*PM World **Journal*** (ISSN: 2330-4480)
Vol. X, Issue XII – December 2021
www.pmworldjournal.com
Case Study

*Challenges of an infrastructural reactivation and
socio-economic development programme
in a Third World community*
by O. Chima Okereke, PhD

Challenges of an infrastructural reactivation and socio-economic development programme in a Third World community [1]

O. Chima Okereke, PhD

Introduction

The names of the community, the country where it is located, and even the continent have been withheld because disclosing them will not add value to the paper. Moreover, the overriding objective is to garner some lessons from the programme and not to publicise the failures of governments to their communities.

The topics to be covered include the following:

- Description of the pre-programme state of the infrastructure in the community
- Creation of a development team charged with the responsibility for the community development
- Problems resolution by the application of programme management
- Current situation and sustainability
- Takeaway lessons from our experience.

Description of the pre-programme state of the infrastructure in the community

The conditions of the various infrastructure and the socio-economic parameters and systems, when the programme was launched in June 2020, were as follows:

- There was widespread unemployment among adults and the youths. Many qualified persons had no jobs.

- There was a palpable hunger in the village as the food production methods were manual and rudimentary. There were no food production cottage industries to provide food and jobs.

- Organised entrepreneurial education for unemployed persons, especially youths, was minimal, and skills acquisition in Information Technology was not in existence.

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[1] How to cite this article: Okereke, O.C. (2021). Challenges of an infrastructural reactivation and socio-economic development programme in a Third World community, case study, *PM World Journal*, Vol. X, Issue XII, December.

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- Water supply was in a poor and dangerous condition. The supply scheme installed by a government organisation over eleven years ago was a failed system. Since it was commissioned, no comprehensive maintenance was carried out on the three artesian wells and the whole water system. What was worse, there was a backflow from the overflow of the wells that was damaging the well head and the adjoining area creating a non-stop environmental degradation for many years. It was a case of an environmental damage that was worsening every day.

- Grid electricity supply was drastically inadequate as it was only available, in some cases, for about two to three hours a day in about three days in the week.

- Security system was poorly organised since there were no security persons on guard duties always to conduct regular security checks in the village.

Creation of a management team charged with the responsibility of the community development

- In June 2020, seventeen international professionals were appointed and charged, by means of terms of reference, with the responsibilities of identifying and developing opportunities that should enhance the general wellbeing of the people. These professionals constituted the programme management team. The focus areas were food production, employment, training and empowerment of youths, environment, development of infrastructures, entrepreneurships, culture/traditions, etc.

- The vision was to create a sustainable urban community in the village in the next five years

- The desired strategic goals could be summarised as sustainable developments in education, socio-economy, infrastructure such as water supply, electricity supply, computer business centres for email and office applications, cottage industries for food production, service industries, environment, etc.

Problems Resolution by Application of Programme Management

Programme management is the process that allows organisations to manage multiple, related projects concurrently to obtain significant benefits from them as a group more than could be obtained if the projects are managed separately. It concentrates on delivering

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the following:

- New capabilities, products and services

- Benefits and goals

- Strategic objectives

- Change

- Other initiatives

Strategic Roadmap has been used in our programme to link and apply aspects of programme management. Our organisational structure for the programme management implementation has been realised by the use of the Project Management Office (PMO) structure. By this, major problems to be solved have been represented as projects. In addition, we have a PMO project office in which we perform the following functions as prescribed in our Ground Rules:

- A bank account was opened for safeguarding the funds sent for the various projects. Each fund is kept and used strictly for the earmarked project.

- Disbursement of funds is implemented by the treasurer and financial secretary. These are the only two persons required to sign jointly for transfer of money when the invoice has been approved by the PMO manager.

- The group secretary is responsible for managing all correspondence, including internal and external communication between members, and with the community and contractors.

Internal communication within Committee members

- **Virtual communication:** Since we live on different continents, our communication has been mostly virtual. We use email, WhatsApp phone, and any communication system. Our regular two-weekly Saturday meetings have been through the Zoom link.

- Frequency of meetings was initially weekly, then fortnightly, on Saturday evenings

- Within the weeks, email communication on issues is ongoing among members so that even before a meeting, some matters have been discussed.

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- Ground rules for the ADG Committee operations were formed.

Programme Strategic Roadmap

We have used a structured approach by the formulation and use of the strategic roadmap. This map is used to guide our efforts from our starting situation to the achievement of our desired strategic goals. It is a chronological representation of the programme's intended direction, contents and implementation.

Activities on the Roadmap

These consist of formulation of ground rules, formation of committees and their work on programme identification, planning and delivery. These were all accommodated in the Strategic Roadmap and will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

Formulation of Ground Rules for Operations of Committees

Ground rules are essential to ensure that we achieve a level playing field, even-handedness, transparency, integrity, and accountability in the operations of all committees and in our project delivery.

Two sets of Ground Rules were produced respectively to guide Internal Committee activities and another to serve as comprehensive guidelines for community projects. They covered such issues as fund raising, use and approval of fund, accountability, procurement, transparency, etc. They were discussed extensively, voted on, and approved. They have been in use since approved.

Formation and activities of Committees

The committees were formed as recommended by the community. We described all the problems that needed to be solved on the Community WhatsApp platforms. We requested that community residents should identify which were their priorities. We analysed their responses and from which we identified the prioritised tasks and constituted each major task into a project.

Thus, we have committees responsible for education and training projects, water project, electricity project, security, etc. Members were assigned to committees according to their areas of expertise.

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Each committee had the remit of defining the problems in their assigned tasks. The members of committees planned projects and suggested solutions, including the contractors, to be used. They obtained quotations for their implementation and made a presentation to the full house comprised of the programme management members during our fortnightly meetings. The members criticised their presentation and approved, or amended, or rejected the plan. In case of rejection, they highlighted what corrections needed to be made before resubmission. The timeline for implementation were also included in each project plan.

The Ground Rules provided guidelines and checks and balances to the committees in their activities.

Fundraising and utilisation

When a given committee has its project plan approved, it starts fundraising by advertising on the community WhatsApp platform. Every financial contribution is paid directly into the bank. When the bank sends a credit alert to the financial team on receipt of a payment, the financial secretary publishes a public acknowledgement on the community WhatsApp platform.

For any cash transactions by the committee, its manager raises an invoice to the Programme manager. The item being invoiced has to be taken from the budget approved for the committee by all the members of the group. The manager cannot and is not authorised to approve any expenditures not contained in the approved budget for the project.

After any procurement or payment, a receipt for the transaction is returned to the financial secretary for accountability purposes.

Current situation

Just the water project, and the education and training will be discussed.

Water project: Source of environmental degradation eliminated as the backflow of the overflow line that damaged the well head and adjoining houses and roads was stopped. The defective pumps, solar powered, have been repaired and are now in use. Problem of water distribution within the community remains outstanding.

Education & Training: From January 2021, about seventy youths were shortlisted and given an orientation course to prepare them for various courses. By September about forty youths have undergone residential training in training centres in two large cities. The ladies have been trained in dress making, fashion and decoration. While the boys have

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trained in farming skills such as fish farms and poultry, Welding, electrical installation, Information technology, etc.

Lessons to take away

- **Necessity of funds:** It is difficult to prepare and comply with Gantt chart and timelines in carrying out projects if there is no money for executing the projects completely. What we have been doing has been to break up projects into segments and phases. When adequate funding is received for a given phase, it is planned and executed. The phases are planned to be able to stand alone, even as a part of the project.

- **Use of Programme Strategic Roadmap:** The stages of programme management consisting of programme identification, planning, delivery, and closure are conducted within the roadmap. In effect, programme design, resource management, monitor and control, progress reporting, risks and issues management are conducted at project level and accommodated with the roadmap.

- **Adherence to Ground Rules:** We have discovered that strict adherence to our Ground Rules has introduced discipline, predictability and reliability in our activities. For example, generally project phases are completely executed within the agreed time because an agreement is signed and the contractor is confident that payment will be made on completion of the agreed tasks.

- **Strict and transparent financial discipline:** Every member knows how procurement procedure should be handled as stipulated in our Ground Rules. There is no room for any deviation. For example, there was a case of a committee manager who requested that money earmarked for an agreed task should be paid into his personal account without providing a budget for approval by the management group. His request was turned down. He refused to continue in the project and has since stopped every association with the programme.

- **Tough interpersonal relationship:** Every member of the group is a volunteer. A manager has to learn to carry along the members of his committee with him. He cannot give instructions because he is not paying them and they are his colleagues and not strictly his subordinates as he has no controls over them. The control is as much as individuals are willing to yield to their manager.

- **Governance is difficult to achieve:** My experience is that it is more difficult to achieve effective governance in a voluntary community development organisation than in a

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public or private sector organisation. It is probably the toughest management assignment that I have carried out. As a chief engineer in a public sector company, my colleagues carried out my instructions. They could discuss what was not clear but refusal to carry out the instruction was not a practical prospect because corrective punitive measures could follow.

As a consultant, a customer understands that what you are discussing is in their interest to get the job done, and therefore is prepared to cooperate and do what you suggest.

However, in the community programme where everyone is a volunteer, you want to get the job done, he tells you that he also wants to get the job done but not doing what you suggest. A few days ago, I was talking with a manager of a committee, advising that what he wrote for posting to the community needed to be amended. He informed me that if this continued, he might consider resigning. I did not press the point further but still ensured that it was not published. The writeup was reproduced by another member of the committee who volunteered and did it. It is also necessary to explain that not everyone is interested in serving as a volunteer. While it is clear that the project is being done to develop the community and enhance the quality of life, yet many people are not willing to spare time for it.

- **Funding is difficult to find:** Probably the most difficult aspect of an internally funded community development programme is finding the funds. Members of the programme management group made and still make contributions. Some other natives of the community also make some contributions. However, there are some who are financially well off who should contribute to various projects such as water, youths training, but they are not interested. Having made a number of calls and writing personal emails to targeted individuals, but received very poor response, I became frustrated. It was then I advised the management team that we needed to appoint a full-time fundraising manager. We did, he has made a difference but the problem is not completely solved. It is understandable that there is a limit to which a group of persons in a community can tax themselves to fund projects which the government should provide for the community. This is why, invariably, the most valuable resource in a community development programme is the funding. Irrespective of the skills and knowledge of the management team, without funds, no development work can be carried out and no progress can be made.

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Dr. O. Chima Okereke, Ph.D., MBA, PMP is the Managing Director and CEO of Total Technology Consultants, Ltd., a project management consulting company working in West Africa and the UK. He is a visiting professor, an industrial educator, a multidisciplinary project management professional, with over 25 years' experience in oil and gas, steel and power generation industries. For example, On December 26th 2013, he completed an assignment as a visiting professor in project management; teaching a class of students on Master's degree in project management in the Far Eastern Federal University, Vladivostok, Russia. In August and September 2013, he conducted an innovative, and personally developed training programme for seventy six well engineers of Shell Nigeria to enhance the efficiency of their operations using project and operations management processes.

Before embarking on a career in consulting, he worked for thirteen years in industry rising to the position of a chief engineer with specialisation in industrial controls and instrumentation, electronics, electrical engineering and automation. During those 13 years, he worked on every aspect of projects of new industrial plants including design, construction and installation, commissioning, and engineering operation and maintenance in process industries. Chima sponsored and founded the potential chapter of the Project Management Institute (PMI®) in Port Harcourt, Nigeria, acting as president from 2004 to 2010.

Dr. Okereke has a Bachelor of Science Degree in Electrical Engineering from the University of Lagos, and a PhD and Masters in Business Administration (MBA) degree from the University of Bradford in the UK. He also has a PMP® certification from the Project Management Institute (PMI®) which he passed at first attempt. He has been a registered engineer with COREN in Nigeria since 1983. For many years, Total Technology has been a partner for Oracle Primavera Global Business Unit, a representative in Nigeria of Oracle University for training in Primavera project management courses, and a Gold Level member of Oracle Partner Network (OPN. He

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