

Participation in Development Practice: A Poisonous Gift or Magic Bullet? A Case from Ahwiaa Wood Carving Industry, Ghana

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Abstract

Ghana's decentralised planning and administrative system encourages the involvement of communities and ordinary citizens in the planning and implementation of development projects which affect them. However, in line with some of the criticisms leveled against participation, the practical aspect of the system has been compromised in many situations. Based on a case study of a wood craft village project at Ahwiaa, a tourism destination in the Ashanti region in Ghana, this paper attests that, despite the apparent challenges and criticisms on the viability and usefulness of participation, the concept is very pertinent to development practice. Using qualitative methodology, data was gathered from about 45 informants intermittently within a period of 3 years. Although the project has been almost complete since 2008, it has remained unused. Discussions with the various stakeholders revealed that, the current state of the project is primarily due to the poor participatory methods adopted in the planning and implementation of the project. The intended final users and local leaders are therefore hesitant to use the facility due to anticipated conflicts in distributing the facility among the artisans and traders in the carving industry. It is therefore suggested that, participation should practically remain a core principle in development initiatives. However, it should be operationally defined and critically assessed in order to minimize its adverse influence on development processes and projects.

Keywords: Development, Decentralisation, Participation, Wood carving, Tourism, Ghana

1.0 Introduction

Development issues and problems and the respective methods and approaches for addressing them change over time (Mikkelsen, 2005). These changes have been necessitated by differing contexts and contents of development problems. Following the rollback of the state, the advancement of market forces and breakdown of regulations, the alternative development paradigm took center stage of development practices. This paradigm has concerned itself with development from below. Thus development directed at locally defined needs and goals. Concepts such as empowerment, participation and people-centered development have therefore been some of the frontline methods/approaches towards attaining desired development goals recently. These concepts also represent some of the key initiatives in the implementation of decentralised governance system and ultimately in reaching the goal of consolidated democracy which many developing nations are aspiring (Pieterse, 2010). This paper focuses on the participation initiative.

Like many other democratic states, Ghana practices the decentralisation system. Ghana's current programme of decentralisation was initiated in the late 1980s. In 1988, the Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) government introduced a major piece of legislative reform; the *Local Government Law* (PNDC Law 207) (Crawford, 2004; Owusu, 2004). This law sought "to promote popular participation and ownership of the machinery of government by devolving power, competence and resource/means to the district level" (Map Consult Ltd, 2002, p. 35). Moreover, chapter 20 [article 240 (20)] of the constitution of Ghana emphasizes the principles of participation in the decentralised system by stating that: "to ensure the accountability of local government authorities, people in particular local government areas shall, as far as practicable, be afforded the opportunity to participate effectively in their governance" (Crawford, 2004, p. 9). Popular participation in development process is therefore theoretically at the core of the decentralised planning and administrative system in Ghana. Under the system, the development process starts from community levels where development problems/needs are identified through the efforts of ordinary citizens led by their local representatives. These problems/needs are harmonised with others identified in other communities in the same district to ascertain the district development problems/needs. The harmonised district development problems/needs are then forwarded to the regional coordinating council where all development needs/problems of all districts within each region are harmonised and presented together with sectoral plans from government ministries and agencies as national development plan by the National Development Planning Commission (NDPC). Implementation of development plans are also undertaken together with community members (Aye, 2000; Owusu, 2004). Currently, Ghana's decentralized planning and administrative system consist of 10 administrative regions (Regional co-coordinating councils); 6 Metropolitan Areas, 49 Municipal Areas and 161 District Assemblies (Ghanadistricts.com, 2013). There are also the town/area councils and unit committees where the development initiatives and processes begin

(Owusu, 2004). These structures coupled with the respective national bodies are meant to ensure that ordinary people have a say in the development planning process. However, as Ayee (2000) points out, there is no clear distinction on the kind of decentralisation that should be practiced although the entire processes and structure leans towards devolution and democratic decentralisation. Similarly, the type of participation (see Mikkelsen, 2005) applied in various development processes have also remained ambiguous in many contexts. This has led to numerous misinterpretations and misconceptions towards the concept. For instance, despite the various structures and policies, the reality with respect to the implementation of the decentralisation principles and particularly the participation initiative has had immense deficits in many contexts in Ghana.

Concerns have generally been raised concerning the real contribution of participation in development practice. There is no real consensus on the contribution of participation in improving the lives of especially the poor and disadvantaged groups. While some development practitioners and academicians posit that the concept is valueless in development practice, others hail it as the 'magic bullet' in development especially in poverty alleviation. The process of promoting participation in development projects have therefore been driven mostly by ideology and optimism as opposed to systematic analysis based on empirical research (Mansuri & Rao, 2013; Pieterse, 2010). This paper emphasizes the pertinence of participation as well as enhances understanding of the concept by offering an empirical example on the adverse effects of ineffective and inefficient participatory methods in development projects. It is based on issues relating to the conception, design, implementation and post implementation status of a wood craft village project at Ahwiaa in the Kwabre East District in Ghana. The paper agrees with the position of Mikkelsen (2005) that instead of entirely dismissing the validity and usefulness of the concept, it will be more beneficial to operationally define the meaning of the concept and to spell out the challenges in inducing participation in respective development projects and processes.

1.1 Citizenry Participation in Development Process: Brief Background and Critique

Participation was adopted as a reaction towards the highly centralized development system proclaimed by earlier development theories and practices. Activists and non-governmental institutions deemed the centralized development system as being disconnected from the needs of especially the poor and marginalized in societies which made their policies less effective (Mansuri & Rao, 2013). Participation stemmed from the belief that the poor and the marginalized will benefit more from development initiatives if they are involved in the relevant aspects of planning and implementation of projects and processes that affect them (Greig, Hulme, & Turner, 2007; Pieterse, 2010). Moreover, it is argued that the process of getting ordinary citizens involved in the planning and implementation of their own development projects is not new in development discourse and practice. For instance, in the 1940s, there was a project in Uttar Pradesh India which was "based on mobilization of villagers by a multi-purpose village-level worker to increase agricultural output and improve rural infrastructure, largely through self-help efforts" (Greig et al., 2007, p. 234). This project is said to have influenced later approaches and institutions such as community development (community-driven development) and cooperatives as well as decentralization at the twilight of colonialism (Greig et al., 2007; Mansuri & Rao, 2013; Pieterse, 2010). Although participatory research and practice cannot be traced to a singular source, it is argued that, advocacy for more and effective participation in development projects strongly began from the 1970s (CARE, 1999).

Several debates have also arisen on the meaning of the concept. The result have been multiple positions and definitions which have rendered the meaning of the concept blurred in many situations (Mikkelsen, 2005). Notwithstanding, the World Bank defines participation as a "process through which stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives and the decisions and resources which affect them" (Greig et al., 2007, p. 236). Participatory development therefore aims at putting the ordinary people at the helm of development affairs by involving them in the initiation and management of development projects and processes (Mikkelsen, 2005). Moreover, despite the blurriness in the meaning, the concept has assumed prominence in many development projects around the globe. In some spheres, especially in developing countries, the application of the concept is a requirement in project design and implementation. The World Bank (especially through its poverty reduction strategies papers) and many other donor agencies for instance have incorporated the concept into their projects (Brown, 2004). Participatory development is thus proposed as a method for sharpening poverty targeting, improving service delivery, expanding livelihood opportunities, and strengthening demand for good governance (Mansuri & Rao, 2013, p. 1). The vitality of participatory development in current development practice is also evidenced by the amount of funding and attention dedicated to mainstreaming participation especially in developing countries recently (Greig et al., 2007). It is estimated that, over the past decade, the World Bank has allocated as much as US\$85 billion to local participatory development. There is therefore the possibility that bilateral donors and international development banks across the globe have also spent as much or even more than the World Bank (Mansuri & Rao, 2013). Regardless of the importance and attention given to the concept over years, a number of criticisms have been leveled against it.

Contrary to arguments that the participation initiative is set to empower the ordinary people by involving them in development planning and implementation, participation has been criticized on the grounds that it does not empower the poor due to the fuzziness of the concept both in meaning and application. The tenet of this argument stemmed from the fact that, there are different forms of participation (see Mikkelsen, 2005, p. 59). Hence application of any of the types of participation irrespective of its impact on the project at hand (for instance, passive participation instead of local initiatives) may be construed as participation although the ordinary citizens may have not had any influence on the project nor decisions taken (Agarwal, 2001; Greig et al., 2007; Mikkelsen, 2005). From a more radical perspective, it is argued that participation is not a missing link in development discourse and practice as have been forwarded by some of proponents of the concept. In the light of this, others have labeled the concept as 'the poisonous gift' or a 'trojan horse' and a 'myth' (Greig et al., 2007, p. 238). Thus, in the words of Rahnama (1992, p. 167), "participation is a political practice which has been made politically palatable to the ruling classes and its institutions". Participation in this sense is deemed as a destruction to stable cultures by often neglecting power differentials within project communities (Mikkelsen, 2005). The poor are thus manipulated through delusional power ceding mechanisms. Moreover, others also see participation as a means for external experts to take-over from locals through the application of foreign ideas and principles. This therefore represents a modern process of colonization of the lives of remote dwellers through conscientization. These critics therefore give preference to autonomous community building and a tactful engagement in modern technology and approaches (Greig et al., 2007; Mikkelsen, 2005). Moreover, there is also the fear of excluding some social groups and individuals in the development process. In the view of Chambers (1994, 2002), not all people in a given population have the ability and capability to participate in social movements and decision making process. In his words, there is the danger of "naive populism in which participation is regarded as good regardless of who participates or who gains" (Chambers, 1994, p. 1444). There's therefore the propensity of leaving some groups and individuals out in the planning and implementation of development projects although the process is meant to siphon knowledge and information from ordinary people. This therefore poses doubts as to the quality, credibility and representativeness of the decisions that are taken.

Owing to these criticisms and many others as forwarded and discussed by Greig et al. (2007); Mikkelsen (2005); Pieterse (2010) and many others, a lot of doubt have been cast on the relevance of the concept to development projects and initiatives. However, regardless of the division on the importance and impact of participation in development projects, the concept is still seen as critical in development planning and poverty alleviation in many contexts as evidenced in the case presented below (Mikkelsen, 2005).

1.2 Participation in Development: Case Study

This section presents an empirical case on the adverse effects of ineffective application of participatory methods in relevant projects. The case is taken from a wood craft village project at Ahwiaa in the Ashanti region, Ghana.

1.2.1 The Wood Carving Industry in Ghana and Ahwiaa

Wood carving began as a prominent industry for forest regions and areas in Ghana mainly for its cultural importance. The industry has been with Ghanaians for centuries. In many situations, the skill is transferred informally through the family lineage system. Culturally, wood crafts just as other cultural symbols and artifacts are seen as a means to express people's thoughts, beliefs and way of life through symbols designed to communicate specific messages (Obeng, Mensah, & Pentsil, 2011; Okrah, 2002). Carving and other cultural artifacts also manifest the folklore, environmental characteristics and unique science and technology as well as the aesthetic quality and humanistic dimension of a given nation (NCC, 2004). The wood carving industry has historically played a key role in cultural practices and displays especially among the people of Ashanti in Ghana. The activity was previously deemed as a leisure time work and in some instances as an activity for supplementing household income (Obeng et al., 2011). The industry has however expanded over the years due to its economic gains to the carvers and the nation in general. Many have thus attributed the growth and diversified nature of the wood carving industry to modernity and rapid social change across the globe which have made it difficult to keep the indigenous traditions intact (Adu-Agyem, Sabutey, & Mensah, 2013). The carving industry received a boost in the 1980s when the culture of Ghana was exposed to the western world through international trade, organization of cultural festivals and trade and culture fairs (Okrah, 2002). It is estimated that Ghana gained a total of US\$ 60,000 from the sale of handicrafts in 1989. This figure shot up to about US\$3,000,000 worth of handicrafts consisting of mostly wood carvings in 1996 (Obeng et al., 2011; Okrah, 2002). As of 2009, there were at least about 3500 people engaged in wood carving nationwide (Obeng et al., 2011). Owing to increased foreign interest in the cultural artifacts and the evident economic potential of the industry, the government of Ghana has over the past two decades made conscious efforts to fully exploit the benefits accruing from the industry. This has often been in the form of tourism promotion activities and strategies aimed at exposing the rich culture of Ghana to the rest of the world. It is not surprising that tourism contributed about 7%

to Ghana's GDP in 2011 and have created over 300,000 direct and indirect jobs all over the country (Mensah, 2011; VibeGhana, 2012).

Ahwiaa is one of the most popular places for traditional wood carving in Ghana. The town is located on the main Kumasi-Mampong highway about 14 kilometers north of Kumasi in the Kwabre East District in Ashanti region, Ghana. The town consists of over 5000 inhabitants. Wood carving remains one of the commonest economic activities in the town although there have been reports of decline in the wood carving activity recently (Adu-Agyem et al., 2013).

1.2.2 Methodology

The study was undertaken using qualitative methodology. Data for the study was gathered intermittently between January, 2010 and September, 2013. The data was gathered mainly through individual interviews using semi-structured interview guides and 2 group interviews. A total of 45 people participated in the study. Primary interviews were gathered from a total of 15 carvers, 10 wood artifact shop owners/sellers and 15 ordinary inhabitants in the town. The carvers consisted of only males as there were no female carvers (see also Adu-Agyem et al., 2013). The opinion of the women in the community was therefore sought through the interviews with ordinary inhabitants where 8 females were interviewed. Group interviews were held with 2 groups of carvers and artifact sellers with each one consisting of 6 members.

Key informant interviews were held with the district planning officer and 2 key informant interviews with the assembly member of the community and one unit committee member and the traditional chief for the carving industry (*Senehene*). Selection of participants for the study was done using purposive and snowball sampling techniques (see Bryman, 2008; Kothari, 2004). Purposive sampling helped to distinguish between the various actors and interests groups in the carving industry. The technique also helped to select and confirm the preferred characteristics of identified individuals and groups as well as in selecting appropriate number of participants. Snowball technique also assisted in selecting especially the artisans. Through the snowball technique, carvers identified initially were asked to help in identifying other carvers especially those that were difficult to locate. As a way to protect the primary participants, general names and corresponding numbers are given to each of them depending on their category. The artisans are labeled as 'carvers' plus a unique number. The ordinary residents of the community are also labeled as 'resident' plus the gender of the person and a unique number.

1.2.3 Citizenry Participation in the Ahwiaa Wood Craft Village Project

The decentralised planning and administrative system requires districts and metropolitan areas to design favorable policies and to raise internal funds through taxes and other viable for effective development and administration at the local levels (Owusu, 2004). The boom in tourism receipts from the 1980s therefore prompted all districts with viable tourism potential(s) to improve their assets in order to take advantage of the market boom. The Kwabre East district which was carved from Kwabre Sekyere District in 1998 in line with the national aspiration has therefore taken measures to boost their tourism potential and receipts by enacting favorable polices and building relevant infrastructural base (KED, 2006). The district's potential tourism attractions are all related to cultural values and practices including kente weaving (traditional cloth), traditional shrines and wood carving. A District Cultural Committee with a subcommittee at Ahwiaa has therefore been formed to help identify and develop inventible cultural sites, practices and values that could promote tourism in the district. Some training programmes have also been organized for craftsmen in the district on financial and business management and on etiquettes in tourists' reception. Other projects also include construction of visitors' centres at Adanwomase as well as washrooms for visitors at Ntonso and Ahwiaa (KED, 2006).

However, the implementation of one these initiatives have remained problematic owing to lack of and inadequate participation on the part of many inhabitants and key stakeholders. This project is the construction of a craft village for the Ahwiaa wood carving industry (KED, 2006). The project started in the late 1980's as way to boost the carving industry and promote tourism in the district. It was also an attempt to create employment avenues especially for the youth by increasing their interest in the carving industry. The project was abandoned midway after several stoppages and was left untouched for over a decade. Work however resumed around 2004 and almost brought to a completion by 2008. The facility is currently habitable for purposes of carving and even showcasing and selling the artifacts as disclosed by some community leaders and carvers.



Figure 1: Pictures of the Ahwiaa wood craft village structure
Source: Fieldwork, October, 2013

However, the facility remains unused despite its habitability over the years. Coupled with lack of maintenance and protection, the structure is rapidly wearing out as could be inferred from the photos in figure 1. It is reported that some of the youth (males) rarely use the spaces around the facility as places of convenience at night while others have erected structures for washrooms around it. The surroundings of the building have also become a litter ground for some individuals and households; a behavior which the local leaders are fighting vehemently to eradicate as echoed by the traditional chief responsible for the carving industry (*Senehene*). Other public institutions such as the Electricity Company of Ghana also use some exterior portions of the structure as storage for their equipments. The structure is therefore not used for any of the purposes for which it was put up. Inquisition into why the project has remained an otiose monument revealed diverse but much related reasons. Discussions with the different groups of stakeholders pointed to a similar direction: inadequate involvement of the direct beneficiaries in the planning and implementation of the project. The project started as an initiative of the central government through the district assembly to boost the local craft industry. The conception of the project therefore emanated from the political leaders. Issues relating to the building plan and design and its size as well as the facilities therein were therefore forwarded by the Assembly and their 'chosen' contractor. Local leaders including the local district assembly representatives and traditional leaders including the *Senehene* were contacted for deliberations on issues relating to the project. The local leaders were also 'tasked' with the responsibility of sensitizing the people with regards to purpose and relevance the project as was narrated by the district planning officer:

"...We met with the local leaders for discussions on the project...This project was started and brought to a halt. Our goal was to complete it. We therefore sought for their permission and assistance to complete the project (Interview with District planning officer).

The current administrators of the district therefore attempted to distance themselves from the failed aspects of the project including the poor participatory methods used in the project. However, the local leaders who witnessed the conception and the entire implementation processes recounted bitter stories about their involvement in the various stages and periods of implementation:

"...when the 'government' (the district assembly) introduced the project to us, they showed us pictures and a plan of a tourist village in Burkina Faso. We (the leaders of the town) liked that plan...Everyone liked it. However, during implementation, a different structure was started. I was told it was due to change in the construction firm. The construction had barely started so we argued for initial plan to be implemented which brought the project to a halt....We wanted to see the initial plan from Burkina Faso built (Senehene)

The project and its implementation plans were therefore introduced to the chiefs and elders of the town. However, their contributions and concerns were not taken into consideration nor considered in the design and implementation of the project. Moreover, despite their plea of innocence, the local leaders were partly at fault in the failure of the project. They did not adequately carry out their duty of disseminating information about the project to the ordinary citizens and even the artisans as echoed by the district development officer:

"After some meetings and discussions with local leaders.....we expected them to transmit information about the project to the inhabitants especially to the artisans and offer us their feedback" (interview with District Planning Office)

These statements also reflect the ongoing disagreement between the two groups of leaders and to a greater extent the reason why the project is still unused despite being habitable. This also explains the inefficiency in the participatory method adopted in the project. There was clearly a weak feedback mechanism between the project coordinators and the stakeholders. Some of the older carvers moreover iterated that, the district leaders focused their discussions mainly with the traditional leaders instead of the artisans even though they have an association which makes contacting them easier. The final users of the project were therefore virtually ignored in the planning and implementation of the project. This is contrary to the stipulations of the participation process encouraged under the decentralised planning and administration system in Ghana. The carvers argued that, their lack of involvement was also due to the fact that, traditional leaders control the land in the community. Hence, in order to get access to land and official permit to enter the community, the government officials concentrated their discussions with the community leaders:

"...the district 'commissioners' only held discussions with the chiefs. For ordinary carvers like me, we were not consulted" (Interview with Carver 5).

Types of participation such as interactive and self-mobilization (see Mikkelsen, 2005) which are strongly encouraged under the decentralised planning system were not adopted in this project where they could have been very essential. Both the leaders and inhabitants of the Ahwiaa community including the artisans were passive participants (see Mikkelsen, 2005) in the project. The leaders especially were informed of the impending project and about decisions that had already been taken and implemented without any power to neither influence nor change the decisions. Moreover, with the wood craft industry being a community-wide activity, one might have expected that at least the final users would be involved as an incentive by allowing them to offer even their labour. This would have brought them closer to the project and eventually making them assume ownership of the project once it was completed. The passive participation method adopted by the leaders therefore resulted in an unsuccessful project. All the artisans and even community leaders have declined to use the facility owing to varied reasons.

To begin with, some residents did not even have fair knowledge on the reason for the structure as it had been there for a long period without any function. One participant was quoted as saying: *"...I heard a place have been built for carvers in this town but I don't know if it has been completed..."* (Resident 3, female). This was a statement from someone who lived just about 100 meters from the wood craft village. It was even more astonishing when some of the comparatively older artisans appeared clueless about the structure and therefore needed detailed description in order to recognize the facility in contention and its intended purpose. These revelations give a general idea on how poor the ordinary people and even the artisans of the industry were involved in the various stages and periods of the project.

The facility also remain unused partly because, almost all the different groups of participants iterated their fear of the rise of misunderstanding and conflicts among carvers, artifact traders and even between households in the event of distributing/sharing the facility among the artisans and traders. This is because the facility does not have enough room for all: *"....there are a lot of carvers and artifact sellers in this community. The tourism village cannot accommodate everyone.....I do not think it will be possible to share among all the actors without any problems"* (Carver 3). This assertion is true as almost every indigenous household/family in the community have at least a member in the carving industry (Adu-Agyem et al., 2013). Moreover, the expansion of the industry over the years due to its economic gains also attracted people from different parts of Ghana into the community. The Ahwiaa carving industry just as other craft based tourism sites in the Kwabre East district therefore currently consist of people with diverse ethnic backgrounds. The ethnic composition of the final users therefore further complicates the situation. The fear of causing feuds among the direct beneficiaries such as the artisans and the craft traders as well as among households and even ethnic groups has deterred the local leaders from taking initiatives to make use of the facility. Going by this situation, one could with ease appreciate the fact that, fewer consultations were held with the stakeholders of the project. The social, economic, cultural and demographic diversity of the community were thus overlooked by the planners. The project commenced and evolved over the years without an accurate count of the direct players in the carving industry.

Moreover, one striking argument put forth by the artisans and traders was with the location of the project. According to them and as evidently expressed in the community, the carving activities in the town are mostly

located along the main road. The major road in the community is flanked by numerous carving sheds and stores. The location of the activity has therefore become a fabric of the community's layout and identity. One of the carvers explained this as:

"...our aim is to showcase our work. Everyone is located along the street in order to attract customers and potential tourists who might just be passing through the community....even those that carve in their homes have shops along the road to showcase their products (carver 11).

The tourist village is interiorly located at about half a kilometer from the main road. Moving the activities to the craft village meant not only losing customers/potential tourists but also changing the traditional fabric of the community. As a matter of fact, the main road in the Ahwiaa community leads to other tourist communities and also the capital of the district, Mamponten. It is therefore common for the artisans to attract customers from travelers through the community who might be visiting other tourist centers or to the District Assembly. Many of the artisans and traders therefore did not want to move away from their traditional location. The current planning officer of the District however argued that *".... We did not need to change the location and design of the project as it would have meant starting a new project altogether"*. Moreover, the community leaders argued that, the current location was the closest available and unoccupied land to the street. However, conversations with other elderly citizens revealed otherwise. One resident stated that *"....the project started long ago....I do not think they could not have found a place along the streets...some individual have even managed to secure lands along the streets for their projects recently..."* (Resident 2, male). It could therefore be argued that, a more suitable location could have been found if the efforts were intensified. This assertion is also evidenced by a number of new and sizeable structures along the main road in Ahwiaa.

Moreover, as have been hinted earlier, both the carvers and the community leaders were not happy with the design of the structure. The carvers and traders mostly held the view that the nature of the structure conceals their work with regards to the making of the crafts and even in showcasing their finished products. They all seemed to prefer sheds which make their activities and products visible to everyone. This is the more reason why the leaders got disinterested in the project when their preferred design was abandoned. Some of the artisans therefore referred to the structure as a *'compound house'*, a description which depicts their disdain for the design of the structure. Many of them therefore saw the structure for the tourism village as a 'home' instead of a work place. These opinions attest to the fact that, the input of the direct beneficiaries were not neither sought nor incorporated into the project. Moreover, empirical studies from diverse contexts have proven that aspects of project such as design, construction and location are better when final users especially are allowed to interactively participate during the project conception and implementation. However, probable inhibiting factors such as low educational level, lack of relevant technical skills among primary stakeholders, high inequality level among inhabitants may render participation less useful to some communities/projects (Mansuri, 2012)

The weak participatory methods employed by the project coordinators have rendered the project inutile for an appreciable time now. Moreover, the situation and attitude of the people as observed in the past 3 years did not depict any sign of favorable conditions with regards to the use of the facility in the near future. It is therefore expected that the structure will continue to deteriorate.

1.3 Conclusion

The participation discourse has had its fair share of criticisms and implementation constrains. The concept as has been argued by many scholars is not a panacea to all development problems. For instance, an empirical review of the participatory rural appraisal approach (PRA) which is used by many international development organizations in the Gambia had a ground breaking result. Four criteria including: 'utilitarian considerations', 'community mobilization', 'motivational benefits' and 'empowering the poor' were used to evaluate a number of development projects (Brown, Howes, Hussein, Catherine, & Swindell, 2002). The researchers concluded that the participatory method had a weak impact on the project. In general, the detailed review of the participatory approach rather to a very large extent confirmed many of the criticisms leveled against the participation initiative (Mikkelsen, 2005). However, this is not to argue that participation and its related approaches are not relevant in the development process but to argue for a thorough application of relevant participatory approaches in any development project. The case study presented in this paper should serve as a motivation for more attention and scrutiny into making the participation initiative more effective and beneficial to the development processes and projects.

¹ *It is the most prevalent housing form in Ghana which has traditionally accommodated the low income population. It often has rooms opening to a central courtyard. It is basically a courtyard house (Arslan, 2011)*

The major aim of the participation initiative under the decentralised governance system is to ensure deepened stakeholder participation as well as in reducing the deficits in the process (Greig et al., 2007). The case of the carving village at Ahwiaa however depicts that more need to be done in order to make the initiative valuable to the development and decentralisation process. Citizenry participation in local government such as improving access to information and fostering mechanisms for deliberative decision making lag behind in many Ghanaian settings (Crawford, 2004). Although popular participation in development projects have increased over the years in Ghana, the practical aspect of the concept remain vague in some instances (Arthur, 2009). It is argued that, contrary to the fact that district assemblies are the principal authority of development at the local level, the assemblies in general act as mere conduits for development agenda of the central government. In some instances just as in the case of the Ahwiaa wood craft village, development projects and tasks are delegated to district assemblies and local authorities by respective central government ministries and institutions (Crawford, 2004).

The tenets of the decentralised planning and administration policy in Ghana should therefore be implemented to the latter. District assemblies should be allowed to have greater control in their areas of jurisdiction in terms of development planning and implementation as stipulated in the policy framework. Development initiatives should therefore not be delegated to them by the respective government ministries and institutions but should emanate from the ordinary citizens together with their leaders (Crawford, 2004). This appeal moreover, requires the commitment of relevant government ministries such as the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development to enforce and strengthen the available but dormant rules and laws governing decentralisation and consequently the participation initiative.

It is also recommended that thorough stakeholder analysis and consultation be undertaken before the initiation or commencement of development projects. The majority of individuals, social groups and relevant institutions who may be affected or are in a position to influence projects and its outcome should be involved as much as possible at all stages of the project cycle. This will ensure the inclusion of views from a range of stakeholders in the development and review of development projects. This process if well undertaken will help to resolve complex issues, gain consensus and support from stakeholders and reduce implementation and post implementation problems such as the one identified at Ahwiaa and many other places (see ADB, 2012, p. 25). Conscious efforts should thus be made to maximize participation of stakeholders in the design, monitoring and evaluation of development projects and processes. Many have argued and it has been proven true in many contexts that, involvement of stakeholders/final users tend to strengthen project design, make stakeholders assume ownership of the project, improve post implementation governance and ultimately promotes sustainability of the project (ADB, 2012; Mansuri & Rao, 2013). Involvement of people in specific development projects should be seen as more than just a requisite for successful projects but also as an avenue to improve and strengthen democratic decentralization and in ensuring social cohesion and promoting functional and stronger institutions (ADB, 2012). Moreover, the case study presented here also demonstrates that, participation can ensure efficient and effective use of limited resources. The inactive state of the wood craft village implies that the monetary resources, the time and efforts put into initiating and implementing the project have virtually gone into waste. In a developing country like Ghana, such mismanagement of resources at any level cannot be tolerated. Optimum attention should therefore be dedicated to addressing the grave deficits in the participation initiative as part of efforts to ensure efficient resource mobilization and utilization.

Additionally, as have been admitted in many relevant public policies, the decentralised planning system in Ghana and many other developing nations lack adequate skilled personnel to satisfactorily implement the programme in all contexts (ADB, 2012). Moreover, many of these sub-national governments are ill equipped to meet all the requisites of the bottom up process in the development planning and administration system. To this end, it is suggested that, the government and its relevant national institutions should strengthen their commitment to improving popular participation in development process. Continual training and courses should be given to personnel at the various Metropolitan, Municipal and District Assemblies. Moreover, extensive monitoring and evaluation should be conducted especially on issues relating to participation at all stages in development projects. Current monitoring and evaluation frameworks should therefore be revised to include effective conditions and standards for monitoring citizenry participation in development projects.

This paper therefore posits that, notwithstanding the criticisms and implementation challenges leveled against the participation initiative, the concept remain very pertinent to development process especially in the initiation of policies, programmes and projects which have direct impact on the livelihoods of people. Efforts should therefore be made to tactfully engage the concept in the development projects and decisions with cognizance to the history, the social, economic, demographic and cultural situation as well as the geographical and political environment of respective contexts (Mansuri & Rao, 2013). Moreover, regardless of the fact that many ordinary citizens may not be able to adequately contribute to the technical aspects of some development processes, this paper contests that '...development is more than a technical undertaking that can be handled by experts. It is a complex and often contentious process that works better when citizens or final users participate in decisions that

shape their lives and allows them to monitor the people whose task it is to govern their destinies' (Mansuri & Rao, 2013, p. 283).

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