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Analysing the Effectiveness Of Public Meetings for Rural Food Security Communication

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Abstract

This paper examines the effectiveness of public meetings for food security communication, that is, communication about the government's rural food security enhancement programs and people's participation in the Irob and Gulomekeda districts of eastern Tigray, Ethiopia. Ethnography was used as the research design, involving semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, participant observation, and document reviews. The results revealed that development experts and government representatives dominate public meetings and that the deep-rooted socio-economic problems of rural people are not adequately discussed. Although public meetings are conceived as venues to help people collectively discuss their priority concerns and identify solutions, they are criticized for not embracing people's input in decision-making processes. Although representation is necessary for public meetings, rural food security-related programs in the Irob and Gulomekeda districts do not necessarily embrace public representation. Overall, people in both districts played a nominal role in decision-making domains. This study contributes to our understanding of the effectiveness and limitations of public meetings as a communication approach in rural development in areas with limited access to technology.

Keywords: public meetings, communication, participation, food security, rural people, Tigray

Analyser l'efficacité des réunions publiques pour la communication sur la sécurité alimentaire rurale

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Résumé

Cet article examine l'efficacité des réunions publiques pour la communication sur la sécurité alimentaire, c'est-à-dire la communication sur les programmes gouvernementaux d'amélioration de la sécurité alimentaire rurale et la participation de la population dans les districts d'Irob et de Gulomakeda, dans l'est du Tigré, en Éthiopie. L'ethnographie a été utilisée comme modèle de recherche, impliquant des entretiens semi-structurés, des discussions de groupe, l'observation participante et l'examen de documents. Les résultats ont révélé que les experts en développement et les représentants du gouvernement dominent les réunions publiques et que les problèmes socio-économiques profondément enracinés des populations rurales ne sont pas suffisamment débattus. Bien que les réunions publiques soient conçues comme des lieux permettant aux gens de discuter collectivement de leurs préoccupations prioritaires et d'identifier des solutions, elles sont critiquées pour ne pas prendre en compte la contribution des citoyens aux processus décisionnels. Bien que la représentation soit nécessaire pour les réunions publiques, les programmes ruraux liés à la sécurité alimentaire dans les districts d'Irob et de Gulomakeda n'incluent pas nécessairement la représentation du public. Dans l'ensemble, les habitants des deux districts ont joué un rôle minime dans les domaines décisionnels. Cette étude contribue à notre compréhension de l'efficacité et des limites des réunions publiques en tant qu'approche de communication dans le développement rural des zones ayant un accès limité à la technologie.

Mots clés : réunions publiques, communication, participation, sécurité alimentaire, populations rurales, Tigré

1.0 Introduction

Worldometers (n.d) report shows that 77.9% of the Ethiopian population resides in rural areas. Ethiopia will remain predominantly rural until at least 2050 (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020). Rural households (farmers) actively participate in agricultural activities. However, agricultural productivity is declining, leading to food insecurity (Tenaye, 2020; Gebissa, 2021). Although more than 50% of the Ethiopian population depends on agriculture for their livelihoods, the country continues to face food insecurity (Food and Agriculture Organisation [FAO], 2017). Due to droughts, conflicts, and increases in food prices, Ethiopia has 22.6 million food insecure people (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [OCHA], 2023). In Tigray, food insecurity remains the worst (Nigussie & Kiflu, 2024; Tigray Bureau of Agriculture and Rural Development, 2021; Weldemichel, 2022), as the region has been a battlefield for different wars (Nigussie, 2017), including the 2020 war between the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in Tigray, the Ethiopian federal government, and its allied forces, including Eritrea, Somalia, the UAE, Iran, Russia, and Turkey (Nigussie & Kiflu, 2024). The Tigray Bureau of Agriculture and Rural Development (2021) revealed that crops and animals were looted or destroyed, and most farmers were left without any food, seeds, oxen, farm tools, or farm inputs, which led to the total collapse of the sector.

War results in the loss of livestock, demolition of civilian infrastructure, deforestation, and widespread use of landmines that disrupt agricultural practices (Teodosijevic, 2003). Alluding to the conflicts in the South Sudan and Syria, FAO (2016, p. 2) contends "conflicts damage agriculture, disrupt food production and food systems; fuel the plundering of crops and livestock that cause loss of assets and incomes." Thus, programs that increase food security are vital. Various intervention programs have been implemented in Tigray to alleviate food insecurity. However, as this study demonstrates, their effectiveness has been curbed by the lack of appropriate communication. This shows that the means of communication—public meetings—are seen as ineffective for participants and do not allow them to participate in ways that meet their needs. The main reason is that although communication approaches imply the possibility of dialogue, they are used only for one-way communication. Communication should facilitate inclusive expression of communities' needs and voices (Scott, 2014) to ensure people's participation. Participation recognises the knowledge and capability of stakeholders in development processes enabling them to exercise their power in decision-making processes (Nigussie, 2023).

This paper focuses on government-sponsored public meetings (hereafter, public meetings), which are regularly utilized for rural food security communication. The purpose of public meetings is to inform people about rural food security programs and their relevance to food security and to identify people's preferences and their participation. Communication amplifies people's voices, allowing communities to express their expectations and share their knowledge (FAO, 2014), which facilitates a bottom-up approach to community development. It focuses on dialogue and horizontal communication, enabling excluded groups to hear their voices (Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation [SDC], 2016). Studies have shown that public meetings are helpful, for several reasons. These include reaching a broader audience with crucial information (McComas et al., 2006), promoting public participation in public health and safety reasons (McComas, 2003; Tracy & Dimock, 2004), engaging citizens in discussions on a wide range of public policy issues that experts have

conventionally undertaken (Guttman, 2010), and offering forums to organisations and the public to engage in meaningful, open discussions about related interests (Adams, 2004). These studies have discussed different topics, and there are limited studies on the efficacy of public meetings in improving the public's understanding of rural development initiatives, including food security programs.

Little is known about the efficacy of public meetings in conveying food security messages, which determines people's understanding of the feasibility and implementation procedures of food security programs. Similarly, it is unclear about power relationships and how rural people engage with local structures about food security programs. The overall implication is that with well-structured public meetings, consistent food security-related messages can help raise awareness and promote participation in these programs. Hence, it is necessary to analyze the use of public meetings to convey rural food security messages to raise people's awareness and enhance their participation in food security programs. This paper examines the following questions:

1. How effective are public meetings for food security communication?

2. What is the level of people's participation in food security programs?

3. What are the qualities and limitations of public meetings to convey food security messages?

2.0 Background

2.1 Food Security Interventions in Ethiopia

The Ethiopian economy relies on agriculture, which employs 80% of the population and accounts for 36.3% of the GDP and 75% of export earnings (World Bank, 2021). However, the Ethiopian agricultural sector is dominated by small-scale farmers who practice rain-fed mixed farming by employing traditional technology and adopting a low-input and low-output production system (Dube et al., 2019). To address these challenges and increase productivity, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) introduced agricultural development-led industrialisation (ADLI) in the 1990s as its underlying development strategy. The Ethiopian government introduced ADLI to build the capacity of small-scale farmers as a fundamental goal in the implementation process to make use of the country's huge labour force, abundant agricultural lands, diversified agro-climatic zones, and sufficient water resources in rural areas (Lulit, 2010).

ADLI strengthens the linkages between agriculture and industry by increasing the productivity of small-scale farmers and investing in industries with the most production linkages to rural areas (Dube et al., 2019). However, inconsistent policies and program implementation failures have challenged the success of rural food security programs. In relation to this, Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia [FDRE], (2011), for instance, contends that the previous food security programs implemented in Ethiopia specifically from 2005 to 2009 have failed to provide the required result. The FDRE further stated that due to failures in previous food security policies, the Ethiopian government and donors initiated a review of the previous programs and designed a new Food Security Program (FSP) for another five years (2010–2014), which is still functional. The newly designed food security program contains four components: Household Asset Building Program (HABP), Public Safety Net Program (PSNP), Complementary Community Investment (CCI), and Voluntary Resettlement (FDRE, 2011).

In eastern Tigray, food security programs mostly rely on the PSNP and HABP as the main components to alleviate chronic food insecurity. These include poultry, fertilisers, animal husbandry, beekeeping, and small-scale water projects. However, the implementation of CCI and Voluntary Resettlement (VR) programs has become challenging (Nigussie, 2017). While implementing CCI requires access to community lodges or other tourist attractions to which communities should take their initiatives and contribute, VR focuses on relocating people from drought-affected and food-insecure districts to more fertile and productive areas. The implementation of these programs relies on three fundamental factors: First, it requires more investment from the government and investors. Second, this depends on people's willingness to leave their villages and relocate to other areas. Third, it depends on the extent of infrastructure development, such as healthcare, transportation, and schools, in areas where people relocate.

2.2 The Public Safety Net Program (PSNP)

The Ethiopian government, in collaboration with a consortium of donors such as the World Bank, USAID, CIDA, and European donors, launched the PSNP in 2005 (Gilligan et al., 2009). Ethiopia's PSNP is one of the largest social protection programs in Africa, with the aim of enabling food-insecure households to smooth consumption and hence prevent asset depletion (Berhane et al., 2014). The primary objective of PSNP is to "provide transfers to the food insecure population in chronically food insecure districts in a way that prevents asset depletion at the household level and creates assets at the community level" Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia [FDRE], (2004, p. 2). PSNP includes food for work (FFW), cash for work (CFW), and direct support through free food.

2.3 Agricultural Extension System

The Ethiopian government launched a Participatory Demonstration and Training Extension System (PADETES) in 1994/95 as a component of ADLI meant to strengthen technology transfer and innovations in the agriculture sector. The main operations of the extension program include the greater diffusion of improved farm technologies, management techniques, and know-how to smallholder farmers (Asfaw et al., 2012). This is to enhance productivity using technological inputs, including modern fertilizers, improved seed, and credit, as well as information on input use and better agricultural practices, which was delivered to most smallholders in rural areas (Dube et al., 2019).

Ethiopia's agricultural extension strategy emphasizes the provision of extension services that are customized to farmers' needs and interests (Diriba, 2020). However, there is a low adoption of fertilizers across different parts of the country, including eastern Tigray. This is attributed to multiple factors, including low profitability, riskiness of expected returns, lack of credit, lack of information, and market failures (Holden, 2018). Despite the introduction of different policies and interventions by the Ethiopian government, aid organizations, and NGOs, it seems that communication approaches applied to implement these strategies in rural communities have not been effective in connecting rural people to food security programs (Nigussie, 2017). Notably, the communication approaches used are predominantly top-down, expert-led, and not contextualised to local thinking. This shows that food security-related messages are not effectively communicated, and that rural people do not understand the relevance and implementation procedures of food security programs. However, communication is not the only factor that can improve food

security in rural areas. Different factors affect rural food security, such as limited funding, corruption, low capacity of implementers, low technology (including traditional farming systems), and unpredictable climate change.

3.0 Communication for Rural Development

Communication significantly drives innovation and social change in rural development worldwide (FAO, 2017). In most nations, rural development dominantly relies on the agriculture sector, which is central to livelihoods, is a primary source of economic prosperity, human health, and social well-being, and is an essential engine of growth and poverty reduction (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2014). Based on this, agriculture has been a leading theme in the prevailing food-related communication scholarship, emphasising the role of communication initiatives in rural development projects (Gordon & Hunt, 2019). This implies that communication should be seen as a tool for achieving a specific objective rather than empowering community members to have their voices heard (Scott, 2014). This emphasises that community empowerment should lead to practical actions to fulfill the desired objectives. Servaes (1999) relates empowerment with participation and decision-making at all levels so that people can control the outcomes of these decisions through participation. Participation has been defined differently (Arnstein, 1969; Scott, 2014; Tufte & Mefalopulos, 2009). Arnstein's (1969, p. 218) definition best captures the focus of this paper, who defined participation as:

> It is the redistribution of power that enables the have-not citizens, presently excluded from the political and economic processes, to be deliberately included in the future. It is the strategy by which the have-nots join in determining how information is shared, goals and policies are set.

Power distribution from the powerful to those without power enables communities to negotiate their interests, which leads to community empowerment. Communities become empowered by gaining knowledge about specific issues, communicating about matters of common concern, making decisions for themselves, and negotiating power relations (Waisbord, 2005). This, in turn, implies the importance of a culture-centered approach, which focuses on the capability of communication processes to transform "social structures of the agency of the subaltern to promote social change" (Dutta, 2011, p. 39). The fundamental concept of the culture-centered approach is to create participatory spaces through which the poor and marginalised can join to develop problems and identify solutions collectively (Dutta et al., 2013). Agency refers to the competency of individuals to sanction their choices and negotiate structures (Dutta, 2011). Accordingly, if communication is to play a part in enabling communities to express their needs, it must not reinforce existing power relations (Scott, 2014).

Most development communication approaches consolidate the existing power structure, where powerful authorities determine the agenda of discussion, which restrains people's roles in decision-making processes. This perfectly describes the realities in most development contexts, in that rural people have limited power to voice their concerns and priorities (Nigussie, 2023). In most contexts, participation is associated with the involvement of stakeholders in development processes (Deetz & Brown, 2004). However, involvement lacks clarity and does not describe the stages and levels of people's participation in the development processes. In addition, it does not clearly indicate the levels at which people are allowed to be involved in development processes. People should have active

roles in the development process, from the conception of development ideas to the implementation stages. Despite widespread support and recognition of participatory development, rural development projects face criticism and implementation difficulties (Nigussie, 2023).

4.0 Food Security Communication

Food security communication simply refers to the communication approaches used to convey food security messages to rural people to raise their awareness about the relevance and implementation procedures of the programs. Ethiopia does not have a clearly designed rural development communication strategy; rural development policies are not well communicated, and people are mostly excluded from these stages. The lack of people's participation in decision-making emanates from power inequalities, and the disempowered cannot participate and make their own choices (Dagron, 2009; Tufte & Mefalopulos, 2009). This can be associated with a lack of opportunities to express their knowledge and experience regarding the issues affecting their lives. Owing to the lack of infrastructure in the Irob and Gulomekeda districts, it is challenging to use technology, including local radio broadcasting, for rural food security programs.

4.1 The Wudabe System

Wudabe refers to an association of people based on age and sex, excluding the elderly and children, which still applies to different parts of Tigray (Nigussie, 2017). Studies show that in TPLF-controlled sub-districts in the region, separate associations for women, men, and young people were established to raise awareness about the TPLF's ideology and policies (Vaughan & Tronvoll, 2003; Young, 2006). Therefore, it is necessary for individuals to be assigned to their respective Wudabe groups. However, joining Wudabe is not necessarily an individual appeal, but a government's direction to mobilise people in politics and development. Each Wudabe group has leaders responsible for facilitating communication between the groups and government representatives. The Wudabe group leaders undertake leadership roles based on loyalty to the ruling political party through active participation in political matters. Although Wudabe leaders are responsible for organizing public meetings, it is unclear how they interact with rural people to connect them to food security programs. For instance, regular visits and interactions with rural people have become vital because the success of food security programs requires regular follow-up and discussion of their implementation procedures. Under each Wudabe, there are *Gujule Lim'aat* groups, also called farmer development groups, who are responsible for mobilising their fellow members to development programs. Farmer development groups improve the transfer of knowledge on modern agricultural techniques and technologies to and among farmers through a small number of trained contact farmers (Segers et al., 2009).

4.2 Public Meetings

Although we are in the age of a digital world, orality dominates the mode of communication in the Irob and Gulomekeda districts. Public meetings are forms of communication that are regularly practiced in the Irob and Gulomekeda districts. Public meetings broadly describe any organised form of a social gathering of three or more people, open to any person to discuss issues, provide information, review projects, and seek input (Adams, 2004; McComas et al., 2006). Public meetings can be customary, or government sponsored. Community elders locally initiate customer meetings to discuss various issues among community members. These meetings are informal and are organised

based on the willingness of the community. However, government-sponsored public meetings are more formal, and participant attendance remains compulsory (McComas, 2003a). Government-sponsored public meetings are initiated and organised by government representatives or development experts, focussing on the readymade agenda rather than the socio-economic concerns of the people. Public meetings are top-down in format, and their presentation approach does not consider the language and worldviews of participants. Political leaders, development experts, and males from the community dominate public meetings in that females have limited roles (Nigussie, 2017), which limits their roles in community-based decision-making processes.

Kratz (1983) reviewed rural meetings in African countries (also called the *palavers*) and concluded that the extent of discussion and participation in rural meetings varies. About the Kenyan palaver, she noted that while meetings are sometimes said to be open to all, women are sometimes explicitly excluded or intended to perform support tasks. Kratz further indicates that the 'palaver in Ethiopia' as a more successful treatment of a similar problem. Despite public meetings are conceived as venues to help people collectively discuss their priority concerns and identify solutions, they are criticised for not embracing people's input as an essential component of the decision-making processes. The input includes the knowledge, skills, and experience of people about development initiatives, including indigenous knowledge systems. In stakeholder decisions, everyone must be ahead, as this determines their perception of the intended development initiatives and implementation procedures.

4.3 Development Agents as Communicators

Development agents are vital in disseminating information and promoting the adoption of new farming technologies. The Ethiopian government believes that extension agents can liaise between the government and rural people to attain agriculture-based development (Nigussie, 2023). Farm technologies communicated through demonstrations, simulations, case studies, and other participatory rural appraisal methods facilitate mutual understanding, motivate farmers, and inspire them to participate in agricultural development activities (Quarry & Ramirez, 2009). Rogers (2003) argued that extension agents facilitate the flow of innovations to farmers, and feedback from farmers is reported back to extension organisations to help them adjust programs to suit their changing needs. However, although extension has a long history in Ethiopia, its coverage is very low and the linkage of actors in the system is very poor (Sewnet et al., 2016). As employees, development agents come from different cultural backgrounds and do not understand the languages of the rural people they work with, which affects their mutual understanding with rural people (Nigussie, 2023).

4.4 Materials and Methods

This study was conducted in the Irob and Gulomekeda districts of the eastern Tigray region. The total population in both districts is 135,417, of which 101,504 resided in Gulomekeda district (Gulomekeda Woreda Administration, 2018), and the remaining 33,913 people lived in Irob district (Irob Woreda Administration, 2018). Both districts rely on agriculture for their livelihoods (Nigussie, 2023). These districts were selected because they are food insecure and depend on food aid for survival. These include poultry, fertilisers, animal husbandry, beekeeping, and small-scale water projects. Ethnography was used for the research design. Ethnography is helpful in "critically analysing interconnected socio-cultural issues" in a given social context (Sarantakos, 2013, p. 182). Interconnected socio-cultural issues can be taken as the norms,

values, and meanings people attach to their lives. This emphasises the ethnography of communication (Cunliffe, 2010), which enables researchers to systematically describe, analyse, interpret, and critique communicative events (Kalou & Sadler-Smith, 2015). It is helpful to get closer to a social phenomenon through deep immersion in, involvement with, and translation of human experiences of communication and interaction (Cunliffe, 2010). A purposive sampling technique was used to select study subjects based on their participation or specific roles in rural food security programs. Participants include rural households (male and female), development agents, and rural food security experts. Individual interviews, focus group discussions (FDGs), participant observation, and document reviews were employed as data collection tools.

5.0 Individual Interviews

This study involved 20 semi-structured interviews with rural households (males and females), development agents, and rural food security experts in both districts. Semi-structured interviews allow interviewees to express their views openly (Flick, 2002). Interviews with rural households were undertaken in venues for public meetings, which helped identify the level of people's participation in meetings and record their perceptions about public meetings for food security communication and people's participation. However, interviews with development agents and food security experts were held in venues for public meetings or their respective offices. Interviews with rural households were held in Saho and Tigrigna, and interviews with development agents and food security experts were held in Tigrigna.

5.1 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

This paper involved eight focus FGDs. FGDs help explore people's knowledge and experience (Liamputtong, 2013) and examine how individuals "collectively make sense of a phenomenon and construct meanings around it" (Bryman, 2004, p. 348). I used open-ended questions, which helped participants undertake discussions flexibly. Also, there were probing terms to maintain clarity and depth of responses from participants. FGDs in the Irob district involved participants from Aiga, Magauma, and Alitena villages. However, the FGDs in the Gulomekeda district comprised participants from Mainegest and Fireselam villages. Sites for FGDs were villages, Churches, and venues for public meetings where many people congregate. The FGD participants were selected based on their active involvement in food security programs in their respective districts.

5.2 Participant Observation

Participant observation was used to observe and record how research participants respond to public meetings for food security communication. Participant observation becomes helpful in "learning how people respond to situations and how they organise their lives; it is about learning what is meaningful in their lives" (Liamputtong, 2013, p. 166). Participant observations were conducted in venues for public meetings, which helped identify how public meetings were organized, recorded the level of people's participation, and identified the power relationships among participants in public meetings.

A checklist of observations was developed to avoid the subjectivity of what is observed. This involved 18 hours of participant observation.

5.3 Document Reviews

Documents can be valuable additions to a knowledge base, suggesting some questions that need a detailed explanation. I used a purposeful selection to review two public documents about rural food security communication strategies. These documents include the Public Safety Net Program Implementation Manual (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia [FDRE], (2006) and Household Asset Building Program Implementation Manual (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia [FDRE], (2011).

5.4 Data Analysis

Ethnographic data analysis is characterised by a detailed description and interpretation of issues under inquiry. This paper focused on answering the perception of different stakeholders about public meetings for food security communication and people's participation. Audio outputs in Saho and Tigrigna (local languages) were transcribed into English and responses were coded in a matrix that contained different thematic categories. Tabulated responses were thematically ranked from the most frequently mentioned to the least stated. Observation-based field notes were coded into themes based on a matrix of observation to identify and formulate all ideas, themes, or issues they suggest (Emerson et al., 2011). Document analysis was based on the procedures described (Coffey, 2014; Startt & Sloan, 2003), and it focused on "evidence, context, and constructing generalisations" (Startt & Sloan, 2003, pp. 201–202). Observation-based field notes, tabulated responses, and texts were carefully analysed, and such sensible meanings emerged from the recurring themes.

6.0 Results and Discussion

6.1 Effectiveness of Public Meetings for Food Security Communication

The Office of Agriculture and Rural Development administers food security programs and hires development agents who work with the rural people. Development agents in the Irob and Gulomekeda districts transfer agricultural technologies and innovations to rural people (Nigussie, 2023). Effective communication becomes vital to inform rural people about these innovations and technologies for food security programs. As public meetings are the only communication forms for food security programs in both districts, it requires analysing their effectiveness for food security communication to raise people's awareness about food security programs and their implementation. Rural food security Program Implementation Manuals (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia [FDRE], (2006); Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia [FDRE], (2011) were used to analyse the effectiveness of public meetings. Nevertheless, these manuals do not state any specific rural food security communication approach. Hence, it was vital to analyse their effectiveness based on how rural people and development experts recognised public meetings for food security communication and the reliability and acceptance of messages through these communication forms. Development agents believe that public meetings help reach many participants. A development agent in the Gulomekeda district argued, "…as a development agent, I firmly believe that public meetings are useful to inform our people about food security and other related programs." (personal communication, June 12, 2023). Another development agent from the Gulomekeda district also indicated:

> Public meetings are the main communication approaches we practice
>
> reaching our people about rural development programs. Hence, public

> meetings help inform people about food security programs. People get informed through different associations, such as the 'Wudabe' system (personal communication, June 12, 2023).

A development agent in the Irob district also added that:

> As we live in rural villages, we have been using public meetings to communicate developmental messages. Public meetings are useful for obtaining feedback and clarity regarding the activities we are working on. They are easier to organise because of the existing social networks in the community (personal communication, June 12, 2023).

Public meetings can enhance interpersonal and group communication to enable rural people to share knowledge and best practices about food security programs. A development agent from the Gulomekeda district also shared the same view and argued that:

> In public meetings, we invited individuals who had achieved success in their food security efforts to speak about their experiences and best practices. This motivates others to engage in food security programs. We found that fellow farmers had gained knowledge and experience with it (personal communication, June 12, 2023).

These views emphasise some of the qualities of public meetings in conveying food security messages. In addition, it shows the role of public meetings as venues for sharing knowledge and experiences among people to enhance their active participation in food security programs. However, participants attending meetings may have varied views on a given agenda as each may have different reasons to attend. Some may attend meetings to criticise elected officials, show support for policies, or offer support to other community members (Adams, 2004). McComas (2003a) argues that people believe in public meetings to learn how others in their community feel about a specific issue. This shows that organising regular meetings may not pledge the effectiveness of public meetings for food security communication. A female-headed household in Mainegest village, Gulomekeda district, explained:

> We travel long distances to attend public meetings, which is almost a regular activity. But we are not benefiting from it compared to the time we spend. …the meetings are exhausting much of our time, which we could have used for other activities, including herding and farm activities (personal communication, June 12, 2023).

Public meetings remain ineffective for rural food security communication in the Irob and Gulomekeda districts. One of the main reasons for this is that food security programs are communicated orally, accompanied by technical jargon, making two-way communication challenging. A male-headed household in Fireselam Village, Gulomekeda district, articulated this as:

> Development experts and government representatives present their
> programs in our villages' public meetings. However, we do not get
> enough chances to reflect our views…Thus, I can say that this is a one-
> sided communication, which leaves most of us uninformed about the
> food security programs (personal communication, June 12, 2023).

The above views imply that development agents need to deeply examine people's perceptions and desires about the effectiveness of public meetings. However, in both districts, development agents neither talk with people about their needs and priorities nor evaluate the effectiveness of public meetings. I attended a public meeting in Alitena, the Irob district. Participants were representatives from the Agriculture Office, two development agents (beekeeping expert and irrigation expert), and rural people from different villages. The representative from the Agriculture Office made an opening speech and the two experts presented their respective programs. The experts used jargon to elaborate on traditional and modern beehives, irrigation systems, small-scale water projects, and soil fertility. However, this affected the mutual understanding among experts and rural people. The meeting was concluded without any feedback or comments from rural people except for a few. This limited the effectiveness of public meetings as it affected dialogue and mutual understanding among stakeholders. Observation results showed that in both districts, people were late for meetings and were keen to leave shortly afterward to participate in agricultural activities, distract attendees, and affect the flow of communication in public meetings. This is consistent with related studies in that physical locations were identified as factors that may influence public deliberation (Baker et al., 2005). With this, although representation becomes vital to ensure trust, build ownership, and enhance collective response, food security-related decisions in both districts are made by a quorum, which may not embrace representative groups. This shows the deficiencies of public meetings for stakeholder representation (Johnson et al., 2003).

6.2 The Levels of People's Participation in Food Security Programs

People's participation becomes vital in realising development objectives. Individual interviews, FGDs, and participant observation were used to analyse the levels of people's participation in rural food security programs. Development experts in the Irob and Gulomekeda districts revealed that people actively participate in food security programs. A development agent in the Irob district described this as:

> We are clear and transparent about our objectives and expectations,
> openly explaining what rural people need to do. We give them a chance
> to reflect on each of the activities about the food security programs,
> enhancing their confidence to participate in these programs (personal
> communication, June 12, 2023).

A development agent in the Gulomekeda district also reiterated, "The only way we can ensure food security is to adhere to the government's rural development policies and participate in food security programs" (personal communication, June 12, 2023). The head of Agriculture and Rural Development in the Irob district also added, "Our plan about food security programs in our district is to encourage people to participate in the packages actively" (personal

communication). Despite these claims, the level of people's participation in food security programs remains unclear. A female-headed household in Fireselam village in Gulomekeda district contended that:

> Public meetings are common in our villages, and development agents inform us about food security packages. However, we do not fully understand how these programs improve living conditions. For instance, some programs such as poultry can be useful, but the supply is limited and there are challenges (personal communication, June 12, 2023).

To encourage people to participate in these programs, it is necessary to analyse the procedures and strategies involved, including people's participation in the strategy design and the availability of food security packages to realise individual package preferences. Results showed that the relevance and feasibility of food security programs are not discussed in advance. For instance, as an agricultural input, purchasing fertilizers is one of the packages, and FGD results show that people are not adequately communicated about the feasibility and limitations of fertilizers. Instead, development agents directed each household to purchase fertilisers in quotas, mostly 100–200 kg per year, irrespective of individual interest, farm size, or other financial factors to fulfil the government's plans. This shows the politicisation of local development as people are forced to participate in fertilizers or are perceived as opposing the government's development programs (Nigussie, 2017).

The role of development agents is to convince rural people to participate in fertilizers, rather than encouraging active discussions and dialogue for mutual understanding. The results showed that rural people have mixed assessments of the relevance and effectiveness of fertilizers. Confusion often arises due to a need for more effective communication from development agents. Rural people believe that fertilizers are helpful only during the rainy season. A male-headed household from Mainegest village, Gulomekeda district, asserted, "We understand that most of the packages are useful, but it would have been effective had we discussed them openly and identified their weaknesses and strengths" (personal communication, June 12, 2023). Another male-headed household in Mainegest village, Gulomekeda district, also added:

> Fertilizers can help improve agricultural productivity during rainy seasons. However, if there is no sufficient rain, it does not help. We only obtained seasonal rainfall data, and we suggest increasing fertilizer uptake only during the rainy season (personal communication, June 12, 2023).

Observation results showed that people have limited roles in the strategy design. In the meetings I attended, rural people were only informed about available packages, irrespective of individual preferences. The next step was casting votes to identify who wanted to participate in the packages. Nevertheless, there were no votes against it, although some participants did not vote. Only a few participants expressed their views, and others echoed the sentiments of government representatives rather than personal opinions about the relevance and feasibility of the packages. The role of attendees in these meetings was to confirm the decisions already been made by the government, where people have little opportunity to influence the program designed for their benefit (Arnstein, 1969). This shows that rural people need more power to negotiate their needs and priorities as they are marginalised from decision-making. Public meetings

are not inclusive but notably top-down, focusing on 'information dissemination' (Mefalopulos, 2008). One of the concerns in public deliberation is that participation and communication should be free from coercion (Guttman, 2010). Wudabe leaders mobilise rural people for food security programs. Development agents believe that Wudabe helps people to voice their concerns collectively.

A development agent in the Irob district equates Wudabe with people's collective power and contended that "…if people join the Wudabe, it will give them opportunities to enlighten their concerns collectivelly." (personal communication, June 12, 2023). However, the Gujle Lim'aat and Wudabe leaders promote the government's propaganda and rural development policies instead of people's deep-rooted economic problems. Rural people do not trust these leaders. A female-headed household in Fireselam village, Gulomekeda district, also added, "The Gujle Lim'aat and Wudabe leaders…understand our needs and priorities. However, they were not ready to listen to people. Instead, they remind us to participate in the packages to alleviate food insecurity" (personal communication, June 12, 2023).

Different factors affect people's participation in the strategy implementation. First, public meetings focus on persuasive communication, which limits participant feedback, restraining dialogue, and mutual communication. Second, rural people do not trust public meetings to connect them to food security implementation procedures. This is because public meetings focus on different issues rather than the immediate challenges of the people. Third, the lack of qualified development agents affects the strategy implementation. The head of Agriculture and Rural Development in the Irob district highlighted this, as "Packages such as beekeeping are useful. However, we have not had development agents trained in beekeeping for the last three year" (persoanl communication, June 12, 2023). Thus, although beekeeping is one of the food security packages and a source of income for most households in the Irob district, the lack of competent development agents affected productivity.

6.3 Limitations of Public Meetings for Food Security Communication

I used individual interviews and participant observation to analyse the limitations of public meetings for food security communication and people's participation. Results showed that several factors constrain the effectiveness of public meetings. First, government representatives and development experts dictate public meetings to advocate the government's development policies rather than the deep-rooted economic problems. A male-headed household in Magauma village, Irob district, accentuated this, "Although we participate in public meetings, we are not benefiting from it as political leaders and development agents do not pay attention to our concerns" (personal communication, June 12, 2023). A female-headed household in Fireselam village, Gulomekeda district, also contended that "They ask us if we have understood what is addressed in meetings. However, they never encouraged us to forward our ideas about the feasibility of food security package" (personal communication, June 12, 2023). These assertions denote the limited levels of people's participation in the strategy design and implementation and the politicisation of food security programs. Moreover, it highlights the limited agency of rural people to negotiate their choices and priorities. This is consistent with related studies emphasising that public meetings are ineffective at allowing participants to influence decisions but can be helpful for sharing preliminary information early in the decision-making process (Ebdon & Franklin, 2006). Although public meetings provide the impression of democratic legitimacy, they legitimatise decisions made without public input (Tracy & Dimock, 2004) and

create power-related concerns, as participants are confined to specific issues instead of raising related matters (Guttman, 2010). Therefore, whether public meetings offer opportunities for participation and provide significant impact is still an open question (Adams, 2004; Baker et al., 2005). Second, the views and interests of a few dominate the public meetings. The results showed that development agents and male-headed households dominated public meetings, but female-headed households were mostly unvoiced. This is consistent with related studies in Botswana and Ethiopia: people lacked opportunities to express their voices; notably, women were excluded (Molutsi & Holm, 1990; Nigussie, 2017).

Despite female-headed households in both districts aspiring to participate in food security programs, they have limited roles in the decision-making processes. This shows the limited agency to negotiating the structures and the prevailing male dominance in decision-making domains. Third, development experts outside the people's language and culture initiate and chair public meetings, and technical jargon dominates the communication modes, limiting dialogue among participants. Dialogue is essential as it targets specific groups in a clearly defined social and cultural context to identify their needs and priorities and enhance participation (SDC, 2016). However, failures to enhance dialogue and mutual understanding create misunderstanding and mistrust between experts and rural people.

7.0 Conclusion

This paper examines the role of public meetings for food security communication in the Irob and Gulomekeda districts, eastern Tigray, rural Ethiopia. Development agents believed that public meetings help communicate rural food security programs effectively. However, rural people do not trust public meetings for food security communication. One of the main reasons for the uncertainty is that they blame public meetings for their focus on the government's propaganda rather than the people's socio-economic challenges. Development agents use technical jargon to elaborate the discussion agenda in public meetings. This shows that public meetings have failed to inform the people about rural food security programs, leaving rural people unacquainted with the relevance and implementation procedures of the food security programs. Besides, rural people are not encouraged to participate in the strategy design and implementation of the food security programs, situating them as end users rather than the main actors in the food security programs. Proper use of Wudabe becomes essential, as it originates within the community to enhance interpersonal and group communication, which strengthens dialogue and knowledge exchange among people. Public meetings being the only methods for food security communication in the Irob and Gulomekeda districts, policymakers, food security experts, and development agents must formulate strategies to encourage people's participation in decision-making. The study findings provide theoretical and practical insights into the relevance and applicability of public meetings for food security communication. Particularly, with the lack of clearly designed food security communication strategies in both districts, the findings can contribute as policy input and practice for rural development communication strategies. The results also contribute to the existing literature on the factors affecting people's participation, including power relationships in development programs (Mefalopulos, 2008; Waisbord, 2008). The results further contribute to an emerging literature that elaborates on the intersectional nature of communication for rural development and people's participation. Moreover, it provokes similar studies to build on an additional body of knowledge on the role of public meetings for rural food security communication.

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