Enhancing agricultural development project implementation in Nigeria: The case for early-stage communication and stakeholder engagement strategies
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Aishat Ayijimoh ONUSI
University of Abuja

Abstract

The practical implementation of agricultural development projects is crucial to advancing socio-economic growth in Nigeria, where the agrarian sector forms a vital part of the economy. Despite progress in project execution, many agricultural initiatives lack foundational communication strategies and stakeholder engagement frameworks in their early stages. This study examines the impact of these missing elements on project outcomes, drawing on the author's first-hand experiences and insights from training programs focused on strategic communication and stakeholder management for agricultural projects across Nigeria. The study's findings reveal that the absence of structured communication plans and stakeholder engagement mechanisms leads to various project challenges, including delays, increased costs, and reduced effectiveness due to misaligned stakeholder expectations and inadequate community support. This research advocates for a paradigm shift toward integrating communication and stakeholder engagement strategies from the inception of agricultural projects. Through a qualitative methodology, including field observations and literature reviews, this study underscores the necessity of these strategies to foster trust, transparency, and collaboration among all project stakeholders. Key recommendations are provided for policymakers, development organisations, and project managers to prioritise the early adoption of comprehensive communication and engagement frameworks, enabling smoother project execution and enhanced sustainability. This approach aligns with Stakeholder Theory and Participatory Development Theory, emphasising the need for inclusivity, empowerment, and continuous engagement throughout the project lifecycle. By embedding these principles, agricultural development projects in Nigeria can achieve greater resilience, foster community buy-in, and promote sustainable agricultural growth, ultimately contributing to broader national development goals.

Keywords: Agricultural Development, Stakeholder Engagement, Communication Strategies, Sustainable Project Implementation

Introduction

Development projects are fundamental to the socio-economic advancement of any nation, particularly in developing countries like Nigeria. These projects, spanning infrastructure, healthcare, education, and agriculture sectors, address pressing societal needs and foster sustainable growth. However, the successful implementation of these projects often hinges on more than just technical and financial resources; it requires robust communication strategies and active stakeholder engagement from the outset. Despite significant investments and efforts in project execution, a critical gap has been identified in the Nigerian context - the absence of structured communication and stakeholder management plans in many state-led projects. This gap was starkly revealed during interactive strategic communications and stakeholder management training conducted across various Nigerian states over the past four years. In these interactive sessions, it became evident that none of the states had established communication strategies or stakeholder engagement plans before the commencement of implementation and had advanced well into at least two years or more before considering the need for strategies or technical support on the subject matter.

The success of development projects is often contingent on effective communication and stakeholder engagement strategies. This is even more imperative in Nigeria, where diverse cultural, economic, and political factors play crucial roles in project implementation. This makes early-stage communication and stakeholder engagement particularly important. According to the Project Management Institute, PMI (2021), and as widely recognised within project management discussions, about 90% of project management is spent communicating with stakeholders. However, many development projects do not incorporate communication strategy into their plans or give it any consideration until about the second or more years of implementation. Ineffective communication puts the project's success at risk, as the efficiency and sustainability of development initiatives could be seriously jeopardised. Projects that lack well-defined communication and stakeholder management frameworks are more likely to have miscommunication, misplaced expectations, and less transparency. Similarly, a project's failure may result from a lack of support from the community, resistance, and stakeholder participation.

This paper explores the critical importance of integrating communication and stakeholder engagement strategies at the early stages of project implementation. By analysing the current practices observed during the training programmes and interactions and drawing on relevant literature and case studies, this study underscores the need for a paradigm shift in project management approaches within the agriculture sector in Nigeria. The objective is to provide actionable recommendations for policymakers, project managers, and development organisations to enhance project success and ensure long-term impact. In the following sections, the paper will delve into the conceptual and theoretical underpinnings of communication and stakeholder engagement in project management, present detailed findings from the recent training programmes, and offer practical steps for developing and integrating these strategies into project planning and execution. Ultimately, this study advocates for a comprehensive and proactive approach to project management that can significantly improve development outcomes in Nigeria.

Project Implementation and Agricultural Development Policies in Nigeria

As one of Africa's largest economies, Nigeria has seen many development projects to bolster its socio-economic growth. Historically, these projects span various sectors, including infrastructure, healthcare, education, and agriculture. Nigeria's national development plans, such as the Economic Recovery and Growth Plan (ERGP) 2017-

2020, included development initiatives to rebuild economic growth through diversification, human capital investment, and creating an internationally competitive economy. Agriculture has long been a strong backbone of Nigeria's economy, providing livelihoods for a significant portion of the population and contributing to the national Gross Domestic Product, GDP. The sector has evolved through various phases, from subsistence farming practices to more structured, policy-driven approaches to boost productivity and ensure food security.

In the pre-colonial era, Nigerian agriculture was predominantly small-scale and subsistence-based, with farming practices tailored to local ecological conditions. The colonial period saw the introduction of cash crops such as cocoa, palm oil, and groundnuts, cultivated primarily for export. This shift had a lasting impact on the agricultural landscape and economy. After gaining independence in 1960, Nigeria's government initiated several agricultural development programs to improve food production and reduce dependency on food imports. Key initiatives included the National Accelerated Food Production Programme (NAFPP) in the 1970s and the Green Revolution in the 1980s. While each of these programmes sought to improve food production, the Agricultural Development Programmes (ADPs) represented the major practical demonstration of Nigeria's integrated approach to agricultural development (Alahira, 2012). Despite these efforts, the sector struggled with inadequate infrastructure, poor funding, and policy inconsistencies. In recent decades, Nigeria has seen a renewed focus on agricultural development through programs like the Agricultural Transformation Agenda (ATA) and the Agriculture Promotion Policy (APP), 2016-2020 and the current National Agricultural Technology and Innovation Policy (NATIP), 2022 – 2027. These initiatives aim to modernise agriculture, enhance value chains, and increase private sector participation. The current emphasis is diversifying the economy away from oil dependence and achieving sustainable agricultural growth.

Challenges in Implementing Agricultural Development Projects

Despite numerous initiatives, implementing agricultural development projects in Nigeria faces several challenges: Poor infrastructure, including farm access roads, processing and storage facilities, and irrigation systems, hamper agricultural productivity and market access. Farmers often struggle to transport their produce to markets, leading to post-harvest losses and reduced incomes. Access to finance: Limited access to finance is another major constraint for farmers and agribusinesses, especially smallholder farmers. High interest rates, collateral requirements, and lack of financial literacy impede investment in modern farming practices and technologies. Inconsistent Policies: Frequent government policy and programme changes create uncertainty and disrupt long-term planning. Inconsistent implementation of agricultural policies undermines efforts to achieve sustained growth and development. Climate change: This poses significant risks to agriculture, with increased frequency of extreme weather events, changing rainfall patterns, and rising temperatures. Environmental degradation, such as deforestation and soil erosion, worsens these challenges. Capacity: There is a persistent need for capacity building among farmers and extension workers. Limited access to training and extension services restricts the adoption of modern agricultural practices and technologies.

Early Integration of Project Communication and Stakeholder Engagement Plans

A communication strategy is a systematic plan that ensures effective information exchange among project stakeholders. It involves planning, implementing, and monitoring communication activities to support project objectives and foster

stakeholder engagement. Effective communication ensures that all stakeholders are informed, engaged, and aligned with the project goals. It also entails setting clear objectives, identifying target audiences, crafting messages, and selecting appropriate communication channels. Clear and consistent communication promotes transparency, which builds trust and credibility among stakeholders. It ensures all parties know the project goals, progress, and challenges. Effective communication ensures the project's goals and expectations are in sync by informing all stakeholders. This alignment helps to avoid miscommunication and disputes. Prompt communication enables the early identification and resolution of concerns and prevents minor issues from growing into more serious ones. Maintaining open lines of communication makes it possible to get stakeholder feedback, which is essential for ongoing development and project success.

Strategic communication can help disseminate critical information about project timelines, good agricultural practices, and available resources for agricultural projects, raising awareness and promoting best practices among farmers and other stakeholders. It also aids in building trust and collaboration among farmers, government agencies, NGOs, and other stakeholders. Clear and consistent messaging helps build trust, fosters collaboration and ensures that project objectives are well understood and supported. Early-stage communication is crucial in setting the tone for project implementation and ensuring all stakeholders are aligned with the project's goals and objectives. Early communication helps build trust, clarify expectations, and prevent misunderstandings that could lead to project delays or failures (Heath & Frey, 2004). A study by Mazzei and Ravazzani (2015) on corporate communication strategies highlights the importance of transparent and consistent communication from the project's inception to foster stakeholder trust and cooperation.

In Nigeria, the lack of early-stage communication has been identified as a significant barrier to the successful implementation of development projects. A study by Nwafor (2018) found that many projects in Nigeria failed to achieve their intended outcomes due to inadequate communication strategies, leading to stakeholder disinterest and resistance. The research emphasised the need for a strategic communication plan that includes clear messaging, regular updates, and active listening to stakeholder concerns from the project's outset. A communications and stakeholder management plan specifies who should be informed, what information should be provided, and when, just like a project management plan lays out tasks and deadlines. This methodical approach guarantees that no vital communication gets lost in the shuffle. As Minois (2023) puts it, there is a need to create a thorough communication plan before the project even begins, outlining the objectives, target audiences, channels, etc., and updating frequently.

Stakeholder engagement involves identifying, understanding, and involving all relevant stakeholders throughout the project lifecycle. This engagement is critical for gaining stakeholder buy-in, addressing concerns, and leveraging local knowledge and resources (Bryson, 2004). Effective stakeholder engagement strategies include stakeholder mapping, regular consultations, participatory decision-making, and feedback mechanisms. In the Nigerian context, stakeholder engagement can be particularly challenging due to the country's diverse and often conflicting interests. A study by Idemudia (2009) on the Niger Delta region demonstrates that development projects often face resistance from local communities when their interests are not adequately considered. The research underscored the importance of inclusive engagement strategies that recognise and address different stakeholder groups' unique needs and expectations. Additionally, a study by Ogunyemi (2020) highlights successful case studies in Nigeria where early and continuous stakeholder engagement led to more sustainable project outcomes. The research shows that projects prioritising stakeholder engagement from the planning stage were more likely to achieve community support, reduce conflicts, and enhance project sustainability.

Understanding stakeholders' perspectives can uncover risks that may not have been initially apparent. Projects that incorporate stakeholders' inputs are more likely to be relevant to their needs and sustainable in the long term. Engaged stakeholders are more committed to maintaining project outcomes. Effective stakeholder engagement helps prevent and resolve conflicts by fostering a collaborative environment where issues can be addressed constructively. Informed stakeholders contribute valuable insights that enhance project planning and design, ensuring realistic and feasible plans. For stakeholder engagement to succeed, mapping is imperative. Stakeholder mapping identifies and analyses individuals, groups, or organisations with a stake in a project. This analysis helps understand stakeholder interests, influence, and potential impact on the project. Stakeholder mapping ensures that all relevant parties are considered in the project planning and implementation. Engaging stakeholders such as farmers' associations, local governments, and community leaders can enhance project acceptance, mitigate risks, and foster collaboration.

Regular communication and engagement foster a sense of accountability among project teams and stakeholders, as they are kept informed and involved in the project's progress, ensuring that resources are allocated efficiently and stakeholders are aware of their roles and responsibilities. Projects with robust communication and stakeholder engagement strategies will likely meet their objectives and deliver lasting benefits. Strategic communication and effective stakeholder engagement are essential to overcome these challenges and ensure the successful implementation of agricultural development projects. Encouraging the adoption of new technologies and practices in agriculture requires behaviour change communication strategies. These strategies should be tailored to local contexts and address cultural, social, and economic factors influencing behaviour. Engaging stakeholders at all levels, from farmers to policymakers, is fundamental to the success of agricultural development projects. Inclusive and participatory approaches ensure that diverse perspectives are considered and projects are aligned with the needs and priorities of the communities they aim to serve. Involving stakeholders in the planning and decision-making processes fosters ownership and accountability. Participatory planning helps identify local challenges and opportunities, ensuring that projects are relevant and responsive to community needs. Collaborative partnerships with government agencies, the private sector, civil society, and international organisations enhance resource mobilisation, knowledge sharing, and capacity building. Multi-stakeholder partnerships leverage the strengths of different actors and create synergies for sustainable development. Continuous monitoring and evaluation involving stakeholders ensure that projects stay on track and achieve their intended outcomes. Feedback mechanisms enable adaptive management and allow timely adjustments based on lessons learned.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is anchored on two theories: (1) Stakeholder Theory and (ii) Participatory Development Theory. Combining Stakeholder Theory and Participatory Development Theory provides a comprehensive framework for examining the role of early-stage communication and stakeholder engagement in optimising development project implementation. Stakeholder Theory offers insights into various stakeholders' identification, analysis, and engagement, while Participatory Development Theory emphasises the importance of communication, inclusivity, empowerment, and collaboration. Together, these theories underscore the need for a holistic approach to stakeholder management that begins at the project's inception and continues throughout its lifecycle. By integrating these theories, the paper provides a nuanced analysis of how early-stage stakeholder engagement strategies can lead to more effective, inclusive, and sustainable development projects in Nigeria.

Developed by R. Edward Freeman in the mid-1980s, Stakeholder Theory posits that organisations should consider the interests and influences of all stakeholders, not just shareholders. According to Freeman (1984, Pg. 46), "Stakeholders are defined as any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organisation's objectives". The central tenet of Stakeholder Theory is the need for organisations to create value for all stakeholders, not just shareholders. This involves understanding and addressing different stakeholder groups' needs, concerns, and expectations. The theory emphasises the following core principles: Stakeholder Identification and Analysis: Organizations must identify their stakeholders and analyse their needs, interests, and potential impact on the project. Stakeholder Engagement: Active engagement with stakeholders through communication, consultation, and collaboration is essential to consider their input and concerns. Balancing Interests: Organizations must strive to balance the interests of various stakeholders to achieve sustainable success. Ethical Considerations: Ethical behaviour and responsibility towards stakeholders are fundamental to Stakeholder Theory.

Several scholars have explored the application of Stakeholder Theory in the context of project implementation. Freeman & McVea (2001) highlight that stakeholder engagement is not just a reactive strategy but should be proactive and integrated from the earliest stages of project planning. This proactive approach helps identify potential conflicts and align project goals with stakeholder expectations, which is crucial for the success of development initiatives. Brugha and Varvasovszky (2000) argue that incorporating stakeholder analysis early in project planning helps map out various stakeholders' power dynamics and interests. This understanding allows project managers to devise strategies to mitigate risks, leverage support, and ensure that the project aligns with the local context and needs. Friedman and Miles (2006) discuss the importance of trust and communication in stakeholder engagement. According to them, early incorporation of a stakeholder engagement plan fosters trust, reduces resistance, and increases the likelihood of project acceptance and success. Similarly, Eskerod and Huemann (2013) emphasise that early stakeholder engagement is essential for managing stakeholder expectations and avoiding scope creep in development projects. They argue that stakeholder management should be viewed as a continuous process that begins at the project's inception and continues through its lifecycle. Turner & Zolin (2012) provide evidence that projects with early and effective stakeholder engagement are more likely to meet their objectives on time and within budget. They also suggest that early engagement helps identify critical success factors and potential challenges that might be overlooked.

Nigerian scholars provide valuable insights into applying Stakeholder Theory locally, highlighting challenges and strategies for effective stakeholder engagement in development projects. Sadiq A. (2018) explores the challenges and opportunities of stakeholder engagement in Nigerian development projects. He emphasises the need for early stakeholder involvement to address local needs and mitigate conflicts that may arise due to diverse interests. Bola, A. (2020) examines how stakeholder theory can be applied in the Nigerian public sector, particularly in large-scale infrastructure projects. She discusses the importance of stakeholder mapping and engagement strategies for project success. Although Osemeke, L., & Adegbite, E. (2016) focused on corporate governance, their study touches on stakeholder engagement in Nigeria, particularly how regulatory environments influence stakeholder relationships. Ojo, A., & Fadeyi, O. (2019) address the challenges of engaging stakeholders in rural development projects. The authors highlight the role of local communities, traditional leaders, and government agencies in successful project implementation. Eyinla, B. (2017) critically assesses the application of Stakeholder Theory in promoting sustainable development in Nigeria. He argues for a more inclusive approach to stakeholder engagement that considers the socio-economic realities of the Nigerian context.

Challenges of Applying the Stakeholder Theory

While Stakeholder Theory is widely regarded as a valuable framework for early stakeholder engagement, some challenges have been identified. The first challenge is determining which stakeholders should be prioritised, especially in resource-constrained projects. Greenwood (2007) critiques Stakeholder Theory by questioning whether it is always possible or desirable to engage all stakeholders, particularly in projects with conflicting stakeholder interests. This raises the need for a nuanced approach to stakeholder engagement that considers power dynamics and the potential for stakeholder exclusion. Clegg, Kornberger, and Pitsis (2005) also discuss the potential for stakeholder theory as a managerial tool that can sometimes overlook the broader social implications of development projects. They advocate for a more critical approach that questions the underlying assumptions of stakeholder theory, particularly in development contexts where power imbalances are prevalent.

Stakeholder Theory provides a robust framework for understanding and managing the complex relationships underpinning development projects. Its relevance to early stakeholder engagement is well-supported by academic literature, with numerous scholars advocating for its integration into the planning and execution phases of projects. However, challenges remain, particularly in balancing the interests of diverse stakeholders and managing the power dynamics that can influence project outcomes. Therefore, while stakeholder theory is essential for development practitioners, it must be applied thoughtfully and contextually to achieve the best results. This can be achieved by conducting a holistic stakeholder mapping that clearly defines the stakeholder influence and interest dynamics. In the context of development projects in Nigeria, where stakeholder dynamics can be complex due to diverse social, economic, and political factors, Stakeholder Theory underscores the need for a systematic approach to stakeholder management. It highlights the potential for improved project outcomes through proactive stakeholder engagement, which aligns with the paper's focus on early-stage communication strategies.

Participatory Development Communication Theory

The Participatory Development Communication Theory (PDCT) emerged in response to the limitations of traditional top-down development approaches that often overlooked the needs and inputs of local communities. The theory advocates involving community members in planning, implementing, and evaluating development projects. It emphasises the importance of local knowledge, empowerment, and active participation in achieving sustainable development outcomes. It is rooted in the belief that sustainable development can only be achieved when those affected by development initiatives actively engage in decision-making. Participatory Development Communication Theory is grounded in several fundamental principles: Inclusivity: All stakeholders, particularly marginalised and vulnerable groups, should have a voice in the development process. Empowerment: Development initiatives should empower local communities by building their capacity and providing them with the tools and resources to take control of their development. Local Knowledge: Local knowledge and experiences are invaluable and should be integrated into project planning and decision-making. Collaboration: Development efforts should be collaborative, involving partnerships between communities, governments, NGOs, and other stakeholders. Sustainability: Participatory approaches promote sustainable development by ensuring that projects are relevant, accepted, and maintained by the community.

Participatory Development Theory is particularly relevant to the paper's focus on early-stage communication and stakeholder engagement strategies in development project implementation. The theory provides a strong rationale for involving and communicating with stakeholders, especially local communities, from the beginning of

the project lifecycle. It highlights the benefits of leveraging local knowledge and fostering a sense of ownership among stakeholders, leading to more sustainable and effective project outcomes. By allowing rural communities to be contributors and communicators and not merely passive consumers, they can help change hearts and minds (Mundy & Sultan, 2001). In the Nigerian context, where socioeconomic disparities and governance issues often compound development challenges, Participatory Development Theory offers a pathway to more inclusive and equitable development. By applying this theory, the paper illustrates how early-stage participatory approaches can enhance project relevance, acceptance, and long-term success. It also aligns with the paper's argument that early and continuous stakeholder engagement can mitigate risks, address community needs, and foster collaborative solutions to development challenges.

Relevance of PDCT to Early Integration of Communication Strategy in Projects

Banjo (2015) explores the role of indigenous media in participatory development communication within Nigeria. She argues that integrating traditional communication channels with modern media enhances community participation and ensures that development communication strategies are culturally relevant and practical. Okon (2017) examines the integration of participatory development approaches in Nigerian rural development projects. He highlights the importance of early stakeholder engagement and local communication methods to foster community ownership and ensure the sustainability of development initiatives. Nwosu (2019) discusses the practical challenges and opportunities of applying participatory communication strategies in Nigeria. He emphasises the need for culturally sensitive approaches and the inclusion of local knowledge in designing and implementing communication plans for development projects. Ojebode (2014) investigates the role of community radio in participatory development, focusing on how it has been used to enhance community engagement in development projects. He advocates using community-driven communication platforms to ensure local populations receive and act upon development messages. Obono (2016) examines the intersection of traditional media and participatory development in Nigeria, arguing that traditional forms of communication can be effectively leveraged to enhance participation in development projects. He stresses the importance of integrating these media into communication strategies from the early stages of project planning.

Robert Chambers (1994) emphasises the importance of putting the "last first" by involving marginalised communities in decision-making. His work highlights how communication strategies should be co-designed with local stakeholders to ensure that they are culturally relevant, context-specific, and responsive to the needs and realities of the communities involved. In their work on power and participatory development, Nici Nelson and Susan Wright (1995) argue that communication strategies must be designed to empower communities rather than inform them. They stress the importance of creating spaces for dialogue where local voices can be heard and influence project design and implementation. Cornwall (2002) discusses the significance of participation in development communication, advocating for the use of participatory tools such as focus group discussions, community meetings, and participatory rural appraisal (PRA). She argues that these tools enable the co-creation of communication strategies that reflect local stakeholders' needs, preferences, and knowledge.

Participatory Development Theory has been applied to the early design and integration of communication strategies. Tufte and Mefalopulos (2009) emphasise that communication strategies should be integral to project planning. They advocate for a dialogic approach to communication, where project implementers and stakeholders engage in ongoing dialogue to co-create and adjust communication strategies as the

project evolves. Servaes (2008) highlights the need for participatory communication strategies that are not only informative but also transformative. He argues that early integration of these strategies ensures that communication is a tool for social change, empowering communities to take ownership of development projects. Waisbord (2001) discusses the importance of participatory communication in health development projects, arguing that communication strategies should be designed with active input from local communities to ensure they are effective and culturally appropriate. He provides case studies showing how early stakeholder involvement in communication planning leads to more successful project outcomes. Gumucio (2001), in his work on participatory communication and social change, advocates for the use of participatory media to integrate communication strategies into development projects. He highlights the importance of early involvement of communities in the design of communication materials and channels to ensure that they resonate with local audiences.

Challenges of Applying the Participatory Development Communication Approach

While Participatory Development Theory offers a valuable framework for integrating communication strategies, challenges exist. The first issue is the assumption that all stakeholders have equal power and capacity to participate in communication planning. White (1999) argues that power imbalances can lead to tokenistic participation, where the most marginalised voices are still not adequately heard. This highlights the need for careful facilitation and power-sensitive approaches to participatory communication. Mohan (2001) also raises concerns about the potential for participatory approaches to be co-opted by external agendas. He argues that participatory communication strategies can become formalities rather than meaningful engagements without a genuine commitment to local ownership. Mohan calls for a deeper understanding of local contexts and a commitment to genuinely participatory processes. Cleaver (1999) critiques the overly idealistic view of participation in development, pointing out that it can sometimes lead to unrealistic expectations and project delays.

The caution notwithstanding, several studies have explored the interplay between communication, stakeholder engagement, and project success. For example, a meta-analysis by Zwikael and Smyrk (2015) found that projects with robust communication and stakeholder engagement strategies were significantly more likely to succeed. The analysis emphasised the need for early and proactive communication to address potential issues before they escalate. In the Nigerian context, a comprehensive study by Ofori and Anumba (2021) examined various development projects across different sectors. The study concluded that early-stage communication and stakeholder engagement were critical factors in determining project success and that projects which invested in these strategies reported higher levels of stakeholder satisfaction, reduced delays, and improved overall project performance. From the preceding, we can safely suggest that while participation is essential, it must be balanced with practical considerations and an understanding of the limitations and complexities of participatory approaches.

Integration of Empirical Findings with the Theoretical Frameworks

The empirical research reveals that many agricultural development projects in Nigeria suffer from poorly defined communication and stakeholder engagement strategies at the inception stage. This gap often results in missed opportunities for early engagement, relationship building, and information dissemination, ultimately impacting project success. Absence of Early Engagement: The recurrent absence of well-defined communication strategies in the early stages of projects directly contradicts the

principles of Stakeholder Theory. This oversight undermines the ability to identify and address stakeholder concerns from the beginning, leading to difficulties in managing relationships and aligning interests throughout the project lifecycle. Impact on Stakeholder Relationships: The delayed development of communication strategies, often only considered in the second or third year of a project, indicates a failure to manage stakeholder expectations and build trust, as Stakeholder Theory recommends. This delay aggravates issues such as project abandonment and ineffective stakeholder management, as observed in the findings of this paper. Late Integration of Communication Strategies: The observation that communication strategies are often not developed until later stages reveals a significant gap in applying Participatory Development Theory, as the theory highlights the importance of early and ongoing stakeholder involvement to ensure that their perspectives and needs are integrated into the project design and implementation processes. Missed Opportunities for Participation: The empirical data showing that projects miss critical opportunities for engagement and information dissemination aligns with the theory's assertion that participatory processes should be embedded from the outset. This gap in practice undermines the project's ability to achieve meaningful participation and effective stakeholder engagement, leading to reduced impact and success. According to Lindenberg & Bryant (2001), the only key to unlocking the impasse is increasing the participation of "beneficiaries" in project identification and implementation.

This paper emphasises the importance of integrating Stakeholder Theory and Participatory Development Theory from the beginning of project planning to address the identified gap. This integration involves Early Identification and Engagement: Applying Stakeholder Theory by identifying key stakeholders and their interests early in the project cycle and developing comprehensive communication strategies from the outset. Embedding Participation: Following Participatory Development Theory by involving stakeholders in decision-making processes from the start, ensuring their input shapes the project's design and implementation.

Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative research methodology, integrating primary data from field experiences and secondary data from document reviews. The approach is designed to explore the relevance and impact of early-stage communication and stakeholder engagement strategies in the implementation of development projects in Nigeria. The research follows a case study design, leveraging my extensive field experience and observations during training sessions with project staff across various Nigerian states. This design is chosen to provide in-depth insights into the practical challenges and opportunities associated with integrating communication and stakeholder engagement strategies in development projects.

These field experiences provided a unique opportunity to observe the existing practices or lack thereof regarding communication and stakeholder engagement strategies in development projects, especially at the early stage. Field notes were systematically recorded, focusing on key themes such as project implementation challenges, the role of communication, and the level of stakeholder involvement. Secondary data is obtained through a comprehensive review of relevant literature, including academic articles, project reports, and policy documents. The document review also focuses on existing research on Stakeholder Theory and Participatory Development Theory and their application in development projects. The review also includes an analysis of best practices and case studies from Nigerian and international contexts, providing a broader perspective. A triangulation approach is employed to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings. Data from the field experience, document review, and work experience are cross-referenced to identify consistencies and discrepancies. This triangulation enhances the robustness of the conclusions
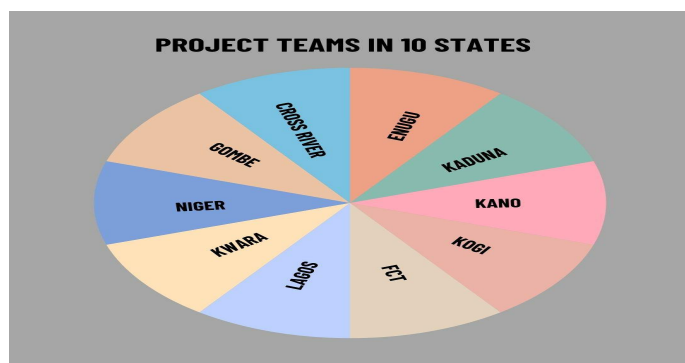
Aishat Ayijimoh ONUSI

drawn from the study. Given the reliance on professional experiences and field observations, confidentiality and anonymity of the participants involved in the training sessions are maintained. The study adheres to ethical guidelines, ensuring that the insights drawn from these sessions are used responsibly and with respect for the participants' privacy.

Discussion of Findings:

Late Integration of Communication/Stakeholder Engagement Plans in Projects

I have had the opportunity to interact directly with project teams, first as a team member and secondly as Lead Trainer on Strategic Communication and Stakeholder Engagement for some international donor-funded projects within the agricultural sector in Nigeria. These projects, which are located across different states in Nigeria, are funded by key development partners, including the World Bank Group, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the African Development Bank (AfDB), the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB), etc. The training programmes and interactions were a significant step forward in enhancing the strategic communication and stakeholder engagement capabilities of the project teams at the state and national levels. The key objective of the training was to equip the team with the skills and knowledge necessary for effective project communication and stakeholder management.

Over 300 project team members were involved in the training and interactions that took place across ten states, namely: Cross River, Enugu, Gombe, Kaduna, Kano, Kwara, Kogi, Niger, Lagos and the FCT, Abuja. Generally, the teams at the various states displayed a high level of enthusiasm and readiness to learn throughout the training sessions, showing a keen interest in enhancing their skills. The interactive nature of the training, combined with practical exercises, facilitated understanding and demonstration of lessons learnt. Their active engagement and willingness to embrace new concepts were commendable. However, gaps in specific areas where further development is necessary were identified to fully leverage the benefits of the training and ensure long-term success.

The project teams comprise professionals of diverse backgrounds, including Project Coordination, Agro-Processing, Productivity Enhancement, Gender, Environmental and Social Safeguards, Communication, Knowledge Management, ICT, Business and Commercialization, Value Chain Development, Rural Infrastructure Engineering, Project Administration, M&E, Financial Management, Internal Audit, Procurement, Agricultural Extension, Animal Husbandry, Veterinary Services etc.

Table 1: Key Areas of Training and Appraisal in Ten States

S/N	Subject Matter Area	Understanding/Attitude	Recommended Actionable Next Steps

1	Strategic Project Communication	Average understanding of clear and consistent communication strategies for achieving project objectives.	Capacity building/ Technical Assistance on developing strategy for Communication and Stakeholder Engagement.
2	Stakeholder Mapping and Engagement	Participants were learning about stakeholder engagement for the first time and actively contributed to stakeholder mapping exercises.	More capacity development is needed.
3	Social Media Communication	Low knowledge but high interest in leveraging social media for project visibility and citizens engagement.	Hands-on social media management training.
4	Success Storytelling /Media Relations	Average news writing and project reporting skills.	A specialised writing workshop will focus on impact reporting and success story writing.
5	Multimedia Documentation of Activities	Lack of awareness on importance of early/proper documentation of activities.	Hands-on workshop on multimedia documentation, covering basic and advanced techniques.
6	Crisis Communication	Low knowledge of theory and practical aspects.	Both theory and practical skills need reinforcement.
7	Knowledge Management	Lack of understanding of the concept and application in projects.	Training on concept and practice recommended.

A critical insight drawn from these interactions is the recurrent absence of well-defined communication and stakeholder engagement strategies at the project inception stage, even when the subject matter is well captured in the Project Appraisal Document. This gap often leaves projects ill-equipped to manage stakeholder relationships and effectively communicate with key audiences. In many cases, projects only begin to consider the development of communication strategies in their second or even third year of existence. By this time, critical opportunities for early engagement, relationship building, and information dissemination may have already been missed, affecting the overall impact and success of the project.

This late integration of communication strategies undermines the projects' ability to foster trust, manage expectations, and align stakeholder interests from the start. It also reveals a significant oversight in project design, highlighting the need for a more structured approach to embedding communication and stakeholder engagement as core elements. This observation reinforces the argument that early-stage integration of communication and stakeholder strategies is essential for optimising project outcomes and ensuring long-term sustainability.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The agriculture sector in Nigeria needs development projects to be implemented with a comprehensive strategy that considers past setbacks and uses stakeholder participation and strategic communication. Nigeria can attain sustainable agricultural growth and development through establishing robust partnerships, promoting inclusive and participatory procedures, and improving information dissemination. Unlocking the full potential of agriculture through development projects will require a commitment to effective communication and collaboration as the country continues to manage the sector's complexity.

Stakeholder engagement and early communication are essential to successfully implementing development projects in Nigeria. Project managers can create and carry out initiatives promoting cooperation, trust, and inclusion using stakeholder engagement and strategic communication techniques. This approach not only complements the likelihood of project success but also guarantees that development efforts remain viable and aligned with the expectations of all stakeholders.

The following recommendations aim to strengthen communication and stakeholder engagement in optimising the implementation of development projects in Nigeria, especially within the agricultural sector, ensuring that projects are more inclusive, responsive, and sustainable.

1. To ensure impactful communication and successful stakeholder engagement in development projects, it is crucial to involve communication professionals from the earliest stages of project planning to execution. Their expertise is vital for making informed contributions to the project document, enabling the early integration of communication and stakeholder engagement strategies. This proactive involvement ensures that these essential elements are not an afterthought but are embedded in the project's design from the outset, leading to more effective stakeholder relationships, enhanced project outcomes, and a smoother implementation process.

2. Development agencies, government bodies, and NGOs should institutionalise the requirement for early-stage communication and stakeholder engagement strategies as a mandatory part of project design and planning. Ensuring these strategies are integrated from the outset will help align project objectives with community needs, foster ownership, and increase the likelihood of successful outcomes.

3. Create and disseminate standardised guidelines and toolkits for project managers that detail best practices for designing and implementing communication and stakeholder engagement strategies. Practical, context-specific tools will help project teams effectively engage stakeholders and communicate project goals, leading to more consistent and successful implementation across various regions and sectors.

4. Build capacity through training and professional development by implementing regular training programmes and workshops for project staff on the importance of communication and stakeholder engagement, including stakeholder mapping, participatory communication, and conflict resolution techniques. Enhancing the skills and knowledge of project staff in this area will empower them to better engage with stakeholders and manage communication processes, leading to more effective and inclusive project implementation.

5. Promote policy advocacy for stakeholder engagement at national, state and local levels that mandate stakeholder engagement and participatory communication in development projects. Policy support will create an enabling environment for the widespread adoption of these practices, ensuring they are prioritised and adequately funded.

6. Actively involve local communities in co-creating communication strategies, using indigenous knowledge systems and traditional communication channels alongside modern technologies. Leveraging local knowledge and channels will enhance communication efforts' relevance, acceptance, and effectiveness, making them more resonant with the target communities.

7. Maintain ongoing communication and stakeholder engagement throughout the project lifecycle, not just during the initial stages. Continuous engagement helps sustain trust and collaboration, allowing projects to adapt to changing circumstances and stakeholder needs, thereby improving overall project sustainability.

8. Allocate sufficient resources for communication and engagement activities within project budgets. Adequate funding is essential to implement robust communication strategies and meaningful stakeholder engagement, preventing these critical components from being excluded due to resource constraints.

9. Encourage collaboration and knowledge sharing between development agencies, government bodies, and NGOs on effective communication and stakeholder engagement practices. Sharing lessons learned and best practices across agencies will enhance the overall effectiveness of development initiatives and reduce duplication of efforts.

10.   Establish mechanisms to monitor and document best practices and lessons learned in communication and stakeholder engagement, creating a repository to inform future projects. Documenting successful strategies and challenges will provide valuable insights for future projects, contributing to Nigeria's continuous improvement of development practices.

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