

## **Citizen Participation in Local Government: The Importance of Effective Communication in Rural Development**

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In societies around the world there is a concern over the plight of poverty. In South Africa, years of active discrimination policy making and neglect have resulted in high levels of inequality characterized by extreme wealth on one hand and desperate poverty on the other. These activities left rural areas, mostly occupied by blacks in underdeveloped state while the urban areas, mostly occupied by whites are developed. This situation alienated poor communities to take active role in matters of governance and their development. The dawn of democracy in 1994 saw the inclusive democratic government having to strengthen communication between government institution and its communities and also to harness community participation. A qualitative study was conducted in Mutale local municipality, Vhembe district in Limpopo Province of South Africa where unstructured interviews were conducted to focus groups including ward committee members, traditional leadership and management. The study revealed that despite a number of communication mechanism and models implemented by Government, there is communication gap between government institutions and communities they serve. This demands for a new model of communication aimed at community participation and rural development. This communication gap makes the community members feel alienated from government initiatives and projects in general. They therefore do not feel they are part of government and do not take active role in matters of governance and those that are aimed at improving their living conditions. This continues to hinder rural development and the objectives of developmental rural government; that of the government that seek to empower communities through harnessing their full participation.

Keywords: Effective communication, under-development, citizen participation, developmental local government

### **Introduction**

According to Oosthuizen (2004), in societies around the world there is concern over the plight of poverty. In South Africa, years of active discrimination policy making and neglect have resulted in high levels of inequality characterized by extreme wealth on one hand and desperate poverty on the other (Price, 2000). Marais, Muthien, Van Rensburg, Maaga, De Wet and Coetzee (2001) also argue that the Southern Africa socio-economic context in 2001 was still largely characterized by abject poverty.

Also, according to report by Schwabe (2004), new estimates of poverty show that the proportion of people living in poverty in South Africa has not changed significantly since 2001. Instead, the report argues that people on poverty have sunk deeper into it. In South Africa approximately 57% of individuals are reported by this report as living below the poverty income line during 2010. Limpopo and Eastern Cape had the highest proportion of poverty with 77% and 72% respectively. This is despite government coming up with different plans to fight poverty through the initiative called Towards Anti-Poverty Strategy

(2008). The strategy says the most poverty target are the older persons, the unemployed, low wage earners, women, people with disabilities and people living in poor areas such as the rural areas of the poor provinces.

The strategies government use includes:

- The support grants system where according to the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) the state is reaching over 11 million people.
- The indigent register where municipalities identify households eligible for free basic services such as electricity and water.
- Employment creation where short and long term job opportunities are created. These include the Extended Public Works Programme (EPWP).
- Human resource development including the use of free basic education and national student support at FET's and other institutions of higher learning.
- On the other hand, government also suggests in this strategy that there is a need for community mobilization to be used as a strategy to seek active participation by community members. Community mobilization requires the emergence of competent, inclusive community groups that can:

- Work with government to identify viable and desirable projects.
- Drive implementation within the communities.
- Ensure the programmes benefit the poorest households.
- Disseminate information on new opportunities and
- More effective use of resources and transfer of useful skills.

All these will need an effective communication between government, with special attention to municipalities and its communities. Current government communication system, both at national and local sphere lacks relevant communication model for rural development.

### Methodology

This paper is based on the qualitative study conducted in the rural Mutale local municipality, Limpopo Province in South Africa. The study was conducted in Ward 05 and 12. Different sets of questions were used simply to guide conversation in this unstructured interview where respondents were allowed to speak freely. Interviews were conducted with the management of the municipality of Mutale including the mayoral council members, section 57 managers and their structures such as ward committees, communicators, CDW's and employees of the Mutale local Municipality. The study was also extended to the grassroots communities at the targeted wards which were Wards 05 and 12. Tribal authorities of Masisi, Thengwe and Mulodi were visited and allowed their representatives to be interviewed.

The study ended up with the ward community workshop at Thengwe clinic in Ward 05 and Masisi taxi rank at Ward 12. The workshops were used to discuss key elements of the proposed effective communication model for enhancement of developmental local government. The workshop was also conducted in Thulamela, Musina and Makhado communicators' forums. Thulamela, Makhado and Musina are other three local municipalities of Vhembe district. The workshops were conducted here as part of validation of the proposed new communication model.

### Government's Efforts on Provision of Effective Communication for Rural Development

Government is spending money in communication. All government departments, district and municipality have either a communication unit or personnel taking care of communication activities. There is also a budget in each government institution dedicated to communication function. This is used in

developing communication tools such as posters, mass media activities, heavily censored departmental newsletters and for unmediated communication or outreach programmes.

Following former president Thabo Mbeki's State of the Nation Address in 2003, government also established Community Development Workers programme which saw Community Development Workers (CDWs) hired and placed in districts and municipalities. The intention was to at least have a CDW in each municipality. At that time Mbeki said, "Government will create a public service echelon of multi-skilled community development workers (CDWs) who will maintain direct contact with the people where the masses live". Masses live at local government jurisdiction.

The need for community participation is in line with the concept of sustainable development which indicates that development itself can be defined as a movement from existing attitude, behaviours, perception and standards of living or any other situation that are no longer conducive to the aspiration of the society in search of those that can meet the goals and aspiration of the society (Marais *et al*, 2001). Other channels government uses at local sphere of government include:

- **Ward committee:** A ward committee can be regarded a cabinet at the municipalities' wards to make sure government is at all the times closer to its people. Although this is supposed to be a communication platform between people at local communities and their local government, it has the tendencies of either lack of relevant skills or deviation from its mandate and work for a certain political party.

- **Traditional leaders:** Government has established houses of Traditional leadership which are also used as government communication platforms. Traditional leaders also get salaries from the government of the day which also serves as incentive to harness government activities.

This has potential of turning them solely into relaxed state agencies with guaranteed salaries. Some turn to measure development through their salaries and take passive role in issues of development. Often there are conflicts between ward councilors, CDW's and traditional leadership over government resources control.

All these groups of people are expected to empower community members with knowledge of government programmes, plans, activities, challenges and assist with interventions.

Several anti-poverty strategies have been developed and projects have been put in place particularly on presidential nodal points of government but still fail to improve the living

conditions in rural areas. Most of government's community projects are not sustained. Reasons for collapse include lack of relevant skills both financial and marketing. (Towards an Anti-poverty Strategy, 2008)

Development initiatives in rural areas are negatively affected as rural communities are not taken on board to be active in issues of their own development. This translates into projects "piloted" to communities without their full participation.

In his public participatory experience, Chambers (2010) argues on the need for participatory development which one can argue is important in local government communication. Chambers (2010) also argues for community-driven development (CDD) which is based on the empowerment of local communities whereby local governments, rural and urban drive communities towards development with a new set of powers, rights and obligations. Chambers (2010) sees CDD as:

- Empowering communities with resources and authority.
- Improving accountability and
- Building capacity.

Chambers (2010) also emphasizes a need for Community-based Planning (CBP) which is a form of participatory planning which has been designed to promote community action. This means local government should have ways to involve communities during planning stage of any programme including the communication process. This approach lacks in current local government communication and this can be attributed to lack of effective communication.

### **Relationship between Effective Communication and Rural Development**

Deduced from Chambers (2010), effective communication is a pillar of rural development. Effective Communication for Rural Development refers to communication characterized by community participation wherein community members are empowered with information and are part of the identification of their needs, challenges, intervention plans, implementation thereof, monitoring and evaluation in an environment conducive for them to take issues of their own development into their own hands by becoming active participants and owners of the whole process. (Chambers, 2010). This means that members of the community are persuaded to take matters of their development into own hands and own all initiatives intended to change their lives for the better.

Relevant communication model for rural development should involve persuasion. Larson (1990) indicates

that persuasion involves self-motivation and it occurs incrementally through some time. According to Larson (1990), effective and successful persuasion is determined by persuaders' knowledge of the needs of their audience.

Correct knowledge of audience seems to be lacking in local government communication system hence delivery of some messages that are not well understood by target audience...messages that fail to derive action from community members. Communicators at local government take it for granted that they know the community members well just because they are governing closer to the communities. Local municipalities for example seldom conduct customer satisfaction survey. If they conduct this it takes long time before another study or implementation of the findings.

Effective communication involves situation analysis and communication research which is regarded key in document called Guidance on Communication for Rural Development (2009). It is through communication that community members will be made to participate in initiatives that improve their lives through self-actualization.

The notion of self-actualization (Larson, 1990) comes as a result of effective communication. O'Keefe (2002) argues that persuasion is connected to the notion of success and this emphasises the importance of effective communication in rural development. O'Keefe (2002) also adds that persuasion is like the orientation of the mind.

However, within the current communication situation in South Africa, there is what is termed Development Communication (DC) which is the most dominating type of information exchange as per the South African Government Communicators' Handbook (2007). Development Communication is communication within the developing situation where there is more use of modern channels but with focus on community development through information dissemination. Also, as described by South African government in the Government Communicators' Handbook (2007), Development Communication (DC) is about communicating the messages that are relevant in empowering people's socio-economic lives. It is about giving people the information they will be able to use for their own development.

According to Melkote (1991), DC success depends on rural people modifying their attitudes and behaviour and working with new knowledge and skills which normally benefit from communication support. DC needs well-defined strategies, systematic planning and rigorous management hence requiring massive resources, intensity and duration which is rare in rural areas. (Guidelines on communication for Rural development: 2009).

## Review of Some Existing Communication Models and How They Function

According to Mortensen (1972), a model is a systematic representation of an object or event in idealized and abstract form and that there are the following most dominating communication models:

### *Aristotle's model of communication*

Aristotle, a Greek philosopher-teacher established this communication model in the desire of observing the availability of the means of persuasion in his teaching of rhetoric. This model gives the speaker more power as this is where the message is discovered. Considerations of both ethical and emotional feelings are done by the speaker with little consideration of the recipient. The speaker then arranges the strategies, dresses the idea or message and sends it out. Recipient has to passively receive hence ill-effective communication.

### *The Shannon-Weaver mathematical model*

This model is considered by Mortensen (1972) as the most common used in low-level communication texts and has been taken as an appropriate model for human communication. Just like the Aristotle one, message flow is from one side to the other with all organized by the sender. Recipient plays little role in the process.

### *Berlo's Model of Communication*

This model as Mortensen (1972) explains tends to stress the manipulation of the message during the encoding and decoding processes. It implies that human communication is like a machine communication resembling signal sending in telephone, television or computer as in radar system. This model suggests that human communication challenges may be solved technically while problems in meanings and meaningfulness are a matter of reaction, agreement, beliefs etc that goes beyond mere comprehension.

## Status Core of Government Communication Systems in South Africa

Communication in government of South Africa starts at the Government Communication and Information Systems (GCIS) which is the highest communication office based at the presidency.

Every year GCIS sets communication tone to make sure there is alignment in themes and messages

of the year or any other stipulated period. The provinces only develop their communication strategies after receiving guidelines from GCIS. Provinces align their strategies with guideline from GCIS. Provincial departments, districts and municipalities then align their communication strategies to that of the province.

The challenge is that the national sphere of government through GCIS imposes "one-size-fits-all" type of guidelines and that the other spheres have to copy and comply. This approach is top-down in nature and does not make government communication model different from other models where the recipient is regarded just as a receiver and not contributor or equal partner of the communication process.

Government also communicates through Public Participation Programme (PPP), formerly known as Imbizo's. During the PPP, the president, the deputy president, ministers and their deputies go to the municipalities accompanied by premiers and other Members of the Provincial Executive Council (MEC's) and political leaders at local sphere. Amongst others they visit local projects as identified by their advance teams and gather in one place where some members, representing what government calls organized groups of the community get a chance to raise their concerns. However, often time for this is very limited hence few members of the community getting a chance to speak to government leaders. This excludes those that are not members of the so called organized structures and there if often political influence among the representatives. As for other engagement such as official opening of projects, community members are gathered for political leaders to read speeches at times in a language the community members do not even understand.

The PPP is in line with the notion of the community based planning aiming at bringing community driven development through listening to the needs of the communities and responding to them as per public participatory models of Chambers (2010).

Bessette (2004) argues that communication is important for bringing community participation. However Bessette (2004) believe there is a lot of talk on the word participation yet in practice it covers many "non-participatory" approaches. Government's public participation is one such community participation full of non-participatory approaches. Bessette (2004) says good community participation is the one that does **involve** members and not just end up at **consultation** level. Further, Bessette argues that community members need to **participate** and not just be **mobilized**.

It can be argued that government does consultation and not involving, government does mobilization and not getting communities to

participate. Participation is when people take responsibility for carrying out a development initiative. Community members are involved when they are part of identifying their own development problems, in seeking solutions and taking decision about how to best implement them.

### New Communication Model of Effective Communication for Rural Development

This communication model should go beyond **consultation** and **mobilization** which have turned norms in Integrated Development Plan (IDP's) processes in both districts and local municipalities. This has also been turned into norms in the running of different types of Public Participation Programmes (PPP) by the Government of South Africa. Effective communication can be achieved through the establishment of a communication model that will be able to achieve the following:

- Ushering effective communication for the development of rural communities through full community participation.

- Create more understanding, belief, sense of togetherness between local government and the rural communities.
- Create sense of belonging with the spirit of **OURS** prevailing over the spirit of **THEIRS** between government and communities.
- Bring in high level of community-driven communication which will lead to true public participation in local government activities.
- Bring community participation through involving community members and making them to participate and take responsibility for their own development initiative from the beginning to the end of the process.
- A model that will bring in development as it will persuade community members to move from existing attitude, behaviours, perceptions and standards which is not conducive for development to those that are in line with meeting developmental goals.
- In this model, both communicator and recipient treat each other with respect and as equal partners in the communication process.

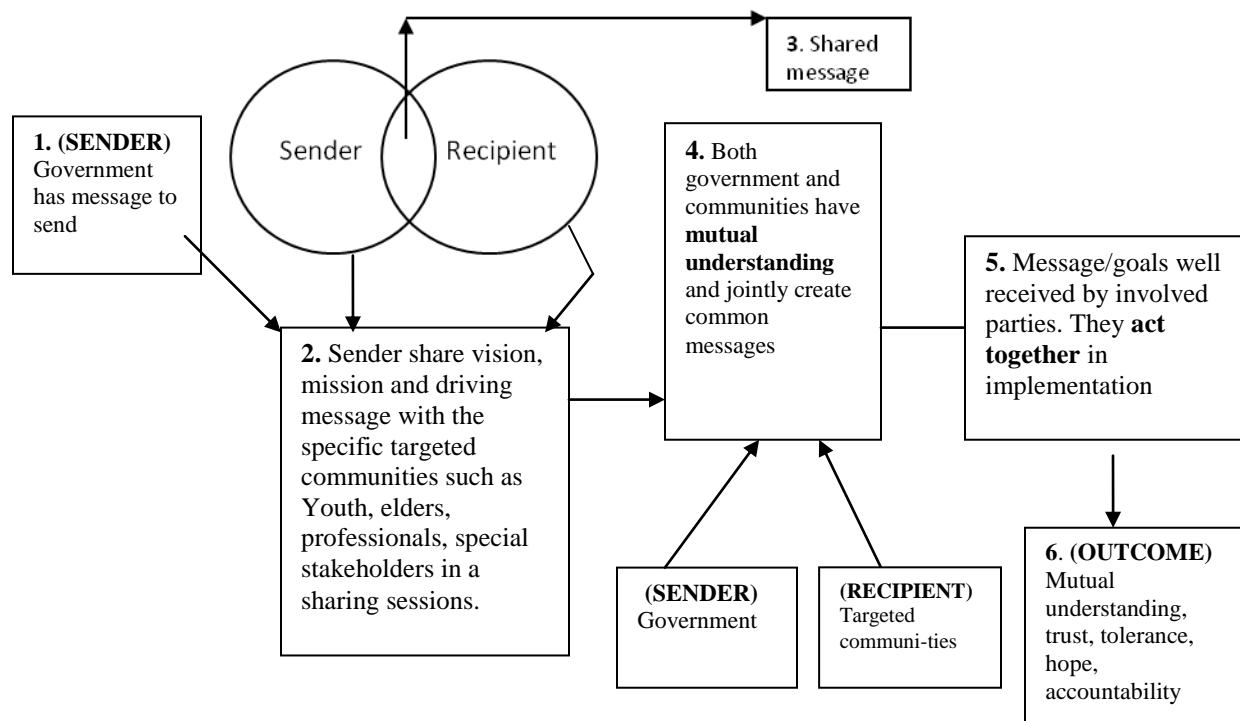


Figure 1. A Model of Effective Communication for Rural Development

The following is an explanation on the model (Figure 1): Government is a sender of the message (1). Government begins by sharing the message to recipient, in this case the community members (2). The two parties have common understanding (3). They both develop mutual understanding and jointly create common message towards realization of discussed objectives (4). The two parties take initiatives jointly to the realization of the objectives of the message (5). At the end the two parties accept accountability on the end results. If the end result is good they rejoice and celebrate together. If the results are not favourable, the two parties go back to the drawing board without pointing fingers. Therefore government and community members will never fight again as they plan, implement and monitor projects together.

### Conclusion

Dudley (1999); Hurskainen (1993) and Lu (2009) are some authors who all agree that in many parts of the world there is a communication gap between government and its communities and this is hampering development.

In conclusion, it can be argued that there is a need for the strengthened citizen participation in matters of local government. Also it can be argued that there is a need for effective communication model which will allow local government to take citizens along starting from identification of their challenges, identification of the intervention strategies, and implementation of the intervention plans and the sense of collective accountability from both parties involved.

This cannot happen without a relevant communication model which will encourage full community participation and contribute in rural development. This model of effective communication for Rural Development will assist in enhancing the idea of Developmental Local Government which is characterized by citizen participation, empowerment and accountability.

One can ask what the implications of continuous communication gap between government institutions and the communities they are serving are. It has been proved through this study that in areas of violent protests, one of the contribution factors is poor communication. Lack of information, just like having wrong information equally causes conflict amongst people. Community members, especially those that are poor turn to think government is failing them. This is because government institutions are not able to effectively communicate to these members on

difficulties they have to create that mutual understanding, level of trust and giving community members accountability to matters of governance. Communication gap left between two parties open room for assumptions which in many cases just become perceptions unchallenged turning to be true. There are instances in South Africa that the community lives in government subsidized houses, using tap water brought by government, waiting for government subsidized transport to take their kids to school for free education along the tarred road but planning to go for violent protest against the government for not delivering a clinic but destroying government vehicles, the nearest library and the road. This is because the community members do not see government delivered facilities as theirs. Destroying these facilities to them is the way to hurt the government as they see it not as theirs. Community members in South Africa have also grown a tendency to believe that government must provide them with everything even though they can afford, the tendency of spoilt kid who over demand to waste.

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## Appendixes



Sign used during apartheid rule of South Africa separating whites and blacks. Source: Wikipedia (2013).



Toilets for whites only during the apartheid South Africa



Toilets for blacks only- during apartheid South Africa