

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION: A TOOL FOR SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN ILORIN WEST LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA, KWARA STATE

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Abstract

This paper examines community development as a crucial tool for community growth. The researcher explored several models of community development, including the Elitist model, where proponents believed that community development initiatives should be led by socialist, educated elites and a select group of wealthy individuals. Other models discussed included the incremental gains model and the public awareness model. The paper delved into other key aspects of community development, emphasizing the roles of education and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in fostering stronger and more vibrant communities over the long term. The researcher concludes by emphasizing the need for a comprehensive community development model that benefits the entire population. This model should incorporate public opinion through mechanisms such as public hearings, public juries, focus group discussions, and referendums to determine the most suitable path for community development. Consequently, the paper recommends that the government establish robust communication channels, conduct regular town hall meetings, enact legislation that reflects the will of the people, implement social intervention programs to assist rural populations, and create employment opportunities for youth.

Keywords: community development, models of community development, communication education

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Introduction

Community participation is the basis of the socioeconomic development of any society. A community is a group of people who share a common heritage, cultural practices, beliefs, identity, and/or religion. A community consists of a small number of families (in the case of a village) that form a community for socioeconomic survival. Some communities are so large that, in the case of urban community settlements, they consist of many disparate communities who agree to live together as a unit. This idea of coming together as a community and developing together would not have been possible had the people living in such communities not participated in community development

programs such as subsistence farming and economic liberation. Participation in multi-family housing construction projects, working in hospitals to provide emergency care, teachers, civil servants such as security guards, and other essential workers in the community. Community development is impossible without the active participation of local residents in the community development (Warbuton, 2018). Community development depends on community participation. Since these development activities take place in communities where people live together, the role of the local workforce is crucial. Therefore, active participation in the community promotes community development and leads to socio-economic liberation.

In 1864, Abraham Lincoln described democracy as “government of the people, by the people, for the people” (Wolak, 2020). In line with the above definition of democracy, effective community participation in the development of human communities is essential to achieving the goals of current and future generations. Effective participation is considered functional for community development and important for the public (Agoogh & Shahgbouhi, 2020). Scientists go on to say that participation is functional if it helps us make better decisions and make community development more effective. And participation makes sense when the public has the opportunity to influence decisions and feels a sense of ownership in community planning and management to support sustainable community development. Public participation occurs in successive stages: Early, intermediate, and final stages. International Association for Public Participation (IAP), 2014, reported that the initial phase is mainly devoted to the information exchange process, the intermediate phase to the program design process, and the final phase to the program execution process. Effective civic participation at all stages is essential to ensure functional and meaningful participation and consistently supports achievement of program objectives. The purpose of this study discussed community participation as a tool for sustainable development in Ilorin-West Local Government Area of Kwara State

Statement of the Problem

Community participation is an indispensable tool for community development. As Karl Marx observed, the 'state' cannot achieve meaningful development without the active involvement of its people in community activities. The will, interest, motivation, knowledge, and skills of the community members are crucial contributors to overall development. In essence, community participation is the driving force behind community development. If community members withdraw their participation, the community will stagnate and remain trapped in the grip of underdevelopment. Based on this premise, the researcher is motivated to delve deeply into Community participation as a tool for Sustainable Development.

Literature

Theoretical Background

In today's modern society, there is a growing consensus that public policy formulation is incomplete without community participation (Hugel & Davis, 2020). In the context of local government planning and development, community participation embodies democratic ideals, particularly at the grassroots level (Miltin, 2021). This enhances public trust in the legitimacy and responsiveness of governments (Enaifoghe &

Adegbite, 2019) and increases the transparency of local government regulatory systems. Despite these advantages, experts, practitioners, and policymakers still grapple with effectively fostering progressive relationships between local people and the institutions that affect their lives.

It is crucial to recognize that local democracy thrives when all citizens can participate. Therefore, we must develop legitimate pathways for all citizens to engage with and influence their local government, with systems designed to be accessible to people of all educational levels (Andrew, Flynn & Wood, 2022). Nkosi (2017) suggested that anti-poverty and democratic policies are most effective when ordinary people are provided with effective mechanisms for community participation.

Community participation reimagines the relationship between government and citizens. Instead of a top-down approach, it creates avenues for the public to actively shape policies, access information, and participate in decisions that impact their communities (Evans & Reid, 2013).

To better understand the importance of this definition, we must examine its underlying components. In essence, community participation necessitates enhanced stakeholder engagement in government functions and decision-making processes through accessible participation mechanisms. Participation in decision-making processes defines the depth of societal participation, while both participation in government functions and the availability of participation mechanisms determine the breadth of participation within society.

Models of Community participation

Elitist Model of Community Participation

The elitist model of community participation argues that decision-making groups should consist of qualified individuals (Uzonwanne, 2023). These qualified candidates are seen as the informed members of the community, such as socialites, the educated, and the wealthy. Unfortunately, this model disregards the potential contributions of non-elite community members.

Incremental Gains Model

Building on the elitist model, the incremental gains model acknowledges that not everyone is well-informed about decision-making processes (Cooke, 2018). This model suggests that public education can empower non-elite citizens to participate more effectively. While the gains from such education may not be immediate, it can lead to broader-based decision-making in the long run. However, if elites maintain dominance, public education initiatives for the non-elite may not be supported.

Public Awareness Model

The public awareness model focuses on the different levels of community participation (Reed et al., 2018). Public awareness involves a one-way flow of information from authorities to the public. Public involvement involves a two-way flow of information exchange. Community participation, however, is a broader concept that encompasses

public involvement as well as shared decision-making between authorities and the public.

As Kinsley and MJ in Polletta (2014) point out, excluding residents from important decisions can lead to delays, distrust, and inaction. Conversely, decisions developed through inclusive processes are more likely to garner broad support. It is important to note that the followings:

- i. Local decision-making can be complex, but the contributions of ordinary people should not be underestimated.
- ii. Excluding the public from decision-making can lead to conflict.
- iii. Public education is essential for building a knowledge-based community.
- iv. Community participation is a complex process involving interaction between authorities, experts, and the public. The importance of joint planning is crucial.
- v. Inequality in the distribution of resources remains a concern, and maximizing the value preferences of all stakeholders in local government planning is essential.

Community Participation and Local Government Planning

The previous section highlighted the complexity of community participation in local government planning. This section examines the goals of community participation and how they relate to local government planning. Specifically, it explores information sharing, building community support, and the role of representative voices. It also examines why community involvement in local government planning can be elusive.

Information Exchange

Information exchange is critical in the regional planning process (Coelho et al., 2022). The selection, presentation, and interpretation of information influence the extent to which community participation impacts local government planning. The competency model (Webler in Polletta, 2014) suggests that effective knowledge dissemination leads to a better understanding of local problems and a higher level of community involvement in planning. Public understanding of technical information is essential for effective participation.

Community Support

King in Abelson (2003) argues that citizens are more likely to participate when they feel their efforts and opinions matter. Ensuring community support requires extensive consultation among stakeholders. Public authorities should strive for fairness in the selection process to ensure equal access to opportunities and mutual respect. Community dynamics, cultures, and shared stories all play a role in the consultation process (Abelson et al., 2003). The design of participation mechanisms can either motivate or inhibit grassroots mobilization. Open, transparent, and equitable models are essential for building trust and encouraging community support for local government planning.

Representative Voice and Equity

Equality is important in selecting participants, but geographic, demographic, and political representation are also crucial in deliberation and policy dialogue (Reeds, 2018). The diversity of perspectives within a community necessitates empowering the public and ensuring their voices are heard. When the public is well-informed and supported, their contributions can significantly influence local government planning. Ensuring representative voices in local government planning requires providing all community groups with equal opportunity and access to participation mechanisms. Clear articulation of issues and a guarantee of respected processes are essential for building trust and encouraging participation. This aligns with Reeds' (2018) argument that stakeholder engagement should be underpinned by a philosophy that emphasizes empowerment, fairness, trust, and learning.

Factors Influencing Participation

The discussion so far indicates that there is no direct link between community participation and local government planning. People's willingness to participate is influenced by various factors, including political structures, participation mechanisms, perceived levels of autonomy, fairness, and trust between authorities and stakeholders. In developing countries like Nigeria, weak decision-making legitimacy, weak accountability, weak constituencies, and poor project planning all contribute to the lack of community participation in local government planning.

Information Technology (IT) and Community Participation

The emergence of information technology (IT) is rapidly transforming the dynamics of community participation and its potential impact on community planning (Ferraz de Abreu, 2002; Kingston, 2002; Hanzl, 2007; Twitchen & Adams, 2011). While the impact of IT varies across continents and countries, its potential to engage the public in local planning is significant. For example, technology-based tools strongly support democratic innovation through localized planning systems and participatory democracy (Twitchen & Adams, 2011). They provide a platform for participation, decision-making, and quality improvement in regional planning (Ferraz de Abreu, 2002). These technologies facilitate remote collaboration between citizens and local stakeholders (Hanzl, 2007) and support analytical consultation processes (Nyerges, 2006).

Community Participation

Community participation is a process where residents actively engage in local decision-making and governance. It moves beyond token involvement to meaningful influence over policies and outcomes that affect their lives (Beckwith, Friedman, & Conroy, 2016).

Communication Criterion

The Communication Standard emphasizes that 'modes of communication,' 'channels of communication,' and 'methods of communication' are distinct concepts and should be clearly understood before using technology for community engagement. Enhanced communication is an integral part of the participatory process.

Specifically, open communication facilitates discussion, consultation, and interaction among those involved in the local planning process. Open communication involves a two-way exchange of information between residents and local authorities. When used effectively, it can gradually contribute to building trust within the local community. Based on this criterion, the technologies deployed should support information exchange, updates, and high-quality interaction among all stakeholders. IT-enabled communication can therefore improve the quality of planning, decision-making, and public interactions.

Barriers to the Adoption of Information Technology in Community Participation

Several barriers hinder the adoption of technology for community participation. These include limitations in versatility, adaptability, robustness, unstructured search capabilities, and support for user input. Additionally, specific needs such as content management, feedback mechanisms, corrections, upload/download capabilities, and modern data management systems often present challenges. Obvious obstacles to technology-based community participation include:

- i. High implementation costs
- ii. Limited time and financial resources
- iii. Existing work processes
- iv. Resistance to change in established institutional norms
- v. Prevailing value systems
- vi. IT infrastructure deficiencies

The discussion so far suggests that the successful adoption of IT aligns with the identified goals of community engagement. While IT may motivate people to participate in regional planning, it is crucial to recognize that its impact is not direct. Internal factors, such as people's literacy levels, mediate the relationship between IT and local planning for community participation. Information sharing encompasses data collection, structuring, and analysis to better understand local issues. IT can empower enlightened community members by facilitating strategic, investment, institutional, and regulatory decisions aimed at improving local planning.

Community Engagement Mechanisms

Community Engagement Mechanisms are approaches used to discuss, participate, and provide information on issues that affect the public. These mechanisms aim to gather public opinion to improve decision-making (Marzuki, 2015). Community involvement strategies now operate on two tracks: traditional mechanisms that have served us for generations, and contemporary digital platforms that leverage modern technology.

Conclusion

The paper emphasizes that community leaders play a crucial role in bridging the communication gap between themselves and the community members. This fosters social bonds and encourages active community participation. Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of government transparency in handling community affairs. Transparent leadership styles encourage public involvement in community development. To enhance community participation, the government should increase

employment opportunities for youth to empower them economically and foster their involvement in community development. Additionally, the study recommends promoting activities such as community censuses, community advisory activities, public opinion surveys, public hearings, focus group discussions, citizenship juries, and referendums in rural communities. These activities empower rural dwellers to actively participate in community development initiatives.

Recommendations

The researcher offers the following recommendations:

1. Community representatives should establish strong communication channels to disseminate government policies and programs effectively. This ensures that the community can provide valuable input and guidance.
2. Periodic town hall meetings should be conducted to keep the community informed about government activities. This fosters transparency and encourages community cooperation.
3. Before enacting any laws within the community, public hearings should be conducted to allow community members to provide input and contribute to the development of their community for sustainable development.
4. Regular meetings of the community members, or "People's Assemblies," should be held to document their contributions to community development and facilitate a smoother policy framework.
5. The government should establish socio-economic empowerment schemes to uplift community members and enhance their ability to contribute to community development.
6. Creating employment opportunities for youth is crucial to empower them and enable them to contribute meaningfully to community development.

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