COMMUNITY GROUP ENVIRONMENT FOR PEOPLE PARTICIPATION AND EMPOWERMENT: THE SOCIO-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE[8]

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ABSTRACT

The study was conducted in Makhuduthamaga Municipal area in Sekhukhune District of Limpopo Province in South Africa. The study observed how socio-cultural factors impact on participation environment in community development groups particularly in rural sections of society. To generate insight on these dynamics, some sets of empirical data were collected from community groups and individuals. Qualitative and quantitative sets of data were collected through structured interview schedule from simple random samples of twelve interest groups and twenty-eight individuals, and a quota sample of two organisational linkage structures. Document review of the groups was also conducted. Qualitative sets of data were collected from a simple random sample of two groups through participant observation to establishing their group dynamics and cultural protocols. The study found that the majority of community groups consisted of elderly people. It also found that the majority of people join community groups to participate in social improvement and participation. From document reviewed, no statute was found to provide for socio-cultural protocols in the groups' activities. From the observation, the study found that there are some socio-cultural norms, practices and values that negatively impact on the participation and empowerment of people in community development groups.

1   INTRODUCTION

This study reviews group dynamics as one of the factors that if not properly managed, may hamper people participation and empowerment in community development. A particular attention is paid on the local socio-cultural norms and values' influence on community groups' participation environment. *Participation environment* in the article refers to the community group's internal systems (Roberts, 1979) that have influence on behaviour and interaction among the group members on the one hand, and the practices and norms on the other, in relation to the activities of the group. This internal environment includes the organisational structure design (Ruhiiga, 2001) which in the context of this article refers to the way the community is structured as a social organisation. Before the role of socio-cultural norms and values in community group participation environment is discussed, it is imperative to first have insight on what community groups are, how and why they come into being, and what role they play in community development.

According to United Nations Development Program (UNDP) (1993), people may participate as individuals, but they participate more effectively through group action. This is confirmed by Rahman (1993) that participation is an organised and collective exercise of people's

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power in thinking and acting. People participation is much common in community development projects where the process takes place in groups (Swanepoel & De Beer, 2006). This group formation is defined by Goodman and Marx (1978) as:

> "A pattern of social positions, the holders of which share the same goal or goals, a sense of group identity, and most important interaction structured by the expectations attached to their positions"

And Rahman (1993) defines it as:

> "an association of individuals who possess a sense of identity with the association, so that the collective interest registers emotionally in the consciousness of its members as part of their 'individual' interest, that is, realisation of the collective objective gives direct fulfilment to the individual members".

These definitions entail that a community development group is a structure consisting of participants of the same community, sharing the same identity and interest, and engaged in a collective participation effort to achieving one common objective. According to UNDP (1993), most of the social development efforts take place through development groups wherein people's understanding of the world is formed and nurtured in face-to-face interactions in small social groups such as self-help farming groups found in countries all over the world. Such organisations found in some of the African countries include: *nhimbe* and *jangano* in Zimbabwe, *owe* and *are* in western Nigeria, *nnoboa* in south-eastern Ghana, *ibimina* in northern Rwanda, *njankis* in Cameroon, *cheetu* in Sri Lanka, and *samabaya* in Bangladesh.

This collective participatory mechanism may be a body of individual persons characterised by a passion for a common goal that addresses the needs and interest of all the participants and thus creating an environment that promotes oneness among the participants. It is also characterised by uniform, consistent and continuous interaction and communication that is regulated by norms and principles entrenched in their organisational statute. Through this interaction, communities can make use of their common assets to solve problems and meet their social needs (Hashagen, 2003). These communities may also form structures that may be used to establish strong and formal linkages and networks between the communities themselves or their community groups to access common support and resources (Gilchrist, 2003). Through group structures, community members may have access to resources which as individuals may not have access to. Two forms of these community groups are *interest group* and *organisational linkage structure*. However, interest group takes prominence in this review.

An *interest group* may be a group of individuals who come together for a shared common interest meant for the improvement of standard of living of the group's members. For example, subsistence sorghum farmers in rural communities of Sekhukhune District do group themselves into agricultural village cooperatives, with a view to collectively accessing farming inputs and other resources needed for their household income or to share information needed for their particular common farming goals (Diale, 2005). According to Burkey (1993), an interest group may be a community collective structure of any size consisting of members of any gender. This is also observed by Swanepoel (1992) as *action group* that may consist of a collection of individuals with a common need and interest, based on some specific boundaries and sizes, and it allows horizontal communication among the members, and affords them equal opportunity to participate in decision-making processes at community level. This form of a structure is a collection of a number of people who come together for a

common objective and are able to directly and quite often communicate with one another over a particular length of time (Swanepoel & De Beer, 2006). The participants need to be few in number so that each of them is able to communicate face-to-face with all the other participants.

This kind of collective environment enhances participation and empowerment of the participants in community groups. In Tanzania for example, Farmer Field School (FFS) Extension Approach which was also known as "school without walls" enhanced participation of farmers in the decision-making process. It also stimulated local innovation for sustainable agriculture in the rural villages. It was through this approach that extension workers helped farming communities to form Small Farmer Groups (SFGs) each of which consisted of about 8 to 15 individuals participating horizontally on equal basis (Wambura, Rutatora, Oygard, Shetto & Ishumi, 2007). These groups were characterised by the following elements: (i) individual farmers come together for common interest, (ii) members mobilise their own resources for common goal and mutual benefits, (iii) members collectively share responsibilities, and (iv) members make joint decisions in the management and control of the activities of the organisation.

A similar form of such a community group is *funeral association,* which is more common in rural communities. The study conducted in Ethiopia and Tanzania found that funeral associations were common and suitable community groups that enhanced development in rural villages. These groups were not good only in funeral activities, but were also capable of taking care of other development programmes such as offering loans to its members (Dercon, 2006). These organisations might also be used by development agencies as a channel through which communities might be mobilised for change in their societies (Nesamvuni, Dagada, Raidimi & Mudau, 2007). However, on the other hand, Swanepoel and De Beer (2006) argue that these groups are usually large in size, and their focus is not primarily development, but social disaster and emergency relief. As a result of their nature, the interaction among the participants becomes frequent and emotional. Roberts (1979) argues that when the members frequently interact among themselves, an element of liking grows up among the participants. This leads to further interactions in the group. This means that in the groups where the environment is friendly, interaction increases, and the level of participation improves.

To be effective, these groups need to be internally autonomous so that they can take complete responsibility in analysing and prioritising their needs, planning, mobilising the available resources, implementing the plans, and evaluating the development progress (Burkey 1993). In other words, development of the groups should not be externally managed and influenced (Gran, 1983) but rather more properly and lightly guided." From decision-making perspective, Gran further notes that the external development workers need not lead the groups in decision-making processes, but rather lightly help and guide them to decide upon and manage the processes themselves. The groups should be allowed an amount of autonomy and freedom to manage their development from within themselves rather than to be managed and influenced by external forces of change. They should therefore only be helped to help themselves. Such help should therefore be provided at a minimal rate so as to allow the participants to gradually gain control of the processes through regular collective participation processes. The effectiveness of these groups is dependent on their external and internal participation environment.

Community groups do not exist in a vacuum. They are not immune from any form of influence that may be exerted by the local environment within which they exist. The

environment in which groups exist may be one of the main factors that effect external influence on their internal participation environment. In some cultural norms and values, the role of women is limited to household responsibilities, without collective decision-making powers (Swanepoel, 1992). Under such circumstances, women are deprived of the opportunities to freely participate in social group interactions. Authorities' approaches and some inherent social practices may in some way or the other, hinder genuine people participation in community development processes. In Zimbabwe, for instance, Sithole (2004) found that people participation, particularly women and new migrants in Resource Management Committees (RMC) was impeded by cultural controls. In this case such participants were not allowed to perform some organisational responsibilities.

The cultural norms and values may externally affect community groups' internal participation environment by perpetuating marginalisation of women from realising their potential leadership capabilities in such social organisations. Mali's Islamic institutionalised *purdah* custom, for example, was found to be an impediment on the performance of women in social development leadership or *vice versa*, by its limitations on the visibility and mobility of women outside their homes, as well as through the strict observance of women's submissive behaviour (Akeredolu, 2008). This renders women socially inactive and more organisationally subordinate to men. Men therefore become more advantaged for leadership positions in social development formations than women.

The way in which the community groups are structured may impact on their internal participation environment. Structure of development institutions may be one of the factors that impede rural development by hampering development communication (Treurnicht (2000). From the theoretical analysis of Gran's development strategy, Martinussen (1995) found that there is a particular relevance in drawing attention to difficulties relating to class distinctions, gender and ethnic affiliation within society when engaging people into participation. The amount of interactions among the participants, group size, and the members' gender and age may also negatively impact on the leadership emergence and sustainability in the groups. For example, due to some cultural prejudices, men have a tendency to take leadership more often than women (Kramer, 2006). This means that the social stereotypes and cultural restrictions influence leadership performance in community groups more than one's capabilities. Women always fall victims of such circumstances.

2   RESEARCH METHODS

The study was conducted in Makhuduthamaga Municipal area in Sekhukhune District of Limpopo Province in South Africa. Qualitative and quantitative sets of data were collected form simple random samples of twelve interest groups and twenty-eight individuals on the one hand, and a non-probability quota sample of two organisational linkage structures on the other. The data was collected through structured interview schedule. From the groups, the interviews looked into their sizes, institutionalisation and practices. From the individual members, the interview looked into demographic information among others age, gender, literacy level, leadership positions, motive for joining community groups. Qualitative sets of data were also collected through participant observation from a purposive simple random sample of two groups. Maila-Mapitsane youth group was selected from youth groups in Makhuduthamaga municipality. Haakdroorndraai irrigation scheme in Tswaing village was sampled from a list of nine old irrigation schemes consisted of elderly members in Sekhukhune district. The two groups were observed in two meetings each. The participant observation was conducted during application of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA)

techniques.   The observation looked into variables such as meeting venues, seating
arrangements and pattern, and meeting procedures and protocols. The organisational
document such as statutes and minutes of the sampled groups were review to establishing
their institutionalisation, practices and statutes provisions on cultural dictates. The sets of data
were computed on a spreadsheet. A comparative analysis of the two cases was conducted to
measure how cultural norms and practices are observed, as well as their impact on the
participation environment in the groups.

3   RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic information was generated from the data collected through interviews of
groups and individuals on group size, gender, age, literacy level, leadership role, and motive
for joining groups. Both youth and the elderly groups were separately observed while in their
normal and usual meeting situations. People's participation level and the environment within
which participation took place were looked into. A relationship was observed between
participants' age and gender on the one hand, and observance of cultural norms and protocols
on the other, in group meetings. The role of age and gender in the observance of cultural
protocols and norms manifested itself in the meetings on meeting venue, seating arrangement
and pattern, gender integration, and meeting procedures.

3.1   Participants' demographics

The average size of a community group was 44 members. Women constituted the majority
(78.6%) of the membership in the groups. Men constituted 21.4%. Youth made 7.1% of the
total membership of both men and women. The majority of the groups were consisted of very
old aged members. The average age was 48 years. The literacy level of the groups'
participants looked better for the average level was 9 years of schooling. Such a number of
years amounted to Grade nine. However, some of participants never attend school at all.
Figure 1 depicts distribution of group sizes, participants' ages and their level of literacy.
From the groups and individual interviews, the study found that the majority of the groups
were led by women. 66.6% of women were in leadership positions in their respective groups.
Youth constituted 9.5% leadership structures in the groups.

Only 42.9% of the groups that participated in the study had formal statutes bearing well
defined common and standard principles on organisational institutionalisation and
membership management. From the reviewed membership application forms and individual
interviews, the study found that the participants' motives to joining community groups
substantially varied. The majority of the participants reported to have joined community
groups for social interaction with other members of the community. Some joined the groups
to collectively access services at a lower cost, to share knowledge and experience with others,
or to provide services to the groups as business opportunity. Figure 2 presents participants'
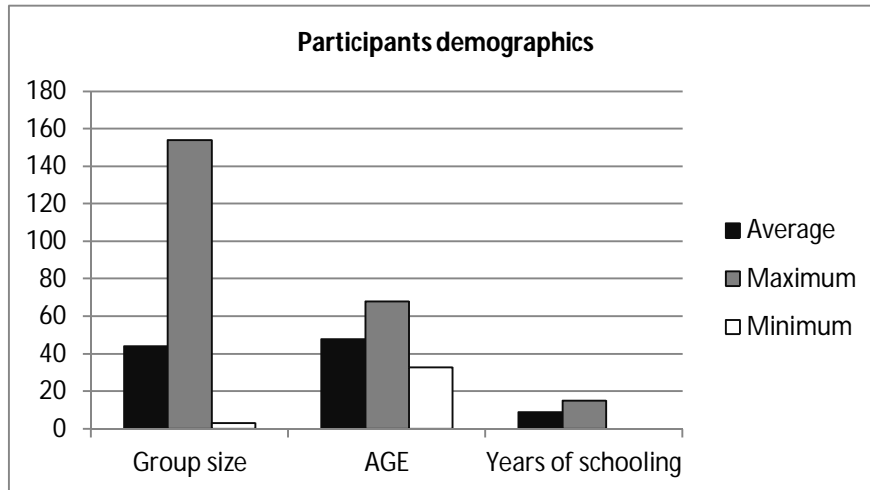motives to joining community groups.

Participants demographics

Figure 1:   Distribution of participants' demographics in community groups
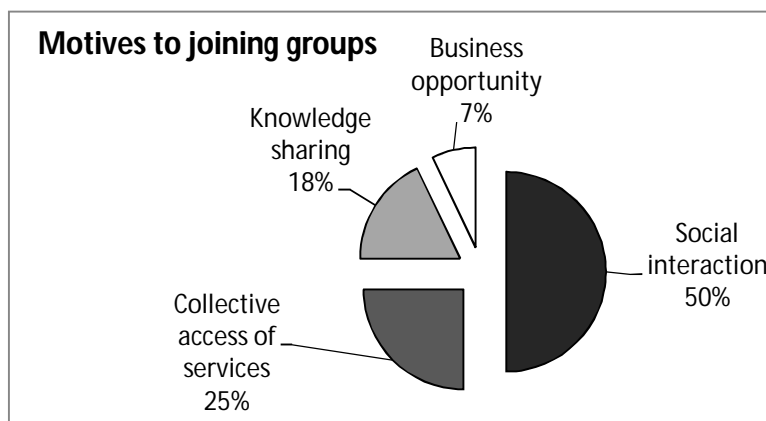

Figure 2:   Motives to joining community groups

3.2   Participation and empowerment in groups' internal environment

As the study applied PRA in helping the groups identified their needs and solutions to their challenges, the participants were given tasks to perform to that effect. The study found that when people were given tasks (responsibilities) to perform for their own development, they took action (participation). As they did so, they eventually took charge (responsibility) of the development processes. When their participation and efforts produced positive results, they displayed some element of confident and belief in their capabilities (empowerment). They were also not shy to relate to the results as of their own efforts (ownership). Their participation thereafter improved. They showed to be more willing to participate further. However, the observation also found that as the environment became strict, the level of participation became minimal. This meant that the more the pressure from the environment, the lesser the rate of participation, and the lesser the number of people empowered.

3.3   Community group meeting venues and seating arrangements

Though the community groups meetings were initiated by the researchers, the logistics of both the youth and the elderly meetings were organised by the participants themselves without any influence from the researchers. The two meetings of the youth group were held in the local community hall administered by Maila-Mapitsane Tribal Authority. The two

meetings of the elderly group were held under a tree, next to the fallow Haakdroorndraai irrigation scheme in Tswaing village.

In the meetings of the elderly group, the participants were seated on stones, in a circular pattern. The seating pattern appeared to have been convenient to all the participants because no participant was obstructed in the meeting. It became easy for every participant to see what happened in the centre of the "court." Every participant could easily have a full view of every speaker in the meeting. No one spoke behind the other. None or passively participating members could also be easily detected by the chairperson and be brought on board. The circular seating pattern therefore created group meeting environment that appeared to have been inclusive and conducive to all participants.

Unlike the elderly, the youth group participants were seated on chairs in a classroom pattern. Some rows were behind the others. The seating pattern seemed to have been less conducive for free participation in that some participants could be seen having their separate meetings during the proceedings. The chairperson could continue with the meeting without having realised that some members were not participating in the meeting. The seating pattern therefore appeared to have been less effective enhancing promotion and monitoring of inclusive participation.

3.4   Socio-cultural values and protocols in community group meetings

Integration of all sections of society in the seating pattern was different between meetings of the two groups. In the elderly group meeting, the participants maintained some distance between the genders. Women in some instances were seated some metres away from the main men-dominated circle of the meeting. The distance between men and the women in some instances might have been approximately ten metres long. Only a few of the younger women were seated slightly closer to the men. However, such women were seated on one side in a small group separately from the men. This might have made it difficult for the women to easily engage in the participation processes.

Participation in the elderly group's meeting was conducted under a strict observance of the local traditional and cultural protocols and values. All their meetings were opened with a prayer. Everybody in the meeting was ordered to take hats off. During the meeting, no man was allowed to speak in the meeting with his hat on. Every male participant was expected to speak standing as a meeting protocol. However, women were allowed to speak while seated.

Unlike in the elderly meeting, in the youth meeting, participants were seated on chairs completely integrated across gender lines. In the youth meeting the cultural norms were not strictly observed. Both young male and female participants were seated on chairs. In the youth meeting, the observance of the local cultural protocols was very minimal. Participants were not expected to stand up when they spoke. Individuals acted as they pleased. Some could stand up and speak, while others preferred speaking while seated.

4   CONCLUSION

From the observation of participants and their empowerment in relation to the groups' internal environment, the study concluded that when people are given responsibilities, they develop some sense of responsibility, and when their efforts produce good results, they own

the outcomes and participate further to sustain such outcomes. The study therefore termed this theory, *sustenance participation.* Figure 3 expresses the theory.

$$T(r)=P(R,O,E,P)\textbf{n/v}$$

Figure 3: Sustenance participation

NB: T=Tasks or r= Responsibilities that are given to the participants to perform, P=participation, R=Sense of responsibility the participants develop during participation, O=Sense of ownership the participants develop during their participation, E=Empowerment participants attain as they participate, n=Number of participants, and v=Environment within which participation takes place. Figure 4 presents the flow chard diagram of the theory.
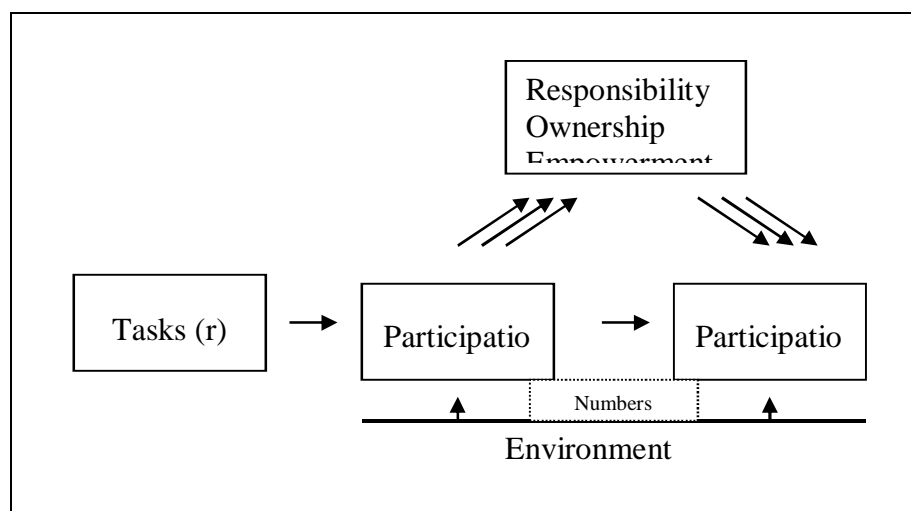

Figure 4:   Flow line diagram on sustenance participation theory

However, the concern is on the number of people participate and the number of participants gain empowerment within the given group's internal participation environment. It must therefore be noted that when the group's internal participation environment becomes strict the level of participation becomes minimal. This meant that the more pressure from the environment, the lesser the rate of participation and the lesser the number of people empowered.

Observance of cultural norms and protocols is still high in rural community group meetings. The elderly participants in particular observed traditional norms and protocols more than the young ones. The elderly participants in rural communities in particular prefer to be seated separately according to their gender. No evidence was noted to have been the reason for such separation. However, the study assumes that the reason might be cultural prejudices. In the meetings wherein majority of participants are older, embracement and effective participation of women is to a certain extent limited. Women are not allowed to speak in a meeting without their heads covered. Such a cultural practice therefore may prevent women who had no head covers, from participating in the meetings. Women are also not allowed to speak standing. Since women are not allowed to speak standing in community meetings, men may have a privilege to tower over them with some element of domination and intimidation. Such group participation environment therefore may become biased to men to the disadvantage of women.

These prejudices do not only affect women but men as well. Men are not allowed to speak seated. They are also not allowed to speak with their hats on. Since men are expected to take off their hats before speaking in the meeting, a conclusion may be drawn that the participants that would not like their heads exposed for any reason may choose to reserve their participation rather than to take off their hats, thus limiting their participation.

However, there are some good lessons that can be learned from these cultural practices. The circular seating pattern in particular, appeared to be somehow more conducive for participation than classroom arrangement. In the former, all participants around the circle have full and equal view to the centre of the meeting. And they are also all visible to the chairperson of the meeting. As a result, all participants can be monitored. All the participants concentrate to the issues for discussion without any side meetings as in case with classroom seating pattern. Any irregular conduct is easily detected by the chairperson. The observed limiting factor in the circular seating pattern in which the majority of the participants are the elderly, women tend to seclude themselves.

The study therefore recommends that the infusion of youth in community development groups should be expedited. It also recommends that the circular seating pattern learned from the elderly section of society needs to be encouraged in community engagement processes to enhancing people participation. The study also recommends that traditional leaders in rural communities should be conscientised of the need for and importance of women integration in social interactions and their empowerment. They should also be made aware of the significance of all-inclusive and broader participatory community decision making processes. Women must also be given equal amount of social responsibilities as men. This will enhance their participation and empowerment in community processes.

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