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THE BENEFITS OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT FOR INTEGRATED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Integrated community development since its emergence has served as a conceptual procedure utilized in tackling the underdevelopment of communities. Although community development programmes appear to be the most acceptable means for grassroots development due to its holistic and comprehensive framework there are gaps between programmes planner, implementers and the community people in Nigeria. These reoccurring gaps emanate from not involving stakeholders of the community in the development programme a fit which community engagement entails. The paper made use of secondary source of information to conceptualize community, community engagement and integrated community development. The paper also examined community engagement as a pertinent tool for integrated community development. It discusses fostering partnership, improved decision-making, community-led initiative and social connection as benefits of community engagement for community development in Nigeria. It recommends that enabling environment through community engagement that will improve community development programmes in Nigeria should be provided so as to facilitate active participation in every integrated community development activity.

Keywords: Community Engagement, Integrated Community Development, Nigeria

Introduction

Community development is prominent in raising and promoting in every form the standard of living of community people for maximizing the positive effect of economic integration. The crucial role community development play in the overall development of a nation cannot be over-emphasized. Since the 1948 Cambridge conference on Africa administration organized by the British colonial office where the concept community development was first mentioned, the word has gained acceptance as a veritable tool for local, national, regional and global development (Arikawei and Etigbamo, 2015). Accordingly, there is need to ascertain the potentials of Integrated Community Development for effective national development. Integrated Community Development is seen as a comprehensive approach that aims to improve the overall well-being and quality of life of a community. This development approach involves the coordination and integration of various sectors and stakeholders to address multiple dimensions of development, including social, economic, environmental and cultural aspects.

The essence of the integrated community development (ICD) as conceived by the International Council for Adult Education (ICAE, 2006) as posited in Arikawei and Etigbamo (2015) is to achieve development to engender the social, economic and political justice that will lead to the liberation of mankind through the eradication of scourges such as mass poverty, disease and illiteracy. From the above, Imhabekhai (2019) concluded that integrated community development (ICD) is a potent tool for promoting equity, peace, justice and happiness which are necessary for the attainment of national development. Integrated community development (ICD) therefore according to Arikawei and Etigbamo (2015) is an important device needed to bring about changes in human capacity to generate increase activities and efficiency in human and materials wellbeing for societal growth and development.

To achieve the underlying benefits of integrated community development, it is pertinent to harness the founts of wisdom, resilience of the community people themselves. This is right as the beneficiaries of the development initiatives are important playing pivotal role in shaping and sustaining these initiatives within communities. To actualize the foregoing, active community engagement is the key to building an integrated developed community. This implies that engaging the communities open the involvement of all groups, division of responsibilities with an aim of engaging special talents, arousing the interests of contributing organizations and individuals thus, decentralising power and responsibilities. World Health Organisation (2020) has defined community engagement as a process of developing relationships that enable stakeholders to work together to address health-related issues and promote well-being to achieve positive health impact and outcomes. Since the world is progressively interdependent and interconnected, making local communities' active, meaningful engagement of community people in development initiatives becomes relevant and vital. Despite the foregoing ideology that effective community development process must ensure community people's involvement in the development process affecting them, most community development project in Nigeria engagement and involvement of all the stakeholders to work together to attain the development process remain at low ebb. There is a need therefore to harmonize community engagement in integrated community development programmes. As such, the paper tends to ascertain the benefits of community engagement in integrated community development.

Community Engagement

Community engagement in recent years has developed significant momentum. Developmentalists, researchers, and community leaders agree that involving community people in addressing issues that affect them has tremendous potential for social change. As with many

emerging fields, much more is needed, particularly in developing effective methods for community engagement. Nonetheless, considerable advances in the field have been made. To define community engagement, it is important to take a look at what community and engagement is respectively. Community according to Delisle, Mangubhai and Kleiber (2021) is a group of people living together in a given physical space, such as a village or group of villages, settlement, town or city.

Engagement on the other hand according to Akpunonu, (2019) is a process and an outcome of making decisions together. This process works to build collaborative relationships. There are different types of participation and inclusion, and some do not actively include everyone in decision-making (Akpunonu, 2019). Thus, engagement takes specific steps to create inclusion in the decision-making process (e.g. ensuring decisions are made together with the widest possible involvement). During the engagement process, not everyone has to agree. However, the process should find ways for everyone to work together, and acknowledge and respect other people's views. In other words, the right to participation means ensuring everyone has access to the engagement process and creating a platform that upholds this fundamental human right.

Community engagement is a process and an outcome. Community engagement is the process of working with and through a group of people connected by special interests, geographic location, or similar conditions to address issues that affect their well-being (Moravec, 2019). Community engagement indicates a willingness to listen and talk about issues of interest, and organizations should be prepared to consider what stakeholders want to achieve (Magdalena et al., 2019). Accordingly, WHO (2020) conceived community engagement as a process of developing relationships that enable stakeholders to work together to address health-related issues and promote well-being to achieve positive health impact and outcomes. By implication, it empowers

organizations to connect with individuals and groups that authentically reflect community perspectives. For community engagement to be meaningful, its execution must embrace, preserve, support and facilitate the diversity of the community (Johnston and Lane, 2019). Community peoples' behaviour towards other members, active participation in joint activities, and voluntary actions to support community-endorsed initiatives enhances community value for oneself as a result of community engagement (Kumar and Kumar, 2020).

Community engagement can range from encouraging communities to share their views and influence the services we provide, to giving communities the power to make decisions and provide services with us. Community engagement focuses on building and improving relationships between different organizations and communities through effective communication. These help address complex issues that involve diverse groups of people and legitimately relies on practitioners' ability to represent and respond to diverse community perspectives. Tower Hamlets Council (2024) observed that the four approaches to community engagement are introduced and juxtaposed to the levels of involvement, problems to be addressed and health promotion actions.

Accordingly, community-oriented implies that the community is informed and mobilized to participate in addressing immediate short-term concerns with strong external support, community-based holds that the community is consulted and involved to improve access to health services and programmes by locating interventions inside the community with some external support, community-managed there is collaboration with leaders of the community to enable priority settings and decisions from the people themselves with or without external support of partners while community-owned assets are fully mobilized and the community is empowered to develop systems for self-governance, establish and set priorities, implement interventions and

develop sustainable mechanisms for health promotion with partners and external support groups as part of a network (WHO, 2020).

Integrated Community Development

The planned evolution of all aspects of community well-being (economic, social, environmental and cultural) is what integrated community development entails. Integrated community development (ICD) is a participatory process through which community members collectively identify challenges and implement solutions to improve their overall well-being. Development process whereby grassroots communities become more responsible, organize and plan together, develop healthy options, empower themselves, reduce ignorance, poverty and suffering, create employment and economic opportunities and achieve social, economic, cultural and environment goals is an integrated community development. Omego and Obetta (2024) asserted that an integrated community development programme (ICDP) is a development strategy that recognizes that communities are complex systems with interconnected needs. They further maintained the main idea behind an ICDP is to address multiple aspects of community life simultaneously, rather than addressing individual issues in isolation. ICD is a means of achieving developmental and participative efforts, requiring that different departments collectively link their plans, objectives, budgets, resource auditing, performance monitoring, and community consultation in a process of cooperative governance (Makalela, 2017).

Integrated community development is a holistic system that is structured to link and synthesize all the various stakeholders of the community to harness their potentials with the aim of bringing the desired change in the social, economic, political and technological advancement of the people to improve the quality of life in their communities and the world at large. Accordingly, Omego and Obetta (2024) posited that the ultimate goal of an ICD is to improve the overall well-

being of the community, alleviate poverty, and enhance the quality of life for its residents. ICD addresses multiple aspects of development in a coordinated and participatory manner. Beyers (2015) posited that it creates lasting and positive change within communities by recognizing and respecting the cultural norms, values, and traditions of the community. ICDP are flexible and responsive to changing circumstances, emerging needs, and challenges that may arise during implementation. Also, ICDP ensures that the benefits of development are distributed equitably and that marginalized and vulnerable groups within the community are included in the development process.

Integrated community development projects may include a range of activities such as infrastructure development, education and healthcare services, livelihood support, environmental conservation, social inclusion, and cultural preservation. These projects are tailored to the specific needs and priorities of the community, with a focus on empowering individuals and fostering community ownership. In order to make this ICD operational, certain principles such communication, seminars and workshops vocational education, sensitization, conscientization (a word made popular by Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educationist) and research/documentation are catalyst which helps in accelerating community action required to effect the necessary changes. Other objective principles which aid effective ICD include participation, collaboration, holistic approach, sustainability and capacity building. More so, the outcome of ICD programmes are usually described by some typical or component parts of a system that forms a large constituent of the whole. Several of these typical or component parts are referred to as the elements of ICD and they are important to make the whole system of the community becomes functional. Hence, these elements are important to be incorporated into the ICD programme to produce the desired effect.

The elements of integrated community development include the following education, health, nutrition, agriculture, housing, security, infrastructure, politics, culture/religion and recreation.

Benefits of Community Engagement for integrated community development

Partnership Development

Community engagement is a powerful mechanism for fostering partnerships that empower youth by ensuring inclusive participation, resource-sharing, and sustainable development. Through community engagement multi-stakeholder collaborations are encouraged. Accordingly, World Bank highlighted that community engagement which emphasizes participatory approaches in youth programmes improve effectiveness by leveraging cross-sector partnerships. Again, community engagement unites diverse actors: governments, NGOs, businesses, men, women and youth to combine resources and expertise in improving youths' wellbeing. Community engagement transforms community stakeholders from isolated interventions into collaborative, sustainable movements. By fostering inclusive partnerships, it ensures that people are not just beneficiaries but active participants in shaping their futures.

A community-engagement as a promoter of partnership enhances joint effort whereby community people whether leaders, men, women or youths work together to achieve common goals. In this intentional relationship, integrated community development offers knowledge, experience, and access to resources, while the various segment of the community imparts fresh ideas, new perspectives, energy, enthusiasm, and talents. Via community engagement community-member partnerships are promoted and as such the community people are focused and collaborated with unique gifts and ideas to share. There are many ways to engage community people in constructive activities that can strengthen integrated community development. For example, youths can partner with adults to perform community needs assessments, write grant proposals,

raise funds, design programmes, implement ideas and projects, collect data, deliver services, or evaluate a program's effectiveness (Chong, 2018).

Improved Decision Making

Again, engaging members of the community for integrated community development activities is not just about giving them tasks to do; it's about empowering them to become active contributors and collaborators in their communities. This engagement can take many forms, from decision-making roles in local councils to organizing community events or participating in advocacy campaigns. The key to effective community engagement lies in recognizing the unique perspectives and energies that the people bring to the table, and creating spaces where they can be expressed and harnessed. It's about moving beyond tokenism to genuine inclusion, where community voices are not just heard but are influential in shaping outcomes.

According to a study published in the Journal of Community Psychology, community engagement initiatives that involve young people in decision-making processes are more likely to be effective and sustainable. By implication, community engagement programmes that focus on skill-building and leadership development can have a positive impact on peoples' self-esteem and confidence which propel effective decision making. Community engagement enhances good governance and effective decision-making by involving every member of the community in decision-making processes which lead to more inclusive and effective integrated community development policies and programmes. By prioritizing community engagement, people's empowerment within communities can unlock their potential and create a more just, equitable, and sustainable future for all.

Through community engagement, community people are involved in the decision-making process of empowerment which enhances transparency, allows for a sense of ownership, and builds

trust, thereby increasing the chances of the project's success and sustainability. According to Igwe, Umezulike and Amadi (2024) for example, youth involvement in community decision-making process remain an integral part of modern mobilization strategy which forms the primary responsibilities of community leaders in carrying along the young ones in the community in their activities and programmes. In support of the above, Osaretin (2014) averred that decision-making is an essential practice in all aspect of the management functions of planning, organizing, directing, staffing, controlling, budgeting, assessing and evaluation. Decision-making is the major element in integrated community development programme especially as it relates to people at every level of taking action in community living, be it in disciplinary issues, incurring cost for providing facilities, maintaining discipline, construction of new community projects and security matters. Abba as stated in Ajuzie (2021) argued that decision-making process includes identification and diagnosis of a difficulty, the reflective development of plan to alleviate the difficulty, the initiation of the plan and the appraisal of its success. Community engagement enhances decision making which plays important role for youth empowerment both organizational and managerial levels. Duze as cited in Igwe, *et al* (2024) opined that decision making process is a major component of managing any organization or business activities. Community engagement grant access for youth participation in decision making in community matters. It further serves as a good measure for the community and its citizens to contribute meaningfully and developmentally to the quality and sustainability of the community.

Community-led initiatives

Community-led initiatives are being recognized in a wide range of fields as the primary methodology for effecting fundamental shifts in communities and institutions. Community-led initiative is a unique approach to tackling local problems and building on local strengths which is

a very potent force of integrated community development. According to Torjman and Makhoul (2022) it is guided by several core principles among which are the voice and views of citizens lie at the heart of community-led initiative; community-led initiatives seeks to empower community members to ensure they have the competencies to identify and formulate key questions; community-led initiatives are guided by local leaders who typically co-create a governance process to help plan and advance the ongoing work; community-led development involves the identification of key questions to be addressed; community-led initiative approaches are bound together by a set of guiding principles; community-led initiative assumes that all communities and their members have strengths, skills and resources on which to build; communities can harness and apply their identified assets through conversations that help create frameworks for change; community-led initiative is an evolving process that involves the translation of aspirational goals into specific steps to be taken in respect of that vision; community-led initiatives is not a straight pathway. It is a process of continual learning and checking of progress against objectives and while community-led initiatives are guided by local residents, they require support from government. Governments can play three major roles in support of this work – as exemplar, investor and enabler.

Community engagement encourages members of the community to initiate or lead community projects which is incredibly the tenet of integrated community development. It gives them a sense of ownership and responsibility, boosting their confidence and leadership skills. Youth-led initiatives, such as organizing a community clean-up, starting a recycling programme, or setting up a youth mentoring organisation, allow youths to identify community needs and work towards addressing them influences integrated community development programmes. These initiatives not only benefit the community but also help youths develop project management, problem-solving, and team-building skills – essential qualities for future success. Through

community engagement, community-led initiatives can be more effective and relevant when they are designed and implemented by the people who will be most affected by them. By this, the people develop valuable skills, build confidence, and feel a stronger sense of belonging and purpose. Community engagement promotes community-led initiatives which can foster social cohesion, promote intergenerational relationships, and empower communities to address their own challenges.

Community engagement helps ensure solutions proposed by community-led initiatives meet the actual needs of the people they are intended to serve. When people are involved in identifying their issues and proposing solutions, the chances of these interventions being relevant and accepted are much higher (Mansuri and Rao, 2012). For instance, empowerment programme aimed at reducing employment among youths might be more successful if the youths from the community are involved in the design and implementation process, as they are best positioned to understand the barriers they face in accessing the empowerment programme. More so, community engagement enhances the legitimacy and local ownership of integrated community development projects. By implication, in contexts characterized by conflict and mistrust, unemployment, increased social vises such as in the Eastern Nigeria, it is vital for community-led initiatives to build trust with the communities they serve (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2018).

Social connection

Community engagement and social connection can also play a significant role in bridging divides within multifaceted societies. Research indicates that a strong sense of belonging fosters civic participation; according to a report by CivicScience (2023), individuals deeply engaged in local community efforts display a 55% higher likelihood of voting in national elections than those

who are not. Furthermore, community engagement enhances social connection which allows marginalized voices to gain visibility, often leading to shifts in policy or the mobilization of grassroots movements. This democratization of information and visibility reinforces the potential for a unified national narrative that honors diversity and inclusivity for improved integrated community development outcome.

Moreover, social connections act as a catalyst for innovation and group problem-solving, directly contributing to effective national building initiatives. Community engagement which fosters collaborative platforms allow citizens to brainstorm solutions to pressing issues, from health crises to economic challenges. For instance, Yaak Kur, Wanyama and Majok (2025) observed that during the COVID-19 pandemic, social networks which connects people were instrumental in fostering community response initiatives. Data published by the World Economic Forum (2022) showed that over 30% of communities involved in local aid networks utilized social media to coordinate responses, significantly improving response times and resource distribution.

However, Yaak Kur, *et al* (2025) maintained that while the positive aspects of social networking are apparent, it is crucial to acknowledge the potential for misinformation and social polarization. The very same platforms that which is enhanced by community engagement can perpetuate divisions if not managed responsibly. Recent research by the Digital Civil Society Lab as posited in Yaak Kur, *et al* (2025) demonstrated that exposure to misinformation can diminish civic participation by up to 40%. This signals the importance of fostering digital literacy and critical engagement among citizens to prevent the undermining of social cohesion and national unity.

Engaging community members through social networks can also enhance governmental accountability and transparency. The use of these platforms can facilitate direct communication

between community stakeholders and their representatives, enabling real-time feedback on integrated community development. Effective e-government strategies have been shown to increase public trust and active participation in the political process, as evidenced by a report by the United Nations E-Government Survey (2021), which found that countries leveraging social media for governmental communication reported an average 25% increase in citizens' satisfaction with public services. Community engagement and social connection further underpin the empowerment of youth by fostering a sense of belonging and community responsibility. Social networks encompass the relationships individuals maintain, which can significantly influence their civic engagement levels.

In terms of integrated community development, community engagement has been linked to promoting competence and confidence, as well as increasing community connections that often become tangibly useful (e.g., for obtaining employment) (Hurd, Stoddard, Bauermeister and Zimmerman, 2014). According to a study by the International Labour Organization (2019), youth who actively participate in community activities report higher levels of social cohesion and mutual support. Metrics to assess this engagement include the frequency of community participation, the size and quality of social networks, and the impact of community projects on local developments. Capturing perceptions of community impact through surveys provides insights into how youth contributions can enhance communal well-being.

Conclusion

Integrated community development cannot actively be achieved without community peoples' engagement since development effort that does not partner and collaborate with the people to which the development is meant may be at low ebb. This phenomenon has led to rejection and abandonment of development programmes. A successful sustainable integrated

community development programme ensures effective engagement of community dwellers in the development efforts meant for them. From the above it is an acceptable fact promoting community partnership, incorporating the entire community people in decision making, enhancing community-led development initiatives and improving of social connection which are essential elements of community engagement encourages the attainment of integrated community development in Nigeria.

Recommendation

To further enhance active engagement of community members in integrated community development projects in Nigeria, and elsewhere, the following recommendation were made:

1. Government agencies and development Policy makers should formulate and implement development policies that create enabling environments for engaging all stakeholders of community to actively get involved in community development process across in Nigeria.
2. There is need to professionalize community development so as to enable professional community developer, in collaboration with other human development professionals, to create awareness on the need for community engagement in integrated community development in Nigerian.
3. Government and community leaders should create enabling environment, through community development policies, that will improve community engagement programmes in Nigeria. This will empower the members of the communities to participate actively in every integrated community development activity.

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