

THE RURAL DEVELOPMENT FALSE START IN ZIMBABWE: A DICHOTOMOUS COMPOSITION OF THEORY AND PRACTICE INFORMING COMMUNITY BASED PLANNING IN BINGA DISTRICT

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ABSTRACT

Despite years of sustained state led and non-state development interventions, underdevelopment has continued unabated in Binga communities with very little imprints of positive strides. The path taken for rural development through Community Based Planning (CBP) has scored theoretical success but has limited relevance to what it has done practically. Its theoretical implications as stretching from the Prime Minister's directive of 1984 which informed participatory planning in development sought to engage poor and vulnerable groups in communities to improve the quality of their plans, improve the quality of services and to influence resource allocation. These development plans will be integrated into the local authority plans and subsequently into the central government budgeting cycle. However, CBP is but a theory, community participation in planning is yet to be a fulfilled idea. Rural interventions have been predominately elusive in their attempt of turning around the fortunes towards development and the tragic consequences of this are all too clear in the intensifying poverty and the diminishing viability of the Binga community development fabric. The foundational bases for development strides impressed supposed solutions to communities sidelining local people into the confines of prescriptions that are parallel to their priority needs.

Keywords: Development, Rural Development, Community Based Planning, Binga

Introduction

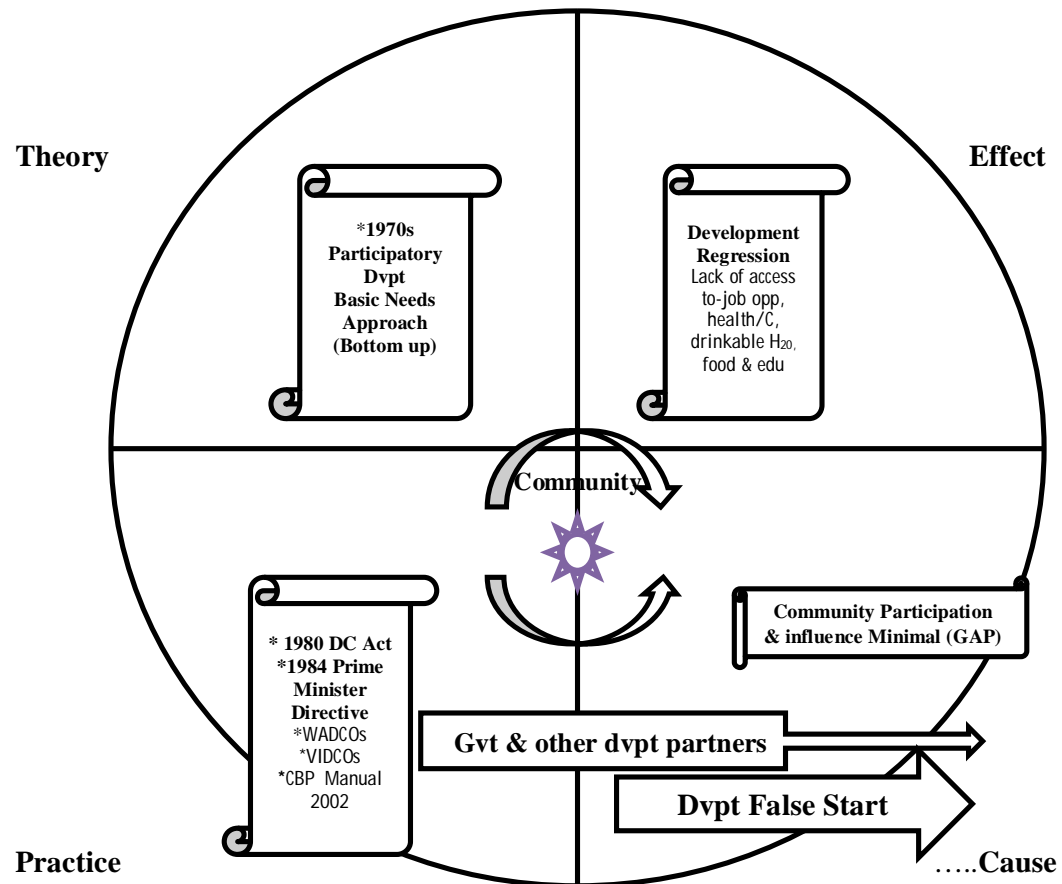
Development strategies have transcended theory and formidably “falsely” practical underlying hinging so much hope of turning around the fortunes toward advancement. Models of rural development have been rolled out but the output inversely minimal to justify government development agenda and aid related support with its associated efforts. As such, Community Based Planning has been a development model whose theory hardly translates into practice. Its reality glosses over the supposed community empowerment in formulating plans for leap forward strategies hence resulting in what this study calls the “rural development false start”.

Theoretical Framework: Community Based Planning in Retrospect

According to Thwaites *et al* (2004:21) “the idea of involving ordinary people in planning is well established in the literature, even if it is not well established in the practice of planning.” However, planning should not be regarded as a new phenomenon as Clayton *et al*, (2003) clearly point out that “participation is nothing less than the fabric of social life”. People have always participated in the development of their own livelihood strategies and cultures. Whether through formal or informal organisations, autocratic or democratic means, a variety of structures and procedures have evolved to define and address collective needs, to resolve conflicts, to make plans and take the steps necessary to implement them (Ibid). in Zimbabwe, this approach of CBP where development is initiated, planned, controlled, driven, monitored and evaluated by the community evolved through a three tier setting of pre-independence, colonial and after independence interlude. According to Loewenson *et al* (2004) development before 1890 was driven by communities through their leaders. There was dialogue first before agreement and traditional leadership was the key player in development. Loewenson *et al* continue elaborating that during the white settler rule (1890-1980) traditional leadership was distorted and made agents of the state. The religion which was pivotal in uniting people for a common purpose was destroyed and planning was top down and development was initiated by the Centre. The planning processes were highly prescriptive, patriarchal, and paternalistic and centralized, (Loewenson *et al*).

The new Zimbabwean government in 1980 introduced participatory planning and democratised rural local governance. Local – level participation in the identification, articulation and implementation of development projects within the communal areas has been facilitated by the democratisation of local government and the establishment of a hierarchy of development planning fora at which the local inhabitants are represented in Village, Ward and Rural District Development Committees (VIDCO, WADCO, and RDDC), up to the Provincial Development Committees (PDC) (Taylor and Mackenzie 1992:39). The priority given to rural development after independence was the new government's way of thanking the rural populace for its support during the war (Ibid: 44). Thus, the theoretical framework informing CBP formulated in the wake of the then Prime Minister's Directive in 1984 advocated for development to be bottom up with plans originating from the community at grass root level to the central government. According to Stewart *et al*, (1994:5) organisational structures for popular participation in development planning were outlined in the then Prime Minister's Directive on Decentralisation (1984 and 1985), which provided the basis for a hierarchy of representative bodies at the village, ward, district and provincial levels. However, there seems to be an inherently loose connection in the hierarchy, with no downward relationship to come up with hybrid plans reflective of community input.

The CBP Conceptual Framework



Key

- DC: - District Council
- Dvpt: - Development
- Gvt: - Government
- Edu: - Education
- Opp: - Opportunities

The diagram above summarises the development process as informed by an alternative to mainstream top- down development. The emergence of participatory development in the 1970s introduced the basic needs approach to development which sought to engage local communities in development projects. As a practical stance to embrace fully the participatory approach, in 1984 the Prime Minister gave a directive which was a spring board for planning at micro level through the formation of VIDCO and WADCO structures. In 2002, a CBP Manual was developed as part of a project aiming to develop systems for community based planning that can be applied country wide (MCBP, 2002). However, not much has been realised through this strategy of reversals primarily due to a “development false start”, a direct result of community minimal participation in the planning process for the development agenda. The tragic consequences of this are all too clear in the intensifying poverty and the diminishing viability of the Binga development fabric indicated in the fourth (effect) segment.

A Review into Bottom up Approach to Development

World Bank (1989:194) gives rhetoric on development from within, alluding that “Like trees, countries cannot be made to grow by being pulled upward from the outside; they must grow from within, from their own roots”. Thus, a basic objective of development from within is to allow local people to become the subjects, not the objects of development strategies. Taylor and Mackenzie, (1992:257) argue that, when communities are given the opportunity to participate meaningfully in development initiatives, “...they have shown themselves to be perfectly capable of making rational choices regarding their own destinies.” Even where there is participation from below - from individuals and communities, the function of development planning is understood to belong to national government, the others are mere helpers (Kent, 1981:1). It is within this premise that this inquiry sought to find out the reasons why local people should be the beneficiaries, but not the producers of their own development. Community participation is largely yet to be a fulfilled idea. The trend of some community development is based on plans formulated elsewhere, lacking contextual setting which forms the bases of development false start, a state of reaching a degree of progress and change and

then sliding back due to sustainability bottleneck which deals with symptoms while glossing over the root causes.

The context within which rural development is understood in this study is a process of people taking charge of their lives through meaningful involvement and participation in community development agenda. In this respect, development for the rural populace has little trace of beneficiary involvement hence suffice to dismiss it as alien to their needs, thus more aligned to starting on a development path before co-opting the beneficiary view points and stance which taps into their local knowledge, a development false start. The developmental signal should be flagged by communities at grass roots, a buy in that informs active participation blended with ownership which resultantly leads to sustainability. There is need to devise more people centred approaches which stress empowerment and participation. Empowerment as participatory development seeks to engender self-help and self-reliance but also effective collective decision making. Borrowed solutions or universalised approaches have failed development. Third world countries including Zimbabwe are very heterogeneous, dissimilar in terms of population, resources, climates, culture, economic structure and locations. It is within this premise that Taylor and Mackenzie, (1992: xiii) summarise the weaknesses of participatory development as “problems emanated from the lack of theorising of social relations with respect to the composition of the state, the existence of class and gender differentiation, and, in turn, state local relations”.

This research sought to study the relevance of Community Based Planning as a rural development approach relevant to the specific needs of the Binga communities. This is the bases of Zimbabwean government to decentralise planning since independence through creating local government structures. This drive translated into community based planning which presumes that people who live in a community should have the right to set the course for their community’s future in terms of development. Local solutions to local challenges are not just a befitting well-meaning answer but sustainable as well.

Back Ground to Binga and its Development

Binga is the largest of the seven districts in Matabeleland North lying on the south eastern shore of Lake Kariba. It is one of the outposts of Zimbabwe that is underdeveloped with plentiful water from the Zambezi River but in perpetual drought. It has a total population of

138 074 people as captured by (ZCPR, 2012:63). Binga is predominately Tonga speaking and the BaTonga esteem their culture so highly which has helped them face and adapt to the massive challenges that their environment presented them.

According to Kuthan (2001) “the valley Tonga are the third ethnic group in Zimbabwe and some of the most marginalised people in the country. In 1957 they were forcibly removed from the fertile shores of the Zambezi River to make way for the building of Kariba dam, which brought electricity to the rest of Zimbabwe and huge benefits to the nation in the form of commercial fisheries and tourism (Ibid). Kuthan continue to point out that, until the 1980s, which saw the building of schools, clinics and roads, these benefits all but completely by passed the Tonga. This is the development neglect that the Tonga has rotational pointed to, topical being the failure by the powers that be to compensate them for the forced massive resettlement.

Binga is predominately in agro-ecological region four with erratic rainfall pattern. Agricultural production is not viable but livestock rearing especially small stock like goats which is one of their sources of livelihood income. Fishing from the Zambezi River is also one lucrative economic endeavour. The sale of vegetables from group nutrition and individual gardens has been adopted as a livelihood source especially by women. Due to its underdeveloped status, Binga has seen an exponential growth of Non-Governmental Organisation (NGOs) since independence and the composition, nature; roles and activities of these NGOs when pulled together define the depth and diversity of inadequacies that have compounded the region socially, politically and economically.

This research investigates the theory and practice of CBP in Binga district. It examined how the approach of community involvement was introduced and its structures linked to meso level bodies of District Council. McGregor (2009:156) contends that “In nearly every sphere of development, Binga has been overlooked and always unfortunate enough to be placed at the tail end of the receiving line where priorities are concerned”. As a result of this, it is drastically lacking in all the essential public services such as health, education, communication and agricultural development (Ibid). Due to this lack of progress which in this study is understood as “development false start”, Binga has been forced to rely almost entirely on aid from various charitable institutions. This is evidenced by an exponential rise

of NGOs since independence which is appreciated but is far from being sufficient to fulfill her development requirements (Ibid). Participatory Development (PD) is yet to fully take off hence incidents of false start continue to have an imprint into the development agenda.

Although, the community based planning approach is widely viewed as the panacea for sustainable development at community level, it has sparked a great deal of debate and controversy and has served as an impetus for more critical analyses of the concept in recent times. Despite of its wide acceptance as a useful approach to rural development there are still many projects that are lying idle and the blame has often been shifted to lack of funding and other factors such as conflicts, imposition and lack of commitment. Concerns have thus been raised on the effectiveness of community based planning in rural development because of the seeming incompatibility between theory and practice.

The rural development efforts in Binga communities are one such classic case study of impressed top down, closed concept void of contextual relevance to turning around the development fortunes toward real people driven basic needs. The mapping exercise to locate community needs is the missing link with many NGOs who are operating in Binga.

According to McGregor, (2009:162) “the Binga Council deemed progress since 1985 to be too slow to the point of failing”. Paradoxically, the council’s concern on development progress came just after a year when the Prime Minister’s directive was introduced in 1984 which informed participatory planning in development. One of the visitors to Binga whose first visit as a Sunday News reporter was in 1983 noted the following three decades after, (2012), with regards to Binga’s development:

I had been assigned to cover the official handover by the Prime Minister Robert Mugabe of 37 fishing boats to the Tweezye fishing cooperative at Chitemene Fishing camp at Binga Centre. The Prime Minister said the fact that the Binga District had stagnated in development and was one of the most neglected areas in the country was a characteristic feature of the political economy of colonialism whereby under developed areas became the major reservoir of cheap labour for the developed ones. The visit by the Prime Minister to Binga at that time, just to present boats to a fishing cooperative was meant to demonstrate Governments commitment towards the development of the district. The Minister of Community Development and Women’s

Affairs Teurai Ropa Nhongo who also addressed the 400 people gathered for the function said her ministry had about half a million dollars set aside for community development programmes in Binga District. Thirty years after that visit, there is not much to show for that amount of commitment demonstrated on that day by the then Prime Minister and some members of cabinet in the vast district with 21 wards and a population of over 200 000, (Machakaire, 2012).

Among the major achievements, though was the tarring of the 140 kilometers stretch of road from Kamativi to Binga centre around 1985 (Ibid). The road is now very old and some sections are so bad that they require resurfacing. The construction of Binga District Hospital and several clinics among them Sianzyundu clinic are some of the major developments. The most recent much celebrated development was the move by the Ministry of Education which saw the local Tonga language being examined at grade seven level in 2011 (Machakaire, 2012). It is within this context that NGOs have endeared themselves to the Binga communities through their gallant unmatched efforts especially in areas of poverty alleviation and drought relief provision all in the name of rural development. This drive by NGOs is as a result of the rolling back of the state in development initiatives. With these entire well-meaning steps in the direction of community development the study sought to locate the level of community participation, their role in informing the direction of these interventions.

When all the ground work for development take off had seemingly been laid down supported by the 1984 Prime Minister's directive and his visit and development commitments to Binga district, the current state of development in the district points to a regression. This is evidenced by lack of access to job opportunities, health care, drinkable water, food and education which are all symptoms of underdevelopment. This explains the Rural Development False Start in Binga District where the rolled out government development agenda have minimal input from the locals, thus starting negatively the development path which had little relevance to the documented theory of CBP. This stance is the one explained by Thwaites *et al* (2004:21) when he alludes that "the idea of involving ordinary people in planning is well established in the literature, even if it is not well established in the practice of planning".

The trickle down expectations of the national cake has been a pipe line dream premised within the politics of recognition by the Tonga people. Thus, CBP in its effort to give development initiatives a local flair has narrowly influenced planning at higher level as a way of merging priorities and addressing real needs and gaps. Planning at meso level has remained dominated by top-down approaches and the local authorities have no clear mechanisms for listening or even responding to community priorities. Village Development Committees (VIDCOs) and Ward Development Committees (WADCOs) as avenues for necessitating development planning at grass root level have proved dysfunctional. Constitution and utilisation of these governing structures remains rooted within the confines of theory, without practical outcome being realised. Political factors, lack of financial autonomy and other factors are compromising VIDCOs' role of defining local needs. The validity of development approaches in this study will not be determined as a result of theoretical and ideological debate, but in the realm of practice translated into CBP based principally on maximum mobilisation of each area's natural, human, and institutional resources with the primary objective being satisfaction of the basic needs of the Binga populace.

General Understanding of CBP

The high percentages on the understanding of Community Based Planning reflected by the research findings confirm indeed that in general, communities and development implementers appreciate that CBP is in existence as a rural development tool. The study found out that, some viewed CBP as just the involvement of the community in all the development activities to be undertaken within their communities. Others indicated that it is the inclusivity of the marginalised and the grassroots in the decision making, planning, monitoring, evaluation and implementation of the development programmes within their area of jurisdiction, others noted that it is the bottom-up approach or system of development where the grassroots decisions on development are valued and lastly others viewed it as a participatory or liberal approach of development that seeks to empower the powerless.

The findings suggest that CBP is popularly viewed as an involvement, inclusivity, participation and bottom-up approach in decision making, planning, monitoring, evaluation and implementation of all development programmes at community level.

CBP – A Theory or Practice?

Another view which emerged was that Community Based Planning involves the decentralised governance approach in development as opposed to an over-centralised system of the unitary state. To this end, the phrase CBP is viewed as a democratic, bottom-up and decentralised approach or system in rural development. However, this popular view also differs with other scholarly views that see CBP as more than just inclusivity and or involvement of communities in development projects. The 1979 WCARRD, Rome, conference declared that participation by rural people in the institutions that govern their lives is ‘a basic human right’: and added that if rural development was to realise its potential, disadvantaged rural people had to be organised and actively involved in designing policies and programmes and in controlling social and economic institutions. This view suggests that there is more to participatory approaches than meets the eye. Most programmes are only to allow participation of the rural communities at certain stages such as implementation.

Designing policies and programmes is always a preserve of the NGOs and their representatives thus making CBP as a mere theory. To add to the theoretical perspective, it can be noted that, these NGOs normally do not take opinions of villagers into consideration instead choosing to import development instead of contextualising it. Stirrat (1996) supports this view when he notes that NGOs working in rural development may talk of empowerment but in practice they are often accountable not to their members or those they work with, but to their donors, and it is the donors’ criteria that they have to satisfy in order to continue being funded. This may lead to the adoption of very similar views to the donor’s and create shared interests that work against the interests of the general populace, thus leading to development false start.

Community Based Planning and Bureaucracy

The study also noted some challenges with Community Based Planning. Respondents noted that it is too bureaucratic and consumes a lot of time in consultations before the projects start thus leading to loss of valuable time. This view is supported by Rogers (2008:57) who notes that “with a large number of participants in the planning process of a project, communication and information sharing could get ambiguous and troublesome”. Das (2006) however seems to contradict this view as he notes that there is also some evidence that community-based projects are comparatively cost effective because of lower levels of bureaucracy and better

knowledge of local costs. However, with the results of this study, this paper would want to differ with Das' assertions as it came out clear that community based projects suffer a lot of bureaucracy in their implementation.

In addition to that, some respondents noted that CBP's greatest weakness is that it empowers the already empowered minority groups in the society (which is in total contrast with the core principles of the approach). This view is also supported by scholars such as Mosse (2001) who note that rather than project plans being shaped by "indigenous knowledge", it is the powerful elite who acquire and learn to manipulate new forms of "planning knowledge". This view shows that, the much talked about "empowerment of the marginalised" through participatory approaches is a mere rhetoric as these projects always fall into the hands of the powerful elite and they are the major beneficiaries. Kothari (2001) supports this view when she throws doubt on the claims of participatory methodologies of acquiring more appropriate and relevant local knowledge and of including and empowering those previously marginalised.

Issues of Participation and Politics

It is on record that not everyone attends the stakeholders meetings and not everyone who attends will be heard and have their ideas taken into consideration. This view also implies another weakness of the CBP in that in theory, it is a good approach but on the ground its ideals are impracticable. Stone (1989) supports this when she notes that there are often gaps in between the ideals and rhetoric of community participation and "the actual practices of the so called participatory programs". In addition, it was also noted that, by its nature, CBP stirs up untold conflicts within the society as power dynamics always come into play when human beings interact. This is supported by literature from (Cleaver, 2001; Francis, 2001) who argue that participatory approaches stress – and rely upon – community consensus and solidarity and tend to pay insufficient attention to social differentiation and conflict, negotiation, inclusion and exclusion, with all that this implies. They note that harmony and cooperation are the exception rather than the rule in rural societies, where division and conflict are much more common.

In addition to the above challenges of CBP, the study also showed that political instability is always mixed with development. There is time wasting through unnecessary consultations

thus making its processes expensive and requiring a lot of resources. These were some of the disadvantages of the Community Based Planning. More importantly, lack of effective participation from all the stakeholders and the prevalence of conflicts that ranges from structural, cultural, gender and direct violence were identified as the challenges to Community Based Planning. In the same vein, one informant from Saba ward was quoted as saying;

“The patriarchal minded leaders operate in a closed system void of participatory planning. They are an end to themselves. Culture of patriarchy is influencing their actions in leadership positions. Grass root ideas are dominated and suffocated due to the social orientation of community leaders. We need result oriented women in leadership to reverse this tendency, man alone despite all the advances of participatory planning will take years to change, man by their nature are resistant to change. Politics usually informs their positions not what the community envisages as the priority. Politics has divided us.” (Interview with Mombe 2013)

To this end, results of the findings revealed that political instability and bureaucracy, lack of effective participation from all the stakeholders and the prevalence of conflicts that ranges from structural, cultural and direct conflicts among other issues were the major weaknesses of CBP.

A weakness in this context refers to the failure of a strategy to realise the anticipated results. For example, some political motivated meetings in the name of Community Based Planning can spoil all the merits behind the aforementioned approach.

Major Advantages of CBP

One of the advantages of the approach which the study revealed was that it empowers the grassroots and the marginalised by allowing them opportunities to contribute to their projects. As Anderson (1999) notes that there is a broad agreement that community-based interventions have the potential to be more responsive to the needs and priorities of beneficiaries. This is understandable, if one takes into account that, most community based projects which use CBP purport to heavily consult beneficiaries on their needs before

embarking on any project or development initiative. If this is the case then it also means that all development initiatives are reflective of the needs and priorities of beneficiaries.

The study also revealed that another major advantage of CBP was that it enhances a sense of accountability and transparency of the development project thereby strengthening local capacities by virtue of their participation in these projects. These popular views are also shared by prominent scholars such as Batley (2006) who contend that mobilisation of community members to identify problems and plan and manage projects helps strengthen local capacity for collective action.

It can also be noted that in general, community based projects which also use CBP have a bias towards the involvement of women and girls (in a bid to address gender imbalances) in their projects. With this in mind, it can easily be concluded that, empowerment is one of its greatest advantages as it equips the previously marginalised groups. Furthermore, some informants indicated that CBP enhances the social capital of the people within and outside the society.

In addition, other informants cited that intervention strategies provide knowledge and skills of doing some projects that can give them employment. To this end, the results of the findings revealed that enhancement of knowledge through stakeholders meetings, capacity strengthening, a sense of ownership and responsibility, accountability and transparency gives Community Based Planning a mileage.

A closer look at the above findings shows that there are points of similarities cited by informants in that empowerment, accountability, sense of responsibility and transparency seems to be the major recurring themes. This is true considering that most of the identified strengths such as provision of knowledge and employment to individuals is reflected by seeing people doing their own projects separate from the community development that might have lied idle for various reasons. Spencer (2006) postulates that community participation processes include an identification of stakeholders, establishing systems that allow for engagement with stakeholders by public officials, and development of a wide range of participatory mechanisms thereby strengthening the society at grassroots level.

However, the findings in this research contrasts with some reviewed literature in that while informants identified the prospects of Community Based Planning its critiques have also challenged it from a practical point of view as revealed by Chambers (1997) who makes considerable claims of validity and reliability for the knowledge about the world through CBP. Campbell (2001) expresses reservations about these claims, on methodological grounds. He argues that 'though CBP and IKS were intended to provide roughly accurate information, the tendency has been to use them as a stand-alone set of techniques to undertake research' (ibid: 37) and that failure by participatory researchers to engage with issues of validity and reliability as defined in the qualitative research tradition will result in unfocused work, limited practical, theoretical and policy value. In a convergence of these ideas one informant noted that the greatest challenge of CBP is that of bringing together people from world apart intentions and drives for a common purpose when he argues that:

Linking my experience with CBP I think in as much as we are encouraged to work as a whole, individual project should also be considered. We are different in many ways and consensus is usually a problem in some aspects. Mainstream projects like the irrigation underway and the clinic we are building in Manjolo can enhance our individual efforts in development. We cannot be bungled as a unit for development (Interview with Mangisi 2013).

Possible Improvements to CBP

To address these challenges, the study identified mechanisms to improve Community Based Planning as a tool for rural development. Respondents noted the need to strengthen the governance structures to make the environment favorable for development as a mechanism to improve CBP. Respondents also noted that, as an approach, it was imperative for it to identify the most vulnerable groups as beneficiaries to the development projects. In addition, consultation time had to be realistic to allow for meaningful and proper consultations of all relevant stakeholders, otherwise, it becomes mere rhetoric. Also the process must not be too restrictive but rather flexible enough to accommodate current trends and practices in development work.

Some informants cited the need for monitoring and evaluating (which according to Crouch (2004) involves reviewing and assessing activity progress) of programmes on a regular basis, as a mechanism to improve CBP, Goetz and Jenkins (1999) concurs with this view when they note that, monitoring and evaluation, and ensuring that resources are spent for necessary technical resources by service providers improves community participation.

Synergies with other Development Approaches

More importantly, creating synergies with other development approaches that is Rights Based Programming and Indigenous Knowledge Systems were also noted by respondents as a mechanism to improve CBP. This, one presumably is an acknowledgement that no one approach is adequate in itself no matter how good it may be. Any approach will always need to be complemented by others to make up for its loopholes and or weaknesses, this view is supported by Barnhardt (2005:3) who notes that the CBP and IKS should be merged if we want to apprehend the reality of the rural development materialisation.

Naturally, the study also sought to establish from respondents if there are any other alternative development approaches that can be employed to improve the effectiveness of the Community Based Planning to rural development. Gomo et al (2003) support this notion when they suggest Sustainable Human Development approach (SHD) as an alternative governance framework in much of their writings. In any case, current development trends demand an approach that guarantees sustainable development.

Respondents also noted other rural development approaches that can be synergised together with CBP for better results. Respondents noted that, Rights based programming has the potential to complement CBP for better results. This view is not surprising considering world trends in terms of human rights, their attainment and or abuse. Rights Based Approach demands that beneficiaries are not beneficiaries but are rights holders and therefore development work should not be seen as charity but as a fulfillment of injustices of the past. Should this mindset be inculcated in communities, then we should see them demanding more of their needs than accepting fate.

Conclusion

From a theoretical point of view CBP is effective as it idealises community relations as solid and their interactions with government as smooth. In reality however as the study has shown, CBP is ineffective because of a number of issues which include but are not limited to bureaucracy, lack of requisite skills for planning, political abuse and lack of financial resources. CBP's core principles of popular participation are impracticable in an environment where power and politics dominate the development arena and unless these are addressed,

beneficiary participation in planning will remain a theory rather than a practice, leading to rural development false start.

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