

## *Review*

# **Effective communication as a strategic tool for rural development: A model to take South African Government beyond mobilization and consultation through public participation**

**B. N. Rasila\* and M. J. Mudau**

Centre for Rural Development and Poverty Alleviation of the University of Venda, South Africa.

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The new South African Government has been marred by protests since 2004. This is according to the report on service delivery protest in South Africa released by the South African Parliament in August 2009 and the one by the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA) in the same year. These protests escalated in 2009 where all provinces were affected. Media in general report these protests as being influenced by lack of adequate service delivery by government. Services needed include free water supply, proper roads, electricity and free houses. The protests are mostly in villages and townships, areas exposed to underdevelopment. When protesting some people damage existing limited government facilities. This suggests that community members feel alienated from government's programmes and matters of governance in general. This alienation follows, as argued in stated reports, lack of effective communication between government and its communities; hence a need for the introduction of a communication model relevant for effective public participation and rural development which goes beyond just consultation and mobilization of community members but sustainable members' participation. The model will also be critical for poverty alleviation as it intends harnessing community participation on developmental initiatives.

**Key words:** Effective communication, violence protests, under-development, public participation.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The importance of effective communication in promoting successful implementation of developmental initiatives cannot be questioned. This article aims to create new effective communication model which will bridge the communication gap between the structures of government and the community members and encourage sustainable public participation. As revealed in this study and in support of Schramm (1997), the problem of underdeveloped regions across the globe is partly due to poor or lack of effective communication. Schramm (1997)

laments the existence of a considerable communication gap between development agents and communities. In support, Dudley (1999) points out that there is a relationship between communication and economic growth.

Lu (2009) reports that communication gaps in economic activities impact negatively on development initiatives. He argues that China needed effective communication to build its internal and external images. Portrayal of poor image by communities within the country is a sign of a communication gap between government and its people. In 2008, the economy of China was affected, resulting in both its internal and international reputation being dented. According to Lu (2009), lack of effective communication and inadequate knowledge of international communication skills needed

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\*Corresponding author. E-mail: rasilan@premier.limpopo.gov.za. Tel: 083 2410 772, 015 287 6084.

to relate with her own stakeholders was likely to be the major reason for this status quo.

Sawer (2009) also contends that a communication gap exists between the government and the people in Australia. He attributed this to the traditions of secretive government, on the one hand and high levels of community distrust, on the other hand.

Hurskainen (1993) explains the situation presented above and expresses the view that governments believe they are custodians of correct policies and possess appropriate knowledge for developing people's living conditions. Most governments strive to address the ignorance that communities have of the programmes and opportunities that they can take advantage of to improve their livelihoods.

In Tanzania, this ignorance is called *unjinga*. In an attempt to strengthen the flow of information between the government and grassroots communities, it was erroneously argued that *unjinga* should be replaced with effective acquisition of formal education. When asked what they attribute service delivery protest within the municipalities to, respondents, administrators and politicians in Mutale local municipality partially blame it on lack of information on mandates of the local municipalities and ignorance by community members.

As Olutimayin (2002) points out, effective communication between government and its people is crucial even in the health industry. The Health for All System introduced in Nigeria between 1993 and 1998 led to the establishment of the Primary Health Care System. The goals of the Health for All programme could not be achieved because effective communication channels among health facilities, districts and community members were non-existent (Olutimayin, 2002). Moreover, it was recognized that communication between decision makers in the urban offices and implementers in rural areas needed attention.

According to the South African State of Local Government Report (2009), a considerable communication gap exists between municipalities and communities in rural areas. This, as indicated in the same report by the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (CoGTA), hinders the realization of rural development and poverty alleviation. According to the State of Local Government in South Africa report (2009), the increasing number of violent protests in some parts of South Africa is partly due to lack of communication between the local sphere of government and people residing in areas under its jurisdiction. Bowes (1997) believes that a communication gap also contributes to underdevelopment in the sense that people cannot access the information they need to improve their livelihoods.

While it is acknowledged in societies around the world there is concern over the plight of poverty, in South Africa years of active discrimination policymaking and neglect have resulted in high levels of inequality characterized

by extreme wealth, on one hand, and desperate poverty, on the other hand. This is according to the report on Estimation of Poverty Lines for South Africa released by the University of Cape Town (Oosthuizen, 2004).

In South Africa approximately 57% of individuals were reported in this report as living below the poverty income line since 2001. Limpopo and Eastern Cape had the highest proportion of poverty with 77 and 72%, respectively. This is despite government's poverty alleviation initiatives to fight poverty including the Towards Anti-Poverty Strategy (2008). The strategy identifies most poverty target being the older persons, the unemployed, low wage earners, women, people with disabilities and people living in rural areas and call for provision of:

- i) The social grant system where, as per Statistics SA (2010), the state is reaching over 11 million people.
- ii) The indigent register where municipalities identify households eligible for free basic services due to their poor economic status.
- iii) Employment creation where short and long term job opportunities are created. These include the Extended Public Works Programme (EPWP).
- iv) Human resource development including free basic education.

Current government communication systems lack effectiveness and this can be attributed to lack of effective model of communication. This paper is based on the qualitative study conducted in Wards 5 and 12 of Mutale local municipality, Limpopo Province in South Africa. The study also focussed on the realization of the following objectives:

- i) To analyze strength and weakness of the current communication framework between municipalities and rural communities.
- ii) To provide a framework for better communication among the municipalities, municipal structures, community-based organization and the rural communities.
- iii) To provide communication framework for effective communication between the municipalities, other government service providing agencies and the rural communities for the enhancement of effective Developmental Local Government.
- iv) To provide communication model for the enhancement of rural community participation on their developmental initiative as provided by their municipalities.

Different questionnaires were used for target audience which comprised amongst others the political component, the Mayoral committee, Management (Section 57), Municipal structures such as Ward Committees and Civil structures such as the local Civic Organization of South Africa (SANCO) and Traditional leadership. There were

limitations in terms of getting responses from target subjects as they had to get permission from different authorities, the mayor and the municipal manager. This was however solved through lengthy deliberation on the benefits of the study to the municipality as it identifies communication gaps and provides relevant interventions.

The questionnaire was then administrated on face-to-face setting where questions were posed to the audience and they provide responses which were recorded and then analyzed.

## **GOVERNMENT'S EFFORTS ON PROVISION OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT**

Government is spending money in communication activities. All government departments in Limpopo districts and majority of local municipalities have either a communication unit or personnel taking care of communication activities. There is also a budget in each government institution dedicated to communication function. This is used in developing among others posters, mass media promotions and for unmediated communication including outreach programmes.

Following former president Thabo Mbeki's State of the Nation Address in 2003, government also established Community Development Workers' programme which saw Community Development Workers (CDWs) employed and placed at local municipalities. At that time in his State of the Nation Address (SONA) Mbeki said, "Government will create a public service echelon of multi-skilled community development workers who will maintain direct contact with the people where the masses live". CDWs account to the provincial and national levels.

There are other structures such as the Ward Committees and traditional leadership councils. However, as Disolwane and Lekonyane (2011) put it, lack of clarification of roles and clear reporting lines for the CDWs put them in risk of getting into territorial competition with other structures within the municipality such as the Ward Councillors and Ward Committees. CDWs are perceived to be usurping roles of local structures and as spying over these structures. This hampers effective communication between government institutions and community members. Community members as indicated earlier do resort on protests for lack of service delivery as if there is no one to communicate government's plans, challenges and intervention and create a sense of hope and patience.

As Chambers (2010) argues, development initiatives in rural areas are negatively affected as they lack community based planning. In his public participatory experience, Chambers (2010) argues for the importance of participatory development and calls for community-driven development (CDD) which is based on the empowerment of local communities whereby local

governments, rural and urban communities are driven towards development with a new set of powers, rights and obligations.

It can be argued that identified communication platforms of government are failing to provide effective communication as they operate in linear form where government as the creator, producer and sender of the message is seen as imposing the message instead of reaching consensus with the recipients. Other common linear models of communication will be sited in the following parts of this paper.

## **RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT**

### **Effective communication is one of the pillars of rural development**

Chambers (2010) describes Effective Communication for Rural Development as communication characterized by community participation where in community members are empowered with information and are part of the identification of their needs, challenges, intervention plans, implementation thereof, monitoring and evaluation in an environment conducive for them to take issues of their own development into their own hands by becoming active participants and owners of the whole process. This means that members of the community are persuaded to take matters of their development into their own hands. They also are made to be accountable to existing developmental initiative.

Larson (1990) indicates that persuasion involves self-motivation and it occurs incrementally. According to Larson (1990), effective and successful persuasion is determined by persuaders' knowledge of the needs of their audience. Correct knowledge of audience seems to be a missing link in government as in most cases they believe in one-size-fits all approach. The easy to single out example in this regard is when government prefers writing one and the same statement and sends it to all media houses irrespective of media houses' different story angles and editorial styles as well as content needs.

Effective communication involves situation analysis and communication research which is regarded as a key in document called Guidance on Communication for Rural Development (2009). It is through communication that community members will be made to take part in initiatives that improve their lives through self-actualization.

The notion of self-actualization (Larson, 1990) comes as a result of effective communication. O'Keefe (2002) argues that persuasion is connected to the notion of success and this emphasizes the importance of effective communication in rural development. O'Keefe (2002) also adds that persuasion is like the orientation of the mind. Effect of persuasion, as O'Keefe (2002) argues, can be



**Figure 1.** Striking community members also destroy limited resources provided by government.

measured by change in attitude. Here, a well trained communicator will assess attitude before and after exposure to the message. Change in attitude will also result in change on outcomes. Should the outcome be positive, this has potential of changing how community members perceive government institutions and their developmental initiative. Instead of becoming passive recipients of government's grants and destroying existing limited resources they may become part of the implementation of interventions and have a level of ownership and accountability (Figure 1).

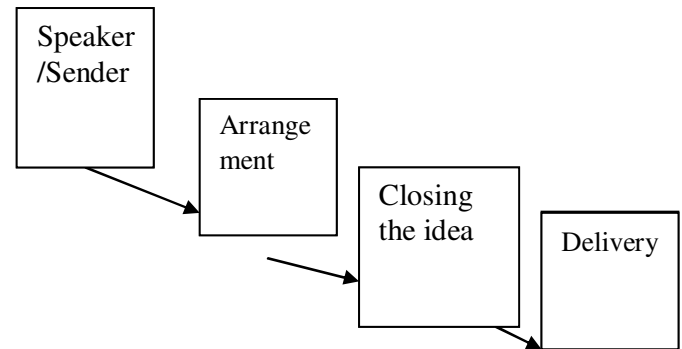
Additionally, within the current communication situation in South Africa, there is what is termed Development Communication (DC) which is the most dominating type of information exchange. As described in the Government Communicators' Handbook (2007), Development Communication (DC) is about communicating the messages that are relevant in empowering people's socio-economic lives. It is about giving people the information they will be able to use for their own development.

DC needs well-defined strategies, systematic planning and rigorous management hence requiring massive resources, intensity and duration which is rare in rural areas (Guidelines on Communication for Rural Development, 2009). Resources will for example be needed for skills development for government employees and community members.

### **Link between poor communication and violent protest in local sphere**

The parliament of the Republic of South Africa conducted a research on violent service delivery protests around the country released in August 2009. The findings of this research indicate that among others, poor communication is a cause of violent protests believed to be in demand of better government service delivery.

The report also indicates that people resolve on riots because of aggression fuelled by intense prolonged



**Figure 2.** Aristotle's model of communication.

frustration, reinforcement of violence as being accepted in families and communities, vindictiveness, anger and lack of confidence which can all be managed through effective communication.

### **Review of some existing communication models and how they function**

According to Mortensen (1972), a model is a systematic representation of an object or event in idealized and abstract form and that there are the following most dominating communication models.

#### ***Aristotle's model of communication***

Aristotle, a Greek philosopher-teacher established this communication model in the desire of observing the availability of the means of persuasion in his teaching of rhetoric. This model gives the speaker more power as this is where the message is discovered. Considerations of both ethical and emotional feelings are done by the speaker with little consideration of the recipient. The speaker then arranges the strategies, dresses the idea or message and sends it out. Recipient just has to receive; hence ill-effective communication as shown in the following sketch (Figure 2). Contrary to this, the new model denies the sender of the message to send the message with the intention of getting predictable final responses but demands the sender of the message to first share on equal basis with the intended recipient, take the recipient on board in identifying challenges, interventions and implementation thereof.

#### ***The Shannon-Weaver mathematical model***

This model is considered by Mortensen (1972) as the most commonly used in low-level communication texts and has been taken as an appropriate model for human communication. Although, having been improved by dif-

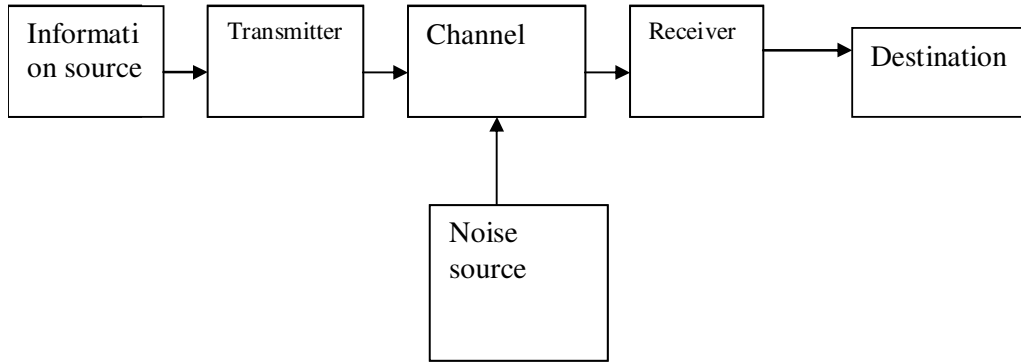


Figure 3. Shannon-Weaver's model.

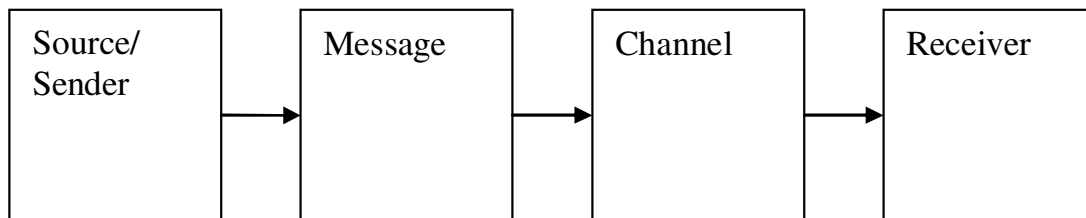


Figure 4. Berlo's Model.

ferent contemporary authors, the model still possesses the elements of linear approach where message flow is only from one side to the other with all organized by the sender as in the sketch (Figure 3). The new model does not deny the sender (Government) to create the message but this message should go to the target audience still as a proposal or suggestion.

It will then gets discussed together and have all participants having ownership in every step of the process including collective accountability.

**Berlo's model of communication**

This model, as Mortensen (1972) explains, tends to stress the manipulation of the message during the encoding and decoding processes. It implies that human communication is like a machine communication resembling signal sending in telephone, television or computer as in radar system. This model suggests that human communication challenges may be solved technically while problems in meanings and meaningfulness are a matter of reaction, agreement, beliefs etc that go beyond mere comprehension. This, as shown in the sketch (Figure 4), is also linear from one side to the other. The new model, on the other hand, demands for face-to-face communication and full participation by members of the community on issues of governance.

**IMPACT OF COMTASK ON GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION PROTOCOLS**

Following the dawn of democratic South African government, there emerged a need for government to restructure the way it communicates.

Many people regard this as the shifting of government communication from what used to be known as South African Communication Services (SACS) to what is today known as Government Communication and Information Systems (GCIS) with the emphasis on the word system coming with the spirit of coordination from national, provincial and local spheres. The task team was established to study on possibilities of developing this communication system.

The task Group known as COMTASK surveyed government communication in 19 countries including ten developing countries and found common trends and practices such as the following:

- i) An effective media relation is always associated with the recipe of coordinated government messaging. These have to be led by officials who have direct access to political leaders. This is the case today in South African communications.
- ii) Government outreach includes a wide variety of methods but places emphasis on electronic channels, hence compromising face-to-face.
- iii) Didactic messages or government slots are not parti-

cularly effective tools (This is still true in current communication system in South Africa).

iv) Radio is a critical vehicle for reaching poor or remote communities.

v) New technology and use of the Internet are generally more advanced in other countries including the developing countries visited than in South Africa.

vi) Most democracies have central communication institutions that handle government services such as advertising, analysis and training.

vii) Decentralized communication was found to be most effective, where information is imparted from that point in Government closest to the target audience (But in South Africa it mostly comes from National) (COMTASK Report, 2000).

Many of the findings are still applicable in today's government communication system in South Africa. Communication in government of South Africa starts at the Government Communication and Information Systems (GCIS) which is the highest communication office based at the presidency.

Every year GCIS sets communication tone to make sure there is alignment in themes and messages of the year or a stipulated period. The provinces only develop their communication strategies after receiving guidelines from GCIS. Provinces align their strategies to the guideline from GCIS. Provincial departments, districts and municipalities also align their communication strategies to the provincial one.

The challenge is that the national sphere of government through GCIS imposes "one-size-fits-all" type of guidelines and that the other spheres have to copy and comply. This approach is top-down in nature and does not make government communication model different from other models where the recipient is regarded just as a receiver and not contributor or equal partner of the communication process.

Government also communicates through Public Participation Programme (PPP), formerly known as Imbizos. During the PPP, the president, the deputy president, ministers and their deputies visit the municipalities accompanied by premiers and members of provincial executive councils (MEC's) and political leaders at local sphere to listen to challenges facing communities. Among others they visit local projects as identified by their advance teams and gather in one place where some members of the community get a chance to raise their concerns. However, often time this is very limited; hence few members of the community get a chance to speak to government leaders.

The PPP in South Africa is in line with the notion of the community based planning aiming at bringing community driven development through listening to the needs of the communities and responding to them as per public participatory models of Chambers (2010).

Bessette (2004) argues that communication is important

for bringing community participation. However, Bessette (2004) believes there is a lot of talk on the word participation yet in practice it covers many "non-participatory" approaches. Government's public participation is one such community participation full of non-participatory approaches. Bessette (2004) says good community participation is the one that does involve members and not just ends up at consultation level. Further, Bessette (2004) argues that community members need to participate and not just be mobilized.

It can be argued that government's current models of communication are good for consultation and not involving community members; they are good for mobilization and not sustainable community participation. Community participation is when people take responsibility for carrying out a development initiative. Community members are involved when they are active in identifying their own development challenges, in seeking solutions and taking decision about how to best implement solutions plus being active in monitoring and evaluating the implementation of intervention plans.

Government also uses newsletters. Government newsletters are becoming more common these days. However, the majority of them are just event based reports where they follow activities of political leaders without serious focus on government's programmes' ability to change people's lives.

One other popular way of government communication is the use of mass media. Mass media refers *inter alia* to radio, television, newspapers and magazines. The most used mass media in rural areas is radio. The challenge is that messages are sent to the radio stations and other media such as the newspapers ready to be broadcast or printed without preparing the listeners and readers.

The ideal situation is when the local government structures do facilitate communication within community structures before the message is advertised to make sure there are people who will remain participating after the lapsing period of the advertisement (for example, after Youth Day celebration is there youth remaining rigorously advocating issues of young people at the villages (ward levels) or it will only be remembered in the next year when celebrated again?).

## CONCLUSION

As indicated this paper is based on the study conducted in Mutale Local municipality in Limpopo Province of South Africa. It was realized that indeed there is communication gap between government institutions such as the local municipalities and their community members. This gap has potential to alienate community members from matters of governance including those of developmental initiatives. The communication gap also has potential of not providing communication platform for government institutions and community members to plan together.

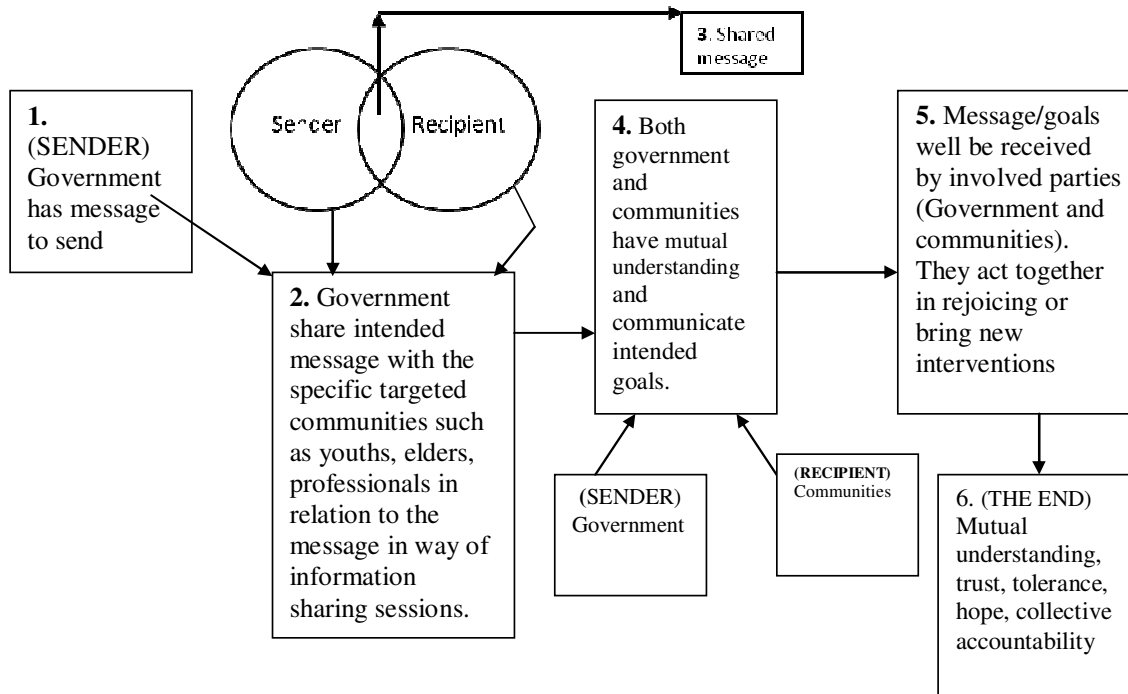


Figure 5. Effective communication model for rural development.

To close this communication gap, it was realized that there is a need for the introduction of a model of communication which will be more effective and relevant for rural development through efficient public participation in matters of governance. Information gathered bears testimony that communication gap exists between structures of the municipality and those within civil society. This gap is also realized between structures of the municipality themselves. Civil structures also do not complement each other due to communication gap between them.

Figure 5 provides the effective communication model for rural development. It is anticipated that the model will contribute positively in the realization of the following:

- i) Ushering effective communication for the development of rural community as it is based on the principles of persuasion, self-actualization and change of attitude.
- ii) Create more understanding, belief, sense of togetherness between communicators (for example, local government) and the recipient (for example, community members) as its most important focus is on community participation and is based on establishment of mutual understanding between the sender of the message and target recipient.
- iii) Create sense of belonging with the spirit of OURS prevailing over the spirit of THEIRS between government and communities.
- iv) Bring in high level of community-driven planning which will lead to true public participation in government activi-

ties.

- iv) Provide community participation through involving community members and making them to participate and take responsibility for their own development initiative.

#### Effective communication model for rural development (Figure 5)

- 1) Government is an initiator and sender of the intended message, for example, "Working together we can do more"
- 2) Government consults and mobilizes recipients (for example, Community members) and interprets the message or theme together.
- 3) Both parties share common views about the message at equal level of participation.
- 4) Both parties develop mutual understanding on what they need to share together to achieve goals of their message. They are equally the willing messengers of the set message. For instance, they understand equally what the message of working together entails and what the expectations of both parties are?
- 5) Message is then well received by both parties as it now belongs to both. They act together for the realization of intended goals. When they succeed they rejoice together and when they fail they strive for intervention together. The challenge here may be those who pretended from the beginning of the process as they had certain motives different from the collective. Fortunately

enough these cannot be in majority and will not be able to challenge decisions openly.

6) There is no more suspicious views again as there is trust, tolerance, hope and accountability by both parties. They work together for success and no one for example, will go on strike and no one will vandalize the little they have as they will be in a position to understand why the government managed to provide certain services and not others and they will join hands to come with interventions. Community members then become custodians of state development initiatives and are persuaded to be active participants in matters of governance.

The new model was validated at workshops with different structures including the Ward Councillors, district and local municipalities' communicators Fora. Vhembe District, Mutale, Musina, Makhado and Tzaneen local municipalities have currently extended invitations to representatives of ward committees in their Communication Fora as part of the enhancement of community participation on matters of governance. In these municipalities, representatives from the ward committees form part of Communicators Fora. The agenda of the meetings also take care of matters at ward level such as how to strengthen working relations with civil structures. In so doing, ward committee members receive communication skills and are tasked to communicate municipality's plans at ward levels in different local structures including at the traditional leadership council meetings. Local municipality's communicators, CDWs and Ward Committees therefore interact with communities having similar understanding of developmental initiatives, challenges and interventions. In doing this, the community members become part of governance and they are skilled and have a level of accountability that will make them act with responsibility at all times. Community members do not just wait as passive recipients of government's grants but take care of their own developmental initiatives. This type of effective communication accountability has potential to limit, if not, avoid violent protests by community members.

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