

A Review to Understanding the Effectiveness of Community Engagement as an Approach to Sustaining Community Development

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Abstract: Communities in societies are resourceful hubs formed overtime with grouping features of existence of species within it attending to day to day activities of life. The most referred to communities are those for human habitation who have shared responsibilities between them and the State for sustainable developed communities. The responsibility of a community does therefore ensure that the State's policies and a community are engaging so as to be aligned to its developmental aspirations and for its sustainability.

A descriptive study to review a community's engagement in decision making was conducted focusing on 6 key respondents who were selected through a purposive sample to relate their vast experience in community engagement.

A finding revealed that community engagement levels have been poor or low in most communities due to lack of education and awareness on community engagement policies and approaches among community members.

The recommendations on this study pointed to the need for education and awareness in the role of communities; in community development initiatives and how their engagement into community decision making processes lead to sustained community development.

Keywords: *Community Engagement, Community, Decision Making, Responsibility.*

How to Cite: Nsala Mauzu; Lucky Musonda (2025) A Review to Understanding the Effectiveness of Community Engagement as an Approach to Sustaining Community Development. *International Journal of Innovative Science and Research Technology*, 10(3), 2064-2068. <https://doi.org/10.38124/ijisrt/25mar496>

I. INTRODUCTION

A community is a feature of society that stands to represent commonalities of human and geographical characters. Therefore, in order for society or government to gain support regarding developmental issues, community consensus has been needed. The need for community consensus has not been easy due to its nature or character. The nature of a community represents humans or people with diverse backgrounds. Then a community of such nature will need to be mobilized and organized to achieve a common purpose focused towards developmental issues. This requires involving almost all community members in recognizing and taking up development projects within their community.

In regard to the nature of a community, community engagement has been one of the approaches initiated with a view to hearing people's voices to aid in decision making processes for improving the community wellbeing (Moos, et al, 2021). Community engagement has been identified as key in the promotion of sustainability in community development projects. In promoting sustainable development in communities, Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Number 6, has identified communities around the world as sources of sustainable development due its nature of people with immense resources.

Community engagement has then been sought as a practice for community sustainable development and remains one of the biggest areas of interest for experts and policy makers. It is envisioned that effective community engagement can then enhance the success and sustainability

of development projects by fostering local ownership and commitment (Bowen, Newenham-Kahindi, and Herremans, 2010). Communities can become a source of development if they are engaged in community development initiatives in the early stages and are more likely to support and sustain the initiatives long after termination of the initiative or project.

However, Cooksey & Kikula (2005, P. 3) asserts that though community engagement approaches are initiated for community participation it will still have to experience Top-Bottom approach which are common methods in most parts of the world utilized by governments and foreign donor agencies in project implementation. Their adaptation of these policies have includes spending of budgets in accordance with pre-established timetables giving policy makers an illusory feeling of control and efficiency than communities.

In Zambia, like many other sub-Saharan African countries, community development has historically been driven by top-down approaches, often led by government entities or external organizations. While the top-down initiatives have brought some benefits, they have also faced significant challenges, particularly in terms of promoting sustainability in community development initiatives.

If Community engagement is meant to promote the needs and aspirations of the community, then as Mansuri and Rao (2013) suggests that participatory approaches, would appropriate for community engagement to lead to better developmental outcomes by aligning projects more closely with local needs and by increasing accountability and transparency. If community projects fail, it has most been communities not involved in identifying their priority issues. Such has resulted into a growing recognition of the need for strategies that engage local communities more directly in the development process. Therefore, the study explored the effectiveness of community engagement as an approach to sustaining community development in Zambia.

➤ *Knowledge Levels on Community Engagement Approaches/Policies*

Various studies highlight that the integration of local knowledge and community participation not only improves the effectiveness of development projects but also fosters a sense of ownership among the participants, leading to better maintenance and continuity of the initiatives (Cornwall, 2008).

Understanding community engagement policies and approaches is crucial for their successful implementation. Studies in various regions indicate that knowledge levels vary significantly based on factors such as education, socio-economic status, and access to information. For instance, a study conducted by Dilling and Lemos (2011) found that communities with higher education levels were more likely to have an understanding of environmental policies and were better equipped to engage in sustainable practices.

Studies have shown that when communities have a clear understanding of engagement policies and practices, they are more likely to participate actively and meaningfully. For

instance, Chaskin (2001) noted that knowledge dissemination is essential for empowering communities to take part in decision-making processes. However, the literature also points to challenges, such as the complexity of policies, lack of access to information, and disparities in knowledge levels across different demographic groups.

Over the years there has been extensive research on the relevance of knowledge dissemination in community development, there is limited empirical data on the knowledge levels of different communities in relation to policies and approaches. knowledge gaps can lead to misinformation, resistance, or apathy toward engagement processes, thereby hindering the overall effectiveness of development programs. it is essential to assess the current knowledge levels among the population regarding community engagement approaches. This knowledge is a critical determinant of how effectively these policies can be implemented and the extent to which the community can contribute to sustainable development goals.

➤ *Attitudes Towards Community Engagement*

Attitudes may have a positive or negative effect on how communities respond to community development initiatives. Negative attitudes may be a barrier to effective community participation, while positive attitudes lead to high levels of community participation. The attitudes formed by communities may be influenced by several factors such as past experiences, cultural beliefs, perceived benefits, and the level of trust in the entities promoting the engagement (Bennett and Dearden, 2014).

Several studies have explored factors that influence attitude toward community engagement, previous experiences with development projects and trust in government institutions. The theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991) provides a framework for understanding how attitudes, combined with subjective norms and perceived behavioral control, influence people's intentions to engage in community development activities. A study by Pretty and Smith (2004) suggests that's positive attitudes toward engagement are often linked to successful outcomes in sustainable development projects, particularly when communities perceive that their involvement will lead to tangible benefits.

Understanding the attitudes of the community toward community engagement is important for designing policies and approaches that reflect community aspirations. Studies have shown that when people feel community engagement efforts do not align with their needs and aspirations, their attitude towards participation becomes negative (pretty, 1995). Conversely, positive attitudes are often associated with successful engagement processes where the community feels valued (Ribot, 2002). Community development policies and approaches that have the full involvement of the community more likely to be sustainable as compared to those with less community involvement.

Although there is substantial literature on the factors influencing attitudes toward community engagement, there is need for more specific studies to examine how these factors affect community engagement levels in community development initiatives.

➤ *Practices Adopted in Community Engagement*

Community engagement practices may include partnerships, relationship building and inclusive participation in decision making processes and implementation of community based projects. The best practices are those that not only involve the community in decision-making but also ensure that their contributions are implemented and monitored over time (Mohan & Stokke, 2000).

There exists a difference in how these practices are implemented across different sectors. For example, in some cases community engagement is tokenistic, with limited real influence on decision making. In some other cases, communities are fully empowered to lead development initiatives, resulting in more sustainable and resilient outcomes (Masuri & Rao, 2012).

It is significant to understand the practices that communities have been adopted in response to community engagement policies and approaches. Knowledge and understanding of these practices is important for alignment of community engagement initiatives with community needs and priority areas. Studies have shown that when communities are actively engaged in the design and implementation of development projects, there is a higher likelihood of these practices being sustained over time (Agrawal & Gibson 1999).

A number of studies have focused on understanding the types of practices that support effective community engagement, such as participatory rural appraisal, community based monitoring, Asset Based Community Development and collaborative planning, there is limited research on the actual practices adopted by different communities and how these practices affect engagement policies and approaches.

II. STUDY OBJECTIVE

- To Review an understanding of the effectiveness of Community engagement as an approach sustainable community development in Zambia

III. METHODOLOGY

A descriptive study to review a community's engagement into decision making was conducted focusing on 6 participants who were selected through a purposive sample regarding to their experience in community development projects. The collection and analysis of data involved qualitative approach. In this regard, the primary data was collected through a semi structured questionnaire administering to participants. The data was analyzed using thematic analysis. Major themes were drawn from the data collected from participants.

IV. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

A. *Understanding community engagement*

The findings in the study were drawn from different community development workers from both the public and private sector who participated in the study. All respondents understood community engagement as the involvement of community members and ensuring community development projects were tailored to community needs. One of the respondents further said:

“Development is only meaningful if it answers to the aspirations of the members that live in a particular community.” (Respondent 6)

B. *knowledge Levels of community engagement*

In an attempt to determine what, in the view of the respondents, the knowledge levels of community members on community engagement policies and approaches, the study participant's responses were centered on two main issues. These are presented in two sub-headings that are based on the emerging themes namely, (i) lack of education and awareness of community development initiatives and (ii) lack of community involvement.

C. *Lack of education and awareness*

In understanding the knowledge levels of community engagement approaches and policies, the findings revealed that the knowledge levels of community engagement were moderate. The moderate levels show there is a degree of participation but not at its optimal.

Lack of full community participation due to the fact that most members are not fully sensitized or they are not aware about the importance of being involved in any community project which is their entitlement. The other challenge is that whatever project you want them to take to them, they think it is about national politics. (Respondent 4)

Mostly it is about understanding of materials or content that has to be shared. The levels of knowledge and understanding of issues are too low due to high illiteracy levels in most communities with low engagements. (Respondent 3)

Dilling and Lemos (2011) found that communities with higher education levels were more likely to have an understanding on policies and were better equipped to engage in sustainable practices. The lack of education among certain community members has led to low levels in understanding community engagement policies and approaches. One respondent went on to say,

Respondent 6: *“community members are aware of the Constituency Development Funds (CDF) within their communities but none of them have accessed these services due to lack of knowledge of how to access and utilize such”*

D. Lack of community involvement

However, two of the respondents further added that poor knowledge on community engagement policies and approaches was due to lack of community involvement.

The Facilitators of these community programs don't really get to involve the people on the ground and as a result successful implementation of projects or initiatives become a challenge because the people deserving are not really involved (respondent 2).

Sometimes it's very difficult to engage the real stakeholders who are the community in developmental programs and this affects their knowledge levels on community engagement policies and approaches (Respondent 3).

Masuri & Rao, 2013 asserts that in some other cases, communities are fully empowered to lead development initiatives, resulting in more sustainable and resilient outcomes, however in some cases community engagement is tokenistic, with limited real influence on decision making. Sustainable community development is more effective when the community is actively involved in the decision making process because their participation creates a sense of ownership which encourages to utilize and look after any community development projects therefore leading to sustained community development practices.

E. Attitudes Towards Community Engagement

In regard to understanding the attitude of community's members towards community engagement, the findings revealed that, commitment levels were quite low due to lack of education and awareness. Low awareness levels indicate that better-informed community members are more likely to engage in projects and lack of education underscores the role of education in boosting community involvement. Respondents generally agree that commitment is tied to awareness levels. As one notes,

"Commitment levels are high to those who have been properly sensitized as compared to some who are not." (Respondent 2)

On the other hand, a study participant observed that commitment levels were low due to inadequate education. However, this commitment might still depend on how well the projects align with their perceived needs.

"At the moment there isn't much commitment, but with enough and proper education there would be proper commitment." (Respondent 1)

A study by Pretty and Smith (2004) suggests that's positive attitudes toward community engagement are often linked to successful outcomes in sustainable development projects, particularly when communities perceive that their involvement will lead to tangible benefits. The question of whether communities were willing to work voluntarily yields positive responses, with one study participant who said:

"Community members are very much committed to working towards the development of their communities as long as such are aligned to their aspirations." (Respondent 3)

Ajzen, (1991) provides a framework for understanding how attitudes, combined with subjective norms and perceived behavioral control, influence people's intentions to engage in community development activities. The attitude towards community engagement are affected by the perception that community development initiatives are linked to politics. This indicates that political associations can lead to mistrust or resistance among community members. One respondent in the study said:

"Whatever project you want to undertake with them they think it is about politics." (Respondent 4)

F. Practices Adopted in Community Engagement

Responses in the study indicate that good practices in community engagement are those that involve all the community members. Mohan & Stokke, 2000 agrees to the fact the best practices are those that not only involve the community in decision-making but also ensure that their contributions are implemented and monitored over time. One other study respondent said:

It is always important to engage community members before the start of any project, by so doing it promotes the sense of ownership to the community members and the project is likely to be a success because people will feel valued if they are involved or engaged from the word go. To the policy makers also, let them sensitize people and engage them during the policy making process because community members are the end users or beneficiaries. (Respondent 1)

A different perspective was centered also in involving community members in the education and sensitization of community engagement policies and approaches by identifying proper channels of dissemination of information such as using community leaders.

"use them to help with community sensitization and education in their own communities. Also have routine activities that will be used as reminders to adopt new ways of living and doing things in communities also have mindset change campaigns." (Respondent 4)

"Information sharing must be enhanced by identifying effective mediums of sharing data. Involvement of traditional and religious leaders is critical" (Respondent 3)

Another different perspective was centered on providing incentives for participant involved in community engagement practices. One of the challenges experienced by community development workers is the lack of interest among community members to participate in any community development activities therefore there is need for incentives to motivate them to participant. One respondent said:

“If incentive-based community engagement can be introduced then we can see some improvement” (respondent 2)

G. Importance of Community Engagement

All respondents agreed that community engagement was crucial for sustainable development. Development could not be meaningful without community input, as they are the ones directly affected by the initiatives. Engaging communities ensures that projects align with their needs and encourages them to take responsibility for maintaining the improvements.

“Community engagement is very important for building vibrant, resilient, and thriving communities where individuals feel valued and empowered to contribute to positive change” (Respondent 1)

“Development is only meaningful if it answers to the aspirations of the members that live in a particular community. While one community may view water and sanitation as priority, others will view education and infrastructure as major needs. Therefore, community engagement is important in identifying priority needs” (Respondent 3)

V. CONCLUSION

The study shows a consensus that community engagement is fundamental for effective and sustainable development. However, the success of such engagement depends on proper education, awareness campaigns and overcoming barriers such as illiteracy, political misinterpretations, and lack of interest. The presence of these factors has led to the ineffectiveness of community engagement as an approach to sustaining community development among some communities in Zambia. Strengthening communication between policymakers and community members, involving local leaders, and creating a sense of ownership within the community are essential to improving participation in developmental projects.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Our gratitude goes to the National Institute of Public Administration (NIPA) for having sponsored this publication.

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