

P(owe)r in Communicative Practice? HIV Prevention Communication and the *Woza Asibonisane Community Responses Project (WACRP)*, South Africa

P(owe)r na Prática Comunicativa? Comunicação para a Prevenção do HIV e o Projeto de Respostas Comunitárias *Woza Asibonisane (WACRP)*, África do Sul

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Abstract

The central organising logic of communicative practices in social change is the recognition of the moderating influence of power in attaining project outcomes. HIV prevention projects involving external stakeholders and local communities can be affected by power imbalances.

This paper presents a reflexive analysis of an HIV-prevention communication intervention, the WACRP, implemented in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Data was collected during fieldwork with WACRP stakeholders. The study examined power dynamics in community projects affected by external stakeholder expectations. Findings show that external funders often hinder community leadership and ownership, while local power hierarchies and customary beliefs also contribute to power imbalances.

The paper concludes that power imbalances in the WACRP project mask the superficial effectiveness of institutionalised communication programs. Sustainable social change requires acknowledging, planning, and accounting for power dynamics

in the conceptualisation, implementation, and evaluation of projects in ways that are authentic to local cultures and practices.

Keywords

community-led projects, HIV prevention communication, power, external funding

Resumo

A lógica organizadora central das práticas comunicativas na mudança social é o reconhecimento da influência moderadora do poder na obtenção dos resultados do projeto. Os projetos de prevenção do HIV envolvendo partes interessadas externas e comunidades locais podem ser afetados por desequilíbrios de poder.

Este artigo apresenta uma análise reflexiva de uma intervenção de comunicação de prevenção do HIV, o WACRP, implementado em KwaZulu-Natal, África do Sul. Os dados foram coletados durante o trabalho de campo com as partes interessadas do WACRP. O estudo examinou a dinâmica de poder em projetos comunitários afetados pelas expectativas das partes interessadas externas. Os resultados mostram que os financiadores externos muitas vezes impedem a liderança e propriedade da comunidade, enquanto as hierarquias de poder locais e as crenças costumeiras também contribuem para desequilíbrios de poder.

O artigo conclui que os desequilíbrios de poder no projeto WACRP escondem a eficácia superficial dos programas de comunicação institucionalizados. A mudança social sustentável requer reconhecimento, planejamento e contabilização da dinâmica de poder na conceituação, implementação e avaliação de projetos de forma que sejam autênticos para as culturas e práticas locais.

Palavras-chave

projetos liderados pela comunidade, comunicação de prevenção do HIV, poder, financiamento externo

Introduction

Community-led interventions play a vital role in achieving effective and sustainable HIV programming to end the HIV epidemic by 2030. These interventions have been proven to reach populations that conventional mass-mediated HIV and AIDS prevention often miss. However, there is a lack of understanding about the management of power relations among stakeholders in community-led interventions, and the application of participatory theory to promote community leadership.

The title of this paper employs wordplay by differentiating 'owe' from 'power' to critique power relations inherent in HIV prevention community responses that involve external interest groups and local communities. The wordplay emphasises the close connection between communicative practice and power dynamics. As the adage goes, with great power comes great responsibility. The exercise of power in externally-funded community-led projects can mask the "ceremonial adequacy" (de Sousa Santos, 2001) of institutionalised social change communication programs that aim to empower communities. The lack of responsibility and social accountability

at a community level can negatively impact collective agency to bring about social change (Brinkerhoff and Wetterberg, 2016). Therefore, it is crucial to consider who holds power and responsibility in such projects.

In projects that are funded by an external agent, questions of ownership become central: does the funder own the project or is it owned by the community? If the project is community-led, decision-making authority and project outcomes must lie with the community. If an external agent provides funding for a community project, what, if anything, does the community owe the funder? Rather than providing straightforward answers to these questions, we use them as what Tufte (2020, p. 5) describes as “concepts to think with” as we examine the significant challenges of power dynamics in externally-funded community-led HIV prevention communication projects within the broader context of community responses. To provide an empirical and localised reflection, we use the the *Woza Asibonisane*¹ *Community Responses Project* (WACRP) as a case study, which was funded by United States Agency for International Development (USAID) through the Centre for Communication Impact (CCI)² and executed by The Valley Trust (TVT) in informal settlements and rural areas in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Our objective is to illuminate the intricate relationship between communication practices and social change at a micro level, serving as an invitation to rethink the application of communication in social change initiatives.

Our contention is that the role of power must be acknowledged, planned and accounted for in the conceptualisation, implementation and evaluation of health communication projects that take into account local practices. The WACRP, a participatory initiative involving internal and external stakeholders in community HIV prevention interventions in South Africa is thus examined to demonstrate the fundamental contradictions and complexities associated with such initiatives. We begin by discussing established and emerging ideas on power and communicative practices in social change related to HIV prevention communication. We then describe the WACRP as a contemporary HIV prevention community response in South Africa. The concepts of “epistemological blindness” (de Sousa Santos, 2001) and “weak communication” (Touri, 2020) are then applied to explore the organising logic of power as perceived by the TVT community representatives (board members, project director, project manager, project co-ordinator) and WACRP local level project implementers (traditional leaders, community advisory committee, Department of Health, Provincial/District AIDS Council).

Conceptualising Power in (Participatory) Community Projects

Power is a complex and multifaceted concept that is central to the success or failure of participatory community projects. Conceptualising power in participatory community projects requires a nuanced understanding of its dynamics at different levels, especially how it can be both enabling and constraining (Cornwall and Gaventa, 2001) and how it can be expressed in both visible and invisible ways (Hickey & Mohan, 2004). Power in community projects can take many forms, including social, economic,

¹ IsiZulu for “come let’s discuss”.

² Formerly Johns Hopkins Health Education in South Africa (JHHESA).

political, and cultural forms, which relate to the ability to influence others through social relationships, controlling resources, shaping policies and decision-making processes as well as beliefs and values respectively (Gaventa, 2006; Haugaard, 2012). Arnstein (1969) reminds us that genuine participation entails redistribution of power from traditional power structures to citizens. Authentic citizen power involves community members being able to make decisions, challenge existing power structures, and participate democratically (Hickey & Mohan, 2004). For Haugaard (2012), individuals have multiple identities and can choose subjective positions associated with their power bases. Foucault (1982) views this as a differentiation process whereby individuals are divided according to their subjective positions. The above nuanced understanding of power provides a useful perspective to investigate how power is expressed by the WACRP stakeholders.

With 'power' at the centre of our analysis, we argue that internal hierarchies in communities, asymmetrical power balance amongst the various stakeholders in a community project, control of the decision-making process, democratic participation in the project processes, and agenda-setting priorities are profoundly complex dimensions of power which, if not moderated, can constrain participation. In multi-sectoral projects that are supposedly 'community-led', there are always discourses of power redistribution. Thus, power relations should be analysed, particularly when stakeholders' associated power bases may lead to divergent power positions. The sensitive management of power contestations amongst stakeholders is critical for successfully implementing social change projects (Lubombo, 2012). This is not the least because social change is only meaningful if local communities are empowered to actively participate as decision-makers at all project stages outlined below.

Research and Design: Agenda setting and catalysts

Men, local chiefs, or public sector employees typically hold positions of power in traditional and rural communities. Social change practitioners often consult with them first, as they act as gatekeepers who may unintentionally reinforce existing patterns of exclusion (Cornwall, 2004). These local leaders are often reluctant to relinquish their political power without pressure from marginalised groups, including women, youth or people living with HIV (Campbell, 2010). Some individuals who claim to represent the community misuse their platforms to promote their own interests (Laverack, 2007). Although citizens are invited to share their perspectives, those in power decide what to accept and reject, without considering how citizens feel about the appropriateness of the idea for their context. Usually, external funders have the final say in decision-making, setting agendas and communication strategies from afar (Dutta, 2011, p. 11). This approach is not acceptable, and community-led interventions must include mechanisms for integrating community voices from a project's initial design stage (Amoyan and Custodio, 2019).

The body of knowledge and practice of participatory social change, including the works by Manyozo (2017), Servaes (2013), Tacchi and Lennie (2014), Teer-Tomaselli et al. (2021), Tomaselli and Chasi (2011), Tufte (2017), Tufte and Mefalopoulos (2009), and Waisbord (2014) offers strategies for appreciating power inequalities through pro-

cedural dialogue at both the funding and local levels. However, there are still some 'blind spots' in understanding how these strategies may inadvertently reinforce power relations. For instance, the Community-led Total Sanitation approach uses 'triggering' to encourage community members to take action to address health problems by physically showing where people live and defecate to establish the scale and depth of the problem, supposedly stimulating a collective sense of disgust amongst community members (Chambers and Kar, 2008; Sah & Neghussie, 2009). Although the community is left to decide on appropriate actions to address the problem, externally motivated triggering may impose external health agendas on the community, which may already be aware of these health challenges but feel limited due to a lack of resources to address them actively.

Implementation and Evaluation

The implementation and evaluation of community health participation projects involve navigating complex social dynamics and power structures, which affect decision-making and resource allocation (Cornwall, 2004; Cornish & Ghosh, 2007). To address power imbalances, a strategic approach that considers a broader political context is necessary, utilising communication, information and collective action to influence power and decisions within the community (Waisbord, 2014). Effective communicative practices are crucial in illuminating unequal power relations caused by systemic inequalities (Noske-Turner, 2020; Waisbord & Obregon, 2012). Natural leaders or communication champions can create communicative spaces for people to challenge power structures and promote community understanding and commitment, ideally using local language, shared experiences, local idioms, metaphors and proverbs (Dyll-Myklebust, 2014; Huda, 2009; Quarry & Ramirez, 2009). The definition of a champion can also extend to external agents with specialised industry knowledge and skills for addressing the social challenges and build capacity for social dialogue in sensitive health topics such as HIV (Hamelink, 2002). In marginalised areas with a skills shortage, partnerships with external agents may be necessary until education systems can deliver sufficient resources (Hottola, 2009). The importance of instilling development and communication skills in the community is emphasised (Dyll-Myklebust, 2012), challenging the notion of automatic self-management.

We posit that it is not enough to only focus on the internal workings of a community project; it is imperative to also question its desired outcomes. Merely striving for "societal impact" may not suffice, as social change can have adverse effects. Numerous factors can influence change at the grassroots level, rendering a narrow fixation on social change as the main measure of success problematic. Therefore, approaches that prioritise the process are more advantageous, particularly when dealing with sensitive issues such as HIV.

A process-oriented approach can be achieved through community dialogues, where the focus is on integrating "voice, advocacy, listening, empathy, dialogue, conflict resolution and consensus-building as core processes for development" (Noske-Turner, 2020, p. 41). This approach, known as "communicative development" shifts the attention to the practices of development institutions rather than

just using communication to transform the practices of the poor (Noske-Turner, 2020, p. 41). However, measuring the success of this approach in terms of “trust, empowerment, better project design, consensus-seeking, and problem prevention remains an unresolved issue” (Tuftte and Mefalopolus, 2009, p. 15). It is not our aim to offer solutions on how to measure this. Our hope, however, is to provide insight into how we can consider power in communication through a focused and localised analysis of the WARCP.

Although the importance of including marginalised voices has been recognised since the 1970s with Paulo Freire’s (2001) seminal work, the realisation of promises of past paradigms has been limited, resulting in a growing “demand for a shift from expert-driven models to endogenous ones” (Tuftte and Mefalopolus, 2009, p. 3). Our perspective is grounded in the dialogic conceptual framework that prioritises a pedagogy of listening as a means of embracing local knowledge (Manyozo, 2016; Dyll-Myklebust, 2014; Lubombo, 2018; Quarry and Ramirez, 2009). This approach emphasises dialogic processes that are integrated into communities’ daily practices as articulated in Touri’s (2020) concept of ‘weak communication’, which offers a tool for legitimising the more local and unmediated communication and the different types of well-being that it enables.

Touri (2020) proposes the concept of weak communication, which draws from Sedgwick’s (2003) weak theory and de Sousa Santos’s (2001) epistemology of blindness. Weak communication is not blind, but rather attentive and adaptive to local conditions and demands (Touri, 2020). This subtle approach can capture the power of the ‘silent’ and communicative practices that sustain social change (Touri, 2020). Tuftte (2017) argues that weak communication is less noisy yet empowering by embracing marginal communicative practices that are often overlooked by institutionalised and quantifiable approaches to social change. This approach challenges institutionalised communication for social change that privileges measurable outcomes set out by ‘planners’. Instead, community-led interventions should be democratic spaces that consider community voices in decision-making processes and challenge power inequalities. This aligns with contemporary advances in development theory that characterise participation as a genuinely transformative approach.

We argue that the weak theory (Sedgwick, 2003) is essential in exposing the dynamics of North-South power relations in participatory health projects. Outside agencies entering communities with predetermined project ideas authored elsewhere and imposed on the community can be questioned through this perspective, as seen in the case of WACRP.

An illustrative case and methodology: Woza Asibonisane Community Responses Project

Community-led interventions are increasingly recognised as critical resources to address persisting challenges, with communities having been at the forefront of the HIV response for decades (UNAIDS & STOPAIDS Alliance, 2015). HIV continues to be a global concern with 38.4 million people living with the virus worldwide as of 2021 (UNAIDS, 2021). Sub-Saharan Africa remains the most affected region, with

South Africa continuing to bear an inordinate share than any other country (StatsSA, 2021). In South Africa, KwaZulu-Natal province has the highest estimated prevalence at 18.1% (Simbayi et al. 2019). Efforts by communities, civil society and government and non-governmental organisations have been implemented to address the South African epidemic.

WACRP is the community-led project examined in this paper as an illustrative case. Our use of the term 'community', refers to a relational, cultural or geographical collective of individuals or groups collaborating to tackle challenges and enact positive changes (Van Vlaanderen, 2001; Cornish & Ghosh, 2007). The project targets communities and people living in informal settlements and other hard-to-reach places in South Africa (Larson et al., 2020). WACRP was implemented in four provinces across South Africa with support from USAID funding under the auspices of the CCI that delegated the implementation of the projects to local partner NGOs. TVT is one such NGO operating in KwaZulu-Natal, which was responsible for the project's implementation at three sites within the eThekweni District spanning North, Central and outer West sub-districts (Larson et al., 2020).

The project was implemented in KwaMashu and Clermont townships outside Durban in KwaZulu-Natal where the majority of the population speaks isiZulu³. About 49% of the population is male, whilst 51% is female (StatsSA, 2021), and they are governed through a political system that includes traditional and ward councils. WACRP targets young men and women in these communities aged between 15-35 and 15-24 respectively (Milford et al., 2021).

The Dialogue-Reflection-Action model (DRA) was employed in the WACRP to facilitate community responses, with community dialogue serving as the primary communication strategy (Centre for Community Impact, 2022). While the DRA model aligns with Freire's liberatory pedagogy, which emphasises praxis as "action and reflection on the world to transform it" (Freire, 2001, p. 52), power dynamics in the participatory process can challenge the transformative ideals of participation. We argue that weak theory offers a valuable perspective for highlighting the duplicity of blind and top-down transformational approaches to social change.

The research presented in this paper utilised a non-extractive community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach rooted in postcolonial research paradigms described by de Sousa Santos (2018) as epistemologies of the South. CBPR involves all stakeholders as equal partners and leverages community strengths and intelligence to facilitate a participatory research process (Wallerstein, Duran, Oetzel, & Minkler, 2017). That simultaneously critiques dominant knowledge systems that serve colonial interests (Said, 1978; Young, 2016) and acknowledges power dynamics in the implementation of projects (Dutta, 2011; Melkote & Steeves, 2001).

The first author, drawing on extensive experience as Director of Drama in AIDS Education (DramAidE) South Africa for over two decades, engaged with local WACRP stakeholders in 2020. This engagement was part of the annual community dialogues that had taken place since 2015, and the first author had also participated in the con-

³ A Bantu language that belongs to the Nguni group of languages. It is the language of the Zulu people with about 12 million native speakers, who primarily inhabit KwaZulu-Natal (Keet & Khumalo, 2017).

ceptualisation, implementation and evaluation of WACRP. His professional experience and nativism enabled a mutually constitutive engagement aimed at joint-sense making of the community's articulations about the project implementation. Returning as a PhD researcher made him an insider and an outsider to the community. This dual status allowed a more collaborative methodology that values the researcher and participant alike as storytellers and listeners, steering away from formal structured interviews. The resulting "development narratives" are thus created "to agitate, complicate, induct and animate, and...have the power to challenge received 'rational' authoritarian modes of development" (Dyll-Myklebust, 2014, p. 534).

Both the weak communication concept and the CBPR methodological approach align with postcolonial thinking, which centres around the notions of empowerment and participation emphasised in this paper. Bhabha's (2015) belief that empowerment entails more than simply realising one's authentic identity, but also achieving agency and authority lies at the core of this perspective. For marginalised communities to achieve agency, participation is crucial, the participation process is marked by power imbalances that needs to be carefully navigated.

Narratives of P(owe)r in WACRP

Through a reflexive analysis of conversations with representatives from TVT and the WACRP local project implementers, we identified two main narratives that were prominent in discussions around power: *contested decision-making powers and managing power relations*. These narratives, presented below, shed light on the complex dynamics of power in community development projects and highlight the challenges faced by those seeking to navigate power relations. The narratives provide a critical anchor to interrogate power and have important implications for community development practitioners and policymakers seeking to create more equitable and inclusive social change.

Contested decision-making powers

The WACRP design and implementation evinces power imbalances and contested decision-making that are typical in community-led responses involving external global development agencies. These agencies use their funding and expertise as critical markers of power (Tacchi, 2020).

Although participants generally believed that the community should hold the power to decide what happens in community-led interventions, they were frustrated that this was not the case. Reflecting on the gap between discourses of community ownership and implementation practice, a TVT Board Member (Nov 2020) stated that while the community should theoretically have the power to determine project priorities, budgets and training, decision-making ultimately rested with the funders. As a result communities were relegated to peripheral positions as mere spectators. Thomas and van de Fliert (2014, p. ix) similarly lamented the way in which "governments, funding agencies and media developments institutions have captured and

corralled the term ‘participation’ and drained it of its essence” reducing it to a means of control to achieve their objectives.

During a community dialogue session in February 2021, a facilitator highlighted the binary between funders and the community. They expressed frustration that the funders made decisions without consulting the community and then dictated what should be done. Despite this, the community participated because they needed the employment opportunities offered. This demonstrates an inadvertent exercise of conflictual power (Haugaard, 2012) by the funders, as they had the ability to offer employment in an area with limited opportunities, driving the community to participate for basic survival rather than a sense of ownership. According to Touri (2020), international development agencies often employ a top-down “transformational” approach to development, prioritising procedural participation while ignoring local realities in order to achieve predetermined goals. This approach gives them control over the decision-making process.

International development agencies often exercise their power through contracting, as seen in the case of TVT, the funding sub-receptient that signed a contract with USAID via CCI. The contract outlined targets and included compliance and monitoring procedures, giving the funders significant leverage and control over the project processes. This formal contracting is an exercise of constitutive power as it recognises the unique powers and capabilities of the local funding receptient such as local knowledge and communication skills that are crucial for successful project completion (Campbell et al., 2009; Haugaard, 2012). However, the complex reporting requirements associated with these funding arrangements are often burdensome and can divert attention from programme activities (Kelly and van Donk, 2009). Furthermore, these administrative practices can disempower community-led interventions and work against the funder’s supposed grassroots leadership and empowerment aims (Cornish et al., 2012). This trade-off comes at the expense of self-awareness, which is essential for communities to transform themselves on their own terms (Quarry & Ramírez, 2009).

The rigid implementation of WACRP restricted the possibility of power-sharing and knowledge exchange, thereby reducing communities to mere recipients of services rather than development partners. This approach can be deemed paternalistic as it deprives communities of what Tufte (2020) refers to as acts of citizenship. Tufte’s notion of acts of citizenship emphasises the proactive and creative involvement of citizens in effecting social change, which includes condensed moments of community, a sense of belonging and inclusion (Tufte, 2020, p. 110).

According to Dutta (2019, p. 2), excluding the community from decision-making processes erases their capacity for agency. Kincaid and Figueroa (2009) similarly propose that all stakeholders involved in health communication implementation should share responsibility for monitoring project activities to ensure they align with the plan. However, this cannot happen if funders drive the entire development agenda through prescriptive reporting and accountability mechanisms. Such mechanisms, which involve prescriptive reporting and rigid upwards accountability from TVT to CCI to USAID, reveal how power dynamics operate in such projects..

Rather than relying on top-down communication, there should be a shift towards participatory communication that acknowledges the importance of “weak commu-

nication" (Touri, 2020) - dialogic processes embedded in people's daily activities. These informal communication channels, such as friends, family, peers, markets, and festival gatherings, not only allow for the exchange of information but also inform decision-making and action that can lead to sustainable change (McAnany, 1980 in Touri, 2020). By utilizing these communication processes, people can challenge power inequalities and take control of their own development from the ground up (Servaes, 2021). Unfortunately, in the WACRP project, there were limited opportunities for communities to contest the economic and political power that perpetuates marginalization and structural inequality in the management processes (Waisbord, 2014, p. 164).

Managing power relations

Due to their deep-seated roots in wider socio-economic inequalities that extend beyond the scope of small community programmes, managing unequal power relations can be a complex task (Campbell et al., 2009). To effectively address this issue, such projects should expand their reach beyond their immediate vicinity and seek support from the wider community networks. A civil society leader (Oct 2020) suggested that organised civil society, equipped with the necessary expertise and experience, can represent the community interest. Acknowledging the value of collective 'ownership' of community causes, the same individual added that community leaders, including traditional leaders and faith-based leaders, can leverage their influence and power to foster accountability in such programmes.

To make these suggestions effective, the community needs to appoint representatives and establish mechanisms for reporting back. The TVT project manager (Nov 2020) suggested setting participation parameters and accountability mechanisms beforehand, which can lead to a fairer distribution of decision-making power between external change agents and communities. Effective communication, facilitated by a communication champion (an individual or civil society group), is key to navigate the differing scales of influence and power and clarify expectations, interests, costs, and assumptions for each stakeholder (Quarry & Ramirez, 2009; Dyll-Myklebust, 2012).

Power dynamics within internal stakeholders are critical to a programme's success. To gain community buy-in, TVT engaged with community leadership and established a community advisory board comprising community activists to ensure that community interests are represented in the programme processes. However, managing stakeholders' diverse interests, was challenging. An NGO Board Member (Nov 2020) emphasised the need to manage stakeholder aspirations, such as traditional leaders, by understanding their goals and managing them:

The problem with stakeholders is that when they come in the project, they want to benefit. So you should always be able to manage their aspirations where they want to get to. So that is critical for me. Department of Health you can. The stakeholders that are causing chaos for me are the traditional leaders. One or two, but we are managing them. They tend to cause chaos. I hope you will interview them.

The above vignette accentuates internal power hierarchies within the communities that can compromise project success. Powerholders may project themselves as representing community interests, but may prioritise their own interests. This tendency, along with the community's inability to hold representatives accountable, can impede project feedback and jeopardise success. Internal hierarchies and power dynamics also limit participation by ordinary community members, hindering what the weak communication theory describes as the informal communication spaces where problems can be identified and addressed.

Spaces, where stakeholders collaborate, should be depoliticised. This is essential for effective management of power dynamics. According to a community advisory committee member (Jan 2021) politicised environments often contribute to tensions among stakeholders, making it challenging to address community issues. By setting aside politics and focusing solely on community projects, the level of tensions could be reduced:

I think the issue of managing tensions amongst stakeholders is a real challenge, especially because we live in a very politicised environment. Maybe if we can put aside politics when it comes to community projects may be the level of tensions will be reduced. You find that you meet about a community issue but see that there are, for instance, three sides based on the political interests that those sides represent. When we deal with community issues, these should be depoliticised (Community advisory committee member, Jan 2021).

But this is easier said than done. Depoliticising communication requires effective listening, which was lacking in the community dialogues implemented as part of WACRP. According to a participant (Nov 2020), these dialogues failed to stimulate genuine community dialogue, conceptualise responses, and promote accountability:

My personal understanding is that we are meant to stimulate a dialogue in the community around issues, in this case HIV/AIDS work, with the community to conceptualise a response and I don't know to what extent we did that because my colleagues used a dialogue a lot in the organisation, but I don't know that is even a dialogue. We refer to a community meeting as "a dialogue", and we tick the D part of the dialogue-reflection-action (DRA), but I am not convinced that the DRA is about that, and I am not convinced that is what creating community responses is about. I think it starts there and is an important component of it, but it is certainly not sufficient and cannot be considered to be the dialogue component of the programme.

The dialogues lacked the foundational principles of participatory communication (Tuftes and Mefalopoulos, 2009) and did not provide a reality-based reflection of community issues. Instead, they were perceived as a co-option strategy to gain community buy-in, without facilitating weak communication where personal yet powerful responses to the impact of HIV on local lives could be shared. Noske-Turner's (2020) emphasis on *communicative* development, as *the doing* of listening, was not upheld and thus distanced the community from providing a reality-based reflection on the issues facing them. This lack of listening may have been due to pressure from funders to meet measurable outcomes.

Conclusion

The case of the WACRP project reveals a gap between the intended community empowerment and the actual exercise of power dynamics in the project. External funders often exert control-based power that hinders community leadership and ownership, while local power hierarchies and customary beliefs also contribute to power imbalances. The exercise of control-based power in the project masks what has been described as the ceremonial adequacy (de Sousa Santos, 2001) of institutionalised social change communication programs to empower communities. The domineering effect of the international development agencies in micro-managing community projects is counter-productive to promoting community leadership and ownership in interventions. It stifles contextualised understandings and the capacity for self-expression. Effectively, while communities benefit from funding, this often comes at the expense of localised articulations of development and neglect of “the legitimacy of more marginal communication practices and the different types of well-being and development that these can enable” (Touri, 2020, p. 77).

Local power hierarchies can also create power imbalances, with leaders having more influence in determining project benefits and approaches. This can be compounded by customary beliefs that make it difficult for marginalised groups to hold those in authority accountable (Campbell et al., 2010).

Acknowledging and managing power inequalities is crucial for effective community-led interventions. The power imbalances in the WACRP highlight the debt of collective agency owed by local communities to international development agencies, which use participatory methodologies without their essence. To improve social change processes, communication practices should prioritise listening and involve depoliticised and candid conversations among stakeholders (Noske-Turner, 2020; Manyozo, 2016). Communicative and adaptive management mechanisms should be incorporated at any stage of the project to ensure its success.

Using the weak communication concept (Touri, 2020) and leveraging informal community networks like friends, family, peers, markets, and festival gatherings can be strategic in planning adaptive dialogic processes for community-based projects like the WACRP. These local platforms can provide spaces for communities to exercise agency in decision-making and pursue avenues of transformation that best improve their lives.

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