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Some determinants of voluntary participation in community development programmes among Nigerians: a preliminary report

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Abstract

This is a joint report of two studies designed to investigate at different levels, some of those factors which affect voluntary participation in community development programmes among Nigerians. Data were obtained from a review of past works and from surveys carried out by the respective researchers among Nigerians abroad and at home. With the Nigerians living abroad, the main aim was to investigate their role perceptions in community development from a projective point of view while with those at home, the aim was to investigate the reasons for participation and non-participation in a concrete community development project.

Results of the studies confirm some earlier findings on the psychology of social participation, particularly that participants in formal organizations for social action of general benefit, tend to be people with relatively higher socio-economic standing. Level of education does not however seem to be very crucial in the Nigerian case. Other revelations include the effects of the community characteristics and the individual's level of identification with or socialization in his community of origin. Where the community is small and the population of formally educated persons is also small, individuals within this small crop of elites tend to exert their leadership in community development more than in larger communities with many educated persons. Similarly stranger elements and those native who had spent most of their lives outside their communities tend to be less interested in participating in community programmes.

Other conclusions of the study are that people will participate more readily in visible projects having potentially general benefits than in those projects whose benefits they cannot readily claim. Also the integrity of project initiators is important in inviting popular participation.

Introduction

Although the traditional essence of community development is the concept of self-help, a growing body of critiques on this concept and the broader definition and implications now given to the term 'community', have all combined to make a case for a re-visitation of the known traditions of community development. Among such known traditions is the notion of voluntary local participation or involvement in programmes of community change which is usually regarded as given. This notion cuts across approaches and definitions given to community development. In other words, whether community development is looked upon as a process, a method, a programme or a social movement, the voluntary participation of people is still an essential concern. Similarly, whether community development is approached from the locality development, social planning or social action point of view, voluntary participation is still a major ingredient.

The concept of community development in developing countries generally entails emphasis on participation, initiative and self-help by the local community. Group action is usually emphasized. However, in contemporary sense of the word, most geographical communities are no more self-sufficient units. The complexity which modern innovations entail makes community change the joint responsibility of various groups, networks and communities of interests. Moreover, the emphasis on 'initiative' and 'self-help' often gives the specious impression that many rural problems can be solved at the community level with community resources and with outside intervention being limited to education and technical aid (Stavenghagen, 1973). Erasmus (1968) has described such assumption as anachronistic while Ekong (1978a) arguing on the exploitive connotation of self-help in community development in Nigeria, has equally queried why 'urban administration in many communities in Nigeria has become a melting pot for *all levels* of government while rural communities have to "help themselves"?'.

Often too, the emphasis on the 'initiative of the people themselves' in community development presupposes an intrinsic lack of initiative for self-help as an original state in the community. The community development worker is therefore expected, among other things, to act as an energizer whipping up people's initiative for self-help. This assumption frequently fails to distinguish between cause and effect in the analysis of social problems (Manghezi,

1976). In other words, although there is no denying the existence of apathy and unreadiness to participate in development programmes among some elements in rural as well as urban communities, these might be mere symptoms of a more fundamental social malaise. As observed by Manghezi, often the negative role of existing social institutions and the community leadership in blocking the release of initiative from the community is either ignored or greatly underrated while the victims themselves are blamed.

Participation in community development programme is here defined to include playing an active, though not necessarily direct roles in community decisions, knowledge of local issues, attendance at public meetings related attempts to influence proposed measures through individual and group actions, and belonging to groups and committees (Presthus, 1964). To these indicators Chapin (1937) adds, financial contribution towards the community programme. Formal studies done in the United States of America on the psychology of social participation have shown some positive association between participation and certain measures of socio-economic status (SES). Wright and Hyman (1958) found that people of higher socio-economic status tend to belong to more formal associations than those of lower SES. Supporting this finding, Nelson *et. al.*, (1960) also found that those who attend meetings in large formal organizations have higher education, incomes, white collar jobs and higher level of living compared to non-participants. Wilson (1963) also found that even where persons of different SES participate in community programmes, the well-to-do and well educated participate on the basis of their perceived benefit of such programme to the entire community whereas the less well-to-do and less educated tend to relate such community actions to how these will benefit them personally. The question here is whether these observations in highly stratified and industrial society do apply in entirety to a developing society like Nigeria with largely diffused system of social placement.

Apart from defining participation in terms of social action as we have done above, participation may sometimes assume the form of feedback from the affected elements in the community with respect to the appropriateness of the services rendered or solutions applied to or planned for an existing problem. The question then arises as to when participation should take the form of collective social action, when it should take the form of feedback and when it should assume both forms? According to Ekong (1978b), this

depends very much upon the nature of the task at hand. By the nature of the task at hand is meant the extent to which the task is structured or unstructured. By this is further meant whether or not the goals and the means for their attainment are clearly defined and readily comprehended by most people involved. Where the task is completely structured (i.e. the problem is clearly recognized by those involved, the goals are clear and the means for meeting the goals are also clear), collective social action *may* be enhanced. However, the extent of individual participation even under clearly structured task, will still be highly mediated by the factor of ability. In other words, do the people have the skills, knowledge, resources or even the physical power to make meaningful contribution to the resolution of the problem? Generally, where the problem is such that the people have nothing to contribute directly to its solution, participation, if any, is limited to feedback. Ekong further observed that apart from the perceived benefit earlier on mentioned and the actual ability of the people to participate actively in community programmes, another crucial factor which is of much relevance in the Nigerian situation is the people's perception of their roles vis-a-vis the role of the leadership or government with respect to that particular social issue or problem. Where a social problem is perceived as arising out of negligence of responsibility on the part of the government, popular participation will tend to take the form of feedback (SOS and press criticisms). However, in cases where the problem involves structured task, but where its existence is as a result of negligence, involvement may assume both forms – feedback and social action – if there is dynamic leadership in the community itself. A good instance of this is where communities in Nigeria have provided basic social amenities for themselves when they realize that waiting for the government would mean frustration. The question here is under what conditions will people voluntarily participate in community programmes of change?

To provide some tentative answers to this question two separate studies were conducted among two categories of Nigerians. The first category was labelled 'potential elites' and consisted of 227 Nigerians studying in various universities and colleges across the United States of America in 1974 while the second category consisted of 92 respondents from a small town in south-western Nigeria in 1977. With the first group of subjects, the aim was to investigate their role perceptions in community development from purely projective or hypothetical point of view while with the second group the aim

was to investigate the reasons for actual participation and non-participation in a concrete community development project or role enactment. This report is therefore a preliminary theoretical summation of the findings on the determinants of voluntary participation in community development programmes with specific reference to Nigeria.

Methodology

Two studies were conducted to further elaborate on the factors affecting voluntary participation in community change activities in Nigeria.

In the first study conducted in 1974, 227 Nigerians studying in various institutions of higher learning in North America were interviewed to ascertain their role perceptions in the development of their home communities and the factors affecting such perceptions. Among the underlying assumptions of the study were:

- (a) that community development is a necessary strategy for improving the standard of living at the grassroot levels and enabling local people to participate fully in the progress of their country;
- (b) the extent to which this objective can be met depends very much upon the potential abilities of the local people to help themselves as well as the level of concern which persons in positions of authority at the national level have for the welfare of local people; and
- (c) the level of such concern is primarily a function of the personal characteristics and predispositions of those in such authority positions (Ekong, 1975).

Among the relevant variables to the subject of voluntary participation investigated in the study were:

- (a) The perception of the respondents of their own contribution to community development measured in terms of whether the respondent with his foreign education, perceives himself as a possible leader in the development of his home community, and the respondent's perception of a need to offer assistance and leadership in the development of his home community;
- (b) The respondent's readiness to assume responsibility and the kinds of roles he ascribes to himself in the development of his community. Such roles were further classified and described as either active and missionary: advisory and tutorial, or minimal and non-committal.

The role theory was here being used to determine anticipated participation mainly because contemporary role theory regards human conduct as the product of the interaction of 'self' and 'role'. In other words, overt participation in social activities involves the psychological positioning of self in relation to the perceived positions of others within that system. Following this theoretical postures, the major independent variables in the study were therefore 'self' oriented and included demographic factors (age, sex, marital status, etc.); structural factors (e.g. being a member of a ruling family or likelihood of becoming a traditional ruler, property ownership in the community, etc.); characteristics of the community of origin (i.e. type and size, population of educated persons, etc.) and community socialization factors (e.g. the number of years respondents have actually lived in their communities, past and anticipated involvement in CD programmes, preference for working near home town, etc.). Simple frequency count, chi-square and correlation statistics were used in the analysis of the data.

The second study was conducted in a small rural town (Ipetumodu) in Oyo State, south-western Nigeria in 1977. The main objective of the study relevant to this report was to investigate the personal characteristics of participants and non-participants in a concrete community development project and to investigate the reasons for non-participation. Ninety-two respondents were involved altogether. Fifty-five of these were active participants while the rest (37) were non-participants in the programme. The project in question was the building of a community post office. The idea for the project was initiated by 12 community leaders whose personal characteristics were specially studied.

The innovation in this case was a visible one which 98 percent of the respondents perceived as something that will benefit all sections of the community.

Participation in this project was however defined mainly in terms of attendance at meetings, contribution of labour and personal identification with the project rather than in terms of contribution of money. This set of definitional criteria were adopted because all taxable adults in the community were required to pay a compulsory levy of two naira (₦2.00) for the project. Some very interested and well-to-do persons donated larger sums of money over and above the general levy but those described as non-participants in this study were those who though having paid their levy, identified themselves no further with the project. Participant observation and

a set of interview guides were used in collecting the data. Simple frequency count and chi square statistics were employed in data analysis.

Results

Nearly all the respondents in the first study (96%) thought that their home communities require development. Similarly, a large proportion (71%) thought that their assistance and or leadership will be required in bringing about such development. However, in defining their specific roles in the process, 45% ascribed active and missionary roles to themselves; 31% saw their roles as merely advisory while 17% saw their roles as very minimal and non-committal. (Table 1)

TABLE 1 – RESPONDENTS' ROLE DEFINITION IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT.

| <i>Response category</i> | <i>Frequency</i> | <i>Percentage</i> |
|---------------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| Active and missionary | 102 | 44.9 |
| Advisory and tutorial | 70 | 30.8 |
| Minimal and non-committal | 39 | 17.2 |
| No response | 16 | 7.1 |
| N = 227 | | |

No significant relationships were found between personal factors like age, sex and marital status of respondents and their active role definition in community development. However, previous involvement in community development programmes and membership in improvement unions were highly related to, and affected by duration of residence within one's home community and previous work history. Those who had resided in their home community for long periods and who had held some employments as opposed to those who had been students all along, appeared to have held membership in community improvement unions and participated in community improvement activities χ^2 significant at .001). Such respondents tended to perceive themselves more as participants and leaders in the

development of their home communities χ^2 significant at .01). They also tended to define their roles as active and missionary in the process ($r = .31$).

The size of the community of origin and the number of highly educated individuals within such communities also affected the respondents' perception and definition of their roles in the development of their home communities. Those respondents from small communities with relatively fewer university graduates tended more than others, to perceive themselves as leaders in the development of their home communities ($r = .21$).

Data from the second project study showed that the project initiators were generally old people with age ranging on the average between 50 and 70 years. Their level of education was found to be generally low, with less than half (42%) going beyond the teachers' grade II certificate level. They were either full time farmers or private businessmen by occupation with incomes ranging from one thousand naira (N1,000) to six thousand naira (N6,000) per annum. Thus by the community's standards, they were relatively well-to-do. Like the project initiators, a majority of the other participants in the programme were males (19%) while a greater part of the non-participants (56%) were females. The participants were generally older than the non-participants with the modal age being 50 and 35 for the respective groups.

While a greater proportion of the non-participants were farmers and petty traders (64.9%), the most common occupations among the participants were farming (42%), private business (27%) and civil service jobs (26%). Over 81 per cent of the non-participants earned incomes below one thousand naira (N1,000) per annum while the incomes of the participants were much higher (modal range, N3,001-6,000).

Thirty percent of the non-participants were non-natives of the community while a majority of the participants (63%) were natives. Further analysis revealed that 39% of the non-participants have spent less than 20 years in the community while only 9% of the participants had spent less than that number of years in the community. Participants were also found to belong to more formal organizations in the community than non-participants but a large number of both participants and non-participants claimed to have travelled out of the community to larger towns on several occasions.

A majority of the non-participants (57%) saw the levy they had to

pay as a great burden while the participants generally described it as a worthy sacrifice. Similarly, while 73% of the participants attended meetings regularly on behalf of the project, 90% of the non-participants did not attend any meeting at all. A summary of the chi-square analysis showing levels of relationship between these variables and participation in the project is shown in Table 2.

When the non-participants were asked why they did not participate in the project beyond payment of levy, 24% pleaded inability; 14% said they were strangers; 11% said they had no faith in the project initiators. The women said they were disqualified on the basis of their sex and that they regarded the project as men's project. A few non-participants said that they had some dispute over the method of land acquisition for the project and so refused to take part.

TABLE 2 — SUMMARY OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN IPETUMODU PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION IN CD PROJECT AND SOME OF THEIR CHARACTERISTICS.

| <i>Factors</i> | χ^2 | <i>Degree of freedom</i> | <i>Level of significance</i> |
|-------------------------|----------|--------------------------|------------------------------|
| Sex [i.e. being male] | 26.26 | 1 | 0.001 |
| Age | 11.07 | 3 | 0.05 |
| Level of education | 5.94 | 4 | NS |
| Income | 10.14 | 3 | 0.05 |
| Being a native | 8.30 | 1 | 0.01 |
| Length of residence | 11.02 | 2 | 0.01 |
| Organization membership | 8.32 | 1 | 0.01 |
| Cosmopolitaness | 0.32 | 1 | NS |

Conclusions and implications for community development

The findings in these two studies confirm some earlier findings on the psychology of social participation, particularly the fact that participants in formal organizations for social action of general benefit tend to be people with relatively higher socio-economic standing. Level of education, however, does not seem to be a very crucial factor in the Nigerian case. The additional revelations of these studies which have hitherto not been taken seriously

by other researchers, are the effects of community characteristics and socialization factors on the individual's inclination to actively participate in community programmes. The first study earlier reported showed that the larger the community and the greater the number of highly educated individuals within it, the less an individual will tend to project his leadership or participate actively in community programmes. It was however found that those who had lived in their home communities for longer periods tend to identify more with their community by being members of community improvement unions. These observations are important. The former observation in a sense, goes to buttress Mancur Olson's (1971) *Logic of Collective Action* which argues that the larger the group, the smaller the fraction of the total group benefit (material or non-material) any person acting in the group interest receives and hence the smaller the incentive to work towards the collective good. Olson therefore suggests that coercion and/or positive incentives are therefore inevitable for the sustenance of any group working for collective good. For community development in Nigeria, this finding implies that in larger communities with equally larger number of highly educated persons, strong voluntary formal organizations acting like 'coercive forces' are invaluable in securing active and committed involvement of the intellectual elites in the development of such communities.

The role of traditional authority in small communities as revealed in the second study is another factor which must not be underrated. It was found here that where people pay undue reverence to traditional authority, the younger educated elements may withdraw their interest in participating in community development programmes.

Similarly, the finding on community socialization (i.e. factors like being a native, living in the community for long periods, belonging to formal organizations within the community, etc.) goes to confirm imoagene's (1967) hypothesis that there is a positive correlation between rural identification and participation in traditional life. In other words, those who identify more with socio-cultural life of the community also tend to participate more in it and vice versa. The implication here for community development in Nigeria is that change agents must realize the fact that stranger elements within a community require additional incentive or persuasion to participate fully in programmes of change in their host communities. Hence this extra effort must be made in order to bring them in. In general,

community change must be carried out within the framework of community organization in order to enlist the commitment and active participation of all sections of the community.

Other conclusions derivable from the findings of these two studies, include the fact that:

- (a) people will tend to participate more actively in community development projects which are visible and whose usefulness could be easily seen and claimed by most people in the community;
- (b) participation is enhanced when the project initiators and legitimizers are people of unquestionable integrity; and
- (c) forced participation (e.g. imposition of levy or forced acquisition of land) might enhance resource mobilization for the execution of community programmes in the short run, but may engender disaffection - the magnitude of which could hinder the smooth execution of community programmes in the long run.

With regards to women participation, it has already been found that women tend to be more active in church-related organizations than men and less active in non-church related organizations (Nelson, et. al., 1960). To ensure the active participation of women in community programmes therefore, church organizations must be specially involved in the planning and execution of community programmes.

Finally, the research implications of the study include the fact that in the study of factors affecting participation, researchers must take into consideration:

- (a) the nature, contents and characteristics of the innovation that people were required to participate in instituting (i.e. whether it was physically visible to all concerned and whether the potential benefits of such programme was such as to accrue to a greater portion of those who were expected to be involved);
- (b) the characteristics of the community itself - its geographical size, authority structure, population composition and nature of its linkages within its various parts and external social system; and
- (c) the characteristics of the project initiators and other participants or interested bodies.

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