Power Relations in Community Participation: Does It Really Matter?

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Abstract

Power relations in community participation is also another concept that appears in many development discourses, but the extent to which it is hindering development practice seems to be overlooked. The purpose of this article is to examine the concept of power relations and how it has been influencing participatory practice in rural community development. It aims at looking at why people must be concerned about the use of power and finds ways of addressing the excessive use of power and power relations that seriously hinder active participatory practice. This article presents results of data gathered from community members in the western region of Ghana. Using a case study approach, the study adopted interpretivists and social constructivists philosophical perspectives. The data was gathered using focus group discussions and one-to-one informal interviews. It is argued that, while development organisations and the district assemblies are encouraging participation, they are finding it difficult to relinquish power to enhance effective participatory practice. Participation continues to reflect in most rural development programmes, but there are key barriers to effective participation and the conflict of power and power relations are still problems affecting participatory practice. Addressing issues of power relations will not only make local people very proactive, but also enhance their readiness to participate in community development activities.

Keywords: *Power relations, power, decision-making, community participation, empowerment, gender*

1. Introduction

Understanding of the concept of power and empowerment raises questions about power relations in participatory practice, but does it really matter if development practitioners use their power to control resources and influence decision-making in participatory activities? Or does it matter if outspoken individuals with expert knowledge and ideas influence development decision-making for the benefit of everybody? Why has power relations become a contested issue in the development debate and in participatory practice, more especially in rural development? To critically examine the concept of power relations and its influence in participatory practice we will first make efforts to answer these questions before evaluate the effect of power relations on decision-making as to and whether it really matters in participatory practice. The paper also examines power relations in participatory practice and the way it influences community development. Disempowering the powerful in order to empower the less powerful is to address the conflict surrounding the use of power and the relations of power between individuals and within organisations, will also be examined.

2. The Debate about Power Relations and Participatory Practice

The debate still remains on-going about the need to make community participation part of every development agenda and become a criterion for release of development funds (Killick, 2002), yet the issue of power sharing to make community members participate on equal terms in decision-making and to enable them have control over development resources still remain a difficult problem for a number of development organisations and institutions. This has raised eyebrows amongst community members and development practitioners as to who should control resources for development interventions; hitherto this has been under the control of development organisations facilitators. Some critics also argue that control of resources by beneficiaries, with the aim of transferring control and power, will be uncompromising, complicated and difficult to achieve (Drinkwater, 2003). Paradoxically, some development facilitators 'feel threatened by sharing power', so they try to resist power transfer which it is argued slows down the process of participatory activities and development practice (Clemente, 2003:44). This raises the question of whether the issue of power relations really matters in participatory practice and must therefore be critically evaluated and justified[20].

Studies have suggested that community participation is about power and how it is exercised by different social actors in the spaces created for interactions between community members and development facilitators in development (Gaventa and Valderrama, 1999). Chambers (1997) and McEwan (2002) asked who voices a community's development needs, how do participants or beneficiaries voice their concerns, whose voices are included in decision-making, what power relations are involved, what social structures shape development and

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[20] Francis, (2004) has argued that participatory practice and development approaches have been mostly subject to criticism for their treatment and dimension of power. Therefore overlooking the realities at community level and assumption about social and political structure are at times partial and naïve.

who creates those structures. Control of the structures and processes for participation defining actors, agenda and procedures - is usually in the hands of NGOs and other development organisations which can also create barriers to effective participation (Gaventa and Valderrama, 1999). For instance, gender differentiations, religious affiliations, cultural backgrounds and social stratification are just some of the complexities which make it difficult for the ideological approach to tackle the controversies surrounding power and power relations within communities and organizations (Johnson and Mayoux, 1998).

The issue of who should control development resources still remains in the development debate because many agencies that advocate for participatory practice in development interventions still feel reluctant to relinquish control (Mohan, 2002; Fulop and Linstead, 2004). Those who possess power act and get things done in their own way (Chambers, 1997). This according to Dixon (1990:58) makes 'the structures that lie behind the inequitable distribution of power and resources' become neglected and has been happening for years. Development organisations advocate for participation and empowerment during the development campaign but they find it difficult to relinquish power. White has observed that NGOs claim to empower the disadvantaged through participatory activities which also helps them to win the support of interest groups yet they still hold firmly onto power (White, 2000).

Power struggle, which surrounds control of resources for development interventions, still remains a problem for development organisations and other stakeholders. This emphasises Desai's (2002:118) argument that resources for development remain scarce, yet 'pressures for their allocation to various interest groups have progressively increased, but the poor who do not have either socioeconomic or political power do not generally gain access to the decision-making processes and hence are unable to influence them'. The pervasive effects of power relations within institutions and between communities and organisations has to be understood and addressed before participation can be effective (James, 2001). The transfer of power that could bring about empowerment means the powerful will have to be disempowered before the power relations within organisations become balanced.

3. How Do Power Relations Affect and Shape Participatory Practice?

A development organisation that adopts the concept of participation has its fundamental basics centred on power relations within the communities it serves (Nelson and Wright, 1995). How do power relations affect and shape the way participation is applied in development practice? According to Kontinen, the dynamics of power and power relations remains a key aspect of most communication in the development process and shapes relationships amongst individuals in organisations (Kontinen, 2005). A shift of the development paradigm has also shifted the argument of participation towards empowerment and is gradually leading to the transfer of management responsibilities and control over resources to the powerless (Desai, 2002). That is, making the powerless able to influence organisation's decisions and actions, through decision-making (Rieger and Wong-Rieger, 1990). The power relationship that exists between and within organisations and how power has to be transferred has also brought about institutional and social conflict between the powerful, that Chambers calls the *uppers* (e.g. the NGOs and other CSOs), who are always in control of development resources and the less privileged *lowers*, the rural poor and who are to benefit development the interventions (Chambers, 1983; 1997; Mohan, 2002).

Development agencies desire to empower the rural poor and make them proactive through participatory activities (White, 2000), but there is some scepticism among NGOs and development facilitators about when empowerment truly occurs, due to the power shift that may result. Community participation brings sustainability in development interventions and leads to the establishment of ownership of the intervention, but some critics also argue that such an assumption is naïve because there is no detailed empirical evidence indicating that participation brings empowerment to rural people (Cleaver, 2001). This is because the power relations between development institutions or organisations and community members and the question of how power has to be transferred are not properly addressed in a way that would increase the level and effectiveness of participation in rural development activities (Schonwalder, 1997 cited in Gaventa and Valderrama, 1999).

There is a general perception amongst development organisations and even community members as to who, in what way and how participation must be practised (Desai, 2002)[21]? Pretty seems not to share this sentiment, but rather argues that development organisations should look at how participants would be empowered as they engage community members in a participatory process (Pretty, 1995). Hill (1997) and Francis (2002) have also noted that the engagement of community members will not only empower them but

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[21] Desai (2002) explained further that, more work and information is needed, if one has to know who participates, what participation really entails and how participation has to be promoted. He further argued that participation is centred on three different areas – namely, taking part, influence and power. While participation is focused on two different dimensions – decision-making process and action process to realize the objectives set for participatory practice.

would help to sustain the development intervention. However, active community participation will never address the changes in the structures and policies that shape development policy and practice; furthermore, it will not even affect the power relations that hinder effective community involvement (Johnson and Mayoux, 1998).

Knowledge is power and it is an asset in development (Chambers, 1983, 1997; Foucault cited in Lukes, 2005). It has been universally accepted that outsiders' knowledge is superior to local, indigenous and rural knowledge, and this biased notion has remained in development policy and practice. However the acquisition of such knowledge is only possible formal education, which rural people lack, and sometimes may not get due to deprivation. Formal education should not be the only route to acquiring development knowledge, informal education is another way by which local people could share information and acquire some basic skills for life. Education sensitizes communities about rights, responsibilities and opportunities; it aligns government's programmes to the needs of communities; it makes local institutions more responsible and accountable; it helps community members to liaise with governments in making their programmes more effective in meeting the needs of communities; it helps in building capacity and empowers rural people (Clark, 2002 and Sahley and Pratt, 2003). However, people could be sensitised in an informal way to become proactive and make a contribution to their communities.

Nowadays, the wealthier are those who have knowledge and therefore possess power, which is used to influence the direction in which information should flow and to control the social structures that shape the people's lives (Chambers 1983; Rooy, 1998). Chambers calls these wealthier the *uppers*, who exercise their power and impose their ideas and knowledge on the *lowers* who are usually the rural poor (Chambers, 1983; 1997). Making the conflict of power and power relations in participatory practice redress participatory problems seems far from reality. Therefore, so long as the flow of the funds remains unidirectional, power will definitely continue to flow in the same direction, thus making the poor to become recipients of outsiders' knowledge rather making them decision makers who should apply their local knowledge to improve their lives. Power and power relations are among some of the issues that control and shape participatory practice and have become the dilemmas that face rural people, because those that advocate participatory practice also fear the lose of power and control over resources.

4. Research Methodology

This research adopted the inductive research approach to investigate the paradoxes and barriers which made participatory practice more complex and which undermined the achievements of development objectives in rural areas. To understand the way community members participate in development activities, why they participate and how they participate; an interactive approach was needed which made use of one-to-one informal interviews and focus group discussions. This aided an understanding of the agents (the researched) and enabled the researcher to acquire the requisite knowledge needed. The research aimed to explore ways in which people at the grassroots level are involved in development activities that employ the participatory principle and the nature of inconsistencies and how power relations affect the application of the concept. The study never tested any hypothesis, however as an exploratory study it did investigate, how the people in Nzema East District (now Ellembenle and Nzema East Districts) and the Italian NGO – Co-operation for Development of Emerging Countries (CDEC) applied the participation concept in order to engage rural people in participatory practice and encourage them to be proactive in development activities. The study did not follow the feminists' approaches which view development interventions to be gender biased and which, as a result has encouraged feminist

researchers to look into ways of integrating women's views into decision-making on development policy formulation and implementation. Rather the research was centred on overall community inclusion in participatory practice and the proactive empowerment of rural people in development activities within their communities. This enabled an investigation of the power relations in community participation. It is argued that community development activities are achieved through the *voluntary contribution* one has to offer one's community. In some communities participation is understood as a form of social obligation that should be seen as an honour for members of a community and inhabitant of an area. The adoption of a one-to-one informal interviews and the use of a focus group discussions approach, helped to generate new ideas and understanding that produced evidence that might challenge not only the researcher's belief but also those of wider society (May, 2001) particularly in the area where the research was carried out. The questions were designed in a semi-structured form so there could be room for probing into unclear responses. This also gave respondents the opportunity to clearly express their feelings about the phenomenon under investigation.

5. The Youth in Decision-Making: Is Power Relations Still an Issue?

The participation of local people more especially the youth in community development decision-making and activities has suffered a lot of absurdity. However, while some schools of thought encourage the involvement of the youth, for instance in participatory practice, some community members, mostly the elders and elites argue that the youth are too immature to be involved in active decision-making. This presupposes that although power

relations have been a concern to development practitioners, it is still an issue even among people in rural areas. The lack of transfer of power from the elders to the youth for example and gender issues is among the paradoxes affecting participatory practice. One main reason for involving the youth in community participatory is to ensure that they become familiar with future challenges ahead of them when they become proactive in community development activities. Active participation observed during the investigation was limited to a few adults and key influential groups – mostly the Unit Committee Members (UCMs), the elders in the communities and the assembly member of the area. So do issues of power relations prevent the youth from participating in decision-making? Some schools of thought believe that active community participation that involves the youth help them to harness their potential and this is key to achieving continuity, effective and sustainable development for a community in its development efforts. Surprisingly, despite this awareness it became evident that some elders and key influential groups in some rural communities are against the participation of youth in decision-making. Participation of the youth (mostly young men and women) in development activities in the villages has been hampered by intimidation and treats from the elders. The chiefs, elders and men in the villages intimidate the youth who actively participate and threaten those that are outspoken during decision-making process. These attitudes not only hamper effective participation but also scare those who may wish to participate in the future. One respondent - a youth member – whose explanation was in support of the elders' negative attitude towards the youth worth mentioning here;

> *A twenty five year old man from this village decided to contest in the district level election to become assembly member of this area. The elders alleged he was too young to stand for election. Some said he was not married, did not have children and did not have a place to sleep (that is he does not own a house) so nobody should vote for him. We want those who are responsible not those who may not have time for us.*

The community members consider marriage as a major social responsibility, so if one is not married he or she is classified irresponsible and not fit for any political, social or community position. This form of social exclusion has made the youth (who are mostly not married) to become inactive in participation of community activities, unless there are penalties against those who abscond such community activities. This behaviour from the elders is preventing the youth from participating in decision-making that will involve the *whole* community. Instead, all participatory decision-making is carried out by the UCMs, the assembly members and the village elders. This does not go down well with the youth in the villages. Some of the reasons they gave to express their disagreement with their elders has been indicated below.

> *More often than not most of the youth members do not attend participatory decision-making even if they are invited. Decisions are taken by the elders. We are not considered or invited to participate in active development decision-making. Even if we are present, our views, ideas or suggestions are not taken. Most of the elders consider us to be children with no experience or have nothing to offer.*

There were a lot of mixed feelings among the youth about how the men exercised their powers over everybody during decision-making process. The youth expressed some misgivings about the elders. They are either prevented from participating or withdraw from participating, for fear of being reprimanded or threatened by the elders after the meeting. This concern was noted among the youth members who are not married or are not in serious relationships and those who do not have children. They are not encouraged to play active role in participatory decision-making or activities. In the presence of the elders who are mostly the key players in community decision-making, the issue of active participation among the youth is very limited. So is the issue of power relations being addressed by community members who might be advocating for active participatory practice? The youth members wish to participate but the opportunities are limited for them to be actively involved. Power and gender relations are some of the issues that still hinder participatory practice, but efforts to address it seem far from reality.

6. Power and Gender Relations in Participatory Development

Power and gender relations are also factors affecting participatory practice at the grassroots level. The dimension of power, the struggle for power, or ways of disempowering the powerful (mostly the men, elderly, assembly members or those in government offices) to empower the powerless (mostly women, the youth and the marginalised) has also become a difficult task for development organisation[22]. Development organisations are making efforts to empower women and children who had previously been relegated to the bottom of the decision-making hierarchy. Generally men dominate decision-making, and in most cases represent women in most levels of governance, whether traditional or political (Massaw, 2000). Arguably, it is also naïve for outsiders to raise the issues associated with gender and power relations when in reality they are in partial support

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[22] Chambers (1995) observed male bias which over the years has affected the performance of women. He cited the following examples as male biases; female farmers are neglected by male agricultural extension workers, most local-level government staff, researchers and other visitors are men. In most societies women have inferior status and are subordinate to men.

of keeping power to themselves (Woroniuk and Schalkwyk, 1998) and have done little to address gender inequalities.

Gender disparity, like power relations still predominates in the villages in Nzema East District (NED) despite over three decades of feminist advocacy, which has argued that the issue of gender should be addressed because women have a vital role to play in development policy and practice (Pearson, 2002). The relations of power and how they are exercised over others, especially women, are not only a problem related to development institutions in the district[23], but one which affects almost every institution there. In the rural communities power and gender relations were observed to be a problem not limited to the district assembly but also throughout the rural communities and villages. The women felt delighted to point out how the men control every bit of participatory decision-making process, be it at the community level or in the homes. Evidently it is sometimes very difficult to participate if you were a woman. An explanation given by a lady is worth pointed out here.

The men do not respect us; they don't want us to talk. Even when you are raising an issue they turn to mumble and grumble. It makes you feel embarrassed at times. In the end whatever a woman will say is not taken into consideration. Sometimes they may listen to you, but your point will not be taken or implemented.

Sometimes some of the elders may threaten to beat women who oppose the views of the men. In some cases, if a woman runs her own business in the village, the men and the elders try to dissuade the community from buying from her by classifying her *witch*. And she may be excluded from taking part in future community development decision-making. In some cases the men may even attack the woman at night through *witchcraft* activities, so the women are scared to participate in community decision-making. This kind of intimidation is common in the villages for people of both genders who oppose the elders, but it is worse for the women.

This problem of power being exercised by the men over the women was not an isolated case observed during the study. Rural development has targeted women because they are the most vulnerable and weak, apart from children, and their commitment surpasses that of men. The duties of the women range from subsistence farming to child care, they need to participate actively in development issues to empower them enough, to become better equipped to effectively address the socio-economic problems they face in their communities and also to help improve their livelihoods. Paradoxically societal problems make it unattractive for the women to play their role in participatory practice as citizens who have equal rights and responsibilities with men. Lack of respect for women in the villages, coupled with the way they are intimidated by the elders and other men is making participation very difficult for them. A quote from one of the ladies will help us to understand their plight.

The men do not respect us at all; they don't, at all. Even if an important point is raised by the women at meetings the men will not take it. The men use their powers to influence decision-making and over-rule issues raised by the women, because they don't respect us.

Perhaps this sentiment seems to be a cultural phenomenon because in African society men are considered the head of the family. So, in the presence of men, women's decisions are considered irrelevant. But the views expressed by the women show that they do not appreciate the idea of the men dominating decision-making and the way they *lord over* them. The power relations debate still remains ongoing in the development discourse, because many agencies that firmly support participation feel reluctant to release power (Mohan, 2002; Francis, 2002). The assumption that, social capital[24] of rural community members is unique, that they have common interests and agendas, and that they live in harmony without any conflict of power, is naïve. This assumption restricts the spread of participatory practice, which also affects the social and political structures in rural communities and rural development institutions (Francis, 2002). These, among other bottlenecks in participatory practice, have prompted rural people to view participation as a development concept that needs to be reshaped to effectively address the problems of participation and power relations in enhancing development in rural communities.

7. Conclusion

Application of participation in community development has a lot of conflicting issues relating to power. For instance those exercising power, those who should transfer power and those who need to be empowered are all issues surrounding power and power relations. Empowerment has come as a result of some stakeholders' excessive use of power, denial of power to others, the use of power to control development resources and others reluctance to relinquish power to the less powerful still need to be addressed. Some development facilitators

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[23] Young (2002) supports the observation made in the study – thus observation was made about women in development advocates that shifted the argument on ineffective development planning which over the years and now focusing on how much development efforts was losing as a result of ignoring women's actual or potential contributions.

[24] Clarke (2002) argued that social capital is an analogous to economic capital, but depends on the less tangible of social relationships. As explained by Putnam the key element of social capital is trust and it is the basis of economic success of the northern part of Italy.

jealously protect the power they hold in their organisations and try to resist power transfer which could enhance participatory practice and decision-making. NGOs claim to empower women, the youth, children, the marginalised or disadvantaged so as to win their support, yet they still hold firmly onto power. There is scepticism among the elderly, those controlling development resources and even development facilitators about how they have to transfer power to empowerment community members.

Women play active role in the various communities; they need to participate actively so as to make them empowered and play active role in development activities. Their problems make it unattractive for them to play their role in participatory practice as citizens whose rights and responsibilities even surpass that of some men. While the youth must also be empowered to take up future development responsibilities and decision-making, so addressing the power relations to empower them is a key to address future community development problems. The assumption that, rural community members live in harmony without any conflict of power because there is social capital is naïve. This makes power relations matter most in participatory practice if development organisations have to gain community support in participatory practice. Therefore so far as power relations still matter to development organisations and community members alike, addressing the power imbalance in participatory practice will not only enhance community members' readiness to participate but also increase the social capital and improve development practice.

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