

Participatory Rural Appraisal as a Strategy for Community Engagement in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Participatory approaches are widely promoted as effective tools in tackling the problem of community engagement in development process, especially among third world countries. This study focused on PRA, and argued that it is suitable for addressing the problem of community engagement in Nigeria. The study revealed that PRA can assist in promoting community engagement: through conscientizing the community members, through providing solutions; through its effective principles, through interpreters and so on. It also highlights the major principles of PRA as well as the tools it uses in engaging community members

Keywords: Community, Community Engagement, Participatory Rural Appraisal.

Introduction

It is now widely accepted among development theorists and agencies that the engagement of people at all stages of development process is critical if outcomes must be achieved. This is because as the Asian Pacific Organization (APO) (2009) observed communities with extensive indigenous knowledge of their natural, social and historical context contributes valuable ideas regarding resources, analysis of potentials and challenges as well as solutions. Such ideas can be exploited for project design and management (<https://papers.ssm.com>). Community engagement also enables the community to assert their rights of ownership over the project. Project ownership represents the area of responsibility that helps to bring project initiatives to fruition. This contributes to sustainability and maximum utilization of the project.

Nigerian communities are indecisive to decision-making. This is because conventional approaches take participation in decision making for granted. They assume if a project is approved for a community, that they will automatically participate in developing the project. This is far from the truth. As the saying goes taking a horse to the water is a different ball game from making it to drink the water, which means that community members may not take part in development process if they are forced. This is the dilemma of the conventional approaches. PRA strategy addresses this challenge. Because, PRA is based on a learning process, which means that it is characterized by decision making.

Studies have also attested that PRA is the most appropriate approaches for the identification of community problems and for understanding the socio-economic and cultural dynamics of the community. It has been used successfully in Bangladesh (<https://papers.ssm.com.>) Wordu (2022) noted that two participatory approaches for ensuring peoples' engagement in development process are PRA and Technology of participation (TOP) in Nigeria It is in the light of these attributes of PRA that this study examined it as a strategy for community engagement.

The Problem of Decision-Making

The problem of decision making arises from ignorance, apathy, fatalism, over dependence on others, and lack of self-confidence (Wordu, 2022; Onyeozu, 2007). Ignorance characteristics of culture in rural areas. Ignorance is lack of information about what one ought to know or do. It makes people not to act to assert their rights. Ignorance breeds ambivalence toward development responses. Deep-seated ignorance leads to fatalistic tendencies. For example, some people believe that results or outcomes are determined by supernatural forces. Hence, they view their involvement in decision making as unimportant. As a result, they may not contribute ideas, ask questions where necessary or try to review someone else or their own ideas. Some suffering from the disease of ignorance may not be able to identify their personal needs, let alone their community's needs. Ignorance blinds someone to his need for self-improvement.

Apathy refers to lack of interest and enthusiasm. Apathy hinders people from pursuing common interest. It is a force that can limit a community from reaching expectations. Over dependence on others to provide solution to one's problem and lack of self – confidence also contribute to apathy. Some community members may feel that the outsiders are experts, and so, will be more effective than themselves. Women due to the influence of culture tend to accept the belief in superiority of the male gender. Therefore, they tend to isolate themselves from decision-making processes.

Concept of Community Engagement

Community engagement entails taking the beneficiaries of a project into account in its design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation stages so that it have bearing on their needs and on their community. It is same as community involvement or participation in its broadest sense. Dinbabo (2003) opined that community participation is aimed to actively involve people in decision making at every stage in the implementation of programmes that affect them. Roodt (2001) believes community participation is involvement of majority of population (especially the previously excluded segments, such as CBOs, women, youth and the illiterate) in the development processes meant to improve them.

Community participation has two components: involvement in decision-making process and an action process (Desai, 2008). United Nations (1979) cited in Wordu (2018) viewed community participation as encompassing three dimensions:

- i. Sharing by people in the benefits of development;
- ii. Active contribution by people to development; and
- iii. Involvement of people in decision-making at all levels

Conventional Approaches in Community Engagement

Conventional approaches refer to the use of civil service or government ministries, departments, etc. to help communities engage in development process. They are bureaucratic in nature. The distinctive feature of bureaucracy is slow decision-making process. It may be described as a system of organization that relies on hierarchical structures in decision making, specialization of labour, a formal set of rules and procedures and rigid selection criteria. It is mainly characterized by inflexibility and inefficiency and largely slow process of decision-making (Barikor, 2005). It negates rapid change because it is inept, uncreative and unresponsive to change.

This perspective does not favour community engagement due to many reasons. It does not guarantee control and ownership of development process, and its decision-making process is too cumbersome for community members to cope due to many of them are not sufficiently literate.

What is PRA?

PRA involves information sharing through consultation and collaboration with the people and empowers them, using qualitative methods, such as structured interviews, mapping and venn diagram (Nwanguw, 2001). PRA was originally designed for work among poor rural people but is becoming a strong appraisal tool for programmes in urban areas and can be used with groups, such as youth, street children, etc (Nwanggwu 2001, Dinbabo, 2003). PRA consists of a family of approaches and methods enabling rural people to share, enhance and analyse their knowledge of life and conditions, to plan and to act; PRA helps them to analyse their experiences and to improve on them through strengthening their self-help capacities. It is applicable in all stages of a project from planning to evaluation. Through its processes communities can discover their assets. It operates through action-oriented planning, it is essentially a process of strengthening the weaker and poorer segments.

The purpose of PRA is to create opportunity for partnership between development practitioners, government and local people to work together to plan appropriate programmes. It involves a multi-disciplinary team comprising of change agents and community members, with change agents facilitating rather than controlling its process. The procedure involves decision-making in the context of the learning process. Mohan (2008) believes that the essence of PRA is to facilitate change and reversals in the realm of role, behaviour, relationship and learning. PRA is designed to raise the consciousness of the beneficiaries of development intervention in preparation for a development project. This implies making a person to know what he should know about, why he is also necessary involved with it, and how, to what end, and to whose interest, as well as against whom it is to be known (Common Wealth Secretariat cited in Wordu, 2018).

The emphasis on this approach, particularly in democratic societies is aimed at involving more local people in policy planning and implementation, as such involvement of local stakeholder holds much for greater utilization of indigenous knowledge in the development of tools and managing of emerging societal needs. Its strength is seen in its

potential for enabling communication and inclusive decision-making processes which consider the opinions of all stakeholders concerned. PRA is part of participatory Research Appraisal (PRA). PRA embraces conceptual framework, principles, ideological values, visions to be achieved, and also methods which can link participation and community empowerment in the context of economy, politics, health and education.

What is Strategy?

The word strategy based on a general view is a method or means (Wordu, 2022) of addressing or confronting a need, objective, challenge or constraints. It usually means to affect people or process of doing something that is considered a value.

How PRA can facilitate Community Engagement

People ask how can PRA facilitate community engagement. The answer can be found by examining the nature and characteristics of PRA. Such examination leads us to discover six ways PRA uses to encourage community engagement, which include:

Through Conscientizing Community Members

Conscientizing community members is the key to constructive engagement in the development process. This is not just through an intellectual exercise alone, but involves praxis – that is authentic union of action and reflection (Freire, 1973). Freire, according to Rogust and Osman (2012) described conscientization as the process of developing a critical awareness of one's social reality through reflection and action. Development beneficiaries as victims of social myths that dominate their lives and often blind them to their reality may not have the correct view and perception of social reality. Hence, conscientization is the best approach to helping them analyse their situation and improving them by strengthening their self-capacities. To be conscientized implies that participants must challenge their own perceptions. This helps reduce the influence of power dynamics, thus guaranteeing more power-free communication.

Through Providing Solution

PRA does not only help community members and development agents to identify problems that need to be resolved in the community, but also leads to the solution of such problems. When people's personnel challenges are addressed, there is tendency for them to become active and committed to any course undertaken by the community to solve their problems.

Through PRA Principles

PRA espouses effective principles. Its principles focus on the social condition of the underprivileged and poor segment of the society. Behaviour attitudes and actions of development workers or agents are subject to rather than confronting. PRA principles take consideration of differences, especially between rich and poor, strong and weaker populations, etc.

Through Continuous Learning

PRA approaches have the attributes of continuous learning, including re-learning, it assures learning even after project implementation. This development encourages

participating communities not to relaps back to ignorance but learn more about the community situation. Such knowledge helps to sustain improvement in the community.

Through Interpreters

Due to the huge-problem of illiteracy among rural and urban poor, many of them have difficulty communicating with outsiders. PRA helps to overcome this challenge through involving interpreters who are can speak the local language/dialect of the community as well as the official language. This promotes effective communication between the agents of change and participating communities. In most cases, such individuals would come from the community and therefore has much knowledge about the community. This is an additional advantage.

Through Medical Fit

PRA ensure that people coming together to discuss the affairs of the community are medically fit. This is to avoid spreading of diseases, but also to achieve quality of output expected from the people of the community, because as the saying goes wealth is health.

Major principles of PRA for Effective Community Engagement

The major PRA principles for effective community engagement are discussed below:

Appropriate Imprecision

Often, development agencies invest too much time and energy in collecting data, without confirming their usefulness. Such detailed data collection methods place much emphasis on analysis rather on changing the reality through pragmatic activities, PRA requires the collection of only data that is necessary for an appropriate depth of analysis, and avoids making measurements more precisely that is needed. By so doing, it optimizes the trade – offs among time, cost, relevance and precision. PRA is concerned that with data that has the quality to impact community change and not just to fulfil all righteousness, hence it prefers qualitative to quantitative data.

Reflection on and Changing Roles

This principle of PRA suggest development beneficiaries should not be seen as objects that provide data for external experts to interpret and analyse to in order to plan development activities and implement them. It means “handing over the stick” to the community itself. For this take effect the external team involves in everyday activities of the participating community, listens carefully to them and trying to see the world from their own perspectives. But the community should be the leading actor, analysing, reflecting on their situation and coming up with appropriate solutions.

Learning Rapidly and Progressively

PRA focuses and learning rapidly and progressively. This requires explorative methods and encouraging communities to rediscover. PRA involves making progress in learning rapidly continuously this requires use of explorative methods and encouraging

communities to rediscover their reality by applying methods, iteration and cross-checking. Dialogue and sharing of information are integral components of the learning process for achieving rapid learning and continuous progression; and not transfer of knowledge. Knowledge and insights gained are documented for future learning and actions.

Importance of Statistics

Statistics assist planners in several ways:

- i. They can be used to identify and understoped the gaps in the social condition of the community, such as literacy rate HIV/AIDS prevalence rate, etc. this would help planners tailor both learning activities and action appropriately towards resolution of their challenges
- ii. Statistics help planners to anticipate problems and challenges that may crop in the development process as the agents of change and the community work together and proffer solutions to them.
- iii. Often development interventions by pass the most challenged while meeting more the needs of the privileged. Statistics is needed to identify such segments of the population and plan to meet their needs.

Strengths of PRA

The strength of the PRA can be itemized as follows:

- i. PRA promotes inclusivity and participation of community members in decision-making in all stages of a project.
- ii. PRA makes community members to have a sense of ownership and responsibility towards the development project in view.
- iii. It helps community members develop necessary competences for proper assessment of their conditions.
- iv. PRA helps community members by meeting needs for effective participation in the development project in view. This is because they have problems that may need to be solved to pave way for their effective participation.

Weaknesses of PRA

PRA has short comings just because no strategies developed by humans is perfect. The main short coming is that it may not adequately address individual differences resulting in the more activist oriented becoming more resourceful, more experienced, and dominating. This may lead to a situation in which getting the views of those who are not less resourceful or intelligent would be difficult. This may reinforce existing power relationships.

Conclusion

PRA is the most suitable approach in tackling the problem of community engagement based on the level of development in Nigeria, which is characterized by high incidence rate of poverty, rising unemployment and increased food insecurity etc., PRA offers solutions to these problems, dissolves their doubts, conscientizes them, make them

the owners of development process etc.; which cannot be done under the conventional approaches. It can be concluded that in democratic societies, development cannot be imposed on the people from outside. It must begin with the people based on their potentials. External actors are not to dictate the tone. They must learn along the same trajectory with the participants so as to understand them and their problems.

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