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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT AND GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY: ASSESSING THE ROLE OF PUBLIC COMMUNICATION IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT COUNCILS IN RIVERS STATE, 2011– 2025

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Abstract

Despite growing advocacy for participatory governance, many local governments in Nigeria continue to face challenges of low citizen participation, weak communication systems, and administrative inefficiencies. In Rivers State, accountability gaps, limited access to information and inadequate citizen involvement in decision-making remains a significant concern. This study therefore examined the relationship between citizen engagement, and government transparency, focusing on the mediating role of effective public communication in local government councils in Rivers State, Nigeria, from 2011 to 2025. Grounded in Participatory Governance and Agenda-Setting theories. A mixed-methods approach was adopted, using interview and questionnaire data from 346 respondents comprising local government officials, community leaders, civil society actors, and residents selected across four local government councils, and complemented by documentary analysis. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, including mean and standard deviation. The findings showed that ineffective public communication demonstrates a limited mediating role due to challenges such as political interference, bureaucratic delays, infrastructural gaps, and low public awareness. The study thus concluded that citizen participation may not yield lasting institutional impact when communication channels are ineffective or poorly coordinated. consequently, the study recommends a well-structured communication units staffed with trained professionals, policies to safeguard the autonomy of communication channels, devoid of influence by political actors, the prioritization of the allocation of resources on investment in digital platforms to enhance access to information and communication across urban and rural communities, routine public sensitization programs by Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) on governance processes, transparency initiatives, and opportunities for citizens participation in the affairs of local government councils in Rivers State.

Keywords: Citizen Engagement, Government Transparency, Public Communication.

INTRODUCTION

Citizen engagement and government transparency are very necessary for sustaining democratic governance in modern day societies. As it is ideal that the absence of open-mindedness of the government in relating to the public, its intent which is regarded as the policy plan, the benefits of the policy to the intended public, alongside its impactful programmes and project begets public distrust, and apathy which undermines the very essence of citizens engagement. It is thus arguable that public policy communication and citizen engagement are synonymous with both the democratic theory of governance and public administration. Central to this public policy communication are openness and transparency which enhance public trust by ensuring citizens awareness of government decisions and actions. In other words, transparency enhances public trust and satisfaction with government actions (Androniceanu, 2021). The second step toward fostering citizen engagement involves an invitation to comment, reply, or act upon an action, or a pending action (Bryson et al., 2013; Rowe & Frewer, 2005). The aim of initiating such citizen participation is to gather opinion regarding the matter at hand (Bryson et al., 2013; Rowe & Frewer, 2005). Without feedback from citizens, communication may serve only the one-way purpose of informing an organisation. Finally, the third step of citizen engagement pertains to initiating consultation between citizens and constituted authority through a bilateral exchange of information (Bryson et al., 2013; Rowe & Frewer, 2005), empowering both at the point of decision-making. It is in view of the above that contemporary public administration emphasises participatory governance, open government practices, and communication-driven administrative processes that ensure citizens are informed, included, and empowered (Ayee, 2019; Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015). Public communication is a factor of strong local governments, which is increasingly becoming critical in the creation of more accountable government systems, especially in the developing democracies (Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015).

Under the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999, Section 7 and the fourth Schedule Part 1 of the Constitution give to local government areas the powers of service delivery, grass root development, community engagement etc. Despite this, at the same level, there are still issues of low transparency, poor public communication systems and low citizen participation which undermine effective governance (Agba et al., 2021). The range of duties LGA's are expected to perform in the area of being responsive, transparent, and in developmental impact has, from 2011 till date been under severe criticism by the peoples of Rivers State. The citizen's demand for better administration and the governance of their country's affairs has increased, especially with the growing use of ICT, civil society activities and media pluralism (Oviasuyi & Uwafiokun, 2019).

No matter the chosen method of communication (whether that is a town hall meeting, digital platforms, community outreach, or information disclosure), effective community communication is key for boosting transparency, participation and a positive legacy for local government leaders (Heald, 2018). In Rivers State where there is such low level of trust in government institutions compared to people's perceptions, communication acts as a catalyst that links between people and what the administration wants. This is consistent with Abiodun (2024) who posits at the importance of communication for local political leaders in the hope that they would be able to filter their administration goals into accepted and supported outcomes that could engender peoples' trust and make them more responsive and participative in governance agenda. Given this, Aihie (2024) shares the ideas that this type of communication can make a political message easily go viral and emotionally impactful to citizens, improving short-term legitimacy and engagement with the voters.

The interaction between citizen engagement, and government transparency, is complex and nonlinear. Many of the local Councils will attempt to undertake development



projects and changes, but with lack of communication, it can be difficult for the public to understand and feel confident about. As a consequence, the effectiveness of public communication could help explain the level to which transparency initiatives sink in with citizens, and enhanced perceptions of governance. It's essential to appreciate these dynamics to broaden discourse on the need to reform Rivers State local government councils.

Although advocacy for participatory governance has been promoted in Nigeria, there are still many local government councils which have suboptimal levels of participatory governance, lack efficient procedures and have limited communication tools. There have been concerns about accountability issues, lack of access to information by government, and citizen's participation in local decision making in Rivers state (Okeke-Uzodike & Subair, 2019). Those problems have led to a recurring sense of dissatisfaction publicly, lack of trust in local institutions and an eroded legitimacy of the elected bodies. From the empirical findings, it revealed that the lack of information about government operations, project administration and financial dealings breeds a situation wherein the citizens can't be able to make informed decision or hold their leaders accountable (Chukwunweike, 2024). For example, even though many members of the public have the knowledge on tax provisions, there is apprehension that such taxes are poorly collected and there is lack of transparency in the utilization of the tax revenue in Rivers State, which makes it hard to rate the performance of the LGA (John, 2025). One such aspect that is under-researched is the effectiveness of public communication as a mediating element on the image of the legacy of local governing bodies and their officials in the relationship between citizen engagement and transparency. Lots of projects for development are taking place in various Councils but due to not adequate communication many citizens are not being aware about. This prompts these questions, what are the impacts of Citizen Engagement in Government Transparency in Local Government Councils in Rivers State? What is the role of effective Public communication between Citizen Engagement and Government transparency in Local Government Councils in Rivers state? What are the issues that confront the effective communication in the local government counsels of Rivers State? Accordingly, there are studies that have looked at citizen participation, accountability or transparency in isolation; however, few studies have explored and looked at the interrelationship of these in a mediation model, especially in the Rivers State local government context. This research thus aims at filling this gap by exploring these governance variables through empirical analysis to determine if, and how, the effectiveness of public communication serves as a passage that can bridge these variables and in turn impact the administrative heritage of local council officials.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study adopted the Participatory Governance Theory which is traced to Pateman (1970) and further developed by Fung and Wright (2003), and the Agenda-setting Theory by Dr. Maxwell McCombs and Dr. Donald Shaw (1972), to guide the analytical construct on Citizen Engagement, and Government Transparency: Investigating the Mediating Role of Effective Public Communication in Local government councils in Rivers State, 2011-2025.

Participatory Governance Theory

It is instructive to note that Participatory Governance Theory emphasises the direct involvement of citizens in public decision-making processes as a means of enhancing accountability, transparency, and democratic legitimacy. The theory emerged from deliberative democratic traditions and gained prominence through scholarly works that argue that governance becomes more effective when citizens are not merely passive recipients of policies but active contributors to policy formulation, implementation, and evaluation (Fung &



Wright, 2003). Through participatory governance, the aim is to move away from the divide between state and society, and to advocate for participatory fora including community consultations, participatory budgeting, public hearings and stakeholder discussion platforms. The idea has been that if citizens can be given meaningful channels for participation, governance outcomes are better, benefiting from policies that better reflect the needs and knowledge of the local communities. Participatory governance has greater relevance in local government in developing countries like Nigeria where proximity to the citizens affords local governments opportunities to engage citizens directly. The proponents of participatory governance believe that it positively affects the level of trust in public institutions and creates opportunities for openness and responsiveness, increasing the consolidation of democracy (Cornwall, 2008). It also helps to foster social responsibility, giving citizens the power to hold public officials to account and demand transparency in public resource allocation.

The theory is based on particular assumptions:

There is a growing body of knowledge among citizens about how local and community matters should be governed and they should be involved in governance decisions.

The participation is inclusive and enables effective policies as they consider different perspectives.

The level of transparency that comes from engagement – the more people are involved, their actions are subjected to a greater degree of scrutiny.

Deliberate processes create trust between citizens and public institutions (Pateman (1970).

However, to be meaningful, participation requires effective communication between citizens and government – information must flow both ways (Fung & Wright, 2003).

These assumptions highlight the need for communication mechanisms that promote engagement and participation and help make participation effective for governance outcomes. The concept of Participatory Governance Theory can serve as a solid basis to analyse the relationship between citizen engagement and government transparency with respect to local government councils in Rivers State of Nigeria. First, from a theoretical perspective, the document indicates how mechanisms of citizen engagement, including town hall meetings, community development committee and public feedback channels, can enable transparency through the required actions of making information available and to explain decisions and actions of local actors. This is all the more important in a context like the Nigerian local government system where there is a need to build trust among the electorate arising out of perceived transparency in the conduct of elections. Secondly, it emphasizes the role of the effective public communication as a mediating factor. It is necessary to have a clear communication or access to the information otherwise the citizens will fail to access information for meaningful participation. This means that the ways to communicate, like using local media, public announcements, and digital platforms, are important for engagement. The theory allows the study to determine from the context of Rivers State the period 2011 – 2025, whether participatory practices has improved accountability and permanently influenced the legacy of the local government councils.

Agenda-setting Theory

According to John Thompson (1995, p.7), the Agenda-setting theory believes that the media create great impact in shaping opinion in society. This theory posits a relationship between the way government uses effective public communication tools or perhaps, channel (either through the print, unprinted media or traditional communication channels) as an instrument to stir up citizen engagement even as they attempt to prove transparency, accountability and build public confidence in the execution of projects and programmes. Patrick (2017) further emphasises that the media rank the importance of various issues



published in them and degree of salience these issues have for the society. According to Patrick (2017) the Agenda-setting Theory has a conceptual link with the Gate-keeping theory and is an extension of the Power of the Press theory as it gives the media the power to select and highlight topics and thus get the society to consider them important. Language and style within which public information is broadcasted can be capable of stimulating minds and opinion of the public to applaud the administration or to criticize it in areas of performance of the particular policies and programmes initiated by the administration (Epelle, 2020). That's the importance of good public communication -- and how an entire nation can become tarnished and put-on-prosecutions due to poor media handling. But in support of this idea that the media is a tremendous agenda-setter in the society, Cohen (1963, p.13) writes that "The press may not always be successful in telling the people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about. And this is exactly what the media have been able to do through effective public communication.

With application of the theories the study is not limited to one theory explanations; it is extended to a comprehensive approach to explain governance processes. In this cumulated model, effective local governance is not just about institutional design or about citizens' participation in itself; it is about institutional design and participatory citizenship in concert with the norms and standards of public communication. This comprehensive method provides some nuanced explanation for why governance outcomes are as they are and why they can continue to have impact on institutional heritage in the longer term.

CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

Citizen Engagement

Aig-Imoukhuede Foundation (2025) cited earlier in World Bank Group (2017), defines citizen engagement as as old as humankind itself. It commented that the activities of giving the voice and participation directly to citizens in civic governance dates back to more than 2500 years ago from the city-states of Greece. Citizen engagement conceptually implies a two-way street relationship between citizens and government with the intention of empowering citizens to participate effectively in the decision-making process, thereby optimizing development outcomes (World Bank Group, 2017; Obasi & Lekorwe, 2014; Phillips & Orsini, 2002; Bourgon, 1998). Citizen engagement, often confused with citizen participation, is seen as a means of formally seeking citizen feedback (often by the legislative arm when holding a public hearing) and establishing long-term 2-way relationships with citizens by or within government. Such kind of engagement is required for, particularly with regard to public matter on which a bearing may be had on any socio-economic cum political issue of public interest and need public input before it can be passed as an act, which is ideal in every democratic system. . . . Citizen participation, on the other hand, is an action by citizens to make an impact, often in more informal ways, including protesting, asking questions, signaling, voting or petitioning.

Government Transparency

The transparency of government can be defined as the availability of information about how things are happening in the government. (Piotrowski et al, 2007). This is permissible only within the confines of a democratic system in which the citizen is protected by the constitution to enquire on how government does its work, in the case of the Ghanaian Steven Lu fibers, it must refer to the policy planning and implementation of a project and programme. Transparency has been generally supposed to make institutions and their office-holders trusted and trustworthy (O'Neill, 2002). On similar lines, Raghuvveer and Priyanka (2024) proposed that transparency in governance is a core principle of a democratic society that ensures open and accessible decision-making processes while



making them accountable to the citizens. They also voiced that transparent governance builds trust between the government and its citizens, through involvement, minimizes corruption, and maximizes use of resources. This post is based on scenarios wherein leaders feel a sense of responsibility to be answerable to a people for whom and from whom they have a mandate. This further illustrates the Lockean social contract theory "by the consent of the people" that the power to investigate and recall leaders who misused the fund, and the trust for their own aggrandizement is invested in the masses, or simply, the people. Transparency in the public sector governance becomes a tool to connect the government with the people and gives power to the people to assert their claims on the government (Raghuveer & Priyanka 2024).

Public Communication

Communication is derived from the Latin word, *communico*, which means, "share." Sharing involves giving out something (in this case, the communicated messages) and receiving something back (for example, a reaction). Cherry (1978, p.4) says that in communicating, we may "enquire, inform, dispute, negotiate, agree, dissent, quarrel, commune, insult, admire, and ritualise in endless ways..." Indeed, when man communicates, he expects to enjoy some level of satisfaction. This form of satisfaction is only attainable where the person who initiated the communication process receives a timely, clearer and precise response from the source he or she is interacting with. According to Webler and Tuler (2021), as cited in Ojonugwa and Andrew (2025), public communication is defined as the mechanism through which government institutions endear themselves to their publics. Public sector agencies need to maintain communication channels in relation to their citizens to build trust and increase their participation in the government. Additionally, Ojonugwa and Andrew (2025) note that citizens can be engaged to foster trust and ownership among individuals by effective communication.

Various communication strategies are used by the public sector Organisations for purpose of increasing their transparency and accountability towards their constituents. A person can voice their opinions, suggestions or grievances in various ways to communicate with the governmental machinery; however, it's up to the governmental body to choose who and how it communicates with the people (Ojonugwa & Andrew 2025). Existing research shows that government bodies use different strategies to communicate (Zerfass et al., 2018; Manoharan & Wu, 2021; Kolopack et al., 2015), such as social media, surveys, newsletters and town hall meetings, via phone and email, or through traditional media like radio and TV. These strategies are continually changing with advancements in information technology. This review shows how strategies can - and are - varied in their efficacy in keeping people informed regarding planned initiatives, development, and events across different forms of communication.

EMPIRICAL REVIEW

Unlike Ekman and Amna (2012), Lippman and Rogers (2020) considered citizen engagement as a phenomenon arising from an institutional perspective, mainly looking at the impact of citizen engagement upon the implementation of World Bank Group supported projects, programmes and policies. The study revealed four types of citizen participation in policy implementation: consultations, policy co-construction, report of citizen feedback, policy recording and collection and citizen monitoring. The study examined the Citizen Consultations instruments as means of enabling the voices of different population groups especially the marginalised and vulnerable population's needs and increasing citizens' participation, citizen understanding, and transparency in decision making.

As regards Citizen input about reporting, recording and citizen collection, Bhargava (2015) identified that feeds from citizens could be collected on a variety of attributes of public



services periodically. The engagement processes, resource use, targeting, quality, inclusiveness and effectiveness are what make up these dimensions. SM/online feedback, citizen report cards, community scorecards, hotlines, focus group discussions, and satisfaction surveys were the main tools identified in the study to collect citizen feedback. Also, citizen monitoring through citizen monitoring of reform policies, contracts, procurement, budget execution, revenue, and policy service delivery was recognized as an effective citizen engagement mechanism to facilitate transparency, improve budget execution or service delivery efficiency and reduce corruption opportunities.

Johnson (2021) proved that citizen involvement was crucial in contributing to the making of public institutions more effective, accountable, transparent and introducing innovative solutions to complex problems in development. The study also found evidence that in the best of circumstances; citizen engagement can help governments achieve better development outcomes by to strengthening citizens' engagement with improved outcomes for social inclusion and empowerment, governance, PFM and public service delivery. In addition, findings from the study showed that citizen engagement outcomes depended on citizen attitudes and abilities to engage in the issue, and were very context specific. Also, as per the study, other factors such as geographics, culture, environment, economy, politics, society and gender dynamics could also impact effective engagement. These findings drew a conclusion about citizen attachment and the importance of citizens' readiness and ability to participate in government action for policies.

METHODOLOGY

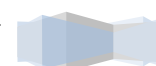
The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The target population of the study was Local government officials (chairmen, councillors, administrative staff, information officers), community leaders (traditional rulers, youth leaders, women leaders), civil society representatives, and residents within the 23 local government areas of Rivers State with local government employees which amounts 1,128,591 staff and political office holders from the selected local government councils as derived from the Local Government Service Commission, 2025. Below is a sample table showing the six selected Local Government Councils in Rivers State, grouped according to their senatorial districts and an estimated distribution of the total staff strength of 4,628 across the councils for analytical purposes.

Table 1: Selected Local Government Councils by Senatorial District and Estimated Staff Strength

S/N	Senatorial District			Local Council	Government	Estimated Strength	Staff
1	Rivers District	West	Senatorial	Abua/Odual LGA		720	
2	Rivers District	West	Senatorial	Ahoada East LGA		850	
3	Rivers East Senatorial District			Ikwerre LGA		900	
4	Rivers East Senatorial District			Emohua LGA		658	
5	Rivers District	South-East	Senatorial	Eleme LGA		700	
6	Rivers District	South-East	Senatorial	Gokana LGA		800	
Total				6 Local Councils	Government	4,628	

Source: Rivers State Local Government Service Commission (2025).

The sample size was 368, including both employees and residents of the local government as determined by the Taro Yamane Statistical Formula on a random sampling technique. The study employed the random sampling technique to select respondents



across the respective selected departments of the six (6) local government councils. Six local government councils (two each were exclusively selected across the three senatorial district; the local governments are Abua/Odual, Ahoada East, Ikwerre, Emohua, Eleme and Gokana respectively).

Table 2: Distribution of Questionnaires across Selected Local Government Councils in Rivers State

S/N	Senatorial District	Local Government Council	Staff Strength (N)	Proportion (%)	Questionnaires Allocated (n)
1	Rivers West	Abua/Odual	720	15.56	57
2	Rivers West	Ahoada East	850	18.37	68
3	Rivers East	Ikwerre	900	19.45	72
4	Rivers East	Emohua	658	14.22	52
5	Rivers South-East	Eleme	700	15.13	56
6	Rivers South-East	Gokana	800	17.28	63
Total		6 LGAs	4,628	100.00	368

Source: Researcher's Computation (2026).

The primary source of data was collected through a structured interview and questionnaire, while secondary data were sourced from textbooks, journals and internet materials. The questionnaire was structured into different parts. Section A was structured to provide demographic information about the respondents, while section B of the questionnaire was designed, using a self-developed questionnaire titled "Citizen Engagement and Government Transparency Questionnaire (CEGTQ)" on the 4- point Likert scale (ordinal scale). The reason is that it is a self-rating instrument that allows the respondents to place him/herself in the category he/she feels is most appropriate. After distribution of questionnaire to the respondents, only two hundred and forty-six (246) questionnaires were returned and used for the analysis. The data generated was tallied and organised in tables, using Mean and Standard deviation to analyse the research questions.

Analysis of Data

Research Question One

How has citizen engagement influenced government transparency in local government councils in Rivers State?

Table 4.1: Mean and Standard Deviation Analysis of the Influence of Citizen Engagement on Government Transparency in Local Government Councils in Rivers State (N = 246)

S/N	Questionnaire Items	Mean (\bar{X})	Std. Dev.	Decision
1	Citizens are regularly consulted before major decisions are made by local government councils.	1.84	0.91	Disagree
2	Increased citizen participation has improved accountability in local government administration.	2.21	0.88	Disagree
3	Public involvement in governance has enhanced access to government information.	2.34	0.95	Disagree
4	Citizen engagement has promoted openness in the management of public resources.	1.76	0.89	Disagree
5	Feedback from citizens has contributed to transparent decision-making processes in local government councils.	3.12	0.81	Agree

Grand Mean	2.25	0.89	Disagree
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Source: Field Survey, 2026

The finding of Table 4.1 shows that the respondents disagreed to four out of five statements measuring the impact of citizen engagement on government transparency in Rivers State local government Councils. Specifically, low percentiles of respondents were in agreement that citizens are consistently consulted prior to major decision-making (Percentile = 1.84, SD = 0.91), that citizens' involvement has created more accountability (Percentile = 2.21, SD = 0.88), that citizens' involvement has lead to more access to government information (Percentile = 2.34, SD = 0.95), and that citizens' involvement has increased openness in the management of public resources (Percentile = 1.76, SD = 0.89). There was strong agreement, however, that feedback from citizens has helped with transparent decision making processes (Mean = 3.12 SD = 0.81).

The mean of 2.25 is found to be less than the criterion mean of 2.50, this shows that the grand mean overall, is below the criterion mean, therefore there is an overall agreement that citizen engagement has not significantly contributed to government transparency in the local government councils in Rivers State. Moderate consensus (standard deviations ranging from 0.81 to 0.95) was found among the respondents.

Research Question Two

What is the mediating role of effective public communication between citizen engagement and government transparency in local government councils in Rivers State?

Table 4.2: Mean and Standard Deviation Analysis of the Mediating Role of Effective Public Communication between Citizen Engagement and Government Transparency in Local Government Councils in Rivers State (N = 246)

S/N	Questionnaire Items	Mean (\bar{X})	Std. Dev.	Decision
6	Effective communication by local government councils encourages greater citizen participation in governance.	3.21	0.78	Agree
7	Timely dissemination of information strengthens the relationship between citizens and local government authorities.	3.16	0.83	Agree
8	Public communication channels facilitate citizens' understanding of government activities and policies.	3.09	0.85	Agree
9	Effective communication enhances transparency by keeping citizens informed about council decisions.	3.28	0.76	Agree
10	Public communication serves as a bridge between citizen engagement and transparent governance.	3.34	0.74	Agree
Grand Mean		3.22	0.79	Agree

Source: Field Survey, 2026

The results obtained from Table 4.2 show that all the items on the mediating dimensions of effective public communication were agreed upon by the respondents on the basis of the mediations shown in between citizen engagement and government transparency in Rivers State local government council. Respondents were in agreement that using effective communication methods increases the citizen participation in governance (Mean = 3.21, SD = 0.78), timely dissemination of information improves relationship between citizens and the local government authorities (Mean = 3.16, SD = 0.83), and the use of public

communication helps citizens to understand activities and policies carried out by the local government authorities (Mean = 3.09, SD = 0.85).

The respondents also agreed that effective communication improves transparency and helps citizens to be informed about council's decisions (Mean = 3.28, SD = 0.76), and there is also a gap between citizen engagement and transparent governance (Mean = 3.34, SD = 0.74). The Grand mean of 3.22 which is a score higher than 2.50 that is regarded as the criterion mean shows that the public communication is indeed effective in playing a mediating role between citizen engagement and government transparency in Local government councils in Rivers state. The relatively low standard deviations show a high level of agreement among respondents.

Research Question Three

What challenges hinder effective public communication in local government councils in Rivers State?

Table 3: Challenges that hinder effective public communication in local government councils

S/N	Questionnaire Item	Mean (\bar{x})	Std. Dev.	Decision
11	Limited funding affects the ability of local governments to communicate effectively with citizens.	2.21	0.84	Disagree
12	Political interference constrains open communication between councils and the public.	3.34	0.69	Agree
13	Lack of communication infrastructure reduces public access to government information.	3.27	0.72	Agree
14	Low public awareness and limits the effectiveness of communication initiatives.	3.19	0.75	Agree
15	Bureaucratic delays hinder timely dissemination of information by local governments.	3.31	0.71	Agree
Grand Mean	—	3.06	0.74	Agree

Source: Field Survey, 2026

The results show an overall mean of 3.06 which means that in general the respondents agree that there are several factors that affect the public communication of local government councils in Rivers State. However, the mean of item 11 was 2.21, meaning there was a degree of disagreement that limited funding is a main constraint. This indicates that the communications challenges are felt more related to governance and administration issues than to financial ones.

Political interference was the most serious issue (mean = 3.34), suggesting that political dynamics could have a negative impact on openness and information flows in local councils. Likewise, there are structural and institutional weaknesses such as lack of communication infrastructure, low awareness among the public, and bureaucratic problems and delays which are identified as key bottlenecks. The relatively low standard deviation values suggest that there was reasonable agreement among respondents in terms of the presence of these challenges. The results indicate that while financial resources are important, political and administrative problems are also significant issues that need to be addressed to improve communication within local government councils.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Influence of Citizen Engagement on Government Transparency in Local Government Councils

The disagreement in four of the five items listed in Table 4.1 is in line with the results

of Fox (2015) who found that "transparency without accountability" is still a governance challenge in sub-national governments of the Global South. The data show that citizens are not regularly consulted before key decisions (Mean = 1.84), accountability has not been enhanced through participation (Mean = 2.21), and access to government information is not always good (Mean = 2.34). The results of this study are echoed by studies by Oluwu and Wunsch (2004) on the systemic dysfunction of local government administration in Nigeria, which they say is caused by the dominance of elites, insularity of the bureaucracy and the distance that exists between the formal structures and the people.

The results of this study have profound implications for theory and practice of participatory governance especially in the local government administration in Nigeria. Over and over, citizen engagement has not led to significantly better governance transparency, which is in contrast to the common belief of participatory governance frameworks that more inclusive decision making processes naturally result in more transparent and accountable government (Fung, 2015; Arnstein, 1969). The Rivers State evidence indicates that without an effective communication system, institutional commitment and political will, the theory cannot produce the transparency outcomes.

The results confirm that Agenda-Setting Theory is still relevant in the study of the perception and action of citizens about government transparency in the field of communications studies. The initial demonstration that media coverage influences public awareness and concern occurred for policy issues by McCombs and Shaw (1972). The theory was extended to the governance domain by Dearing and Rogers (1996) and more recently by Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007), which suggests that issues of citizen involvement and participatory rights need to be made salient to public and media discourse before they impact on the transparency of government.

The Mediating Role of Effective Public Communication between Citizen Engagement and Government Transparency

In contrast, the result that effective public communication serves as a strong mediating role (Grand Mean = 3.22, Table 4.2) is in accordance with the recent research. In his research on public sector transparency, Meijer (2015) found that strategic communication processes on the part of local governments were important vectors of institutional openness into citizens' awareness. In a similar finding, when used effectively, digital and traditional communication channels significantly bolstered civic trust and engagement, as noted by Bertot et al. (2012). The consensus about the mediating role of communication, especially the one that states that it is a 'bridge' between citizen participation and transparent governance (Mean = 3.34), is similar to Meijer's (2015) finding that communication does not play a peripheral role but rather a structural role for participative governance.

Also, the standard deviations on the majority of the items in Tables are moderate (0.69–0.95) but the lower values (0.74–0.85) in Table 4.2 are of interest. They argue that a greater level of consensus exists amongst the respondents around the importance of effective communication as against citizen engagement outcomes, suggesting that respondents may have more shared experiences of the former than the latter. Such consensus on communication could be due to a more general sense of institutional reality that the processes of communication are more tangible and measurable than the less tangible and measurable impacts of citizen participation on governance outcomes.

Challenges that Hinder Effective Public Communication in Local Government Councils

This response to political interference as the primary obstacle to effective communication (Mean = 3.34, Table 4.3) echoes Brinkerhoff and Wetterberg (2016), who reported how patronage networks and political gatekeeping in local government councils

throughout Africa systematically blocked the flow of information and stifled civil society participation. Also, Olusegun (2019) noted that partisanship among Nigeria local government councils in the Niger Delta region greatly affected the independence of communication departments, which led to the selective disclosure of information and information asymmetry that were serving political agenda not the public interest. The unguided utterance of the political interferences were observed to be too high, and has almost twisted the effective public communication and at the same time has affected the interest of the rural people in the effective governance policies and programmes of the area councils of Abua/Odual, Ahoada East and Ikwerre area councils. An interviewee (Tricycle rider) voiced his dismay on the unguided overpoliticization of the communication channel of the local government council by the media aids to Hon. Owolobi Michael Ofori in Abua Central clan as thus:

“As a person, even when our people complain on some issues of local concern such as the slow ongoing project along the Okana/Amalem/Ayama road and the Ayiezi market which is flooded, the media will say “we are attacking the chairman” and we are been sponsored by the opposition party” “me sef don tire for this government” (12th April, 2026)”.

Additionally, a heavy burden of bureaucratic delays was noted (mean = 3.31), which suggests that administrative functions can impede the spread of information and make it less responsive. The stiffness of the bureaucracy is a well-known problem for effective governance. Meijer (2013) points out that failure in the timeliness of information disclosure can lead to failures in transparency efforts and diminish citizens' trust in public institutions. Lack of communication infrastructure with mean score of 2.87, SD = 0.72 and low public awareness which had mean score of 3.27, SD = 0.72 showed that lack of communication infrastructure reduces communication and low public awareness was equally noticed as militating factor to public communication. It was noted that Abua/Odual has the worst environmental terrain and infrastructural decay which has impacted on effective communication among the public and the rural people among the six local government councils sampled. This was proven true by an interviewee as thus:

I feel a deep pain to express the ordeals of my people of the Odual and Kugbo clans of Abua/Odual LGA, as we have been cut off on infrastructural level not only from our Abua brothers, but from the entire Rivers State by the poor geographical terrain in Abua/Odual LGA where there is no motorable road that links the LGA administrative headquarters located at Ayama, Abua central to the 47 villages and communities in the Odual block of the LGA. As sardonic as it seems, the Odual people have to cross Bayelsa State, Ahoada West and Ahoada East in order to reach the administrative headquarters of their council; not to even mention the public announcement they are unable to make from their council either through the social media or the radio to our people at home, due to the lack of network coverage (Warigboko, 24th March, 2026 Assumed).

This mirrors Elekhai Elebiju (2024) findings that inadequate technical support, weak signals and bad power supply were the key challenges that hindered the digital transition programme of the Nigerian government in remote communities of Lagos state. More so, an unexpected finding in this study is the mean (2.21) obtained for Item 11 (Table 4.3) which shows that respondents disagree that limited funding is a key challenge for effective public communication. The finding is not expected in the light of other reports in the public sector communication literature in developing countries that generally point to resource scarcity as a fundamental constraint (Chukwuemeka et al., 2018; Nwosu & Okugo, 2020). One possible explanation for this divide is that some of the respondents have direct experience of political interference or bureaucratic delays and feel these are more immediate and real challenges, while communication problems are seen as due to 'governance culture' and not to financial constraints.

The primary challenges identified as political interference and poor communication infrastructure indicate that there is a high level of control or distortion in the agenda-setting process in Rivers State and this reduces the public's ability to demand transparency in the process. This is consistent with Entman's (1993) framing theory, which suggests that information is presented and omitted to shape public views in ways that serve the interests of the powerful individuals. The practical implication for communications studies in local government contexts is that an improved participative governance must not only involve the improvement of communicative means, but also deliberate the development of independent pluralist media spaces where governance issues can be discussed, contested and made public.

Theories that resonate with these results in the enclosed theoretical perspective are those drawn from Institutional Theory, which focuses on the influence of Organisational norms, rules, and power relations on governance practices. They also fit in with the Agenda-Setting Theory which posits that governments' capacity to communicate affects the general public's perception and understanding of the quality of their governance. However, if there are communications constraints due to institutional issues, communication efforts could fall short of the desired effect.

In general, the results highlight that the problems of effective public communication in local government councils in Rivers State are not financial but institutional and political problems. Political interference, infrastructural constraints, insufficient public awareness and bureaucratic delays indicate that communication needs can be improved by rearranging the system, making administrative service more efficient, more institutional capacity and openness.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the relationship between citizen engagement, and government transparency, with a particular focus on the mediating role of effective public communication in local government councils in Rivers State between 2011 and 2025. The results, meanwhile, show how important citizen engagement and transparency are for maintaining institutional reputation and credibility at the grassroots level, in the short- and long-term. Local governments have a higher likelihood to establish trust, legitimacy, and sustained citizen confidence when citizens participate in decision-making processes and when governance activities are open. But, the study also indicates an unevenness of the public communication effective mediation. Evidence shows that communication practices are weak, inconsistent or are limited by institutional and political factors, while communication can improve the visibility of transparency programmes and contribute to institutional credibility. Specifically, political interference, bureaucracy delays, lack of infrastructure and public awareness were cited as major challenges that hinder the communication as a link between citizen engagement and government transparency. Likewise, citizen engagement can be ineffective at influencing institutions if communication is ineffective, or not coordinated.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:

Local government councils in Rivers State should establish a well-structured communication units staffed with trained professionals to ensure consistent dissemination of information, timely updates on government activities, and effective engagement with citizens as to avoid disengaging the grassroots with recent governmental policies and programmes (Epelle & Ibiamu, 2016).

Policies, especially of local government councils in Rivers State should be implemented to safeguard the autonomy of communication channels within local governments, ensuring that information dissemination is transparent, unbiased, and not



unduly influenced by political actors. This will veritably avoid the issue of public distrust in the affairs of local government administration.

Local government councils in Rivers State should prioritise the allocation of resources on investment in digital platforms, community information systems, local media partnerships, and public outreach mechanisms so as to enhance access to information across urban and rural communities.

There is a need for routine public sensitisation programmes to be organised by the Rivers State Local Government Service Commission in partnership with the respective local government councils, especially in rural areas as to educate citizens about governance processes, transparency initiatives, and opportunities for participation, thereby strengthening informed engagement.

In an attempt to ensure grassroots democracy and stimulating citizen engagement in the effective and efficient administration of local government councils, elected local government chairmen or sole administrators in Rivers State should develop a formal feedback systems such as town hall meetings, citizen reporting platforms, and complaint resolution channels to ensure that public input is captured and integrated into policy decisions.

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