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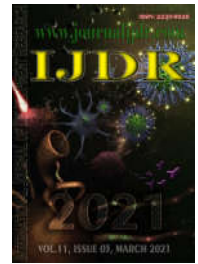
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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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## STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY CAPACITY FOR IMPROVED HEALTHY LIVING DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN RIVERS STATE, NIGERIA

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### ABSTRACT

This paper investigated ways of strengthening community capacity for healthy living during COVID-19 pandemic in Rivers State. The divine ability theory and value free approach were adopted in the study. Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and interviews were the major instrument for data collection. The findings of the study revealed the factors responsible for poor attitudes to healthy living especially during the pandemic to include political gimmick by government, closure of businesses, price escalations, restriction of movement and instability among others. The study further revealed that ways of strengthening community capacity for improved healthy living include campaigns, sensitization and seminar among others. The study concluded that there is need to step up efforts towards addressing the challenges of strengthening community capacity for improved healthy living by providing funds and the required expertise. Based on these findings, it was recommended among others that adequate attention should be given to capacity building programmes for healthy living style and disease control among people and improvement of the health system through the provision of modern health infrastructures should top the priority of government policies.

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## INTRODUÇÃO

The world in various occasions have been confronted with different categories of viral diseases especially those that affect the respiratory tracts such as flu, syncytial virus infection, parainfluenza virus infection, severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) which effects were very devastating on human lives and his environment. Currently, the world is facing another viral attack known as the novel corona virus or officially code named as COVID-19. The out-break of the virus was experienced at the last quarter of 2019 in Wuhan city of Hubei region of China and has rapidly spread to most nations of the world. However, the first confirmed case in Nigeria was on February 27<sup>th</sup> 2020, when an Italian citizen tested positive in Lagos State for the virus and since then it has gradually spread to other States of the federation. The first confirmed case in Rivers State was a female model who returned from one of the infected countries on March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2020 and the number of confirmed cases as at 26<sup>th</sup> November, 2020 in the state has risen to 2916, Recoveries-2758 and Deaths-59 (<https://covid-19.ncdc.gov.ng>) and National Primary Health Care Development Agency Training Manual (NPHCDA, 2020). Although, the novel coronavirus is described as a variant respiratory disease which symptoms are manifested in severe cold,

dry cough, sneezing and difficulties in breathing. It is a kind of disease that is known to be very contagious and commonly affect the upper or lower region of the respiratory tract, though it has been shrouded with some forms of complex controversies among eminent scholars. But, due to the increasing cases of the disease the World Health Organization finally declared it a global pandemic on the January 30<sup>th</sup> 2020 and outlined some protocols to be observed by people in order to break the chain of person-to-person transmission of the disease. It is also argued that COVID-19 is an airborne disease owing to the fact that the virus has a weak nature that makes it difficult to be sustained in the air for a long time but this has not been generally accepted by some medical practitioners and the public (Peter, 2020, Balkhair, 2020 and Mohammed, Abdul, & Midhat, 2020) and in view of the novelty of the virus the Nigerian Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) outlined some safety guidelines for people in order to avoid contracting the disease. These protocols as noted included initial lock down or staying at home, social distancing, regular washing of the hands or the use of hand sanitizers, wearing of mask and decontaminations. Some other guidelines as provided in Jimoh, Aminu, Kolo, Ogundairo, Akinyele & Danjibo (2020) included isolations of returnees to the country who are symptomatic within 14 days of arrival; person who had contact with confirmed cases and develop symptoms within 14 days of contact; those having COVID-19 related symptoms of unknown cases and persons residing

in areas with a moderate or high prevalence of COVID-19. These guidelines are provided to assist people adjust to new lifestyles in a world that is ravaged by novel coronavirus. Apart from the guidelines, Piwat, Pakara & Pratchayapong (2020) explained the following simple but straight forward principles of using COVID against COVID-19 as thus:

- **Contact with Cares:** It is advised that people should use the social media to stay connected to their loved ones. Non-physical interactions with people will actually assist in reducing the rate of spreading the infections.
- **Organize Healthy daily Routines:** It is expected that the prolonged lockdown and physical distancing resulted in inactive life styles where people spend much of their time in the social media without considering healthy activities or exercises. The solution therefore required that daily routines exercises be maintained at home to keep fitness and maintain healthy life style during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **Viral Protection:** It is essential that people seek for ways to improve on the guidelines against the lethal virus. By implications uphold social /physical distancing, wearing of mask outside the home, avoiding hands to facial, regular washing of hands using recommended soap for at least twenty seconds or alternatively regular use of alcohol-based sanitizer as well as practicing proper respiratory hygiene and coughing etiquettes.
- **Information Screening:** Information dissemination without authentication is a big issue in our modern world where different kind of media exist. The media has also made it impossible to hide information from the public domain. Therefore, information should be properly screened to verify the true situation of things before reporting or making it known to the public. On the other hand, the people should be on their guard to verify information reported from the media before accepting it to avoid consuming fake news especially from the social media.
- **Diagnostic Test:** Carrying out regular diagnostic test at this time is very imperative to determine rate of infected persons and ways of commencing treatment at both local hospitals and alternate health care units to reduce people apprehension over the disease. This also demands that people's temperature be checked at least two or three times daily at the range of 36.0 and 37.5 degrees Celsius and also to be very alert for symptoms of COVID-19. The people are also enjoined to avoid self-medication when they develop relative symptoms of the virus rather should they seek prompt medical attention at the right places.

Based on these revelations, the need to strengthen community capacity cannot be overstated in stepping up awareness and participation of the people to improve healthy living during COVID-19 pandemic in Rivers State. Strengthening community capacity will suffice to address myths and poor attitudes towards combating the pandemic.

**Problem statement:** People's experiences as observed during the COVID-19 pandemic in Rivers State caused anxiety and related death of many persons at the eve of the spread of the virus. This added the fact that most people were not adequately exposed to COVID-19 guidelines or information, thereby resulting in anxiety, depression and other health challenges. Most people do not believe that COVID-19 is real, others do not go to hospital to get right treatment when they are sick for fear of being tested for coronavirus. Many others use all sorts of local herbs to treat various ailments without being sure of what the cause of the ailment is. This situation calls for strategies to strengthen the capacity of community members in Rivers State to assist them in improving their health conditions which will reduce death rate and increase their life span. It is against this background that this paper examined ways of strengthening community capacity for healthy living during COVID-19 pandemic in Rivers State.

**Aim and Objectives:** The aim of this study is to examine ways of strengthening community capacity for improved healthy living during COVID-19 pandemic in Rivers State. The specific objectives are to:

1. Identify the factors responsible for poor attitude to healthy living during COVID-19 pandemic in Rivers State;
2. Determine the ways of strengthening community capacity for improved healthy living during COVID-19 pandemic in Rivers State.
3. Identify the challenges of strengthening community capacity for improved healthy living during COVID-19 pandemic in Rivers State.

### Research Questions

The following research questions are posed:

1. What are the factors responsible for poor attitude to healthy living during COVID-19 pandemic in Rivers State?
2. What are the ways of strengthening community capacity for improved healthy living during COVID-19 pandemic in Rivers State?
3. What are the challenges of strengthening community capacity for improved healthy living during COVID-19 pandemic in Rivers State?

**Community capacity:** Frank and Smith in Ugwu and Adekola (2012) defined capacity as the ways and means needed to do what has to be done. Furthermore, Frank and Smith posited that all people and communities have ways and means of doing things. This suggests that capacity is inherent in people since community is about people. Community capacity therefore, is the way and manner community members do the things needed to be done. According to Flint (2013) community capacity is the ability of community members to make a difference over time and across different issues. This shows that capacity is not a one-time thing nor something that can disappear once it is acquired rather it is continually created to improve on attitude, skill, behaviour, characters and values among people. It also helps people work together as a means of addressing community issues for improved conditions of living. The definition considers element of collaboration between and among community members as a yardstick to the realization of individual as well as collective potentials. Community capacity is also seen as the combined influence of a community's obligation, assets and talents that can be deployed by an individual or an institution to strengthen skills that will adequately address community problems. This also shows that a person or institution must first of all develop capacity in and for themselves before it can help to strengthen capacity in others since it is clear that they draw on commitment, resources and skills from those within and around the community to improve upon opinions, commitment, information and organization of the people to positively work together at solving community issues (Fawcett, 2013).

Basically, Atkinson and Willis (2006) referred to community capacity as offering local solutions to local problems which enable communities to deal with problems, ultimately without relying on external resources. They further note that community capacity refers to series of grassroots process by which communities: organize and plan together, develop healthy lifestyle options, empower themselves to reduce poverty and suffering, create employment and economic opportunities and achieve social, economic, cultural and environmental goals together. The definition of community capacity is subsumed in the conceptualization of community development. Community development is seen as an organized and planned initiatives of people towards ameliorating their living conditions for which they gain self-direction and reliance. Furthermore, community capacity has to do with the inherent strengths, skills and abilities (or 'assets') within the people while community development posits an informal and open-ended in practice (Wendel, Burdine, Mcleroy, Alaniz & Felix, 2009).

**COVID-19 Pandemic in Rivers state:** Rivers State is one of the multi-ethnic and cultural states of Nigeria, making most of its communities to deeply share common affinities, attitudes, beliefs and ideas, especially in terms of managing health issues and disease control. The implication of this assertion is that the people are exposed to different forms of cultural practices which may be considered at a time when COVID-19 is rampaging the world to be obnoxious to improving healthy living. COVID-19, according to Peter (2020) is a recombinant virus of SARS-CoV and HIV origins. The two species of viruses had distinct and distance pedigrees, and because of the different space and time of their existence, their recombinant had never appeared in a natural setting. Therefore, 2019-nCoV could not be a product of nature, but rather a product of human genetic engineering. The emergence of coronavirus-associated diseases (SARS and MERS) inflicted global challenges to public health systems. SARS-CoV-2 (the causative agent for coronavirus disease COVID-19) is the latest addition to this growing list of unwelcomed novel agents. The World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a public health emergency of international concern on 30 January and a pandemic on 11 March 2020 (Balkhair, 2020). Mohammed et al (2020) considered the life cycle of a coronavirus in four phases: (i) entry and attachment (ii) replicase protein expression (iii) replication and transcription (iv) assemble and release. However, the interaction between the 'S' protein and its receptors marks initial attachment of the virion to the host cell. The interaction of the 'S' protein and receptor, according to Mohammed et al is the primary determinant for a coronavirus to infect the host and it also governs the tissue tropism of the virus. The virus is commonly transmitted through the contact of infected person or surface and has incubation period of 14 days. On this basis, the Rivers state government responded very quickly and decisively to the implementation of Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) directives to airport screening, hand washing, wearing of face mask, social distancing, and stay-at-home lockdown measures among others. These measures assisted in keeping the number of cases lower than those of Lagos, and Abuja. Yet, these measures are very unsustainable to strengthen capacity for improved healthy living in the state.

**Theoretical Framework:** The divine ability theory as contained in the theological view and the value free system approach as propounded by Wendel, et al in 2009 were adopted in this study. Divine ability theory is based on the premises that people need to learn in order to improve their attitudes, characters, behaviours, skills and values among others. The theory is strongly supported by scriptural (biblical) view in 2 Timothy 2:15 which emphasized the need to learn so as to have the correct ability to teach or explain the truth to the people. The value free system approach on the other hand, allows the possibility for a community to engage in capacity building activities that will enhance the well-being of the people. This theory is related to the study because of the emphasis to strengthen community capacity for improved healthy living during COVID-19 pandemic in the state.

## METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in the three senatorial districts of Rivers State. One local government area each was selected from the senatorial districts thus – Obio/Akpor from Rivers East senatorial district, Bonny from Rivers West, and Oyigbo from the Rivers South-East. Apart from the perceived level of prevalence of COVID-19 pandemic in these local government areas, the lockdown and response to the protocols were also more stringent. The major instrument used for data collection were the Focus Group Discussions (FGD) and interviews of participants from the respective communities in the purposively selected local government areas of the state. Three focus group discussions comprising 13, 11 and 13 participants in Rumuomasi, Bonny Island and Iriebe in Obio/Akpor, Bonny and Oyigbo Local Government Areas (LGAs) respectively were conducted. The discussions and interviews were simultaneously done based on ways of strengthening community capacity for healthy living during COVID-19 pandemic in the state. The

researchers were assisted by one community health worker from each of the local government areas covered in the study who carried out an extensive recorded discussion with participants in attempt to extract vital information related to the objectives of the study. Ten persons were randomly interviewed via telephone by researchers to sample their opinions on the subject matter. At the end, opinions of all the participants were adequately analysed.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

**Response on the Factors responsible for Poor Attitude to Improve Healthy Living during COVID-19 Pandemic:** The participants from the selected communities of the three local government areas studied shared similar views on most of the issues. Most of the respondents are of the opinion that the reason for improved community capacity especially in the era of pandemic such as COVID-19 is to enable people's inputs, volunteerism, and participation to reduce the spread, impact and death rate from the pandemic. They also noted that majority of the people in the area especially in the remote places do not have access to adequate information on the mode of transmissions, precautions and treatment of the COVID-19 pandemic. Another reason adduced during the discussion by participants to strengthen community capacity is the fact that the people have a very poor attitude to the observance of the COVID-19 guidelines, perhaps this is due to the measures taken by government to address the issues of the pandemic which was in some inimical posture against the people. On the other hand, the issue of COVID-19 was also over amplified to create the opportunity for people to suspect some political gimmick by government of the day in the whole scenario. This is also obvious in the manner in which palliatives were distributed to the people. The palliative materials were either not enough or diverted by some government officials constituted to distribute them to the people to cushion the effects of the COVID-19 protocols. It was also gathered that some traditional rulers and grassroot politicians connived to entrench fraud against the people during the distribution of these palliative materials. Some of these palliatives were also shared based on community or party affiliations which assisted in arousing negative attitudes towards the whole scenario. Participants also, noted the negative impacts created by the pandemic in changing the course of socio-economic cultural and political lifestyles of the people. Markets in the state were recently reopened with gradual economic recovery as a result of long-time closure of public places.

**Ways of Strengthening Community Capacity for Improved Healthy Living during COVID-19 Pandemic:** Based on the interviews and discussions conducted, it was gathered that adequate attention is needed in areas such as campaign, sensitization, seminars and workshops, community health education and participation and government support among others to address poor attitude of the people in order to strengthen capacity for improved healthy living especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Details of the outcome of the interview and discussions are outlined thus:

**Campaign and Sensitization:** One of the participants in the interview added that the overall importance of carrying out door to door campaign and sensitization for the people in order to alleviate the perceived poor attitudes of the people on safety protocols cannot be over emphasized. These findings are in tandem with the divine ability theory which emphasizes on continuous learning to improve attitudes, characters, behaviours, skills and values among others and to correctly teach or explain the truth to the people. Also, respondents strongly emphasized on the improvement of health information system. The health information system is the process of gathering, storing and managing of health data of individual patient electronically in a manner that support medical decisions without encumbrances. However, the Nigerian health information system is abysmally underdeveloped.

**Seminars and Workshops:** It was also revealed that the role of conducting seminars and workshops in a time like this cannot be

overemphasized. This is because critical issues relating to human survival are easily taught or discussed in a small group during conferences, training or other meeting. The forum will also give room to question and answer that addresses doubt of participants but that is not the case in this pandemic era because of the protocols to be followed. On this basis many individuals especially in the remote areas are not aware of how to improve, where to improve and what to improve during the pandemic. Other programmes that were used to improve attitude, information, knowledge, behaviour, skill, value and capacity to healthy lifestyles of those communities and the general public to solve their health needs as explained by respondents are as follows:

**Community Volunteerism and Participation:** The use of local human resources to convey information or knowledge. This is very important process because it allows the local participants to connect with new experiences that will assist in solving personal problems as well as that of their communities. Volunteers and participants in capacity building process are often time exposed to new horizon of knowledge and information that can lead to solving related health issues of mankind.

**Health Education:** Periodic sensitization and education of the communities on current issues for healthy living is paramount if the target to strengthen community capacity is to be achieved. Community health education at this point is important as the process of learning that promote fitness and disease prevention mechanism.

**Use of Media:** The role of the media in ensuring that people are adequately informed on varieties of issues cannot be overemphasized. The media as a means of mass communication and education, informs the people through news, music, movies, interviews and discussions of varieties of issues. The need to air the news or programmes in the language the people would understand was also stressed.

**Government Supports to the People:** The sincerity of government towards the welfare of the citizens is capable of engendering positive attitudes to government policies and programmes. Therefore, government as obligated is meant to provide encouragement and supports to the citizenries in a time of natural or man-made disasters. These could be in the forms of providing temporary relief materials or palliatives to cushion the effects of perceived miserable situation of the citizens. A government that cares adequately for her citizen is capable of attracting positive attitudes of the people without coarse for policies' implementations.

**Good Community Leadership:** Leadership by example, effective management of human and material resources, team building, peace building, community development and other areas that promote good governance are meant to be the lifestyle of community leadership. With these the leaders and the led especially the young ones will emulate good leadership style that will boost capacity to improve healthy living in the society. Developing good community leadership also entails working with and building on the existing strengths of the community (Ugwu, 2019 & Patrick, 2013).

**Challenges of Strengthening Community Capacity for Improved Healthy Living Buring COVID-19 Pandemic:** On the challenges of strengthening community capacity for improved healthy living during COVID-19, respondents revealed that the concern for COVID-19 guidelines is one of the major issues, others are cost implications of community capacity programme, approaches of facilitators, inadequate supervision in the process and fear of being attacked among others.

**Concern for COVID-19 Guidelines:** The concern for physical distancing, wearing of mask and hand washing among others are some of factors discouraging commitment to participate in community capacity programmes. This is because, where some of these materials are not sufficiently provided, participants may not be allowed to participate in the programme. Another challenge is the

guideline that stipulated number of persons to be allowed for any given congregation of people to avoid physical contact. On this basis, the programme is divided in sessions with many persons getting fed up waiting for their set time. In so doing, the organizers or the facilitators of the programme may fail to reach the targeted audience.

**Cost Implications of Community Capacity Programmes:** It was also gathered that the cost implications of organizing community capacity programme at a time when government and other community stakeholders are complaining about economic losses as a result of COVID-19 pandemic is another challenge. The non-availability of funds to sustain and also to provide palliatives to participants as means of motivating them for pre- and post-community capacity experiences remain a very big issue to surmount.

**Approaches of Facilitators and Inadequate Supervision in the Process:** It was further noted by respondents that the approaches of facilitators in the process of community capacity, especially to resort to non-experts as an alternative means to facilitate learning for improved healthy living during pandemic is a challenge to interested members of the public, who may want to learn more about the pandemic in order to get related answers on how to improve their health status. Furthermore, inadequacies in organizing and supervising local facilitators in the process create room for non-ethical practices.

**Fear of being Attacked:** The experiences of people at the outbreak of the novel coronavirus showed that some were still very fresh in their memories. Therefore, many people would not like to participate in any public gathering for fear of being attacked or sanctioned for not observing COVID-19 protocols.

**Conclusion:** From the foregoing, the goal of the study is clearly established through the views of respondents on the subject matter. There is no doubt that concerted efforts have been made to improve people's skills, attitudes and knowledge. However, the inability to step up positive attitude for improved healthy living was adduced to government insensitivity in most areas of the people's lives. Therefore, strengthening community capacity for improved healthy living during covid-19 pandemic in the state demands more attention to campaign, door to door sensitization, seminars, training and involving the media and government support among others. Based on these findings, it is recommended that:

- Government and other stakeholders should pay adequate attention to capacity building programmes for healthy living style and disease control among the people.
- Efforts on the financial support and provision of palliatives should be improved by government to encourage people's adherence to safety protocols of reducing transmission and related death occasioned by the coronavirus.
- Improvement of the health care system through the provision of modern health infrastructures and facilities should top the priority of government policies.
- Community members should also make efforts to adhere strictly to safety protocols as stipulated by NCDC and other health institutions.

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