



Audrezara Journal of Communication and Social Research (AJCSR), Vol. 2(1), 193-202, 2026.



AUDREZARA JOURNAL OF COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL RESEARCH (AJCSR)

Vol. 2, Issue 1, pp. 193-202, April, 2026.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19941571>

E-ISSN: 3121-9721

Select Indigenous Languages Used in Development Communication in Cross River State

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History: Received: February 06, 2026; Revised: March 19, 2026; Accepted: March 29, 2026.

Abstract

This study investigated the role of indigenous languages in development communication within Cross River State, Nigeria, a region characterised by rich linguistic diversity, with communities speaking *Efik*, *Ejagham*, *Bekwarra*, and *Yakurr*. These languages are not only central to the people's cultural identity but also serve as essential instruments for effective participation in development initiatives. Grounded in the Participatory Communication theory, which emphasises horizontal communication. A survey research design was adopted to provide an in-depth understanding of language use in development communication. Data were collected through interviews with development practitioners, local government officials, and community leaders across the four linguistic zones of the state. Data were thematically analysed and presented descriptively. Findings revealed that indigenous languages are crucial for effective message delivery, comprehension and community participation in development programmes. When development information is communicated in *Efik*, *Ejagham*, *Yakurr*, or *Bekwarra*, local populations demonstrate greater interest, trust, and behavioural response. The researchers recommended that government and development agencies institutionalise the use of indigenous languages in all community-based programme.

Keywords: Communication, Development, Indigenous, Languages, Linguistic

Introduction

Development communication is central to achieving social, economic and political advancement in communities. In a linguistically diverse setting such as Cross River State, Nigeria, the language of communication can significantly impact the reach and efficacy of development programmes. Despite the



prevalence of English as Nigeria's official language, indigenous languages remain the primary means of everyday interaction for many rural and semi-urban populations.

Cross River State is one of the most linguistically diverse regions in Nigeria with over 50 languages some of the notable languages include *Efik, Ejagham, Bekwara, and Yakurr* (Ekenyong, 2016). The cultural and historical importance of these languages can not be over stated, they carry centuries of tradition, communal knowledge and social norms.

Historically, development communication in Nigeria has relied heavily on English and a lesser extent Pidgin English (Asemah, 2011, Ojebode, 2023). However, the limited understanding of these languages among rural dwellers has posed a challenge to effective dissemination of development messages. Indigenous languages play a crucial role in ensuring effective development communities particularly within culturally diverse communities, like those in Cross River State, Nigeria. These languages serve as more than just mere tools for expression, they are foundational to identity, trust-building, and shared understanding. In development contexts, especially those involving health and wellbeing, the choice of language can determine the success or failure of a campaign. The use of local languages significantly increases nuanced the reach and impact of health messages especially during the COVID-19 outbreak (Obiorah, 2021).

Language is a crucial vehicle for transmitting information, shaping perceptions, and mobilising communities toward development. In multilingual societies such as Nigeria, and particularly in Cross River State, effective development communication depends largely on the use of languages that people understand and identify with. The state is home to a rich diversity of indigenous languages including *Efik, Ejagham, Yakkur, and Bekwarra*, which serve as vital instruments for social interaction and cultural preservation. However, despite their communicative potential, these languages remain largely underutilised in formal development processes.

Over the years, government agencies, non-governmental organisations, and media institutions in Cross River State have increasingly relied on English and Nigerian Pidgin to communicate development messages. While these languages reach wider audiences, they often exclude non-literate and rural populations who are more fluent in indigenous tongues. This exclusion weakens participation, reduces message comprehension, and limits the overall impact of development programmes. Consequently, many well-intentioned initiatives in areas such as health, agriculture, gender empowerment, and environmental management fail to achieve their objectives because target communities do not fully grasp or internalize the messages conveyed.

Furthermore, although indigenous languages are used sporadically in local radio broadcasts and community outreach, their application is neither systematic nor guided by clear policy frameworks. Issues such as declining language proficiency among youth, lack of standardised orthographies for some languages, and inadequate institutional support for indigenous-language media production have further marginalised these languages in the communication landscape.

There is therefore a critical need to examine the significance of select indigenous languages in development communication in Cross River State, how selected indigenous languages are used in development communication in Cross River State, what are the challenges facing the development of select indigenous languages in Cross River State, How can selected languages indigenous languages be leveraged to promote development in Cross River State? Addressing this gap will not only enhance the effectiveness of development communication but also contribute to the preservation and revitalization of the state's rich linguistic and cultural heritage.



Theoretical Framework

Participatory communication theory was primarily propounded by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire in 1970. His work, particularly outlined in "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" (1970), emphasised dialogue, conscientisation, and active participation as a means for marginalized communities to gain a voice and drive. This study which emphasises horizontal communication and stakeholder inclusion. Indigenous languages provide a cultural and linguistic bridge between development agents and local communities, thus aligning with participatory ideals. The theory is relevant to this study because Participatory Communication Theory underscores the importance of dialogue as a two-way process. Indigenous languages serve as a vital medium for this dialogue, enabling development agents and community members to interact on equal footing. Rather than imposing solutions, development practitioners can listen, learn, and co-create strategies with the people. This fosters mutual respect and ensures that development initiatives reflect local realities, values, and knowledge systems.

The reviewed literature supports the assertion that indigenous languages are central to effective development communication. However, despite documented benefits, challenges persist. This study builds on existing research by focusing specifically on the Cross River State context, aiming to highlight both the opportunities and barriers unique to the region.

Method

This study employed a qualitative research design, using semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions to gather data. This approach was chosen to allow for rich, in-depth insights into how indigenous languages are used in development communication and how they influence community participation. The research was conducted in Cross River State, located in the South-South region of Nigeria. The state is known for its linguistic diversity, with communities such as the *Efik*, *Bekwarra*, *Ejagham*, and *Yakurr* speaking distinct indigenous languages. The estimated population of Cross River State as of 2024, according to National population census is 5,100,129. This population comprised of community members, development communicators, health workers, agricultural extension officers, residents and local leaders in Cross River State. The language cluster used-*Efik*, *Bekwarra*, *Ejagham* and *Yakurr* cut across communities in the state. A purposive sampling technique was used to select 30 participants across four tribes representing different linguistic groups. This is because the researcher, wanted to get people who can speak the language fluently and how it has been used for developmental projects in their communities or in the state..

Also, these four languages — *Efik*, *Bekwarra*, *Ejagham*, and *Yakurr* were purposively chosen because they represent the major linguistic zones of Cross River State and capture the state's socio-cultural and regional diversity. *Efik* is widely spoken and functions as a lingua franca in the southern part of the state; *Ejagham* is prevalent in the central zone and historically significant as one of the oldest indigenous languages; *Bekwarra* represents the northern linguistic community, known for its strong grassroots communication culture; while *Yakurr* covers the central highland areas characterised by rich oral traditions.

Selecting these four ensured that the study reflected the linguistic balance and cultural inclusivity of the state, thus strengthening the validity and representativeness of the findings. The study ensured the validity and trustworthiness of its instruments through several qualitative research strategies aimed at enhancing credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was established through the use of semi-structured interviews, which provided flexibility for participants comprising development practitioners and community leaders to express their views in depth and within their own contextual realities. This was further strengthened through triangulation, as data obtained from interviews were cross-checked with findings from document reviews, including policy documents, local radio broadcasts, and NGO communication materials. Dependability was maintained by using a consistent interview guide



across all participants, ensuring uniformity in the themes explored while still allowing room for probing and clarification. To enhance confirmability, the researcher carefully documented all stages of the research process, including detailed field notes and verbatim transcriptions of interviews, thereby minimising personal bias. Transferability was achieved by providing a rich and detailed description of the study context in Cross River State, enabling other researchers to assess the applicability of the findings to similar environments. Additionally, the research instruments were subjected to expert review to ensure clarity, relevance, and alignment with the study objectives.

Data collection for the study was carried out over a period of four to six weeks, allowing sufficient time for in-depth engagement with participants and comprehensive document analysis. The semi-structured interviews were conducted primarily through face-to-face interactions to foster rapport and encourage open communication; however, telephone and virtual platforms were also utilised where physical access was not feasible. Each interview session lasted between thirty and sixty minutes and was audio-recorded with the consent of the participants to ensure accuracy in data capture. In parallel, document review involved the systematic collection and examination of relevant materials such as government policy documents, NGO publications, and transcripts of local radio broadcasts, which were sourced from institutional archives, media organisations, and development agencies operating within the study area.

The data collected were analysed using thematic analysis, a method well-suited for identifying patterns and meanings within qualitative data. All interviews were first transcribed verbatim, after which the researcher engaged in repeated reading to gain familiarity with the content. This was followed by a coding process, where significant statements and ideas were labelled and categorised. These codes were then organised into broader themes reflecting key issues such as language preference, accessibility, cultural relevance, and community participation. The themes were subsequently interpreted in line with the study objectives and the framework of Participatory Communication Theory, allowing for a nuanced understanding of how indigenous languages function within development communication in Cross River State.

Ethical considerations were strictly adhered to throughout the study, particularly given the involvement of human participants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection commenced, with each individual being fully informed about the purpose of the research, the procedures involved, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and all personal identifiers were excluded from the final report to protect their identities. Consent was also sought for audio recording, and all data collected were securely stored and used solely for academic purposes. Participation was entirely voluntary, and no form of coercion or undue influence was exerted on any participant, thereby upholding the ethical integrity of the research process.

Findings

This section presents and discusses data obtained from semi-structured interviews with development practitioners, local government officials, and community leaders, as well as a review of relevant documents, local radio programmes, and NGO communication materials. The focus of the analysis is the use and significance of indigenous languages particularly *Efik*, *Ejagham*, *Yakkur*, and *Bekwarra* in development communication within Cross River State, Nigeria. Findings are presented descriptively and supported by relevant excerpts from interviews and textual materials, followed by interpretive discussion linking the data to existing theories and literature on development communication.

Significance of Indigenous Languages in Development Communication in Cross River State

Findings from semi-structured interviews reveal a widespread belief among respondents that indigenous languages remain central to effective communication and development practice in Cross River



State. Across all study areas Calabar (Efik), Ikom (Ejagham), Yakkur (Ugep), and Ogoja (Bekwarra) participants emphasised that local languages are the most credible and relatable media for transmitting messages about development programmes.

A development practitioner in Calabar South explained that “when we speak to people in Efik about sanitation or waste management, they listen more attentively and are willing to take action, because they feel it is their own people talking to them, not government outsiders.” Similarly, an agricultural extension officer in Ikom stated that using Ejagham in farmer education sessions enhances comprehension and participation: “When we explain planting intervals or fertilizer use in Ejagham, they understand the technicalities better and can apply them on their farms.”

Document analysis supports these observations. Local radio programmes such as Uforo Efik (“Efik Progress”) and Nka Ufok Ejagham (“Ejagham Household Talk”) regularly address health, sanitation, and agricultural themes using proverbs, idioms, and folktales familiar to the local audience. These programmes integrate indigenous linguistic elements to create emotional resonance and cultural relevance. The findings confirm that indigenous languages are not merely communication tools but also vehicles of cultural meaning, identity, and social cohesion. Data gathered from semi-structured interviews across Calabar, Ikom, Yakkur, and Ogoja reveal a consistent pattern: indigenous languages play a central role in shaping how development messages are received, understood, and acted upon. Respondents across the four study areas strongly indicated that communication delivered in Efik, Ejagham, Yakkur, and Bekwarra is more effective than messages conveyed in English, particularly at the community level. Participants explained that local languages create a sense of familiarity and trust, which encourages greater attention and openness to development messages. In Calabar South, a development practitioner noted that when sanitation and waste management campaigns are communicated in Efik, community members respond more positively. According to the respondent, the use of the local language makes the message feel more personal and less like an external imposition, thereby increasing the likelihood of behavioural change.

In Ikom, similar observations were made in the agricultural sector. An extension officer reported that farmers demonstrate better understanding of technical information—such as planting methods, spacing, and fertiliser application—when it is explained in Ejagham. The use of the indigenous language allows farmers to grasp details more easily and ask relevant questions, leading to improved participation during training sessions and more accurate application of knowledge on their farms.

Findings from Yakkur and Ogoja further reinforce this pattern. Respondents in these areas emphasised that development initiatives communicated in Yakkur and Bekwarra respectively tend to attract higher levels of engagement. Community members are more willing to contribute during discussions, share their experiences, and adopt recommended practices when communication occurs in their native languages. In addition to interviews, analysis of local media content highlights the importance of indigenous languages in everyday development communication. Radio programmes broadcast in Efik and Ejagham were found to incorporate culturally grounded expressions such as proverbs, idioms, and storytelling techniques. These elements not only make the content more engaging but also help to simplify complex issues related to health, agriculture, and sanitation. Listeners are able to connect new information with familiar cultural knowledge, which enhances both understanding and retention. The data indicate that indigenous languages function as more than just tools for conveying information. They serve as channels through which meaning is negotiated within familiar cultural frameworks. Their use fosters inclusivity, strengthens community identity, and encourages active participation in development initiatives. Respondents consistently linked the use of local languages with increased trust, better comprehension, and higher levels of community involvement. The findings therefore suggest that development communication efforts in Cross River State are more effective when rooted in indigenous linguistic



contexts. Messages delivered in local languages are not only better understood but are also more likely to inspire collective action and sustained engagement within communities.

In Cross River State, the use of Efik, Ejagham, Yakkur, and Bekwarra ensures that messages are not lost in translation or distorted by linguistic distance.

The significance of indigenous languages thus extends beyond comprehension to the realm of empowerment. When communities hear development messages in their own tongue, they are more likely to perceive such initiatives as inclusive and relevant. This explains why radio programs and outreach campaigns conducted in indigenous languages often record higher participation rates than those conducted in English. The data therefore suggest that effective development communication in Cross River State must be anchored in local linguistic and cultural contexts.

Use of Indigenous Languages in Development Communication in Cross River State

Analysis of interview responses and textual materials shows that indigenous languages are actively used in both formal and informal communication settings across Cross River State. Participants consistently emphasised that the use of local languages strengthens message delivery and enhances community engagement. In formal development activities such as health sensitisation, agricultural extension, and environmental campaigns, respondents noted that government agencies and NGOs rely heavily on translators and local facilitators. A health worker in Calabar explained: *“If we go to the communities speaking only English, many people will not follow. But once the town announcer speaks Efik, everybody pays attention and comes out.”* Another participant involved in immunisation campaigns added: *“The mothers understand better when we explain in their language. They even ask questions without fear.”* NGO representatives also highlighted the importance of indigenous languages in reaching vulnerable groups. A field officer working on gender-based violence interventions stated: *“When we use Yakkur or Efik, the women relax. They talk freely because they feel you are one of them.”* Similarly, another respondent noted: *“Our posters may be in English, but when we explain them in the local language, that is when the real communication happens.”*

In informal contexts, indigenous languages were reported to dominate everyday interactions and community decision-making. A village head in Yakkur Local Government Area explained: *“All our meetings are in Yakkur. If you speak English, some people will keep quiet, but when you use our language, everyone contributes.”* Another community member added: *“Development discussions make more sense when they are in the language we use at home.”* Radio content analysis further revealed deliberate use of indigenous languages to simplify complex topics. A broadcaster in Ogoja noted: *“We mix Bekwarra and small English so people can understand things like loans or farming techniques. If we speak only English, many listeners will switch off.”* These voices collectively show that indigenous languages function as practical and trusted channels of communication across different levels of society. However, respondents also pointed out that their use is not always systematic. As one practitioner observed: *“Sometimes we use local languages depending on the project or funding. There is no fixed policy guiding it.”*

Challenges Facing the Development of Indigenous Languages in Cross River State

Interview data reveal several challenges affecting the sustained use and development of indigenous languages. A recurring concern among participants is the declining proficiency among younger generations. A community leader in Ikom lamented: *“Our children now prefer Pidgin and English. Even in the market, they don’t speak Ejagham well again.”* Another respondent echoed this concern: *“If nothing is done, the next generation may not even understand these languages properly.”* Participants also



identified the lack of standardised writing systems and learning materials as a major barrier. A teacher in Yakkur noted: *"We don't have enough books in Yakkur. It is difficult to teach or even write properly in the language."* Similarly, another respondent explained: *"Efik is better developed, but for languages like Ejagham, we still struggle with consistency."*

Media practitioners highlighted institutional and financial constraints. A radio producer in Calabar stated: *"We want to produce more programmes in local languages, but funding is a serious problem."* Another broadcaster added: *"There are not enough trained presenters who can handle both English and indigenous languages professionally."*

NGO workers also pointed out challenges related to translation quality. One participant explained: *"Most times we depend on volunteers to translate. Sometimes the meaning changes, especially for technical messages."* These responses indicate that while indigenous languages are widely valued, structural challenges-ranging from generational shifts to lack of resources limit their effective and sustained use.

Using Indigenous Languages to Promote Development in Cross River State

Participants unanimously expressed the view that indigenous languages have strong potential to improve development outcomes if properly supported and utilised. Development practitioners emphasised the need for training and institutional support. One respondent suggested: *"Government should train people who can communicate professionally in our languages. It will make development programmes more effective."* Another added: *"We need community reporters and translators who understand both the language and the message."* Community leaders highlighted the importance of integrating cultural elements into communication strategies. A traditional leader explained: *"Our proverbs and stories carry wisdom. If you use them, people will understand and remember better."* Another participant noted: *"When messages come through songs or folktales, people take them seriously because it connects with our culture."* Radio practitioners also confirmed the effectiveness of culturally grounded communication. One broadcaster stated: *"When we use humour and local expressions, listeners enjoy the programme and learn at the same time."*

Younger respondents pointed to the growing role of digital media. A content creator in Calabar explained: *"We now create short videos in Efik and Pidgin to talk about sanitation and relationships. People watch and share them easily."* Another added: *"Social media can help revive our languages if we use it well."* Overall, participants stressed that indigenous languages can drive inclusive and participatory development when properly integrated into communication strategies. As one respondent concluded: *"If development must reach the people, it must speak their language."* These findings show that beyond their communicative function, indigenous languages provide a foundation for engagement, understanding, and collective action within communities across Cross River State.

Discussion

The field findings from Cross River State show that indigenous languages significantly enhance the reception, comprehension, and uptake of development messages. This aligns with recent research showing that participatory communication, characterised by two-way dialogue and local involvement, leads to better engagement and empowerment in development projects (Gebeyehu & Shiferaw, 2023; Cardey et al., 2024). In the Ghanaian context, community radio often broadcasting in local languages was found to be a key platform for participatory development communication, enabling communities to voice concerns and participate in decision-making processes (Diedong & Dzisah, 2023), just as respondents in Cross River preferred Efik, Ejagham, Yakkur, and Bekwarra for sanitation or agricultural messaging.



Several recent studies confirm that language influences not only understanding but also *acceptance* of development communication. For example, research in Nigeria and South Africa found that indigenous language messages shaped audience comprehension and acceptance of COVID-19 vaccine information (Fadipe, Salawu & Ogundeyi, 2024). Similarly, our respondents noted that farmers better understood technical details about fertiliser application when communicated in their native tongue evidence of how indigenous language bridges the gap between *message intent and audience interpretation*. Participatory communication theory foregrounds *meaningful engagement* where communities co-construct understanding rather than passively receive information (Cardey et al., 2024). This framework explains why respondents felt more attentive and open when addressed in their local languages; the shared linguistic context increases agency, reduces distance, and fosters trust

The study's evidence that indigenous languages are utilised in both formal government-led outreach and informal community deliberations reflects the broader literature on communication and rural development. Research from Tolon District in Ghana underscores the role of indigenous communication systems as sites for cultural construction and information dissemination, which enables rural communities to more effectively participate in development processes (Abdulai et al., 2024). Likewise, the emerging role of digital technologies in preserving and promoting indigenous languages suggests hybrid communicative approaches — combining traditional oral forms and new media — can strengthen engagement (Ajani et al., 2024). These findings align closely with the observations from Cross River State, where radio, interpersonal dialogue, and participatory language use converge to support development initiatives.

Across Africa, indigenous languages face pressures from dominant languages like English due to colonial legacies and modern economic systems (Wildsmith-Cromarty, Reilly, & Kamdem, 2023). This trend is echoed in Cross River State, where younger generations reportedly favour English or Pidgin, contributing to declining proficiency in native languages. The scholarship points out that without institutional support, language marginalisation undermines participatory communication and access to information (Wildsmith-Cromarty et al., 2023). Furthermore, limited resources for training, media production, and language planning constrain the effective use of indigenous language- a challenge recognised in multiple African contexts. Respondents' calls for systematic training of communicators and deliberate policy support resonate with the participatory communication emphasis on *capacity building and institutionalisation* (Cardey et al., 2024). Research also suggests that engagement with digital media can revitalise indigenous languages and knowledge systems, expanding channels for community participation (Ajani et al., 2024). Similarly, radio programmes tailored to local languages as evidenced in North-Central Nigeria have been shown to influence adoption of agricultural practices and create feedback mechanisms between broadcasters and audiences (Adeyeye & Salawu, 2025).integrating indigenous languages into development communication aligns with contemporary evidence showing that *culturally anchored, participatory approaches lead to more inclusive, responsive, and sustainable outcomes*.

Conclusion

This study examined the significance, use, challenges, and potential of indigenous languages—*Efik, Ejagham, Yakkur, and Bekwarra* in development communication within Cross River State. The findings demonstrate that indigenous languages remain vital tools for participatory and inclusive communication. They promote better understanding, trust, and ownership of development initiatives among rural and semi-urban populations.

Evidence from interviews and document reviews revealed that when development messages are delivered in local languages, they resonate more strongly with target communities and result in higher levels of



engagement. Indigenous languages also serve as cultural carriers, preserving traditional knowledge, values, and social cohesion that are essential for sustainable development. However, despite their significance, the study found several challenges constraining the development and systematic use of indigenous languages in formal communication. These include the erosion of language proficiency among youth, lack of standardized orthographies for some languages, inadequate funding, limited training for indigenous language communicators, and weak policy implementation.

Indigenous languages in Cross River State are powerful yet underutilised instruments of development. Harnessing them effectively requires deliberate institutional support, community participation, and creative integration into modern communication channels. Sustainable development in the state can only be achieved when people are informed, consulted, and mobilized in the languages they understand and identify with.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. The Cross River State Government should formally integrate indigenous languages into its communication and development policies. This includes making local language use mandatory in rural health campaigns, agricultural extension services, and civic education.
2. Linguists, universities, and cultural organisations should collaborate to develop standardised orthographies, dictionaries, and written materials in Ejagham, Yakur, and Bekwarra. This will support literacy, translation accuracy, and long-term preservation.
3. Media houses, NGOs, and government agencies should organise regular training for broadcasters, translators, and community information officers in indigenous language communication and translation skills.
4. The state government and private media organisations should allocate specific funding for the production of indigenous-language radio and television programmes, including community-based dramas, talk shows, and public service announcements.

Acknowledgements: We acknowledge the contributions of scholars whose published works and reports enriched in this study.

Funding: No funding has been received for this research.

Conflict of Interest: In light of the present study, the authors of the manuscript have no financial or non-financial conflict of interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

How to Cite: Ntui, L.M., Edadi, D.I. & Abang, I.O. (2026). Select indigenous languages used in development communication in Cross River State. *Audrezara Journal of Communication and Social Research*, 2(1), 193-202. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19941571>

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