

Chapter 12

Community Participation: A Catalyst for Sustainable Development? Pitfalls and Opportunities for Post–Apartheid South Africa

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ABSTRACT

The emphases placed on community participation as a sustainable development strategy have increased in developing countries including South Africa. The shift to people-centred development initiative was in response to growing concerns over the unsustainable top-down and bureaucratic approaches to development. Despite the adoption of new development approaches, community participation has been plagued by pitfalls in the post-apartheid South Africa. Community participation remains centralised and politicised. The spaces of participation are closed. The objective of the chapter is to identify the pitfalls and opportunities for community participation in the sustainable development discourse. The chapter bridges the knowledge-gap with reference to critical analysis of development challenges and the alternative strategies. It concludes that community participation is the viable method for ensuring participation of the marginalised groups.

INTRODUCTION

Community participation has become the buzzword in the field of development studies. Community participation model has succeeded in facilitating sustainable development through promoting and advancing the interests of the poor and marginalised. With the increasing emphases placed on the importance of

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decentralisation of power not only as a form of ensuring effective and broader community participation but also as a vehicle for accelerating development projects, South Africa's post-apartheid government designed new policy and legislative frameworks to enhance broader community participation. In a global arena, such a new development was not surprising partly because community participation involving *direct involvement* and/or *engagement* of ordinary people in the affairs of governance has become the integral part of democratic practices over the past few years (Jayal, 2001 cited in Williams, 2006, p.197). In light of growing emphases on community participation as a model to achieve viable sustainable development, people-driven initiatives taken by post-apartheid government included, amongst others, the implementation of White Paper on Local Government (Republic of South Africa, 1998), Local Government Municipal Systems Act, No 32, of 2000 [LGSMA], and Integrated Development Planning (IDP) (Williams, 2006, pp.197-198).

Although there were numerous implementation impediments, these radical changes sought to ultimately enhance and deepen community participation. Despite strong willingness and passion to include ordinary people in the affairs of governance, *community participation* is a fairly complex phenomenon. In its broadest sense, community participation could be regarded as a form of *empowerment*, *capacity-building* and *self-help* initiative (Marisa, 1996, p.431). Although the merits and demerits of the term *community participation* are still highly contested and fiercely debatable in the sustainable development discourse, community participation refers to an active process whereby beneficiaries influence the direction and execution of development projects rather than merely receive a share of project benefits (Paul cited in Bamberger, 1986, p.vii).

It is against this backdrop that since the 1990s multilateral agencies such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) placed greater emphases on stakeholder participation as a particular way of enhancing sustainable development (Gonzales, 1998). From this perspective, any development process which sought to bring about change had to be driven by the people who are directly affected. On 25 September 2015, these emphases gained momentum through the setting up of sustainable development goals (SDGs), which were discussed and approved by the heads of states at the United Nations Headquarters in New York. In order to achieve sustainable development, the conference unanimously agreed that poverty, unemployment and inequality need to be curtailed. Africa was also perceived as the continent which was still lagging far behind, despite its rich history and natural resource abundance.

However, despite strong emphases placed on addressing poverty, unemployment and inequality (triple challenges) through creating equal opportunities to citizens, South Africa currently remains the most unequal society in the world (Sadie, 2010; and Rosenthal, 2010). South Africa's vulnerability to social protests is linked to it being the most unequal society in the world (Lodge, 1994; Turok, 2009; and Rosenthal, 2010). The triple challenges are largely attributed to the repressive apartheid regime which negatively affected black communities. In the political front, it is thus befitting for Matisonn (2010, p.80) to observe that sustainable development could not be attainable if equal political opportunities are not given to all the citizens. The citizens need to individually and collectively influence the political process through active community participation. Arguing along similar lines, Verba & Nie (1972, p.1) cautions that "where few take part in decisions, there is little democracy; the more participation there is in decisions, the more democracy there is". The shift to people-centred approaches to development thinking was largely in response to the ineffective top-down, bureaucratic, and market-oriented approaches to development thinking (Chambers, 1987; and Chambers & Conway, 1992). The ineffectiveness of top-down approaches is largely attributed to the fact that they were not responsive to the needs of the poor. This shift was also directly in line with Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA), which began to advocate

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