

The Role of Communication in the Effective Administration of Local Governments in Cross River State of Nigeria

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Abstract

The Local Government is the closest level of governance to the people at the grassroots; and as a result, needs to generate enough financial resources to provide services that can help in reducing the poverty index of those it serves. Being under close scrutiny by the people, the inability of its operators to perform to expectation can totally destroy their political goodwill. This article aims at properly locating the role communication can play in promoting effective administration of the Local Government in Cross River State of Nigeria. The agenda-setting theory is used as the theoretical framework. The work reveals that even without money to work with, the Local Government administrators had been under intense criticism by the people because there had not been adequate communication between the government and the governed. The paper, therefore, recommends that Local Government functionaries should be proactive in their communication effort so as to always keep their subjects properly informed. The mass media in order to assist in restoring the functionality of Local Governments in Nigeria so that they can serve their people better, should advocate for revolutionary changes in the administration of Local Governments in the country through their news, features, opinions and editorial comments.

Keywords: administration, communication, local government, media, poverty reduction.

1. Introduction:

Leading the Local Government in Nigeria is the most demanding public service engagement any politician should aspire to. Being government at the grassroots level, operators of the Local Government system are in constant contact with the people. Their actions or inactions are subjected to very close scrutiny by the public, and considering the level of exposure and experience of most residents at this level, especially those in the rural areas, their assessment of the administration may be based on very wild and, sometimes, completely false assumptions.

To, therefore, succeed in relating with the people, one major asset needed by the Local Government administrator is the ability to appropriately communicate with them. Such communication should be very effective to engender trust, rapport and close relationship with the governed. This paper, therefore, is aimed at properly locating the role communication can play in promoting effective administration of the Local Government in Nigeria, with Cross River State as the area of study.

2.0 Theoretical Framework:

In every research endeavour, theories have a central role to play. For this paper, the Agenda-setting Theory is chosen, as John Thompson (1995:7) puts it, to help situate the study where it belongs. The media play a major role in shaping opinion in the society. This theory posits a relationship between the way the media rank the importance of various issues published in them and degree of salience these issues have for the society. Rooted in the Power of the Press Theory and closely related to the Gate-keeping concept, the Agenda-setting Theory confers on the media the ability to choose and emphasise certain topics thereby causing the society to see the topics as important. For example, a minor misunderstanding between the State Governor and a Local Government chairman can be over-orchestrated and positioned as a very serious issue by the media through frequent media commentary and exposure, while a highly important event that affects the entire country can be reduced to a mere regional significance through inadequate media coverage.

Adding credence to this argument on the media as a powerful agenda-setter in the society, Cohen (1963:13) explains, "The press may not be successful much of the time in telling the people what to think but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about." And this is exactly what the media have been able to do as can be seen in some studies carried out by researchers on some issues relating to agenda-setting functions of the media. Their contributions can help in making the theory better understood. Christine R. Ader carried out a longitudinal study of agenda-setting for the issue of environmental pollution in 1995. The findings suggest that the amount of media attention devoted to pollution influences the degree of public salience for the issue and that "... the public has little personal contact with pollution and so relies on the media for information." Also making crucial contributions, McCombs and Shaw published their two major research findings titled "The Agenda-setting Functions of Mass Media" (1972) and "Structuring the 'Unseen Environment'" (1976). Their comments in the 1976 report say: "Audience not only learn about public issues and other matters through the media, they also learn how much importance to attach to an issue or topic from the emphasis the mass media place upon it..."

In this study on "The Role of Communication in Revenue Generation, Poverty Reduction and Administration of Local Governments in Cross River State of Nigeria," the Agenda-setting Theory is, therefore, used to strengthen the foundation of the research.

3.0 The Role and Nature of Communication:

Communication is derived from the Latin word, *communico*, which means, "share." Sharing involves giving out something (in this case, the communicated messages) and receiving something back (for example, a reaction). Man, as a social being, is gregarious; and when man communicates, it is just natural otherwise he ceases to be a human being. This gregariousness of man, which expects him to interact with one another, is a good reason for man to communicate. However, there are many other reasons.

Cherry (1978:4) says that in communicating, we may "enquire, inform, dispute, negotiate, agree, dissent, quarrel, commune, insult, admire, and ritualise in endless ways..." Indeed, when man communicates, he expects to enjoy some level of satisfaction.

While assessing the "uses-and-gratifications theory", McQuail, Blumler and Brown (1972) define four major categories of need which man seeks to satisfy by communicating. These are:

1. Diversion (that is, escape from constraints of routine; escape from the burdens of problems, emotional release).
2. Personal Relationships (companionship, social utility).
3. Personal Identity (personal reference; reality exploration; value reinforcement).
4. Surveillance (need for information in our complex world).

In its simplest form, this theory, according to Dominick (1987:44), "points that audience members have certain needs or drives that are satisfied by using both non-media and media sources."

Also, since man communicates through the media in whichever form, it can be assumed that the traditional roles of the media to entertain, inform and educate constitute primarily why we communicate. This is presented in the following model:

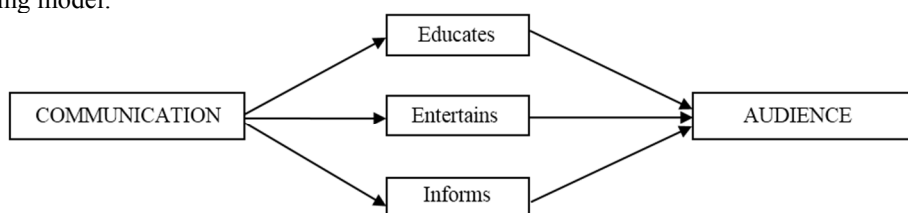


Figure 1: Conceptual Model on Role of communication

Source: Researcher, 2017

In the administration of Local Governments, effective communication with the specific audience – employees, political class, traditional rulers, the community members, the State and Federal Governments – is very important. Communication, in this case, can take place by a two-way method when there is face-to-face interpersonal discussion or an interaction through the telephone, radiotelephone, or the internet. Another way communication takes place is the one-way method through the mass media that include radio, television, magazine, newspaper, films, posters, books, billboards, circulars, and memoranda. Also, people use gestures, words, sounds and pictures to communicate.

There are consequences or effects of communication. These may be in two forms: consequences on the society and on the communicator. These can be actual, so far as it can be ascertained, or perceived. They can also be positive when communication produces pleasant impact or negative when communication produces deviant reaction.

To properly situate this, the "Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur's dependency model of mass communication effects (1976)" succinctly comes to mind. As discussed by Watson and Hill (1993:12), the model points to the fact that "the nature and degree of dependency relate closely first to the extent to which society is subject to change, conflict or instability and second to the functions of information provision and attitude shaping of the mass media within those social structures."

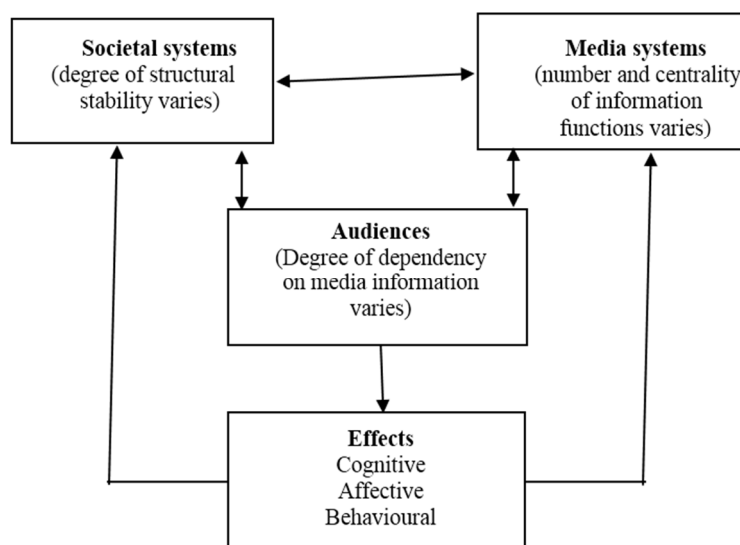


Figure 2: Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur's dependency model of mass communication effects, 1976.

This model emphasises the essentially interactive nature of the processes of communication effects. Watson and Hill observe that the societal and media system interact and influence audience responses that in turn influence media and society.

Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur have identified cognitive, affective and behavioural effects as arising from communication. Under the *cognitive effects* which relate to matters of intellects, areas of influence identified in Watson and Hill are: creation and resolution of ambiguity; attitude formation; agenda setting; expansion of people's belief systems, and value clarification. Under the *affective heading* that relates to matters of emotion, we perceive communication as treating fear or anxiety; increasing or decreasing morale and establishing or sense of alienation. As for *behavioural affects*, the model says communication may have the consequences of activating or deactivating; formulating issues and influencing their resolution.

With this study, the role communication is expected to play in enhancing the efficient administration of Local Governments is further assessed. As highlighted in the above model, effective communication can help to resolve ambiguity, form attitude, expand people's belief systems, clarify value and influence decisions. Administrators of Local Governments need the presence of these ideals so that the people can well understand why some matters cannot be dealt with in the way they would want their Local Governments to handle them.

4.0 Local Government Administration in Cross River State:

4.1 The Issue of Revenue Generation:

Local Governments receive their revenues from three major sources - the Federal (Federation allocation), the State (10 percent of State's Internally-generated income), and the Council's internally-generated revenue (IGR).

The revenues accruing to the 18 Local Governments Councils in Cross River State have been dwindling since 2015 till date. For instance, the following incomes, as declared by the Office of the Accountant-General of Cross River State to the State's Joint Account and Allocation Committee, had accrued to the Councils from the Federation Accounts in 2015:

- January 2015 - N2.528 billion
- February 2015 - N2.179 billion
- March 2015 - N1.938 billion
- April 2015 - N2.459 billion
- May 2015 - N1.732 billion
- June 2015 - N1.848 billion
- July 2015 - N2.368 billion
- August 2015 - N2.279 billion
- September 2015 - N1.897 billion
- October 2015 - N1.709 billion
- November 2015 - N1.241 billion
- December 2015 - N1.313 billion.

This brings it to a monthly average of N1.957 billion. Considering, therefore, that the total monthly wage bill for Local Government staff, primary health practitioners, primary school teachers, political office holders, traditional rulers, pensioners, etc. in Cross River State stands at N2.174 billion besides many statutory

deductions for joint development initiatives and the mandatory contribution of N1 million per Council per month into the State Reserve Fund, the Councils are always on deficit each month.

Many commentators have been quick in criticizing Local Government administrators of lacking the ingenuity to evolve robust internal revenue generating strategies which should help in augmenting their dismal receipts from the Federation Account. Unfortunately, this is very far from the reality on ground. Many things conspire against the improvement of internally-generated revenue portfolios of the Local Governments in Cross River State. Some of the challenges as identified by Okon (2015:3-5) are:

- (i) *Seizure of some constitutionally mandated Local Government revenue sources by the State Government.*
For example, the Fourth Schedule to the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999 in sub-section (h) devolves to the Local Government the function of "provision and maintenance of public conveniences, sewage and refuse disposal;" and in sub-section (k) the "control and regulation of outdoor advertising and hoarding... [as well as] shops and kiosks." However, the Cross River State Government, through the establishment of the CRS Waste Management Board and all the urban development agencies in Calabar, Ugep, Ikom, Ogoja and Obudu, had taken over the function of refuse disposal; and with the creation of CRS Signage and Advertising Agency (CRISSAA), it also took over the management of outdoor advertising. Also, business premises are taxed by the State. The Local Governments are therefore denied the right to collect revenue from those and other sources. And where the provision of the State Law prescribes a sharing of revenue, as in the case of CRISSAA, not a kobo has been remitted to the Local Governments since that agency came to being in 2011.
- (ii) *Lack of resources to embark on aggressive revenue drive:*
One uses money to make money, so goes the saying. To embark on aggressive revenue drive, the Councils need strong vehicles and other logistical requirements. In the situation where no capital vote is accessed and overhead expenses can hardly be met, it becomes an impossible task to successfully generate revenue.
- (iii) *Security challenges:*
With the nefarious and violent activities of area boys, cultists and militants holding sway in the communities, revenue staff had become easy preys to the miscreants. This problem may not be common across all Local Governments in Nigeria, but recently in some parts of the State, armed men were going around some business premises issuing demand notices and sometimes forcefully collecting money from the business owners. Akpabuyo, Bakassi, Odukpani, Abi, Biase, Akamkpa and Calabar South LGAs had experienced such disruptions. The LGAs in the northern part of the State had the cattle herdsmen to contend with. At each attack, businesses and revenues were threatened.
- (iv) *Lack of political will to Control Revenue Collection:*
Several Local Government's revenue points are contracted out to some local political chieftains. In most cases, much of the revenues collected from those sources go into the private pockets of the politicians thereby keeping the Councils' coffers starved of the much needed resources. Unfortunately, the leadership of Councils lacks the political will to redress the situation.
- (v) *Corrupt revenue collection staff:*
Many staff of Local Governments assigned with the responsibility of revenue collection are corrupt. They print their own treasury receipts and issue same for monies collected from tax payers thereby enriching themselves. Where they use genuine receipts in their transactions, they record less than the amount paid to them. Even when the Councils introduced the electronic payment system for revenue collection, the staff sabotaged that effort. All these were aimed at short-changing their employers.
- (vi) *Inadequate manpower to cover untapped revenue collection sources:*
There are many sources of revenue that have been left fallow and unexploited because of inadequate manpower available for their collection. The situation has become even more precarious in Cross River State where employment of fresh hands had been embargoed for about a decade now. Besides, in addition to the lack of enough capable revenue staff to man those collection points, the machinery deployed for such exercise, in some cases, has been quite ineffective.

4.2 *Poverty Reduction:*

People are described internationally as living in poverty when their earning is less than US\$1.90 a day, according to the World Development Report 1990 (Ferreira, 2015). In 2013, the International Labour Organisation estimated that as many as 375 million workers lived on less than US\$1.25, compared to 600 million in the early 2000's, which is 12 percent average drop per year (ILO News, 2014:1). The various economic and humanitarian measures taken by Governments and their development partners, therefore, to permanently lift people out of poverty line constitute what is referred to as poverty reduction.

In order to help in the reduction of poverty in the communities include the following:

- Deliberate effort by Government to grow the economy, which can have the potential to both

directly and indirectly impact on the lives of the people. For instance, growth in the economy would ensure that employment opportunities are open and qualified people can be meaningfully and profitably engaged.

- Encouraging farming activities, which can help to raise incomes of the people and reduce reliance on the importation of certain food products. Government can provide seedlings, chemicals, soft loans, etc. to prospective farmers.
- Introduction of social security mechanism whereby the poor can have access to basic income grant. An example is the Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT), which was applied to help several poor families the State during the Governor Liyel Imoke-led administration.
- Economic empowerment of women, which can help them to generate and manage incomes for the care of their households and development of the community. For instance, the Akpabuyo Local Government, in 2014, applied its internally-generated revenue to train and empower 141 women in various skills.
- Training and empowering the youths to be self-sufficient - thus creating opportunities for them to appreciate their self-worth and expand their own economic horizon.

Where it is possible to implement these measures, the people need to be involved in their planning and eventual execution. Communication, therefore, becomes the vehicle for sending out information to the people and receiving feedback from them.

However, these measures can be thwarted by lack of fund, weak institutional and operational capacities of the Local Government, non-performance on the part of those at the helm of affairs, non-inclusiveness in governance, non-participatory budget preparation, and absence of proper community needs assessment survey. Without being adequately informed of such challenges, the people normally would blame the Local Governments of insensitivity or outright failure in the discharge of their statutory responsibilities. This explains, therefore, why regular communication is required in building strong and consensual relationship between the Local Governments and their communities.

4.3 *Effective Administration of the Local Governments:*

Being the closest tier of government to the people, Local Governments are expected to play a very important role in the development of both their respective communities and citizens. Their contributions, therefore, to sustainable national development – through the provision of primary healthcare, primary education, water and sanitation, roads and bridges, agriculture, and other infrastructures and services – are capable of being felt directly by the people living or doing business in their localities. But why have they not been able to meet this expectation entrusted to them by the constitution and the people?

In the recent past years, the fortune of Nigeria's Local Governments has gradually eroded and currently nosedived to a level of obscurity, which if nothing is done urgently can result in the complete obliteration of this tier of governance. This fear is being compounded by the following scenarios that have daily become the lot of Nigerian Local Government system.

(i) *Administration of Local Government's Funds:*

Admittedly, the State Governments began administering Local Government funds through the Joint Accounts Allocation Committees because of the recklessness of past Local Government administrations, which resulted in the non-payment of staff salaries for many months and their inability to meet contractual obligations. But since the intervention by the State, there has been significant improvement in the payment of salaries but the solvency of Councils has abysmally deteriorated.

In Cross River State, section 5(2) of the Local Government Law of 2007 (as amended) applies 27 percent statutory charges on "the gross sum due monthly to each Local Government Area" to be expended as follows:

- | | | |
|---|---|-------|
| • Rural Development Agency (RUDA) | - | 9% |
| • State Electrification Agency (SEA) | - | 5% |
| • State Joint Security Operations Fund | - | 2% |
| • Ministry of Local Government Affairs | - | 1% |
| • CRS University of Technology (CRUTECH) | - | 2% |
| • Local Government Service Commission | - | 1% |
| • State Joint Social Welfare Service | - | 2.5% |
| • Border Communities Development Fund | - | 1% |
| • Sports Development | - | 1% |
| • Environmental Management and Protection | - | 2.5%. |

The above are in addition to the four percent contribution to the State Infrastructure Development Fund, passed into law by the State House of Assembly in 2015, as well as the compulsory contribution of N1 million

per council per month into the State Reserve Fund and other sundry statutory deductions for common services. These have placed serious financial burden on the Councils, which have left them largely incapacitated in the discharge of their own statutory obligations.

Another twist to this is that when these joint projects and programmes are implemented, Local Governments are always denied a mention as co-providers of those services. It is sad that their money is used but no credit at all goes to them!

(ii) *The eroding status of the Local Government:*

In the scheme of things, either by omission or commission, the Local Government in Nigeria has lost much of its dignity. The council chairman is comically seen as a man without a chair! The respect that used to accompany his status had since been depleted. Now, the Local Government has become lower than a department of the State.

As a result, the Councils lack the capacity to take initiatives. Their budgets are subjected to endless scrutiny and vetting by the Ministry of Local Government Affairs thereby denying the councillors the opportunity to exercise their legislative function. Before any project is executed, approval is obtained from the Ministry and in the case of Cross River State, also from the Department of Project Monitoring and Evaluation in the Governor's Office. Without the monthly overhead funds, money needed for any programme such as immunization, and Independence Day celebration must be applied for through the Ministry to the Governor.

(iii) *Inability to pay counterpart funds:*

With the dwindling revenues of Government at all levels, one avenue that can help in meeting developmental expectations of Local Governments is the collaboration with international development partners such as European Union (EU), United States Agency for International Development (USAID), United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID), and Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). Apart from some aids-in-grant, many of their interventions require counterpart funding. Local Governments have missed many opportunities of obtaining such grants due to their inability to source for and pay their share of the project cost.

(iv) *Control and discipline of staff:*

Established by a State Law, the Local Government Service Commission has the power to employ, promote, transfer and discipline Local Government staff and it does these without any regard to the Local Government chairman. The same thing happens in the appointment of the executive secretary of the Local Education Authority where the appointive power was taken from the Local Government to the State Universal Basic Education Board (SUBEB). Primary school teachers, therefore, owe greater allegiance to SUBEB than to the Council. In a situation where the Council only pays salaries and allowances but cannot discipline recalcitrant staff, control becomes very difficult.

5.0 The Role of Communication in Local Government Administration:

Even with the above pitiable scenario which has negatively impacted on the administration of Local Government Councils in Cross River State so much that only a paltry N20 million was released to them as capital vote for three years and their monthly overhead costs meant for the day-to-day running of Councils (both executive and legislature) were not paid for 22 months, people were still accusing chairmen of stealing money! For example, in July 2015, some individuals in the social media had accused Local Government chairmen in Cross River State, whom they tagged "executhief" chairmen, of being only interested in sharing allocations accruing to their respective Councils. Yet this was in a time when the Councils were wallowing in distressful penury! Why was this so?

There was no conscious effort by the Local Government operators to sensitise the populace about the prevailing circumstances under which they were operating. As a result, the people continued to assess them based on the picture they had of previous Council administrations that were more buoyant.

With proper communication, whereby the people would have been informed of the predicaments being faced by the Local Governments as a result of low revenue inflow, such vilifications could have been avoided. It is not just enough to communicate but this should be done purposefully and efficiently. To, therefore, handle this task of communicating properly, the administrators should firmly embrace what Doyle (2016) identifies as the "Top 10 Communication Skills," which he enumerates as:

1. Listening - being a good listener is one of the best ways of being a good communicator;
2. Non-verbal communication - being able to use body language, eye contact, hand gestures and friendly tone to convey messages;
3. Clarity and concision - communicating with as few words as possible;
4. Friendliness - encouraging people to engage in open and honest communication through friendly tone and disarming smiles;
5. Confidence - entering every interaction with others with self-confidence;

6. Empathy - understanding and respecting other people's point of view even when disagreeing with them;
7. Open-mindedness - entering any conversation with a flexible, open mind;
8. Respect - conveying respect for others and their ideas;
9. Feedback - providing appropriate feedback, including praise as well as accepting and encouraging feedback from others; and
10. Picking the right medium - knowing what form of communication to use at all times.

Unfortunately, many Local Government officials lack these skills. They hardly listen to their people. They are not friendly nor do they adopt clarity while communicating with them. They get too preoccupied with many issues but to create enough time to relate with their subjects. They do not care much about the content of their messages, which most times are very vague and shallow. These faults stand as a barrier between them and the people they were elected or appointed to serve. This attitude need to change. Local Government leadership should learn to communicate more with the people. They should also adopt, as an administrative principle, the willingness to show utmost respect to others while communicating with them. The C.A.R.E. principles of communication come to play here. These are:

- C=Communicate immediately the need arises. Delay can be dangerous.
- A=Appropriate communication. Let your communication fit the status, gender, age, etc. of the person(s) being addressed and the situation under which communication is made.
- R=Recognise and reward. Acknowledge and appreciate every contribution made.
- E=Express Support. Be interested in the challenges the people you are communicating with are facing and be willing to assist as much as you can.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendation:

Operating under this unbearably harsh condition cannot allow for effective Local Government administration in Nigeria. To wriggle out of this quagmire, some drastic measures need to be taken.

It is recommended that the Local Government functionaries should be more proactive in their communication pattern. They should promptly and adequately communicate their predicament to their constituents through such channels of communication as town hall meetings, official circulars, memoranda, and the mass media. Without this, the people will largely remain uninformed and the image of Councils with that of their leadership will continue to be jeopardised.

Also, the mass media, on their own, have not taken serious interest in communicating the calamitous situation the Local Governments in Cross River State have been operating on. The consequences, therefore, have been enormous both on the Council administrations and the people they serve. The mass media should, therefore, advocate for revolutionary changes in the administration of Local Governments in the country through their news, features, opinions and editorial comments. The following issues are recommended for the media's urgent attention:

For the Local Government administration to be effective and sustainable, the Councils should be given a more dignified role to play in "the economic development of the State" as properly envisaged in the Fourth Schedule to the Nigerian Constitution.

The autonomy of Local Governments, especially in financial control and management, should be restored with the proviso that payment of staff salaries and allowances remains a first-line charge so as to allay the fears of non-payment of staff emoluments.

With the envisaged scrapping off of the State's Joint Accounts and Allocation Committee (JAAC), the Ministry of Local Government Affairs should only play the role of close monitoring of Local Government activities and report any established lapses for quick redress.

The Local Government Service Commission, if retained, should carry out its functions in concert with the Local Government Councils so that no serving staff could be transferred, promoted or disciplined without the knowledge of the Council leadership.

Section 5(2) of the State Local Government Law should be amended to drastically reduce the statutory deductions from Local Government monthly receipts for State and Local Government joint-projects from 31 percent to not more than 15 percent and for the deductions to be made on NET, and not GROSS income.

There should be established a Local Government Development Council in every State, patterned after the Council of States at the national level which should meet at least quarterly where issues affecting the Local Government development and security can be addressed.

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