






Marné van Zyl 


School of Communication,
North-West University 
Potchefstroom, South Africa
Email: marnevanzyl199@gmail.
com

Elizabeth (Elbé) Kloppers 

School of Communication,
North-West University 
Potchefstroom, South Africa
Email: Elbe.Kloppers@nwu.
ac.za

Louise Bezuidenhout 

School of Communication,
North-West University 
Potchefstroom, South Africa
Email: Louise.
Bezuidenhout@nwu.ac.za
(corresponding author)

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A COMMUNICATION FRAMEWORK FOR COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANISATIONS TO FACILITATE MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIPS WITH SUPPORTING STAKEHOLDERS

ABSTRACT

Community-based organisations (CBOs) often rely on supporting stakeholders (providing financial support, resources, and collaboration) for survival. Therefore, CBOs must build and maintain mutually beneficial, positive, long-term relationships with these stakeholders to ensure organisational sustainability. However, CBOs often experience challenges in this regard, leading us to ask the question: How can a small CBO with limited time and resources communicate with its supporting stakeholders to facilitate mutually beneficial, long-term, positive relationships towards organisational sustainability? The two-way symmetrical model, stakeholder relationship management theory, and stewardship theory provide relevant constructs to inform communication between CBOs and their supporting stakeholders to facilitate such relationships. However, the unique context of CBOs often puts them in a position where extensive relationship-building following the normative theory is impossible, necessitating adaptation of the theory. To adapt the normative theory, we conducted semi-structured interviews with two management members and seven supporting stakeholders of one South African CBO to determine their perceptions, needs, expectations, and realities in terms of communication. We integrated the empirical findings with the theoretical constructs to conceptualise a communication framework for CBOs to facilitate long-term relationships with supporting stakeholders. This framework should enable CBOs to tailor their communication with stakeholders to build sound relationships based on their unique contexts.

Keywords: community-based organisations (CBOs), mutually beneficial long-term relationships, stakeholder relationship management theory, stewardship theory, supporting stakeholders, two-way symmetrical communication, SDG 17

INTRODUCTION

In developing countries such as South Africa, the non-profit (NPO) sector plays a key role in contributing to the well-being of society (Choto *et al.*, 2020; Nwauche & Flanigan, 2022; Tarisayi, 2023). The South African NPO sector includes numerous small community-based organisations (CBOs) operating in specific communities. Many CBOs are not state-funded and rely on donors and other supporting stakeholders to provide the resources they need to support the community. In this study, supporting stakeholders are defined as those who not only contribute financially to the CBO but also provide support in the form of tangible resources, collaboration, and access to networks.

Several CBOs have reported insufficient resources, including a lack of funds, employees, expertise, volunteers and networks, resulting in the organisations closing down despite their positive contribution to the community (Choto *et al.*, 2020; Mustaffha *et al.*, 2021; Annuar & Ismail, 2023; Tarisayi, 2023). In this study, we argue that positive long-term relationships with supporting stakeholders are important for CBOs' sustainability, and that such relationships should be built and maintained through effective communication.

Recent studies have focused on NPOs and their relationships with donors from financial, relationship management, marketing and communication perspectives. From a financial perspective, the focus was on accountability and governance to sustain relationships with donors (Concharenko, 2021; Tate, 2023). Other scholars explored these relationships from a relationship management theory (Butler, 2022; Parker *et al.*, 2023) and a marketing communication perspective (Minguesz & Sese, 2022). Some researchers offer communication perspectives by exploring the donation experience and advocacy of donors (Harrison *et al.*, 2021), the utilisation of narrative strategies (Parker *et al.*, 2024), stewardship strategies (Li *et al.*, 2021; Harrison, 2023a), and combining stewardship strategies with dialogical principles (Harrison, 2023b). Although some of the aforementioned scholars utilised the same theories we do, none of them integrated all the theoretical perspectives we propose.

Therefore, to contribute to filling the identified gap in the literature, we utilised three normative theoretical perspectives to identify constructs relevant to facilitating positive relationships between CBOs and their supporting stakeholders, including not only donors (who provide financial support), but also those stakeholders who offer tangible resources, collaboration and networking. As these stakeholders are more involved with the CBO than being mere donors, their communication needs and expectations are unique. The theoretical constructs were evaluated by exploring the perceptions of one CBO's management and supporting stakeholders of the communication between them. We then integrated the theoretical constructs and empirical findings to

conceptualise a practical communication framework for CBOs relevant to their unique contexts. This framework should facilitate mutually beneficial long-term relationships with all of a CBO's supporting stakeholders.

Context of the CBO

The context of our research was a small CBO in Potchefstroom, South Africa. The organisation's primary focus is to create awareness of sexual harassment and assault, and to provide support to victims of sexual assault in the community. Given the large number of students in the community, the CBO partners with a local university to create awareness of sexual harassment and assault among students. The organisation also partners with nightclubs frequented by students to create awareness and safe spaces for students and other patrons. The university and nightclub owners are supporting stakeholders who support the organisation through tangible resources, access to networks, partnerships and collaboration. The CBO cannot survive without the assistance and support from these supporting stakeholders, necessitating positive long-term relationships, created and maintained through communication.

The CBO's management and staff consist of three people who are employed full-time elsewhere. This reality created pressure regarding the time and human resources available to build relationships with supportive stakeholders. This lack of time and human resources is not unique to this particular CBO, but it is the sad reality that many CBOs and small NPOs experience.

Within this context, the research question that this article wants to answer is: How can a small CBO with limited time and resources communicate with its supporting stakeholders to facilitate mutually beneficial, long-term, positive relationships towards organisational sustainability?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Given the size of the CBO, the small number of supporting stakeholders, and the personal relationships that most of them shared, we proposed using the two-way symmetrical model to inform communication within these relationships. Theoretically, relationship strategies identified in the stakeholder relationship management theory, supplemented by some stewardship strategies relevant to NPOs, should contribute to building and maintaining positive long-term relationships between a CBO and its supporting stakeholders to facilitate the sustainability of the organisation.

Two-way symmetrical communication model

The focus of the two-way symmetrical communication model is on facilitating strategic, long-term, mutually beneficial relationships between organisations and their stakeholders (Grunig, 1992: 232; Grunig *et al.*, 2006: 53). As the main aim of the CBO's communication with its supporting stakeholders is to create such relationships, we argue that this model is an appropriate basis for a communication framework.

Mutual understanding

The model is founded on promoting mutual understanding between organisations and their stakeholders. Mutual understanding refers to both parties understanding each other's realities, needs and expectations, and the mutual or individual goals they desire to achieve (Musheke & Phiri, 2021). Mutual understanding can enable organisations and their stakeholders to alter their behaviour to make it beneficial to all parties based on consideration of one another's circumstances (Grunig & White, 1992; Holtzhausen *et al.*, 2003). In this article, mutual understanding means that both the CBO and its supporting stakeholders understand each other's realities, challenges, needs and expectations, and the common goals they want to achieve.

Dialogue

The central tenet of the two-way symmetrical model is dialogue between stakeholders. Dialogue entails balanced two-way communication, whereby the participants take turns to share, listen, understand, interpret and provide feedback to each other. Dialogue requires active participation in open, transparent, deliberative, continuous and equitable exchanges of information (Scandeliuss & Cohen, 2016; Villagra *et al.*, 2021). In dialogue, all parties have equal opportunities to receive and provide information to influence decisions made through accessible channels and platforms (Fourie & Kloppers, 2009). Dialogue facilitates the process of establishing and maintaining relationships, as organisations that communicate effectively with their stakeholders are more likely to develop stronger relationships than those that practise ineffective communication (Hon & Grunig; 1999: 10; McAbee, 2021). This article defines dialogue as a continuous process of two-way communication between the CBO and its supporting stakeholders that involves information sharing, listening and feedback, with both parties having equal opportunities to communicate via accessible channels and platforms.

Participatory culture

The two-way symmetrical model implies a participatory culture in the creation of long-term, mutually beneficial relationships. This entails creating a collaborative environment in which input from stakeholders is actively sought (Mitchell *et al.*, 1997: 853-886; Gray, 1999). Such a culture can enable stakeholders and organisations to collaborate, produce innovative ideas, and participate in joint decision-making for mutual benefit (Kligler-Vilenchik & Shresthova, 2012). In this article, a participatory culture refers to a collaborative environment that enables supporting stakeholders and the CBO to work together, with both parties participating in innovation and decision-making processes.

Conflict management

The two-way symmetrical model highlights the importance of effective conflict management in facilitating mutually beneficial relationships. Conflict can only be managed successfully in a relationship characterised by mutual understanding and mutual benefits (Spaho, 2013: 104). The two-way symmetrical communication model

suggests that conflict should be managed actively to sustain the relationship by seeking mutually satisfactory outcomes (Grunig *et al.*, 2002: 15). Conflict management, in this context, refers to the CBO actively managing any conflict that might arise to achieve a satisfactory outcome for all to sustain the relationship.

Figure 1 presents the constructs and sub-constructs used to evaluate the communication between the CBO and its supporting stakeholders.

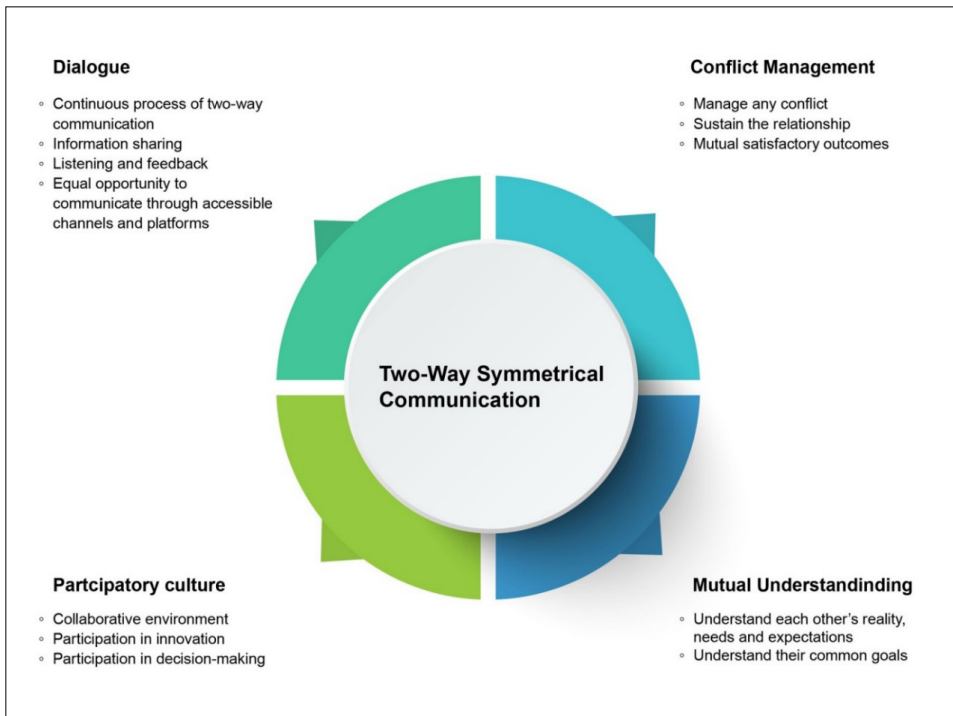


FIGURE 1: CONSTRUCTS AND SUB-CONSTRUCTS OF TWO-WAY SYMMETRICAL COMMUNICATION

The two-way symmetrical communication model guides how the communication between a CBO and its supporting stakeholders should ideally take place. Equally important are practical strategies that could direct these relationships. These can be found in relationship management theory which, connected to the two-way symmetrical model, is viewed as the ideal approach to managing relationships (Ferguson, 1984), and in stewardship strategies that are intended to sustain relationships specifically within the NPO sector.

Stakeholder relationship management theory and stewardship theory

The stakeholder relationship management theory provides the theoretical grounding for stakeholder relationship management. It guides organisations to understand the importance of stakeholder relationships and the benefits of effective stakeholder relationship management (Freeman, 2010; Bourne, 2016; Mato-Santiso *et al.*, 2021).

Hon and Grunig (1999) developed normative strategies for stakeholder relationship management, which serve as the point of departure for managing relationships between CBOs and their stakeholders. In this study, these strategies, developed for a PR context, were customised to fit the CBO context and supplemented with stewardship strategies.

Stewardship strategies were developed in the context of stakeholder relationships within the NPO sector (see Kelly, 2001; Waters, 2011; Parris & Peachey, 2013). They are intended to facilitate continued communication and relationship building to improve stakeholder relationships within the NPO sector (Greenleaf, 2002; Parris & Peachey, 2013; Waters, 2011; 2013; Ledingham & Bruning, 2014).

The relationship and stewardship strategies aim to achieve the same relationship outcomes, such as trust, commitment and satisfaction (Waters, 2009; Pressgrove *et al.*, 2015; Bennett *et al.*, 2018), which are all aims of the CBO's communication with its supporting stakeholders.

Hon and Grunig's (1999) relationship strategies include:

- ◆ Access – providing access to information and being accessible to one another
- ◆ Positivity – efforts to make a relationship more pleasant
- ◆ Openness – transparency
- ◆ Assurance – showing commitment to the relationship.
- ◆ Networking – building networks with groups that are already part of one's stakeholders' networks
- ◆ Task sharing – both parties sharing tasks that benefit either or both of them

Kelly's (2001) stewardship strategies include:

- ◆ Responsibility – acting in a socially responsible manner towards the supporters of the organisation
- ◆ Reporting – being transparent through detailed verbal and written communication
- ◆ Reciprocity – recognising stakeholders and demonstrating gratitude for their involvement assists in creating a “win-win” situation
- ◆ Relationship nurturing – cultivating relationships with existing stakeholders by making their experience positive

In this study, these two sets of strategies are integrated to establish relationship strategies that are specifically customised for a CBO.

Networking and task sharing have been integrated to create *networking towards task sharing*; and access, positivity and relationship nurturing have been integrated into the strategy of *relationship nurturing*. Openness, responsibility and reporting have been integrated into *responsibility*, while assurance and reciprocity have been integrated into *reciprocity*.

Networking towards task sharing

Networking is the utilisation of common alliances and connections to form new relations. An organisation endeavours to form relationships with the same groups as its stakeholders to build shared networks (see Ki & Hon, 2009; Sisson, 2017). Shared networks extend collaboration among all the participants.

Building collaborations through networking links to *task sharing*, which involves the strategic distribution of tasks among the participating parties. Sharing tasks can be accomplished by bringing together various groups (networks) to collaborate on projects or to solve problems of mutual and/or individual interest (see Ki & Hon, 2009; Sisson, 2017).

The focus of the combined stakeholder relationship strategy is on networking for collaboration to facilitate mutual benefits. Networking towards task sharing, in this article, refers to the CBO expanding its network by identifying new supporting stakeholders from within its current stakeholders' existing networks and forming alliances with them to share tasks between all the parties involved.

Relationship nurturing

Relationship nurturing requires an organisation to acknowledge the importance of keeping its stakeholders at the centre of all communication (Kelly, 2001). This requires involving stakeholders by means of the open dissemination of information (Hon & Grunig, 1999). This relates to Hon and Grunig's *access* strategy. In Hon and Grunig's (1999) conceptualisation, access includes utilising communication channels that enable stakeholders to access organisational information (Ki & Hon, 2009). Access also includes stakeholders being accessible to one another, which is achieved by supplying whatever information is needed (Sisson, 2017).

Relationship nurturing also relates to *positivity*, which requires all the parties within the relationship to engage in respectful communication characterised by openness, empathy, understanding and patience (Canary & Stafford, 1994; Hon & Grunig, 1999; Crawford *et al.*, 2018). Hon and Grunig (1999) define positivity as "anything the organisation does to make the relationship more enjoyable for the parties involved". Relationship nurturing, through access and positivity, should contribute to long-term relationships (see Pressgrove *et al.*, 2015) between CBOs and their supporting stakeholders. In this article, relationship nurturing is defined as pleasant interactions created by various means and communication reflecting openness,

empathy, understanding and patience, contributing to both parties experiencing the relationship positively.

Responsibility

Organisations have an ethical *responsibility* towards their stakeholders (Kelly, 2001). They should keep promises and present evidence of their efforts to ensure accountability (Hung, 2004). Therefore, this strategy can be integrated with the relationship strategy of *openness*. Openness is an organisation's attempt to engage with stakeholders to create transparency on how decisions and operations affect them (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998; Hon & Grunig, 1999; Ki & Hon, 2009). The stewardship strategy of *reporting* relates to openness, as the CBO should provide detailed information relevant to the stakeholders through annual reports and other financial information to ensure transparency (Kelly, 2001; Pressgrove *et al.*, 2015; Bennett *et al.*, 2018). Responsibility, in the current context, refers to the CBO providing transparent and accurate verbal or written reports and defining both its responsibilities and those of its stakeholders in a clear and accessible manner while accommodating the communication preferences and needs of its supporting stakeholders.

Reciprocity

The *reciprocity* strategy involves creating a win-win situation for all the stakeholders by openly and visibly honouring them for their contributions (Kelly, 2001; Waters, 2009; Pressgrove *et al.*, 2015). The strategy involves actively seeking ways to express appreciation to stakeholders. This relates to the relationship strategy of *assurance*. Assurance can be achieved by emphasising each other's importance and, therefore, the importance of sustaining the relationship (Canary & Stafford, 1994; Hon & Grunig, 1999; Ki & Hon, 2009). Assurance includes all the parties demonstrating to the others that their opinions and concerns are valid (Hon & Grunig, 1999) and taking action to address concerns (Sisson, 2017).

In this context, reciprocity refers to the CBO publicly and authentically recognising stakeholders' contributions to the organisation's functioning to continuously assure them of the importance of their role in the CBO's success.

Figure 2 presents the constructs and sub-constructs specified in the theoretical guideline and the sub-constructs used in evaluating the relationship strategies.

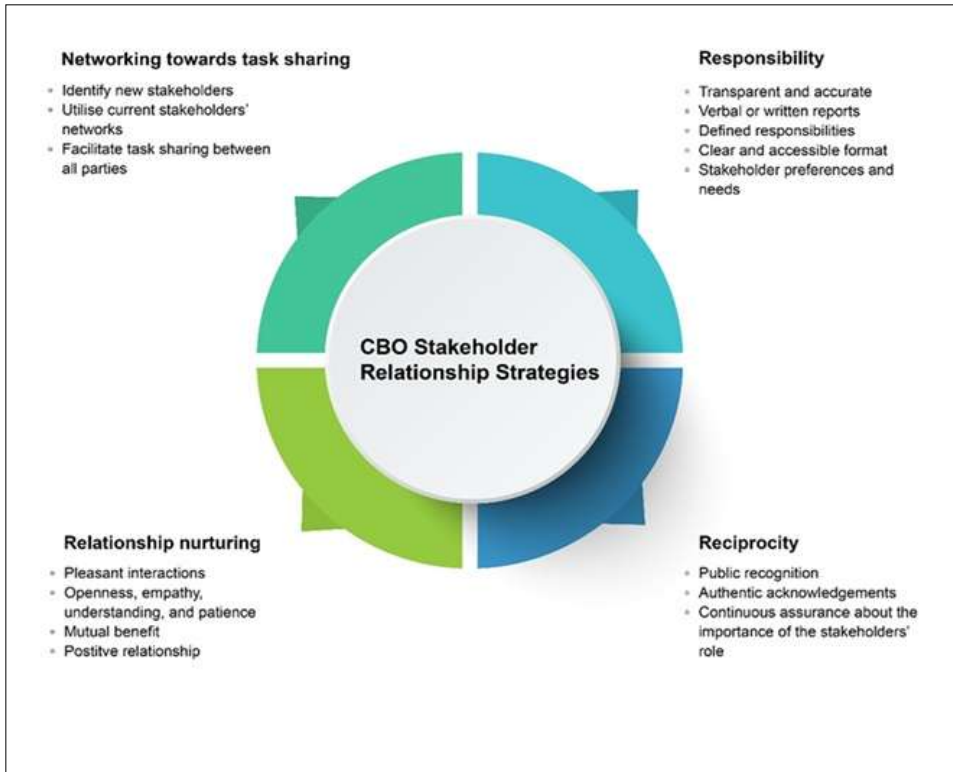


FIGURE 2: CONSTRUCTS AND SUB-CONSTRUCTS OF STAKEHOLDER RELATIONSHIP STRATEGIES

METHOD

The researchers utilised a qualitative research approach to elicit the participants' subjective perspectives regarding communication between the CBO and its supporting stakeholders (see Tracy, 2019).

Sampling

Two populations were identified in this study: the management of the CBO, and the organisation's supporting stakeholders. All the participants were selected using purposive known-group sampling (see Leedy & Ormrod, 2018), where the participants were selected based on their knowledge and experience of communication between the CBO management and the supporting stakeholders.

The CBO's management and staff consisted of three people. To inform the proposed communication framework, it was important to understand the CBO's perceptions, realities, and obstacles regarding communication with their supporting stakeholders. The two CBO directors, who were directly responsible for communicating with

supporting stakeholders, participated in the study. Supporting stakeholders included a local university and nightclubs near this university.

The university's students constituted one of the CBO's primary target audiences, and the university actively supported and collaborated with the CBO in various ways. Two university employees, both members of the university's campus management committee, were identified based on their involvement with the CBO on behalf of the university. As these individuals worked closely with the CBO, supporting the organisation in various ways, their perspectives on communication were relevant to this study.

The CBO collaborates with several nightclub owners and managers near the university regarding the prevention of sexual harassment and assault, and the handling of sexual assault incidents on their premises. The CBO identified five individuals who were actively collaborating with the organisation in the fight against sexual assault. All five individuals participated in the study. The representatives of nightclubs required constant communication with the CBO regarding collaborative procedures, necessitating their contributions to the proposed communication framework.

The researchers obtained ethical clearance from the relevant ethics committee. The ethics number is 01078 22 A7. All the participants agreed to participate voluntarily and signed informed consent forms before any interviews were conducted.

Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to establish the perceptions of the CBO's management and supporting stakeholders. Interview schedules were developed beforehand, informed by the theoretical constructs formulated from the theory. The interviews took place at venues that were most convenient for the participants, such as the participants' offices and coffee shops. The interview schedules were used to guide, but not dictate, the interviews.

Data analysis

The researchers transcribed the audio recording from each interview before analysing the content using qualitative content analysis. Qualitative content analysis is a research method used for the subjective interpretation of the content of text, such as interview transcripts, through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns to gain insight into the meaning of content within a specific context (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Delve, n.d.). We used the theoretical constructs identified above as categories for analysis to determine the participants' views on each construct, to inform the proposed framework.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The empirical findings are presented per construct.

Dialogue

One of the directors indicated that the CBO's communication with stakeholders was ad hoc, primarily via telephone, and it was the responsibility of the founder, who was employed elsewhere and had multiple responsibilities outside of the CBO. Consequently, the CBO was unable to facilitate continuous two-way communication. They stated that the onus was generally on the stakeholders to contact the CBO, not the other way around. They acknowledged that sharing information, listening and feedback were not consistently applied in their day-to-day communication with their stakeholders, primarily because there was no individual responsible for communication with the stakeholders, and because the management had many responsibilities outside of the CBO.

The stakeholders confirmed this, saying they had not experienced continuous two-way communication or even information sharing from the CBO. However, most of them acknowledged that they did not initiate communication from their side. Furthermore, they did not perceive having equal opportunities to communicate via accessible channels or platforms. Some stakeholders preferred one-way communication from the CBO on digital platforms (information sharing), while others preferred regular discussions and meetings.

Given the absence of a continuous communication process, both the representatives and the stakeholders acknowledged unequal opportunities for the stakeholders to participate in discussions. Both parties acknowledged that the CBO did not share timely information or provide consistent feedback, as there were no appropriate communication platforms or channels to enable such communication. Hence, the stakeholders felt unheard, and that they were unable to participate in dialogue.

Participatory culture

The CBO management stated they provided their stakeholders with options regarding how much they wanted to participate in collaborations. One director suggested that the organisation might benefit from having a more formal system to better understand and cater to the diverse stakeholders' preferences, needs and expectations regarding collaboration. This indicates that the CBO management understood the value of stakeholder participation in innovation and decision-making processes.

Most of the stakeholders perceived a lack of participation, leading them to develop their own innovations without the CBO's support. Furthermore, the stakeholders voiced their discontent with the lack of detailed information, which was needed to facilitate participation in decision-making. While a few stakeholders preferred one-way communication, with limited desire for participation during collaboration, most were frustrated with the lack of two-way communication and opportunities to participate during collaborative efforts. Importantly, although everyone did not necessarily want to participate in collaborations, innovations or decision-making, they all desired information from the CBO.

Conflict management

The CBO management suggested that conflict resolution in the organisation was based on the individuals' values and approaches, which helped them to create a relaxed environment for conflict resolution. They perceived the CBO's conflict management as responsive and attentive, leading to positive outcomes for all the parties. One of the directors did, however, mention that the CBO could implement a post-conflict resolution strategy to enhance the current techniques.

The supporting stakeholders, who had experienced conflict with the organisation, stated that the CBO had resolved the disputes positively through negotiation and discussion. For them, it demonstrates the CBO's dedication to engagement to achieve mutual understanding in conflict situations. However, some stakeholders also suggested that the CBO should follow up to ensure that the conflict remains resolved. Moreover, most stakeholders believed that the CBO would guarantee satisfactory outcomes for both parties by ensuring that they understood the stakeholders' concerns and by preventing conflicts from escalating.

Interestingly, the participants had positive experiences regarding conflict resolution, but they did not have the same positive experience in their day-to-day communication with the CBO. This is problematic, as there should not be conflict before the CBO decides to implement two-way communication. The stakeholders' expectations of the CBO again point to the need for two-way symmetrical communication, not only in conflict situations, but throughout to build and maintain positive long-term relationships.

Mutual understanding

The CBO management felt that they did not have sufficient detailed information about the realities, needs and expectations of all the stakeholders involved in the project. As a result, they said they were uncertain whether all the parties understood the common goal.

The stakeholders appeared to have contradictory perceptions regarding mutual understanding. Some were merely interested in understanding situations connected to themselves, while others needed explicit information regarding this relationship's specific demands and expectations. Given these disparities, some stakeholders were dissatisfied with the CBO's understanding of their realities, needs and expectations. Each stakeholder described a distinct understanding of how the CBO should attempt to prevent sexual assault and support victims, which was their common goal. The stakeholders expected the CBO to show an understanding of their needs, expectations and realities, and for the CBO to make their expectations clear. Not all the stakeholders were aware of the CBO's reality, limitations and challenges. This again highlights the need for two-way communication to address uncertainty and create mutual understanding and common goals.

Networking towards task sharing

From the CBO management's perspective, their current communication approach to identifying new stakeholders relied on personal connections and word of mouth. One director mentioned that this process was hindered by a lack of capacity to have follow-up communication after the CBO made new connections. Management's responses indicated that they understood the importance of networking towards task sharing, but it appeared as if this could not be done optimally due to a lack of capacity.

Most stakeholders did not observe the CBO identifying new supporting stakeholders from their networks, using networking towards task sharing with new or current stakeholders, or benefitting from the CBO's networks. Notably, most stakeholders mentioned that they would prefer the CBO to strengthen its current stakeholder relationships before identifying new ones.

Relationship nurturing

The CBO management acknowledged that resource challenges limited their relationship nurturing. They mentioned using social media to keep their stakeholders informed, while other interactions were made pleasant by being open, empathetic and patient with their stakeholders. The CBO management believed both parties benefitted from and experienced the relationship positively because it resulted in human resources and financial support. The directors thus believed that the CBO created pleasant interactions with mutual benefits to nurture their relationships.

The stakeholders were not aware of the CBO hosting any pleasant interactions, although some of the stakeholders had a positive opinion of the mutual benefits involved. In addition, most of the stakeholders highlighted a lack of follow-through and insufficient communication and they indicated that the organisation favoured specific institutions above others. Even though some stakeholders perceived the communication as unsatisfactory, they were still willing to improve their relationship with the CBO.

The management's positive perceptions seemed based on the benefits they believed everyone received from the relationship. However, these benefits seemed lacking, partly due to the challenges (funding and resource and capacity constraints) described by the representatives. Notwithstanding, the result was that neither the CBO nor its stakeholders benefitted optimally from the relationship.

The stakeholders' expectations strongly aligned with relationship nurturing, as defined in this study, concerning pleasant interactions, openness, empathy, understanding, and patience.

Responsibility

The management acknowledged that the CBO fell short in terms of both providing accurate reports with organisational information in a consistent and accessible manner and offering defined relationship responsibilities. They admitted to not understanding their stakeholders' preferences or expectations regarding communication, making it impossible for them to meet those expectations.

Most of the supporting stakeholders indicated that they did not receive any organisational information. Those who did receive information, said they did not receive the information in a clear and accessible format. However, the supporting stakeholders admitted that they had not informed the CBO about their communication preferences or needs, which differed significantly. Some wanted two-way personalised updates, while others preferred quick, frequent digital information.

Reciprocity

One of the directors indicated that they placed their stakeholders' names on their website and in newspaper articles, and that they had also mentioned them at fundraisers. The CBO recognised its stakeholders personally, but not formally, and it admitted to neglecting follow-up communication. The CBO's directors were of the view that they incorporated authenticity to provide assurance to their stakeholders and to recognise them, but they stated that they did not do it consistently.

The stakeholders' perceptions varied, but most of them indicated that the CBO's efforts did not conform to the ideal. However, most of the stakeholders focused more on the CBO sharing positive results and creating public awareness than on recognition. They indicated that they did not seek public recognition for their contributions but wanted the public to know their premises were safe based on their collaboration with the CBO. The supporting stakeholders further indicated that the CBO should continuously assure them of their importance to its success through acknowledgements in a personal and authentic manner via meetings or emails. It is important for the CBO to utilise communication to determine how its stakeholders want to be acknowledged.

COMMUNICATION FRAMEWORK

The supporting stakeholders' expectations regarding communication between themselves and the CBO mainly aligned with the theoretical assumptions in this study. This supports the argument that the abovementioned communication strategies could enable a CBO to build and maintain mutually beneficial long-term relationships within the broader context of two-way symmetrical communication. However, it became apparent during the interviews that some of the strategies combined in the literature review had to be merged in a new way to reflect the supporting stakeholders' needs and expectations. Although the CBO management recognised the value of communication, as proposed in this study, the practical obstacles related to the lack of capacity made adhering to the ideal infeasible. By integrating the theoretical points of departure and the empirical findings, we propose the following CBO-SS Communication Framework (see Figure 3).

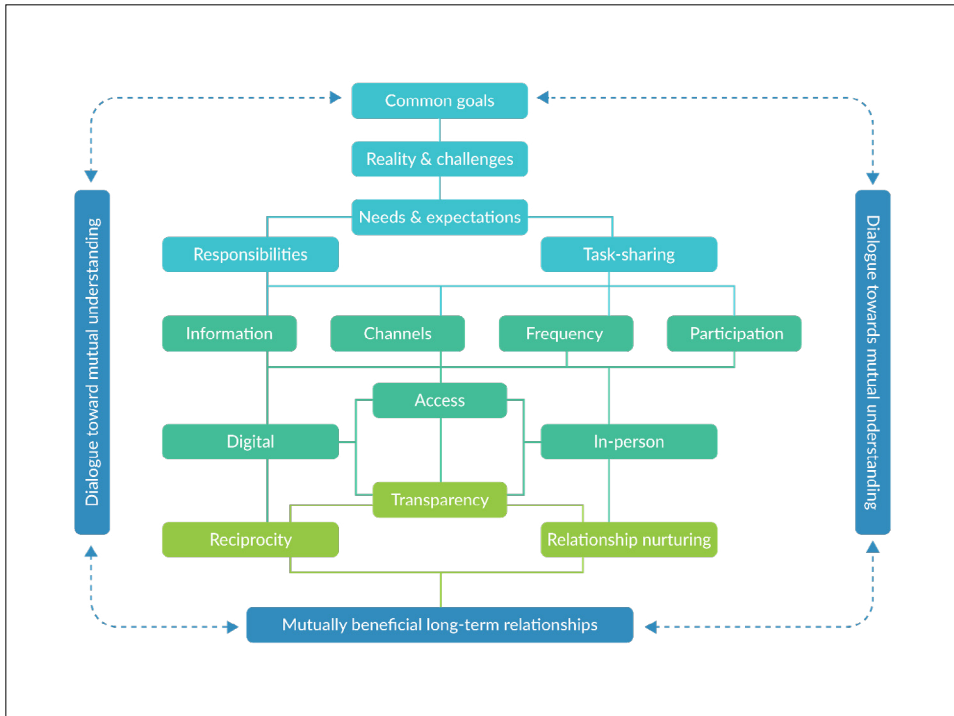


FIGURE 3: CBO-SS COMMUNICATION FRAMEWORK

Dialogue towards mutual understanding

The main aim of the CBO-SS Communication Framework is to create mutually beneficial, long-term relationships between the CBO and its supporting stakeholders. We argue that this aim can only be achieved through dialogue, which is focused on facilitating mutual understanding between the CBO and its supporting stakeholders. Given the pressure that CBOs face in terms of time and human resources, we propose that the CBO representatives have an in-depth opening conversation with each new stakeholder so that they can begin from a point of mutual understanding. Although such an opening conversation will take time at the beginning of the relationship, it is indispensable. It will set the tone for all communication to follow and, thus, the relationship between the two parties. Given the importance of this discussion, we strongly suggest that it happens individually and in person, which should be feasible for most CBOs with a small number of supporting stakeholders. Although the opening conversation is a key point of departure, this should be followed by continuous communication between the parties, during which needs and expectations can be renegotiated. During the opening conversation, and all subsequent communication, the CBO should provide opportunities for dialogue that involve information-sharing, listening and feedback.

Common goals

Determining the common goals in the relationship is a key point of departure. The supporting stakeholders and the CBO should clearly understand what they want to achieve through collaboration. Although the goal(s) of the CBO itself will be fixed, the stakeholders will each uniquely contribute to these goals as they contribute to the CBO's project in diverse ways and want different things from the collaboration and relationship. The CBO and the supporting stakeholders should agree on their common goals, and this should guide their collaboration. A shared understanding of the common goals should be created through dialogical communication to ensure the relationship is mutually beneficial. The CBO should initiate and sustain such communication with its supporting stakeholders, starting with the opening conversation.

Reality and challenges

Mutual understanding also requires both the CBO and the supporting stakeholders to openly share their realities and challenges from the beginning of the relationship. A great deal of frustration and misunderstanding could be prevented if both parties are honest and open about these issues from the onset of the relationship. In the empirical study we established that there were feelings of frustration and blame due to the CBO and supporting stakeholders not sharing their realities and challenges or understanding those of the other party. CBOs should be transparent about resource limitations, while stakeholders must clarify what support they can realistically offer. This openness should foster realistic, respectful, and effective collaboration.

Needs and expectations regarding responsibilities and task sharing

The CBO and supporting stakeholders should establish and discuss their relationship and communication needs and expectations from the outset, revisiting them, if and when necessary. A clear understanding of each party's needs and what they hope to gain is essential for meeting expectations and avoiding frustration. The study found that unmet expectations often stemmed from a lack of mutual awareness regarding needs and expectations. The opening conversation and ongoing dialogue should include specific attention to roles, responsibilities, and task sharing to support a more effective and equitable collaboration.

Both the literature and the empirical study highlighted the importance of both parties understanding their responsibilities and those of the other party to create a mutual understanding and, in the end, mutually beneficial, long-term relationships. These responsibilities should be agreed upon and spelt out in detail to create relationship satisfaction.

The sharing of tasks should also be discussed at the onset of the relationship. The empirical study indicated that some stakeholders were more open to task sharing than others. This needs to be established as part of the needs and expectations of both parties. Some of the supporting stakeholders want to share tasks as they come

up, and they would like the CBO to contribute to their organisations. In contrast, others indicated that they were only prepared to take on the responsibilities agreed upon beforehand.

Both parties' needs and expectations regarding communication should also be determined from the outset. The empirical study showed that the supporting stakeholders had diverse needs and expectations regarding communication, leading to frustration when unmet. Given the small number of supporting stakeholders, CBOs should be able to tailor their communication based on the discussed needs and expectations. Responsibilities in terms of communication should also be discussed so that both parties know what is expected of them and can be held accountable when necessary.

The opening discussion should centre on information, channels, frequency and participation to understand supporting stakeholders' communication needs and expectations.

Information, channels, frequency and participation

CBOs need to establish what information stakeholders deem important, the platforms they find most accessible and preferable, and the frequency of communication each supporting stakeholder favours.

CBOs should also establish the level of participation the stakeholders want in the CBO and how much participation from the CBO they would welcome. Participation can take the form of innovations, collaboration and shared decision-making. Such participation could result in the sharing of tasks between CBOs and their stakeholders, benefiting both parties in terms of attaining their mutual goals. This could include collaborative projects or stakeholders acting only in an advisory role.

The abovementioned aspects should be discussed during the opening conversation and revisited when necessary. This information should be used to tailor the communication with each supporting stakeholder. A one-size-fits-all approach to communication cannot be followed in the context of a small CBO with a small number of supporting stakeholders with unique contributions, needs and expectations.

Access – digital and in-person

As most CBOs experience a lack of resources in terms of time and available personnel, digital platforms can be strategically used to provide information. These platforms need to be updated regularly to reflect any new developments. However, in small CBOs with limited supporting stakeholders, face-to-face meetings can provide an opportunity for dialogue to establish relationships. All communication channels should include feedback mechanisms.

Timely access to the information that supporting stakeholders deem relevant, via the channels of their choice, including digital and in-person communication, should contribute to transparency.

Transparency

Addressing communication and relationship needs and expectations should lead to transparency, whereby detailed, accurate and transparent information about, for example, activities, impact, decision-making processes and finances, should be available through various accessible channels. Some stakeholders might prefer personal updates during two-way conversations, while others might prefer quick and frequent updates via digital channels.

Accessible digital platforms can share generic information such as financial reports, while information relevant only to a particular stakeholder might best be discussed in person. Moreover, CBOs should consistently provide transparent and accurate verbal or written reports in a clear and accessible manner in line with the communication preferences and needs of their supporting stakeholders.

Access and transparency should entail the stakeholders having access to CBO information and vice versa. The latter will assist the CBO with stakeholder information that they could utilise to attain their common goal.

Reciprocity

Transparency should contribute to reciprocity. When supporting stakeholders experience that the CBO is communicating all relevant information in an accessible way, honouring their needs and expectations, they should be committed to contributing to the mutually agreed upon common goals, leading to mutual benefit. Supporting stakeholders might grant the CBO access to their existing networks in this exchange relationship. As the stakeholders indicated in the empirical study, it is important to note that supporting stakeholders will only feel comfortable allowing the CBO networking privileges when they are content with the relationship and the communication they share with the organisation. As with current stakeholders, CBOs should initiate and continue communicating with new supporting stakeholders, following the proposed framework.

Relationship nurturing

CBOs should pay special attention to nurturing their relationships with their supporting stakeholders. When communicating about the successes of the CBO and the positive contribution the organisation is making to the community, the supporting stakeholders who make these successes and contributions possible, should be recognised. The CBO should authentically acknowledge contributions to ensure that the supporting stakeholders feel valued and recognised. The needs and expectations of the stakeholders should be determined and respected concerning whether the recognition is shared publicly via the CBO's website, on social media and in the media, or only in person.

Any conflict between CBOs and their supporting stakeholders should be addressed immediately, through dialogue, to find mutually satisfactory solutions that benefit all the parties. CBOs should follow up post-conflict to ensure that the stakeholders are satisfied with the outcomes and to rebuild and nurture the relationship.

Deliberately creating pleasant interactions through various means is key. Financial constraints, and limited resources and capacity might be seen as obstacles to relationship nurturing for many CBOs. However, given that the sustainability of a CBO might rely on its relationship with its supporting stakeholders, CBOs should find creative and cost-efficient ways to create positive interactions with them, focusing on their relationship and not only on the support needed from the stakeholders. The nature of such interactions should be determined by the stakeholders' needs, expectations and preferences, as discussed during the opening conversation and thereafter. The empirical study showed that stakeholders' preferences regarding interactions with the CBO differ greatly.

Supporting stakeholders should always experience openness, empathy, understanding and patience from the CBO. The overall aim of relationship nurturing is to ensure that both parties benefit from their association. Establishing a positive relationship through social interaction is important in achieving this aim.

Mutually beneficial long-term relationships

Utilising this framework, in which stakeholders' needs and expectations are considered and communication adjusted accordingly, should result in stakeholder satisfaction and loyalty. Stakeholders should feel informed, respected and valued because they can see the direct impact of their contributions and view the CBO as honest and accountable; thus, building trust. Ensuring the relationship is mutually beneficial and continuously nurtured should foster loyalty and long-term support of the CBO, ensuring its sustainability.

CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper aimed to answer the research question: How can a small CBO with limited time and resources communicate with its supporting stakeholders to facilitate mutually beneficial, long-term, positive relationships towards the organisation's sustainability?

To answer this question, we conceptualised a communication framework for CBOs to facilitate such relationships. This was done, firstly, by exploring three normative theoretical approaches, namely, the two-way symmetrical model, the stakeholder relationship management theory, and the stewardship theory, to identify relevant theoretical constructs. Secondly, an empirical study was conducted to determine the perceptions and expectations of one CBO's management and supporting stakeholders regarding communication. The empirical study's theoretical constructs and findings were integrated to propose a feasible communication framework that CBOs can use to guide their communication with supporting stakeholders.

A limitation of this research is that the empirical study that informed the framework was confined to a particular context with a small sample, and the findings are, therefore, not generalisable. A corresponding recommendation would be that future researchers conduct similar studies in other CBO contexts, perhaps with larger samples, and improve on the framework where necessary.

Through the conceptualisation of the framework, this study makes three contributions. Firstly, the study was focused on supporting stakeholders and not only on donors, which is the focus of most other studies. As supporting stakeholders are more involved in the organisation than most donors, their communication needs are unique. Secondly, the theoretical contribution of this study lies in identifying constructs of the three theories mentioned above and integrating them into a framework. Finally, the practical contribution lies in offering a flexible framework that CBOs and other non-profit organisations could follow for managing the relationships with their supporting stakeholders, relevant to their unique contexts and limited resources, to facilitate the sustainability of the CBO.

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