

**Participatory Learning and Action as a Communication Strategy for
Fostering Environmental Dialogue and Action in Makilolo-Okomu
Community of Edo State**

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Abstract

This paper examines how Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) functions as a communication strategy for fostering environmental dialogue and catalysing collaborative action within Makilolo-Okomu Creek Community of Ovia South-West Local Government Area of Edo State, Nigeria. The study draws on empirical data generated through focus group discussions and in-depth interviews conducted with community members as well as other local stakeholders to contend that Participatory Learning Action (PLA) is a handy strategy for communicating environmental action. The findings reveal that, prior to PLA engagement, community members possessed rich experiential ecological knowledge yet remained structurally excluded from the formal communicative channels through which environmental and social development decisions were made. Okomu Oil Palm Company and the Okomu National Park operate within the community's territorial boundaries, yet residents reported no formal memorandum of understanding and no participatory input into decisions shaping their livelihoods. Following structured PLA intervention which incorporates community mapping, pairwise ranking, problem identification, and community action planning, participants reported measurable shifts in their environmental awareness, collective agency, and capacity for evidence-based advocacy with external institutional actors. This study concludes that PLA's communicative value transcends information transfer, to a more concerted methodical tool that serves multinational companies and their host creek communities in conflicts.

Keywords: Participatory Learning and Action, environmental dialogue, community communication, Niger Delta, narrative analysis, Makilolo-Okomu

Introduction

Environmental degradation and social underdevelopment in the Niger Delta have sustained decades of scholarly attention, yet the communicative dimensions of community-level responses to these compounding challenges remain, to a considerable degree, underexplored. The proliferation of extractive and agro-industrial operations across creek communities in Delta and Edo States has generated not only documented ecological harm but a deeper crisis of communicative exclusion, wherein local communities are structurally positioned outside the decision-making conversations that materially shape their immediate environments. Makilolo-Okomu Creek Community, situated within the broader Okomu Kingdom of Ovia South-West Local Government Area in Edo State, encapsulates this predicament.

Residents of Makilolo-Okomu have witnessed the compounding effects of agro-industrial land use, restrictions associated with the Okomu National Park, progressive deterioration of road networks and waterways, and the near-total absence of basic social infrastructure including schools, healthcare facilities, potable water, and market facilities whilst the Okomu Oil Palm Company and the federal Okomu National Park continue to operate profitably on the community's ancestral territorial boundaries, offering no formal memorandum of understanding with the host community and providing minimal corporate social investment. What distinguishes the Makilolo-Okomu situation from mere infrastructure deprivation is the structural communicative exclusion that has accompanied it. Community members have historically lacked the organised knowledge frameworks, institutional access, and advocacy literacy to engage effectively with the formal actors, government agencies, corporate representatives, and development organisations whose decisions shape their lives. This communicative deficit reflects the architecturally reproduced institutional arrangements that privilege technical expertise over indigenous ecological knowledge and formal legal processes over community-based claim-making.

Several scholars (Servaes, 2020; Waisbord, 2020; Tufte, 2017) working within participatory communication theory and development communication traditions have drawn attention to the way such exclusions are reproduced through dominant communication models that conflate information delivery with meaningful participation. It is within this context that Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) emerges as both a methodological instrument and a communicative strategy.

PLA, whose intellectual genealogy traces back to the foundational work on participatory rural appraisal and whose epistemological commitments are deeply indebted to Paulo Freire's transformative pedagogy, offers a structured framework through which communities develop shared environmental narratives, build inter-stakeholder dialogue, and transform distributed experiential knowledge into institutionally legible advocacy. This paper, therefore, examines the instrumentality of PLA in reorganising the communicative relationships through which environmental and social development discourse flows.

Conceptual and Theoretical Explanations

This study is anchored in two complementary theoretical traditions, Participatory Communication Theory (PCT) and Sustainable Development Theory (SDT). Together, these intellectual formations provide a coherent epistemological basis for examining PLA as both a communicative and a developmental instrument. PCT conceptualises communication as a dialogical, power-sensitive social practice grounded in the historical experiences and relational contexts of those who communicate. Servaes (2020) argues that participatory communication entails structural changes in communicative relationships unlike the stylistic adjustments to information dissemination obtainable in mass communication. He insists that “genuine communication for development requires rethinking whose knowledge counts, whose priorities shape collective action, and whose voices are amplified in institutional processes” (p. 47). This structural orientation sits in productive tension with conventional development communication models in which communities receive pre-formulated messages designed by external experts. The study's perspective on this distinction is that until the structural conditions enabling meaningful community voice are transformed, even the most well-intentioned information campaigns will fail to produce lasting environmental behavioural change in marginalised creek communities.

The Freirean inheritance within PCT is particularly significant for the Niger Delta context. Tufte (2017) argues that “communication that genuinely serves social change must begin from the lived experience and critical consciousness of those most affected by the conditions requiring change” (p. 83). This notion of conscientisation is the process through which communities develop critical awareness of their social and ecological conditions as a precondition for transformative action maps directly onto PLA's procedural commitments. When Makilolo-Okomu community members engaged in community mapping exercises

during the PLA intervention, they were actively constructing, validating, and communicating knowledge about that environment in ways that generated new critical awareness and new advocacy capacity.

Sustainable Development Theory, particularly in its post-Brundtland articulations, emphasises the inextricability of ecological, social, and economic dimensions of development and insists that sustainable outcomes cannot be achieved through top-down planning processes that exclude the communities most directly dependent on the natural resources under management. Ife (2019) argues that community development in an era of profound ecological and social uncertainty must prioritise “the reconstruction of community agency as the foundational condition for sustainability” (p. 142), and that external development actors whether governmental, corporate, or non-governmental cannot substitute for the locally grounded, community-owned agency that genuine sustainability requires.

This theoretical position has direct relevance to the Makilolo-Okomu situation, where decades of development activity by Okomu Oil Palm and the national park authority have proceeded in the community's geographical vicinity without generating institutional frameworks for community participation in decision-making. The absence of a memorandum of understanding between the community and these corporate and governmental actors is, from a sustainable development perspective, a structural contradiction anchored on the idea that sustainable resource management in a community whose livelihoods depend on those same resources cannot be achieved without the communicative and participatory inclusion of that community.

The synthesis of PCT and SDT provides this study with a theoretical framework that positions communication as the constitutive fabric through which communities develop the shared understandings, relational trust, and collective agency necessary for sustainable environmental action. This study contends that this synthetic framework is especially productive for analysing PLA in the Niger Delta context because it attends simultaneously to the communicative dimensions of participatory practice and the developmental conditions that participatory communication seeks to produce. A framework focused on either dimension in isolation would miss what is most distinctive about PLA's contribution; which is its capacity to link the process of communication with the substance of sustainable development in communities whose communicative exclusion has itself been a primary obstacle to that development.

The Study Area and Context

Makilolo-Okomu is a creek community forming part of the Okomu Kingdom within the Ovia South-West Local Government Area of Edo State, Nigeria. Named after Makilolo, the founding patriarch of the settlement, the community occupies a geographically strategic yet institutionally marginalised position within the broader Okomu territorial landscape. It is situated along riverine corridors within proximity to the Okomu National Park, one of Nigeria's surviving lowland rainforest reserves and the Okomu Oil Palm Company, both of which exercise significant material influence over the community's ecological conditions and livelihood prospects without, as field data confirm, any formal participatory or consultative relationship with the community.

The community's inhabitants are predominantly of Ijaw ethnic identity and have historically derived livelihoods from artisanal fishing, subsistence agriculture, and forest resource harvesting. Community members report declining yields in both fishing and farming activities, attributable to a combination of waterway siltation, restrictions imposed by the national park on agricultural land extension, and the broader ecological disruption associated with oil palm cultivation in adjacent forest reserves. Infrastructural conditions within Makilolo-Okomu are severely constrained. Field data indicate the absence of motorable roads, functioning healthcare facilities, potable water supply, reliable electricity, and secondary education institutions. Children of secondary school age must board with relatives in distant towns, a situation that generates significant financial and social strain on families.

The community's political position within the local government system is also structurally precarious. As an Ijaw community within an administratively Benin-dominated local government, residents report systematic exclusion from formal governance processes, limited voter registration, absence of community representation at ward level, and a traditional governance structure whose formal recognition including the issuance of a staff of office to the traditional ruler has been withheld by the state government. The community's chairman, at the time of fieldwork, was actively working to rebuild a dialogue with Okomu Oil Palm, having recognised that the prior absence of relational trust between the community and the company had reinforced both parties' isolation. This rebuilding of inter-institutional communication was itself, community members noted, a product of emergent participatory processes in the community. These conditions such as

ecological vulnerability, infrastructural deprivation, political marginalisation, and communicative exclusion from institutional decision-making collectively constitute the foundational rationale for investigating PLA's effectiveness as a communication strategy in this specific community context.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design consistent with the interpretive paradigm, which foregrounds the lived experiences, meanings, and social constructions of research participants as the primary objects of inquiry. The study's data was generated through two principal qualitative methods: focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews (IDIs). For the Makilolo-Okomu community, two focus group discussions were conducted, comprising one male group and one female group, each with a minimum of six and a maximum of twelve participants drawn from diverse demographic segments of the community, including farmers, fisherfolk, youth leaders, women cooperative members, and community elders. The FGDs were structured around a schedule of open-ended questions designed to elicit collective narratives about environmental and social challenges, existing communication dynamics with external institutional actors, perceptions of the PLA process, and observations about changes in community agency and collective planning following PLA engagement.

Three in-depth interviews (IDI) were conducted with purposively selected individual participants in Makilolo-Okomu, targeting the community vice-chairman, the community secretary, and a senior youth leader affiliated with the Okomu Clan Youth Council. IDIs provided individual-level narrative depth that complemented and enriched the collective narratives generated through FGDs. Data triangulation in this study was achieved by systematically comparing and cross-referencing the thematic patterns emerging from FGD and IDI narratives, attending to convergence, divergence, and points of mutual illumination between the two data streams.

All FGDs and IDIs were conducted in a combination of standard Nigerian English, Nigerian Pidgin English, and Ijaw dialect, with a trained local research assistant providing interpretation where required. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participant anonymity is protected through the use of coded identifiers (e.g., FGD-M1, FGD-F2, IDI-V1) in data presentation. Sessions were audio-recorded with participant consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

PLA Intervention Design

The PLA intervention conducted in Makilolo-Okomu encompassed four structured activities: community mapping and transect walk, problem identification, pairwise ranking, and community action planning. These activities were designed to be sequentially cumulative, with each stage building on the shared knowledge and relational trust generated through the preceding one. Community mapping and transect walks enabled community members to visualise and collectively analyse their spatial environment, including natural resource features, pollution sources, and infrastructure conditions. Problem identification created a structured dialogic space for community members to articulate social and environmental challenges in their own terms. Pairwise ranking used a cardboard matrix to facilitate systematic, transparent community prioritisation of identified challenges. Community action planning translated the ranked priorities into a co-developed, community-owned action framework with identified roles, responsibilities, and timelines.

This four-stage sequence instantiates what participatory communication scholars describe as a "communicative spiral", a process in which each communicative encounter generates relational conditions trust, shared vocabulary, and collective identity that make subsequent, more assertive communication possible (Kindon, Pain, & Kesby, 2022, p. 38). This study's perspective on the design of the PLA intervention is that its communicative value derived not merely from the tools employed but from their sequential logic, which mirrored the cognitive and relational process through which communities move from descriptive awareness of problems to analytical understanding and finally to purposive collective action.

Positionality and Reflexivity

The researcher acknowledges that the conduct of PLA fieldwork within Makilolo-Okomu was not a neutral process. As Tuhiwai Smith (2021) argues, any research conducted in communities with histories of marginalisation and exploitation must attend critically to its own power dynamics, acknowledging "the way in which research has been complicit in the silencing and misrepresentation of marginalised communities" (p. 1). Community members in Makilolo-Okomu were initially sceptical of the research team's presence, having experienced numerous previous visits by researchers, government officials, and company representatives from which no material improvement had resulted. This scepticism was directly articulated during fieldwork and is itself a significant datum for understanding the communicative context in which PLA was introduced. The research team addressed

this by providing transparent explanations of the study's purpose and scope, committing to return a copy of findings to the community, and framing the research as generating community-owned knowledge rather than extracting community data for external use.

Findings and Narrative Analysis

The narrative accounts generated through both FGDs and IDIs in Makilolo-Okomu converged around a shared characterisation of pre-PLA environmental and social consciousness within the community. Participants consistently described a condition of rich experiential knowledge existing entirely outside any institutional framework through which that knowledge could influence the decisions shaping community life. Community members could articulate in vivid, precise detail the symptoms of environmental and social deterioration affecting their livelihoods; declining fish stocks, waterway deterioration, encroachment on farming land, yet had neither the conceptual vocabulary to situate these observations within formal environmental governance frameworks nor the communicative access to the institutions nominally responsible for addressing them.

The community chairman, speaking through the vice-chairman who was interviewed during the study, articulated this condition as one of complete institutional abandonment:

From time immemorial, government has not been here. No school. No road. No health facility. No water. Okomu Oil Palm is here, the National Park is here, but there is no MOU with us, there is nothing between us and them. We are just here, like we are invisible." (IDI-V1, Vice-Chairman, Makilolo-Okomu Community).

This account was confirmed and deepened by the community secretary, who noted that previous attempts to communicate community concerns to the company had produced a pattern of procedural deferral:

If we write appointment to the company, they will say come. When we come, they say come back. When we come back, they say the position is filled. We have been writing, they have been saying come back, come back. And nothing comes back (IDI-S1, Community Secretary).

These accounts reveal the practical failure of communication between the community and external actors as well as a deeper epistemic injustice; that is, the systematic devaluation of community knowledge claims within institutional frameworks that recognise only formal, technically credentialed forms of expertise. This study contends that this epistemic dimension of communicative exclusion is what PLA is uniquely positioned to address, that is, giving institutional form and communicative legibility to the knowledge that community members already possessed as well as identifying with communities members the information they lacked.

FGD data from the women's group offered an additional dimension to this pre-PLA picture. Women participants, who bear primary responsibility for domestic food and water provision, described having developed sophisticated informal monitoring practices for tracking water quality and fish population changes over time, relying on observable ecological indicators accumulated over years of daily interaction with the community's riverine environment. Yet this knowledge had never been sought or incorporated by any environmental assessment process conducted in the area. One participant (FGD-F1) described the experience in terms that resonate directly with the Freirean notion of enforced communicative silence:

Nobody comes to ask what we see. They bring their own paper, their own machine, they take, they go. What we know from living on this river every day, they act like it is not important (FGD-F1, Female Community Member).

The convergence between IDI and FGD data on this theme is analytically significant. Both individual stakeholders and collective group participants narrated the same fundamental communicative condition: a community possessed of ecologically and socially relevant knowledge that external institutional actors were structurally arranged to ignore. This convergence across two distinct data generation methods strengthens the validity of this narrative finding and establishes the communicative context within which PLA's subsequent interventions must be understood.

The PLA Workshop as Communicative Architecture

The second major thematic cluster in the narrative data concerns the qualitative transformation in communicative space that PLA activities generated within Makilolo-Okomu. Participants across both FGDs and IDIs consistently described

the PLA workshop as creating a fundamentally different quality of encounter; between community members themselves and between the community and the research process than anything they had previously experienced in formal development or research contexts.

The community mapping and transect walk activities were identified with particular frequency as transformative communicative events. Community members described how the act of collectively mapping their territory on a physical surface marking road, waterways, farms, the oil palm company's boundaries, the national park's limits, and the community's own facilities produced a form of shared environmental knowledge that had not previously existed in consolidated form. Prior to the exercise, individual community members held partial, household-level or quarter-level knowledge of these spatial realities; the mapping process transformed this distributed knowledge into a collective visual artefact that the entire community could see, discuss, and build shared narrative around.

The youth leader who participated in the in-depth interview captured this transformation with precision:

When we drew the map together, we could see our own community for the first time as one thing. We could see where Okomu Oil Palm is. We could see where the national park is pressing us. We could see that our road stops here and does not go further. Before, everybody knows their own corner. Now we saw the whole thing together (IDI-Y1, Youth Council Leader, Okomu Clan).

This account points to a dimension of PLA's communicative contribution that is frequently under-theorised; that is, its capacity to generate intra-community dialogue and knowledge consolidation as the foundation for external advocacy. Much of the participatory development literature foregrounds community-to-institution communication, emphasising PLA's value as a bridge between community concerns and institutional decision-making. The Makilolo-Okomu findings suggest that an equally important prior communicative work concerns the construction of shared community narratives across internal social divisions between men and women, between quarters, between elders and youth that PLA's structured tools facilitate.

The pairwise ranking exercise provided a particularly clear illustration of this intra-community knowledge consolidation function. Through the systematic comparison of identified community challenges such as school, road, healthcare, market, water, electricity, security, and empowerment, community members arrived collectively at a ranked priority order that commanded community-wide legitimacy precisely because every community member had participated in producing it. The ranking exercise surfaced differences in perception between demographic groups. The male FGD participants, for instance, initially prioritised road access, whilst female participants placed greater weight on healthcare and education. The participatory process of negotiating these different priorities, through structured dialogue rather than elite decision-making, itself constituted a communicative achievement that PLA facilitated.

The male FGD group articulated the rationale for road prioritisation in terms that simultaneously communicated the community's infrastructural condition and its understanding of the cascading effects of road deprivation:

Without road you cannot have school, you cannot have health centre, you cannot have police, you cannot have market. Road is the first. When road is here, everything else will come. Our community is caged because there is no road (FGD-M3, Male Community Elder).

The study's perspective on this is that the pairwise ranking exercise did more than produce a ranked list of community priorities as with conventional PLA pairwise ranking practice. It produced a structured community argument about developmental causality. Unlike the conventional PLA instrumentalisation of participatory tools, the community members were constructed a reasoned, evidence-based developmental narrative that linked infrastructural connectivity to social service provision to community well-being. This kind of organised, evidence-based advocacy narrative is precisely what external institutional actors, government agencies, corporate CSR departments, development organisations can respond to. PLA had, through the ranking exercise, transformed the community's experiential frustrations into a clear advocacy document.

Barriers to Participation

The third thematic cluster addresses the barriers and constraints that participants identified as limiting the full realisation of PLA's communicative potential in Makilolo-Okomu. Honest engagement with these barriers is essential both to an

accurate assessment of PLA's effectiveness and to the development of practically useful recommendations for future participatory interventions in comparable community contexts.

The most pervasive and analytically significant barrier surfaced in the data was community scepticism rooted in historically accumulated disappointment. Community members in Makilolo-Okomu have been visited by researchers, NGO representatives, and government officials on multiple previous occasions, each encounter generating expectation without material outcome. One elder in the male FGD described this accumulated scepticism with a force that commanded the researchers' attention throughout the fieldwork process:

People like your team usually come to this place sometimes to ask and hear from them and all that. But at the end of the day, they never see anything in return. Nothing comes out of it. So, to him, they are even fed up with all these interviews. What should be the benefit after this? What are they going to get? That was what he was asking." (FGD-M2, Male Community Elder, reported via interpreter).

This account is analytically uncomfortable for PLA practitioners, because it identifies a systemic risk that participatory approaches share with the extractive research practices they seek to transcend, which is, the possibility that participatory processes generate community engagement and investment without producing the tangible improvements in community conditions that participants reasonably expect. This study contends that this concern is not a reason to abandon participatory approaches but rather a call for greater accountability in the design and follow-through of PLA interventions including transparent communication with communities about the scope and limitations of what specific PLA processes can deliver.

The second barrier concerned the sustainability of inter-institutional dialogue beyond the formal period of PLA activity. The community secretary (IDI-S1) noted that the chairman was actively working to rebuild a relationship with Okomu Oil Palm, having recognised that the prior absence of formalised dialogue had left the community with no institutional mechanism for communicating its concerns to the company. The absence of an MOU, despite years of corporate operation in the community's territory, meant that all communication between the community and the company occurred through informal, ad hoc contact that could be easily ignored

by corporate actors. PLA had not, in itself, resolved this structural gap, but it had equipped the community with a documented evidence base, including community maps, ranked priority lists, and a community action plan, that the chairman could deploy in negotiations with the company.

The third barrier was linguistic and communicative in a more immediate sense. The Ijaw-speaking elder participants whose ecological and social knowledge was most historically rooted found it more challenging to engage with the written documentation components of PLA activities. Kindon, Pain, and Kesby (2022) note that this “literacy trap” is a recognised risk in participatory practice, whereby written documentation requirements inadvertently replicate the literate/non-literate power differentials that PLA is designed to counteract (p. 112). The presence of a local interpreter and the emphasis on oral, visual, and kinetic engagement during the mapping and ranking exercises mitigated this risk significantly, and the FGD data suggest that elder participants regarded these non-textual components as particularly effective communicative modes.

PLA and the Institutional Dimension

The fourth thematic cluster concerns the institutional dimension of PLA's communicative contribution; that is, its capacity to translate community-generated knowledge into documentary forms that external actors' such as government agencies, corporate entities, civil society organisations can recognise, respond to, and be held accountable for. This translational function is among the most strategically significant aspects of PLA's communicative value in contexts of environmental governance, yet it is also among the most susceptible to misappropriation if the community voice is effaced from the documentary record.

IDI data from the community vice-chairman and secretary indicate that the community action plan developed through the PLA intervention had already been deployed as the basis for renewed advocacy approaches to Okomu Oil Palm:

Before we had the map and the ranking, if we go to the company, we go with our mouth, our complaints. They can say: this is not how we see it. They can disagree. Now we have a document. We have the community's paper. They cannot say we are making up the problem. The problem is there, written down, ranked by the people." (IDI-V1, Vice-Chairman, Makilolo-Okomu Community).

This account speaks directly to a dimension of PLA's communicative function that connects to broader questions of environmental justice, which is, the capacity to transform community ecological knowledge and social grievances into institutionally coherent documentary evidence without effacing the community voices and perspectives from which that knowledge derives. Before the PLA intervention, the community's concerns existed as oral narratives circulating within the community but invisible to external institutional actors. After the intervention, those same concerns were organised, prioritised, documented, and ready for advocacy engagement.

The youth leader offered a complementary institutional perspective, framing the community action plan in terms of community-level political empowerment:

If Okomu Oil Palm reads this document, they cannot pretend anymore that they do not know what we need. Before, they could say: nobody came to tell us. Now they cannot say that. The community has spoken with one voice and it is written down." (IDI-Y1, Youth Council Leader)

This account resonates directly with Gaventa's (2021) argument that effective community advocacy requires the articulation of grievances as well as the construction of "claim-making infrastructure" organised, documented, and collectively legitimated evidence frameworks that constrain the capacity of powerful actors to deny or deflect community concerns" (p. 12). PLA, through its structured tools, had created precisely this kind of claim-making infrastructure for Makilolo-Okomu. The study's perspective on this is that the construction of such infrastructure is inherently a communicative achievement, and that understanding PLA as a communication strategy requires recognising its claim-making infrastructure function as central, not peripheral, to its development communication contribution.

Narratives of Transformation

The fifth and final thematic cluster synthesises participant narratives that speak to the transformative communicative experiences associated with PLA engagement in Makilolo-Okomu. These narratives attend to what changed in the way participants understood themselves as communicative and political actors.

Female participants in the FGD provided some of the study's most analytically rich accounts of communicative transformation. Women in Makilolo-Okomu occupy a

structurally complex social position: they are often primary managers of the community's natural resource base such as fishing, farming, water collection, yet are typically excluded from formal community governance structures and have had no prior representation in the ad hoc engagements between community leaders and corporate actors. The PLA workshop's deliberate inclusion of a separate women's group discussion created, for many participants, a novel experience of their knowledge being formally solicited, recorded, and treated as relevant to community decision-making.

One female participant described this experience in terms that closely mirror what PCT theorists describe as communicative conscientisation:

This is the first time somebody came here and was asking us - the women- what do we think. Not just the chiefs, not just the chairman. Us. Our problems about the river, about the fish, about getting water for our children, they wrote it down. They put it in the ranking. It counted." (FGD-F2, Female Farmer)

The significance of this account extends beyond its surface content. This participant is describing a change in the communicative relationship between herself and the formal processes by which community concerns are prioritised and communicated to external actors. PLA had, from her perspective, created a precedent of women's voices being valued in community development discourse, a communicative precedent with potentially lasting implications for how the community negotiates future development engagements.

The male FGD data echoed this sense of communicative transformation, though articulated in more explicitly political terms. Several male participants described the community action plan as producing a qualitatively new sense of community coherence and collective purpose:

Before, everybody knows their own problem. Now we know the community's problem. We know the first thing we need, the second thing, the third thing. If somebody comes from government or company, we can say: this is what we need, in this order, for these reasons. We are not begging. We are demanding what is right (FGD-M1, Male Community Member).

The transition from “begging” to “demanding what is right” encapsulates a fundamental communicative shift that PCT associates with genuine participatory empowerment. Waisbord (2020) argues that participatory communication succeeds not when it produces compliance with externally defined development goals but when it “transforms community members from objects of communication to subjects of their own communicative agenda” (p. 134). The male FGD participant's self-articulation of this transition from passive recipient of whatever government and corporations chose to provide to active demandant of rights-based entitlements, represents precisely this kind of communicative subject-formation.

Across all five thematic clusters, the triangulation between FGD and IDI data consistently produced convergent narratives. Individual participants articulated in personal, reflective terms what group participants described in collective, deliberative terms; and both data streams narrated the same fundamental communicative arc; from exclusion and scepticism, through structured participatory dialogue, towards provisional but genuine communicative agency. The robustness of this convergence across two distinct data generation methods, and across gender, age, and positional lines within the community, strengthens confidence in the validity of the study's narrative findings.

Discussion

The findings from Makilolo-Okomu Creek Community offer several substantive points of engagement with existing scholarship on participatory communication, environmental governance, and development communication theory. The finding that PLA's most foundational communicative contribution in Makilolo-Okomu was the consolidation of intra-community environmental and social knowledge through the creation of shared community narratives out of previously distributed and individually held knowledge extends existing understandings of PLA's communicative function in ways that have practical implications for how participatory interventions are designed and evaluated. A substantial body of literature on PLA and participatory rural appraisal focuses on the community-to-institution communication bridge, treating as the primary measure of success the extent to which community knowledge reaches and influences formal decision-making processes (Bergdall, 2020; Gaventa, 2021). The Makilolo-Okomu findings suggest that this external advocacy function rests on a prior and equally important internal communicative work, which is the construction, through structured

participatory processes, of a shared community voice where previously only disparate individual voices existed.

This internal dimension of PLA's communicative contribution is particularly significant in communities like Makilolo-Okomu that are internally stratified along gender, age, and occupational lines and where the knowledge held by marginalised sub-groups (women, youth, subsistence farmers) has not previously been incorporated into the community's formal engagements with external actors. The PLA workshop's separate women's FGD, the pairwise ranking exercise's inclusion of all community voices in priority-setting, and the community mapping's documentation of ecological conditions as understood from multiple subject positions all served to consolidate this distributed knowledge into a collectively owned community narrative. This consolidation involves the redistribution of communicative authority within the community, and the study's findings suggest that this redistribution was experienced as transformative by participants who had previously been excluded from formal community deliberation.

The barriers identified in this study especially community scepticism rooted in historical disappointment, the literacy differential in documentation-intensive PLA phases, and the limited sustainability of institutional dialogue following the completion of formal PLA activities are consistent with, and extend, the critiques of participatory practice that have accumulated within the critical development literature. Mefalopulos (2020) argues that the participatory communication field must grapple seriously with what he calls the “accountability gap” the structural tension between PLA's commitment to community empowerment and the reality that participatory processes rarely succeed in structurally redistributing the institutional power that determines whether community knowledge and priorities translate into material outcomes (p. 67). The Makilolo-Okomu findings confirm the empirical relevance of this critique whilst demonstrating that skilled and context-sensitive facilitation specifically, the research team's transparency about the study's scope and limitations, its commitment to returning findings to the community, and its use of the local interpreter to ensure elder participation can meaningfully, if incompletely, address several of the most significant participation barriers.

The institutional dimension of the findings specifically, PLA's construction of a community-owned documentary evidence base that can serve as the basis for formal advocacy with corporate and governmental actors, raises important questions about the relationship between communicative practice and structural

power in environmental governance contexts. The community vice-chairman's articulation of the shift from informal complaint to documented claim-making resonates with Pettit and Roper's (2019) argument that effective participatory communication must ultimately engage with the "power to set the agenda, to determine what counts as evidence, and to decide whose knowledge is legitimate" (p. 434). The instrumentality of producing community-generated maps, rankings, and action plans, positions PLA to create documentary artefacts that can enter and potentially disrupt these agenda-setting processes. Whether this disruption will be sufficient to produce material change in Makilolo-Okomu's institutional relationships with Okomu Oil Palm and governmental actors remains to be seen and constitutes an important question for longitudinal follow-up research.

Conclusion

This paper has examined and analysed the communicative role of PLA in fostering environmental dialogue and catalysing collaborative action within Makilolo-Okomu Creek Community in Ovia South-West Local Government Area of Edo State, Nigeria. The narrative evidence generated through triangulated qualitative fieldwork focus group discussions with male and female community groups, in-depth interviews with community leadership and youth representatives, and participant observation during PLA workshop activities, demonstrates that PLA functions as a multi-layered communicative process whose transformative impacts operate at three distinct levels: the individual (epistemic self-confidence and communicative agency), the intra-community (knowledge consolidation and shared narrative construction), and the institutional (claim-making infrastructure for external advocacy).

The study concludes that PLA's communicative contribution to environmental sustainability and social development in Makilolo-Okomu cannot be reduced to information transfer as believed by many communications for development experts. More fundamentally, PLA reorganised the community's internal communicative relationships, creating structured space for marginalised voices particularly women and youth to contribute to collective knowledge-making and priority-setting. It also transformed the community's external communicative position, equipping it with documentary evidence and a prioritised advocacy framework that formal institutional actors cannot as easily ignore as oral grievances. These are communicative achievements of structural significance, and they warrant greater

theoretical attention in development communication scholarship than they have yet received.

For development practitioners and policymakers working in the Niger Delta, several practical implications emerge from this study. The most important amongst them is that, mechanisms for sustaining institutional dialogue between communities and relevant governmental and corporate actors, beyond the formal completion of PLA activities, must be built into intervention design from the outset including facilitating the formalisation of memoranda of understanding between creek communities and the companies operating in their territories. The absence of such formalised dialogue structures in Makilolo-Okomu has been a primary driver of the communicative exclusion that this study documents, and PLA alone cannot substitute for the structural institutional reforms necessary to address it.

Future research should extend the narrative analysis framework employed here to comparative longitudinal studies across multiple creek communities in the Niger Delta, tracking the sustainability of PLA's communicative impacts over multi-year timeframes and attending carefully to variation in institutional context, facilitation approach, and community governance structures. Such research would significantly advance the evidence base on participatory environmental communication in sub-Saharan Africa and contribute to the development of more effective, more accountable, and more genuinely community-driven approaches to environmental sustainability and social development in one of the world's most ecologically and socially complex regions.

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