



APPRECIATING THE CHALLENGE OF COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN NGO-LED DEVELOPMENT INTERVENTIONS: AN ANALYSIS OF SOME EXISTING LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have been a dominant participant in the development process throughout the world. Particularly in Africa, participation has assumed even greater relevance given the complementary, or occasionally supplementary role NGOs play to that of government in social development. It is widely conceived that for NGOs' presence to be hugely felt by the beneficiaries, there is the need to pay serious attention to the issue of participation by community members. There is a growing fear that without the active participation of community members in the development programs and projects of NGOs in Africa, it will be very difficult for them to achieve meaningful and sustained progress in the lives of the beneficiaries. Needless to indicate that the lack of clear definition of involvement of community members in the development activities of NGOs in Africa has led to uncontrolled, uncoordinated and ineffective development projects. This paper seeks to contribute to the discussions on the issue of community participation in the development activities of NGOs in Africa and the associated challenges. It presents an introduction which seeks to locate the place of NGOs in the development discourse. It also conceptualizes community participation and its typologies, as well as the role of community participation in development. It, again, highlights some of the challenges associated with community participation in development projects and concludes on the issues discussed.

Key Words: Community, Participation, Development, Interventions, and Non-Governmental Organization.



1.0 INTRODUCTION

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have progressively been recognized today as vital development partners globally. This recognition is premised on the fact that they have been able to position themselves before the donor community as credible institutions that seek the interest of vulnerable people in their quest to gain a voice in the social, political, and economic discourse of a nation. NGOs are pronounced in local, national and international scenes where they engage in activities as diverse as grassroot mobilization, community empowerment, micro-finance, humanitarian relief and emergency assistance. NGOs have gained a very high status as the key drivers of development in Africa. African governments have reacted obscurely to the existence of these agencies. NGOs are seen as having the desire and capacity to pursue participatory and people-centered forms of development and to fill gaps left by the failure of states across the developing world in meeting the needs of their poorest citizens (Banks & Hulme, 2012). Especially in the 1980s, in Africa for instance, the growth in the number of NGOs was to mitigate the social impacts of the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) that was implemented by governments. It was recognized that as advocates for the vulnerable in society, NGOs were better placed to address the social impact of SAP that was adopted by countries in Africa. In essence, NGOs have and continued to play an increasingly vital role in the development sector, widely praised for their strengths as innovative and grassroots-driven organisations (Banks & Hulme, 2012).

In the last few years, Africa can be viewed as a home of snowballing numbers of NGOs. There is almost nowhere in Africa that does not have some kind of contact with NGOs as they have found a momentous favor in bodies such as United Nations, European Union, International Monetary Fund and the World Bank and other bilateral and multilateral organizations which believe they are a vital element to put African governments in check on issues of mal-administration and human rights abuse. As facilitators in the field of development, NGOs act as providers of basic services to vulnerable individuals and communities in response to inadequacies in the public delivery of such services. In this regard they complement the roles of governments and the collective efforts of individuals towards human well-being and



development. To achieve their set goals, NGOs come in the form of charities, foundations, associations, nonprofit corporations, and voluntary organizations (Brass, 2010).

Several studies have been conducted on the activities of NGOs especially with regard to development. For example, Stromquist (2002) observed in his study that NGOs undertake three major functions towards community development. They are: service delivery (e.g. relief, welfare, basic skills); educational provision (e.g. basic skills and often critical analysis of social environments); and public policy advocacy. Baccaro (2001) also observed that NGOs can promote the organization and “empowerment” of the poor, particularly poor women, through a combination of micro-credit, awareness-raising, training for group members, and other social services (Hedayat & Ma’rof, 2010).

Additionally, in a study conducted by Streeten (1997), it was found that the activities of NGOs contribute to the reduction of human suffering and to the development of poor countries in many ways including education, health and agriculture. Similarly, in a study conducted by Desai (2005), it was revealed that NGOs play an important role in supporting women, men and households to be able to meet their basic needs. Other roles and functions for NGOs include counseling and support service, awareness raising and advocacy, legal aid and microfinance. These services help the people to achieve their ability, skill and knowledge and take control over their own lives and finally become empowered (Desai, 2005).

According to Langran (2002), through capacity building NGOs help to sustain community development. NGOs are often created in order to increase the capacities of people (Korten, 1990). Furthermore, NGOs are praised for promoting community self-reliance and empowerment through supporting community-based groups and relying on participatory processes (Edwards & Hulme, 1994; Fowler, 1993; Salamon, 1994). Their study, Hedayat and Ma’rof (2010) found that in the long term, the goal of NGOs is to promote sustainable community development through activities that promote capacity building and self-reliance. In their study in Vietnam, Hibbard and Tang (2004) noted the importance of NGOs’ roles in sustainable community development. They argue that NGOs balance the social, economic and environmental factors in promoting sustainable development. Another important role of NGO



that they discovered was decentralization of the central government which helps the local communities to acquire more power in order to make their own decisions. They however stated that sometimes the local communities lack specialists to do professional work and resources that are important for the particular projects. In such situations, NGO assists local staff to draft development plans that are functional under the umbrella of a central government policy. However, they concluded that sustainable rural development is process-oriented which requires extensive community participation and relies on network to share resources, knowledge and expertise (Hedayat & Ma'rof, 2010).

Ramesh Singh (2004) made an effort to provide a better understanding of NGOs working in Manipur and their problems. He conducted a survey during 2000-2001 in two tribal villages in Manipur called Khangshin and Minou. He concluded that NGOs are playing active role in development activities in the fields of education, health and sanitation, women and children to improve the quality of life. Pradeep Kumar (2005) observed that last two decades have been witness to tremendous growth of NGOs, both national and international. He maintained there is an urgent need for governments and NGOs to work in collaboration for rural development. In their study, Kuponiyi and Ladele (2007) found that NGOs are very reliable in effective adaptation and transfer of technology to farmers, delivery of agricultural support services and effective vehicles for alleviating rural poverty. Their study examined the performance of two agricultural based NGOs in their effort to improve the lots of small scale resource – poor farmers in Southwestern Nigeria Farmers Development Union (FADU), an enterprise building organization and Diocesan Agricultural Development Programmes (DADP), a capacity building organization were studied. The unique features of their strategies were organization of farmers into cooperative groups, attention to supply of inputs, firm arrangement for the provision of farm credit, and clientele participation in decision making. They concluded that the NGOs needed more donor assistance to enable them expand the scope of their operations.

Sarfo (2013) also conducted a study on the role of international NGOs in development. Sarfo sought to critically examine the impacts of Plan International's educational projects on children's rights to quality education in the Awutu-Senya District of Ghana using qualitative



research methodology. In this study, the alternative development theory was the theoretical framework with specific emphasis on the rights-based approach to development. Sarfo established that most of the children in the NGOs assisted communities have witnessed improvements in the quality of their educational system, especially in the area of learning environment and service delivery. However, few problems bothering on over-expectations on the NGO, inadequate funds for scholarships, apathy on the part of some members of the beneficiary communities and the inability of local government to fulfill their obligations were recorded in the course of this study. In their study in Nigeria, Ojua, Obeten and Cheimezie (2014) posited that the dynamics of operations of NGOs produce some latent inhibiting consequences which constrain the attainment of anticipated grassroots development.

It is believed that for NGOs in Africa to make meaningful and sustainable impact on the continent there is the need for the citizens to be actively involved in the development process and activities undertaken by these organizations. Adedokun (2008) explains that for community development projects to be truly effective, the critical role of the members living in the community cannot be ignored. Adedokun (2008) adds that development initiatives without effective participation from the local recipients will not be successful. The sustainability of such development projects will also be problematic and elusive.

2.0 CONCEPTUALIZING COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

The second section of this paper considers how various scholars have tried to conceptualize community participation. Indeed, community participation is a rich concept, which means different things to different people. For some, community participation is an end in itself; for others, it is a means to reach a certain goal (Servaes, 1996; World Bank, 1996). In the views of Brager, Specht, and Torczyner (1987), participation is a means to educate citizens and to increase their competence and wealth in the development process. From the above definition, participation is seen as a vehicle for influencing decisions that affect the lives of citizens and an avenue for transferring political power. Chowdhury (1996) broadens the discussion on the concept of community participation. Community participation is about the involvement of a significant number of persons in situations or actions that enhance their well-



being, for example, their income, security, or self- esteem. Chowdhury adds that the ideal conditions contributing towards meaningful participation can be classified into three aspects. These are: the kind of participation under consideration; who are to participate in it; and the process of participation occur (Chowdhury, 1996).

Westergaard (1986) defined participation as “collective efforts to increase and exercise control over resources and institutions on the part of groups and movements of those hitherto excluded from control” (p.14). This definition points toward a mechanism for ensuring community participation. Besides, World Bank’s Learning Group on Participatory Development (1995) sees participation as “a process through which stakeholders’ influence and share control over development initiatives, and the decisions and resources which affect them” (p. 3). Participation is valued as a voluntary contribution by people towards the performance of programs and projects that enhance their lives. It involves sensitizing people and to increase the ability to respond to development programs, and to encourage local initiatives. It also entails people's involvement in decision-making process in implementing programs, sharing benefits and their involvement in efforts to evaluate its. Armitage (1988) defines citizen participation as a process by which citizens act in response to public concerns, voice their opinions about decisions that affect them, and take responsibility for changes to their community. In the views of Pran Manga and Wendy Muckle as cited in Chappel (1997), citizen participation may also be a response to the traditional sense of powerlessness felt by the general public when it comes to influencing government decisions: “people often feel that health and social services are beyond their control because the decisions are made outside their community by unknown bureaucrats and technocrats” (p. 99).

Community participation is a process by which stakeholders take control over development initiatives and the decisions which affect them. It is an active involvement of people in the decision-making process, as well as the responsibilities of people in assessing the health needs, mobilizing resources and suggesting new solutions (World Bank, 1996). It offers people the opportunity to actively take part in initiatives and organize their efforts to enhance their lives (Community Involvement in Health, Geneva: WHO, 1996). However, according to Jaksic



(1996), although community participation is about voluntary contributions of people in issues that affect their own lives, the people are often denied the opportunity to actively take part in shaping the program or criticizing its contents. Jaksic (1996) adds that it is a moral disgrace to develop structures for community participation in a situation where it is not in the interest of the community members.

Community participation assumes a rather a dangerous trend if it is used as a way of political prosecution. Neither should one start half-prepared experiments bound to disappoint the community. It is a common experience that promises are given to the community, raising high expectations. After the donor's objectives are reached, the project is stopped leaving the community without resources. In that way dignity and credibility of local activists who supported the project may be seriously damaged. Apparent apathy of people to external initiatives may be a cautious wisdom and a symptom of negative experience of communities surviving under unstable conditions. According to Bessette (2004), the value of community participation is evident only when it becomes a process of facilitating the active involvement of different community groups, together with other stakeholders involved, and the many development and research agents working with the community and decision makers.

2.1 TYPOLOGY OF PARTICIPATION

Several varying perspectives exist with regard to the types and levels of participation and how such variety of viewpoints tends to influence policy formulation. To start with, participation as a concept is not a "one size fits all" principle; there are different types and levels of it. Each type and level of participation has implications for policy options and decisions in development process. This section looks at the various ways of classifying and typifying participation. The level and form of participation vary with the stakeholders' capacity to participate on issues that need to be addressed by stakeholders. Types of participation by stakeholders range from passive participation, where people are simply told what is going to happen or has happened already, to active participation, in which people take responsibility for and actively contribute to project planning, design, and implementation (Sirpal, 2010). As much as there is a widespread adoption of the rhetoric of participation in development, there is no clear understanding of what



constitutes meaningful and effective community participation. There is variation in the ways the extent of community participation is conceptualized. Some scholars prefer to view community participation along a continuum with passive participation on one end and self-mobilization on the other (Chambers, 2005; Kumar, 2002). Community participation is believed to flourish in democratic systems and contribute to democratization. In the views of Pant (2009), participation can be coercive and manipulative in nondemocratic societies. Pant however cautions that even in a nation considered to be democratic, it is possible for some groups to lack sufficient free space for deliberations.

Evans and Boyte (1992) argue that the concept of direct participation involved the idea of free and active debating from ancient Greece. They contend that particular uncontrolled public places in a community become important venues for alternative discourses to develop. Notwithstanding the above positions on the types of participation, some scholars have tried to come out with some classifications. There are seven distinct levels of participation, ranging from the low level to the high level. They include passive participation, participation by information giving, participation by consultation, participation for material incentives, functional participation, interactive participation and self-mobilization (Pretty et al., 1995). Passive Participation occurs when people participate by being told what is going to happen or has already happened. It is unilateral announcement by an administration or program management without listening to people's responses. The information being shared belongs to only external professions. During passive participation, the community maintains a distance and never intervenes in the activities; they are told what is going to happen or what has happened already (Roodt, 2001). On the other hand, active participation is open and community members take part actively in all stages of the project. Decision making as well as other vital activities, such as management as well as monitoring and evaluation of the projects, are done by the people (Mikkelsen, 2005).

Participation in information giving is when people participate by answering questions posed by extractive researchers and program managers using questionnaire survey or similar approaches. People do not have the opportunity to influence proceedings as the findings of the research



program design are neither shared nor checked for accuracy (Pretty et al., 1995). Participation by consultations is about people being consulted by external agents to elicit views. These external agents define both problems and solutions, and may modify these in the light of people's responses. Consultation provides opportunities for the public to express their views on the project proposal initiated by the project proponent. Rigorous planning and implementation of projects should be undertaken only after considerable discussion and consultation. Consultation includes education, information sharing, and negotiation, with the goal being a better decision making process through organizations consulting the general public (Becker, 1997, p. 155). Such consultative process does not include and share in decision making and professionals are under no obligations to take on-board people's views.

Participation by material incentives occurs when people participate by providing resources, for example labor in return for food, cash or material incentives. Such people are not involved in the experimentation and have no stake in maintaining activities when incentives end. Functional Participation deals with situations in which people participate by forming groups to meet predetermined objectives related to the program, which can involve the development or promotion of externally initiated social organization. Such involvement does not tend to be at the early stages of program cycle or planning but rather decisions have been made elsewhere (Roodt, 2001). These institutions tend to be dependent on external initiators or facilitators but may become self-dependent. Interactive participation is when people take part in joint analysis as well as the planning process and the members of the target community improve their existing structures as well taking charge of their development process (Mikkelsen, 2005). The joint analysis leads to action plans and the formulation of new local groups or strengthening of existing ones. It tends to involve interdisciplinary methodologies that seek multiple perspectives and make use of systematic and structured learning processes. These groups take control over local decisions, so people have stake in maintaining structures and practices. Self-mobilization refers to a situation whereby people participate by taking initiatives independent of external institutions to change systems. Such self-initiated mobilization and collective action may or may not challenge existing inequitable distributions of wealth and power (Chambers, 2005).



3.0 THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN DEVELOPMENT

The third section discusses the role of community participation in the development programs and projects of NGOs especially in Africa. It should be mentioned that the contributions of community participation in development are multi-dimensional. Community participation enables community members to appreciate how to resolve conflict and allows for different perspectives to be heard. In other words, it teaches people how to understand and deal with conflicts from diverse approaches. In this way, learning is promoted and people will be able to help themselves (Baum, 1999; Nampila, 2005). Community members will be able to assess their own situation, organize themselves as a powerful group and work creatively towards changing society and building up a new world (Nampila, 2005). Nampila (2005) adds that these increased diverse capacities of individuals enable communities to mobilize and help themselves to minimize dependence on the state and leads to a bottom-up approach. For instance, the Botswana NCS was initiated in 1983, and was finally approved by the Government of Botswana in 1990. During the intervening years, a process of intensive consultation, involving all public and private sector stakeholders took place. These included village elders and members; District Council Officers and elected representatives; NGOs; and environmental agencies. Through a process of representation, it was possible for the views of all communities to be canvassed and brought up (Bass, Dalal-Clayton & Pretty, 1995).

In construction of community projects, mutual self-help plays a big role. It reduces building costs for beneficiary communities, as construction material can be bought in bulk and skills can be pooled (Rakodi, 1983; UNCHS, 1986). A clear case in point in Kenya is the Dandora housing project in Nairobi which the Nairobi City Council supported by encouraging people to form building groups. Indeed, development is not an exercise of delivering goods and services to a passive citizenry. It entails active participation and growing empowerment (Callaghan, 1997). In a study conducted by Davids et al. (2009), there was an outright rejection of development as the delivery of goods to a passive citizenry. It is about involvement and growing empowerment and increased contribution of community members. Community participation brings about empowerment and contribution of the community; empowerment and



collective contribution center on individuals developing a critical understanding of their circumstances and social reality (Davids et al., 2009; Rakodi, 1983).

Participation of the community members in development projects is very crucial as it leads to capacity building which enables the community to be more effective and efficient in the process of identifying, implementing, monitoring and evaluating of developmental projects (Davids et al., 2009). In the views of De Beer (1998), by continuously fulfilling their needs, people learn to realize their objectives more easily. It is a mechanism that enables local people to determine their own values and priorities and act on their own decisions. Full potentials of individuals are realized after they have been made aware; then, depending on their capabilities, they act in order to achieve their goals and objectives (Freire, 1993).

People-centered development shifts the emphasis in development action to people, rather than to objects and production, and to the enhancement of their capacity to participate in the development process. As it heavily relies on outside resources such as funding it often leads to most interventions being unsustainable. A people centered approach improves self-reliance in communities (Kotze, 1997). Meaningful community participation enhances the sustainability of the community development projects and this can only be achieved through a people centered development. If community participation is effective it may lead to social and personal empowerment, economic development, and socio-political transformation (Kaufman & Alfonso, 1997; Korten, 1990).

With respect to community participation in educational infrastructure in Africa, evidence in Malawi indicates that it is very useful in this regard (Rose, 2003). In fact, the trend in Malawi showed a gendered division of labor where women fetch water while men mix the soil and water and take the bricks to the builders (Rose, 2003). Other studies by the Government of Malawi/UNICEF (1993) showed that while women usually get involved in community activities, such as maintaining water supplies, school construction, and child care and literacy schemes, men take on more of the community leadership roles. Also, other studies in other parts of Africa and the world found that participation has been the most significant factor contributing to project effectiveness and maintenance of water systems. It was revealed when



people were involved in decision-making during all stages of the project, from design to maintenance that the best results occurred. Also, when they were just involved in information sharing and consultations, then results were much poorer (Narayan, 1993).

Community participation in the development projects undertaken by NGOs has also been found to be useful in places such as Kenya especially in the area of soil and water conservation. There has been a collaboration between professionals from various departments, combined with interactive participation with rural people, with some substantial impacts on the country's agriculture (Pretty, 1995; Ministry of Agriculture, 1988-95). The findings from Kenya show that where there is community mobilization, strong local groups, committed local staff and collaboration with other departments in multi-disciplinary planning and implementation, then within two years there are clear benefits. They include increases in agricultural productivity, diversification into new enterprises, reductions in resource degradation, improvements in the activities of local groups, and independent replication to neighboring communities. These improvements have occurred without payment or subsidy, and so are more likely to be sustained.

Moreover, the role of community participation in development activities in Africa has been reported by several studies. For instance, it is believed that girls' enrollment in schooling in particular has improved in places including Ethiopia, Ghana, Mali, Guinea, South Sudan and Uganda due to increased community participation in programs supported by NGOs (Miller-Grandvaux & Yoder, 2002). In Ethiopia, for example, total enrolment has increased by 8.9 percent in the region where World Learning operates a community school program, and girls' enrolment has increased by 13.8 percent. In these schools, girls' attendance in school also improved (with 36 percent of girls in class, compared with 28 percent in government schools. The gross enrolment rate for girls in the district in Guinea where Save the Children is working has increased from 31 percent to 37 percent. In South Sudan, CARE's work in sensitizing communities about the importance of sending children, in particular girls, to school is reported to have increased girls' enrolment by 96 percent. Girls comprise 47 percent of enrolment in



ActionAid's community schools in Uganda, and almost half of those transferring to government schools are girls (Miller-Grandvaux & Yoder, 2002).

4.0 CHALLENGES WITH COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN DEVELOPMENT

The fourth section of this paper explores the challenges associated with community participation in development activities and programs and the concluding aspect of the paper. Despite the role community participation plays in the development of nations and communities, there are some factors which seem to disable its conceptual intention. One of the challenges is the lack of a universally accepted conceptual framework. Even though it is argued that community participation has strong methodological roots, this view has been challenged. According to Cooke and Kothari (2001), it is not possible to develop such a methodology, because participation comes about as a result of practice in specific situations. To see participation without the grounded experience would not be possible. Community members involved in the projects see specific projects in a variety of ways. Consensus about what works and why, is not possible and is in fact, mutually exclusive from a single view about the process (Rifkin & Pridmore, 2001). This lack of a clear framework makes those living in a technological world feel uneasy, hence tend to view participation as a 'soft' science. According to Cooke and Kothari (2001), to remark that participation cannot be measured, quantified and replicated is only a concern to those who try to view universal solutions to the wide-ranging problems of especially Africa. In the case of Botswana NCS, initially the consultations proved beneficial. The opportunity to be consulted and involved was appreciated. However, it became increasingly evident that the planning process did not involve community members in the crucially important consensus-building phase; and raised local community expectations unrealistically high. As the central discussions on the principal planning issues were extended progressively, so the mood of local community consultees changed from disappointment, to frustration, to strong disillusionment and mistrust. Delays in both decision-making and in taking action not only disenchanted local communities, but also several donors (Bass, Dalal-Clayton & Pretty, 1995).



Again, despite the many perceived benefits of community participation in development activities of especially NGOs, many scholars including Servaes, White and Dempsey continue to see it as a rhetoric which lacks the ingredients required to serve the interest of all. It is posited that the issue of genuine participation of members of community is not in everyone's interest (Servaes, 1996). In support, White (1999) contends that the reality of participation often substantially varies from the rhetoric. White (1999) appears to attribute the failure of allow for active community participation in development interventions to the rhetoric of the concept. Contrarily to Fischer's (2000) belief that it is difficult to legitimately deny citizens a place at the decision-making table despite their level of knowledge, Dempsey (2009) maintains that citizens do not have enough knowledge to participate meaningfully in policy decisions. Indeed, the issues of what expertise is and the appropriate roles of citizens and experts remain a bigger challenge in the discourse of community participation within the NGO discourse.

While development discourse largely embraces increased community participation as beneficial in decisions that require relatively more local knowledge, there is a debate over whether communities should be involved in projects that require expertise. On this view, communities remedy their lack of technical knowledge by contracting out decisions to experts. "Expertise" itself is defined discursively by the powerful. Foucault talks about knowledge as constituted in discourse. For Foucault power and knowledge imply, implicate and presuppose one another (Foss et al., 2002). The paradox of community participation finds expression in stakeholders calling for a greater participation of the oppressed and claiming only a certain type of knowledge is expert knowledge (Gough et al., 2003). In many places in Africa where illiteracy is high, community participation in the development activities of NGOs only becomes a mirage since the citizens lack the capacity needed to participation a living reality.

Another critical issue for program planners/professionals of NGOs concerns the assumptions about community participation as a panacea to development. There is a wide assumption that participation will lead to sustainability of programs, to equity and to empowerment. However, there is scarcity of evidence of a direct causal relationship (Rifkin & Pridmore, 2001). Although some anecdotal data exists to offer support to a linkage, there is not a direct knock-on effect.



While it may be fair to say community participation is essential for all development outcomes, there is a growing recognition that no sufficient evidence exists establishing the relationship. More research needs to be done to seriously scrutinize the relationships between community participation and development outcomes (Rifkin & Kangere, n.d.; Rifkin & Pridmore, 2001). Even where these relationships exist, they are most likely to be situation specific (Rifkin & Kangere, n.d.; Rifkin & Pridmore, 2001).

As professionals, international NGO workers generally tend to favor scientific rationality over indigenous knowledge and communicative rationality. Whereas scientists believe in science as a superior approach to understanding and explaining reality, those who embrace communicative rationality argue that people can reach at better solutions to specific problems through a collaborative process of communication. Experts tend to portray science as the only way of knowing, usually with the motive of suppressing the voices of those lacking scientific knowledge. Servaes (1996) is critical of the effort to further marginalize the poor under the guise of lack of “expertise.” In recognition of the difficulty in giving practical meaning to community participation, Fischer (2000) explains further that to many social scientists and politicians, community participation is a dilemma between impossibility and inevitability.

Streeten (1997) appears to underscore the seeming uselessness of community participation within the field of NGOs. Streeten states that from the NGO perspective, community participation is more “as a slogan than a thought-out strategy” (Streeten, 1997 p. 193). Even when there is evidence of participation, Dempsey (2009) contends that no true democratic culture may be found within NGOs. She argues further that these organizations are structured by a complex set of economic relationships and social and material inequalities. Dempsey also asserts that these inequalities contribute to the differential ability of groups and hence their roles in the global public sphere. In an attempt to improve upon a community’s circumstances, NGOs according to Dempsey (2009), may privilege a certain kind of knowledge and eventually prevent these very citizens from speaking on their own behalf. Thus, it is important to discover how far NGOs that swear by democracy and community participation have gone in practice toward fulfilling the mission of “giving voice to the people” (Lugar, 2006, p. 1). Some NGOs’



current practices of limiting “community participation” to the involvement of rural communities in the provision of cheap manual labor might be the result of these inherent contradictions. There are also apparent tensions between the requirements of bracketing differences between participants, on the one hand, and maintaining the values and preconceived missions of NGOs, on the other hand (Lugar, 2006).

Moreover, community participation as a development tool by NGOs is challenged because it is a fluid concept sustained in discourse by different rhetors, including UN agencies, the World Bank, NGOs and academics. Cook and Kothari (2001) assert that participatory development does not have a refined existence “out there” but is constructed by a cadre of development professionals whose ability to create and sustain this discourse is indicative of the power they possess (p. 15). McPhail (2009) compounds this danger by asserting that community participation is involved in both legitimating participatory development interventions and in obscuring practices that do not qualify as participatory. If community participation in development projects is about making stakeholders’ voices heard, then it is actually not worth the efforts (McPhail, 2009). Behera (2006) argues that most development rhetoric originates from the international headquarters of NGOs and multilateral organizations. Mosse (2003) suggests “participation” is primarily a form of representation oriented towards concerns that are external to the location. He says such representations do not speak directly to local practice and provide little clue to implementation. How to turn “participation” from policy texts into meaningful grassroots practices is another important challenge of community development. NGOs are there to implement policies and serve as bridges between the global and the local. Owing to their funding links they are accountable to international aid agencies and states. At least theoretically, they are also accountable to the rural communities they are supposed to work with, not to mention the host country’s national and local governmental bodies. So this multiple accountability puts them in a conflicted position when it comes to interpreting and acting upon participation discourses. For example, NGO discourses usually take “community” as a homogenous group or recognize only certain major categories like the poor, the youth, men or women. However, in reality, there are a lot of grassroots social, cultural, and class dynamics that need to be taken into consideration in talking about voice and participation.



In an attempt to deepen the discussion, Behera (2006) argues that within the category “women,” there are multiple sub-categories like literates and illiterates, rich and poor, high and low class, most often mutually non-exclusive, who have multiple, sometimes conflicting identities. He says, participatory development loses its meaning and efficacy if such diversities within multiple categories are not given due attention in the development strategies of rural people (p. 39). Behera (2006) believes that the concept of community participation is a fluctuating reality and that the ever-changing global political and economic orders are the reason for the shifts in the essence of community participation. For example community participation in the Global South during the colonial era cannot be the same as community participation in the postcolonial period (Behera, 2006). Chambers (2005) opines that unlike a rock, community participation has no final meaning. It is mobile and malleable, an amoeba, a sculptor’s clay, a plasticine shaped as it passes from hand to hand” (p. 104). Not only does he seek to belittle the impact of community participation, Long (2001) challenges its conceptual intention by indicating that it is only an “involvement of poor and marginalized people in decision-making roles regarding all important aspects of donor-funded projects or policies” (p. 2).

Many development NGOs in Africa pay lip service to the fashionable concept of community participation. Chambers (2005) observes that there may be a wide gap between the senses in which community participation is used and the reality on the ground. It is contended that the reality of participation has often differed from the rhetoric (Chambers, 1999; White, 1999). Despite the participatory rhetoric, practices in development in general remain top-down. According to White (1999), community participation is easy to talk about but very hard to achieve. White concludes that genuine participation of grassroots people is more an ideal than a reality. In support, Simmons (2007) contends that current models of community participation are unproductive for involving the public in the decision-making process in significant ways. She states that community participation practices focus on either bombarding the publics with a one-way communication or holding meetings in which the public could make comments but not influence final policies. In essence, citizens have very little say and very little power to influence decisions even when it affects their own lives and communities. They basically play the yes-man’s role during participation.



5.0 CONCLUSIONS

Development is about and for the people. The people are the ones to give practical meaning to development. Thus, it is of an uncompromising relevance that the local people are made a vital part of the process of development through whichever means possible. Indeed, despite the associated difficulties with the concept, the value of community participation in the development interventions of NGOs cannot be disregarded. Although the researchers concede that community participation is only becoming a virtue of necessity, they reject the claim that knowledge gap should be the basis to negate the essence of participation by community members in the activities of NGOs especially in Africa. In fact, the researchers call for the need for development facilitators to cooperate with and learn from local people, and also apply their knowledge in the context and to the benefit of those locals. Development facilitators of NGOs need to ensure that participation of community members is given a serious attention within the framework of sustainable development. They need to truly accept that beneficiaries of development projects are not only capable, but are indeed the most qualified persons for the task at hand. They feel the impact of development and so are better positioned to offer experiences of the value of development interventions. Although not all the anticipated benefits of community participation have been met, there is demonstrable evidence to justify its continuing relevance in the development discourse of NGOs. To ignore the participation of community members in development interventions of NGOs especially in Africa is to assume that development is a package that can be wrapped up and dumped onto the beneficiaries without regard for their collective inputs. The danger in such manifestations is that other key stakeholders especially the local people will find it extremely difficult to contribute rich ideas and knowledge to development initiatives of NGOs, however well-intentioned such initiatives are. This, in the views of the researchers, is not good enough in the context of sustainable development drive.



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