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Ethical considerations in community engagement: A literature review of practices in Nigerian NGOs

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Abstract

This paper delves into the multifaceted realm of sustainable community development in Nigeria, with a keen focus on the ethical implications of non-governmental organizations' (NGOs) interventions. The primary aim was to discern the role of NGOs in fostering sustainable community development, especially in the Niger Delta region, a hotspot for oil exploration with its attendant environmental and socio-economic challenges. Through a comprehensive literature review, the study examined the historical context, the socio-economic landscape, and the environmental degradation resulting from oil activities. The methods employed involved a critical analysis of existing literature, supplemented by case studies and empirical data. Results highlighted the pivotal role of NGOs in addressing the challenges faced by communities in the Niger Delta. However, the ethical dimensions of their interventions raised pertinent questions about sustainability, the nature of their engagement, and the broader socio-political implications. The study underscored the concept of reciprocal responsibility, emphasizing the importance of co-created solutions and active community participation. In conclusion, while NGOs have made significant strides in community development, the ethical foundation of their initiatives determines their lasting impact. Recommendations include fostering informed consent, protecting vulnerable populations, nurturing genuine community partnerships, and prioritizing research into emerging ethical considerations. The paper paves the way for a more ethically grounded approach to community development, ensuring that interventions resonate with the aspirations and well-being of the communities they serve.

Keywords: Sustainable community development; NGOs; Niger Delta; Ethical implications; Reciprocal responsibility

1. Introduction

1.1. The Landscape of Community Engagement in Nigeria

Community engagement in Nigeria, particularly within regions such as the Niger Delta, has been a focal point of attention due to the extensive involvement of multinational enterprises and the subsequent environmental, social, and human rights implications. The Niger Delta region, abundant in oil reserves, has witnessed a surge in the activities of multinational corporations. However, these activities have often been associated with environmental pollution, human rights abuses, social conflicts, and other challenges (Denedo, Thomson, & Yonekura, 2017).

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International advocacy NGOs (iaNGOs) have played a pivotal role in highlighting and addressing these concerns. These NGOs have employed counter accounting as a tool to challenge and confront the dominant and unequal power relations, political ideologies, and to delegitimize corporate unsustainable practices. Counter accounts are symbolic political tactics that create alternative representations of the consequences of problematic conduct, aiming to instigate changes within existing governance systems or even a radical restructuring of these systems (Denedo, Thomson, & Yonekura, 2017).

Furthermore, the role of community engagement in health initiatives, such as polio eradication, has been significant. Efforts to eradicate polio globally have seen the involvement of various stakeholders, including civil society organizations, in ensuring community ownership of the initiative. This has been crucial in reversing public distrust and re-invigorating community ownership of efforts to fully vaccinate all children (Andrus & Perry, 2019).

Additionally, the ethical considerations in research have also seen the involvement of Research Ethics Committees (RECs) in Nigeria. These committees have undergone training and capacity-building initiatives to ensure the ethical conduct of research, emphasizing the importance of community engagement in the research process (Foláyan et al., 2014).

1.2. The Interplay of Ethics and Community Development

Nigeria, with one of the world's most significant Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) epidemics, has necessitated a multifaceted response to address the HIV crisis. Historically, community-based organizations (CBOs) have been at the forefront, playing an indispensable role in targeting key populations, such as men who have sex with men and sex workers, who are particularly burdened by HIV. These CBOs have been pivotal in the provision of health services across sub-Saharan Africa. However, there remains a knowledge gap regarding the management practices of CBOs that offer HIV prevention interventions (Akeju et al., 2021).

The role of CBOs in Nigeria is multifaceted. They serve as a bridge between the community and the broader health system, especially in the context of HIV prevention and treatment. Female sex workers (FSWs), for instance, are at a heightened risk of HIV infection, with an estimated prevalence of 14.4% in 2016. These populations face numerous challenges, including stigma, discrimination, and socio-economic stressors. While HIV prevention and treatment services are largely subsidized in Nigeria, the delivery structure and prevailing social norms can inhibit access to these services. CBOs, with their flexible organizational structure and rapport with vulnerable groups, are crucial in implementing prevention services (Akeju et al., 2021).

Furthermore, evidence suggests that CBO involvement in HIV service delivery can significantly enhance health service access and reduce HIV spread. This is achieved through effective community mobilization, engagement, and stigma reduction. However, the sustainability of these services is a concern, especially with the decline in funds from international donors for HIV-related services in low-and middle-income countries. Despite the funding challenges, Nigeria has historically been a significant recipient of Global Fund financing. Given the high HIV burden in Nigeria, the country remains central to global efforts to eradicate HIV. Hence, there is an emphasis on optimizing the efficiency of existing program funding to maximize the impact of limited resources (Akeju et al., 2021).

The interplay of ethics and community development in Nigeria, especially in the context of HIV prevention and treatment, underscores the importance of CBOs. Their role in bridging the gap between vulnerable populations and essential health services is invaluable. However, the sustainability of their operations in the face of dwindling international funding remains a concern. Efficient management practices and innovative funding models are essential to ensure the continued impact of CBOs in community development and health service provision.

1.2.1. Historical Ethical Practices in Nigerian Community Engagement

Historically, community engagement has been recognized as a pivotal element in medical research, especially in regions like Nigeria. Ethicists have consistently recommended it; research funders have mandated it, and ethics guidelines have advocated for it (Adhikari, Pell, & Cheah, 2019). The instrumental benefits of community engagement, such as promoting recruitment and retention in studies, have been highlighted. However, the ethical dimensions of community engagement, which encompass respecting individuals, communities, and stakeholders, building trust, determining appropriate benefits, and minimizing risks, have been less emphasized but are equally crucial (Adhikari et al., 2019).

The recent COVID-19 pandemic underscored the importance of community engagement in research. While the nature of the virus and national response strategies, such as social distancing, challenged traditional methods of community engagement, the role of community engagement in research during this period was undeniable. Researchers and

institutions were called upon to respond directly to the pandemic by addressing the emergency healthcare needs of the community (Tindana, de Vries, & Kamuya, 2020).

In the context of Nigeria, community engagement has played a significant role in addressing health challenges. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, African countries, including Nigeria, demonstrated strong political commitment and robust implementation of public health measures. These measures were complemented by nationwide lockdowns, travel restrictions, face mask mandates, testing, contact tracing, isolation, and community education and engagement (Nachega et al., 2021).

Furthermore, in regions like Ile-Ife in Southwest Nigeria, community engagement has been instrumental in addressing breastfeeding practices. Prelacteal feeding, an obstacle to optimal breastfeeding practices, has been prevalent in many communities. Through community-based cross-sectional studies, determinants of such practices have been identified, emphasizing the need for interventions that strengthen individual and community access to appropriate health information (Ogundele, Ogundele, & Adegoke, 2019).

1.2.2. Socio-Cultural Implications of Ethical Considerations

The socio-cultural fabric of Nigeria, a diverse nation with over 250 ethnic groups, plays a significant role in shaping ethical considerations, especially in areas like health, environment, and biotechnology. These considerations, deeply rooted in the country's traditions, beliefs, and practices, have implications for various sectors, including maternal health, livestock management, and environmental conservation.

Maternal health is a critical area where socio-cultural factors intersect with ethical considerations. Despite the preventable nature of maternal mortality, it remains a significant challenge in many African nations, including Nigeria. Factors such as low socioeconomic development, traditional beliefs, and practices contribute to this issue. For instance, certain socio-cultural practices influence pregnancy outcomes, emphasizing the need for interventions that strengthen individual and community access to appropriate health information (Olonade, Olawande, Alabi, & Imhonopi, 2019). The functionalist perspective, which examines the interrelated functions of various societal sectors, suggests that a weak social structure, resulting from socio-cultural factors, contributes to poor maternal health outcomes. Consequently, maternal mortality has debilitating effects on the socioeconomic development of the nation (Olonade et al., 2019).

In the realm of livestock management, the misuse of antimicrobials is a pressing concern, with socio-cultural activities significantly influencing this misuse. Pastoralists, who play a vital role in Nigeria's livestock sector, often resort to self-prescription of antimicrobials for their animals. Arbitrary applications for dosage determination, influenced by traditional beliefs and practices, further exacerbate the issue. This misuse of antimicrobials, driven by factors such as nomadic culture, low education, and weak financial status, has implications for the emergence of antimicrobial resistance, a global health threat (Alhaji & Isola, 2018).

Environmental conservation, particularly in regions like the Niger Delta, is another area where socio-cultural implications of ethical considerations come to the fore. Five decades of oil exploration have not only made Nigeria a major oil producer but have also led to significant environmental degradation in the Niger Delta. This degradation has had profound socio-cultural implications, affecting the economic, social, and cultural lives of the people. Land pollution, oil spills, and gas flaring have rendered agricultural lands infertile and fishing waters polluted. The result is a decline in food production, widespread poverty, erosion of cultural values, and increased intra- and intercommunal clashes (Nwachukwu & Mbachu, 2018).

The socio-cultural implications of ethical considerations in Nigeria are vast and multifaceted. From maternal health to livestock management and environmental conservation, these implications shape the nation's approach to various challenges, emphasizing the need for culturally sensitive and ethically sound interventions.

1.2.3. The Role of NGOs in Shaping Ethical Standards

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have been instrumental in shaping ethical standards in various sectors within Nigeria. Their influence spans across health, environment, finance, and more, ensuring that practices align with globally recognized ethical norms and that the rights and well-being of individuals and communities are upheld.

In the health sector, the establishment of regulatory bodies has been pivotal in ensuring ethical compliance, especially in areas of research and medical practice. Before 2007, Nigeria lacked specific guidelines or laws to regulate health research. However, this changed with the establishment of the National Health Research Ethics Committee (NHREC) in 2007. The NHREC's primary role is to ensure ethical conduct in research and accredit institutional and state health

research ethics committees (HRECs). Four years post-establishment, a qualitative study revealed that while about 30 institutional HRECs had been set up, their functionality was hampered by financial constraints and a lack of qualified individuals. Despite these challenges, the establishment of the NHREC and subsequent HRECs marked a significant stride towards ensuring ethical compliance in health research in Nigeria (Agunloye, Salami, & Lawan, 2014).

In the financial sector, ethical compliance in financial reporting is of paramount importance. Regulatory bodies play a crucial role in ensuring that financial reports are not only accurate but also ethically sound. A study examining the role of regulatory bodies in relation to financial reporting in Nigeria found that accounting ethics significantly impacted the quality of financial reporting. The study further revealed a significant level of compliance with ethical standards among professional accountants in Nigeria. This underscores the importance of ethical awareness and training among professional accountants and accounting students in higher institutions, ensuring the quality of financial reporting aligns with ethical standards (Babayanju, Animasaun & Sanyaolu, 2017).

NGOs, through various regulatory bodies, have played a significant role in shaping ethical standards in Nigeria. Their influence, spanning across different sectors, ensures that practices within the country align with globally recognized ethical norms. While challenges persist, the efforts of these NGOs and regulatory bodies have undoubtedly set Nigeria on a path towards a more ethically compliant future.

1.2.4. Past Ethical Dilemmas and Resolutions in Community Engagement

Historically, Nigeria has grappled with various ethical dilemmas in community engagement, particularly in sectors such as health, education, and environmental conservation. These dilemmas often arise from the intersection of traditional beliefs, socio-cultural practices, and the need to align with globally recognized ethical standards.

In the realm of health, the prevention science approach has been a focal point, emphasizing the identification of risk and protective factors in adolescent risk behavior. While this approach has generated numerous research and prevention programs over the years, it has also been criticized for its overemphasis on adolescent developmental problems. An alternative approach, positive youth development (PYD), has been proposed, focusing on each child's talents, strengths, interests, and future potential. The PYD approach emphasizes integrated youth development, upholding the belief that being "problem-free" does not equate to being fully prepared. It also stresses the importance of a person-in-environment perspective and focuses on developmental models about how young people grow, learn, and change (Shek, Sun, & Merrick, 2012).

Another significant ethical dilemma has been the practice of anthropology within Nigeria. Historically, anthropological studies have been critiqued for their Eurocentric perspectives, often sidelining African voices and experiences. However, with the rise of African anthropologists and scholars, there has been a shift towards more inclusive and culturally sensitive research. These scholars have highlighted the importance of understanding and acknowledging African histories, critiques, and practices in anthropological studies. By doing so, they aim to bridge the gap between Western anthropological perspectives and African realities, ensuring that research is both ethically sound and culturally relevant (Ntarangwi, Mills, & Babiker, 2006).

Furthermore, the ethical practice of human-centered civil justice design has come to the fore in recent years. Legal professionals have increasingly engaged in civil justice design, creating systems to resolve conflicts, disputes, and grievances between parties. While this new role for legal professionals is essential, it also raises ethical dilemmas. The primary ethical challenge for these civil justice designers is the tension between maximizing a client's interest and providing the public with fair, just, and legitimate institutions for resolving disputes. The principle of neighborly morality suggests that legal professionals should prioritize the broader societal good over narrow client interests, ensuring that the designed systems are both ethical and effective (Quintanilla & Hinkle, 2018).

1.2.5. Contemporary Ethical Challenges and Solutions

Nigeria has faced many contemporary ethical challenges in community engagement in recent years, particularly in health, environmental conservation, and socio-economic development. These challenges often arise from the interplay of socio-cultural norms, economic constraints, and the evolving global landscape of ethical standards.

The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the importance of effective community engagement in health interventions. As countries grapple with the pandemic's challenges, contact tracing has emerged as a critical tool in controlling the spread of the virus. In African countries, including Nigeria, the implementation of contact tracing has presented unique ethical challenges. While contact tracing is essential for public health, it raises concerns about individual privacy, data protection, and potential misuse of personal information. In Nigeria, as in other African nations, there's a delicate

balance between safeguarding public health and ensuring that individuals' rights and privacy are not infringed upon. Best practices from countries like Rwanda, South Africa, and Uganda highlight the importance of sustained public communication, leveraging technological innovations, and robust community engagement to ensure the ethical implementation of contact tracing (Nachega et al., 2021).

Environmental conservation, especially in regions like the Niger Delta, presents another set of ethical challenges. Decades of oil exploration have led to significant environmental degradation, affecting the socio-economic and cultural lives of the local communities. While efforts are being made to address these challenges, there's a need for more inclusive community engagement that takes into account the voices and concerns of the affected communities. Ethical solutions in this realm require a multi-stakeholder approach, involving local communities, NGOs, government agencies, and multinational corporations, to ensure that conservation efforts are both effective and ethically sound.

Furthermore, the drive towards universal health coverage (UHC) in Nigeria brings to the fore the role of community engagement in shaping health interventions. Achieving UHC requires a shift from a top-down approach to one that places people at the center of health services. Community engagement is crucial in this endeavor, ensuring that health interventions are tailored to different communities' specific needs and contexts. As Nigeria works towards UHC, there's a need for more robust community engagement that addresses the socio-cultural and economic realities of different regions and communities (Odugleh-Kolev & Parrish-Sprowl, 2018).

Objectives of the Review

This literature review aims to delve into the ethical considerations surrounding community engagement in Nigeria, particularly within the context of NGOs. By examining past and contemporary challenges, practices, and resolutions, this review provides a comprehensive understanding of the landscape and offers insights for future endeavors. The following are the specific objectives:

- To explore the historical context of ethical practices in community engagement within Nigeria.
- To understand the socio-cultural implications of ethical considerations in community engagement.
- To assess the role of NGOs in shaping and upholding ethical standards in community engagement.
- To identify past ethical dilemmas faced in community engagement and the resolutions that were implemented.
- To examine contemporary ethical challenges in community engagement and the solutions proposed or implemented to address them.

1.3. Scope and Limitations of the Review

This literature review is centered on the ethical considerations in community engagement within Nigeria, with a particular emphasis on the role of NGOs. The primary geographical focus is Nigeria, and while occasional comparisons or references might be drawn to other countries for context, the core insights and discussions remain rooted in the Nigerian context. In terms of time frame, the review predominantly covers literature from the last two decades to ensure relevance to contemporary challenges and practices. However, some historical references might be included to provide a foundational understanding. It is important to note that while the review aims to be comprehensive, the vastness of the topic means that not every nuance or sub-topic related to ethical considerations in community engagement can be covered in depth. Additionally, the availability of open-access literature and the inherent biases of published works might influence the breadth and depth of discussions in this review.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Paradigm and Approach

The research paradigm underpinning this review is rooted in the interpretivist tradition, emphasizing the understanding of human experiences, behaviors, and interactions within the context of community engagement in Nigeria. This paradigm acknowledges the subjective nature of human experiences and recognizes the importance of context in shaping these experiences (Zamani, 2022). The interpretivist approach allows for a nuanced exploration of the ethical considerations in community engagement, taking into account the socio-cultural, economic, and political intricacies of the Nigerian landscape.

The approach adopted for this review is a systematic literature review, a rigorous and structured method that ensures a comprehensive and unbiased examination of existing literature on the topic. This approach involves a systematic search, selection, and analysis of relevant studies, ensuring that the review is both exhaustive and replicable. The

systematic literature review offers a holistic understanding of the topic, drawing from diverse sources to provide a well-rounded perspective (Gul & Guneri, 2021).

2.2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Literature Selection

For a systematic and unbiased review, clear inclusion and exclusion criteria were established.

2.3. Inclusion Criteria:

- Peer-reviewed articles published in recognized journals.
- Studies focusing on ethical considerations in community engagement within the Nigerian context.
- Articles published in the last two decades to ensure relevance to contemporary challenges and practices.
- Studies that provide empirical evidence or theoretical insights into the topic.

2.4. Exclusion Criteria:

- Non-peer-reviewed articles, such as opinion pieces, editorials, and commentaries.
- Studies not directly related to the Nigerian context or not focusing on ethical considerations in community engagement.
- Articles published more than two decades ago.
- Studies with incomplete data or unclear methodologies.

The inclusion and exclusion criteria ensured that the literature selected for this review was both relevant and of high quality. The systematic approach, combined with the clear criteria, ensured that the review was comprehensive, unbiased, and provided a deep understanding of the topic (La Placa & Corlyon, 2014).

2.5. Collection and Examination of Key Ethical Guidelines and Case Studies

The collection and examination of ethical guidelines and case studies are pivotal in understanding the nuances of community engagement, especially in contexts like Nigeria. Ethical guidelines provide a roadmap for researchers to navigate the complex terrain of community engagement, ensuring that research practices are both ethically sound and culturally sensitive. On the other hand, case studies offer real-world examples of how these guidelines are applied, highlighting successes and challenges.

In the realm of global health research, community engagement is increasingly promoted to improve ethical research practices. However, it's essential to recognize that community engagement can sometimes inadvertently coerce participation, compromising research's ethical integrity. A global assessment of Indigenous community engagement in climate research revealed that a significant majority of studies practiced an extractive model. In this model, outside researchers utilize Indigenous knowledge systems with minimal participation or decision-making authority from the communities that hold this knowledge. Such practices underscore the importance of having robust ethical guidelines that prioritize genuine community engagement and participation (David-Chavez & Gavin, 2018).

Moreover, the involvement of street-connected children and youth (SCCY) in research in low- and middle-income countries presents unique ethical challenges. Adapting ethical guidelines to address the specific vulnerabilities of SCCY is crucial. Innovative procedures, such as substantial community engagement and tailored assent processes, can help manage these vulnerabilities, ensuring that research is both ethical and responsive to the needs of SCCY (Embleton et al., 2015).

2.6. Framework for Ethical Analysis

The framework for ethical analysis in community engagement research is grounded in the core principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. This framework emphasizes the importance of recognizing and addressing the specific vulnerabilities of research participants, especially in contexts like Nigeria.

One of the key considerations in this framework is the potential for structural coercion in community engagement. For instance, in the context of global health research conducted in Africa, structural coercion arises due to various factors, including socio-economic contexts and power relations among research stakeholders. Addressing such coercion requires a holistic approach that takes into account the broader social impacts related to research design (Nyirenda et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the framework emphasizes the importance of community engagement that is both meaningful and genuine. For instance, in the context of tobacco control policies in Nigeria, multi-sectoral engagement has proven to be effective in formulating policies that are both comprehensive and responsive to the needs of the community. However, it's crucial to ensure that such engagement is free from conflicts of interest, especially from industries that might have vested interests (Oladebo et al., 2018).

3. Findings

3.1. Overview of Predominant Ethical Guidelines and Cases

Community engagement in global health research has gained significant prominence, with ethical guidelines being increasingly recognized as a critical element. These guidelines are not just recommended by ethicists but are also mandated by research funders and advocated in various ethics guidelines. The primary goal of these guidelines is to ensure that research practices are both ethically sound and culturally sensitive, especially in contexts like Nigeria (Adhikari, Pell, & Cheah, 2019).

One of the significant challenges in community engagement is the potential for structural coercion, especially in low-resource settings. Structural coercion arises due to an interplay of factors, including socio-economic contexts and power relations among research stakeholders. For instance, in global health research conducted in Africa, structural coercion emerges from the involvement of community leaders, government stakeholders, and power inequalities among research stakeholders. This affects some participants' ability to make autonomous decisions about research participation. Such challenges underscore the importance of having robust ethical guidelines that prioritize genuine community engagement and participation (Nyirenda et al., 2020).

Furthermore, specific populations, such as street-connected children and youth (SCCY) in low- and middle-income countries, present unique ethical challenges in relation to research participation. These challenges require tailored ethical guidelines that are responsive to their needs and the social, cultural, and economic context. For instance, in western Kenya, innovative procedures were developed to address the vulnerabilities of SCCY. These procedures included substantial community engagement and tailored assent processes to ensure that research is both ethical and responsive to the needs of SCCY (Embleton et al., 2015).

While the aforementioned guidelines and cases provide a roadmap for navigating the complex terrain of community engagement, it's essential to recognize that ethical guidelines should be dynamic, adapting to the evolving challenges and needs of the community. For instance, the involvement of Indigenous communities in climate research has shown that many studies practice an extractive model, where outside researchers utilize Indigenous knowledge systems with minimal participation from the communities. Such practices highlight the need for ethical guidelines that ensure genuine community engagement, where communities have a say in how their knowledge is used and shared (David-Chavez & Gavin, 2018).

3.2. Ethical Tools and Frameworks Adopted by NGOs

The rise of global health research and community engagement has necessitated the development and adoption of ethical tools and frameworks by NGOs, particularly in regions like Nigeria. These tools and frameworks serve as guiding principles to ensure that research and community engagement activities are conducted in an ethically sound and culturally sensitive manner.

One of the significant ethical tools that has gained prominence in recent years is the Health Impact Assessment (HIA). HIA is a blend of procedures, methods, and tools designed to predict the probable health impact within a population arising from a policy, program, or project. By shifting focus more broadly to "potential effects on health," including both positive and negative effects, interventions can be evaluated beyond merely risk or hazard reduction. The HIA framework encourages the analysis of synergistic pressures on environmental public health, making it a valuable tool for stakeholders when considering multiple outcomes to optimize population-wide benefits (Raimi et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the increasing demand for Environmental Social and Governance (ESG) disclosure has led to the development of carbon accounting, ESG disclosure measures, and regulations worldwide. Transparent information about ESG risks and opportunities can promote more effective engagement with investors and other stakeholders. Global, national, and organizational leaders have both a legal and ethical responsibility to deliver sustainable outcomes to their communities. The integration of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in ESG practices further underscores the commitment of NGOs to align their operations with global sustainability targets (De Silva Lokuwaduge et al., 2022).

In the realm of genomic research, the biobanking capacity has experienced considerable growth. However, this growth raises a range of legal, ethical, social, and cultural issues, including concerns about broad consent, confidentiality, community stigmatization, and long-term use. Active community engagement (CE) has been recommended as a way to address these concerns. The experience in South Africa, for instance, highlights the challenges in developing educational tools as part of a CE initiative, emphasizing the need for tailored ethical guidelines that are responsive to the needs of specific populations (Staunton et al., 2019).

3.2.1. Ethical Codes and Principles in Community Engagement

The importance of ethical codes and principles in community engagement cannot be overstated. These codes and principles serve as guiding frameworks for NGOs and other stakeholders to ensure that their interventions are both ethically sound and culturally sensitive, especially in complex environments like Nigeria. Notably, the recent years have witnessed significant strides in the development of codes of conduct for humanitarian intervention, particularly on the part of international NGOs and UN organizations (Black, 2003).

However, the engagement by the academic and broader research communities with humanitarian crises remains relatively ad hoc and unregulated beyond the basic ethical guidelines developed within universities. For instance, the humanitarian challenges faced in Liberia during its civil war from 1989 to 1996 led to the development of two key sets of ethical guidelines for humanitarian intervention: the Joint Policy of Operations (JPO) and Principles and Policies of Humanitarian Operations (PPHO). These guidelines were instrumental in addressing the challenges faced by humanitarian agencies in Liberia, providing insights into the role of academic researchers and research itself in humanitarian crises (Black, 2003).

3.2.2. Ethical Influence in Policy Development and Execution

The ethical influence in policy development and execution is paramount, especially in sectors where human rights and corporate responsibilities intersect. With the increasing economic influence of multinational corporations (MNCs), there has been a shift towards acknowledging the human rights obligations of these entities. The rise of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) strategies at national levels, such as Canada's national CSR strategy, underscores this shift. However, the effectiveness of such strategies in preventing or ameliorating human rights violations remains a subject of debate (Kwakyewah & Idemudia, 2017).

For instance, the activities of Canadian mining companies operating in Ghana have been associated with human rights concerns. While Canada's national CSR strategy presents opportunities to address these concerns, its ability to significantly ameliorate human rights violations remains limited. This highlights the need for a more robust and comprehensive approach that integrates ethical considerations into policy development and execution, ensuring that corporate activities align with global human rights standards (Kwakyewah & Idemudia, 2017).

3.2.3. Ethical Dilemmas and Resolutions in Fieldwork

Fieldwork, especially in complex socio-political environments like Nigeria, often presents a myriad of ethical dilemmas. Ethnographic researchers, in particular, find themselves navigating a challenging terrain where the emergent nature of their research often clashes with established ethical guidelines and procedures (Katz, 2006). These dilemmas are not just theoretical but have practical implications on the ground, affecting the quality of research and the well-being of both the researcher and the participants.

One of the primary ethical challenges in fieldwork is the power dynamics inherent in the researcher-participant relationship. This dynamic becomes even more pronounced when the research involves vulnerable populations or is conducted in politically charged environments. The researcher's positionality, their background, affiliations, and even their personal beliefs can influence the research process, sometimes leading to unintended biases or misinterpretations (Morris, Woodward, & Peters, 1998).

Another significant ethical concern in fieldwork is the issue of informed consent. While obtaining consent is a foundational principle in research ethics, the practicalities of doing so in the field can be challenging. For instance, in ethnographic research, where the researcher immerses themselves in the community, obtaining explicit consent from every individual they interact with can be impractical. Moreover, in some cultural contexts, the Western concept of individual informed consent may not align with communal decision-making processes (Sriram et al., 2009).

The ethical challenges don't end once the data is collected. Researchers must grapple with dilemmas related to data storage, confidentiality, and dissemination. In environments where the disclosure of certain information can lead to

harm or persecution of participants, researchers must be especially vigilant about protecting their data. Furthermore, the way research findings are presented and interpreted can have significant implications for the communities involved. Misrepresentation or oversimplification of complex issues can perpetuate stereotypes or lead to misguided interventions (Katz, 2006).

Despite these challenges, fieldwork remains valuable for gaining in-depth insights into communities and issues. To navigate the ethical minefield, researchers have developed various strategies. One approach is to prioritize reflexivity, where researchers continuously reflect on their positionality and the impact of their presence in the field. This involves being transparent about potential biases and actively seeking feedback from participants and peers (Morris, Woodward, & Peters, 1998).

Another strategy is actively engaging with local communities and stakeholders in the research process. This collaborative approach ensures that the research is culturally sensitive and aligns with the needs and priorities of the community. It also helps in building trust, which is crucial for the success of any fieldwork project (Sriram et al., 2009).

3.3. Strategies for Ethical Community Engagement

Community engagement (CE) is an integral aspect of public health interventions, especially in contexts like Nigeria where socio-cultural dynamics play a significant role in the acceptance and success of health initiatives. The importance of CE is further underscored during public health emergencies, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, where rapid and effective communication is crucial to curb the spread of the disease and mitigate its impacts (Tindana, de Vries, & Kamuya, 2020).

One of the primary strategies for ethical community engagement is the establishment of open and transparent communication channels. This involves not only disseminating information but also actively listening to community concerns, feedback, and suggestions. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, traditional methods of community engagement were challenged due to social distancing measures. However, innovative platforms emerged, such as virtual community dialogues, teleconferencing, and radio broadcasts, which facilitated continuous interaction between health authorities and the community (Usman, Bologna, & Stamidis, 2019).

Another vital strategy is the involvement of community leaders and influencers in the engagement process. In many African contexts, including Nigeria, community leaders hold significant sway in shaping public opinion and behavior. By collaborating with these leaders, health authorities can ensure that their messages are not only heard but also trusted and acted upon. For instance, during the polio eradication efforts in North East Nigeria, the CORE Group Partners Project (CGPP) actively engaged with community leaders to address skepticism and build trust for vaccine acceptance. This approach proved effective in reducing non-compliance and improving immunization uptake in the region (Usman, Bologna, & Stamidis, 2019).

Training and capacity building form another crucial aspect of ethical community engagement. Community health workers, volunteers, and other frontline workers play a pivotal role in disseminating information and ensuring compliance with health guidelines. By equipping these individuals with the necessary skills and knowledge, health authorities can ensure that their engagement efforts are not only widespread but also accurate and consistent. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic in 13 African countries, including Nigeria, risk communication and community engagement (RCCE) strategies focused on training and capacity building to ensure effective communication and address challenges such as misinformation and cultural resistance (Adebisi, Rabe, & Lucero-Prisno III, 2021).

Lastly, addressing the socio-cultural nuances is essential for effective community engagement. Every community has its unique set of beliefs, traditions, and practices that can influence health behaviors. By understanding and respecting these nuances, health authorities can tailor their engagement strategies to be more culturally sensitive and relevant. This ensures better acceptance of health interventions and fosters a sense of ownership and empowerment among the community members (Galiatsatos et al., 2020).

3.3.1. Proactive vs. Reactive Ethical Approaches

In community engagement, especially for NGOs operating in diverse environments like Nigeria, the ethical approaches taken can greatly influence the outcomes and sustainability of initiatives. These approaches can be broadly categorized into proactive and reactive paradigms. A proactive ethical approach is characterized by anticipation, foresight, and preparation. NGOs with this approach prioritize ethical considerations from a project's inception, ensuring they are embedded throughout. This involves anticipating ethical challenges before any engagement activity, conducting thorough assessments ranging from cultural sensitivities to potential conflicts of interest. Stakeholders, especially

community members, are involved from the outset, with their inputs sought in the planning phase to ensure initiatives are tailored to their needs and culturally sensitive (Wray, 2011). Continuous monitoring is also a hallmark of this approach, with NGOs ensuring ethical standards are maintained and addressing emerging challenges promptly. On the other hand, a reactive approach to ethics is characterized by responding to challenges as they arise. While it might seem less ideal, it's sometimes adopted due to unforeseen circumstances or the dynamic nature of community engagements. This approach addresses ethical challenges post-emergence, often in response to community feedback or unforeseen challenges not anticipated during planning. One strength of the reactive approach is its flexibility, allowing NGOs to adapt strategies based on real-time feedback and evolving community needs (Egerer et al., 2021). However, it might lead to short-term solutions that, while addressing immediate concerns, might not be sustainable long-term. In Nigeria's diverse socio-cultural landscape, a combination of both approaches might be ideal. The proactive approach ensures initiatives are ethically grounded from the start, while the reactive approach allows NGOs to navigate the dynamic and often unpredictable nature of community engagements across the country (Maccaro et al., 2020). Regardless of the approach, the core principle remains: prioritizing the well-being, dignity, and rights of community members. By foregrounding ethical considerations, NGOs can build trust, foster sustainable relationships, and ensure the success and longevity of their initiatives.

3.3.2. Collaborations with Other NGOs and Ethical Bodies

Collaboration is a cornerstone of effective community engagement, especially in complex environments like Nigeria. NGOs often find that by joining forces with other organizations and ethical bodies, they can amplify their impact, share resources, and navigate challenges more effectively.

In Nigeria, the landscape of community engagement is diverse, with many NGOs operating in areas ranging from health to education, human rights to environmental conservation. Collaborating with other NGOs allows for the sharing of best practices, resources, and knowledge. For instance, during the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, several NGOs collaborated to provide a unified response, ensuring that resources were utilized efficiently and that communities received consistent messages (Adebisi et al., 2021).

Furthermore, collaborations with ethical bodies, such as research ethics committees or international ethical organizations, can provide NGOs with guidance on maintaining high ethical standards in their operations. These bodies often have expertise in navigating the complex ethical landscapes of community engagement, ensuring that the rights and dignity of community members are upheld. In Nigeria, where traditional beliefs and practices can sometimes conflict with modern ethical standards, guidance from these bodies is invaluable (Tindana et al., 2020).

3.3.3. Engagements with Community Leaders and Stakeholders

Engaging with community leaders and stakeholders is another crucial aspect of ethical community engagement. In many Nigerian communities, leaders such as traditional chiefs, religious leaders, and community elders hold significant influence. Their endorsement or opposition can make or break an NGO's initiative.

By actively engaging with these leaders, NGOs can ensure that their initiatives are culturally sensitive and tailored to the community's needs. For instance, during polio vaccination campaigns in Northern Nigeria, some communities were initially resistant due to misconceptions and distrust. However, by engaging with community leaders and involving them in the campaign, NGOs were able to build trust and significantly increase vaccination rates (Usman et al., 2019).

Moreover, community leaders can act as mediators between NGOs and the community, helping to resolve conflicts and misunderstandings. Their deep understanding of the community's dynamics, beliefs, and values makes them invaluable allies in ensuring that community engagement is both effective and ethical.

The collaborations and engagements are vital tools for NGOs operating in Nigeria. By joining forces with other organizations, seeking guidance from ethical bodies, and actively engaging with community leaders, NGOs can ensure that their community engagement initiatives are both impactful and ethically sound.

4. Analysis

4.1. Effectiveness of Ethical Frameworks and Strategies

Mass drug administration (MDA) programmes for neglected tropical diseases (NTDs) are pivotal in addressing some of the most debilitating diseases that affect impoverished communities. These programmes heavily rely on community drug distributors (CDDs) to ensure the effective delivery of drugs to the target populations. The role of CDDs is not just

limited to drug distribution; they are the linchpin that connects the community with the broader health system. Their role is multifaceted, encompassing health promotion, data handling, and sometimes even clinical care. However, the success of these programmes is contingent upon the regular training and supervision of these CDDs, ensuring they are equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to carry out their duties effectively (Macfarlane et al., 2019).

The World Health Organization (WHO) has been at the forefront of setting policies and guidelines for the effective implementation of MDA programmes. An analysis of WHO policy documents reveals that while the organization recognizes the importance of CDDs, there is a lack of clarity and comprehensive definition regarding their roles and responsibilities. Only a few documents explicitly mention that CDDs are responsible for distributing drugs. Some touch upon their roles in health promotion, data handling, and clinical care. Furthermore, while the need for training and management of CDDs is acknowledged in some WHO documents, a comprehensive overview of this aspect is often missing (Macfarlane et al., 2019).

National NTD programme master plans from countries like Cameroon, Ghana, Liberia, and Nigeria provide further insights into the expectations from CDDs. These plans often include additional responsibilities for CDDs, such as case management in certain countries and transmission control in others. Training and supervision are common elements across all these national plans. However, the specifics, such as the purpose and frequency of training, often vary. One of the recurring challenges identified across these plans is the motivation of CDDs. While the challenge is acknowledged, comprehensive strategies to address it are often missing, with only a few plans mentioning potential solutions like the provision of bicycles for CDDs (Macfarlane et al., 2019).

The ambiguity in the roles and responsibilities of CDDs, coupled with the lack of explicit policies or programmatic guidance, can potentially impair the effectiveness of NTD programmes. The success of these programmes hinges on the active participation and commitment of CDDs. Therefore, it is imperative for both global organizations like WHO and national health departments to provide clear guidelines and support for CDDs. This would not only ensure the smooth implementation of MDA programmes but also enhance the overall health outcomes for the target populations.

In the context of Nigeria, where community engagement is crucial for the success of health interventions, NGOs play a significant role in bridging the gap between the community and the health system. The effectiveness of ethical frameworks and strategies employed by these NGOs can have a profound impact on community engagement and, consequently, the success of health interventions. As Nigeria grapples with a myriad of health challenges, including NTDs, the role of NGOs and CDDs becomes even more critical. Ensuring that they are equipped with the right tools, training, and support can pave the way for a healthier future for the country.

4.2. Challenges Faced by NGOs in Ethical Decision-Making

The global response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been multifaceted, with countries implementing a range of public health measures to curb the spread of the virus. African countries, despite their limited resources, have shown resilience and adaptability in their response strategies. The experiences of countries such as Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa, and Uganda provide valuable insights into the challenges faced and the best practices adopted in the face of the pandemic.

Most African nations reported lower COVID-19 burdens compared to Western countries. This relatively lower burden has been attributed to several factors, including early and robust political commitment, stringent public health measures like nationwide lockdowns, travel restrictions, face mask mandates, testing, contact tracing, and isolation. Community education and engagement played a pivotal role in these efforts. Other contributing factors include the younger demographic profile of the African population and potential cross-immunity from parasitic diseases or other circulating coronaviruses. However, it's essential to note that the true burden might be underestimated due to operational and resource constraints in COVID-19 case identification and reporting (Nacheha et al., 2021).

In Nigeria, for instance, the Nigeria CDC (NCDC) established a multi-sectoral National Coronavirus Preparedness Group (NCPG) early on to ensure a coordinated response. This group leveraged community networks previously set up in response to other outbreaks like Lassa fever and Ebola. The integration of COVID-19 community screening and contact tracing with established strategies for HIV and tuberculosis was a notable best practice. The NCDC utilized multiple communication platforms, including social media, SMS messaging, and radio, to engage, inform, and educate communities. However, challenges such as limited national testing capacity, community resistance due to mistrust and stigma, monitoring adherence to self-isolation, and inadequate resources for contact tracing persisted (Nacheha et al., 2021).

The experiences of these African countries underscore the importance of community engagement and the decentralization of contact tracing to the lowest geographic surveillance levels. It also highlights the need for multi-platform public communications, leveraging technological innovations, and deploying community health workers for robust community engagement.

In the broader context of public health, engaging patients and the public with evidence is ethically imperative. Such engagement fosters respect for individuals and likely improves health outcomes, facilitates resource stewardship, enhances justice prospects, and builds public trust. However, this engagement is also morally complex, as evidence alone is never definitive. As patients and the public engage with evidence, value conflicts arise, necessitating management to achieve trustworthy decision-making (Solomon, Gusmano, & Maschke, 2016).

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented unprecedented challenges to global public health systems. The experiences of African countries, particularly Nigeria, offer valuable lessons in community engagement, the importance of multi-platform communication, and the need for decentralization in contact tracing efforts. These insights can guide future responses to similar global health crises.

4.3. Implications for Sustainable and Ethical Community Development in Nigeria

Sustainable community development is a multidimensional concept that encompasses economic, social, and environmental aspects. In Nigeria, the role of NGOs in fostering sustainable community development has been pivotal. However, the ethical implications of their interventions and the broader socio-economic and political landscape in which they operate have profound implications for the sustainability of their initiatives.

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria vividly illustrates the complexities surrounding sustainable community development. Historically, the region has been a hotspot for oil exploration, leading to significant environmental degradation and socio-economic disparities. The involvement of multinational corporations in the extraction of oil has often been at odds with the aspirations and well-being of local communities. The adverse environmental impacts, including oil spills and gas flaring, have degraded the ecosystem and affected the livelihoods of local communities, primarily dependent on fishing and farming (Idemudia, 2014).

In response to these challenges, various NGOs have embarked on community development initiatives in the Niger Delta. Their interventions have ranged from providing basic amenities such as water and healthcare to more comprehensive projects aimed at economic empowerment and environmental restoration. However, the ethical considerations underpinning these interventions are crucial. For instance, while an NGO might provide clean water to a community affected by oil spills, the ethical question arises: Is it merely a palliative measure, or does it address the root causes of the problem? The sustainability of such interventions is contingent upon their ability to address systemic issues rather than just the symptoms (Udensi et al., 2013).

Furthermore, reciprocal responsibility has emerged as a critical ethical consideration in Nigeria's discourse on sustainable community development. While NGOs and other stakeholders are responsible for fostering development, local communities also have a reciprocal duty to engage actively and responsibly in these initiatives. This reciprocity ensures that development interventions are not just top-down but are co-created with the active participation of the communities they aim to serve. Such an approach not only enhances the sustainability of projects but also fosters a sense of ownership and empowerment among community members (Idemudia, 2014).

Another significant implication pertains to the relationship between NGOs and the government. In many instances, NGOs have stepped in to fill the void left by inadequate or absent government services. While this has immediate benefits for communities, it raises questions about the long-term sustainability of such interventions. Relying heavily on NGOs can potentially absolve the government of its primary responsibility to provide basic services to its citizens. Moreover, the funding sources of NGOs, often international donors, might have their own agendas and priorities, which may not always align with the needs and aspirations of local communities (Nwokorie & Obiora, 2018).

In conclusion, while NGOs play a crucial role in fostering sustainable community development in Nigeria, the ethical implications of their interventions are profound. Addressing the root causes of challenges, fostering reciprocal responsibility, and navigating the complex relationship with the government are all critical considerations that influence the sustainability and ethicality of community development initiatives.

4.4. Suggestions for Enhancing Ethical Practices in Community Engagement

Community engagement is a cornerstone of ethical research, especially when addressing complex societal challenges. Engaging communities ensures that research is grounded in the realities and needs of those it seeks to serve. However, the landscape of community engagement is intricate, with various ethical considerations that need to be addressed. Drawing from recent literature, this section provides recommendations for enhancing ethical practices in community engagement.

Meaningful community engagement is a significant determinant of successful research and intervention uptake. Researchers should prioritize genuine engagement, ensuring that communities are not just passive recipients but active participants in the research process. This can be achieved by adopting practices such as community entry and stakeholder engagement, which have been identified as key facilitators of effective community engagement in sub-Saharan Africa (Bain et al., 2022). Barriers such as cultural, historical, and religious practices, geographical limitations, and communication challenges can hinder effective community engagement. Awareness creation and sensitization through mediums like drama, social media, documentaries, and community gatherings can help bridge these barriers and ensure that communities are adequately informed and engaged (Bain et al., 2022).

Gender mainstreaming in community engagement is crucial. Lin et al. (2020) highlight that gender considerations are often overlooked in community engagement practices. Researchers should ensure that both genders are adequately represented and that their unique needs and perspectives are considered in the research process. Respect for autonomy, privacy, and informed consent are fundamental ethical principles that must be upheld in community engagement. Roberts and Thizy (2022) discuss the importance of articulating and adhering to ethical principles in community engagement, especially for emerging technologies like gene drive research. They emphasize the need for projects to reflect on and articulate the ethical principles that motivate and justify their engagement approach.

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented unique challenges to traditional methods of community engagement. Tindana et al. (2020) discuss the need for flexibility in community engagement practices during such public health emergencies. They advocate for researchers and institutions to adapt their engagement strategies to address the immediate healthcare needs of communities while upholding ethical standards. Lin et al. (2020) emphasize the importance of partnership and trust-building in community engagement. These activities, applicable across all research phases, ensure mutual respect and understanding between researchers and communities. Such partnerships foster a sense of ownership among community members, enhancing the sustainability and impact of research interventions.

Incorporating these recommendations can significantly enhance the ethicality and effectiveness of community engagement practices. As research landscapes evolve, it is imperative for researchers to continuously reflect on and adapt their engagement strategies, ensuring that they remain grounded in ethical principles and are responsive to the needs and aspirations of communities.

4.5. Potential Areas for Future Ethical Research

The evolving landscape of community engagement and research presents a myriad of ethical considerations that warrant further exploration. As the global research community becomes increasingly interconnected, the multinational nature of research activities, especially those involving collaborations between developed and developing countries, has grown. One pertinent area for future ethical research lies in the realm of informed consent in collaborative research in developing nations. Piñeiro-Martín et al. (2023) delve into the intricacies of how informed consent is truly obtained and how community engagement can make this process more meaningful and ethical. Their findings underscore the interdependence between the consenting process and community engagement, emphasizing the role of community involvement in formulating context-specific consent processes and ensuring ongoing oversight during research. This area of study is crucial as it touches upon the very foundation of ethical research, ensuring that participants are genuinely informed and that their consent is obtained in a manner that respects their values and societal norms.

Another potential area for future ethical research revolves around the engagement of specific vulnerable populations in research. Posada et al. (2023) explored the ethical considerations surrounding the involvement of youth living with HIV in research. Their qualitative study, conducted in Kenya, highlighted the importance of assessing HIV disclosure status, ensuring confidentiality, and engaging caregivers. The findings from this study can serve as a foundation for developing ethical guidelines and protocols for engaging other vulnerable populations in research, ensuring that their rights and well-being are safeguarded.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also brought to the fore the challenges and ethical considerations of conducting research with vulnerable groups during global crises. Kung'u et al. (2023) discussed the ethical considerations, challenges, and

lessons learned from conducting violence and mental health research with female sex workers during the pandemic in Nairobi, Kenya. Their study underscores the importance of ensuring the safety and privacy of study participants, especially when researching sensitive topics with vulnerable populations. The lessons gleaned from such research during unprecedented times can provide valuable insights for future ethical research endeavors, ensuring that research can continue in a manner that is both ethical and beneficial to participants.

5. Conclusion

The intricate tapestry of community development in Nigeria, particularly within the Niger Delta region, unravels a narrative steeped in sustainability, ethics, and the pivotal role of NGOs. The Niger Delta, with its historical backdrop of environmental and socio-economic challenges due to oil exploration, stands as a testament to the pressing need for sustainable interventions. NGOs, in their quest to ameliorate these challenges, have become central actors. Yet, their role is not without scrutiny, prompting us to question: Are these interventions merely palliative, or do they genuinely address the foundational issues?

This exploration underscored the ethos of reciprocal responsibility in sustainable community development. It is a dance of partnership, where NGOs and local communities come together, co-creating solutions that resonate with the lived experiences and aspirations of the people. The onus is not just on external bodies; the community itself plays a cardinal role in shaping its destiny.

Delving into recommendations, the study accentuated the imperativeness of ethical practices in community engagement. The essence of informed consent, the sanctity of protecting the vulnerable, and the art of nurturing authentic community partnerships emerged as non-negotiable tenets for meaningful and lasting interventions. Furthermore, by spotlighting potential avenues for future ethical research, the study reaffirms the dynamic and evolving landscape of ethical considerations in community development.

In encapsulation, while NGOs are undeniably instrumental in the tapestry of community development in Nigeria, the ethical bedrock upon which their initiatives stand is the true measure of their legacy. Sustainable community development transcends the immediacy of the present; it is a beacon for future generations, guiding them towards a horizon where communities don't just survive, but thrive. This odyssey, rich in promise, mandates unwavering ethical commitment, deep-rooted community engagement, and a relentless pursuit of solutions that echo the heartbeats of the community.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors wish to affirm that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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