

## **Local Community Development and the Participatory Planning Approach: A Review of Theory and Practice**

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**Abstract:** This study tries to put forward the argument that, much as the Participatory Approach has in theory been praised and given high international prominence as a possible solution to addressing community development issues, its practical application still leaves a lot to be desired. Practically, it remains to be seen as an approach whose islands of knowledge continue to be unknown, some invisible and yet others denied from the mainstream of practice. The paper makes this observation from a study conducted in Ghana on the use of the approach to address local community development needs. Specifically, the aim was to establish the link between the theoretical knowledge of the approach and its practical application.

**Keywords:** Community development planning and participatory planning approach

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Ever since its inception, the planning profession has as one of its ultimate objectives to ensure that the needs of its beneficiaries are met. The concept of sustainable development stresses this fact by pointing out that the needs of the present and future generations need not to be compromised. The underlying question behind fulfilling this objective does however lie in how to achieve this desired end state of ensuring that development needs of the beneficiaries are met.

Various approaches have been tried by development planners in response to this query and among them is the most recent approach of Participatory Planning approach. Ray (2000) and Rietbergen (2001) labelled it as the new paradigm in development planning geared towards a general approach that can be defined on a general set of principles, notably the willingness to involve local people in development decisions that will affect their lives. This approach has gained momentum in the field of development planning over the years and continues to do so.

Contemporary development scholars such as Chambers (1983, 1992, 1997), Arnstein (1969), Uphoff (1987), have played a leading role in ensuring that the approach gains more momentum and credence. They advocate for people's involvement in all development activities because they believe that the key objectives of any development cannot be fully achieved unless people meaningfully participate in it Mohammad (2010). This study therefore, aims at showing the extent to which the participatory approach has been used in meeting local community development needs at Municipal level in Ghana. This also includes analysing

the factors affecting the approach as well as its strengths and shortfalls.

### **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

Development Planning may until today continue to experience changes in approaches but its focus of meeting the needs of its beneficiaries remains as one of its key fundamental objectives. It is an objective that many approaches seem to have failed to achieve leading to the search for new approaches such as the participatory planning approach. The approach is today seen as the path-way to successful local community development. Also seen as a concept, the participatory planning approach has been praised as a rich concept that varies in its application and definition. The World Bank (1994) argued that, defining the approach depends on the context in which it occurs. According to the World Bank Learning Group, the approach is seen as a matter of principle to some people, others see it as a practice and still others find it as an end in itself. It has also broadly been conceived to embrace the idea that all stakeholders should take part in decision making and narrowly described as drawing local knowledge from stakeholders (Ray, 2000). This idea is shared by Uphoff (1987) and further refined by the World Bank's Learning Group on participatory development. According to the group, the idea of participation has to do with a process through which stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives, decisions and resources that affect their lives (World Bank, 1994). On the other hand, DFID (1995) sees the broad aim of participation as the active involvement of people and communities in identifying problems, formulating plans and implementing decisions over

their own lives (DFID, 1995). Of course this view was stressed out by Arnstein (1969) way back in her ladder of citizen participation where she stressed the need for active and meaningful involvement of community members in activities of their communities. In her ladder, she identified eight ranks of participation and grouped them into three levels, that is, non-participation level as the lowest level with the least degree of involvement; tokenism as second level where people are allowed to participate to the extent of only expressing their views but no real say that matters to impact the decision process; and citizen power as the third level and the highest where true and meaningful participation actively takes place.

Generally, all the above authors clearly inform us of what participation is about and emphasis is drawn to the need for true and meaningful involvement of stakeholders in development matters.

Local community development on the other hand is a product of community planning which has had its share in the confusion surrounding its definition. Marie (1996) in her study on transformative community planning defined it as combining material development with the development of people while Stuart (2004) looked at it as increasing the community's capacity to take control of its own development and still Wallerstein (1993) argued that it involves building the critical thinking and planning abilities as well as concrete skills of community members so as to take control of their own destiny in development. Marie (1996), however, concludes on this issue by asserting that, community development must reflect changes within the community gained through an open and inclusive strategy that seeks to build strong community togetherness through active contribution of everyone in the community. This understanding stresses that, community development is a people-centred activity where the contribution of the participatory planning approach cannot be ignored. The approach has actually been branded as the path way through which local community development can be achieved and because of this role, both the participatory planning approach and local community development tend to intermingle. However as they intermingle, a number of factors are said to be responsible for this process and therefore influence the outcomes of the entire process.

Masanyiwa and Kinyashi (2008) discussed three of these factors as structural, administrative and social. Cornwall (2002), Samad (2002) and Gupte (2004) have also argued that factors such as institutional framework, socio-economic and politico-cultural factors are crucial to the success of the intermingling process between the approach and local community development. In addition, the authors also argue that the environment in which the participatory approach takes place equally influences local community development. This view is shared by Abott (1995) who points out that, participatory community development planning can

only operate successfully within the specific environment where the government is open for community involvement in the decision-making process. Lastly a people-friendly planning system which is decentralised in nature and hence brings close the institutions of governance to the people at the grass-root level is also of essence in enhancing local community development (GOG, 1996). When all these factors are handled well, the principles of participation that enhance people's involvement in local community development matters are well embraced and this strengthens the whole process of local community development. For principles such as inclusion, equal partnership, sharing of power, sharing of responsibility, transparency, empowerment and cooperation are crucial to this process. Failure to handle them well simply means that the participatory approach cannot successfully contribute to local community development as desired. Besides handling these principles well, the prevalence of factors such as bureaucratic preponderance as pointed out by Ali *et al.* (1983), dominance by the strong in communities (Nazneen, 2004), over-class bias (Afsar, 1999) and prevalence of wide spread corruption by Hossain (1979) will equally fail the attainment of local community development through the participatory planning approach if they too are not addressed or even eliminated.

Hence, on the basis of the views gathered above regarding the two concepts, we can for sure say that, the way to handle these two aspects so as to be successful needs to be carefully planned. These views should also serve as lessons and key issues that we must clearly understand as we try to apply the two concepts in the field of development.

To examine this issue, the study used a mixture of approaches. These approaches included the case study, qualitative and the participatory methods (interviews and focus group discussions). Two study communities of different status, that is, Asotwe community with a rural status and Ejisu community with an urban status, all under the jurisdiction of Ejisu-Juaben Municipality in Ghana were considered as the case study areas. Ejisu-Juaben Municipality is one of the twenty-seven administrative and political districts in the Ashanti Region of the Republic of Ghana. It was created during the inception of the decentralized local government system in Ghana in the year 1988 and attained a municipal status in 2006. The municipality covers an area of approximately 637.2 km<sup>2</sup>, constituting about 10% of the entire Ashanti Region and 0.27% of Ghana. It is located in the central part of the Ashanti region and lies within latitudes 10 15'N and 10 45'N and longitudes 60 15'W and 70W. The two study communities, that is; Ejisu and Asotwe were selected on the basis that, the environment (urban or rural) in which the participatory approach is used has influence on the application of the

approach. As a result, development needs of urban communities and those of rural communities in most cases differ and therefore this has influence on the application of the approach.

The main unit of analysis was the household with other sub-units such as the individuals (officers) at the Municipal offices and the identified community leaders in the two study communities. The study had a sample size of 156 households (42.8% male and 57.2% female) determined and systematically selected through a mathematical expression:

$$n = \frac{N}{1+N(\alpha)^2}$$

where,

$n$  = Sample Size,

$N$  = Sampling frame (3780 Households)

$\alpha$  = 0.08 significance level with a confidence level of 92%

Key informants were determined and selected purposively, totalling nine key informants. Primary data collection was done through household questionnaires, checklists for key informants at municipal and community leadership levels as well as focus group discussions that comprised women from the two study communities. All gathered data were analysed qualitatively because of the qualitative nature of the study. Description and cross tabulation of views obtained through the various data collection instruments was adopted.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The issue of contention in this study revolved around the extent to which the participatory planning approach was being used in addressing local community development needs and how effectively it was fulfilling this task. To obtain answers to this issue, examining of people's involvement in matters of decision making, planning, implementation and management, also considered as a post-implementation activity was found necessary. Hence effective fulfilment of the task of addressing local community development needs meant that, there was true and meaningful participation of the people in all these stages/activities.

To begin with the decision making process and as observed from the order of the stages/activities, it is the first stage in the development process where people begin to influence and share control over development initiatives through the decisions they make and consequently determine the destiny of their lives and the community at large. Study results on this stage showed an insignificant level of involvement by community members from the two communities in the

decision making process. Much of the decision making was said to be done by the Unit Committee and the Municipal Assembly and later communicated to community members. On the average, only 23% of the respondents reported that they had been involved in the decision making process while the majority amounting to 77% indicated that they were not involved in the activity. This situation was attributed to the approach adopted by the leaders both at the Municipal and Community level where things are first discussed by officials and then communicated to members of the community for endorsement. Even a close look at the activities in which the 23% claimed had been involved in deciding showed that, in-fact they were not involved in making major decisions rather in providing additional inputs to what had already been decided. For example, for the toilet and water projects, the majority of the people only decided on the location of the facilities while decisions on the type of facilities were taken by the committees and municipality and later endorsed by community members. In this instance, the first part of the participatory planning approach in contributing to local community development in the two communities was undermined. The question then becomes: If this was the situation in the activity that does not seem to be technical for one to be part, what then is the situation in the other activities that are actually technically inclined? In this case we are referring to the planning and implementation stages/activities.

The Planning Process is widely seen as a professional activity that seeks to solve problems using a balance of technical competence, creativity and hard-headed pragmatism. Although those involved in the activity need to have the ability to envision alternatives to every task they intend to adopt, this does not justify the ruling out of the non-professional people, we may call 'lay people' if that better describes them from the planning activity. In fact over the years, the planning profession itself and those involved in it have come to appreciate the fact that, planning as an activity is a collaborative activity which sees local knowledge from those considered as "lay people" very essential for the sustainability of what the planning profession strives to achieve. The results of this activity from the two study communities revealed that, even after the recognition of the need for these people to be part of the planning activity, the extent of involvement of the 'lay people' in this activity was still largely compromised and therefore insignificant. For the two communities, it was found that, less than 19% claimed their involvement in the activity while over 80% indicated otherwise. As it was the case with the decision making activity, the planning activity was also said to be carried out by the Unit Committee and the Municipal Assembly. The majority of the respondents knew who exactly was in charge of coordinating the planning activities in the

communities and the roles or tasks to be executed by the concerned coordinators but there was very little to show that good working relationship between the planning coordinators and community members existed. This meant that, the link between the two groups of actors was weak and therefore effective application of the participatory planning approach at this stage would not be guaranteed.

Moving on to the implementation process, information on this aspect produced a mixture of results. While in Ejisu community, 22% of the respondents indicated their involvement in the activity against 78% who said no, in Asotwe community, 78.8% actually revealed that they were involved in the activity against the 21.2% who were not in agreement with this view. This meant that, a large portion of community members from Asotwe community were involved in implementing development activities in their community as compared to Ejisu community members. Definitely these results tell us that, there must have been something special happening in Asotwe and not Ejisu. In a discussion with some of the key informants from the communities, it was revealed that, this difference was due to the fact that, in Asotwe community, members had one project (toilet project) initiated by them and when it came to the implementation of the project, all members were required to participate either directly or by contributing funds. All options for everybody to be involved in this activity were exploited and thus little or no room was left for some members of the community to keep themselves away from the task. Unfortunately a project of this nature had never been experienced in Ejisu community where most of the projects are either government or donor funded. According to the municipal planning officer, these projects were tendered and contracted out. In quote, the planning officer stated that:

*“Community members are vital in activities such as selection of sites for projects and prioritising of projects and at times to monitor the implementation of projects but this is more effective in community initiated projects as opposed to government or donor funded projects which require the municipality to tender and contract them out”*

On the account of these results, it can be noted that, in practice, community involvement in development projects is sought to be useful in community driven and implemented projects as opposed to government and donor funded projects. The people have the opportunity to decide what is needed, plan how to realise it and implement it. Based on such findings, we can see that the application of the approach in the two communities

was not much welcomed in both government and donor funded projects by the municipal authority but fully accepted in community initiated projects. We can therefore sum up the application of the participatory planning approach in this stage that, it was partial having been limited to only community initiated projects. At this juncture, one should be wondering whether the management stage had anything different from the previous stages.

Management process in most cases is not considered to be more of a technical aspect as compared to planning and implementation. Over the years, experience has shown that, most projects, after implementation are handed over to the community to manage regardless of the community's ability to execute this task. So to a large extent, it is accepted that, community members can actually be part of the management activity. The challenging part of this acceptance is that, in situations where community members have totally not been part of the initial activities (decision making, planning and implementation) of the project, success in the management activity is very much questionable and usually a dead end with many developments failing to last and serve the purpose for which they were undertaken. In this study, while looking at this activity as a post-implementation activity, involving aspects of providing communal labour, paying user fees and taxes among others, results from the two communities revealed that, there was a higher level of involvement by community members in this activity. In fact, on the average, over 66% of the interviewed revealed their involvement in this activity as compared to the 33% who stated that they were not involved. The portion of respondents who actually indicated that they were not involved claimed that they were not aware of their role in this activity, some claimed they did not get the time while others insisted that it was not their duty but rather the duty of the Assembly men and the Unit Committee to manage community projects. However, one wonders why the high claim of involvement in the management activity while the other stages are relatively low? In examining this activity, it was observed that, through all stages to implementation level, project executors hand them to communities for management regardless of their ability to manage these developments. This could explain the high participation results in this activity. A summary of the entire situation is shown in Fig. 1.

In short and as observed from the results, we can say that, in all the stages, there was some silver lining of participation though not sufficient enough to guarantee effective application of the approach especially in the activities of decision making, planning and implementation. In line with this argument, we can conclude that, indeed the application of the approach is still far demanding as far as addressing local

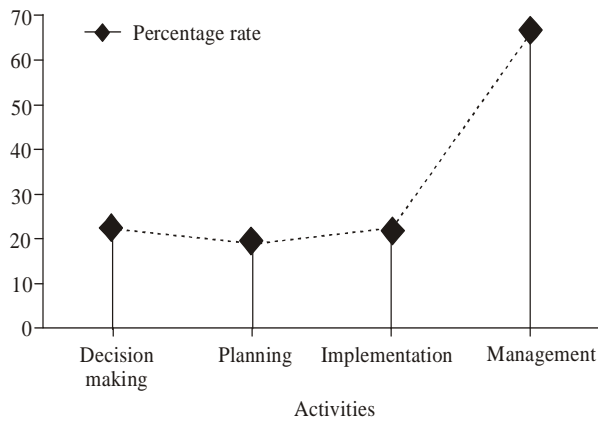


Fig. 1: Participation levels of community members under the PDP-approach in E31508 Asotwe communities (Field Survey, 2012)

community development issues is concerned. The study found the application of the approach to this cause far demanding and therefore an issue that remains into contention of whether the participatory planning approach will ever be a complete solution to local community development matters. But what exactly are the factors behind this situation and to what extent have they contributed to the situation?

In discussing the theoretical views on the concept of local community development and the participatory planning approach, it was pointed out that, success of the participatory planning approach in enhancing local community development depended on how certain factors were handled or addressed within a given community. In both communities, results showed that there were threatening factors to the application of the participatory planning approach and regardless of their level of manifestation and magnitude; they had succeeded in working against the application of the approach. The manifestation of these threats was found to vary among the two communities. For example in Ejisu, 46% of the respondents revealed that, bureaucratic practices of government officials were a threat to their participation, 53.7% found corruption of community leaders as the threat, 52% indicated that it was distrust of government officials at 52% while 54.5% implicated corruption of government officials. In A sot we, 57.6% of the respondents pointed out distrust of community leaders while 69.7% put the blame on the corruption of community leaders. This in one way or another revealed that, the extent to which these factors had been left to intensify and therefore operate against the way in which community members took part in the various development activities was very high.

Much as factors such as the existence of guiding rules and regulations, rights and obligations awareness, income and political influences, information sharing effectiveness, cultural influence and the existence of a

people-friendly planning system based on decentralisation were expected to boast the application of the approach in the communities, it was found that their contribution was actually over-shadowed by the high degree of intensification of the threatening factors. In fact, respondents from the study communities had a lot of commendation for the decentralised planning system as having provided them the opportunity to be involved in the development activities of their communities. This commendation could however not match the results observed in the three development stages. In addition, their responses on the performance of the government substructures operating within the established decentralised framework revealed a non-performing sub structure. The substructures that included the municipal assembly, unit committees and area councils were said to be in-active, ineffective and little was being done by them to include community members in their affairs, revealing a weak link between the structures and members of the communities. As a precaution, this means that, if decentralised planning is to be viewed as a mechanism to bring closer the institutions of governance to people and hence enable them get involved in the development activities, then the manner in which the substructures operate must be open enough to embrace the involvement of people in development activities.

Generally, these results confirmed that, it is possible for the planning system to provide room for community members' involvement in the development activities of their communities but it is not a guarantee that such involvement will definitely be successful unless the sub structures are ready and flexible enough to let this happen.

Till this point, the findings have shown that, the application of the participatory planning approach in local community development is still questionable and the reasons for this situation have been brought to light. It is however worthy pointing out that, on the basis of these results, we cannot solely put the blame for failure to address local community development matter on the approach. As observed, a number of 'threatening factors' are responsible for the situation. This means that there is still something good about the approach that we need to exploit in the form of its strength but we also have to examine its shortfalls so that we can address them or minimise their effect. Thus from the good side of the approach, the study revealed that, the approach is seen as being useful in building a spirit of togetherness and commitment among community members, giving everyone an opportunity to show concern for the development of the community as well as building communal spirit towards community work. However, the shortfalls of the approach were mainly taken as challenges that the users of the approach faced in their quest to apply the approach. These challenges originated from the manner in which the approach was

being used and the behaviour of the users and some of them included; poor attitude towards communal work by some community members, lack of platform for effective public interaction, ineffectiveness of the government structures as well as favour given to some people within the communities. This however does not imply that the approach itself is free of shortfalls. It is very possible that the approach itself has weakness but as far as this study was concerned, no such shortfalls could be traced.

On the basis of the findings, the study draws our attention to a number of issues relating to the existing gap in the application of the participatory planning approach to local community development. First and foremost, the participatory planning approach can never be an effective approach for addressing local community development matters as long as little is being done to put to practice the theoretical underpinnings of the approach. As observed from the findings, the difference between the theoretical underpinnings of the approach and its practical application especially in the activities of decision making, planning and implementation remain far too wide.

Secondly, it appears that little is being done to recognize and appreciate the essence of the participatory planning approach in both government and donor funded community projects. The impression as shown by the results is that, most planning authorities prefer executing projects by contracting them out. But if this is the situation, where then is the place of the participatory planning approach in these projects especially in maintaining and sustaining them? In addition, how does this play out with the adoption of the decentralized planning system by governments?

Finally, decentralized planning system can never be the foundation for promoting participatory development as long as the substructures operating within it are not ready to live up to this expectation. Results show that, these substructures indulge themselves in unethical acts of conducts ranging from corruption to adopting unnecessary bureaucratic tactics. These acts pose serious threat not only to the approach, but also to the effectiveness of the decentralized planning system itself.

Addressing these issues will require effective strategies that must in turn enhance true and meaningful participation. A number of strategies could be adopted; however the study found that, a zero-tolerance policy targeting key challenges of bureaucratic practices, corruption and distrust among officers working in the structures is very crucial. Secondly government structures should work towards creating a good working relationship with NGOs and other grass-root organizations to eliminate over dependence on contractors. NGOs and grass-root organizations have good working relationship and understanding of the

dynamics of communities as compared to outsiders who come in as contractors. In short, a reform in the administration of government projects is needed. Thirdly, citizen education is still required among people as a way of eliminating ignorance while making them aware that, they have a role to play in the development undertakings of their communities and lastly, planning should be institutionalized and indigenized at the grass-root level and not to be seen as an activity for the educated or those in authority. This calls for the decentralized substructures to open up to the wide community population and allow them to get involved in the activities executed by these substructures.

## CONCLUSION

Development theory and practice have a lot to draw from the participatory planning approach. As an open ended, holistic, systematic and adaptive approach that is people- centered, a lot can be drawn from it to both accelerate and sustain development at all levels of societies. This possibility as observed from this study is however being hindered by a number of factors that have widened the gap between the theory and practice of the approach in local community development matters. The decentralized planning system adopted by many developing countries provides an excellent opportunity to deal with this situation as it advocates for increased involvement of people in development affairs of their communities by bringing closer the institutions of governance. However, as observed from the results of the study, this opportunity is at risk of drifting away due to the manner in which the substructures operate within the system. A lot is left to be desired as a result of the acts of the structures. In fact one has to wonder how decentralized planning itself will survive under such circumstances. The proponents of decentralized planning must come to terms with the fact that, if decentralized planning is to be used as a platform for encouraging people to get engaged in development activities, then it is of paramount importance for the structures to put in place strategies that will ease this whole process. This however requires that, the structures should in actual sense start with strategies that will help in addressing the challenges that the structures themselves face or have created. It is a simple logic first; ‘to take away the dirt in your eye before you do the same with someone else’s eye’. The dirt of misconduct and any other related points of weakness observed within the structures need to be addressed first. Cornwall (2002), Samad (2002) and Gupte (2004) already stressed the fact that, institutional frameworks are very important influencing factors in the effectiveness of the participatory process. This must be seen on the ground but as long as they remain closed to people, indulge in acts of misconduct and people not well empowered, such role will not be fulfilled by

them. Abott (1995) also adds to this point by asserting that, participatory community development planning will only operate successfully within the specific environment where the government is open for community involvement in decision making process. Institutions as organs of the government are responsible for creating this enabling environment and should be seen to do so.

Finally, due to the observed significant gap between the theory and practice of the approach, this paper ends by calling for more practical innovations and further studies to address the gap and improve the contribution of the participatory planning approach to local community development.

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