

## Participation for Political Development in Cameroon

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### **Abstract**

*This paper seeks to show that participatory communication is suitable not only for socio-cultural and economic development efforts but also in promoting political advancements in less developed nations. It is even more pertinent here because democracy means participation in the politics of one's country. Thus, the people must feel that their involvement in the politics of their nation is the foundation on which their democracy is built. A survey research method proves that some of the ways in which this can be done are through behaviour change communication strategies that encourage participation and dialogue.*

**Keywords:** Participation, behaviour change, participatory communication, political development, dialogue

A democratic system of government, based on liberal ideas is the ideal that was preached by John Locke in 1690. He debunked the theory of Divine Rights of Kings (which held that kings were ordained by God and so whatever the king said was implemented rigorously as law) and the nature of the state as conceived by the English philosopher and political science theorist, Thomas Hobbes. In brief, Locke contended that although a state is sovereign, sovereignty itself did not reside in the state but with the people, and that the state is supreme, but only if it is bound by civil and what he termed “natural” law.

Given that sovereignty means supreme authority and it resides with the people rather than with the *King*<sup>1</sup>, the latter therefore becomes an individual whom the people have designated to fight for their interest. As such, he acts only in favour of these people who have designated him to represent their own very interest (national interest). Generally, that king who represents the will and interest of his people is “appointed” by the people (the word “appointed” is used here to demonstrate the authority of the people). This “appointment” is carried out through democratic elections whereby each citizen has the right and duty to choose whom he feels can lead the country and can best defend their interests. The consent of the governed is thus central to the concept of democracy. Democracy of course involves other rights such as constitutional limit, freedom of expression, protection of human and minority rights, accountability and transparency, a multiparty system, free market system and the rule of law. Therefore, elections alone are not enough to preserve democracy. But the importance accorded to free and fair elections by the proponents of democracy underscores its relevance. Elections establish the individual's and the citizenry's political rights. They constitute the main sign post of democracy. They are the on-going representation of the accord of the governed. It is the forum for citizens to express their will and participate in the political life of their country.

Movements, strikes and even riots have often risen in countries where people feel they are not enjoying this right – the right to express themselves through the ballot box. The Egyptian people who ousted Hosni Mubarak in 2011 and President Morsi in 2013, the Tunisian people in 2011 who ousted Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali etc. all go a long way to show the importance accorded to public participation for the prevalence of democratic practice.

In some societies however, the people are not denied this right of participation. They rather are unwilling to take part. This was the case of Cameroon in the advent of the 2011 presidential elections and the 2013 twin elections. In a country of more than 20 million inhabitants, just over 5 million people take part in the elections.

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<sup>1</sup> King here means leader. It could be president, prime minister, etc.

Voter registration is the primary way of giving one's consent to participate in elections. Voter registration is recognized in international law as a means of ensuring the right to vote. Voter education is recognised in international law as an important part of the electoral process. In a democratic country, it is the duty of the government to ensure public participation for the prevalence of democratic practice. Article 1 of the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) guarantees broad autonomy within a state and participation of people in the state's political decision making process.

The African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance in articles 2, 3 and 4 makes it a government's responsibility to promote the establishment of the necessary conditions to foster citizen participation in democratic and development processes. It goes further to describe participation in stating that the state "shall recognise popular participation through universal suffrage as the inalienable right of the people". It therefore falls on the government to ensure participation for the sake of the country's political development. But what accounts for the high level of voters' apathy in Cameroon? What is the reason behind the lack of enthusiasm about the political life of Cameroonians?

One of the reasons that account for this apathy is the fact that Cameroon has a history of elections fraud since elections used to be organised and supervised by the government through the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralisation. This situation usually led to the contestation and eventual nullification of results such as the 1997 and 2002 elections in the country. This caused the electorate to lose faith in the proper organisation of the elections even with the creation of Elections Cameroon, ELECAM, an independent body in charge of organising, supervising and managing the elections. The general attitude of Cameroonians about the elections is described by some as: "*their thing*"; or "*no need to vote since it would not count*".

According to Transparency International, another source of discontentment and lack of trust in the political system is the high level of youth unemployment in the country and their feeling of humiliation and abandonment by the government and who thus find no reason to go to the polls because the elections do not contribute in any way to their development.

Participation in its most basic sense refers to sharing or taking part in the activities of a group. It means having a share (though not usually equal) in the operations of a group. Technically, there are two main perspectives to participation. These are institutional or project based perspective (involvement of all stakeholders from problem identification right up to monitoring and evaluation) and social movement perspective (equal distribution of power, including knowledge and resources)

The absence of participation retards development efforts in a country given that development is not only limited to economic furtherance but also political advancement. The very act of participation, besides providing a sense of belonging, is in itself advantageous because it empowers citizens, strengthens the spirit of patriotism and engenders citizens to develop great concern in the decisions taken about them. In a society which sees the prevalence of participation, decision makers can therefore take informed decisions.

As a solution, ELECAM set a communications strategy that had as main objective to change the behaviour of prospective electorate from not registering to registering for elections. In other words, it aimed at causing the electorate to break away with elections apathy and participate in the political life of the country.

Participatory communication is regarded as an instrument aimed at effecting change for the advancement of the development process (Tufte&Mefalopulos 2009). It makes reference to empowering the people on whose lives the development project will have an effect. Owing to the fact that the people on whose lives the development project will impact are an important stakeholder, it goes without saying that they must occupy a central place in the project cycle right from the needs assessment stage. This form of communication had its origins in the 1950s from Paulo Freire, a Brazilian Development Worker who first tried it by empowering landless peasants in North Brazil to identify their needs as liberation and improved living standards. This deviates from Lasswell's linear form of communication: who says what to whom through what channel and with what effect, which gives way for domination rather than participation and complementarity.

Even more pertinent is that fact that participatory communication deals with live skill development. This means that individuals within a community are trained, either formally or informally, to acquire certain skills which will make them contribute positively to the development of that community. This has a lot to do with civic education and political participation.

I carried out a study that aimed at evaluating the behaviour change communication strategy that was put in place by ELECAM.

This study was carried out in the rural areas of Cameroon specifically in the Buea vicinity situated in the South West Region of the country. The total population of the rural areas in Buea is counted at 41,235 people. Our study seeks to measure opinion trends and so it made use of the quantitative method of research specifically the survey research method. The disproportionate stratified sampling method was used to select the participants of the survey. Out of a population of 41,235 persons, 380 were chosen to represent the views of the others. This is based on the model proposed by Krejcie and Morgan (1970). A questionnaire with 20 questions divided into 3 sections was used. A total of 331 questionnaires were completed giving a response rate of 87.1%.

The results of the study showed that ELECAM prioritised mainstream media in its communications efforts to solve this problem. It made use of vertical information dissemination techniques including the use of TV, radio, billboards etc. at the expense of participatory methods of communication. It was also discovered, however, that the people rather relied more on participatory channels such as interpersonal communication involving the use of opinion leaders (such as school teachers, traditional authorities etc.) and arenas of social gatherings (such as traditional meetings, local tontines etc.), all of which give preference to dialogue rather than what ELECAM prioritised. These people (opinion leaders) are able to talk others into changing their attitudes and behaviours and can talk on behalf of the people given that the latter form their opinions from those of the said leaders. This goes in line with Santucci (2005) who is of the opinion that effective communication interventions rely on participatory and interpersonal methods rather than on mass media. As a result of such a strategy, in a country of more than 20 million inhabitants, just over five million registered to vote, including members of the diaspora.

The participation in the politics of the country should be encouraged through participatory communication approaches which aim at changing the attitudes and eventually the behaviour of prospective electorates. The change in this context is one that had to take place at the societal level owing to the fact that the people were not even aware that their attitude and behaviour as concerns political participation was a thorn in the flesh of the democratic life of the state as a whole. The case in question is the advancement of the democratic process by bringing about change not at the individual level but at the societal level, to create a sense of patriotism and political awareness in the minds of the citizens. The focus, thus, is not limited to individuals but to households, networks and communities. If the change occurs in the societal structure, it has a chance of becoming sustainable since it will become a part of that community (social change). The communication orientation moves from sensitisation (vertical top-bottom) to participation and empowerment (horizontal). The knowledge passed across is not through vertical information dissemination but an acquisition process where the individual participates and seeks for knowledge to empower himself. It moves from a need to a right and duty (e.g. it is a *duty* to register for elections in the case of ELECAM). The individual moves from ignorance of the problem to awareness that his current behaviour is problematic, he realises that there is a need to change, then gathers information to resolve the problem caused by his current behaviour and finally adopts the modelled behaviour.

Stages of behaviour change	Operational significance
1. Non-awareness of the problem	High level of voters' apathy due to lack of trust. Population is not aware that apathy poses a threat to the democratic structure of the state
2. Awareness of the problem	Population is aware that apathy is a problem. They however take no steps to solve this problem. This may be caused, among other factors, by the lack of trust in the political system.
3. Acknowledgment of a need to address the problem (need to change)	They now try to regain trust in the system so that they can participate in the elections
4. Skill development	Gathering useful information about the unfolding of the electoral process and the requirements for registration and voting (civic education)
5. Adoption of the modelled behaviour	Positive outcome demonstrated by registration on the electoral lists.

Source: Author

As a solution therefore, any campaign aimed at changing behaviours for political furtherance must consider an approach that encourages participation and dialogue.

The environment to foster change must be created. In this case, it does not just suffice to educate the people on their civic responsibility and to incite the desire to participate. It requires (but is not limited to) easing the access to registration offices and access to national identity cards.

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