

RESEARCH ARTICLE



Interrogating the Community Participation Paradigm: A theoretical Perspective

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Abstract

Community participation in governance processes has been viewed as enhancing a democratic culture within concerned communities by making participants part of the problem-solving mechanism. Proponents of community participation espouse divergent views but concur that positive attributes are realised. In South Africa the post-1994 democratic dispensation has created an enabling environment for community participation at different levels of government. This has been necessitated in part to the participatory approach the communities undertook to dislodge the apartheid regime. In South Africa, through appropriate constitutional provisions, communities have been empowered to have a stake in the running of their own affairs through elected councillors and municipal officials. With community participation, people have felt to be part of a solution to problems in their communities and this has helped to eliminate poverty through the engagement of private sector to provide services which cannot be efficiently delivered by government. Lack of interest in municipal affairs has also resulted in non-participation by some communities.

Keyword: Characteristic

Introduction

The main purpose of this paper is to give an analysis and significance of community participation in governance processes in general and in alleviating and eliminating poverty across and within local authorities in the South African context. The discussion will start by highlighting the theoretical framework guiding community participation on a comparative basis as well as the importance of the policy context in understanding the extent of poverty in the community. Communities as components of the decision-making and policy formulating mechanism will be analysed. Debates on the significance of community participation in community programmes will also be given prominence in the discussion. Institutional compliance with policy, at local authority level will be given prominence in the discussion because it is after compliance with policy matters informing the creation of an enabling environment for community participation, that decision-makers would be in a position to understand the dimensions of poverty in their localities. Knowledge and manipulation of dominant relations of power can also help to meet the needs and demands of the poor in the community. In addition to the foregoing, the paper will also seek to emphasise the significance of the voices of the poor as these can be turned into an integral component in addressing poverty because it is only through the involvement of appropriate communities that appropriate solutions to problems bedevilling communities can be identified and eventually solved. The paper is informed by the appropriate participatory theoretical approach which impresses upon *community participation* and *Public-Private-Partnership*

as attempts to address service delivery and infrastructural development. The paper will conclude by looking at the strengths and constraints of community participation in addressing poverty by local authorities and the vital role that policy plays in addressing poverty through community participation.

Theoretical Perspectives

There is a potpourri of definitions of community participation, varying mostly by the degree of participation. A community is a group of people with diverse characteristics who are linked by social ties, share common perspectives, and engage in joint action in **geographical locations or settings**. **Participation** ranges from negligible or "co-opted"—in which community members serve as token representatives with no part in making decisions—to "collective action"—in which local people initiate action, set the agenda, and work towards a commonly defined goal. A practical definition of community participation has been one given by Youths in Burkina Faso where they give community participation in varying degrees of continuum. Below is a tabular representation of their definition of "community participation":

Mode of Participation	Type of Participation	Outsider Control	Potential for Sustainability, Local Action & Ownership
Co-opted	Tokenism and/or manipulation; representatives are chosen but have no real power or input.	*****	
Cooperating	Tasks are assigned, with incentives. Outsiders decide agenda and direct the process.	****	*
Consulted	Local opinions are sought. Outsiders analyze data and decide on course of action.	***	**

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Collaborating	Local people work together with outsiders to determine priorities. Responsibility remains with outsiders for directing the process.	**	***
Co-learning	Local people and outsiders share their knowledge to create new understanding and work together to form action plans with outside facilitation.	*	****
Collective Action	Local people set the agenda and mobilize to carry it out, utilizing outsiders, NOT as initiators or facilitators, but as required by local people.		*****

Adapted from Advocates for Youth, Unpublished data from the Burkina Project (www.advocatesforyouth.org/publications/transitions/transitions1401.htm-accessed 9/2/08)

Community participation occurs when a community given the chance to organise itself, mobilize its members; and takes responsibility for managing its problems. Taking responsibility includes identifying the problems, developing actions, putting them into place, and following through. Community participation is a vitally important strategy in efforts to work with communities. Community participation is a strategy that respects the rights and ability of youth and other community members to design and implement programmes within their community. Community participation opens the way for community members—including youth—to act responsibly. Whether a participatory approach is the primary strategy or a complementary one, it will greatly enrich and strengthen programs and help achieve more sustainable, appropriate, and effective programs in the field.

Theories of Community participation

Participatory governance – Theoretic-analytical Approach

Proponents of the participatory governance theory argue that in analysing participatory governance, the major issues to be considered are the level of participation and the output/outcome of the participation. They assert that two principles are considered as fundamental criteria for a democratic system: Participation and “good” output and outcome, respectively. However proponents have conceded to the fact that the connection between participation and output/outcome is controversial in political scientific literature. Three different branches of theoretical approaches can be found. The first argument is that **too much participation is “bad”** for output and outcome, i.e., has negative effects. Secondly, no connection between input, output or outcome is expected; and thirdly, it is argued that there is a positive connection between participation and output/outcome. The foregoing schools of thought can be explained in detail below.

Debates around Community Participation

Nicole Cheetha (2002), commenting on community involvement in health and reproductive issues, conceded that “A community’s members are a rich source of knowledge about their community and of energy and commitment to that community”. **When public health professionals envision a program to address health issues in a particular community, tapping into the community’s expertise and enthusiasm is frequently an essential issue. Genuine participation by community members, including youth, is the key. Community**

members control the project at the same time that professional partners build the community’s capacity to make informed decisions and to take collective action.

Authors have however varied on their conception of community participation. While to view is as contributing to the enhancement of a democratic culture, others see community participation as just a window-dressing venture that further disadvantages the ordinary people. Below are arguments for and against community participation in governance processes.

Positive Impact of participation on output and outcome

Contrary to the arguments mentioned before, proponents of participatory democracy theories state a positive connection between participation and output/outcome (see Luthardt 1994/2000; overview: Schmalz-Bruns 2002). According to these authors, **the political system can only “work well” if citizens are involved and exercise democratic control to a large extent.** Different arguments refer to the positive effect of participation and I will only mention a few of them. Authors such as Lindblom (1965) or Fischer (2000) developed an argument that is centered on the knowledge of the people; citizens have special knowledge that is indispensable for the development of practice-oriented, effective, and meaningful solutions to problems. The involvement of stake holders would allow the gathering of knowledge and lead to optimal results. Most authors also assume, that political decisions are better accepted when the affected people. For democratic to be sufficient, citizens need new spaces in which to engage with local government, as well as the traditional liberal democratic forums. Thus, a participatory policy-process would facilitate the implementation of a policy. From this perspective, participation is not an antagonism to output/outcome, but the condition of optimal output/outcome

No connection between Input, Output, and Outcome

There are those authors who maintain a middle-of-the road approach by asserting that there is no connection between input and output at all. In their view, they indicate they existence of variables if the input-output and outcome theory is to work. They point out that output depends on several variables, but not necessarily on the input arrangements. Crucial variables could, for example, be institutional arrangements, socio-economic conditions of a certain territory, or the values and competencies of elites, especially in the consolidation of new democracies (Merkel 1999: 53ff.; Eisen /Kaase 1996) and much less in the context of policies. They consider input from the general public as of less importance.

Negative Impact of citizen participation

One of the most famous authors representing this theoretical approach is Dahl (1994:28) who described what he calls the democratic dilemma, i.e., the conflict between system output/outcome versus citizen participation. He indicated the dilemma emanated from the ability of the citizens to exercise democratic control over the decision of the polity versus the capacity of the system to respond satisfactorily to the collective preferences of its citizens. In the wake of this consideration, several arguments support the concept of the superiority of a purely representative type of democracy: Firstly, a broader participation of citizens and social groups is considered counter-productive, because this prevents an effective and efficient working of the political elite. Elite pacts and compromises would hardly be possible. Second, average citizens do not have the necessary skills and knowledge to be able to decide on complex political issues. **Most policies and problems would “require greater substantive information than the general public (or most legislators) has at their disposal” (Sabatier 1991: 149).** Other arguments include the danger of populism, of minority oppression, or the decrease of influence of the less educated (because they are often less involved in participatory forms of governance). They further maintain that with or without input from the public, decisions will have to be made. Oyugi, (2000a),

points out that there are a series of challenges to participatory democracy, where existing decentralization programmes often fall short of the great expectations that precede them, and fail to 'deepen' democracy. Further, exponents of community participation assert that institutional forms of liberal democracy and techno-bureaucratic administration has led to exclusion and alienation, not increased citizen involvement in government decision-making (Fung & Wright, 2001). We also find in the literature that increased participation may further entrench existing patterns of political and social inequality instead of the desired affect of increasing the voice of the poor and marginalised in local decision-making (Schönwälder, 1997).

Who Benefits from a Community Participation Approach?

In all the places where the participatory approach is applied, and where communities are practically involved, it has been observed that community participation has many direct beneficiaries when carried out with a high degree of community input and responsibility, where everyone benefits when participating in the activities. For example, adults and youth might participate in village committees to improve services. In health-related matters, youths, the most vulnerable group, benefit from improved knowledge about contraception and HIV/AIDS or from increased skill in negotiating condom use. During the deliberations on health-related matters, **communities are not only "lectured to" but form the basis of the deliberations and are practically involved.** The deliberations and programmes become concrete when communities are "immersed" in the deliberations and programmes. A truly participatory programme involves and benefits the entire community, including youth, young children, parents, teachers and schools, community leaders, health care providers, local government officials, and agency administrators. At the end of the day communities are endowed with life-skills and solutions to community problems. Programmes also benefit because trends in many nations towards decentralization and democratization also require increased decision making at the community level.

Key Characteristics and Skills that Facilitate the Community Participation Approach

Proponents of the participatory approach to community participation point out that those tasked to undertake such programmes should ensure that communities are involved as chief participants not observers. Those promoting community participation need to be able to facilitate a process, rather than to direct community programmes from the background. Facilitators need to have genuine confidence in a community's members and in their knowledge and resources. A facilitator should be willing to seek out local expertise and build on it while bolstering knowledge and skills as needed. Key characteristics and skills important to facilitating community participation include:

- Commitment to community-derived solutions to community-based problems
- Political, cultural, and gender sensitivity
- Ability to apply learning and behaviour change principles and theories
- Ability to assess, support, and build capacities in the community
- Confidence in the community's expertise
- Technical knowledge of the health or other issue(s) the project will address
- Ability to communicate well, especially by actively listening
- Ability to facilitate group meetings
- Programmatic and managerial strengths
- Organizational development expertise
- Ability to advocate for and defend community-based solutions and approaches (National Institutes of Health)

Key Challenges that face Community Participation Programmes

Community participation also poses important challenges. The most outstanding challenge for program planners is how to evaluate community participation. They are not really sure on, what should be evaluated; whether health outcomes, participation levels, improved capacities, or some combination of these. They are also not confident on how the foregoing should be evaluated. While measuring health outcomes—such as birth rates or sexual health knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours in a particular age group—may be fairly straight forward, it will be important for community participation programmes also to identify and measure indicators of participation. One of the goals is to achieve participation. Whether planners want to measure changes in community self-efficacy or changes in local capacity to identify and solve problems, it is important to define these objectives clearly and to develop appropriate tools for measuring progress toward the objectives. No one research tool would achieve the amount of objectivity required to measure levels of community participation, should the facilitators of the programmes settle on what should be evaluated. In such cases, the application of methods triangulation (a combination of qualitative and quantitative research tools) may be most appropriate to assess the subjective quality of "participation." Still indicators of participation and ways of assessing it should be defined by the community, and community members should decide and carry out the evaluation.

One of the difficulties in assessing participation and influence depends on the issue or subject matter in consideration. Because many programme sponsors are the legal corporate authorities, there is a tendency to perceive that "all decisions" ultimately rest with them, or with their appointed representative. The extent to which the community perceive that they have some degree of input into decisions regarding resource allocation and financial support, or are at the least solicited for their opinions, there tend to be more favourable assessments of democratic participation and more benevolent assessment of authority. In smaller and remote communities operating in a tight fiscal environment, all issues revolve around budgets and finance. It has been noted that evaluation of community programmes can be frustrating where budgetary power can "be used to effectively strangle programs and initiatives in which the administration is not interested and build programs which administrators favour."

Religiously-affiliated or sectarian communities can compound the dilemmas of participation and democratic decision-making because of the mandates and traditional obligations imposed on the usual governance structure of the communities. While some communities may exhibit strong institutional commitments to democratic values, but have an organizational culture and hierarchical decision-making structure, with authority vested at the top. Such arrangements may constrain and restrict community participation and possibly the promotion of civic engagement. Some constraints have been that most of the major substantive policy decisions are initiated by religious authorities. This has been prevalent in strong religious communities where evangelical pietism dominates the ethos of the community

Community participation and poverty alleviation In Local Governance: Case of South Africa

Why the policy context is important to understand the dimensions of poverty

Prior to 1994, the vast majority of the African population possessed no political rights. Consequently they had no or very little opportunity for community participation and no voice in the administration of affairs that directly affect their livelihood. **It was only after 1994 that the people's constitution made efforts to involve public participation.** Hence public policies formulated that put people participation at the centre-stage. Along 'people

participation' was the creation of 'people-centred development' which envisaged the involvement of communities in spearheading development and service delivery in their own constituencies. The RDP was premised on the need to address the concerns of the people through poverty alleviation through the provision of housing. The **decentralisation, devolution and delegation** of power from national and provincial levels to local levels were meant to incorporate people from grassroots levels to participate in governance. Community participation in local authority governance has been viewed as allowing for the revitalisation of a democratic ethos. The RDP as a policy framework endeavoured not only to understand the levels of poverty among the populace, but attempted to address the high levels of poverty that existed among people.

Baker et al. (1975; 12-15) define policy as "...a mechanism employed to realise societal goals and allocate resources". This implies that policy should be in place and then the implementation of this policy is the one which is utilised to solve societal problems. Poverty being one such societal problem, appropriate policies should be in place to help alleviate and eliminate poverty. It becomes democratic to engage community input to solve problems of poverty. Being a developmental state, South Africa has constitutional provisions that call for community involvement in tackling societal problems, poverty being one. The democratic nature of South Africa demands that it engages public participation in all endeavours.

Democracy in South Africa is reflected as a constitutional provision under which public administration has a developmental thrust. The constitution calls upon local authorities to address people's needs and to facilitate public participation in policy-making. Public involvement and participation must be visible at all levels of public administration ranging from the grassroots right up to the high echelons of decision-making machinery. At municipal level a legal provision, the Municipal Structures Act exhort municipal management to make report backs to their constituencies with a view to get feed back and community input. Chapter 4 of the Municipal Structures Act alludes to the fact that participation of citizens helps revolutionise the way local governance happens at the metropolitan level. Political structures such as councillors at ward level are ways meant to facilitate community participation through these local representatives.

How institutional compliance determines the success of a policy

Through community participation, decision-makers are made aware of the problems bedevilling the community, especially lack of adequate service delivery. Input from the community will also guide policy-makers in advancing the interests and addressing the needs of the people, especially in addressing issues of poverty, lack of decent housing, safe drinking water and provision of electricity. The Constitution of South Africa puts the engagement of people in developmental issues at the forefront. Through the constitutional proclamation in subsection 152(e), the government proclaims its position of empowering local government to encourage the involvement of communities and community organisations in matters of local government (RSA, 1996a).

It becomes incumbent upon local authorities to adhere to constitutional provisions in service delivery in their constituencies. One such policy framework is the Employment Equity Act (1998) which calls upon authorities to give preference to previously disadvantaged groups. Complying with this Act would imply the consideration, and affirmative action towards previously disadvantaged and marginalised groups, including women. This would in turn give women the chance to participate in the development of the country, and to earn a livelihood. The success of this policy, together with other policies, is based on the commitment of the executing authorities. Representation of various ethnic and racial groups is also dependent upon the commitment of employers to truthfully apply the provisions of various pieces of legislation that pertain to employment. The same goes for local authorities

whose operations are guided by legal provisions and policies. Compliance with policy and adhering to the various specifications would result in successful implementation of the policy at hand.

Why the voices of the poor are important to address poverty

The constitution of South Africa endeavours to provide a and the RDP stress the importance of nation building through improved standards of living for all, as well as the increased importance of local government for development planning at grassroots level. This implicitly means that poverty is a human rights violation with the government, through local authorities should resolve. It becomes necessary for communities, especially the poor ones, to involve and approach local authorities with their concerns. To equip the voiceless in the community, *Fair Share* has initiated a programme called Budget Advocacy and Monitoring Resource (BAMR) whose mandate is "...about assisting community organisations to participate actively in municipal budgeting processes and strengthen the capacity of community organisations to influence municipal budgets".

Municipal authorities are receptive and accommodating to the concerns of their constituencies, especially when it comes to service delivery. It is also the poor who know what they want and their voice is usually vital when it comes to elections where decisions are to be made on who to vote for either in local, provincial or national elections. In most cases, it is when the poor comes into the scene as the electorate that their voice becomes very important. It is also the poor who can cause commotion when their concerns are not addressed; hence the need to incorporate them into development programmes and ensure service delivery to them is prompt. By making the poor part of developmental programmes, local authorities will make them feel part of the decision-making process and this would make them compliant to any by-laws since they would feel obliged to be compliant.

Community participation manifested itself when people embarked on a participatory approach to dislodge the apartheid regime and to ensure a better life for all the people of South Africa. And it was those deprived of their right to basic commodities who helped in spearheading the struggle against apartheid.

How dominant relations of power can be transformed to meet the basic needs of the poor

The apartheid exclusivist relations of power did not cater for, implement or provide constitutional provisions for community participation in their plans. This implicitly indicates that communities were taken as unable to contribute to their welfare, hence abject poverty persisted. There was no provision for adequate and meaningful community participation in local government affairs for the African majority. With the advent of a democratic dispensation in 1994, an all-encompassing and exclusionist relations of power attempted to address colonial anomalies through coming up with constitutional provisions that cater for community participation in addressing societal problems such as poverty that had been caused by deprivation during the apartheid era.

The constitutional inclusion of community participation in local governance shows the commitment of the new power relations to involve communities in contributing to solutions to solve their problems. The fact that communities are empowered to choose representatives at street, ward and local authority level should be an indication of the commitment of the national authorities to enable input from communities. Through interaction with the local authorities and elected councillors, communities should help transform their constituencies because of the existence of enabling legal provisions in the constitution. At such forums, communities are made conscious of their rights and obligations both at grassroots and local government levels.

The enabling environment created by the legal provisions also facilitates the incorporation of the private sector in addressing community problems; especially those of the provision of housing which have caused abject poverty among communities. The *Public-Private-Partnership* have been necessitated and facilitated by the need to involve civil society in helping addressing problems in communities, with the involvement of the communities. In such endeavours, the government has been there to facilitate the construction of housing and other infrastructure through contracting the private sector. *Policy analysis* has come in handy in identifying that government does not have both the financial resources and expertise to erect infrastructure and efficient service delivery, hence the contracting of the private sector to provide service in important but non-essential sectors while essential services like the provision of water and electricity have remained in the hands of government. Policy analysis has also ensured that services provided by the private sector to communities are affordable since expensive service delivery would impoverish people the more. The Local Government Municipals Systems Act empowers and enables communities to define their own goals, need as well as related priorities

Rationale for community participation in governance

Governance enables institutions to fulfil their missions, goals and objectives. These objectives, goals and missions can be achieved through a prescribed "...manner in which power can be exercised through the efficient utilisation of available resources and management of a country's economic and social development". It is an on-going process that affects how results are achieved through steering and controlling an activity. Kooiman (1993:59) echoes the foregoing sentiments by maintaining that "...governance is composed of purposeful action to guide, steer, and control society with ordinary people being incorporated into the decision-making process". Interface between the state and communities can occur where people are afforded the opportunity to articulate their concerns.

Governance is also necessary to help maintain uniformity and rationality in activities that are meant to achieve public good objectives. Without some form of authority to steer and control, there is bound to be mayhem but community participation should not be compromised.

Community participation indicators

While at national level the existence of a democratically elected government may be an indication that people were consulted, but at municipal level that cannot be the readily assumed to be the case. At local government level, the election of local **councillors** and, representatives at ward, provincial and national levels is indicative of participation by local communities in addressing issues that concern them, such as poverty eradication and service delivery

The existence of Public-Private-Partnership projects also indicates the extent to which communities are consulted in trying to address their concerns. The holding of consultative forums at local levels is another indication of interaction between the state and grassroots level citizens. The involvement and consultation of various members of the community and an exchange of ideas as well as report-backs by the provincial and national government can be viewed as indicators that community participation is taking place. Consultations with communities would come in the form of allowing communities to critique local authority developmental programmes, the existence of **Local Community task Force** and **Local Management Boards**, as well as involving local communities in the drawing up of local authorities' budgets and subsequent allocation and disbursement of money to various projects. Communities will be in a position to identify, notify and draw the attention of the local authorities to projects that need urgent attention

Constraints to community participation

While there are constitutional provisions that provide for community participation at local government level, but there have been a number of impediments which militate against community participation. However, despite the vital importance of community participation in poverty alleviation and elimination, it has met with a number of challenges and impediments. The existence of bureaucratic structures has posed structural limitations against the backdrop of uneven power relations which have in turn severely hindered a constitutionally-driven community participation model of development planning at grassroots level. The constitution does not precisely prescribe the parameters and depth of grassroots community engagement and involvement in policy and developmental planning. This has tended to create a void and a leeway for manipulation by individuals at the expense of whole communities. Interpretation of legal framework on community participation has been left to senior officials whose interpretation may not be in line with the expectations of the community.

The re-emergence of bureaucracies that were instrumental in planning programmes during the apartheid in the new democratic dispensation has been a cause for concern for frustration of community participation endeavours. Ironically, these bureaucracies have been found once again doing the same task –being responsible for participatory development planning. This would cast doubts as to their sincerity and commitment to community engagement and involvement. Questions have also been raised as to whether the same apartheid architects have undergone a paradigm shift. This scenario has caused loss of confidence by the communities involved. The same bureaucracies have also failed to show commitment to eliminate poverty, hence the existence of high levels of poverty thirteen years after the first democratic elections which brought the **people's government into power**.

Although significant progress has been made in encouraging and assisting community organisations to utilise municipal budgeting processes to advocate for their interests and issues as well as monitor municipal expenditure, many challenges still stand on the way of meaningful community participation. Some of these challenges include the undemocratic culture of withholding information by municipalities, inaccessible councillors and officials, lack of financial reports and the general fear of community members to engage with the budgets and financial documents. Many communities are not aware of municipal formalities and the centrality of municipal budgets to issues of development, service delivery and combating poverty and have even shown general lack of interest on how municipal resources are accumulated, disbursed and accounted for. This has discouraged many communities from playing an active role in the budgeting processes of their municipalities since many communities see no concrete link to their general welfare, hence the lack of interest. Some have remained contented with what is generally an insignificant consultation process which is undertaken by some municipalities as a formality just before the budgets are approved by municipal councils. In most cases, this consultation area mere formality and usually relegate community participation in the budget process at the tail end of the budgeting process.

Among other challenges that have hindered community participation and exacerbated poverty in some local authorities have been corruption, maladministration, over-expenditure, low levels of capital expenditure, fiscal dumping, fruitless expenditure and huge disproportionate salaries within municipalities, the latter point of which tends to chew a large chunk of the municipal revenue. This has been worrisome given the bankruptcy of some local authorities alongside abject poverty among the communities.

Conclusions and Recommendations

From the foregoing discussions, communities derive much benefit from participation in the affairs of local authorities in an effort to address their concerns and to alleviate and eliminate poverty, as well as to improve service delivery in their localities.

on-participation by some communities have been a result of not being informed about the significance of participating in the administration of community affairs, with special emphasis on municipal budgeting processes and the subsequent disbursement of municipal revenue. Local communities should therefore be exposed to information pertaining to the importance of participation.

Public relations departments of municipalities should also be encouraged to sensitise communities on the need to participate in such important issues as the budgeting process. Concrete benefits should be seen as proof of efforts of municipalities at eliminating poverty among their communities. This would encourage communities to engage local authorities on issues of concern to them. Municipal officials, through local councillors, should be reprimanded for making consultative forums a formality without taking into serious consideration input from the community. Monitoring mechanisms should be put in place to ensure that an enabling environment is created to facilitate community participation and to rid any euphoria that might be within the community of financial matters.

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