



Theoretical Perspectives on the Determinants of Effective Community Participation in Development Programs

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Received: 9 April 2020; Revised: 17 June 2020; Accepted: 1 July 2020

Abstract

The objective of this research is to highlight from the theoretical perspective the key determinants of effective community participation in development programs. Indeed, effective community participation in development programs is considered by many scholars and development practitioners as one of the ingredients for sustaining development programs. However, as a catalyst for programs sustainability, this paper makes a case that community participation can only serve its intended purpose of ensuring that development programs at the community level are sustainable only when a number of factors are well articulated and instituted or addressed. Based on this articulation, this paper employed a theoretical literature review approach to critically examine the determining factors for effective community participation in development programs from a theoretical point of view.

Keywords: Community Development, Community Participation, Development Programs, Participation

Introduction

Beck and Crawley (2002) have argued that community participation is fundamental to achieving sustainable community development in any community. This is further echoed by Schutte (2000) who also points out that the participation of the community in any development program that seeks to bring about sustainable community development in such a community is very essential. In fact according to Odoyo (2013), effective community participation in development programs need to be fully embraced if sustainable development is to be attained in communities. In addition, the author further emphasizes that, in order to achieve effective community participation in development programs, there is a need to pay close attention to key factors that serve as determinants and thus ensure that such factors are supportive to the process of community participation in development projects and programs Odoyo (2013).

Consequently, Bamber et al. (2010), stresses that development programs at the community level are normally designed and implemented with the intentions of achieving the desired objective of enhancing community development and that these programs remain sustainable. Ceptureanu et al. (2018) further stress that when a program is not sustainable; its impacts decrease leading to unmet expectations and thus affecting development efforts of the community as a whole.

In order to avoid this situation, Wasilwa (2015) suggests that active participation which is open and allows community members to actively take part in all stages of the program is essential for the sustainability of a program. Through active community participation, Wasilwa (2015) stresses that this leads to capacity building, which enables the community to be more effective and efficient in the process of identifying, monitoring and evaluating the program so as to ensure that the program and its results are all sustainable

Akumu and Onono (2017) also echo that community participation allows beneficiaries to influence the direction and execution of development programs rather than merely receive a share of the program. Similarly, according to the 2013 Human Development Report (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP),

2013), in order to walk in the human development pathway, people should engage fully in activities that reform the lives and they should be able to participate in policy making process and results.

In general, there is enormous literature that seems to point to the fact that involving community members in development programs is an essential step towards ensuring that development programs operate sustainably and thus meet their intended objectives to the community and the targeted beneficiaries.

Theoretical Definition of Community Participation Concept, Its Benefits and Approaches

As cited by Nkwake et al. (2013) in Zakus & Lysack (1998), Community participation' is commonly understood as "the collective involvement of local people in assessing their needs and organizing strategies to meet those needs". While variations exist in how community participation is conceived and realized, there is widespread agreement that it is a vital ingredient of community development. As an ingredient of community participation, community participation provides people with the sense that they can address their problems through careful reflection and collective action as a result of working together. In recognition of its contribution to community empowerment, community participation has been referred to as "the heart that pumps the community's life blood" (Reid, 2000). In fact, as cited by Nkwake et al. (2013), the benefits and justification for participatory approaches are several: These benefits and justifications have been summed up by Weaver & Cousins (2004) as follows;

- a) From a *pragmatism sense*, participation enhances the relevance of programs to ensure that they are well suited for the needs and circumstances of beneficiaries.
- b) From a *fairness perspective*, participation ensures that the views of many stakeholder groups are represented in the development process.
- c) From an *epistemological sense*, it is expected that program decisions that feed on the insights of many stakeholders are not just relevant to beneficiaries, they are generally smarter.

Consequently, Studies have linked community participation to greater program outcomes such as greater access to social services (Nkwake et al., 2013) as well as promoting program sustainability due to a greater sense of ownership and responsibility for program activities by stakeholders (Oakley, 1989). This is because stakeholders are willing and able to mobilize and commit local resources to continue some or all of the program proceeds even after external support is withdrawn or reduced.

It should be pointed out at this point that as stressed by scholars such as Nkwake et al., 2013, the prevailing evidence for the benefits of community participation does not really indicate which approach works best. However, Taylor et al., 2008 as cited in Preston et al., 2009, managed to outline four conceptual approaches to community participation as discussed below.

In the *contributions approach*, participation is considered as primarily involving voluntary contributions, to a project, such as time, resources, or community-based knowledge. This process is normally led by external professionals while community stakeholders simply follow the lead –they wait to be told how the contributions will be made and used.

In the *instrumental approach*, wellbeing is conceived as an end result, rather than as a process, with community participation as an intervention supporting other development interventions. Still this type of participation is usually led by professionals and the important components of the interventions or programs are predetermined according to local and national priorities.



The community *empowerment approach* tries to empower and support communities, individuals, and groups to take greater control over issues that affect their well-being. This includes personal development and social action among others.

In the *developmental approach*, development is conceived as an interactive, evolutionary process, embedded in a community of place or interest. Local people, in partnership with professionals, have a role in decision-making and in achieving the outcomes they consider are important.

In the context of this paper, the concept of community participation was largely viewed as the direct involvement of the people in the activities of development programs which in the long run would bring about several benefits to the community at large.

Theoretical Explanations as to why Community Participation is of the Essence to Community Development Programs

There is no doubt that community participation has indeed been a constant theme in development dialogues for the past 50 years. In fact, between the 1960s and 1970s, community participation became central to development programs/projects as a means to seek sustainability and equity, particularly for the poor.

Since then, community participation found its place in influencing development programs and projects at various society levels including the community level. As viewed by different stakeholders in community development issues, the essence of community participation in community development programs is not underestimated. In fact, according to the World Bank (1996), community participation plays an important role in community development programs on the basis that;

- a) Local people have a great amount of experience and insight into what works, what does not work and why.
- b) Involving local people in planning programs/ projects can increase their commitment to the program/project.
- c) Involving local people can help them to develop technical and managerial skills and thereby increase their opportunities for employment.
- d) Involving local people can help to increase the resources available for the program.
- e) Involving local people is a way to bring about 'social learning' for both program implementers and beneficiaries. In this regard, 'Social learning' implies the development of partnerships between professionals and local people, in which, each group learns from the other

In addition, as cited by Mwiru (2015), community participation could also be of essence to community development programs in a number of ways. Some of these ways are as explained below;

- f) Self-reliance: Participation helps to break the mentality of dependence which characterizes much development work and instead it promotes self-awareness and confidence, making people examine their problems and to think positively about solutions to be addressed by any development program.
- g) Program Efficiency: Participation can, for example help reduce misunderstanding or possible disagreements, and thus the time and energy often spent by professional staff explaining to people program benefits can be reduced.
- h) Program Effectiveness: Participation will also make programs/projects more effective as instruments of development programs/projects are invariably external mechanisms which are supposed to benefit the people of particular area. Participation which allows these people to have a voice in determining objectives, to support project administration and to make their local knowledge, skills and resources available must result in more



effective projects. A major reason why many projects have not been effective objectives in the past is because local people were not involved.

i) **Expanding Program Coverage:** Most government and agencies programs/projects reach only a limited number of people and usually privileged number of people. In many developing countries delivery of services have contacts with only few people of the population. Participation will extend the coverage, bringing more people within the direct influence of development activities, which, in turn could broaden the mass appeal of such services.

Generally, from the theoretical point of view, the essence of community participation to community development program is highly expressed. This implies that development practitioners, program implementers and program beneficiaries at the community level have the onus to translate these theoretically perceived justifications into practice.

In the context of this paper, it is important to acknowledge the fact that the theoretical explanations concerning the essence of community participation to community development programs are enormous and therefore what has been presented in this paper is not an exhaustive explanation.

The Link between Community Participation and Community Development Programs

The link between community participation and community development programs is embedded in the concept of participatory development. According to Cornwall (2002); Participatory development (PD) seeks to engage local populations in development programs and projects. In fact Participatory development has taken a variety of forms since it emerged in the 1970s, when it was first introduced as an important part of the “basic needs approach” to development (Cornwall, 2002). Most manifestations of public participation in development as pointed out by Cornwall (2002) seek “to give the poor a part in initiatives designed for their benefit” in the hope that development programs and projects will be more sustainable and successful if local populations are engaged in the development process.

To this effect, there is a clear theoretical link between community participation and community development programs that may have to be enhanced if community development as an end product of this link is to be attained.

Methods and Materials

This research employed a theoretical literature review approach to examine the determinants of effective community participation in development programs. Specifically the paper tries to look at what has been put forward from a theoretical perspective as the determinants for effective community participation in development programs at the community level.

Results

Examining from the theoretical perspective the key determinants of effective community participation in development programs is the intention of this paper. Understandably, such determinants do vary but what should be noted is that pre-requisite determinants for effective community participation in development initiatives such as programs are normally contextual and may be specific to particular locations and program settings. This paper therefore examines some of those determinants as follows;



Socio- Economic Related Determinants

As pointed out by Tarver (2019), Social economics also referred to as socioeconomics, is concerned with the relationship between social and economic factors within a society. As such, socio-economic related determinants include those factors that influence how a particular group or socioeconomic class behave within society, including their actions. Different socioeconomic classes may have different priorities. Similarly, the extent of involvement in any development program by people can be influenced by these factors. Some of these determinants as documented in literature include resource availability, literacy level as well as economic Structure based on income levels.

In view of this aspect, theory appears to inform us that, socio economic factors such as the availability of resources for undertaking the program, literacy level of the participants and their income levels among others have influence on the extent of participation by community members in development programs and this need not to be underestimated.

Socio-Cultural Related Determinants

According to Apsalone & Šumilo (2015), socio-cultural related determinants largely constitute a combination of social and cultural factors. These factors tend to influence the manner in which people get involved in development initiatives such as programs and projects on different scales. Hence, taking care of them during the program design stage is very important because this will ensure that the extent of peoples' participation in a particular program is not compromised by such factors. These factors range from factors such as shared values, norms, peoples' attitude, skills/capacity, beliefs, awareness, gender to ethnicity. Apsalone & Šumilo (2015) further stresses that these factors are very significant and have the potential to either positively or negatively influence peoples' participation in any development program.

In line with the above views, theory does again inform us that socio-cultural factors such as shared values, norms, peoples' attitude, skills/capacity, beliefs, awareness, gender and ethnicity are very determining factors when it comes to influencing the participation of people in development programs. From the theoretical point of view, just like the socio-economic determinants, these too need to be taken into consideration to guarantee effective participation of community members in any development program.

Institutional and Regulatory Determinants

Masanyiwa and Kinyashi (2008) point to the fact that institutional and regulatory factors also have influence in the manner people may get involved in development programs. These factors mainly affect the governance and operational mechanisms for implementing the program. They originate from the institution implementing the program and the regulations that have been put in place for the smooth implementation of the program. According to Masanyiwa and Kinyashi (2008), these factors may among others include; rules governing how people participate, leadership, program policies, program objectives, program instruments and program benefits including how such benefits are distributed.

From the theoretical point of view, these factors are therefore determinants in influencing the extent to which people can participate in development programs. Again, just like the other previously explained categories of factors; these too need not to be compromised. This implies that the rules, policies, program objectives, program benefits and how they are distributed as well as program leadership must be well spelt out and very clear to people.

Participation Methods / Level Related Determinants

As reflected in literature, the method in which people are allowed to get involved in development programs largely determines the extent or intensity of peoples' participation such in development programs. According to Everest-Phillips (2016), one of the best ways to explain the intensity of participation in development programs is by understanding what Sherry R. Arnstein calls "A Ladder of Citizen Participation". Arnstein (1969) through her ladder revealed that peoples' participation in development programs could be assessed through eight rungs each depicting a different level of participation. These levels include manipulation, therapy, informing, consultation, placation, partnership, delegated power and citizen control as shown in Figure 1.

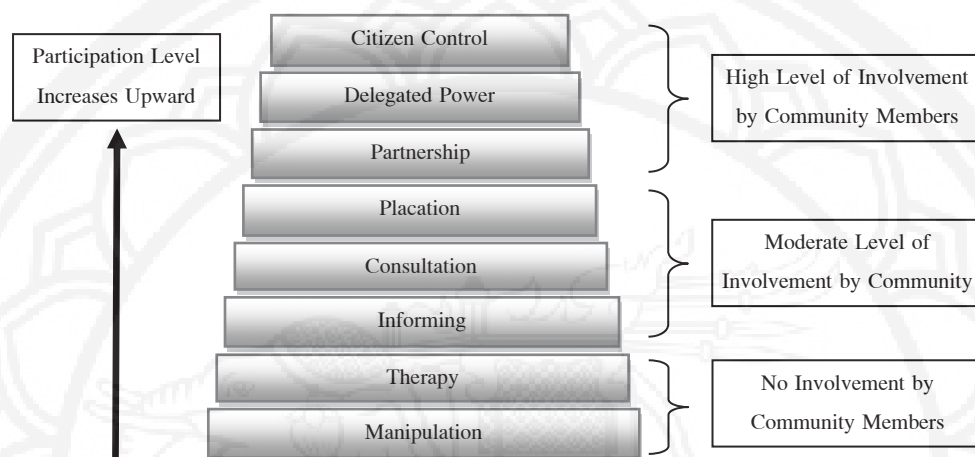


Figure 1 Ladder of Community Participation Cited from Arnstein (1969)

According to Arnstein, sustainability of development programs can only be attained when people are actively and meaningfully involved in deciding over development initiatives. Hence by looking at Arnstein ladder of citizen participation as illustrated above, levels of citizen control, delegated power and partnership stand a higher chance of promoting effective community participation in development programs as opposed to the other levels such as placation, consulting, informing, therapy and manipulation.

From theoretical point of view, participatory methods employed in any program have influence on the intensity of peoples' participation. As such, the proposed methods of citizen control, delegated power and partnership by Arnstein have the potential to ensure that people effectively participate in development programs.

Participatory Obstacle Related Determinants

While emphasis by most scholars are usually put on the previously examined factors i.e. social economic, social cultural, participatory method as well as institutional and regulatory factors, this paper notes that there is another category of determinant factors to effective community participation. This category consists of determinants categorised as participatory obstacle related determinants. These too according to theory need not to be underestimated or least forgotten. In fact, according to scholars such as Omunu (2008), the presence of these obstacle- related determinants may make it impossible to benefit from the other determinants.

In addition, Omunu (2008); stresses that Community managed programs and projects have become important forms of development assistance in developing countries. However, a look at their conceptual foundations shows that they fail to target the intended beneficiaries and as a result, the extent of participation is low since those involved in the project have less to care about.



Chifamba (2013) on the other hand also points out that, among the obstacles facing community participation in development initiatives include the lack of access to information, poverty and the contradicting approaches employed in the practice of community participation where some implementing agencies pay community members to participate while others do not.

Similarly, Kilewo & Frumence (2015) also argue that, possible reasons as to why community members shy away from participating in development programs and projects are quite many. However, some of these reasons include; the lack of orientation on roles of community members in the program, lack of training to community members about their roles, lack of clearly defined community members roles, unclear methods of participation by community members and poor communication and information sharing.

From the theoretical point of view, this implies that the above explained obstacles have the potential to fail the process of effective community participation in any development program if not addressed. On the contrary, theory appears to insinuate that by ensuring that roles are well defined, participants are trained in their roles, methods of participation are made clear, and mechanisms for information sharing put in place, effective community participation can be ensured in development programs.

Conceptualization of Examined Determinants for Effective Community Participation in Development Programs

Conceptually, the concepts advanced in this paper stipulate that the sustainability of development programs is dependent on several determinants. In the context of this paper, effective community participation has been examined as one of the determinants of programs sustainability. The paper does however argue that the community and its members are essential in ensuring that development programs are sustainable. Members in the community have particular roles to play in influencing the manner in which development programs are undertaken in their communities. Understandably, literature stress that in order for community members to participate in any development program, particular determinants as explained in the previous section of this paper must be in place. Literature also indicates that neglecting these determinants from a theoretical point of view may jeopardise the success of any program at the community level. Figure 2 below shows how these determinants may link up and influence effective community participation in development programs at the community level.

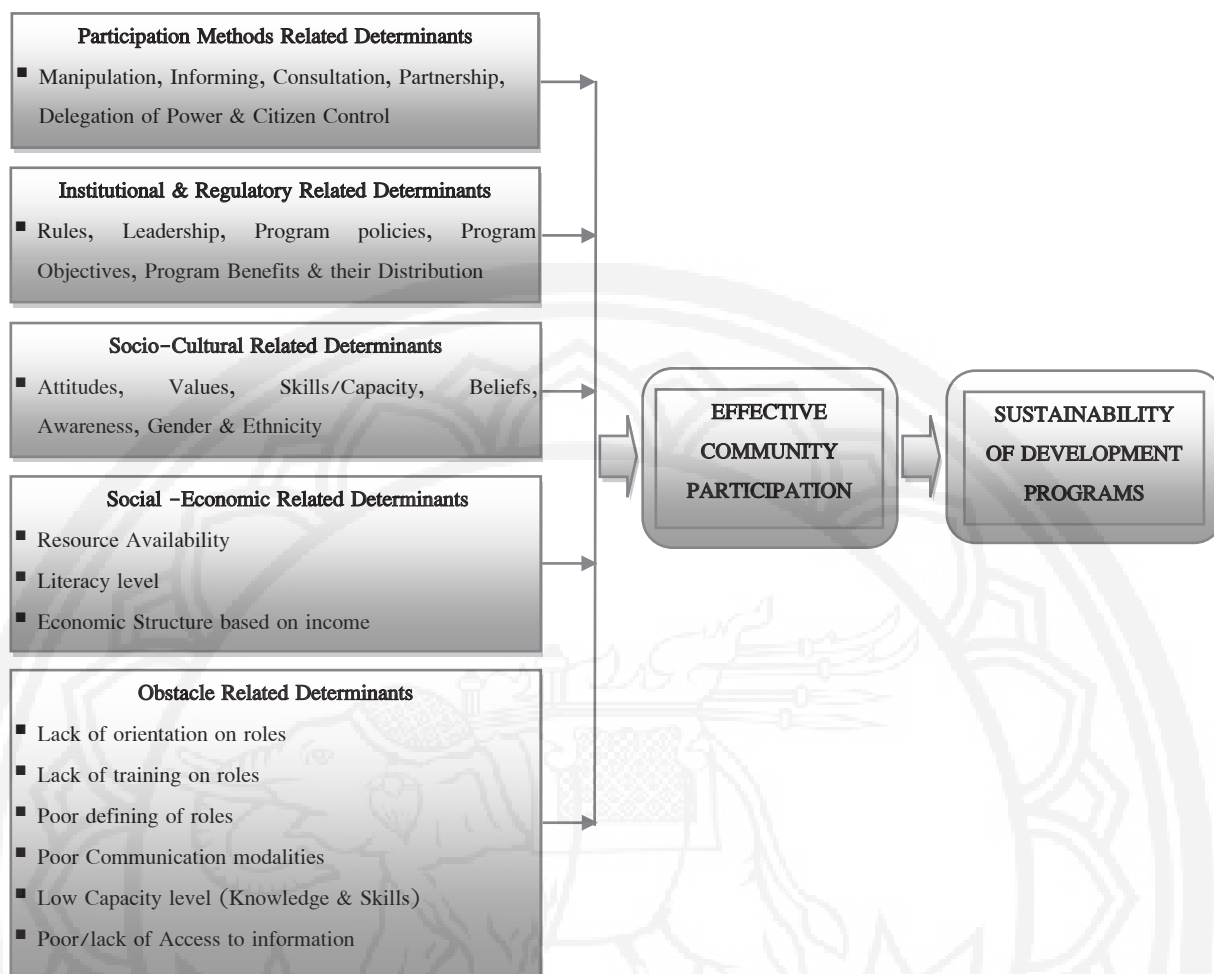


Figure 2 Conceptual Link between Determinants and Effective Community Participation in Development Programs as Constructed by Author, 2020

Generally; based on the conceptualization for examined determinants in Figure 2, theory shows that a combination of various factors is responsible for determining the effectiveness of community participation in development programs.

Conclusion

It is indeed a fact that theory informs practice while at the same time practice builds on theory. Hence, as explicitly stated in the abstract section, the case being presented in this paper is that community participation can only serve its intended purpose of ensuring that development programs at the community level are sustainable only when a number of factors are well articulated and instituted or addressed. Indeed as noted from the examined theoretical perspectives, there are a number of factors that can potentially determine the extent of peoples' participation in development programs. However these factors as earlier stated do vary and they are contextually based. In addition some of the factors are very specific to particular locations and program settings.

This being the case, the onus is therefore on program implementers to see to it that these factors are translated into practice so that they do not compromise the need to ensure effective participation of people in development programs. Consequently, community members have a due responsibility to embrace the factors once their practical implementation has been well articulated by the program implementers for mutual benefit.



Acknowledgements

This research stems from my ongoing PhD research. I therefore wish to acknowledge the contribution of my Ph.D. research supervisors Prof. Eleuther Mwageni and Dr. Jacob Kihila of Ardhi University for their guidance and constructive comments.

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