Facilitating Participatory Approach to Resolving Problems Facing Nigeria’s Rural Families

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Abstract

The aim of this paper was to propel the facilitation of participatory approach to resolving problems facing Nigeria’s rural families. The paper describes participatory approach as an equal opportunity strategy that enables the marginalized poor citizens who have been excluded from community development projects and/or programs’ planning and implementation processes to be fully included so that they can decide their own future. This approach is based on the belief that everybody in a community has knowledge and ideas to contribute meaningfully to the solutions of shared problems. Four pertinent review questions were raised and answered regarding the use of participatory approach. The paper also made reference to specific cases that had turned the corner since participatory communication hit the scholarly scene decades ago. Through the pertinent questions, the prevalent problems (including poverty, indoor air pollution, HIV/AIDS, shelter and settlement risks) facing families in Nigeria’s rural communities were addressed in this paper. The various ways participatory approach can be applied, the hindrances to its application, and ways of enhancing its application were also addressed. The authors stressed that whereas, it seem all too easy to say things did not work out in rural Nigeria—or to state that rural families in Nigeria are still wallowing in abject difficulties, it is about time for all to begin to sing the praises of successes while highlighting their instructiveness to failed “experiments”. Based on the review of related literatures, the authors concluded that participatory approach should be utilized by the government, non-governmental organizations and project firms in order to promote sustainable livelihood among families in Nigeria’s rural communities.

Keywords: Development projects; rural families; Nigeria; participatory approach.
Introduction
Participatory approach has been an effective way out of a myriad of problems facing rural communities in different parts of the world. It is through the application of participatory approach that all stakeholders are able to participate meaningfully in resolving problem situations effectively by making maps and diagrams, by analysis of the situations and, by coming out with plans of action meant for changing such situations[1]. Over the years, this approach became more important as many low-income individuals and groups felt that they have no voice in the society and that they are not listened to, even when they are asked for their opinions. Such feelings of dissatisfaction further led to the call for true participation. True participation means that everyone’s voice must be acknowledged and is seen as one in which everyone’s perspective is considered [2]. Arnstein as cited by Govender [3] described participatory approach in terms of the degree to which people are involved in the projects and programs that affect their lives. Arnstein stated that what is more important is the empowerment of the less privileged citizens.

Deducing from Freire [4] participatory approach should be seen as approach that respects the right of all people to individually and collectively speak their word. It is very vital in any decision-making process for community development. In this article, participatory approach is considered as an equal opportunity strategy that enables the marginalized poor citizens who have been excluded from community development projects and/or programs’ planning and implementation processes to be fully included so that they can decide their own future. It is an inclusionary approach wherein the project beneficiaries are involved in the implementation of the community development projects brought by the government or aid agencies.

Participatory approach is based on the belief that everybody in a community has knowledge and ideas to contribute meaningfully to the solutions of shared problems. The underlying assumption is that solutions to most problems could be found by people working together effectively. Thus, participatory approach focuses on activities that uses different forms of communication such as images, stories and objects to encourage all the members of a group to join in the analysis of problem situations and encourages creative thinking on a subject of common concern [5]. Such activities require a facilitator or facilitators, whose role will be to introduce the activity to the group and help create the conditions for an active and productive exchange between the group members. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies [5] further stated a number of advantages in using participatory approach. According to them, it enables everybody involved to contribute equally to the analysis and planning of project, notwithstanding their age, sex, social class or level of education. It also build self-confidence, respect for other members of the group and a sense of individual and collective responsibility for decisions. It enables individuals to develop understanding and respect for local capacities and knowledge. Participatory approach also help to spread appropriate innovations, serves as fun and rewarding system for the facilitators and, creates a new and positive relationship with community members.

Participatory approach is a process through which people influence and share control over planning and decision-making regarding development issues. As such, when
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considering and providing opportunities for people to participate in development programs, it is important to acknowledge them as active and competent [3]. The individuals’ right to communicate their ideas should also be at the center of participatory approach in order to bring about community empowerment. The participatory approach should use creativity and ownership as tools for creating a sense of pride in the community through their full involvement in the community’s problem-recognition and problem-solving. Willems[6] observed that when looking closer at the roots of the concept of participatory approach as well as the way it is being used in West African socio-cultural context, unexpected findings may turn up. Willems further said that despite formal structures designed to guarantee the free participation of all individuals in decision-making processes, whether at the national or local level, West-African cultural logic appears to prescribe men and women to comply with the existing unequal power relations of their communities. For this reason, the application of participatory approach developed to ensure the empowerment of marginalized groups may lead to results quite different from those initially intended.

There are several studies [7-12] that have identified participatory approach as effective strategy for successfully resolving the problems confronting rural communities. These studies revealed how countries such as Brazil, Kenya, Uganda, China, Philippines and India, have had success stories of community development projects due to their active involvement of the project beneficiaries throughout the course of the projects. And just like other development-conscious nations, Nigeria has never been left behind in the use of participatory approach to resolving the problems of her citizens. Although, Ajaiya [13] observed that the story of community development projects is quite different in Nigeria since a number of projects and programs such as Better Life Program, Family Support Program, Family Economic Advancement Program, Integrated Rural Development Programs, Directorate for Food Road and Rural Infrastructure, Mass Transit Program and, National Directorate of Employment Program amongst others, failed in uplifting the living standards of the people despite huge financial resources set aside for their implementation. As Ajaiya further observed, one of the key reasons behind the failure of these programs is the non-involvement of the project beneficiaries in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the programs and/or projects. In fact, it has been widely acknowledged that past rural development strategies have failed to raise living standards significantly, especially in African rural communities [14].

Contrary to the above assertions, we wish to stress that there are several positive ways in which these projects and programs such as Better Life Program, Family Support Program, Family Economic Advancement Program, Integrated Rural Development Programs, Directorate for Food Road and Rural Infrastructure, Mass Transit Program and, National Directorate of Employment Program touched the life of Nigerians, especially in terms of sustainable livelihood, improved health conditions, economic empowerment, gainful employment, good road networks, surplus food, reduced mortality rate among others. Thus while it seem all too easy to say things did not work out in rural Nigeria—or to state that rural families in Nigeria are still wallowing in abject difficulties, it is about time for all to begin to sing the praises of successes
while highlighting their instructiveness to failed “experiments”. No doubt, the federal and state governments and international agencies are still scaling up efforts to promote sustainable livelihood among the people, even though they may be somewhat faced with difficulties of reaching some poor and rural families. Our major concern here lies in the fact that it may be possible that majority of the families residing in rural communities in Nigeria still suffers from lack of financial resources, unemployment, poor housing, poor healthcare services, dearth of electricity, and poor road networks among others. Some of these conditions in which these families actually find themselves could mean that the traditional development programs and policies which seem to be effective in helping them may not always work [6]. These factors, therefore can pose a big challenge to the government, program specialists and non-governmental organizations while designing and implementing poverty alleviation programs.

To these end, as a poverty alleviation mechanism, participatory approach may be use as a necessary component of effective and sustainable livelihood program for raising the living standards of people by alleviating poverty among them. Poverty alleviation refers to substantive reduction of any of the negative effects of poverty [15]. Participatory approach as a poverty alleviation strategy aims at removing social and legal barriers to income growth among the poor. It is a principle that encourages equal opportunity in planning and implementation of projects and programs by beneficiaries [7]. The participatory approach enhances project effectiveness using families’ input to help identify needs and local constraints. It increases project target by reducing linkages to elites and allow for local resource mobilization which plays a very important role in facilitating local commitment to program goals. The participatory approach is capable of increasing people’s involvement so as to reduce financial and administrative pressures on government since local resources mobilization and human resources development components are involved. It further contributes to programs’ financial and institutional sustainability [7]. All these exposition provides the rationale for the present review undertaken.

**Review Questions**

The following review questions were raised to guide the researchers as follows:

1. What are some of the situations and problems of Nigeria’s rural families that need participatory approach?
2. What participatory approaches can be applied in Nigeria’s rural communities?
3. What could hinder the effective application of participatory approach in rural Nigeria?
4. How could participatory approach be effectively implemented in Nigeria’s rural families?

**Research Method**

This is a conscious-raising paper in which pertinent questions were raised to address certain issues relating to Nigeria’s rural life situation and way forward using the
participatory approach. The authors searched through Google scholar, Wiley, Sage and Scopus databases for peer-reviewed articles on the issues being considered.

Results
What are some of the situations and problems of Nigeria’s rural families that need participatory approach?
From the numerous problems that may be facing the Nigeria’s rural families, we have identified the following major issues that appear to be commonplace among the rural populace.

Poverty
There are numerous unhealthy conditions being faced by rural areas in different parts of the world. They heavily affect families living in those rural communities. Poverty is one of such prevalent problems facing rural communities in different parts of the world. Many families in these areas, due to poverty cannot afford good housing conditions and good lightnig and many of them live in poor sanitary conditions. This lack of economic power also limits the possibility of access to good nutrition and access to quality healthcare. It also result to inability of parents to pay their children’s school fees on time and, even buying the necessary educational materials for their children is a big problem. Ladimi [16] pointed out that the poor situation of rural communities in developing countries like Nigeria is currently alarming and has reached a crisis dimension.

Indoor air pollution
Today, rural communities are also faced with the problem of indoor air pollution. Majority of the families, especially those from developing countries are facing indoor air pollution unavoidably due to the prevalent traditional cooking practices [1]. Village Education Resource Center [1] further pointed out that since women are mostly responsible for cooking, they are affected most and, therefore are more vulnerable to induced-respiratory diseases such as sinusitis. According to them, indoor air pollution is mainly caused by domestic cooking using traditional stoves fed with biomass fuels, fire wood, charcoal, dry twigs and leaves, plant residues, paddy husk and bran, jute sticks and animal dung.

HIV and AIDS pandemic
HIV and AIDS pandemic is also a serious challenge facing all people, and thus families in rural communities are not exempted. Given the slow progression of HIV and AIDS, many families exhaust their entire savings long before the death of the person with AIDS. In rural communities, the HIV and AIDS perception among the young girls is often related to cultural beliefs [17]. Chitomfwa [17] also stressed that these young girls, for instance, marries at the early age to mostly men of their parents’ choice with a belief that they will grow prosperous and bring wealth to the village. Furthermore, people in rural communities also believe that if a man marries a young girl, his sexual ability is enhanced and his life span will be potentially extended. The
use of sexual stimulants is also more common among young girls in these areas because they get a lot of counsel on sexual activities from elders who brain-washes them that women are meant to be used as sex objects and, that girls should not starve their men sexually. At the onset of puberty, the young girl in the rural areas often has no control over her sexual activities and there are no negotiations for safer sex.

**Shelter and settlement risks and vulnerabilities**
In rural communities around the world (including Nigeria’s), shelter and settlement risks and vulnerabilities are also on the increase due to changes in disaster trends, impact of climate change, as well as growing social and economic marginalization [5]. Despite these challenges, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies [5] also observed that institutional resources to support safe and adequate housing for all, including rural communities are declining because of global financial constraints, the move towards smaller, less interventionist government and, the scale of the challenges faced. Rural communities that were previously able to safeguard their lives and assets using their own resources and technical know-how are increasingly finding that the type, scale and frequency of the hazards they are now being exposed to often pose a severe threat to their safety and well-being. These problems and other issues like poor access to clean water, lack of feeder roads and limited knowledge of alternative source of energy among others are some of the problems facing many rural families in Nigeria. These problems are such that it would require group-oriented effort to resolve them. It is obvious that participatory approach could assure such group-oriented effort and opportunity for resolving problems being faced by rural communities.

**What participatory approaches can be applied in Nigeria’s rural communities?**
The answer to the question of what participatory approaches could be applied to resolving most of the problems confronting Nigeria’s rural families are discussed under the following approaches.

**Rapid rural appraisal approach**
Participatory approach have since been developed and put into use in different parts of the world. One of such ways has been through the rapid rural appraisal. The rapid rural appraisal is a term describing participatory approach quickly undertaken to evaluate and meet the immediate needs of rural communities by actively involving them in the problem-recognition and problem-solving. The rapid rural appraisal later evolved into participatory rural appraisal, but is equally and effectively applicable in both urban and rural communities. Although it was during the 1980s, that the term ‘participatory’ came to be associated with it. Subsequently, instead of participatory rural appraisal, some researchers also started using the term ‘participatory learning and action [13]. The participatory rural appraisal is a growing family of approaches and methods to enable local people to share, enhance and analyze their knowledge of life and conditions, to plan and to act [18].
At the international conference held at the University of Khon Kaen, Thailand a model for rapid rural appraisal was further developed. The participatory rapid rural
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apaappraisal was one of the packages that emerged from it [19, 13]. The participatory rural appraisal was then carried out in 1988 at Kenya and India respectively. The National Environment Secretariat collaborated with Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts to conduct the participatory rapid rural appraisal which led to the development of a village resource management plan in Kenya [20]. At India, the Aga Khan Rural-5 support program with support from London’s International Institute for Environment and Development also carried out the participatory rapid rural appraisal in two of its villages. These yielded significant inputs in the overall development of the participatory approach [21]. The participatory rural appraisal has also been promoted by the World Bank, mainly in African countries in order to influence development policies which affect the poor. A significant strategic attempt to use participatory rapid rural appraisal in Bangladesh has also been made by the United Nations Development Project [13]. Thus, participatory rural appraisal appears to be a fast growing feasible approach for initiating and implementing development programs, particularly for the rural communities.

Community-based watershed development approach
Community-based watershed development, a community-driven program wherein the villagers are involved in participatory planning, implementation and maintenance of assets, has been identified as another effective approach for resolving problems facing rural communities. Watershed development is a well accepted method of treating land through scientific means for sustainable development of natural resources. The watershed is a natural boundary connecting similar elevation points in the form of ridge tops which is self contained polygon of natural resources which is amenable for conservation and protection [22]. Diwakar and Jayaraman [22] further stated that this watershed participatory approach is focused on mobilizing the farming community to collectively take up measures to conserve the soil and water resources in their respective watersheds. The main idea is to adopt control mechanism that would limit the runoff potential of the soil based on terrain conditions, which ultimately drains to a common point, by designing locally specific approaches through community participation. Watershed development is gradually evolving into a comprehensive program with simultaneous pursuit of biophysical and rural development objectives that promote sustainable livelihood.

Participatory approach to safe shelter awareness approach
A participatory approach to safe shelter awareness (PASSA) is another way that rural communities have been successfully involved in implementing projects meant for them and, it fosters locally appropriate safe shelter and settlement practices [5]. As the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies indicated, participatory approach to safe shelter awareness is a participatory tool for comprehensively identifying and safeguarding against shelter and settlement risks among families. Using a step-by-step process, this approach utilizes three complementary processes. Firstly, it harnesses the established role of the National societies to support community-led and socially inclusive development activities. Secondly, it enables communities to identify their own solutions and realistic and
comprehensive strategies for addressing the myriad of problems which may include spatial and environmental planning, local building cultures and the effectiveness of local construction techniques. Thirdly, it fosters partnerships between local authorities, communities and supporting organizations to prepare for, cope with and recover from disasters.

**Peer approach for life skills education**
Participatory approach has been successfully applied in HIV and AIDS pandemic prevention efforts. The main goal of the Anti-AIDS Project is to promote safer lifestyles among children and young people in order to contribute to the prevention and control of the further spread of HIV and other STIs [17]. The Anti-AIDS Project promotes the use of peer approach in life skills building and HIV and AIDS education in order to enhance behavior change among young people. This is achieved through empowerment. In this context, empowerment means giving young people living in rural areas the ability to negotiate for safer sex practices and take responsibility for their behavior. As a participatory approach, Anti-AIDS Project aims at empowering young people to take control of their sexual behavior by educating them on life skills as well as uplifting their status through educating them on their rights and privileges, especially in the context of sexuality which can help them meet day-to-day challenges in life in a positive manner [17]. In other words, since rural families found themselves living in a world of HIV and AIDS and other STIs, drug problems, sexual abuse, misfortune and poverty, there is need for life skills education through participatory approach.

**What could hinder the effective application of participatory approach in rural Nigeria?**
There could be hundred of hindrances against the effective application of participatory approach, but in the present paper, the authors limited their emphasis on the following four major concerns.

**Perceptions that it threatens existing hierarchies**
One of the major hindrances in the decision to adopt the participatory approach could be that it threatens existing hierarchies [23]. However, Servaes [23] argued that using participatory approach does not imply that there is no longer a role for development specialists, planners and institutional leaders. It only means that the viewpoint of the local members of the public is being considered before the resources for development projects are allocated and distributed, and that their suggestions for changes in the policy are taken into consideration.

**Community-oriented problems**
According to Fawcett et al. [2], there are situations where the application of participatory approach would appear unsuccessful. According to them, it appears unsuccessful when a community is so brutally divided, when it is impossible to get all or even any of the rival factions to the same table, when there is no way to provide proper support such as facilitation and structure for the process, when the target
population is simply not interested in participating, and just wants the organization to take care of it and, when the intervention rests on technical knowledge of a kind that the target population and community members simply do not have.

**Logistic concerns**
Participatory approach may be constrained when involving all or most stakeholders is not logistically possible due to distance, time, or other issues, and when funding constraints or funders’ regulations does not allow it and, when there is no trust between the organization executing a project and the community. This could be because such organization is new and unproven, or because of past history. In this circumstance, it is important to reestablish trust, but it may not be possible to do this before the intervention is planned or when a grant may have to be written immediately. For instance, a situation where youth violence, perhaps, may have reached such crisis proportions that it must be addressed immediately. In such circumstance, it may be possible to do some participatory approach in terms of planning, either to adjust the intervention before it begins, or to plan its next phase [2].

**Government-oriented problems**
Another hindrance in the use of this approach may be seen in government’s negligence and limited understanding of the inherent skills and zeal among families in rural communities A study by Ajaiya [13] using a focus group data set collected from ten compounds in Offa Kwara State of Nigeria revealed that beneficiary’s participation in the design of borehole water projects, maintenance and repairs increased the performance of the projects. The beneficiaries took over the maintenance and repairs of the boreholes when the government failed to maintain it since they are the end-users and they did not have any option. This effort by the beneficiaries is an indication that there are still people with relevant skills residing in rural communities that can be harnessed through the participatory approach, even though they are not officially recruited for the job.

**How could participatory approach be effectively implemented in Nigeria’s rural families?**
The following suggestions are made to promote the application of participatory approach in Nigeria’s rural communities:

- Community development programs utilizing participatory approach should carry with it, sense of ownership and build a strong foundation for intervention in the community in a way that would maximally benefit them.
- Participatory approach should ensure that community development projects and programs for families in rural communities will have credibility in all segments of the community.
- Community development programs targeting rural communities should employ participatory approach that would focus on bringing a broader range of people to the planning and implementation processes.
Participatory approach used for community development projects should endeavor to avoid the challenges caused by ignorance of the realities of the target community.

It should foster sustainable livelihood and recognize the survival strategies of families in rural communities and seek to eliminate underlying constraints.

It should be inclusive of the clustering and networking of local institutions to promote self-reliance without compromising local autonomy [24].

The overall impact of participatory approach should include capacity-building for improved livelihood and self-governance. The target-oriented impacts should mostly include motivation for all-round development, substantial increase in agricultural produce, boosting income through best management practices, formation of self-help groups, awareness of technical skill development, improvement in milk/meat yielding herds, increased awareness of soil and water conservation practices and, efficient use of water and reclamation of degraded lands for livestock farming, fishery, horticulture, forestry and mixed farming systems [25].

Conclusion

The paper has pointed out some of the situations and problems of Nigeria’s rural families that may require participatory approach to their resolution, including poverty, indoor air pollution, HIV/AIDS, shelter and settlement risks and vulnerabilities. It is obvious that rural communities can be empowered through participatory approach and should be advocated by all concern including community counselors, social workers and community development specialists. All stakeholders should strive for a nation where all Nigerians can participate in the decision-making process and be fully heard and represented in matters affecting them. For effective execution of community development projects, there is also need to work in collaboration with project firms that are in support of families in rural communities and, are also committed to the elimination of exclusion in community development project planning and execution. There is also need to work collaboratively with project firms that believe as strongly as the beneficiaries do, in the rights of people to take their destiny into their own hands. As such, sustainable livelihood for rural communities would be achieved through participatory approach, which will lead to improvement of social and financial wellbeing of families, especially in terms of meeting their daily needs, wants and desires.

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