INFLUENCE OF COMMUNICATION MODES ON SUSTAINABILITY OF WATER PROGRAMS IN KITUI RURAL SUB-COUNTY

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Abstract

Modes of communication play vital role in ensuring sustainability of outcome and has become a buzz terminology in the global sustainability discourse. With the growing interest in these modes of communication for sustainable outcomes the researcher has focused his attention on community engagement in relation to water program sustainability. The study adopted a mixed research approach and collected data from participants through random sampling method using questionnaires administered by the help of enumerators and in-depth interview with key informants. A sample size of 100 was applied and data was analyzed and presented using statistical tools and the findings and recommendations documented. The findings demonstrate that out of the three main modes oral mode had a major influence in sustainability of water projects. The result revealed a mean of 2.52 and a large standard deviation of 3.27. This suggested that the responses were quite spread apart. Interpretively, the effectiveness of the oral mode of communication, which featured as the most popular means of communication in the study area, was neither as good nor as bad- with the possibility that the oral mode of communication may have been very effective or not as effective. The study therefore recommends that Implementers of water projects needs to clearly understanding that effective communication with communities is far removed from just passing out information at mass community meetings which brings together women, men, children, educated and the uneducated alike. It involves having the skill set to articulate complex ideas to the various groupings by contextualizing the issues in a simplified and appropriate way, such that the messages being conveyed are adequately understood by all, especially individuals with modest levels of education.

*Key Words: Communication Modes, Sustainability, Project Management

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Introduction

Communication, whether in organizations, personal relationships, politics or public information campaigns, is one of the most complex and strategic activities of human beings. It may have limited effectiveness for two interacting reasons. The first obstacle to effectiveness is the lack of congruence between the sender (source, persuader, speaker) and the receiver (recipient, addressee, listener). As many contributions have emphasized, the latter is unlikely to trust the former's statement or recommendation if their interests diverge. Countries and communities alike, including indigenous peoples, international institutions, national, state and local governments, academic institutions, business and civil society organizations from across the world, took part in the International Conference on Engaging Communities, held in Brisbane, Australia, from 15th to 17th August, 2005. The conference affirmed that community engagement plays a pivotal role to effective, transparent and accountable governance in the public, community and private sectors. The Brisbane conference further recognized that community engagement is a two-way process which involved on the one hand, ensuring that the aspirations, concerns, needs and values of citizens and communities are incorporated at all levels and in all sectors in policy development, planning, decision-making, service delivery and assessment. While on the other, it sought to play the role of advocacy whereby governments and other business and civil society organizations involved citizens, clients, communities and other stakeholders in these processes. This is to be done with the view that effective engagement generates better decisions, delivering sustainable economic outcomes, sustainable use of the environment as well as related social and cultural benefits (Brisbane Declaration, 2005). A human development report of 1993 by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) underscored that "People's participation is becoming the central issue of our time". This therefore goes to point out that for a society to ensure that the benefits of community engagement projects are impactful, there is need to embrace social inclusion.

The study focused solely on how modes of communication influence project sustainability, It is the view of the researcher that perhaps there is need for a study which aims at analyzing community engagement within the context of water program sustainability. This with a specific focus on the communication, infrastructure, the role of the community and program proponents and/or implementers. This may go a long way in providing solutions to this societal issue which continues to negatively impact the quality of life of the locals in the study hindering any progress in achieving Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) number six, which is premised upon the provision of clean water and sanitation.

The central question that guided the study was,does communication influence the sustainability of water programs in Kitui Rural Sub-County?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study was guided by the theory of sustainability. According to (Paul, 2008), the history of the sustainable development theory can be traced from more than two hundred years ago when questions were raised regarding the impact of the evolution of our civilization on the resources of our planet and the environment. Thomas Robert Malthus in 1978 predicted that the world's population would, at some point, out pace its capacity to produce food simply because production levels could not keep up with the increasing population. Malthus wrote that "population, when unchecked, increased in a geometrical ratio with subsistence for man in an arithmetical ratio (Rogers, 2008, p. 20)". His argument was however been disproved with the advancement in technology.

According to Jenkins (2008), the term sustainability in the literal sense of the word refers to the capacity to maintain something, an outcome or a process over time. The argument put forward by the scholar suggests that in its contemporary use, sustainability is defined in terms of environmental considerations and its impact on healthy economic, ecological and social systems. The theory of sustainability seeks to bring into harmony our desire to meet our current needs on the one hand and the consideration for future needs on the other.

It can be subdivided into which include economic, ecological, political and/or social models. The economic model is concerned with fostering natural and financial capital while the ecological model looks at issues pertaining to biodiversity. The political model takes into account the social systems necessary for the realization of human dignity - Willy (2008). It is important to note, that religion is also converging on the issue and is becoming a critical part of the debate - by illuminating change by linking respect for the environment and respect for its inhabitants. The all-encompassing nature of the concept of sustainability which brings into focus society's economic, political and ecological dependency into moral consciousness reinforces this point.

The term, in the writing of the scholar, can be used to proffer arguments in favor of and against climate change, social spending and environmental protection. Hence, "finding a standard

definition seems elusive". The scholar remarked that in view of this contention, critics tend to rebuff the concept of sustainability as vague, conceptually meaningless, and prone to several interpretations to be of value, Jenkins (2008).

Paul (2008), in his literature review on the history of sustainability claimed that, "some critics argue that the Brundtland Commission Report's discussion of sustainability is both optimistic and vague." Paul (2008) noted that " Others are even more critical: "Mrs. Brundtland provided a slogan behind which first world politicians with green electorates to appease, and third world politicians with economic deprivation to tackle, could unite. The formula was of course vague, but the details could be left for later (Benton, 1994)" (p. 129). However, it is clear that discussions around sustainable development was necessary and needed to be initiated. The all-inclusiveness of the sustainability theory couple with its capacity to maintain outcomes and processes over time fully anchors this study.

Influence of Modes of Communication on water project Sustainability

Panos London (2007), on the case of communication in sustainable development, contends that effective communication in program communication is hindered by the situation of simply vocalizing what needs to be done verses achieving the same which can be an uphill task to accomplish. He noted that for leaders to ensure the establishment of the rule of law and sound responsive political systems, the governing process must not only improve sustainable and equitable economic growth, but must also become a hallmark. The civil society must be allowed to operate in a supported environment.

Although this writer highlighted the significance of not simply stating but actually doing what is required to ensure effective communication in programs, he did not explain how effective communication influences programs in a devolved system like Kitui County. This study will examine the role of effective communication in program sustainability.

In Malaysia, a study conducted by Lee and Chuan (2012) on communicating environmental sustainability revealed that, employees of a certain company demonstrated increased awareness on environmental sustainability issues and cited email as their preferred channel for receiving information about environmental sustainability. This was due to its convenience, environmental-friendliness and ease of access. However, the context in which the above study was carried out is

far removed from the proposed study area which is not versed in technology and therefore a communication as well as a technological lacuna.

A study by Owusu (2014) on the role of communication in sustaining development projects: The Case of EjuraSekyedumase Municipality in Ghana revealed that "the absence of participatory communication in some of the projects did not help implementers understand the challenges the community goes through in maintaining such developmental projects thus come together to find solutions to them." The researchers were therefore of a very strong opinion, that the argument advanced in the writings of Mefalopolus, (2004) as cited by Owusu (2014) that, by ensuring communities and implementers have a common understanding of set goals and objectives while at the same time building trust amongst each other, communication can become an important channel in ensuring community participation and entrenching tenets of program sustenance and durability. Although the setting of this research finding is different from the proposed study area, the position of the author on participatory communication in the Ghanaian context brings to light ways in which communication can lead to program sustainability. The current study sought to bring out details of the relationship between communication and program sustainability in Kitui Rural Sub-County, Kenya.

Benita (2014) on the impact of communication skills on sustainable and green project management in South Africa, using a Likert scale, ranked the skill of leadership first above all else and that a project manager must have to enhance and ensure communication. The research ranked decision-making and problem solving skills set second with listening and motivation third. Communication and reflecting was ranked fairly important.

Although respondents in this study viewed leadership as the most important, it is also worth noting that project managers need to be leaders, who are able to communicate effectively for the success of a given initiative. Additionally, the above study, reported a response rate of 32% which is less than adequate for a social science research as recommended by Mugenda and Mugenda (2003). The co-authors (Mugenda&Mugenda, 2003) were of the opinion that a response rate of fifty, sixty and seventy and over were adequate, good and very good respectively.

USAID (2014) exposed that in spite of efforts made by both the public and private sectors in Liberia to improve its telecommunication infrastructure. Communication remains a challenge in

terms of capacity and spread. The report highlighted that with just about 25 kilometers of fiber optic cabling for high speed internet, compounded by the influx of technology-enabled emergency responders into the country, the system may not be able to cope. Relief operations are fraught by discontinuous network coverage, late delivery of text messages as well as interruptions in the movement of cash via mobile platforms. The case presented by the author is analogous, in more ways than one, to the study area which has limited fiber penetration in place and interrupted network coverage due to topographical impediments.

In the Ugandan context, information and communication technology awareness and connectivity turbulence remains a challenge. The absence of governments' commitment across Africa coupled with honest political will to address such limitations, which could reverse this appalling trend, continues to impede development and the achievement of major goals on the continent.(Okaka, 2008). Although the researcher's work is tilted entirely towards environmental policy awareness and environmental related projects, the difficulties highlighted are comparable to Kitui. This current study will examine different types of projects and will not be limited to environmental related project. It will also cover the subsequent contribution of communication in ensuring the sustainability of development programs.

Mlage (2014) in her unpublished work on sustainability of donor-funded community development projects in Tanzania: case of farmer group investment sub-project in Morogoro district, found out that, more that 50% of her respondents agree on the need for projects to have development indicators to measure success. From the study, however, it is not clear what indicators were in place for those specific projects.

Augustino (2015) on Factors influencing project sustainability: A case of saint Franciscan sisters program in Otiende sub-county in Nairobi argues that communication is a major requirement for successful community development project and that "sound decision making is based on availability of relevant information (PMBOK, 2008)". The researcher indicates that it is important to ensure that communities targeted for development initiatives are well informed to enable them make sound judgment regarding participation and sustainability of outcomes. The research also conveyed the notion that effective communication contributes to success which may range from improved focus on the goal, high productivity, continuous learning and ownership to sustainability of the product or service (PMBOK, 2008).In this study, though there

are many issues dealing with information dissemination, the researcher will focus on establishing the nexus between communication and program sustainability in Kitui County.

It is from the gaps highlighted that the researcher will seek to collect data about communication of program sustainability and how this informs and fills the existing gaps from the empirical literature reviewed.
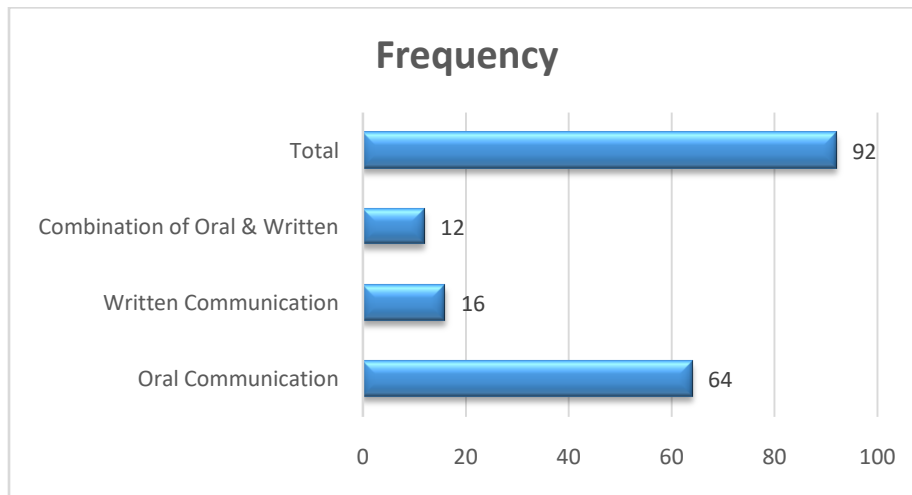
RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a mixed-methods research approach, which was selected because of its capacity to provide answers to the research questions by collecting and analyzing qualitative and quantitative sets of research data. The qualitative data was chosen to support the positions or findings that arose from the quantitative data collected. This serves not only to validate the reliability of the research findings collected from the various categories of participants, but to also deepen and widen the study's interpretations and understanding of the phenomenon. This according to Olsen (2004) is referred to as data triangulation.

A cross-sectional survey research design was used to gather quantitative data. The choice of this design was based on the fact that the research was limited to a set time scope as well as the need to cover a vast geographical scope in a transect manner. This research design in lieu of the dynamics under which the study was carried out is justified by Kumar (2011).

FINDINGS

The study took interest in analyzing the role of effective communication on water program sustainability in a devolved system like Kitui Rural Sub County. The participants in the various categories were asked to give their views on the above. From the findings of the study, it was observed that a cumulative total of ninety-eight respondents gave feedback. These were broken down specifically into two. These were ninety-two community members and six key informants who were interviewed in order to zero in on the critical issues at stake. A synopsis of the results obtained regarding the various mode of communication used by communities in their interactions with implementers of water-related programs and projects are presented below in Figure below:

Mode of Communication

Frequency

Total	92
Combination of Oral & Written	12
Written Communication	16
Oral Communication	64

Source: Field data (2018)

The data presented in the figure 4.3 above provides a vivid picture of the responses of respondents relative to the various modes of communication used during their interaction with implementers of water programs and projects in the study area. It was clear for all to see that a good majority of community members, sixty-four out of ninety-two respondents (sixty nine per cent), were of the view that face-to-face communication was the most frequently used and preferred mode of communication employed during the community members' interactive session with implementers. This is a result that largely tallies with the opinion that was captured during an in-depth interview with one of the key informants, and is presented below.

> *"....implementing agencies of water projects particularly NGOs working in our area usually hold community meetings during implementation. However, such meetings are mostly held in Swahili*

which creates a barrier in communication and space for the views of a few to be heard."

Source: Key Informant Two

This overwhelming use of the oral form of communication for interaction as illustrated above can possibly be attributed to the modest literacy levels of beneficiaries in the study area as well as the ease with which oral massages can be transmitted from sender to receiver. Another important reason which has an implication on cost, since most organizations are very concerned with how money is spent for a particular initiative, could be attributed to the common perception that oral communication is much more economical since no paper, ink, postage fees and/or courier services are required. It is also worth noting that Kiswahili was the most preferred language during the oral communication based on the fact that in as much as the community members were predominantly Kamba, and thus familiar with the Kamba language, there were employees of the various implementing organizations (governmental and non-governmental) who were not from the locality. The study noted that government employees were mainly from various parts of Kenya while the non-governmental organizations had a significant presence of staff drawn from beyond Kenya.

On the other hand, sixteen out of ninety two respondents provided were of the contrary opinion in terms of the feedback they gave about the most commonly used mode of communication. They were of the stance that implementers of water projects frequently used the written mode of communication. Their points of view were seen to sharply contradict those of the majority. This may have been due to the fact that these were educated individuals who could thus read and write and may have come across a number of formal communications from implementers of water projects to their community members. The smallest category was that of twelve out of ninety two respondents, who selected a combination of oral and written communication as the most frequent form used for their interactions. According to the study, such individuals may have been the ones in authority and/or closer to power who were in charge of drafting some of those communication at one point as well as interpreting the contents of such communication received from implementers of water projects to their less literate community members at another.

To examine further the effectiveness of oral communication as depicted, this study utilized measures of central tendency, most specifically the standard deviation, to determine the extent to

which the data set deviated from the mean/average. Standard deviation as a statistical operation can be used to measure how spread a set of data is from the mean. A low standard deviation tells us that the data is closely clustered around the mean/average while a high standard deviation denotes that the data are dispersed over a wide range of values. Therefore, the findings of theeffectiveness of oral communication using standard deviation as a means of analysis are presented in Table 4.3 overleaf.

Effectiveness of Oral Communication

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Effectiveness	92	1	33	2.5217	3.2732

Source: Field data (2018)

The analysis sought to measure the extent of the effectiveness of oral communication using comparative and superlative adjectives such as not effective, effective, very effective and extremely effective. These adjectives were assigned numbers ranging from one to four with one meaning not effective, two meaning effective, three meaning very effective and four meaning extremely effective. The result revealed a mean of 2.52 and a large standard deviation of 3.27. This suggested that the responses were quite spread apart. Interpretively, the effectiveness of the oral mode of communication, which featured as the most popular means of communication in the study area, was neither as good nor as bad- with the possibility that the oral mode of communication may have been very effective or not as effective. This outcome is in accordance with the argument put forward by Owusu (2014) as outlined in the literature review of chapter two. The scholar noted that the lack of participatory communication leaves program implementer's limited in-terms understanding the key challenges community members faced in sustaining well-intentioned development projects intended to improve their socio-economic status.

This fact clearly lends itself to the popular "Baraza" culture across Sub-Sahara Africa which is used as a medium in passing oral communication to local community dwellers. However, despite its widespread use, it can be susceptible to domination by a few influential voices, whose opinions are often taken into account at the expense of the "Common Mwananchi". The above-

mentioned position agrees with the point put forward by London (2007) as outlined in the literature review where it is argued that effective communication in programs is hindered by the simplistic notion of merely vocalizing what needs to be done verses accomplishing the same, which can be an uphill task. This stance is further supported by a verbatim quote drawn from one of the respondents who took part in the study and noted that:

> *"....implementers, particularly NGOs working in the area have little understanding of the indigenous Kamba vernacular. Hence, most of their interactions with the communities is in Swahili which is not widely spoken and properly understood in every context by the majority of the people who prefer to communicate in their native dialect."*

Source: Key Interviewee Two

It is also key to note that some of the members of staff working with the non-governmental organizations in the water implementation projects pointed out that Kamba, as a language, was not only hard to speak and follow, but it was also difficult to learn as well. On the flip side, the locals, especially the senior citizens as well as those with modest backgrounds in education mentioned that they found it difficult to follow discussions in Kiswahili as they were not well grounded in this language to the extent that they could hold debates.

The study therefore concludes and recommends that, in bringing out the substantive issues related to the influence of communication on water program sustainability, the study scrutinized how communities and program implementers of water projects interacted by examining the different modes of communication used in conveying important messages regarding such intervention. The findings showed that the standard deviation regarding the effectiveness of the popular form of communication (oral communication) in the study was too large (3.27). This clearly suggests that it was neither as good nor as bad. Hence, the study calls on practitioners (community development agents) and donor agencies to adopt structures that purpose to deliberately accommodate the opinions of the "common mwananchi" through embracing social inclusivity that will bring in the views of men, women and children alike. This will treat them as equal stakeholders, particularly during the planning and implementation stages of water related projects and programs.

The study also recommends the need for implementer of water projects to take conscious effort in allowing for a reasonable time during the identification and planning stages of the project cycle for effective interactions with communities to ensue. It is important that such interactions are characterized by listening and takes into account messages conveyed through body language and observation. Particularly of the ways in which community opinions are expressed in order to fully understand the depth of the community needs.

There is a need for practitioners (community development agents) to also recognize that effective communication is necessary for program sustainability. Communication which dose no lend itself to unnecessary misinterpretations due to communication barriers such as language, too much information, reaching early conclusions without listening (cultural noise) and so forth.

Implementers of water projects needs to clearly understanding that effective communication with communities is far removed from just passing out information at mass community meetings which brings together women, men, children, educated and the uneducated alike. It involves having the skill set to articulate complex ideas to the various groupings by contextualizing the issues in a simplified and appropriate way, such that the messages being conveyed are adequately understood by all, especially individuals with modest levels of education. Recognizing that in the process of communication, even individuals who speak the same local vernacular - which in the case of the study area is "Akamba" - may have difficulties in understanding each other owing to generational differences is key. This in combination with too much information which could lead to information overload, as well as making hasty conclusions without fully listening to all sides may undermine sustainability in the long term.

In terms of policy, the study calls on the County government of Kitui to ensure communities are continuously reminded of their right to participation, as inscribed in the Kenyan Constitution of 2010. This is in keeping with the obvious fact that there is a void between having the right to participate, as spelled out in the organic laws of the land and knowing as well as exercising that right. Therefore, it is also important for policy makers in the employ of the County government to recognize that most communities have for too long been used to seeing development practitioners as saviors, which is justified in many respects but also, as being beyond reproach which can be counterproductive.

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