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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Community Participation in Project Planning, Management and Implementation:
Building the Foundation for Sustainable Development

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ABSTRACT

Participatory development paradigm has increasingly been associated with people and their aspirations to make decisions affecting their own lives. Central to these aspirations is their desire to plan and participate in the identification, planning and management of their needs without outside prescriptions. Community participation in project planning and management is essential in enhancing development at the basic community level, a critical for tool and sustainable development and a foundation for national development. Furthermore, it also promotes equity, legitimises decision-making processes, builds, strengthens self-determination and predisposes a people toward a more democratic behaviour and development. Using secondary data this paper assesses the importance of participatory development by the community in terms of project planning, management and evaluation; it evaluates its potential to achieve better management practices through the achievement of higher project completion rates and better prospects of ownership. The paper argues that participatory development has the propensity of achieving project sustainability and increased utilisation rate of the project by members of the community and sustained ownership. It concludes that national development cannot be achieved without partnership and active participation of other key stakeholders at the community level. Community members are important partners in national development and therefore, participation, ownership and sustainability of the projects has the multiplier effect of enhancing the overall development of the local community and contributing to the country's national development and economic growth. As Kenya implements the democratic decentralization of people's participation in development and decision-making process as reflected in the spirit of the new constitution, the study becomes even more significant because people will own and sustain the entire chain of development.

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INTRODUCTION

Participation is a concept that occupies a central place in development. Not so many programmes can succeed without applying the principles of participation. Today all government development programmes in all ministries apply participatory approaches which have not only increased interdisciplinary interest but have also exerted influence in social development policy and planning circles, both at micro and macro levels (Mulwa, 2008, p.13). Besides participation occupying a central role in development thinking and practice, all major development organizations including multi-lateral agencies like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have arrived at a near consensus that development cannot be sustainable and long-lasting unless people's participation is made central to the development process (Kumar, 2002, p. 23). Although this is a relatively new paradigm, its central motivation is people and their aspirations. It advocates that people's needs should be the primary purpose for any development planning and intervention, and that other developmental concerns should be secondary. Its emergence has changed and enriched people in development-thinking by empowering them, strengthening and re-defining their commitment to development.

The focus of this paper is to show how participation can be applied to better the living conditions of people and built their capacities to bring about desired change by legitimizing plans, actions and leadership. The primary concern is how development endeavours to

improve people's lives in developing their inherent potential for self-actualization to enable them assume responsibilities that go with it (Ibid:13-14). As a matter of fact, material development can no longer be seen as the primary motivation for development endeavours although it is a necessary 'dividend' of participatory development (Ibid: 14). Based on the experiences from the many development projects that have failed in many parts of the country, unless people are central actors in activities and programmes that affect their lives, the impact of such interventions would either be negative, irrelevant or insignificant as far as transforming people's lives is concerned (Ibid, 14).

The Origins of Participation

Participatory approaches to rural development fundamentally involve a painful process of change and calls for a change of attitudes and structures which were treasured and cherished by those in power (Mulwa, 2008, p.14). The new popularity of participatory approach has several origins; it is a concept that has been popularised in community development since the 1970s. The Integrated Rural Development (IRD) that dominated the development scene was its precursor and operated on the assumption that sectoral integration was imperative to check on the phenomenal dismal impact experienced then with community development initiatives. It was believed that integration, as opposed to the isolated action of various departments and sectors would lead to symbiotic effect thus enhancing efficiency (Ibid, 2004). According to Nici and Wright (1997, p. 2-5), this new thinking was as a result of the recognition that most development failures originated in attempts to impose

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standard top-down programmes and projects on diverse local realities where they do not fit or meet the needs of the local people. The top-down approach believed that people were too ignorant and perhaps primitive to effectively discern and decide what was good and appropriate for them and as such were not expected to set up their own development priorities, rank them and identify the most felt need (Mulwa, 2008, p.15). Due to the top-down approach that had been adopted by most governments in developing countries for most of the projects they had initiated for its communities, sustainability as a key component for ensuring that communities owned the programme, continued suffering as long as development specialists kept doing things for the people (*Ibid*, 2008).

The top-down methodological approach employed then was responsible for the collapse of most community development projects such as dams, bridges, schools and even health facilities. Second, it arose out of concern for cost effectiveness; recognition that the more the local people do, the less capital costs are likely to be; preoccupation with sustainability and ideologically for some development professionals, the belief that it is right that people should be empowered and should have more command over their lives. Empowerment starts from an examination of how power is present in multiple and heterogeneous social relations (Nici and Wright, 1997, p. 8). In this relations people are exercising power by reproducing, changing or challenging systematic relations (*Ibid*: 8). It can be conceptualised as the capacity to manage one's own life, whether as an individual or as a community. This involves influencing and changing public policy that may adversely affect the freedom of choice towards becoming master of one's own destiny (Mulwa, 2008, p. 25). Participatory development paradigm therefore is meant to correct the inadequacies encapsulated in the top-down and modernisation and social welfare dispositions and practices that do not allow participation of stakeholder (Mulwa, 2004). Stakeholders such as opinion leaders, beneficiaries, women local leaders and the general local community all have a stake in whatever is invested in the locality. The previous development approach that excluded community members was responsible for the slow economic growth despite increased foreign aid which did not offer any solution to the deepening poverty within developing countries (*Ibid*, 2004). This was because local participation had been completely excluded and hence they did not invest their thinking in projects being put up.

Participation of community members in local projects therefore, has the potential to influence, challenge, change and modify local village economy for the benefit of all. In particular, if projects targeting the local poor are appropriately planned and effectively managed, they are likely to benefit and move from a level of dependency to that of self-reliance with the resultant effect of scaling down poverty. For this to be achieved, it requires participation of local people in needs identification; for instance, what are their most urgent needs? Have they ranked those needs in order of priority? Have they participated in ranking them? It also includes the need to participate in planning, management and evaluation of their programmes. One major limitation to this participation is political interference in the decision-making process. This is always done at the local or community level in which case people's decision-making is constrained.

Understanding Participatory Development

Participation is an important concept in development and because of its wide application it means different things to different people (Regional Partnership for Resource Development, 2009, p. 6-7). However, the way it is defined largely depends on the context and background in which participation is applied. As a matter of fact, participation includes people's involvement in the entire decision-making process, in implementation of programmes, their sharing in benefits of development and their involvement in efforts to evaluate such programmes (*Ibid*: 6). Furthermore, participatory development stands for partnership which is built upon the basis of dialogue among the various actors during which the agenda is jointly set, and local views and indigenous knowledge are deliberately sought and

respected. This implies negotiation rather than the dominance of a set agenda (*Ibid*: 6). It is the involvement by local populations in the creation, content and conduct of the programme or policy designed to change their lives and requires recognition and use of local capacities. It also avoids the imposition of priorities from outside. Participation is driven by a belief in the importance of entrusting citizens with the responsibility to shape their own future. The people have to be involved in the needs identification, they must be involved in prioritising and ranking of the needs and building a consensus around what they believe amounts to the problems facing the community. They should not be influenced to accept a need as a problem affecting them because it amounts to imposing a priority from outside.

Therefore, community participation is an active process by which beneficiaries or groups influence the direction and execution of a development project with a view to enhancing their well-being in terms of income, personal growth and self-reliance. Community members must own and control the process by making decisions as to its progress and design activities that will subsequently enable them achieve the desired goal. What gives real meaning to popular participation is the collective effort by the people concerned to pool their resources to attain their objectives. In this regard, participation is viewed as an active process in which the participants take initiatives and actions that are stimulated by their own thinking and by deliberations over which they exert effective control.

Although participation focuses on the active involvement of all stakeholders in the content of the programme, Bryant and White (1982) state that there are a number of levels of participation. They single out what they call "extractionist participation which emphasises the role of the government in the planning and implementation of development projects and activities, often with involuntary contribution to the project. This kind of approach to development is likely to fail because as Bergdall (1993, p. 7-8) states, it is supposed to contribute to the national development but people are not expected to take part in shaping it or criticising its content but are treated as objects, stripped of decision-making responsibilities regarding planning and their initiatives. This approach creates room for abuse of power. Authentic participation is the ideal model which seeks to empower the powerless towards assuming full responsibility over their destiny within their cultural and socio-economic spheres.

Participatory Needs Identification and Planning

Needs identification is an important stage in development at the grassroots level. Community development starts with the identification of a need or the realisation that there is a need. This identification and the sharing of the vision elicit a commitment from the people to continue with the process of community development to become a reality. This process is followed by group discussions and analysis. Such a discussion is aimed at understanding the problem, how it affects them and its extent. This shared understanding provides a solid foundation for identifying the problem and trying to find ways of solving it. It also helps to clarify the scope of the problem at hand and the resource available. The community is also able to set the objectives, goals and how the intended development will proceed (Mulwa, 2008). Therefore for any development to succeed there must be participation by stakeholders and beneficiaries. They must understand their needs, be able to prioritise and rank them according to the severity of the needs, they must understand how the problem affects them including their causes and effects. They must also be involved in assessing the options available to them given their resource base. Participatory needs identification by community members is important because once they collectively conceive a problem and prioritise it they then move it to the stage of appreciating its extent and legitimising the process of solving it. If they do not participate in needs identification, even if the need is identified with the assistance of the outside world they will not legitimise it. This leads to greater chances of stalling at the implementation stage.

Planning is also to any project being conceived. Planning is a communication process where people with different views and ideas share on how a desired situation should look like and how they are likely to get there and how to express these ideas together and reach a consensus (Chikati, 2009, p. 4-5). Chikati further states that through communication people can achieve the commitment necessary to sustain the decision taken by them. Planning therefore implies control of the process. For effective development to be realised, the community, which is the major beneficiary of the project, must be involved by use of project implementation committees to coordinate project planning and other aspects such as budgeting, resource identification, procurement and allocation (Mulwa, 2008, p. 18-20).

Participatory Management and Sustainability of Projects

According to Regional Partnership for Resource Development (2009, p.8), participatory development is an end because it initiates an empowerment process which allows those affected by the project to assume responsibility for designing initiatives, implementing them and maintaining high levels of project sustainability. It is a goal in itself and which can be expressed as an empowerment process of their acquiring the skills, knowledge and experience to take greater responsibility for their development (*Ibid*:8). Participative approaches depend on people and nothing happens or succeeds without their cooperation and involvement. Many development projects have stalled or collapsed as a result of lack of certain fundamental participatory processes involving people and because of these lapses management gaps emerge and threaten the survival of the projects and their fruition (Mulwa, 2008, p.13-16). Evidence from several cases show that availability of project funds alone is not a guarantee for the success of the project and by extension its sustainability. People's participation in management, monitoring and evaluation is important. The traditional community structures must be respected because they legitimise the project whether funded by the government of a Donor Agency. Their involvement in the management allows them to accept the project and hold the local leadership accountable for the funds being used and how the project quality shapes up.

Other scholars have stated that cultural factors are important in the success and sustainability of community projects. The relevance of a project to the cultural norms and taste of the local people should be established early to avoid unnecessary losses on projects which turn out to be white elephants. In addition to creating local committees at the conception stage, it is also important to involve them in the management of the project throughout the entire project life (Mulwa, 2008). If this is not done the development interventions from the external donors may fail to sustain the required level of development activity once support is withdrawn by the funding agencies (Kumar, 2002, p. 28). It has been argued that people's participation has many advantages. Chief among them are sustainability of the project, ownership of the process and the final product by members of a given community. When people participate and take control of the process it means that either the funding agency or the government has to relinquish some authority, power and control. Increased empowerment of people lead to increased capacity to manage processes, monitor, evaluate, make decisions and gain analytical ability to understand their own difficult situations and therefore increased agitation to be involved in all aspects of development (Kumar, 2002, p. 28).

More often, government agencies or ministries are unwilling to yield power to the local communities especially where development issues are concerned. Such reluctance may lead to decreased interest in development by the local people and therefore sustainability is likely to suffer. Furthermore, increased people's participation especially the interactive participation, has been known to generate increased expectations due to the involvement by the local people. However, this may not always be realised. Hence, most projects prefer to involve people only in the implementation stage despite the fact that

participation especially by self-mobilisation is an essential ingredient in development processes (*Ibid*:25).

Participatory management also involves projects needs identification. This is where people participate in identifying their felt needs and ranking them in the order of preference. If people are involved in this process, they are likely to own the process as their own and therefore manage it effectively. At this level, stakeholders identify and prioritize the core of the problems and their causes and effects (Regional Partnership for Resource Development 2009, p.54-55). Once the problem has been identified, people discuss it exhaustively before a consensus is built. The objective analysis is done and a possible solution worked out based on the cause effect relationship (*Ibid*:55). This leads to the planning stage. This is an important stage because finer details are discussed. The problem is discussed further by focussing on the budget, resource mobilisation, expected completion date, designing and costing of activities, implementation plan and schedule and wrap-up evaluation plan (*Ibid*, 2009, p.54).

During the implementation process all activities designed at the planning stage are actualised and implemented by the people. Responsibility for this process is participatory and therefore people-driven. The final stage in the programme is participatory evaluation which seeks to redistribute power in favour of the powerless and constitutes a process of devolution of power for decision-making and review of those decisions to the same people served by the project in question (Mulwa, 2008, p.15). It calls for the recognition and respect for local knowledge and experience of the people's ability to review and judge their own experience with a reasonable measure of objectivity (*Ibid*: 15). A project that has evolved through participatory processes of identification, planning and management should of necessity be appraised in the same spirit with the key stakeholders maintaining a key role throughout the process (*Ibid*:18). The stakeholders and beneficiaries representatives are therefore called upon to participate jointly in drawing up the Terms of Reference for the evaluation (*Ibid*: 18). The process ensures local ownership and commitment not only to the exercise and its outcome but more importantly, to the future of the programme evolution (*Ibid*: 18).

Obstacles to People's Participation

Participation does not take place in a vacuum but in a socio-political context. Kumar (2002, p.29) has identified three major obstacles to people's participation in project management. Structural obstacles were largely responsible for the atmosphere of passivity and dependence that prevails in rural communities and formed part of the centralised political systems which are not oriented towards people's participation. This type of situation is typified by a "top-down" development approach adopted by development initiatives like the Integrated Rural Development Programmes. However, local initiatives when taken at all were quite dismal and did not reflect the true self. Furthermore, the administrative structures that are control-oriented provide little significant space to local people to make their own decisions or control their resources. On the other hand, the social obstacles such as the mentality of dependency, the culture of silence, domination of the local elite or gender inequality militate against people's participation (*Ibid*: 2002). The implications of these omissions are that participatory as a process fails and the subsequent development of encouraging people's participation recommended.

According to Mulwa (2004), those rural communities have little or no organizational and managerial skills. This shortcoming is likely to expose the community members to intentional mismanagement and other forms of manipulations by the rural elite. This inability to plan and manage situations may contribute to the failure of the projects. Bergdall (1993) says the is made more complex by the fact that even though women form the bulk of community labour force for community projects they are often marginalised when it comes to access to information, decision-making and access to opportunities for capacity building.

The Benefits of People's Participation

Participation in projects by members of the community has major advantages. It allows people to build their capacities and identify and own the project. This leads to efficiency and sustainability. Kumar (2002, p.27-28) has identified a number of factors which he considers as benefits that come with participation of people in a programme. First, he states that participation ensures efficient utilisation of resources. People work together towards achieving their objectives. If the objective is to construct a bridge of a health centre then they are likely to move together towards that direction. Second, people's participation increases effectiveness; projects can be finalised within the time schedule; they can also carry out monitoring and evaluation and draw a progress report.

Participation also increases effectiveness by granting them a say in deciding the objectives and strategies in the project. Third, it reduces dependency and increases self-reliance. People would not always look at the government to solve all their problems. With active involvement and participation in the process of development, it is possible to break the mentality of dependency and utilise their own resources- both human and material on the basis of the decision taken by the people themselves and from the realisation that they have the solutions to their local problems. Third, peoples participation can be a potent way of ensuring the flow of the benefits to the beneficiaries. Furthermore, the cost-effective operations can ensure that resources are available for wider coverage of weaker sections of society. Generally, development interventions are funded either by the government or by external donor agencies. Experience has shown that development interventions from externally assisted projects fail to sustain the required level of development activity once funding has been withdrawn (Kumar, 2002, p.28). The involvement of the people and the utilization of local resources generates a sense of ownership over the development interventions by the local people (*Ibid*: 28).

Conclusions

Participatory development is therefore important to national development. First, participatory approach to development is an empowering process; it allows members to grow both professionally, physically and in the understanding of the dynamics of change and how to cope with it. Through this dynamics they are able to evolve as skilful people capable of taking up challenges facing them as a community. It also enhances their capacity to skilfully analyse issues and make appropriate decisions, manage time and organise a sequence of activities beneficial to the community.

Using these enhanced capacities, they are able to pool their synergies in building their own communities to systematically scale down poverty and contribute to regional and national development. This paper is particularly important to University students majoring Community Development. For the last one decade, Community development as a discipline, has become popular among students wishing to work with communities either as project managers or Change Agents in the wider field of community development. It therefore contributes some basic knowledge to their understanding of participatory development within the framework of national development. It also adds value to community leaders working with communities. The paper will therefore be of great benefit to the wider reading community.

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