Review

Methodological choice and application in participatory community organizing for rural development: frame work for rural development practitioners in developing countries

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Rural community development has become one of the most important preoccupations of African governments. This is because most of the people in African countries live in rural areas. In most of the literature on rural community development consulted the discussions focus on theories, macro-strategies and paradigms that have not been practically tried and tested in a selected rural setting in Africa. The micro-strategies, which respond to the exact needs of the rural communities, are left unattended to. Governments in Botswana, Tanzania, Nigeria, South Africa and Ghana have structured policies that can help to usher in successful rural community development projects. Unfortunately, the bases of the success of rural community development and community organizing have not been given prominent attention in the policy documentations of these governments. This oversight makes it impossible to achieve the set objectives for rural community development. This paper sketches the basis for effective community organizing and provides a list of characteristics of rural community development initiatives in an attempt to provide a methodological framework which will enable rural community development practitioners to identify, make informed development project choices and add some progressive initiatives in rural community development in Africa to raise the aspirations of rural communities.

Keywords: methodological choice, framework, participatory community organizing, rural development, developing countries, community development projects, rural community

INTRODUCTION

In Africa rural development practitioners are faced with a daunting task of helping their communities to help themselves through progressive development projects (Batten, 1957). Governments' ministries and other interested stakeholders in rural community development usually employ these rural development practitioners for the initiation of rural community development projects (Batten, 1965). Generally, the communities they work with are identified as less developed, under-developed, poor, unsophisticated and left-behind (Biddle and Biddle, 1966; Blakely, 1979; Brokensha and Hodge, 1969; Cary, 1970). In retrospect, most of the development

practitioners have excellent notions of the basis of their tasks and know exactly how to tackle the overwhelming number of problems and obstacles strewn along their path of practice (Blakely, 1979; Chekki, 1979; Coetzee et al, 2001; Ferrinho, 1980). To succeed in this enterprise of rural community development requires intellectual approach to these tasks applying acquired knowledge and skills in a practical way that relate to the actual needs of the rural community through organizing (Edwards and Jones, 1976; Jeppe, 1985; Singh, 2003). Community organizing at grassroots centres on the involvement of the rural community themselves who are usually excluded in the initial planning and implementation stages of rural community development projects (Rubin and Rubin, 2001).

Community organizing and its significance in rural community development

For the purpose of this discussion, community organizing is taken to mean, creating a democratic instrument to bring about sustained social change among the rural community (Rubin and Rubin, 2001). Community organizing finds hope in community organizations which take upon themselves responsibilities like building a village school or health centre, the provision of affordable house in collaboration with municipalities, ease of tension between ethnic and cultural groups. In all their activities grassroots efforts enable them to secure legal rights of ownership of projects for the rural folk. Community organizing also helps the rural community to learn a variety of skills, which in turn increase their personal competence thereby helping them to achieve the empowerment to make governments and other organizations accountable to their needs (Fairhurst et al, 1997).

Through organizing people reduce their sense of powerlessness because as they join together, learn from one another and collectively forge a shared sense of legitimacy and purpose that challenges the powers-that-be. Organizing is the process of helping people understand shared problems they face and encouraging them to join together to resolve them thereby building social linkages and networks that bring them together to create firm bonds for collective action. It also enables communities to gain the capacity to take actions for change leading to development. Organizing and development, therefore, are about creating local empowerment through groups of people with a shared mission action collectively to control decisions, projects, programmes and policies that affect them as a community (Rubin and Rubin, 2001).

In short, community organizing involves bringing people together to combat shared problems and to increase their say about decisions that affect their lives. In effect community organizing leads to the initiation of community

development projects and consequently, community development finds solace in effective community organizing where the rural communities strengthen the bonds within their communities, build social networks and form their own organizations to combat injustice and inequality thereby creating a social movement.

What has always been the case in most African countries like Ghana, Botswana and South Africa is that most development practitioners are specialists in various fields such as agriculture, health, education and religion (Chekki, 1979; Gilmore, 1977; Burkey, 2002) whose specialised skills and knowledge are required by the rural communities for their development projects (Calvert and Calvert, 2001; Rist, 1999).

It is necessary to sketch the methodological paradigms with their characteristics of rural community development initiatives in an attempt to help draw tentative and applicable guidelines using the methodological paradigms and assumptions to enable rural community development practitioners to identify issues of importance, take their responsible places and play their roles and add some progressive initiatives in the rural community development actions groups (Rubin and Rubin, 2001; Swanepoel, 1990; Bittel and Newstrom, 1990; Visvanathan, Duggan, Nisonoff and Wiegersma, 1997).

Methodological paradigms and guidelines for rural community development

Rural development is one of the several practice theories on development (Jordan, 2003; Todaro and Smith, 2006; Rubin and Rubin, 2001; Pearce et al, 1997; Chekki, 1979; Gilmore, 1977). It has been indicated by several rural community development theorists that when the community is provided with the required knowledge and skills, there is that possibility that social, economic, political and education standards of the rural community will improve. Such improvement in social, economic and political lives lead to reduction in rural-urban migration, a disturbing problem of most African countries that needs curbing (John, 2002; Jones, 2002). Fairhurst, Booysen and Hattingh (1997) in their book Migration and Gender: Place, Time and People Specific argue that, contrary to popular belief that when rural community members are empowered, they migrate to urban areas for better opportunities, they prefer staying in their familiar environment to develop it to the state they would prefer. In an article by Gugler (1997) in Fairhurst et al, in Indonesia due to the acquisition of skills by rural communities, supported by government initiatives, most manufacturing factories are located in rural communities to stamp out rural-urban migration In effect, people, in all classes, fight back to eliminate a variety of socially caused problems and would like to remain where they find solace in their communities bondage (Rubin and

Rubin, 2001).

Swanepoel (1990) contends that the theory upon which rural community development is based, that is the improvement of the worth of life of the rural community, is not suitable for all situations neither can it be applied as a national strategy where needs identification and planning take place on a national level. To him most rural community development projects are unsuited for large-scale modernization efforts such as the creation of sophisticated infrastructure. His suggestions are that rural community development projects should, in the initial stages, be on a scale that could be successfully managed and that they should respond to the immediate needs of the rural folks. Burkey (2002) agrees with Swanepoel and emphasises that members of the community should participate as much as practicable to identify their needs before the project is initiated. Burkey (1997), on participatory rural community development suggests the 'people first' approach. This approach places the people at grassroots first in the initiation of manageable rural community development projects and their participation at every level must be prominent. When the initial success has been achieved, expansion of the projects could be initiated to cover larger rural communities because participants might have acquired the fundamental knowledge and skills that could be applied to initiate larger, more sophisticated rural development projects (Allen and Thomas, 2000; Coombs, 1980; Kolawole, 1982; Korten, 1980; Kotzė and Swanepoel, 1983; Roberts, 1979; Schoeman, 1985).

Rural community development addresses abstract human needs

It is important to indicate that rural community development fulfils both concrete and abstract human needs (Swanepoel, 1985; Swanepoel, 1987). The concrete needs might be provision of drinking water or a small village clinic. It is not primarily a process through which all the physical needs of a community are met immediately. Unfortunately, there is quite a serious misunderstanding about this that leads to many rural development project failures (Wilden, 1970; Kotzė and Swanepoel, 1983). Rural development projects should be attended to gradually and cautiously with the aim that the project must be successfully completed.

Generally, when people are involved in a rural community development project, their objective is always concrete. Specifically, their objective can be precisely described and can be seen and touched, as indicated above – provision of safe drinking water or the building of a small clinic to cater for their health needs (Jeppe, 1985). The peculiarity, though, is that while people are striving towards a concrete objective, they, at the same time, reach abstract goals that they may not even have thought of. For instance, while a rural community is striving to get good drinking water or a clinic established, they gain something abstract such as self-reliance, self-sufficiency and human dignity. These abstract gains are the enduring and permanent results of rural community development, which enables people to help themselves in a practically applicable way (Wilden, 1979; Korten, 1980; Allen and Thomas, 2006).

Rural community development is a learning process

Every rural community development project has characteristics (Kolawole, 1982; Biddle and Biddle, 1966). It is a learning process. In fact, it is always action and participatory in nature because the whole community is made to participate in any meaningful way by learning as they participate (Clark, 1972; McNiff, 1995; McTaggart, 1992; Newman, 2000; Participatory Research, 1982; Smit, 1995). Through every step taken by participants to realize an objective, participants learn to do the next step better to improve on the next project (Batten, 1965; Edwards and Jones, 1976). By gaining in the ability to reach a certain objective, participants gain in self-sufficiency through the acquisition of knowledge and skills that get them equipped to resolve their problems without necessarily looking for external solutions. This does not mean that external assistance is not required. If available, it can be a booster that will contribute to the successful completion of the development project initiated (Biddle and Biddle, 1966). In this way, their reliance on external resources to achieve an objective diminishes and when they become self-reliant, they further gain in human dignity and capable of taking their destinies into their own hands and safeguard it (Jeppe, 1985; Singh, 1999).

Participation does not necessarily mean that all the participants should be involved physically. Participation takes many forms. It can be physical or advisory. This must be done at every stage of the project that is from the planning through articulation and finishing. In general terms participants should not only do but must have the ability to think, seek, discuss and make decisions that should be acknowledged. As a result, the community should participate in the very first survey action to establish their needs and resources and should not stop to do so until the project has come to a successful finish (Participatory Research, 1982). In effect, the people can only learn to improve on their own action, gain self-sufficiency and self-reliance; and move towards real self-help if they participate.

Furthermore participatory rural community development initiatives, in many cases:

• "Promote the production of collective knowledge that helps in the investigation and presentation of a social reality by the participants living it with the sense of group ownership of the information they produce.

• Promote collective analysis that helps in the

ordering of information in ways useful to the group in examining their reality leading to self-sufficiency.

• Promote critical analysis by the participating groups and individuals using the ordered information already found to determine the root causes of problems and issues apparent in the constituency with the view to finding solutions to them.

• Promote the building of relationships between personal and structural problems as part of the collective problem solving process.

• Link reflection, assessment and evaluation with action, taking time to ask who, what, why, where and when of the pertinent issues and problems that led them to participate in the development initiative" (Participatory Research: Introduction, 1982: 5-6).

In order to make a rural community development a learning process which will equip the participants with the most appropriate, relevant and applicable knowledge and skills, the participants should be guided and helped to take the initiative, even if the idea is not originally from the rural folks (Bobo, Kendall and Max, 1991; Brown, 1993). A self-sufficient rural community is the one that takes the initiative to make something out of nothing and the people should be aided in taking the initiative right from the beginning through to the end.

Even though initiative in the people's hands may cause problems if not properly managed, every opportunity should be given to the people to take the initiative through protracted self empowering education. Passive submissiveness will not help to make the people self-sufficient (Johnston and Clark, 1982; Singh, 2003).

Another aspect of the learning process is to enhance the people's involvement in assessing and evaluating what they have done during the project. Through assessment and evaluation, people really learn what the consequences are of their own decision-making and action (Korten, 1980). Generally, one cannot learn without assessing and evaluating what has been learned. This holds true for all rural community projects. Therefore, to make the most out of rural community development as a learning process, participation in assessment and evaluation by the people are absolute necessity and must be encouraged and regularly applied (Desai, 1983; Fernandez and Tandon, 1981; Fernandez and Tandon, 1983). The learning process is made viable through participation, initiative, assessment and evaluation. Without these four most important ingredients, rural community development cannot be a learning process.

Rural community development is a collective action process

At this stage, it must have been identified that rural community development is not the action of an individual or a few individuals. It is a collective-evaluative activity in the sense that a group of people sharing some mutual interest, sentiment or concern; act in tandem and in concert to achieve the set objective (Mulenga, 1984). This means that a group of people who can be defined as exclusive group will be involved at every stage of the initiated project (Rahman, 1993).

Rural community development is objective oriented action

The concrete need that is identified must be addressed by striving towards the realization of a concrete objective. Generally, rural community development is born out of a need. It is therefore, obvious that it must be oriented towards an objective that will address that specific need (Tandon and Brown, 1981). Rural community development project can never have vague objectives. Peoples' norms and values influence their perceptions (Bryant and White, 1980). The overall goal of various rural community development efforts may be a better life that must be attained through concrete objectives which direct people's perceptions and eventually their actions (Singh, 2003).

It is very important to note that the identification of a felt need will not automatically lead to the setting of an objective, and even less so; to an effort to reach the objective. As long as people are of the opinion that they cannot do anything about a felt need, they will not take the initiative in setting objectives or doing something to reach the objective (Desai, 1983). This, therefore, underlies the very important role of the rural community development worker to get people to look at their needs positively. In fact, the setting of an objective is, therefore, in itself; a very positive action and the participants should be encouraged to do so (Anyanwu, 1988; Brown, 1985; Berger and Neuhaus, 1977).

Rural community development is needs oriented action

It is very important to emphasise that without a need existing among a community and without it being perceived as such, rural community development cannot take place (Fals, 1985a). This is an absolute truism which must never be underestimated. It is only when the people have come to realise that they have a problem that should be resolved can there be absolute cooperation for success in the initiative. Rural community development addresses specific and concrete needs. The people should be made to rally together to achieve august objectives. For instance, a rural community which aims to build a small health centre or clinic will set that as an objective and will stop at nothing until the health centre or clinic becomes a reality.

Rural community development is action at grassroots level

The primary focus of rural community development is on the ordinary people. It is both basically and principally a process in which the ordinary rural people play the leading role with government, experts and non-governmental agencies (Desai, 1983, Coombs, 1980; Kolawole, 1982).

A very important issue to be (already mentioned) identified in rural community development is that it should be small and simple and should address the basic needs of those at grassroots level. In other words, it is an approach for the micro-level (Blakely, 1979). The bigger, more complex and more sophisticated a project the larger is the role of the government or any other external agency and the less chance exists for the ordinary people, especially the rural fold, to take the initiative. Generally, the more people are involved in a project, especially from outside the rural community, the less the individual or rural folk will feel involved and responsible for the outcome (Bryant and White, 1980).

As grassroots involvement is concerned to make the project a learning process, the people should start with what they know (Coombs, 1980). Truly, sophisticated and large projects can easily put rural community people out of their depth. Rural community development, in perfect respect, seeks simplicity, avoids complexity and focuses on the micro-level always putting the immediate needs of the people which drove them into participation first (Kolawole, 1982). The project should serve the needs of the people upon completion.

Up to this point in this discussion, it has been made clear that the people themselves strengthen rural community development; they gain in self-sufficiency, self-reliance and dignity, they learn how to organize more effectively and their leadership structures are developed so that they are able to initiate new development projects to successful completion (Jeppe, 1985).

In order for a rural community project to be successfully implemented some basic rural community characteristics need attention that should be changed through protracted education. The characteristics of most rural folk all over the world include, among others, the following. In general terms rural poor communities:

Lack recognition by larger society and authority.

They are bound by tradition in terms of beliefs and leadership.

There is poor leadership.

They have poor standard of living.

They depend mostly on outside help.

They are ignorant and ill informed.

They have fatalistic outlook.

They lack resources. (Not that the resources are not there, they do not know how to access them).

They are slow in accepting change.

They are always suspicious about outsiders' intentions to help them.

It is therefore pertinent to indicate that, in order to be successful in promoting rural community development, there is urgent need to reverse all the characteristics listed through protracted education. This is the main reason why it is necessary to look at all rural community development projects as learning processes. First, the rural communities have to be made aware of their dilemma either by themselves or by an interested agent. In the process the people create a realization urge for their development objectives, which may lead to the peoples' ability to organize, set up institutions, make linkages, develop leadership skills, and acquire other relevant and applicable skills to sustain the rural community development project and consequently leading to the improvement of their living conditions (Roberts, 1979; Singh, 2003; Swanepoel, 1987).

In brief, the community's organization becomes appropriate, effective, efficient and able to expand because they have participated and learned in the process. The established institutions they set up become adaptable and development oriented and through them leadership is created. New linkages between institutions and individuals are forged and the existing ones improved (Berger and Neuhaus, 1977). External linkages between communities and the various authorities and agencies are created and existing ones improved. In this way leadership is enhanced. Existing leaders are enabled to lead more effectively and efficiently and new leaders are brought to the fore either through the institutions or community activities (Brown, 1993). Knowledge and skills are acquired that will enable the community to organize, initiate, negotiate, plan, act or do specific tasks aimed at improving their gains. At the end of it all, the lives of the rural folk will improve in education, health care, childcare, housing and generally their life style (Batten, 1957; Batten, 1965). Income could be generated and jobs created occupying every member of the rural community and as a result crime and most anti-social behaviours in the community will be either reduced or completely eradicated.

Rural community development is awareness creator leading to further development

The most significant gain in rural community development is the creation of awareness among the people. They become aware of themselves and their environment, their needs and available resources within their communities (Bobo, Kendall and Max, 1991). They become aware of their set objectives to improve their lot. The awareness in itself, in terms of the set objectives, is one of the greatest strengths a rural community can enjoy because it does not see itself as a suffering entity any more but as an active and doing people who have the ability to change their environment.

The awareness acquired through rural community development projects sparks further development activities (Kolawole, 1982; Gilmore, 1977). Each establishment must be carefully organized, managed and maintained. It must be used and adapted according to changing needs. The result of a project may be manufactured or produced item that must be sold. The event of selling necessitates advertising and marketing arrangement including bookkeeping. The people must remain responsible in all these cases. It always happens that the attainment of one objective leads to the identification of further needs and the setting of new objectives and action to reach them. The attainment of an objective does something good to the people making them proud. It builds confidence in them. They experience enthusiasm to tackle further problems and become aware of other needs in other fields. It is correct to claim that one successful rural community project can and very often leads to various other projects. In other words, the success becomes contagious and the development spreads among the rural communities (Schoeman, 1985; Smit, 1995; Korten, 1980).

Possible threats and obstacles to guard against in rural community development

The negative characteristics of the rural community need protracted education to eliminate them to make rural community development projects to be successfully implemented. It is equally important to indicate that the reason for rural community development projects also acts as an obstacle in the way of successful projects. There is necessary to be aware of the fact that the people's poverty and their lack of self-sufficiency and self-reliance make it extremely difficult to involve them in the development efforts. The following attitudinal obstacles need to be guarded against at all cost.

- Illiteracy: This is a very serious obstacle in rural community development initiatives. It causes inferiority complex. The people become afraid to take part thinking that they cannot make any worthwhile contribution (PRIA, 1982). They believe that innovations must come from educated people while rural community development wants to involve the ordinary people. Furthermore, illiteracy hampers organizational aspects such as keeping records of all kinds – minutes of meetings, doing surveys and bookkeeping (Swanepoel., 1985, 1987).

- Traditions and customs: In rural community setting people are obliged to follow customs and traditions even if they work against development. The submissiveness to traditional leaders and the inferior position of women are examples worth mentioning (Swanepoel, 1985, 1987). This does not mean that customs and traditions are obstacles *per se.* On the contrary, they can be valuable resources if considered in terms of the project objectives.

are not static (Desai, 1983). They are dynamic and have the tendency to adapt themselves to suit modern time's expectations. However, where people keep them static for one reason or the other they can become major obstacles in the way of development. It is suggested that proper persuasions tactics and protracted education are used to turn the static customs and traditions into something dynamic that can contribute to the rural community development initiatives including the application of indigenous knowledge.

- Dependency: In many parts of Africa - Botswana, Nigeria, South Africa and Ghana – the rural folk have become so used to being dependent on the government and other donor agencies that receiving handouts becomes the norm. People do not want to do anything for themselves and expect to be paid for any effort on their part for the communal well-being. This needs eradication in its entirety through education which begins with their participation and the realization that they have the capacity to help themselves. They should be made to think progressively by those who have been identified as leaders in the projects and realise that they have the capability to serve themselves without any remuneration from outsiders.

- Apathy: Since rural poverty has become endemic in most rural communities in Africa, the rural folk have become used to being poor and to suffer all the consequences of poverty. They have no real will to do anything but to survive. They accommodate their poverty and misery by accepting it as life. They are fearful of trying any innovation because it carries tremendous risks. This must be changed through community enlightenment education in the form of mentoring or workshops where the need for education is stressed. Such intervention is a necessity for the progressive advancement of rural community projects

There is need for the reversal of the listed impediments for a successful rural community development projects to be initiated by the rural folks themselves with the help of rural community development practitioners as enshrined in the Commission for Africa Report (2005)

CONCLUSION

This discussion has focused on rural community development initiatives. It has proposed a methodological framework to guide rural community development practitioners to enable them initiate rural community development projects successfully. The following have been identified that:
- community development can be theoretical,
- it addresses abstract and real human needs making it needs oriented,
- it is a learning process and represents a collective action,
- it is objective oriented,

• it must be approached as action at grassroots level subscribe to community building and

• in the process, it creates awareness which further leads to other developments.

Obstacles that are likely to hijack successful rural community development projects have been discussed suggesting that the best way to remove these obstacles is through community education. These obstacles are real. Ignoring them is an anathema to progress. To break them by force is disaster. It becomes pertinent that they must be addressed accordingly. Where it is impossible to resolve it must be accommodated in order to bring development to the rural community.

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