
Barriers to Men's participation in Community Development Projects: The Experiences from Okatana Constituency of Oshana Region, Namibia

Fransina Ndunge^a, Nchindo Mbukusa^{b*}

^{a,b}University of Namibia, private bag 13301, Windhoek 9000, Namibia

^aEmail: fnjsmith@gmail.com, ^bEmail: nmbukusa@unam.na

Abstract

The study draws on the experiences of Okatana Constituency of the Oshana Region in Namibia. The purpose of the study was to: (i) investigate the leading barriers of men's participation in community development projects and (ii) discover strategies to promote the participation of men in community projects. A total number of eight [8] participants were interviewed through a semi-structured interview. An observation sheet was used to augment data from interviews. Collected data were analysed using a thematic content analysis method. Three major categories of barriers to men's participation in projects including Structural, administrative as well as socio-cultural and political barriers were identified and discussed. Lack of resources, restrictive legal requirements, Low levels of education, negative attitudes and behaviour, alcohol abuse as well as political interference were some of the barriers to men's participation in community projects indicated by participants. The study further recommends strategies to promote men's participation in community projects such as enhancement of community education, the involvement of traditional leaders, the formation of community development committees, and the improvement of service delivery.

Keywords: Community Participation; Community Development; Development Projects; Men Participation.

1. Introduction

The study reported in this paper has two main objectives, namely to investigate the leading barriers of men's participation in community development projects and discover potential strategies to promote the participation of men in community projects.

* Corresponding author.

Experiences from Okatana Constituency in the Oshana Region, Namibia serves as the empirical reference for the study reported herein. In recent years, Community Participation has gained momentum in the development spectrum. A paradigm shift to participatory development emerged with transition from place-based to people-based development. Since then the focus of development revolved around the active participation of grassroots people in development initiatives rather than being mere recipients of development. However, the reform has been coupled with several shortcomings, advocates of participatory development argue that persistent gender inequality between men and women remains an obstacle to achieving the goals of development [1]. The main dilemma in the literature stems from a methodological bias that is shaped by feminist ideologies. Although previous studies such as [2,3,4,5] highlighted low community participation in development projects, most of the studies have either looked at general community participation in projects or women's participation in projects, as such the phenomena of men's participation and equal participation was limitedly investigated. Briefly, previous studies on community development focused on women's participation in community projects, while neglecting the role played by men in ensuring success of such projects [6]. Consequently, the feminist approach to development has led to a scenario of men beginning to distance themselves from development activities [7]. The challenge of men beginning to distance themselves from community development projects possess a threat to development. This trend encroaches on the statement "unity is power" [7]. Research has also noted that expanding women's opportunities in several community development projects has influenced gender equality negatively and brought down the acceleration of development [8]. Where men have participated in community development equally with women, projects have flourished [9]. Ignoring men in community development projects may not only limit effectiveness but also exacerbate the existing disparities between the two sexes [7]. Finally, Systematized and improperly informed agendas of elevating participation of women in community development projects at the expense of men also contribute to their exclusion [10]. Measuring the impact of development is determined by the extent to which residents are involved in activities aimed at achieving common goals. Community development seeks to bring people together with the common goal of improving their social, economic, political, and cultural wellbeing for better living conditions. As such community participation is an indispensable element for effective community development [11]. Authors in [12] posit that projects are means by which community development is brought down to the grassroots level. The success of every project depends on the equal and active participation of community members in terms of designing, implementing, and sustaining projects that affect their livelihoods [13]. Therefore exclusion of some members of the community could lead to subsequent failure of community projects [8]. Drawing from the experiences of Okatana constituency in the Oshana Region, Namibia, the paper looks at barriers to men's participation in community projects and then discusses strategies for promoting men's participation in projects. Initially, the concept of community participation is theorized, then barriers of men's participation in community projects are discussed, followed by a discussion of potential strategies to promote the participation of men in community projects, finally, the conclusion is drawn and recommendation for future practice is made.

1.1 The Concept of Community Participation

Recognition of community participation as driving force behind community development can be traced in the work of authors such as [14, 15, 16 & 17]. Over the past decades several debates among authors, philosophers, and community development practitioners emerged surrounding the meaning of community participation within

the development discourse. According to [18] participation means different things to different people. As such the definition of participation is rooted in both the context and background in which it is applied. Conversely, the view of participation varies significantly amongst various authors. Development practitioners such as those in [14, 15, 19, & 20] view participation as means used to achieve some predetermined goals. It is a way of harnessing rural people's physical, economic, and social resources to achieve the aims and objectives of development programs and projects more efficiently and effectively [14]. While other development practitioners [17, 16 & 21] view participation as an end goal. According to these development practitioners, participation is an active, dynamic, and genuine process that unfolds over time, and the purpose of which is to develop and strengthen the capabilities of rural people to intervene more directly in the development initiatives. In this respect, viewing participation as a process could help to develop people's capacities or abilities, recognize and improve their potential to influence decision making and exercise control over their lives. Although both viewpoints emphasize the improvement of livelihoods, the author in [22] argued that strategies which adopted the view of participation as a means have not resulted in meaningful participation of community members; rather it resulted in the current situation of development agencies failing to confront the issue of lack of community participation in development projects. Naturally, the ideology of participation as a means is often associated with tokenism whereby Non- Governmental Organisations, Development agencies, and donors may passively involve community members at some stages of project management while excluding them from the decision-making process, as such participation is regarded as manipulative since people are not allowed to decide or influence decisions that affect their lives [9]. Alternatively, the author in [23] suggest that community participation should be viewed as an end or process because it allows local people to influence decisions affecting their lives. Moreover, the author in [16] further stresses that Community participation as an end is regarded as a process whereby community members identify their needs, prioritize such needs and act together to bring about collective solutions to their problems. The extent of community participation is yet a crucial element discussed in the literature, authors in [24] posits that while it is important to advocate for active participation of residents in development efforts affecting their lives, it is equally worthwhile to examine the models/typologies employed to facilitate participation, which influences the extent of people's involvement in the decision-making process and the degree of people's control in the activities or projects for them as recipients of the development programs. Owing to this background various Authors in [25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32 & 33] postulates that participation occurs at different levels and suggests a typology of participation which is based along a continuum. Though the types of participation differ among authors, they share common ideas regarding the extent or the degree to which community members have a chance to influence decision making. However the level of participation is shaped by the socio-cultural and political environment in which it takes place [34]. According to the author in [35] the degree to which community members have a chance to influence decision making relating to the execution of development activities aimed at improving their living standards depends upon the existing socio-cultural and political system, which can either facilitate or limit meaningful participation. Therefore, development practitioners embarking upon community development should become cognizant of potential barriers to community participation and devise strategies to overcome such barriers before formulating community projects. The debate of whether participation is a means or an end is endless, but since both lie in a continuum, the most important issue is how participation as a means can be 'upgraded' and can develop into participation as an end. Low levels of community participation have been identified as a major

causal factor of the development project's failure [18]. Several authors have identified barriers to community participation. Authors in [36] postulates that weak socio-economic status of communities may prevent them from taking part in development activities, even if communities succeed to start projects they may lack resources to sustain projects as a result their efforts end in vain [37]. Similarly, Low levels of Education influences participation in development projects, quiet often people with low educational background are less likely to participate in development activities as compared to those with good educational background [38]. Bureaucratic processes associated with projects implementation tend to discourage community members from participation in projects [39, 40]. According to the authors in [41, 4] attitude, Behaviour are determinant factors of the extent to which communities participate in development activities. In a nutshell the author in [42] comments that rural African communities are often dominated by dictatorial leadership that shape participation to benefit those in power. Despite these barriers the literature recommended several strategies such as; enhancement of community education [39]; Involvement of community leaders in project cycle management [43] and Establishment of committees and sub-committees [44]. In Namibia, the problem of low community participation is particularly associated with men distancing themselves from development projects [45]. Although, the main barriers to men's participation in community projects have been limitedly investigated, The scenario of men distasting themselves from development projects could be directly influenced by the two popular development theories; Women in Development (WID) as well as the Women and Development [WAD] theories adopted by many developing countries such as Namibia, Uganda, Nigeria, Tanzania, and Kenya. The two theories encroach around the notion of "Women Empowerment" that promotes active participation of women in development activities while side-lining the contributions of men in development efforts. An alternative to the WID and WAD theories is the emergence of the Gender and Development [GAD] theory. The GAD theory of development focuses on socially constructed differences between men and women, challenging the existing gender roles and relations between women and men as well as the creation and effects of class differences on development [46]. GAD thinking seeks to address existing socio-economic and political factors embedded in the system which propels gender inequality in the development sphere. GAD further advocates for the active participation of women and men in development projects as well as emphasizing equal benefits of both sexes from development activities. Since the current study seeks to investigate factors preventing the participation of men in community projects regarding the Okatana Constituency in the Oshana Region, Namibia, the GAD theory was deemed appropriate for the reported study, thus GAD theory as a theoretical framework underpinned this particular study.

2. Materials and Methods

The study reported in this paper, was conducted in Okatana Constituency, Oshana Region, Namibia. A phenomenological research design was employed to gain insight into factors preventing the participation of men in community development projects with special reference to Okatana Constituency, Oshana Region, Namibia. The phenomenological research design was deemed appropriate for this study because of its strength to explore the lived experiences, perceptions as well as perspectives of people regarding a certain phenomenon. Purposive Criterion and Snowball sampling techniques were used to select a total sample of 8 participants from the target population. Data was collected employing semi-structured interviews which were augmented by field observations as well as document analysis for cross-checking and verifying information provided by participants

during interviews. A thematic content analysis method was used to analyse generated data, while words served as units of analysis. Several themes and sub-themes emerged as a result of data analysis.

3. Results

3.1 Barriers to Men's Participation in Community Projects

The study investigated barriers to men's participation in community projects, three major categories of barriers emerged from this study, namely: (a) Structural barriers (b) Administrative barriers and (c) socio-cultural and political barriers. These major categories were further divided into sub-categories. The description of findings are detailed below:

(a) Structural barriers

When participants were asked and probed to describe how structural barriers obstructs men's participation in community projects, they had the following to say:

The government gives us little money for our projects and materials are very costly, so even if we start projects with an intention to sustain them longer, a lack of resources shatters our dreams. At times we have to use our own money to supplement the funds allocated to us. These complications drive men away from participating in projects". (Participant, B5) The finding above indicates that, even though community members start projects with the hope and determination to achieve intended goals, they may lack financial and material resources that subsequently lead to the natural death of community projects. This implies that a lack of material and financial resources obstructs men's participation in community projects. Quite often men prefer complex projects which require large financial and material inputs, thus, unavailability of adequate resources limits men's participation in community projects. Correspondingly, previous research findings suggest that even if communities are successful in creating projects, they may lack material resources and connections to sustain their efforts, as a result their efforts are in vain (Cleaver, 1999). In support Kakumba &Nsingo, 2008 posits that the weak socio-economic status of people obstructs them from meaningful participation in development activities. Another participant narrated the implication of structural barriers towards men's participation as depicted below:

"Most projects here are headed by women, even when calls for funding applications for community projects are made, the connotation of women empowerment is always attached, for instance when they say women are encouraged to apply, so in most cases opportunities for us are fewer as compared to women" (Participant, D18). Another structural barrier to men's participation in projects pointed out by participants was a lack of opportunities for men to participate in such projects. The issue of designing community projects based on the popular "Women Empowerment" approach could not be overstated across most responses. This phenomenon, resulted in limited opportunities for men to participate in existing projects or even to start projects, since most projects were feminist oriented and funding opportunities are often linked to "Women Empowerment" as such men are pushed to the receiving end of community development projects. The above finding has been complemented by several authors (see for example, Boserup, 1970, Oakley, 1972, Duryea, 2007 and Farre, 2012). For instance, Duryea (2007) postulates that domination of the so called "Women empowerment" regime

has pushed men to the periphery of development activities. In further support of the current finding, Farre, 2012 stressed that the feminist approach to development has led to a trend of men beginning to distance themselves from development activities.

(b) Administrative Barriers

Below is an extract from interview transcripts, describing administrative barriers:

“We submitted our funding proposal to the constituency office long back, but up to date we didn’t get any feedback on the status of our application. If you go there to ask, you will be told to wait. That is how we suffer to get funds for projects my dear, so we just gave up”. (Participant D16). This finding demonstrates how bureaucracies in acquiring resources meant for projects inhibits men’s participation in community projects. Participants narrated that the process of allocating either financial or material resources tends to be bureaucratic, characterized by extended time-span between the application for financial or material assistance and the actual rendering of assistance which discourages community members (in this case, men) from participating in projects. In congruence with the above finding, are Heck (2003) and FAO views who stated that a centralized public administrative system that controls decision-making, resource allocation, and information may strain participation; where residents feel they are not part of the design or process, they are likely to lose interest in programs/projects controlled by outsiders.

(c) Socio-Cultural and Political Barriers

Perhaps a major set of barriers falls under this category. A significant number of participants made various comments regarding this category. The following are a few comments from participants:

“Some people think projects are for women and people living with HIV/AIDS. I heard in the past some of the projects were initiated for people living with HIV/AIDS but that has all changed so do people need to change their beliefs and attitudes towards projects”.(Participant C11). Negative attitudes and beliefs towards community projects was labelled as a major socio-cultural barrier to men’s participation in projects. For instance, perceiving community project as “women’s activities or activities for people living with HIV” affects the level of men’s participation in projects, leading to many men distancing themselves from community projects due to negative connotations attached to such projects. In support of the above stance are the findings of Homan, (2008) and (Ajayi, 2006) who highlighted the impact of negative beliefs and attitudes on development projects. Homan and Ajayi, demonstrated how negative attitudes and beliefs result in a creation of negative publicity towards community projects which often leads to unequal gender participation in such projects.

Regarding the influence of educational level on participation, one participant said:

“Men do not understand projects; they always have an excuse not to start or join existing projects. I think illiteracy limits their potential in one way or the other. Thus they are easily coerced into believing that projects are for women or whatsoever”. (Participant, A1). Participants identified low levels of education that influence

the understanding of community members with regards to projects as another socio-cultural barrier to men's participation in community development projects. In this context, men are said to possess limited understanding regarding the importance of community projects, consequently they are less likely to participate in such projects. The finding described above is consistent with that of obbo (2000) who articulated that educational level has a direct influence on community participation; people with high educational levels are more likely to participate in development activities as compared to those with low levels of education.

3.2 Strategies to Promote men's participation in Community Projects

The objectives of the reported study were two-fold, the first objective has been already addressed in the previous section. The second objective of the reported study was to discover possible strategies to promote the participation of men in community development projects. Four potential strategies were identified and thus described as follows:

(a) Enhancement of Community Education

In their own words participants narrated:

“It is not that people do not want to partake in community development projects, the truth is many people do not know the purpose of such projects, thus some say community projects are for women and people with HIV. So they need to be educated on the importance and benefits of community projects” (Participant C10). *“You reminded me of one important thing, civilization plays an important role determining how people behave in the society. Our children and especially men are in a mess, they are not into church, community, schools and are even absent in families. We need to re-direct them to come back to society and it can only be achieved through education which starts from home. I recommend the revival of evening gatherings around the fire”* (Participant B7). The finding above suggests enhancement of community education as conduit to raise awareness and increase the understanding of community members regarding the importance of full participation in projects. It was worth noting that participants narrated that ignorance and lack of understanding/awareness which results in low levels of participation in projects could be eliminated by enhancing community education to include aspects such as socialization, family life education, and citizenship education. Experiences shared by participants here above concur with the previous studies which posits that creating awareness amongst community members by educating them to become aware of their socio-economic conditions, the causes of their plight and their potential to change their situation promotes community participation (FAO, 2002).

(b) Involvement of traditional leaders

With reference to involvement of traditional leaders Participants recommended the following:

“Headmen and women are very influential when it comes to mobilizing people in the community to take part in activities, so they should be part and parcel of development projects in order to motivate people. Now the problem is; experts hardly involve our leaders in execution of projects that is why the community tends to reject some community development initiatives” (Participant, B7). The above finding, emphasized the role of

traditional leaders in exercising power over major community decisions as well as influencing community members to participate in community development activities. Naturally, participation of traditional and community leaders in development projects often inspire and attracts many community members to start or join projects. Therefore, involving traditional leaders at all stages of project cycle management including, designing, planning, Implementation as well as monitoring & evaluation could promote equal community participation in development projects. Supporting this finding, are the experiences shared by Theron (2005), which state that identifying influential individuals or community groups who can bring people together and promote action is a pragmatic strategy which works well in promoting community participation, especially in rural African communities.

(c) *Establishment of Community Development Committees*

Below is a direct quotation from interviews:

“I recommend that the constituency councillor office should facilitate the election of community development committees which can direct and educate other community members on the importance of community development projects. We can even have more men in the committees, just as an example for other men” (Participant, D17). This finding implies that focusing on the use of local knowledge and expertise to solve community problems strengthen capacity of local residents and empower them to lead change in the community. The findings further posit that community members tend to be inspired by ordinary community members serving as agents of change than technical experts. In fact, community members possess first-hand experience of issues affecting them; therefore having them as leaders of development ensures responsiveness of community projects. The revelation above is congruent with the literature on Asset-based community development which advocates for local capacity building rather than hiring experts from outside the community. In further support the former finding (Chitambo, 2002) recommends establishment of committees and sub- committees to oversee development activities in communities as a logical strategy to improve community participation in projects.

Improvement of service delivery

Since, the lack of financial and material resources coupled with bureaucracies has been echoed as a barrier to men's participation in projects. Participants suggested the following: *“We want our government to increase funding for community development projects, so that we can help ourselves and poor people in our communities. The little resources we get currently can barely sustain projects. One has to fork out a substantial amount of money from their own pockets to purchase the needed material or equipment for the project to start functioning”* (Participant, B5). *“The time we wait for funds to be released from the offices is too long, if they could speed up the process of awarding grants for starting community development projects. I am quite sure many projects will excel as people will be motivated to join projects. The only standing issue now is bureaucracies”* (Participant, D15). This finding recommends improvement of service delivery in two main ways, namely: increased funding for community development projects and elimination of bureaucracies in distribution of funds/resources meant for projects. Moreover, it emphasizes that quality service delivery is crucial for effective governance as it ensures that goods and services are delivered to intended recipients/

beneficiaries efficiently and without bureaucracies or inequalities. It is thus believe that once service delivery is improved many community members will be attracted to participate in projects as a result of availability of adequate resources and the absence of bureaucracies.

4. Conclusion

According to the analysis of findings and discussion, it can be concluded that three interlinked- major categories of barriers, namely: Structural, Administrative as well as Socio-Cultural and Political barriers obstructs the participation of men in community development projects. However, despite these barriers there are several alternatives that could be embarked upon to overcome such barriers so as to promote equal community participation in projects.

5. Limitations of the Study

During the study several inconsistencies and contradictions emerged as a result of different factors. The absence of literature on the factors preventing the participation of men in community development projects was the main challenge in this study. The researchers experienced difficulties to make inferences from the literature and therefore opted to generalise the literature to community participation instead of focusing on the participation of men in community projects. Moreover the absence of literature on the phenomenon under investigation made it difficult for the researchers to link findings to the literature and establishes relationships and or deviations of findings from literature during data presentation and analysis. Another challenge experienced by the researchers was that of sampling and locating participants according to the pre-determined categories (Men who withdrew from projects and those who fully participated in projects) due to the vastness of the Okatana constituency. This resulted in a smaller sample size than planned during the project proposal phase. Finally, the narrow scope of the study, focusing only on men in the Okatana Constituency made it difficult to generalise the findings to other areas in the Oshana Region and Namibia at large.

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