



APPLICATION OF PARTICIPATORY COMMUNICATION IN SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES BY THE EASTERN AFRICA GRAIN COUNCIL: A CASE OF MAKUENI COUNTY, KENYA

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Abstract

Effective communication is crucial in the implementation of social development initiatives, as the absence of clear information can lead to uncertainty and poorly informed decision-making, ultimately impeding development. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) involved in social development must employ robust communication strategies to ensure the successful execution of community-based programmes. The study investigated the application of participatory communication in EAGC-led social development programmes in Makueni County, Kenya, and examined how top-down communication, bottom-up communication, and corporate communication complement participatory communication in enhancing stakeholder engagement and programme sustainability. Despite the recognized importance of communication in development, there is limited empirical research on how participatory communication is operationalized in agricultural-based social development programmes in Kenya. This study addresses this gap by exploring the effectiveness of participatory communication in enhancing community ownership and stakeholder engagement within EAGC-led initiatives. The study purposively sampled 22 programme beneficiaries comprising 12 farmers and 10 traders

participating in EAGC programmes across six sub-counties in Makueni County. The study adopted a qualitative research approach grounded in an interpretivist epistemology and employed an instrumental case study method. Data were generated through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions using semi-structured interview guides and analysed within the study's theoretical framework. The findings were thematically analyzed through coding and categorization to identify key patterns, recurring themes, and participants' perspectives. The results indicate that participatory communication fostered community ownership, trust, and inclusive decision-making, while top-down communication supported coordination and technical guidance, bottom-up communication strengthened feedback and adaptive learning, and corporate communication enhanced institutional credibility, stakeholder confidence, and programme sustainability. The study concludes that participatory communication, when integrated with complementary top-down, bottom-up, and corporate strategies, enhances stakeholder engagement and programme sustainability. The study argues that EAGC should institutionalise an integrated communication framework that reinforces participatory communication, while structurally integrating top-down coordination, bottom-up feedback, and strategic corporate communication to promote stakeholder engagement and long-term sustainability of programmes.

Keywords: Stakeholder Engagement: Communication Strategy Participatory Communication Community Ownership Communication Framework

INTRODUCTION

Communication is increasingly recognised as a key element in the design and implementation of social development programmes. At the global development practice level, the perspective has transitioned from communication as a transmission of information to a dynamic and participatory process that facilitates dialogue, engagement and collective action. Conventional models of linear communication (i.e., the "knowledge transfer" from experts to non-experts to (passive) audiences), have been largely criticized for their failure to consider local situation, power, community dynamics and agency (Mefalopulos, 2018; Waisbord, 2020). Consequently, new developmental discourse now focuses more on participative and multi-directional communication, centred on the inclusion of all and shared decision-making, (Servaes & Thomas, 2020).

At an international level, poor communication has been recognised as a major factor in creating success challenges to development programmes. Indeed, the World Bank (2020) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (2022) report that many interventions fail not because

they lack funds or expertise but because stakeholders were not effectively involved – and communication was poorly designed. There is growing evidence that development outcomes are influenced by how communication structures are designed, particularly in terms of their capacity to facilitate participation, feedback, and responsiveness (Manyozo, 2019). As a consequence of this, an emphasis has been placed on integrated communication paradigms that draw on participatory, top-down, and bottom-up communication approaches to respond to complex global development problems.

The recent literature focused on development communication on the international stage highlights the necessity that communication strategies must be appropriate to the socio-economic realities of the target communities. For instance: In Makueni County, successful communication should include utilizing local languages, community meetings, and farmer groups in order to address different levels of literacy, limited internet access, and predominantly rural livelihoods of programme beneficiaries. Nevertheless, non-contextually sensitive communication can be exclusionary for vulnerable groups, particularly in rural and marginalised communities with significantly different levels of literacy, language diversity, resources, and information (Servaes & Thomas, 2020). This has resulted in a greater focus on audience-centred communication techniques that are adjusted for the socio-cultural and economic profile of target communities (Mefalopulos, 2018).

Moreover, the increasing complexity of development interventions has highlighted the importance of communication systems which are flexible, interactive and offer opportunities for continuous learning for the stakeholders (Waisbord, 2020). In the African setting, communication issues still influence how well social development programmes work. Top-down communication and a lack of community involvement can limit the degree to which community participatory and community owned development programmes throughout sub-Saharan Africa (Manyozo, 2019). While participatory communication models have been relatively adopted over time, their enactment is inconsistent because of institutional-, capacity-, and resource-constraints (Servaes & Thomas, 2020).

Research in East Africa shows that participatory approaches are increasingly supported in policies, but these policies are often not operationalised in practice with limited feedback mechanism and minimal incorporation into formal decision-making processes (Mefalopulos, 2018). Empirical evidence from Africa also reinforces the importance and role of communication in shaping programme results. These are illustrative of the success stories of development interventions that harness community participation and feedback, yielding sustainable long-term outcomes that enhance the well-being of citizens (Manyozo, 2019).

In many contexts, however, unequal power relations, limited access to information, and cultural barriers have become obstacles to effective communication. These obstacles highlight the necessity of communication strategies that balance technical guidance and participatory engagement. In Kenya, communication is still important for the successful or the not successful implementation of social development programmes in rural and semi-arid regions. This includes barriers such as disparities in access to information and different literacy levels (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2022), which affect community participation in development.

Likewise, a lack of stakeholder engagement and poorly planned communication approaches were reported by the Kenya Institute for Public Policy Research and Analysis (2021), to result in low levels of programme ownership and sustainability. In Kenya, the nation's developmental framework, most notably Kenya Vision 2030, promotes inclusive and participatory development approaches in pursuing sustainable development. Policy aims are frequently not realised in practice unless the policy is implemented, particularly in how communication strategies work on a community-based level.

Development programmes continue to heavily rely on this kind of directive communication that may not be well connected with the voices of the community, which has a detrimental effect (Maina, 2020). In the agricultural sector, on which Kenya's rural economy depends, communication is of particular significance when it comes to the adoption of innovations and programme outcomes. Studies have found that farmers adopt more new practices when communication strategies involve participatory and peer-to-peer learning approaches (Chepngetich, 2017). But the continued prevalence of top-down communication models in extension services has hampered these interventions to an extent. Makueni County as a semi-arid area with high levels of poverty and vulnerability to climate variability is a suitable geographical location for a systematic examination of methods of communication in social development practices of programming.

In agriculture and water management, the county has a number of livelihood-supporting and community-building interventions. But then there were also challenges to programme delivery, such as low completion rates and sustainability of interventions. Such complications are in part caused by communication strategy failures and have particularly been recognised as being associated with lack of stakeholder involvement and participation. In terms of a case study in how communication strategies influence programme outcome, the Eastern Africa Grain Council (EAGC) is an ideal example of a practical group involved in the delivery of social development programmes in Makueni County. Indeed, despite a series of multiple programmes undertaken by EAGC to improve agricultural productivity and access to market, no empirical evidence has been presented about how these strategies have been used in practice, and what

is known about the impact of programmes and programme effectiveness depending on communication mechanisms.

In this context, this research is driven by the understanding that communication is not only a supporting practice but is also one central to development practice. The study aims to facilitate an understanding on how communication affects stakeholder engagement and programme implementation and sustainability in social development contexts by investigating the implementation of participatory, top-down, bottom-up, and corporate communication strategies in EAGC programmes.

The Eastern Africa Grain Council (EAGC) is an organisation of private sector, regional, not-for-profit entities with a membership structure in Eastern Africa founded in 2006 to encourage rational trading of grain from Eastern Africa. The consortium joins together all relevant stakeholders in the grain value chain – farmers, tradespeople, processors and warehouse owners, as well as policy makers, to enhance food security, market access, and regional trade access. This organisation works in multiple countries in Eastern Africa and in collaboration with governments, and development partners, as well as research institutions and civil society to deliver programmes to improve both the productivity and profitability of agriculture to facilitate market linkages and improvement of farmer livelihoods.

Based in Kenya, specifically Makueni County, EAGC has championed social development initiatives for small-scale farmers and agribusiness players from training and market access to policy advocacy and capacity-building interventions. A central claim proposed by EAGC is that the development of the local grain sector has tended to prioritise production above market access, information dissemination and coordination of institutional mechanisms. In response to the above gaps, EAGC set up specialisation initiatives such as Eastern Africa Grain Institute (EAGI) to conduct training and consultancy and the Regional Agricultural Trade Intelligence Network (RATIN) for stakeholders to get access to market information and trade intelligence. By these channels, EAGC encourages knowledge sharing, skills development and data-based decision making among farmers and traders. These programmes call for proper communication practices to facilitate dissemination of information so that the information is not only disseminated, understood and used effectively among a variety of the community groups varying in education, language and technological level. EAGC was deliberately chosen for this research as it had strong participation in community-driven development activities and communication as a primary tool to deliver a programme. The organisation's operations at Makueni County offer a suitable context for investigating how participatory, top-down, bottom-up, and corporate communication strategies drive social development programming.

Moreover, EAGC's business model is multi-stakeholder, so that it is a prime case to explore the dynamics of communication among institutional leadership, programme implementers and community beneficiaries. By analysing the way communication strategies have been implemented in this environment, the researcher can gain valuable insights that can enhance practice development not only with EAGC but also with other organisations working in the areas of rural development.

Statement of the Problem

Effective communication is widely recognised as a critical determinant in the successful implementation of social development programmes, as it facilitates stakeholder participation, informed decision-making, trust-building, and collective ownership of development initiatives. Globally, development organisations increasingly acknowledge that programmes designed without meaningful communication and stakeholder engagement often experience weak community participation, low adoption of interventions, poor accountability, and limited sustainability (Paolo Mefalopulos, 2018; Silvio Waisbord, 2020). Although participatory communication has emerged as a preferred development approach, evidence suggests that many social development programmes continue to rely on fragmented communication systems that inadequately integrate dialogue, feedback, institutional messaging, and community participation.

In Kenya, communication remains central to the implementation of social development interventions across agriculture, health, education, and community empowerment programmes. However, many development initiatives continue to experience challenges related to weak stakeholder engagement, limited community ownership, poor feedback integration, and difficulties in sustaining programme outcomes, particularly in rural and resource-constrained contexts. These challenges are more pronounced in agricultural development programmes, where timely information exchange, trust, local knowledge, and collaborative decision-making significantly influence programme adoption and long-term impact (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2022; Food and Agriculture Organization, 2022).

Within this context, the Eastern Africa Grain Council implements social development programmes in Makueni County aimed at strengthening farmer capacity, market participation, agribusiness skills, and livelihood resilience among smallholder farmers and traders. While these interventions depend heavily on effective communication to mobilise stakeholders, support learning, coordinate implementation, and sustain programme outcomes, little is empirically known about how participatory communication is operationalised within such

interventions, or how it interacts with top-down communication, bottom-up communication, and corporate communication strategies in practice.

Despite growing scholarship on participatory communication, limited empirical evidence exists on how participatory communication interacts with top-down, bottom-up, and corporate communication strategies in agricultural social development programmes in Kenya, particularly within private-sector-led interventions such as EAGC. This knowledge gap limits understanding of how integrated communication strategies influence stakeholder engagement, community ownership, and programme sustainability in rural development contexts. Against this backdrop, the present study sought to examine how participatory communication interacts with top-down, bottom-up, and corporate communication strategies in the implementation and sustainability of EAGC-led social development programmes in Makueni County, Kenya.

Research Objectives

- i. To examine how participatory communication strategies are applied in the implementation of social development programmes by EAGC in Makueni County.
- ii. To explore how top-down communication strategies complement participatory communication in the implementation of social development programmes.
- iii. To examine how bottom-up communication strategies shape stakeholder engagement in EAGC social development programmes.
- iv. To analyse how corporate communication strategies interact with participatory communication to support the sustainability of EAGC-led social development programmes.

Research Questions

- i. How are participatory communication strategies applied in the implementation of social development programmes by EAGC in Makueni County?
- ii. How do top-down communication strategies complement participatory communication in the implementation of social development programmes?
- iii. How do bottom-up communication strategies shape stakeholder engagement in EAGC social development programmes?
- iv. How do corporate communication strategies interact with participatory communication to support the sustainability of EAGC-led social development programmes?

METHODOLOGY

Research Study Area

The research was conducted in Makueni County, Kenya. The county covers an area of approximately 8,176.7 square kilometres and is predominantly classified as arid and semi-arid land (ASAL), characterised by unpredictable rainfall, recurrent droughts, and persistent livelihood vulnerability. According to the 2019 Kenya Population and Housing Census, Makueni County had a population of 987,653 people, while subsequent county projections indicate continued population growth during the current planning period (KNBS, 2019; County Government of Makueni, 2023). These demographic and ecological characteristics make the county an appropriate setting for examining how communication influences the implementation of social development programmes in underserved rural contexts.

Research Design

The choice of a qualitative research approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to explore participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of communication practices within social development programmes, rather than to measure variables or test predetermined hypotheses. As observed by Jwan and Ong'ondo (2011), qualitative research is particularly suitable for examining social behaviour, meanings, interactions, and experiences within their natural social contexts.

The study adopted an instrumental case study method within the qualitative research approach. According to Jwan and Ong'ondo (2011), an instrumental case study uses a particular case to provide insight into a broader issue or phenomenon beyond the case itself. In this study, the Eastern Africa Grain Council (EAGC) served as the case through which communication strategies in the implementation of social development programmes were examined. The choice of the instrumental case study was informed by the exploratory nature of the research, which sought to understand how participatory, top-down, bottom-up, and corporate communication strategies are experienced, interpreted, and applied within real-world relationships, meanings, and context-specific experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Consequently, the qualitative research approach enabled the researcher to capture participants' lived experiences and interpretations of communication practices in programme implementation.

The instrumental case study method further supported methodological triangulation through the use of multiple data generation techniques, including in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and observation, thereby enhancing the credibility, richness, and trustworthiness of the findings.

Research Approach

The methodology for this study adopted a qualitative research approach grounded in an interpretivist epistemology. The interpretivist perspective is based on the assumption that reality is socially constructed and that meaning is derived from individuals' lived experiences and interactions within the social world they inhabit (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A qualitative approach was therefore considered appropriate because it enabled the researcher to explore how farmers and traders interpreted the communication strategies employed in the implementation of social development programmes.

The interpretivist epistemology was therefore well suited to exploring how communication strategies are perceived, interpreted, and experienced within rural development contexts. Furthermore, the qualitative approach provided the flexibility to probe emerging issues, seek clarification, and pursue deeper insights as data generation progressed. This flexibility was particularly valuable for communication research, where participants' narratives often reveal underlying meanings, assumptions, and experiences that may not be captured through structured methods alone. In line with the interpretivist epistemology, the researcher remained reflexive throughout the study, recognising that knowledge was co-constructed through continuous interaction with participants and that interpretation formed an integral part of the research process.

Target Population

The target population for this study comprised approximately 120 beneficiaries of the Eastern Africa Grain Council (EAGC) social development programmes across the six sub-counties of Makueni County. These beneficiaries consisted of approximately 100 farmers and 20 traders who had participated in EAGC programme activities during the study period.

The accessible population was derived from the EAGC beneficiary register, which identified 22 direct beneficiaries, comprising 12 farmers and 10 traders, who met the study's inclusion criteria and were available during the period of data generation. These beneficiaries constituted the sampling frame from which participants were purposively selected based on their direct experience with the communication strategies employed by EAGC, the dissemination of programme information, and their involvement in programme activities and decision-making processes.

Sampling Technique

Study participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their information-rich nature and direct involvement in Eastern Africa Grain Council (EAGC) programmes.

Creswell and Poth (2018) argue that purposive sampling is appropriate in qualitative research because it enables the researcher to intentionally select participants who can provide detailed, relevant, and experience-based insights into the phenomenon under investigation.

The decision to include farmers and traders was deliberate, as both participant groups had direct experience with EAGC programmes, and the communication processes applied during programme implementation. Their participation ensured that the study captured practical, context-specific, and experience-driven perspectives on how communication strategies were applied in social development programmes.

Data Analysis

The data collected analysed thematically in line with the study objectives and interpreted within the context of the theoretical framework guiding the study.

DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

This section presents and interprets the findings of the study based on data collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with farmers and traders participating in Eastern Africa Grain Council (EAGC) social development programmes in Makueni County. The findings are analysed thematically in line with the study objectives and interpreted within the context of the theoretical framework guiding the study. The section is organised according to the four communication strategies examined in the study: participatory communication, top-down communication, bottom-up communication, and corporate communication. Verbatim quotations from participants are used to support the emerging themes and enhance credibility of the findings. Recent qualitative research emphasises that the use of verbatim participant voices enhances analytical credibility and allows findings to remain grounded in lived experiences rather than researcher interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Nowell et al., 2017). Furthermore, thematic analysis has increasingly been recognised as a rigorous and flexible approach for examining patterns across qualitative datasets, particularly in development and community-based research contexts. Accordingly, this section presents participants' views and critically engages with these perspectives in relation to the study's theoretical framework and existing literature, thereby providing both descriptive and analytical depth.

Participatory Communication Strategy and Implementation of Social Development Programmes

This section presents the findings of the study based on qualitative data generated from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with participants involved in social development

programmes implemented by the Eastern Africa Grain Council (EAGC) in Makueni County. The presentation of findings is guided by the study objectives and reflects patterns identified through thematic analysis. To enhance analytical rigor, credibility, and transparency in reporting, each participant was assigned a unique identifier. This coding system ensures anonymity while allowing for clear attribution of participant perspectives in the presentation of findings. The identifiers are structured as follows:

Table 1. Identification Codes

Participant Category	Code Range	Description
Farmer Beneficiaries	P01–P12	Farmers participating in EAGC programmes
Trader Beneficiaries	P13–P22	Traders participating in EAGC programmes
Focus Group Participants	FGD-01–FGD-22	Farmers and traders participating in group discussions

Participants Identification codes

Although all focus group participants were assigned unique identifiers ranging from FGD-01 to FGD-22, only selected verbatim quotations that best illustrated the emerging themes are presented in this section. Not all participant excerpts are reproduced verbatim, although every contribution informed the thematic analysis. This categorisation enabled the study to capture diverse perspectives across different stakeholder groups, thereby enhancing the depth, richness, and credibility of the findings.

The data were analysed thematically following the systematic and iterative process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021). The analysis began with familiarisation through repeated reading of the interview and focus group transcripts, followed by the coding of meaningful data segments. Related codes were then grouped into categories, from which broader themes and sub-themes were developed in response to the research objectives. The analytical process was recursive rather than linear, with the researcher moving back and forth between the data, codes, categories, and emerging themes to refine interpretations, ensure coherence, and strengthen the analytical depth of the findings.

Four key themes emerged from the analysis:

- i. Participation and ownership in programmes
- ii. Communication approaches used in programme implementation
- iii. Barriers to effective participatory communication
- iv. Perceived impact of participatory communication on programme success

These themes reflect the central dimensions through which communication strategies influence programme implementation and outcomes.

The findings are presented thematically, with each section incorporating verbatim excerpts from participants to preserve the authenticity of their voices and experiences. The use of direct quotations is consistent with qualitative research best practice, as it enhances credibility and allows readers to engage directly with participants' perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

In addition to presenting participants' accounts, the section provides interpretive analysis to explain the meaning and significance of the findings in relation to the study objectives and theoretical framework. This approach ensures that the findings move beyond description to offer analytical insights into how communication strategies shape the implementation of social development programmes in Makueni County.

P02 (Farmer beneficiary):

"When they come and sit with us and ask us what we think before the project starts, we feel included. It is not like before where things were already decided. Now we are part of the discussions, and because of that, we take the project seriously because we feel it belongs to us."

Similarly, another respondent noted:

P04 (Trader beneficiary):

"Participation gives us confidence because we know our ideas are being considered. Even if not all of them are taken, at least we are heard, and that makes us feel important in the programme."

The sense of partnership rather than dependency emerged strongly across participants. One trader expressed this:

P05 (Trader beneficiary):

"When we give our views during meetings and they listen to us, we feel like partners, not just beneficiaries. Before, we used to wait for instructions, but now we contribute, and that changes how we see the programme."

Participants also linked participatory communication to improved trust and openness between the community and programme implementers. The ability to speak freely without fear was repeatedly emphasized:

P01 (Farmer beneficiary):

"We are not afraid to talk because the officials listen to us. Even when we don't agree, we can say what we think, and they explain things to us in a way we understand."

Another participant added:

P03 (Farmer beneficiary):

“Now we can ask questions freely. Before, people feared speaking because they thought decisions had already been made. But now there is more openness.”

Interpretation of the Findings

This finding is consistent with participatory communication theory, which holds dialogue, involvement and joint decision making to be key forces of ownership and sustainability. The narratives shared by the participants reveal that participation is not merely symbolic, but also practical in programme commitment.

Participatory communication converts beneficiaries into stakeholders to strengthen programme legitimacy and sustainability, by involving members of the community in decision-making processes. Apart from building an ownership-based attitude, participatory communication seems to act as a power redistributor in programme implementation arrangements. Participants’ narratives indicate a move from the previous passive acceptance of externally designed interventions to active participation in shaping programme outcomes.

The significance of this transformation can be noted from the traditional hierarchical communication structures of development programmes. This finding would be theoretically consistent with this perspective in terms of Participatory Communication Theory, which assumes that dialogue and consensus are central to development success. However, then, the results also imply that participation is not monolithic but there is a continuum in participation in this context. Despite participants reporting more active participation, there were signs that most of the ultimate decision-making remained with programme implementers. This is an example of what Cornwall (2008) calls “partial participation”, that is, when communities are engaged, but not fully empowered.

In this study, stories of participants reveal that participation in the decision-making process engendered perceived responsibility and accountability, which allowed participants to maintain motivation as they continued participation in various programme activities. This is well supported by recent empirical research in sub-Saharan Africa, where participatory communication has been associated with better programme uptake and longer-term sustainability due to it being anchored in community realities (Manyozo, 2019).

Implications of Participatory Communication for Stakeholder Engagement and Programme Sustainability

Participants identified several strengths of participatory communication, particularly inclusiveness, transparency, and improved understanding of programme processes.

One participant noted:

P06 (Farmer beneficiary):

“In the meetings, everyone is given a chance to speak. Even those who are usually quiet can say something. That makes us feel equal and part of the programme.”

Another respondent emphasized transparency:

P07 (Trader beneficiary):

“Participation helps us understand why certain decisions are made. When things are explained, we don't feel left out or confused.”

However, participants also highlighted important limitations, particularly the perception that participation sometimes remained at the level of consultation rather than influence.

One participant explained:

P08 (Farmer beneficiary):

“Sometimes we give our ideas, but later you find that the decision was already made. So even though we talk, not everything we say is taken into consideration.”

Another respondent added:

P09 (Trader beneficiary):

“There are times when we are asked to give opinions, but we don't see the changes reflected. That makes some people feel like participation is just part of the process, not real decision-making.”

Interpretation of the Findings

The participant's account reveals a critical tension between participation as process and participation as influence. While participatory structures exist, their depth varies. However, the persistence of tokenistic participation observed in this study reflects a broader critique within development communication literature. Scholars argue that while participatory structures are often established, they do not always translate into meaningful influence over decision-making processes (Cornwall, 2008; Tufte, 2017). More recent studies reinforce this concern, noting that participation frequently remains consultative rather than transformative, particularly in donor-driven programmes where institutional priorities may override community input (Chitnis, 2022). The narratives highlight the need to move beyond procedural participation towards substantive

engagement, where community voices actively shape programme design and implementation outcomes.

Shared Decision-Making and Inclusive Participation

Another important theme that emerged from the findings was the role of participatory communication in promoting shared decision-making and inclusive participation among programme beneficiaries. Participants indicated that EAGC created opportunities for dialogue, consultation, and collaborative planning, which enabled beneficiaries to actively contribute to programme decisions and implementation processes. This active involvement enhanced participants' sense of belonging, responsibility, and ownership of programme activities.

One farmer beneficiary explained:

P04 (Farmer Beneficiary):

"Before new activities are introduced, we are first invited to meetings where our opinions are sought. Sometimes our suggestions change how the programme is implemented. This makes us feel that the programme also belongs to us."

Similarly, one trader beneficiary observed:

P09 (Trader Beneficiary):

"They do not just tell us what to do. They ask us what challenges we face and what support we need before making decisions. That makes us feel respected and included."

These responses demonstrate that participatory communication moved beyond information sharing and created meaningful spaces for beneficiaries to influence programme decisions. Through dialogue, consultation, and collaborative planning, participants were able to share their experiences, priorities, and contextual realities, which informed programme implementation and strengthened collective ownership.

Maina (2020) observes that when communities actively participate in decision-making processes, they develop stronger ownership, commitment, and accountability toward development interventions. Similarly, Servaes and Servaes (2021) argue that participatory communication promotes empowerment, democratic engagement, and inclusive governance by positioning communities as active contributors in development processes rather than passive recipients of external interventions. The findings of this study therefore suggest that participatory communication strengthened shared decision-making and inclusive participation by creating opportunities for dialogue, consultation, and collaborative planning among programme beneficiaries.

Bottom-Up Communication Strategy and Implementation of Social Development Programmes

This section explores how feedback from community members influenced programme implementation.

Perceived Influence of Bottom-Up Communication

Participants consistently highlighted the importance of bottom-up communication as a channel through which they could express their experiences, concerns, and suggestions. This form of communication was seen as critical in ensuring that programmes remained relevant to community needs.

One participant explained:

P03 (Farmer beneficiary):

“We are given a chance to speak about the challenges we face. When we explain our situation, they can understand us better and sometimes adjust the programme.”

Another respondent noted:

P05 (Trader beneficiary):

“Our feedback helps improve the programme because we are the ones experiencing it on the ground. When we speak, they learn what is working and what is not.”

Participants also emphasized that bottom-up communication enhanced responsiveness and adaptability:

P08 (Farmer beneficiary):

“When we raise issues, they try to address them. It may not happen immediately, but you can see that they are listening and making some changes.”

Another participant added:

P09 (Trader beneficiary):

“The programme improves because they listen to us. Without that, they would not know the real challenges we face.”

Interpretation of the Findings

The findings demonstrate that bottom-up communication enhances programme responsiveness and contextual relevance. By allowing community members to share lived experiences, this approach ensures that interventions are grounded. This supports arguments by Isidiho and Sabran (2016) that bottom-up communication strengthens programme acceptance and effectiveness by incorporating local knowledge into decision-making processes. These findings are also supported by recent scholarship which highlights the role of bottom-up

communication in enhancing programme responsiveness and contextual relevance. Bottom-up communication enables the incorporation of local knowledge, thereby improving the alignment between programme design and community

Adaptive Learning and Programme Responsiveness

Another important theme that emerged from the findings was the role of bottom-up communication in promoting adaptive learning and programme responsiveness. Participants indicated that opportunities to share experiences, challenges, and emerging realities enabled programme implementers to make timely adjustments to interventions based on local needs and contextual conditions. This suggests that bottom-up communication did not merely function as a mechanism for collecting feedback but also served as an important learning process through which programme strategies were continuously reviewed, refined, and improved.

One farmer explained:

P08 (Farmer): “When we reported that some farming methods were not working because of drought, the trainers listened to us and changed the advice they were giving. They introduced drought-tolerant practices that were easier for us to apply in our area.”

Similarly, one trader observed:

P16 (Trader):

“After we explained our transport and storage challenges, the programme officers came back with practical market coordination solutions. This helped reduce losses and made our work easier.”

These responses demonstrate that community feedback was not merely collected for compliance purposes but was actively integrated into programme decision-making and implementation. Through continuous interaction with beneficiaries, programme implementers were able to identify emerging challenges, reassess existing approaches, and introduce context-specific adjustments that responded more effectively to community realities.

Silvio Waisbord (2020) argues that effective development communication requires continuous learning, responsiveness, and the integration of stakeholder feedback into programme implementation. Similarly, Everett M. Rogers (2003) observes that feedback, peer learning, and contextual adaptation are critical in influencing the adoption and sustained utilisation of innovations within social systems. The findings of this study therefore suggest that bottom-up communication promoted adaptive learning by enabling programme adjustments based on local experiences, emerging challenges, and changing environmental conditions, thereby strengthening programme responsiveness and stakeholder confidence in Eastern Africa Grain Council interventions.

Implications of Bottom-Up Communication

Participants identified empowerment and inclusion as key strengths of bottom-up communication. The opportunity to express views and influence programme processes was seen as a significant shift from traditional development approaches.

Interpretation of the Findings

These findings reinforce the argument by Zaval and Cornwell (2017) that communication strategies must move beyond “one-size-fits-all” approaches. The challenges related to language complexity identified in this study reflect broader concerns in development communication regarding accessibility and inclusivity. Recent research indicates that effective communication must be tailored to audience characteristics, including literacy levels, cultural context, and language preferences (Servaes & Thomas, 2020). The finding reinforces the argument that communication strategies should be context-sensitive rather than marginalised, particularly in rural settings.

Communication Challenges and Suggested Improvements

In addition to the communication strategies examined in this study, participants also highlighted several communication challenges that affected their participation and the effectiveness of programme implementation. These challenges largely related to language accessibility, timing of engagement activities, and delays in feedback processes. Participants further provided practical suggestions for strengthening communication processes within EAGC-led programmes.

Communication Challenges

One of the major challenges that emerged from the focus group discussions was the use of technical language that was sometimes difficult for some beneficiaries to understand, particularly older farmers with limited formal education. Participants indicated that technical agricultural concepts were occasionally communicated using language that was not easily accessible to all members of the community.

One participant explained:

FGD-01 (Farmer):

“Sometimes the trainers use technical farming terms that older farmers do not easily understand. Some of us need the information explained in simpler language or in our local language before we can fully understand what is expected.”

Similarly, another participant observed:

FGD-02 (Farmer):

“There are times when meetings are called on market days or during busy farming periods. This makes it difficult for some of us to attend because we have family and business responsibilities.” Participants also expressed concern regarding delays in receiving responses after raising concerns or providing feedback during programme implementation.

FGD-03 (Trader):

“Sometimes we share our concerns during meetings, but it takes a long time before we receive feedback or see action being taken. This can make some members feel that their views are not being considered immediately.”

These responses suggest that although communication structures existed within EAGC programmes, certain operational and contextual barriers limited the effectiveness of communication and the consistency of stakeholder participation. The findings indicate that communication effectiveness is influenced not only by the content of messages, but also by accessibility, timing, and responsiveness. Jan Servaes and Pradip Ninan Thomas (2020) observe that effective development communication requires communication processes that are context-sensitive, inclusive, and responsive to the socio-cultural realities of target communities. Similarly, Silvio Waisbord (2020) argues that communication becomes more effective when stakeholders receive timely responses and can observe how their contributions influence programme decisions.

Suggested Improvements

Participants also proposed several practical recommendations for strengthening communication and improving stakeholder engagement within EAGC-led social development programmes. One of the most common suggestions was the need for more regular community-based engagement forums that would create additional opportunities for dialogue, consultation, and collaborative decision-making.

One participant stated:

FGD-04 (Farmer):

“If village meetings were held more regularly, more people would participate and share their experiences. Sometimes important discussions happen when only a few members are present.” Another participant recommended greater use of locally appropriate communication channels and language.

One trader explained:

FGD-05 (Trader):

“Using mobile phone messages, WhatsApp groups, and local language would improve communication because people would receive information early and understand it better.”

Another participant added:

FGD-06 (Trader):

“Using mobile phone messages and local language would help us receive information early and prepare better for programme activities.”

Interpretation of the findings

Finding further suggested that continuous communication beyond formal meetings would strengthen trust, transparency, and accountability between programme implementers and beneficiaries.

The results indicate that beneficiaries value communication approaches that are regular, accessible, culturally relevant, and supported by appropriate digital and community-based platforms. The findings further suggest that strengthening community dialogue forums and digital feedback mechanisms would enhance stakeholder engagement, responsiveness, and programme sustainability. Paolo Mefalopulos (2018) observes that effective participatory communication requires continuous interaction, feedback integration, and the use of communication channels that are appropriate to local contexts. Similarly, Manyozo (2019) argues that sustainable development communication depends on communication structures that promote dialogue, accessibility, and long-term stakeholder engagement.

Integrated Analysis of the Findings

This study showed that the successful implementation of social development programmes did not depend on a single communication strategy but on the integration of participatory, top-down, bottom-up and corporate communication approaches. This comprehensive approach is increasingly supported by development communication research, which finds that no single communication strategy is adequate for dealing with the multifaceted challenges of delivering any programme. Rather, successful communication systems demonstrate interaction and complementarity and are flexible when it comes to different channels of communication (Waisbord, 2020).

This study adds to the body of knowledge by showing how these communication strategies interact in practice, instead of working in isolation. In this study, participatory communication emerged as the most influential communication approach in strengthening

ownership, trust, and long-term stakeholder commitment. This aligns with other studies showing that participatory approaches increase programme legitimacy and sustainability due to their role in enhancing community agency (Manyozo, 2019; Chitnis, 2022). Theoretically we conclude that communication is best when it is dialogic, inclusive, and responsive rather than just directive.

Participants' ability to make inquiries, engage, and shape processes in programmes signals a shift from being 'received by' to 'engaged', and in turn, increases comprehension, ownership, and commitment to programme results. Top-down communication, which is essential to structure the processes, coordinate between project stakeholders and to provide technical direction, was most effective when it was combined with participatory mechanisms. This aligns with Steyn (2018), who suggests that leadership communication is critical for organisational alignment but requires interactive methods to make sure stakeholders and their needs are met, and that people are included. A bottom-up approach was important for making the programme more relevant and responsive. This approach enabled community members to express their lived experiences which facilitated programme tweaks based on reality, rather than merely theoretical.

This evidence is consistent with Diffusion of Innovation Theory (Rogers, 2003) and is confirmed by new work focusing on the role of interpersonal communication and feedback in the adoption of innovation in context of development (Mefalopulos, 2018; Waisbord, 2020). Corporate communication promoted institutional credibility and trust and underscored the significance of straightforward, consistent and clear organizational communication. Yet its effectiveness was determined to be influenced by simple language and context specific ways of communicating that relate to the context-specific social contexts of the audience. From a Systems Theory approach, these results validate that communication is an interrelated system where each element contributes to the performance and effectiveness of the others.

The weakness of any one communication strategy can affect the system, but successful integration will facilitate coordination of the programme and engagement with other key stakeholders and will contribute to overall success. From a contemporary theoretical point of view, the results also highlight that the communication in development is increasingly being realized as a dynamic, two-way, relational process, as opposed to straightforward information dissemination. Recent works highlight that sustainable development outcomes arise from ongoing interaction among stakeholders that leads to feedback, adaptation, and mutual learning (Manyozo, 2019; Servaes & Thomas, 2020).

Overall, the findings of this study suggest that sustainable social development programmes require an integrated and multidirectional communication model that effectively combines dialogue through participatory communication, structural coordination through top-

down communication, responsiveness through bottom-up communication, and institutional coherence through corporate communication. Such an integrated communication approach enhances stakeholder engagement, strengthens coordination among programme actors, and increases the likelihood of long-term programme sustainability.

The implications of these findings are significant, as they reinforce the view that communication should not be perceived as a supplementary function, but rather as a strategic and central component of development practice that directly influences programme implementation and outcomes. Additionally, this study contributes to existing scholarship by providing empirical evidence on how integrated communication strategies operate in practice, thereby advancing understanding of communication as a critical determinant of programme effectiveness, stakeholder engagement, and sustainability within agricultural-based social development interventions in Kenya.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that communication strategies are not peripheral tools, but essential determinants of effective programme implementation in social development contexts. Participatory communication plays a central role in strengthening stakeholder engagement, community ownership, trust, and inclusive decision-making. However, the findings further demonstrate that participatory communication is most effective when integrated with complementary top-down, bottom-up, and corporate communication strategies.

The study also concludes that top-down communication contributes to technical guidance, role clarity, and programme coordination, while bottom-up communication strengthens stakeholder feedback integration, adaptive learning, and programme responsiveness. Similarly, corporate communication enhances transparency, accountability, organisational credibility, and stakeholder trust.

Overall, the study concludes that sustainable social development programmes require integrated, multidirectional, and context-sensitive communication systems in which dialogue, structure, responsiveness, and organisational coherence function as interconnected processes. Communication should therefore be understood not as a supplementary activity, but as a strategic and indispensable component of effective development practice.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the effectiveness of communication strategies in the implementation of social development programmes.

First, development organisations should institutionalise integrated communication frameworks that deliberately combine participatory, top-down, bottom-up, and corporate communication strategies across the programme cycle. The findings of this study demonstrate that no single communication approach is sufficient to address the complexity of programme implementation. Rather, programme effectiveness is enhanced through the interaction and complementarity of multiple communication processes. Silvio Waisbord (2020) and Jan Servaes and Pradip Ninan Thomas (2020) similarly emphasise the importance of multidirectional communication systems in strengthening stakeholder engagement, programme effectiveness, and long-term sustainability.

Second, development organisations should strengthen participatory communication mechanisms by establishing structured and inclusive engagement platforms such as community dialogue forums, participatory planning sessions, and collaborative decision-making processes. Although the study established that participatory communication enhances ownership, trust, and stakeholder commitment, the findings also revealed that meaningful participation may be constrained by institutional structures and implementation practices. Strengthening inclusive engagement platforms would therefore promote shared decision-making, accountability, and sustained stakeholder involvement (Manyozo, 2019; Chitnis, 2022).

Third, organisations should establish structured, responsive, and context-sensitive feedback systems that facilitate continuous interaction between programme implementers and beneficiaries. The findings indicate that bottom-up communication enhances programme responsiveness and adaptive learning when community feedback is systematically captured, analysed, and incorporated into programme adjustments. Organisations should therefore institutionalise formal feedback mechanisms and ensure that feedback loops are closed by communicating back to stakeholders how their contributions have influenced programme decisions and outcomes (Waisbord, 2020).

Fourth, development organisations should strengthen context-sensitive communication by simplifying technical language, adapting communication messages to local socio-cultural realities, and aligning engagement schedules with beneficiaries' socio-economic routines. The findings demonstrate that communication is more effective when messages are accessible, culturally relevant, and responsive to the linguistic, educational, and economic characteristics of target communities. Context-sensitive communication therefore enhances participation, inclusivity, and programme relevance (Servaes & Thomas, 2020).

Fifth, development organisations should invest in capacity building for communication practitioners, programme staff, and community stakeholders. The findings indicate that the effectiveness of integrated communication strategies depends not only on the communication approaches adopted, but also on the capacity of actors to facilitate dialogue, manage stakeholder relationships, interpret feedback, and implement adaptive communication strategies. Capacity-building initiatives should therefore focus on strengthening competencies in participatory facilitation, stakeholder engagement, feedback management, and strategic communication design (Mefalopulos, 2018).

Sixth, organisations should institutionalise regular community dialogue forums and appropriate digital feedback mechanisms to strengthen stakeholder engagement, transparency, and programme responsiveness. The findings show that continuous interaction between programme implementers and beneficiaries enhances trust, accountability, and timely adaptation of interventions. Digital and community-based communication platforms would therefore support real-time engagement and strengthen the sustainability of development interventions.

Finally, organisations and policymakers should integrate communication as a strategic function within organisational and policy frameworks. The study demonstrates that communication plays a central role in shaping programme implementation, stakeholder relationships, and development outcomes, and should therefore not be treated as a peripheral or supportive activity. Organisations should allocate adequate resources, establish clear communication structures, and ensure alignment between communication objectives and programme goals to strengthen coordination, accountability, and long-term sustainability of development programmes (Mefalopulos, 2018).

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDIES

The researcher suggests future research should explore the application of communication strategies across different sectors, including health, education, and governance, to enhance the generalisability of findings. Comparative studies across counties and regions would further provide deeper insights into how socio-cultural contexts shape communication effectiveness in development programmes. In addition, future studies could adopt mixed methods approaches to integrate qualitative insights with quantitative analysis, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between communication strategies and programme outcomes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Longitudinal research designs would also be valuable in examining how communication strategies influence programme sustainability over time.

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APPENDICES

Interview Guide

The following questions guided the in-depth interviews:

- i. How does participatory communication influence the implementation of social development programmes in your area?
- ii. How does top-down communication affect your involvement in programme activities?
- iii. How does bottom-up communication help in addressing community concerns?
- iv. How does corporate communication influence trust in the organisation?
- v. In your experience, which communication approaches have been most helpful in programme implementation, and why?
- vi. What challenges do you experience in communication during programme implementation?
- vii. What suggestions would you give to improve communication strategies in the programmes?

Note: Probing questions would be used where necessary to seek clarification, elaboration, and examples from participants.

Focus Group Discussion Guide

- i. How are communication strategies used in the implementation of EAGC programmes?
- ii. What role does community participation play in programme success?
- iii. How do leadership communication practices affect programme coordination?
- iv. How does feedback from community members influence programme activities?
- v. What communication challenges exist in the programmes?
- vi. What improvements would you recommend?
- vii. How does organisational communication influence trust, transparency, and accountability within EAGC programmes?