

**Stakeholder Consultation and Public Debate as Catalysts for Sustainable  
Community Development in Akwa Ibom State**

**Godwin Sunday Sam<sup>1</sup>, PhD\***

**Aniekan James Akpan<sup>1</sup>, PhD**

**Elizabeth Uwemedimo Ndem<sup>2</sup>**

**&**

**Uko Friday Inyang<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Mass Communication  
Akwa Ibom State Polytechnic, Ikot Osurua, Ikot Ekpene

<sup>2</sup>Faculty of Communication and Media Studies,  
University of Uyo, Uyo.

\*sam.godwin@akwaibompoly.edu.ng  
08133377384/08025337987

**Abstract**

This study was carried out with the broad objective of finding out the roles which stakeholder consultation and public debates can play as essential requirements in rural community development in Ibesikpo Asutan Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State. The contemporary and observation methods were adopted as the research designs for the study. Findings of the study revealed that sometimes stakeholders in rural communities in the local government area are not consulted to find out their peculiar needs. More findings also indicated that public debate is a very important requirement in rural community development in Ibesikpo Asutan, and Akwa Ibom State in general. The researchers, therefore, concluded that stakeholder consultation and public debate are catalysts in sustainable community development in Akwa Ibom State. The researchers then recommended that it is pertinent for community developers to always consult, as well as engage stakeholders in public debates in order to feel their pulse. Such consultations and debates would make them own and sustain the developmental projects.

**Keywords:** stakeholder consultation, public debate, sustainable community development

## Introduction

In contemporary society, development partners such as government (at all levels) and organisations can no longer choose if they want to engage with stakeholders or not. The only decision that they need to take is when, as well as how to engage with such stakeholders in a fruitful way. According to Jeffery (2019) stakeholder consultation, or engagement is premised on the notion that those groups who can affect, or are affected by the achievements of an organisation's purpose should be given the opportunity to contribute and make input into the planning and implementation of decisions that affect them. If stakeholders are not actively sought out and engaged, they may demand to be consulted sooner or later.

When organisations fail to actively engage with their stakeholders, they may be forced to do so if crisis breaks out as a result of such negligence. In such situations, organisations may be forced to resort to crisis-management techniques, by adopting defensive dialogue with the stakeholders, leading to a significant and long-lasting loss of reputation. Such emergency communication is often antagonistic, and lack trust (Jeffery, 2019).

Stakeholder consultation is a process through which subjects or topics of interest are discussed within or across constituency groups. It is a deliberation, discussion and dialogue and sometimes debate. Consultations are more formal and interactive than dialogue, and generally vary from consultations on global policies, such as social safeguards and adjustment lending, to local consultations on Bank-financed projects. The objective of a consultation is to seek information, advice and opinion. In any consultative process, the convener is not only gathering input, but sharing information as well. The organiser seeks to identify and clarify interests at stake, with the ultimate aim of developing a well-informed strategy or project that has a good chance of being supported (by the stakeholders) and therefore, being implemented. Providing and sharing information is seen as the foundation of an effective consultation process. But who is to be consulted? The answer to this rhetorical question leads this paper to the next major concept to be addressed – the stakeholder.

## Statement of the Problem

Whenever development projects are to be sited in a rural community, the people for whom such projects are meant to benefit must be made to know how relevant such project is to them, and the need to protect such project. The relevance and usefulness of such project to the community dwellers should not pre-determined by those who think that is what the community needs. Any time beneficiaries of a developmental project are made to feel like strangers toward projects sited in their communities, there is the

likelihood that they would not really value such project like they would if the idea for the project emanated from them.

For instance, when former governor of Akwa Ibom State, Godswill Akpabio, decided to site the Disney-land prototype Ibom Tropicana project on the ancestral land of four communities of Itiam Etoi, Mbiabong Etoi in Uyo Local Government Area; and Afaha Ikot Obio Nkan, and Afaha Etok Ibesikpo in Ibesikpo Asutan Local Government Area, along the Udo-Udoma axis of Uyo, without having to consult the people to educate them on the benefits they would derive from the project, he ended-up wasting billions of the state's resources as the project was not protected by the host communities. This sentiment was expressed by Jefferey (2019) that:

Corporations that effectively serve the needs of all their key stakeholders will out-perform their peers. We are moving into a new economic era of accelerating stakeholder consciousness and connectivity, which makes it imperative for corporate leaders to master the art of organisational metamorphosis, of transforming their organisations from near-sighted, shareholder-centric systems, to organisations designed to serve all of their stakeholders all the time. Those organisations that learn to make that shift will survive and thrive. (p. 13).

Different sectors pose different types of risks and opportunities. Local contexts such as dimensions of social vulnerability and exclusion; conflict and fragility; governance aspects; land tenure systems; presence of indigenous groups; risks of natural disasters; and stakeholders' concerns about noise, pollution, or critical habitats may all be relevant.

Moreover, stakeholders are not homogeneous within one project setting. Different groups will have different concerns, and these concerns (and the stakeholders themselves) may change over time. Even when the authorities or agents that bring the developmental project consider themselves familiar with local the context and the likely project impacts, stakeholders in the rural communities are likely to know, and therefore, can raise issues that authorities, development agent may not have thought of.

This is what happens in some Akwa Ibom communities when projects are executed without due consultation with the rural dwellers who are supposed to be the 'beneficiaries' of the projects. It is very common in Akwa Ibom State for members of the rural communities where projects are sited to complain that they were not "carried along" in the planning and implementation of such projects. The question that therefore begs for answer is: Are stakeholders in rural communities in Akwa Ibom State consulted and carried along, before development projects are sited in their communities?

### **Objectives of the Study**

The general objective of this study is to ascertain the extent that stakeholders in rural communities are consulted before a development project is sited in their communities. But the specific objectives of this study are to:

- i. Find out if stakeholders in Ibesikpo Asutan Local Government Area are usually consulted before developmental projects are sited in their rural communities;
- ii. determine the importance of public debate in rural community development in Ibesikpo Asutan Local Government Area in Akwa Ibom State.

### Research Questions

- i. Are stakeholders in Ibesikpo Asutan Local Government Area are usually consulted before developmental projects are sited in their rural communities?
- ii. What is the importance of public debate in rural community development in Ibesikpo Asutan Local Government Area in Akwa Ibom State?

### Methodology

This study was restricted in scope to Ibesikpo Asutan Local Government Area, in Akwa Ibom State. The research design adopted in carrying out the study was the survey method. The Focus Group Discussion (FGD) technique was adopted in gathering data for the study. According to the 2022 projection, Ibesikpo Asutan Local Government Area has a population of 175,000 people (www.citypopulation.development, 2024).

### Review of Literature

#### is a stakeholder?

According to Watson and Hill (2012) stakeholder is a term used in public relations practice to refer to those who have an interest or stake in, and thus are likely to be affected by, activities and plans of an organisation or individual client. Stakeholders may not always be aware of their potential involvement. Baines, Egan and Jefkins (2004) identify four categories of stakeholders, based on their relative levels of power and interest regarding a particular situation. They include:

- i. The key players who have considerable power to affect the activities of a company or industry sector;
- ii. There are stakeholders with low levels of power, but a high degree of interest in the situation, and who will look forward to being informed of activities in the communities;
- iii. There are those stakeholders with a high level of power, but a low degree of interest in activities, but who should still receive a satisfactory amount of information on the goings on in their communities; and

- iv. The last set comprises those stakeholders who have both low levels of power and interest; and relatively less effort may be expended to keep them informed.

In discussing the issue of public debate, it becomes pertinent to define who constitutes the public. Public refers to specific groups that are, or might become an intended audience for development communication activities. They include pressure groups, youth groups, community leaders, and opinion leaders. Baines, Egan and Jefkins (2004), note that the identification of the publics of a communication campaign is fundamental to the planning of such campaign; for until the publics are defined, it is difficult to select the media that will best convey the (development) messages to them.

### **Value of Stakeholder Consultation**

Meaningful consultation with project stakeholders adds value to projects in different ways:

- i. It captures the views and perceptions of people who may be affected or have an interest in a development project, and provides a means to take their views into account as inputs to improve project design and implementation, thereby avoiding or reducing adverse impacts, and enhancing benefits;
- ii. It provides an important source of validation and verification of data obtained elsewhere, and improves the quality of environmental and social impact assessments;
- iii. It enables people to understand their rights and responsibilities in relation to a project; and
- iv. Greater transparency and involvement of stakeholders enhances trust, project acceptance, and local ownership, which are key to project sustainability and development outcomes;

There are several criteria that should be met for a stakeholder consultation process to be considered meaningful. Above all, it should not be thought of as one or more isolated events, organised in a pro forma manner to check a box or to meet a licensing requirement. It should be preceded by an analysis of the project, its context, potential impacts, and identification of the relevant stakeholders. It should be followed by genuine consideration of stakeholders' views and concerns in decisions related to project planning and implementation.

### **Elements of Successful Stakeholder Consultation**

There are three essential elements to a successful stakeholder consultation. These include timeliness, clarity, and proportionality. The importance of stakeholder consultation is understood and accepted by most. However, sometimes, there are concerns that the consultation process may delay project planning and implementation, add to cost, brew tensions and conflicts, or raise unreasonable expectations. These are valid concerns, but avoiding transparent engagement with stakeholders does not eliminate such problems. On the contrary, it may exacerbate them, for example by fomenting rumours and suspicion. This would then lead to people in the local communities opposing a project.

It is therefore, pertinent to state here that a good stakeholder consultation is not only an essential requirement in the community development process, but it also adds real value to development projects. Such values become more apparent if transaction costs and delays are reduced to a minimal level. This can be achieved in three ways:

- i. **Timeliness:** The first essential thing to do is to ensure that preparing and undertaking the stakeholder consultation process start as early as possible in the project cycle. If the process starts too late, there may not be enough time to undertake the consultations in a meaningful manner, and lack of adequate consultation can turn into problems and local opposition, which may delay or put other aspects of project planning and implementation at risk.
- ii. **Clarity of purpose:** The second essential element to consider is clarity of purpose from the outset of a development project. Delays and costs can be reduced by being clear about requirements and good practice, and by ensuring that individuals and institutions responsible for consultation have the necessary skills and resources to manage the process.
- iii. **There is no “one size fits all” principle:** The third thing to note is that there is no “one size fits all” principle when it comes to stakeholder consultation. The principle of proportionality should guide the degree of effort. In projects with low or no risk, the consultation process can normally be limited to simple disclosure and information dissemination. Projects with moderate risk should have a two-way dialogue with affected stakeholders, while complex, large scale or higher risk projects require more systematic and thorough engagement with stakeholders throughout.

Good consultation and stakeholder engagement is an investment. It requires effort proportionate to project risk and complexity. While this may be seen as a cost or delaying factor, inadequate community engagement and stakeholder consultations can lead to far higher costs than those of the initial effort. Once trust has been broken, or there is a crisis



that needs to be dealt with, the cost in project delays or actions needed to retroactively address the problem can be very significant and involve adequate attention of management. It can damage an institution's reputation for a long time, and may lead to a loss of political support, reduced credit-worthiness, or other costs. In some cases, projects have had to be abandoned. It is, therefore, in everyone's interest to undertake systematic and meaningful consultations, and to demonstrate that stakeholder views are reflected in how projects are designed and implemented.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored on the Stakeholder Theory and Cyclical MELDS Model of Development Communication.

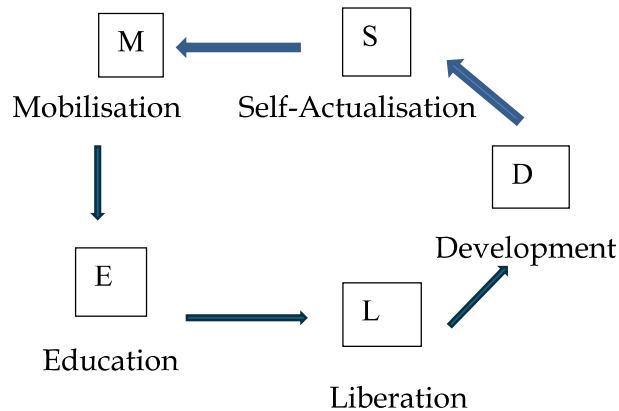
**The Stakeholder Theory:** The concept of Stakeholder was first used in 1963 in an internal memorandum at the Stanford Research Institute. According to its first usage, stakeholders are groups whose support an organisation needs so as to remain in existence. The concept was developed into a theory and championed by Edward Freeman in the 1980s (Freeman & Reed, 1983). Stakeholder theory states that a corporation has stakeholders who are generally the groups and individuals that benefit from, or are harmed by an organisation's actions. The rights of these parties can either be violated or respected by the organisation (Hartman, 2005).

Stakeholder theory identifies the groups and individuals relative to a corporation; and describes, as well as recommends methods by which the interests of each set of stakeholders can be catered for by the management of the corporation. The stakeholder theory is one of the classical theories in public relations. Philips (2004) observes that the question of who is and who is not a stakeholder has been discussed for years. Some of the questions that appear relevant to a proper conceptualisation of stakeholders are: Should stakeholder status be a reserved right for constituencies having close relationship with the organisation? Should the status be seen to apply broadly to all groups that can affect or be affected by the organisation? Should activists, competitors, natural environment or even the media be classified as stakeholders?

Meanwhile, Kvam (2017) states that meaningful stakeholder consultation is a two-way dialogue (debate) and engagement, rather than a one-way dissemination of information. It is a process rather than one or a few single events; and it involves people in affected communities and other relevant stakeholders.

### Cyclical MELDS Model of Development Communication

The M in the model stands for Mobilisation; E = Education; L = Liberation; D = Development; and S = Self-Actualisation. The revised model is presented graphically thus:



**Figure 1: Cyclical MELDS Model of Development Communication by Sam (2023) adapted from Wilson (2005)**

The MELDS Model of Development Communication as propounded by Wilson (2005) is linear in nature, and sees the mass media as the only agents that can mobilise members of the society for change. It does not make provision for an individual to act as an agent of change in the society. The Cyclical MELDS Model of Development Communication (Sam, 2023) states that apart from the mass media, it is possible for an individual, who perceives self as an opinion leader, mentor, or role model to be an agent of change. The redesigned Model also states that once a cycle of change occurs, it could be repeated. James and Sam (2023) state that:

A person whose attitude towards the change object has been positively influenced could himself become an agent of change, and the cycle continues. For instance, an individual who has been mobilised, and educated, and who is liberated to attain a certain level of development, and who has achieved self-actualisation, can set the whole process in motion all over again. This could be seen in a situation where someone who has been influenced by an opinion leader, grows to the point where he becomes an opinion leader in the future, where he mentors other people to become stakeholders in the community, and the cycle continues. (p. 287),

The postulations of the model are expatiated in the following segment of this study as follows:



- i. **Mobilisation:** This is the state of readiness which the individual or group is placed as a result of the message that has been available in the open society. This active state of psychological and social motivation is also a product of social rewards, which the participants receive from the mobilisers.

The postulation of the Cyclical MELDS Model of Development Communication is that the process of talking to someone, or being talked to about a development project in the society is mobilisation. Additionally, the real process of mobilisation may not have to be verbal, but learnt and adopted through observation, mentorship, and role modelling. In this context, a mentor can mobilise his mentee by showing him/her what to do.

- ii. **Education:** Communication can be used to provide education and enlightenment to members of a community. Education as a communication objective, once provided for, can ginger members of a community to higher levels of development, and through it, people acquire the knowledge for better ways of doing things.
- iii. **Liberation:** Education helps to bring about liberation in a community. Such liberation could bring about the betterment of individuals in the community, and the community as a whole. The liberation could attract higher financial freedom for community members; protection of development projects sited in the community; having more confidence in oneself; and greater commitment to one's community. These outcomes of education, in themselves, could liberate the people from financial stress, and low self-esteem.
- iv. **Development:** The position of the Cyclical MELDS Model of Development Communication is that the process of disseminating change-oriented information must be participatory in nature. This means that development agents such as the Akwa Ibom State Government should give a listening ear to the rural dwellers, and give them the opportunity to express themselves freely in the course of siting developmental projects, as much as possible.
- v. **Self-Actualisation:** According to psychology, self-actualisation is the highest level of human needs attainment. But the point of its attainment varies from one individual to another and from one rural community to another. It entails having a healthy confidence in one's own abilities; which include possession of independent, self-supporting, self-satisfying and self-propelling abilities. The position of the Cyclical MELDS Model is that as far as majority of Nigerians, and by extension Africans, are not individually self-actualised, the country and continent would still be seen as not having developed yet.

### Levels of Stakeholder consultation and engagement

- i. **Information sharing** as primarily a one-way communication. This may be appropriate as the main form of engagement with the public in low-risk circumstances, where the project does not seek to actively engage communities or other stakeholders in a dialogue. The engagement consists largely of public information dissemination of project-related information in a transparent and accessible way, and provision of a way for members of the public to request additional information or to convey their concerns and recommendations.
- ii. **Consultation as a two-way dialogue:** In projects of moderate risk and complexity, and where there is potential for adverse impacts that would trigger safeguards policies, stakeholders are consulted through an active two-way process of engagement and dialogue. Information needs to be shared with relevant stakeholders, generally on a wholistic basis, in order to reflect local contexts. Also, stakeholder views should be captured, documented, and considered.
- iii. **Participation and empowerment:** Projects of substantial or high risk and complexity require a more meaningful and informed process of involvement with stakeholders. This builds on the dialogue principles above, but entails more active participation by stakeholders in defining and implementing relevant aspects of a project. In certain high-risk circumstances, policies and good practice require that stakeholders make contributions to project decision making, and that a degree of decision-making authority be transferred to local communities and stakeholder groups. An example of this is when a project requires formal agreement or consent from affected stakeholders.

### Challenges of effective Public Debate and Stakeholder Consultation

The achievement of the specific goal of achieving better communication and participation faces a number of obstacles on a range of levels. At a macro level, those who decide which services should be provided are not the same people as those who actually provide the service. This is a tension inherent in any process of governance and it presents a challenge to those interested in enhancing community participation. Understanding this tension means locating efforts at achieving community consultation at the right juncture within processes of governance, so that the consultation is meaningful in the sense of having an impact on decision-making, and also effective in terms of having an impact on service delivery.

Other obstacles are inherent to the strategic planning process. These include the presence of conflicting values amongst participants, uncertainty about outcomes, the difficulty of defining responsibilities, and the controversial nature of sustainable land use

management. Combined with these inherent difficulties is dissatisfaction with conventional consultation methods such as public meetings, formal submissions and public hearings.

There is the issue of poorly attended meetings, a feeling among participants that they have not been heard, suspicions that valuable time and resources had been spent less effectively than they could have been, and a general sense of wondering if improvement was possible. This dissatisfaction emanates from many quarters.

Government authorities entrusted with making consultation happen may, in the past, have questioned its relevance and struggled with its implementation. Interest groups have felt frustrated by their perceived lack of impact. Experts have criticised the appropriateness of outcomes, and the broader public has felt disempowered. Some of the reasons people give for not consulting with stakeholders include: "We don't have enough time, it costs too much money and resources, people won't understand the complex issues involved, people won't agree, it might encourage dissatisfaction, and so on" (UK Cabinet Office, 2000, p. 44).

Irrespective of this, it should be understood that differences of opinion are inevitable, but surmountable. However, successful management of these issues is possible, by developing a strategic, integrated and involving approach to consultation and participation. Public involvement in strategic planning and visioning requires extended participation methods; the ability to become involved – and sustain an involvement over time.

### **Discussion of Findings**

**Research Question One:** Are stakeholders in Ibesikpo Asutan Local Government Area usually consulted before developmental projects are sited in their rural communities?

During the second term of Obong Victor Attah as the Executive Governor of Akwa Ibom State, the State Government thought of giving a project to Afaha Ikot Obio Nkan community in Ibesikpo Asutan Local Government Area. But since the people who advised the then governor of the State felt they know what the people needed, they proposed to the governor that people in the community needed pipe-borne water, without duly consulting with the different stakeholders in the community to find out what their needs were.

The water project was sited near the village primary school, a location which is relatively far from where majority of the residents in the community live. And since the project was not what the people really needed, compared to the construction of roads that lead to the

popular Afaha Market, that project is now only a useless monument. The current state of that project convinced the researchers of this study that any project that is hurled at the people without due consultation may likely fail, or at the best, not fully benefit the people for whom such a project was meant.

Another finding of the study, which shows that most times community stakeholders are not consulted before a developmental project is sited in their community, is the case of the Worship Centre Project situated in Afaha Ikot Obio Nkan. When the immediate past Governor of the State, Mr. Udom Emmanuel, went to Afaha Ikot Obio Nkan and took over the farmland of the community to build the Worship Centre, the people of the community were not consulted. Stakeholders in the community assert that they were not consulted to discuss how the project will benefit them. To even make matters worse, stakeholders in the community state that they were not even compensated for their farmland, before it was taken over by the Akwa Ibom State Government.

These findings are supported by Hartman (2005) who states that a corporation has stakeholders who are generally the groups and individuals that benefit from, or are harmed by the organisation's actions. The rights of these parties can either be violated or respected by the organisation.

**Research Question Two:** What is the importance of public debate in rural community development in Akwa Ibom State.

A very good example which illustrates the importance of public debate in rural community development was what transpired at Ibom Hall during the twilight of former Governor Godswill Akpabio's tenure. As his tenure was rounding off, he organised Town Hall Meetings, where he met with the different stakeholders to feel their pulse and seek their input on government programmes and activities in order to impact their lives before he left the stage.

The Town Hall Meetings were held on Federal Constituency-bases. At the meetings, people were given opportunities to air their views on government projects and programmes. As a result of those meetings, some projects such as renovation of primary schools, construction (or at least grading) of rural roads were awarded to be constructed in some communities.

On one of those Town Hall Meetings, particularly, the one held at the Ibom Hall for Uyo Federal Constituency, one David Jackson from Ibesikpo Asutan Local Government Area was given the opportunity to speak. When he stood up, he thanked the governor for the opportunity given him. He directed his message to the governor, reminding him of the

promise he (the governor) made in 2005 when he consulted Akwa Ibom State Youth Caucus to enlist their support for his first term ambition.

Mr. David Jackson told the former governor that everyone in that youth caucus was empowered, except him. The former governor, in his characteristic manner, on hearing that immediately appointed Mr. David Jackson as a Special Assistant. He was given an official car and an office, and placed on a monthly salary of ₦300,000 till the end of that administration. This buttresses the importance of public debate in rural community development in Akwa Ibom State (*Vanguard Newspaper*, April 9, 2014).

This finding is supported by the redesigned MELDS Model of Development Communication (Sam, 2023). Mr. David Jackson was *mobilised* as a result of Town Hall Meeting, where he was *educated* through active participatory communication process. This education led to his *liberation* from financial stress, and this further led to his *development*, that resulted in *self-actualisation*, as a Personal Assistant to the Governor on Project Monitoring.

### Conclusion

If done well, community stakeholder consultation can feel real, committed, integrated and influential. An overview of the ways in which the skills provided in this study can help development agents to overcome problems associated with achieving best practices in rural community consultation. It is, however, important to note here that stakeholder consultation in rural community cannot, in any way, replace the appropriate process of decision-making by elected, accountable, and public representatives. But, when it comes to siting development projects in rural communities, it is important to still practice the participatory and democratic communication process.

Central to any democratic system is the idea that the power to make decisions is linked to due process and is ultimately tested against public opinion in elections. Elected officials are, rightly, sensitive to the problem of making legitimate decisions through formal democratic procedures, such as town hall meetings and public debates. However, stakeholder consultation can help elected officials to understand, as well as incorporate public preferences and concerns into their decision-making processes.

Stakeholder consultation should not replace an elected official's right to make decisions on behalf of the constituents, but rather, it should be an integral part of it. Indeed, contemporary planning practice can be reconceptualised as a communicative, engaging and negotiated process, rather than largely a decision-making one. For such planning

practice to be successful, clear legislative backing is needed to uphold the legitimacy of community involvement and concerns.

### Recommendations

The following recommendations are offered by the researchers of this study:

- To avoid wasting scarce resources on projects that would not be useful to rural dwellers at the end of the day, it is hereby advised that development agents such as the Akwa Ibom State Government should consult extensively with community stakeholders.
- For effective and efficient rural community and human development, it is advised that public debates be organised regularly, in order to appreciate the depth of issues affecting rural community dwellers so as to incorporate their needs into the developmental projects sited in such communities.
- Since it has been established in this study that effective stakeholder consultation can reduce the cost of rural community development projects, it is suggested that development agents such as the Akwa Ibom State Government should ensure that they engage rural community dwellers in consultations and public debates in order to reduce the cost of providing development projects in the rural communities.

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