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From Policy to People: Interrogating Communication and Media Strategies for Development Initiatives in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Communication has evolved to be a foundational element in Human development. In Nigeria, its centrality is reflected in the consistent dissemination of information using “Queen’s English” in the media and official statements by policymakers articulating developmental goals. Plans that, if executed in partnership with citizens, will promote development. However, feedback from citizens at the grassroots indicates a substantial level of dissonance, marked by conflict and heightened trust deficit. The question arises: What constitutes the root cause of this dissonance? Leveraging an exploratory sequential, mixed-method approach, which utilised surveys with 308 respondents and six focus group sessions, this study aims to interrogate the causal factors for this dissonance. Results obtained through discourse analysis and non-parametric statistics affirm that the style, language, medium and frequency of communication from the government to local communities coalesce to impact the effectiveness of communicative acts. The study thus concludes that optimising communicative acts through tailored strategies can greatly enhance the effectiveness of developmental initiatives in Nigeria. By employing culturally sensitive, multi-channel approaches and fostering community involvement, the alignment between government programs and local community needs can be significantly improved, leading to more successful and sustainable development outcomes.

Keywords

communication for development; communication channels; participatory communication; communication strategies; media ecology

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, communication has played an essential role in human development (Alakwe & Okpara, 2022). The importance of communication becomes clear when we examine its role in empowering individuals by promoting a better understanding of issues, facilitating idea exchanges, supporting negotiations, and encouraging public debates at both the local and national levels (McCall, 2011). This unique role of communication distinguishes development communication from other forms of communication. It is also what makes development communication vital for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The primary aim of development communication is to harness communication and media technologies to foster development (Alakwe & Okpara, 2022). It emphasises the needs of the people, which in turn shape the development strategies that should be implemented. The challenge, however, is to get people aligned with the developmental programs. While education is a critical factor, in this case, communication is the tool.

The essence of communication as a tool is to garner people’s support through formal and informal education. This is premised on people’s right to their views and perspectives, and also on the freedom of the media. The human person should have the right to express his/her needs,

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expectations, and concerns about developmental programs. As a result, no development program can be successful without access to information. It produces short-term improvement in people's lives and long-term impact on human capacity. On the other hand, independent media with a pluralistic approach are essential to building a free and open society. Mefalopoulos (2008) suggests that development communication enhances public access to information, empowers grassroots communities to engage in participatory communication processes, and fosters communicative actions that are based on research. Thus, while economic and physical growth are essential, they must be complemented by the development of the human person. The implication is that physical and economic growth can be meaningful only if it translates to improvements in the lives of the citizenry. Communication, therefore, is not just about providing essential information or merely transferring knowledge and technology; it goes beyond the internalisation of problem-solving skills.

The notion of utilising media to promote the growth and advancement of many countries in the Global South arose from consistent empirical evidence demonstrating that targeted communication strategies can significantly accelerate knowledge and technology transfer. Consequently, the evolution of communication technologies that led to cheaper and faster means of communication made it easier to reach audiences at the community level. It is against this background that media and communication were deployed as a strategy for accelerating the level of awareness and adoption of recommended technological innovations through information sharing, motivational speeches, and training (Coldevin, 1990).

For genuine community development to be achieved, there must be full participation of the people from the rural to the urban areas, from the local and state governments, and up to the federal level. This participation facilitates the emergence of new social relations leading to effectiveness, an essential prerequisite for growth and development (Alakwe, 2024). Unfortunately, communication cannot carry out these responsibilities unless it is fully integrated into the overall developmental process.

The Research Problem

Existing scholarship on development initiatives in Nigeria has largely focused on policy formulation and programme outcomes, with limited attention to how communication and media strategies shape citizen understanding, engagement, and behavioural response. Although numerous studies examine development communication broadly, few interrogate the disconnect between institutional messaging and the lived realities, perceptions, and information needs of target populations. This study addresses this gap by critically analysing how communication and media practices can be redesigned to translate policy into people-centred development outcomes. It is motivated by my desire to better understand the causal factors for the dissonance in communicative acts between the government and the citizens in Nigeria.

Over the past six decades, emphasis on human communication has evolved from a monologic, unidirectional “*I and It*” process to a more robust, dialogic, transactional process, which Buber (1937) refers to as “*I and Thou*” communication. According to Barnlund (1970), this transactional model of communication differs from the transmission model in three ways: the conceptualisation of communication, the role of the sender and receiver, and the role of context.

There is evidence (Idowu, 2016; Daka & Ebiri, 2018; Alike & Okafor, 2018; Niger Delta Development Commission [NDDC], 2001; Alakwe, 2024) showing a continuous flow of communication between the Nigerian government and its citizens. However, feedback from the populace, particularly the youth, reveals significant dissonance in communication between the federal government and the citizens (see *figure 1*). This dissonance is marked by issues such as criminality, protests, and a deepening trust gap. This underscores the importance of this study, which aims to explore the reasons behind this communication breakdown and provide insights on how to improve the communication process between the government and the people.

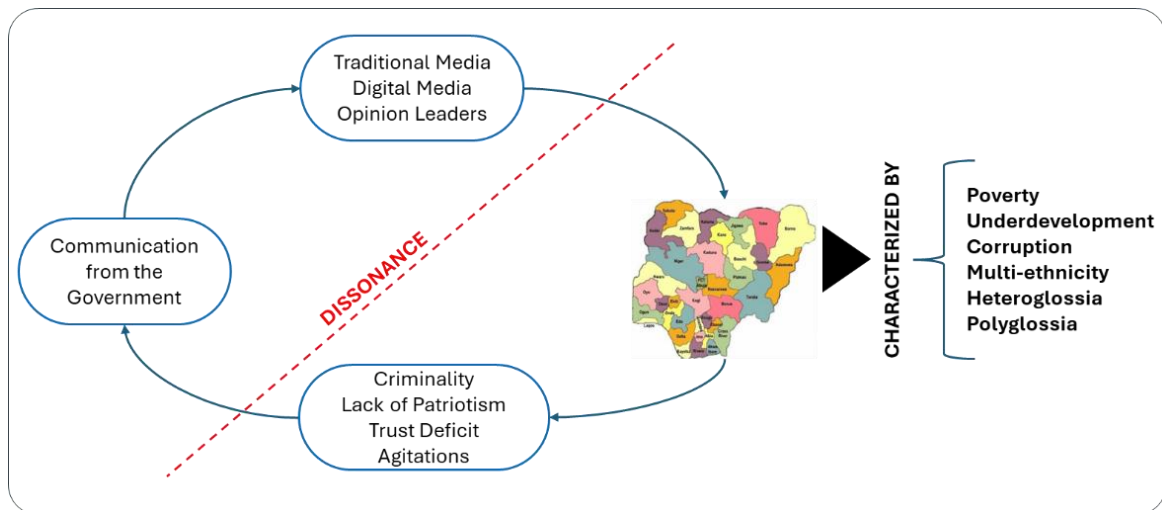


Figure 1: Framework for Problem Statement (source: Author's analysis)

Consequently, a clear understanding of communication for development and how the media can be deployed as a strategic communication tool will stimulate a spirit of partnership among the citizens and facilitate the growth and development of local communities in Nigeria. In consideration of the empirical relationship between communication, the media and development, the principal objectives of this research are:

1. To investigate the style of communication—vertical, horizontal, top-down, or bottom-up—utilised by the government in communicating developmental initiatives to the citizens;
2. To identify the predominant communication medium employed by the government and to ascertain the preferred communication medium by the citizens.
3. To determine the preferred frequency of communication between the government and the public with regard to developmental programs,
4. To assess the degree of involvement of the citizens in the planning and strategy formation by the government for regional development.

Theorising Media Ecology as Foundational to Communication for Community Development

The field of media ecology has long examined how communication technologies shape consciousness, culture, and society (Petricini, 2025). As a theory, it emerged from various studies by scholars in the field of communications and focuses on the symbiotic relationship between individuals, the media technologies available for the dissemination of information, and the environment where this relationship occurs. Conceptually, media ecology as a theory emerged from attempts to proffer answers to questions of who conceived the technology, who it was meant for, and what challenges it was meant to address. The bases of thinking in the media ecology domain are, first, that media are involved in each act in society (Tiani et al., 2021). Consequently, media ecology invites us to see media not just as channels for messages but as dynamic environments that shape human experience, culture, and society (Wang, 2025)

From the perspective of media ecology, communication media are not neutral or value-free channels for transmitting information from one place to another. All communication media across the ages possess some intrinsic array of technical, physical, symbolic, and environmental features or biases that define how each specific medium is utilised in the encoding, storing, disseminating, retrieving, and subsequent decoding of information and messages. These unique features differentiate one medium from another and are the reason why a specific medium will be more apt than another in disseminating a specific kind of information.

Lum (2006) stated that though people relate to the physical world through their senses of sight, smell, sound, touch, and taste, they perceive, think, and communicate this relationship within the constitutive symbolic world of the medium. This view echoes the position of McLuhan (1964), who states that the media with which we communicate with our physical environment represent an extension of our sensory organs. For instance, the medium of audio recordings makes it possible

for human beings to appreciate sounds, whether in their natural forms or engineered in unique ways that our ears on their own might not be able to provide. Consequently, the human biological sensorium is always reconfigured by the communication media we come in contact with (Lum, 2014). This further elucidates McLuhan's (1964) 'sententia' that "the medium is the message," which aims to draw our attention to the complex, dialectical relationship between the medium and the message. This could also be the reason why making a call while driving a car affects our concentration, as the heightened auditory senses intrude on our vision and our eye-hand coordination.

The call by McLuhan (1964) for the liberation of the human mind from the domination of symbolism, media, and communication technologies can only be valid when humans start to pay more attention to the medium. This is because it is the medium that impacts most people and not the messages sent or received by individuals. Consequently, what is of great importance is the symbolic form and not necessarily the content or the intentions (Strate, 2008). To drive this point home, Strate (2008) referred to the slogan of the National Rifle Association of the United States, which says *guns do not kill people; people do*. He believes that disagreeing with this statement is tantamount to agreeing that "the medium is the message" (McLuhan, 1964, p. 7). That messages cannot exist outside a medium is a further confirmation of McLuhan's statement.

METHOD

To interrogate the research objectives, this study adopts a descriptive, exploratory-sequential, mixed-method approach that comprises focus group discussions and surveys. The exploratory sequential approach was selected because the study sought to first uncover, through qualitative inquiry, the underlying perceptions, communication challenges, and contextual nuances that shape how citizens in rural Nigerian communities engage with development initiatives. These emergent insights were essential for informing and structuring the subsequent quantitative phase, ensuring that the survey instruments reflected locally grounded realities rather than assumptions. Participants for both the FGDs and the survey were selected using a non-probabilistic purposive sampling approach, guided by the study's focus on Nigerian adult citizens residing in rural communities.

Qualitatively, six focus group sessions (see *Table 1*) were conducted to unearth the desired forms and frequency of communication and the extent to which the citizens participate in developmental initiatives from the government. Recordings from the sessions were translated from the local languages of the participants into English and transcribed into Microsoft Word. Six files, which comprise transcripts from the six focus group sessions, were systematically coded using NVivo Version 14 and evaluated through a deductive approach, leveraging discourse analysis.

Table 1: Details of location and participants for focus group discussions

Zone	State	Community	Male	Female	Total
South-West	Lagos	Ibeju Lekki	9	3	12
South-East	Imo	Umuozu	6	2	8
South-South	Bayelsa	Koroama	5	3	8
North-Central	Abuja	Gwagwalada	4	4	8
North-East	Adamawa	Toungo	6	2	8
North-West	Sokoto	Ungushi	7	2	9

To validate the findings from the group sessions, a survey leveraging closed-ended questionnaire questions was used to highlight and identify the predominant medium and desired language of communication between the government and the citizens. In addition, the surveys helped to ascertain the desired forms and frequency of communication from the government to the people. The survey was designed using Google Forms, structured to align with the research objectives, and disseminated using diverse social media networks: Facebook, LinkedIn, and WhatsApp. A total of 308 responses were received from both male and female Nigerians over seven months and coded into Microsoft Excel. These were then analysed using IBM's SPSS Regression and Spearman's Rho, a non-parametric statistic to test for correlation.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Existing Forms and Styles of Communication

An in-depth discussion with participants across the six locations of the study indicates a significant level of communication between the government and its citizens. Interactions revealed the existence of three primary forms of communication: participatory (lateral or horizontal), top-down (vertical), and the use of community leaders and representatives (two-step or multi-step). Table 2 below reveals that the participatory form of communication received a total of nineteen (19) references, which were recorded in three (3) locations, representing 16.81%, while a top-down form of communication received a total of forty-four (44) references in six (6) locations, representing 38.94%. However, the use of representatives or community leaders had the highest number of references among all three, with a total of fifty (50) references representing 44.25%.

Table 2: Breakdown of style of existing forms of communication

Variable	Definition	No. of Samples (files)	References Counts	% of References
Existing Forms & Styles of Communication				
Participatory	A communication approach that actively involves community members in decision-making, message development, and feedback processes.	3	19	16.81
Top-Down	A directive communication model in which information flows from authorities or programme implementers to citizens with minimal consultation or feedback mechanisms.	6	44	38.94
Representatives and community leaders	Individuals formally or informally designated to speak for, coordinate, or mobilise community members, often serving as intermediaries between development agencies and the wider population.	6	50	44.25

With this result, it was possible, and thus necessary, to carry out a simple parametric analysis using a one-way chi-square test of significant differences in the existing forms of communication. The result is presented below in Table 3.

Table 3. Table of Chi-Square—existing forms of communication

Chi-square value	Expected Frequency	Degree of Freedom	Sig.
14.35*	37.7	2	p<.01

*0 cells (0.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 37.7.

The chi-square table above reveals a significant difference between the observed and expected frequencies, $X^2 = 14.35 (2)$, $p < .01$. This implies that the difference in the frequency count between the different categories of references of existing forms of communication is large enough not to be considered as having occurred by chance.

The predominant form of communication between the people and the government is top-down, as the government carries out developmental activities without recourse to the people, such that the people are not aware of what the government is trying to do or how such activities will benefit the citizens. As a participant at Koroama, Bayelsa State, put it, “Most times, they do what they want and not what we want.”

Desired Forms of Communication

There exists a difference between the existing style of communication and the desired style. Discussions revealed a strong affinity towards the participatory style of communication and some reference to the use of representatives in communicative acts. In all the locations studied, participants strongly advocated for total involvement in developmental plans and initiatives through the process of dialogue and participation. This is best captured in Table 4 below, which shows the difference between preferred modes of communication.

Table 4. Frequency of desired forms of communication

Variable	Definition	Number of Samples (files)	Frequency of References	% of References
Desired Forms of Communication				
Dialogic and Participatory	Two-way, inclusive communication	6	52	75.36
Top-down and the use of Representatives	Hierarchical, mediated communication	3	17	24.64

Comments from the group sessions indicate that the dialogic and participatory form of communication was referenced 52 times in all six locations, representing a total of 75.36%, while the use of representatives or community leaders in communicative acts was referenced 17 times in three locations, with a total percentage figure of 24.64%. This data is also captured in the pie chart below. A simple parametric analysis using a one-way chi-square test of significant differences in the existing forms of communication was carried out. The result is presented in Table 5 below.

Table 5. One-way Chi-Square test of significant difference on desired forms of communication

Chi-square value	Expected Frequency	Degree of Freedom	Sig.
17.75*	34.5	1	p<.001

0 cells (0.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 34.5.

The one-way chi-square test of significance shows that the difference between the observed frequency and expected frequency is significant ($X^2 = 17.75$, (1), $p < .001$). Had there been no significant difference, the expected frequency for both categories (Dialogue/Participatory and Use of Representatives) would have been 34.5. However, that not being the case, the difference noticed in the observed frequency is large enough not to have occurred by chance. It is important to note here that dialogue and participatory forms of communication are the most desired forms of communication among stakeholders. The choice for a participatory style of communication is further confirmed and is evident from these quotes from participants.

...definitely, because through proper engagement, everyone will be able to air their view, and the views will be articulated (Ungushi, Sokoto State).

...if they had involved us in discussions, town hall meetings, and so on, light, electricity, schools, hospitals, and good roads would not have failed; it would have been a success (Umuozu, Imo State).

...we want to participate in all developmental activities so that we can share our needs rather than what the government wants to do for us (Gwagwalada, FCT).

The general expectation is best captured by a participant at Toungo, Adamawa State, who said, "I want them to talk to us the same way the politicians do when they want to campaign. They will come down, gather a crowd, and even before they come, they always inform the community and then use a microphone." This is very instructive because it gives everybody the opportunity to access information at the same time, ask questions, and be able to make demands in cases of failure of the governments or the donor agencies.

Interrogating the Place of the Medium in Communicative Acts Between the Government and Local Citizens

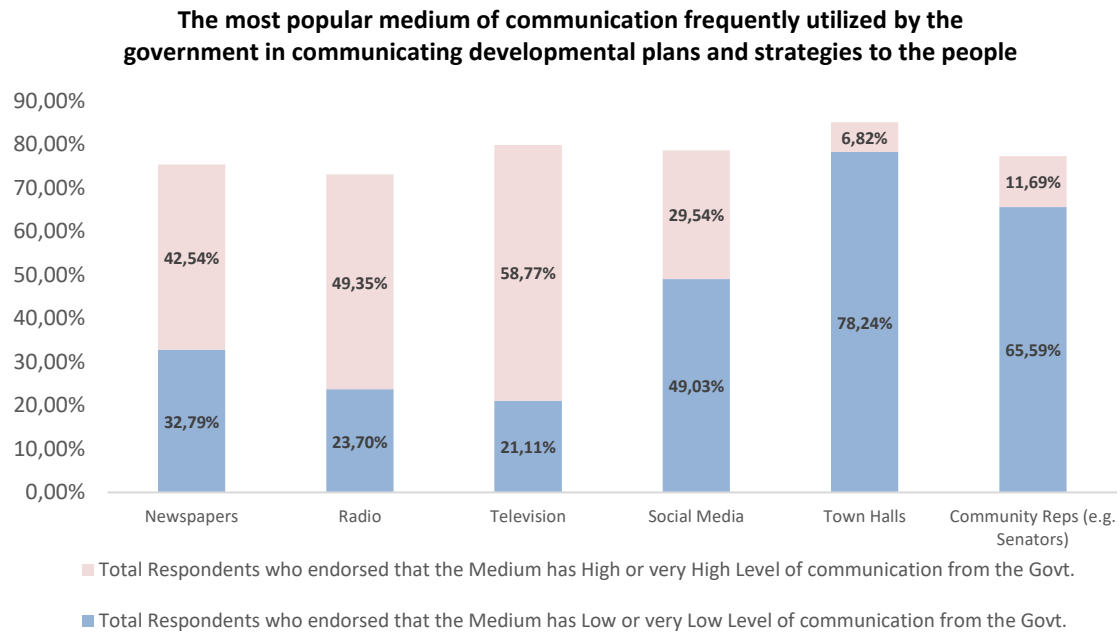


Figure 2. Medium of communication frequently utilised by the government

Analysis of survey results revealed that the government leverages diverse media in communicating with the people. These include radio, newspapers, television, social media, and, in some cases, community leaders and representatives. Television emerged as the most popular medium for government communications, followed by community representatives and social media (see Figure 2 above). However, the focus group sessions identified town halls, radio, and social media as the most desired channels of communication from the government to the people (see Figure 3 below).

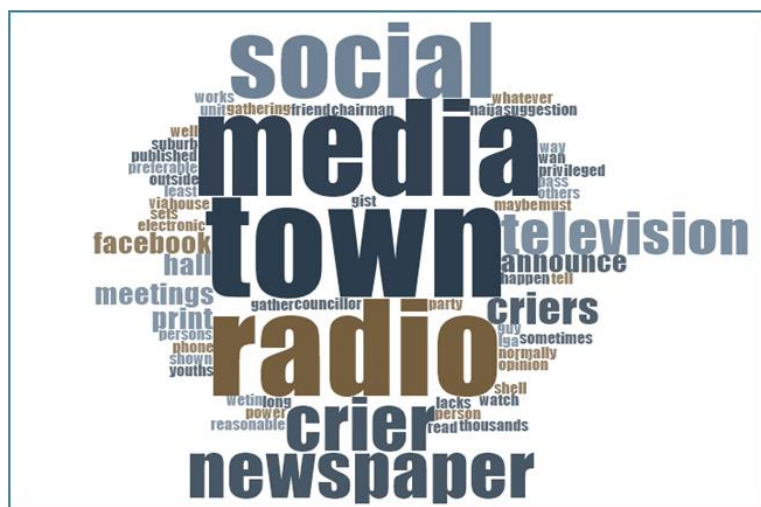


Figure 3. Word Cloud of Predominant Medium of Communication

A majority of the participants stated that television is the least desired because of the need for electricity to power it, and others are of the view that using community leaders never works, as there exists the suspicion that those messages must have been coloured for selfish interest before being remediated to the people. Popular views are evidenced by the following statements from participants:

...radio is preferable. At least to a reasonable extent, even in the suburbs, they have access to the radio (Ungushi, Sokoto State).

...because there is no light to power the television sets (Toungo, Adamawa State).

...we do not normally have light to watch TV (Gwagwalada, FCT)

From an effectiveness standpoint, these three media of communication also emerged as the most effective (see Figure 4 below).

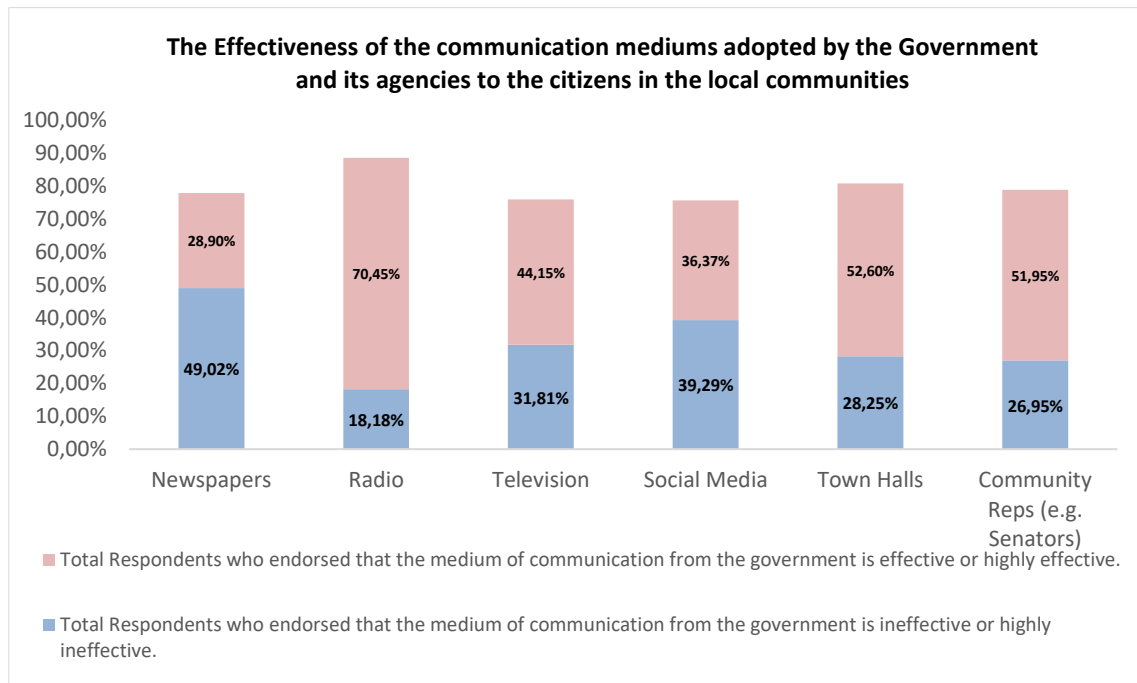


Figure 4. Effectiveness of the communication mediums adopted by the government

Further inferential, non-parametric analysis on the survey results to ascertain the most effective medium of communication from the government to the local communities produced the results in Table 6 below.

Table 6. Predictors for effective communication from the government down to the local communities

Media	R ² change .048	Constant 2.470	B	Std. Error	β	t	Sig
[Newspapers]			.110	.058	.124	1.889	.060
[Radio]			-.007	.070	-.009	-.106	.916
[Television]			.114	.078	.129	1.456	.147
[Social media]			-.101	.058	-.127	-1.734	.084
[Town Halls]			-.137	.065	-.183	-2.112	.036*
[Community reps]			.085	.067	.106	1.275	.203

Dependent Variable: Communication from the government and its agencies cascades down to the local communities.*
Correlation is significant at the <0.05 level (2-tailed).

From the results, only town halls emerged as significant, albeit negatively. The explanation here is that while town halls as a medium of communication are seen as very effective in community development, they are rarely adopted by the government as a medium of communication, and they are utilised only during the general election cycle, which occurs every four years.

Language as a Critical Factor in Communication for Community Development

While the English language is the adopted national language in Nigeria, respondents preferred otherwise. Analysis of the survey results indicates that pidgin is the most preferred language of

communication if the government is serious about inclusivity and participation in its developmental strategies. This is followed by local dialects, which are believed to be easily understood by citizens in the grassroots communities. This result is best captured by Figure 5 below.

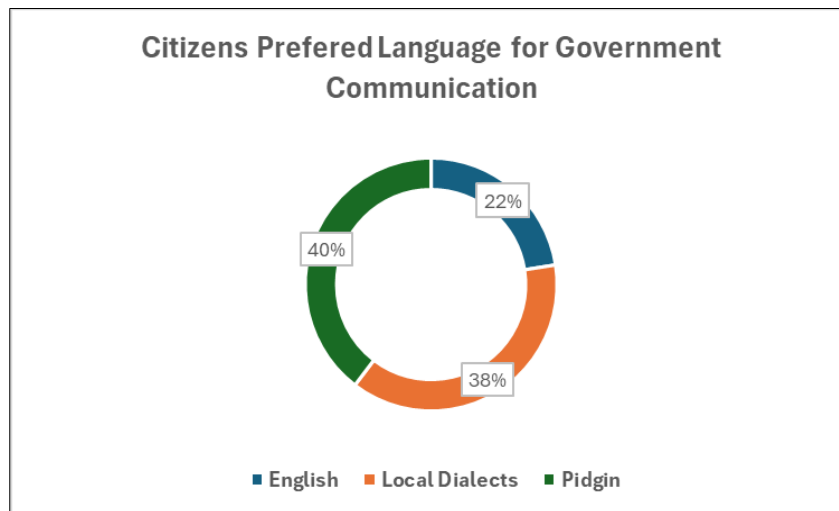


Figure 5. Preferred language for communication from the government.

Frequency of Communication and the Challenge of Recency Effect in Communication for Development

Across the six communities studied, participants struggled to remember the last time governments at any level came down to them for discussions aimed at developing their communities. Though there was broad acceptance of the fact that there exists some form of communication targeted at the people in the print and electronic media, such communication never considered the input of the people in consideration of the understanding that they represent the primary beneficiaries of such communication. Interactions revealed that the only semblance of dialogic communication occurs every four years, during the election period. This is deduced from statements like

... the only time we know we have a government ruling us is during elections. Because the political party will send them home to come back to run the grassroots politics (Ibeju-Lekki, Lagos State).

When the election comes, they will start their work. Like six months to a year before the election. During this time, you will see them rallying around, going to houses, and begging people to please vote. After voting for them and they enter, you will not see them again until they want to go for the second time (Ibeju-Lekki, Lagos State).

However, participants unanimously agreed that they would prefer more frequent engagement with the government. This, they said, will give them that sense of belonging as participants in developmental strategies and plans for their general well-being. This is evidenced by Figure 6 below on the desired frequency of communication from the government.

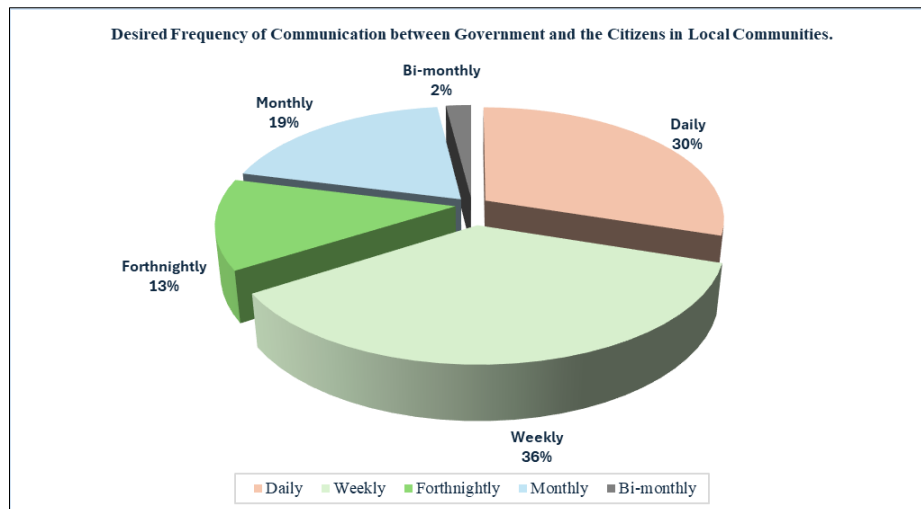


Figure 6. Desired frequency of communication between the government and the citizens.

Discussion

It is indisputable that effective communication is essential to the execution of developmental programs. This study aims to create a novel communication model that bridges the gap between government institutions and citizens and fosters sustainable public participation. In alignment with Schramm (1997), this study attributes the challenges faced by underdeveloped regions of the world to an inadequate communication structure. Schramm (1997) thus expresses dissatisfaction with the significant communication divide that exists between the government and the people. Dudley (1999) contends that a correlation exists between communication and economic progress. In Nigeria, a communication gap exists, primarily resulting from the perceived secrecy of the administration and heightened trust deficit. Hurskainen (1993) discusses the situation mentioned above, suggesting that governments see themselves as guardians of the right policies and believe they have the necessary knowledge to improve the living conditions of the people.

Effective communication plays a crucial role in rural development. According to Chambers (2010), effective communication in this context involves community engagement, where individuals are provided with relevant information and participate actively in recognising their needs, challenges, strategies for intervention, and the implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of these strategies. This process occurs in an environment that promotes their independence in addressing development issues, making them active participants and stakeholders. This implies that community members should take responsibility for their progress and be accountable for ongoing development efforts (Rasila & Mudau, 2012).

A comprehensive understanding of the audience seems to be a significant shortcoming in government, as it frequently employs a one-size-fits-all methodology. An instance is when the government opts to create a singular message and distribute it over several platforms, disregarding the polyglossic and heteroglossic attributes of the Nigerian populace. Effective communication necessitates situational analysis and communication research to understand the needs of the citizens and how they access information. Consequently, this research complements media ecology studies by demonstrating how the interplay of language choice, communication channels, message frequency, and socio-cultural context together influences the efficacy of development communication. Rather than treating media as neutral conduits, the study demonstrates that the dominance of elite-oriented media forms and formal language (“Queen’s English”) structurally excludes rural populations. This underscores the centrality of conceptualising development communication within a media ecology paradigm that considers power dynamics, accessibility, and cultural relevance, especially in low-literacy and rural contexts.

Cascading Information on Developmental Initiatives: Actual Style vs. Desired Style

Communication typically takes one of two primary forms: vertical or horizontal. Vertical communication can be either top-down or bottom-up and often involves local figures like

community leaders or chiefs. In contrast, horizontal communication, also known as participatory or dialogic communication, emphasises more interactive exchanges. In the studied locations, the dominant form of communication between the government and citizens is vertical, with information flowing primarily in a top-down and one-directional manner. Participants' comments indicate significant frustration with this approach, as it often fails to address the actual needs of the people. This long-standing style has led to growing discontent and disillusionment, with citizens often feeling that the messages they receive are repetitive and unhelpful. This aligns with Freire's (1970) assertion that the real issue in developing nations is not the lack of information but ineffective communication.

The top-down approach often results in projects being implemented that do not meet the actual needs of the community, such as building schools when hospitals are needed. This practice undermines the principles of dialogue and often leads to abandoned or poorly executed projects. When people are directly involved in planning and executing projects, such as a hospital, they are more likely to contribute actively to its success. Additionally, relying on community leaders has proven ineffective, as some participants at Toungo stated that they do not want government messages relayed through local chiefs. Self-interest and corruption among these representatives have led to projects being mishandled or abandoned, as seen with contract funds being misappropriated. This behaviour has fostered a deep mistrust of the government. To build understanding and trust, the government must engage in careful listening and observation of the people's needs in their specific context, as Buber's concept of experiencing the other suggests, which fosters inclusion (Rule, 2015).

Interrogating the Place of Medium in Communicative Acts Between the Government and Local Citizens

The disparity between the medium through which information from the government is received by the citizens and their preferred choice speaks volumes about their perception of communication from those quarters. Interactions with participants revealed that even though radio remains the most cost-effective and wide-reaching medium of communication, people would prefer dialogic communication where they meet with the representatives of the government to discuss issues pertaining to their development. The relationship between the medium of communication and perception is affirmed by Lum (2014), who posited that the convergence of culture, communication, and technology has the capacity to influence the human person.

As humans, we continuously strive to make sense of our social environment through a conscious evaluation of information garnered via a diverse communication medium. This process facilitates the formation of pictures, images, and perceptions of our environment. Perception in this context is about the way people comprehend the myriad of information received. While this information on its own is essential, the way it is packaged (medium) is critical. Interactions with participants indicate that the television is not a favourite medium of communication because electricity, which is rarely available, is required to power it. Similarly, newsprint is not popular because of the cost of buying a newspaper daily and the requisite literacy level. This makes the radio more acceptable.

According to Hornik (1988), the mass media can serve as a low-cost means of disseminating information for developing nations that lack the necessary funds to engage experts to educate the masses on technological advancement and developmental programs. The role of the mass media is evident in stimulating discourse and exposing the masses to developmental plans (Hornik, 1988). The understanding, therefore, is that if the government wants the people to access specific information, it will do well to adopt a medium that is easily accessible to the people. When this is not done, it sends a negative signal to the people and reinforces the perception that the government is not sincere in reaching out to the general masses.

The consensus across the communities studied, however, is that the preferred method of communication is dialogic and participatory. For clarity and lack of appropriate definition, participants referenced the style of communication utilised by politicians during election campaigns as the form of communication they desired. Explaining this further, they want the government or their representatives to come down to their communities and talk to them the same way politicians do during elections. The advantage of this method, according to them, is that they will be able to

share their views and explain their requests better and thus facilitate a harmonious relationship between them and the governments.

The choice of face-to-face, dialogic communication as opposed to the use of radio or any other mass media approach addresses the polyglossic and heteroglossic characteristics of Nigerians. Using the mass media approach wrongly assumes that these people are of the same culture and language. A face-to-face mode of communication mitigates the challenges inherent in using a mass media approach to communicate with a group of people sharing different cultures, norms, and values. Socratic dialogue, thus, facilitates dialectics and presents it from a human perspective where arguments are not presented monologically but are incorporated and dramatised through dialogical interactions (Rule, 2015). This expressed comfort for face-to-face interaction is in tune with the tenets of the media richness theory of Daft and Lengel (1986). The theory posits that how rich a medium is depends on some factors, of which the key ones are the capacity to elicit feedback and the extent to which the recipient receives attention.

Language as a Critical Factor in Communication for Community Development

Language has a crucial role in facilitating communication for community development, influencing the way information is conveyed, comprehended, and responded to. Utilising language effectively ensures that communications are easily understood, culturally appropriate, and able to encourage meaningful interaction. Language plays a crucial role in community development as it serves to connect different stakeholders, promote inclusive communication, and empower communities by ensuring that development efforts are in line with local values and requirements.

Therefore, acquiring a deep understanding of language dynamics is crucial for achieving successful and fair development results. Traditionally, language is a tool to interact, communicate, and convey thoughts, ideas, concepts, or even feelings (Rabiah, 2012). It serves as a primary tool for communication within a society. As a result, a shared language is a key characteristic of any community, and the continuous use of this language strongly signifies the enduring historical connection of its members (Sirbu, 2015). However, the pluralistic nature of Nigeria makes communication from the government to the citizens difficult. This is tied to the highly polyglossic and heteroglossic nature of the populace occasioned by the multiple ethnic groups scattered across the nation.

From the perspective of the government, most announcements, discussions, and news bulletins are broadcast in the English language, even though most of the regional and state-owned broadcast stations run some programs in the local language. This creates a communication gap in view of the literacy level of Nigerian citizens, especially those in the local communities. Analysis of results from the field study indicates that while English is the predominant language used by the government, the citizens, especially those at the grassroots level, will prefer such communication in their local languages or, at best, pidgin.

A case in point is the annual budget, which historically is presented and broadcast in the English language with no attempt to translate it and communicate the same to citizens living in local communities. This approach implies that the masses will struggle to understand the plans of the government in relation to their welfare and to the growth and development of the nation. And if they do not understand, the expectation that they will be partners in the government's developmental plans will not materialise. This phenomenon contributes significantly to the developmental challenges faced by Nigeria as a nation.

Consequently, for the citizens to comprehend developmental plans from the government and become partners in the nation's developmental journey, there is a need for a communication strategy that adopts a mix of the local Nigerian languages and pidgin, which is widely spoken and understood by the majority of Nigerians. Aside from facilitating deeper understanding, leveraging the local languages will also help in strengthening their use in communicative acts and propagating such languages into the future.

Frequency of Communication and the Challenge of Recency Effect in Communication for Development

The social nature of man demands constant and consistent interactions. This desire is drawn from the fact that human needs and challenges are perpetual and, as such, require a more sustained

approach that requires constant engagement. Effective communication in community development relies heavily on the frequency of communication to continually reiterate fundamental ideas and efficiently reach target audiences. Consistent updates and ongoing interaction are crucial for sustaining the citizens' interest and involvement in governance, creating an atmosphere where information is easily understood and implemented. Nevertheless, attaining the ideal frequency of communication can be difficult, particularly in situations when resources are scarce or there are conflicting signals.

An important obstacle in communication frequency is the recency effect, which is the tendency for individuals to recall the most recent information more vividly than older communications. This cognitive disadvantage, known as the recency bias, can diminish the effectiveness of significant yet less recent communications, resulting in gaps in comprehension. To effectively address the recency effect, it is necessary to carefully organise and balance the frequency of messages with reinforcement. This ensures that all important information remains prominent and impactful for a longer period.

In a democratic setting like Nigeria, where leaders are elected into different levels of government, the desire for constant interaction between the electorate and their leaders is high. At variance with this desire is the situation where such interaction happens once in four years, during the political campaign season. This practice is confirmed by the focus group sessions, where participants affirmed as unacceptable the practice where they are denied frequent interactions with their representatives and the government. Following the unanimous view that a dialogic and participatory approach to development communication is appropriate, they proposed a weekly media briefing and a monthly interactive session between them and representatives of the government. When such interactions are delayed, the challenges mount up and lead to frustration among the people. That Nigerians desire to meet with government representatives lends credence to this yearning for constant contact and close relationships. Adopting a more frequent engagement will, thus, improve their perception.

The Participatory Paradigm for Communication for Development

The participatory paradigm emphasises the active engagement of the citizens across all stages of the developmental process (Wang & Huang, 2025). This strategy emphasises local knowledge and experiences, creating a collaborative atmosphere in which the citizens play an active role in decision-making, problem-solving, and implementation of developmental programs. The participatory paradigm increases the relevance and efficacy of development programs by emphasising inclusive discourse and cooperative action, ensuring that solutions are adapted to the specific needs and conditions of the communities they want to help. This paradigm is based on the notion that communities are not passive recipients of development messages but rather active participants in defining their future. The transition from top-down communication paradigms to a more democratic process empowers individuals, strengthens community ownership, and raises the possibility of long-term success.

A key issue contributing to Nigeria's ongoing developmental challenges is the noticeable absence of citizen involvement in national development initiatives. In all the communities visited, there is a unified demand for a more inclusive approach to development. Quoting a participant at Umuozu, Imo State, "Yes, if they had involved us in discussions, town hall meetings, and so on, light, electricity, schools, hospitals, and good roads wouldn't have failed; it would have been a success." Participants criticised the government's approach of imposing decisions on communities without considering the needs and desires of the people. This method undermines the principles of participatory models, which emphasise the significance of cultural identity, active participation, and the democratisation of development from the national to the local levels. Instead of merely disseminating information (Agunga, 1997), development is fostered through participation, which enhances understanding. What makes participation vital to development is that it ensures everyone has the right to express their opinions and concerns, making them integral partners in the development process (Maina et al., 2020). As Freire (1970) argues, citizens ought to be motivated to cultivate a sense of ownership via collective experiences. If people feel deprived of this participatory right, it will be challenging to demonstrate that such developmental programs align with their best interests.

However, for participation to be genuine and active, it should be approached as an end in itself and not a means to achieve pre-defined imperatives. (Molale & Fourie, 2023). The absence of participation lies at the core of the developmental issues faced by Nigerians. When communities are excluded from the development process, they often view projects and plans with distrust. This lack of involvement frequently results in higher project costs, a lack of ownership, increased feelings of alienation, and the failure to tap into local knowledge and expertise. Therefore, development initiatives should prioritise a participatory approach that centres on the stakeholders and the residents of the affected communities. After all, no one knows their needs or the local context better than they do. Any approach that neglects the importance of involving the people in the development process is likely to fail.

This study thus extends participatory communication theory by empirically demonstrating that participation is not merely a procedural inclusion of community representatives but is fundamentally dialogic in nature. Findings from the FGDs reveal that top-down communication, even when mediated through community leaders, fails to generate trust or ownership unless accompanied by sustained two-way engagement. By emphasising citizens' perceptions of dissonance, the study redefines participatory communication as a relational process that prioritises meaning-making, feedback, and co-creation, thereby providing a context-sensitive enhancement of participatory communication models in development practice.

CONCLUSION

Poverty cannot be eliminated by merely engaging and empowering a select few; it requires an integrated and sustained strategy that addresses the collective interests of the Nigerian populace, both in urban and rural areas. An integrated approach to addressing developmental issues that incorporates both interpersonal and mass media in information gathering and dissemination would be most appropriate in eradicating the developmental challenges faced by the nation. This approach builds on the use of mass media channels for a more extensive reach while at the same time utilising interpersonal communication as proposed in Figure 7 to achieve cohesion, participation, ownership, and a better understanding of the messages being propagated. The approach also entails the innovative use of the media at every stage of the process to disseminate creatively packaged information to facilitate ease of understanding. These activities are directly driven by the specific outcome that is desired.

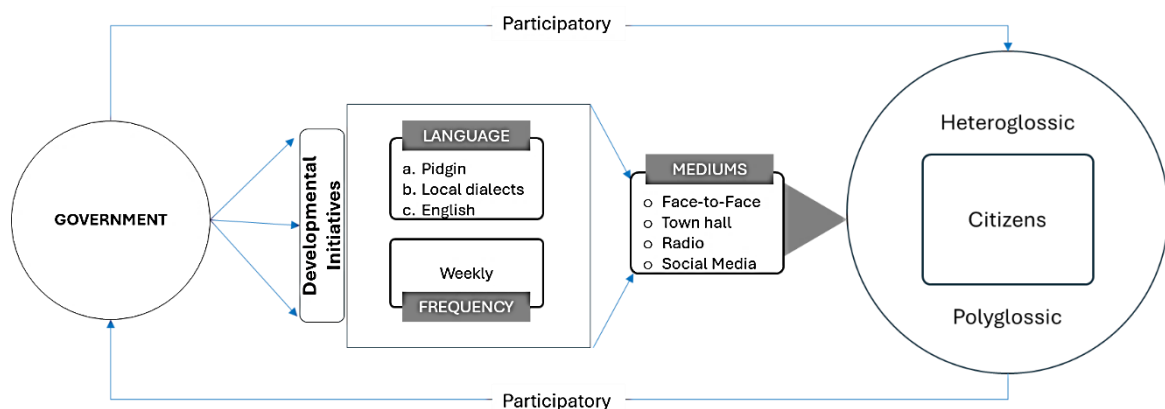


Figure 7. Proposed model of communication between the government and local citizens

As has been highlighted in this study, extant literature and field studies have brought to the fore clear evidence of the positive contributions of communication to developmental initiatives. The study has also exposed the role that communication style, language, medium, frequency, and level of participation play in cascading communication on developmental initiatives from the government to the masses. An examination of communication theories and current approaches to development communication reveals that dialogue is central to development. This dialogic process forms the basis for participation, which ultimately leads to more sustainable development. According to the transactional model of communication, the context in which communication occurs is crucial in

determining how messages impact the audience. Factors such as physical, psychological, social, relational, and cultural contexts come together to enable the shared creation of meaning between the sender and receiver. Also of great importance is the frequency of communication. The more people meet with the agents of development, the more comfortable and willing they will be to contribute towards and participate in developing their communities.

Consequently, this study validates that the dissonance in communication between the government and the people may be ascribed to the style of communication, the language employed, the medium, the frequency, and the perceived lack of participation on the part of the people. Clearly, Nigerians are more comfortable with a direct, face-to-face, and participatory approach to development communication. What can be deduced from this choice is that when you deny a group of people the opportunity to have a voice in their affairs, they are bound to view whatever developmental plans are targeted at them with suspicion. Secondly, because of the top-down approach often adopted by the government, meanings are lost along the medium, hence the desire of the people for a medium that reduces the incidence of noise arising from language and frequency of communication. This makes face-to-face dialogic communication far more desirable to people. Thus, the non-participatory approach to development is destined to fail, as it undermines humanity's intrinsic drive to enhance personal well-being and engage with both immediate and larger societies.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research may investigate the impact of digital participation models, such as mobile and social media platforms, on improving bidirectional engagement between governments and rural populations. Comparative research across other African contexts would elucidate whether the patterns of communication dissonance observed in Nigeria are locally distinctive or universally applicable.

Limitations of the Study

This study has certain limitations. The substantial regional, cultural, and linguistic diversity in Nigeria indicates that the communication patterns identified in the chosen rural areas may not comprehensively reflect variances in other geopolitical zones. Secondly, the study's cross-sectional design restricts its capacity to evaluate the evolution of communication methods and citizen responses, highlighting the lack of longitudinal evidence.

STATEMENTS AND DECLARATIONS

The research on which this paper is based was fully funded by me. I retain the rights for this manuscript and declare no conflicts of interest. The research is based on extant literature, surveys and focus group sessions, which did not involve human subjects. Ethical procedures were strictly observed throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, with the purpose of the study clearly explained and participation made entirely voluntary. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and no personally identifiable information was included in the analysis or reporting of findings. All data were securely stored in password-protected digital files accessible only to the research team and used solely for academic purposes.

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