote experience of the community

3. Leadership: Leadership also helps community development, sensitization participation. This is an incontrovertible fact, owing to the fact that one of the variables that community development greatly relies on, local leadership. This is because it is traditional leadership and change agent that doubles effort as change agent at the local level. In furtherance to that, it is the local leadership that ought to elicit the needed enthusiasm of the people. This is why they are perceived and regarded as real agent of social change improvement of the community. Local leadership is also regarded as a critical or centric force to be recon with in the active participation, planning and execution of community development programmes since it has the potential of enhancing or hindering the implementation of the programme exercise.

In effect, an individual can deduce that leadership influences people to cooperate towards achieving some desirable goals or target or in any community development programme. It also connotes to the process where by an individual directs, guides, influences or controls the thoughts, feelings of human conducts. Leadership in community development fosters community participation or genuine involvement of the people in activities designed to

improve humans' life and well-being. The leader creates faith, common understanding, ultimate satisfaction of personal and community objectives, superiority of community purpose, philosophy of cooperation, success and what not. (Omoruyi, 2001 in Jaec, 2010).

Importance of Community Active Participation

In an interview with Shitu, (2024), active citizen participation, results to the following:

- i. Trust
- ii. Acceptability
- iii. Legitimacy
- iv. Credibility
- v. Accountability
- vi. Poverty Alleviation

i. Trust: According to Shitu, (2023) engaging peoples' participation in community development project aids in the context of building the local community trust about project quality and project executors. This results to situation where people support the project process of execution.

ii. Acceptability: The more project has the participation of recipient community, the more it becomes well accepted and supported.

iii. Legitimacy: The more a project has community member's participation in it, the more people gaze it as legitimate to be supported.

iv. Credibility: People will see the project with value and credibility as they involved deeply in the project execution process.

Accountability: the community members will defend community development project's account when the need arises.

Problems of lack of sensitization visits and mobilization to communities

1. Mistrust: It results to the situation where the community will never trust the programmers
2. Lack of support: It will result to the situation where people will not see or support any programme in the community.
3. Lack of change: The community will remain stagnant without change.
4. It results to suspicion: The recipient communities will be suspicious about the programmes.
2. Different channel of community sensitization visit should be explored and improved in our local communities.
3. There should be financial support to community mobilisers either from government or private individuals.
4. Community leaders should be up and doing on issues concerning mobilisation
5. Future researchers should focus on the use of community sensitization towards addressing the current

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study underscores the vital role of sensitization visits in empowering communities in Niger State, Nigeria, to foster active civic participation. The paper reveals a notable increase in community engagement and awareness of civic responsibilities among participants. These results highlight the potential for such initiatives to strengthen democratic processes and enhance local governance.

To further this empowerment, it is recommended that local governments and NGOs collaborate to expand sensitization efforts, ensuring they are inclusive and accessible to all community members.

Ultimately, fostering an informed and engaged citizenry is essential for driving sustainable development and improving the overall well-being of the community. Through continued efforts in this direction, we can pave the way for a more participatory and vibrant civic life in Niger State.

This paper suggests that:

1. Community sensitization should be encouraged and intensified by government, civil society organisations and community educators so as to keep people abreast and engaged in the issue of governance.

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