

Full Length Research Paper

New trends in rural community development practice in Africa: The case of Cameroon's grassfield rural development project

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This paper examines a new trend in rural community development in Cameroon using the Grassfield Rural Development Project, to highlight the challenges of the participatory approach in an African context. There is an on-going debate about the future of the rural sector in developing countries, centred on implementation of participatory projects to alleviate poverty and deteriorating rural living conditions. Using data from project documents and evaluations, participant observation and interviews with key stakeholders, this paper examines project outcomes achieved in the priority communities that underwent the new policy implemented between 2004 and 2010. The project provides a new approach to engage the state and local government stakeholders in strategic decisions on long-term rural development. Achievements are evident in community infrastructure (classrooms, halls, feeder roads, improved water schemes, slaughter slabs, rural radio), and also in social capital and enhanced leadership. However, challenges remain in the implementation of participatory projects; and dependence on external sources of funding community projects persist, due to harsh economic constraints and long-term neglect in providing rural areas with quality services.

Key words: Grassfield rural development project, outcomes evaluation, rural community development, participatory approach, poverty alleviation.

INTRODUCTION

Rural development strategies aimed at reducing poverty and ameliorating human living conditions on a sustainable basis are undergoing tremendous transformations in Africa.

Since independence, Cameroon, in an effort to accelerate the pace of social change, adopted a series of five-year development plans starting in 1961 and ending

in 1991 with the overall objective of improving the welfare of the population (Amin, 2008). After experiencing a high average growth rate of 7% from the 1970's to the mid-1980's, Cameroon underwent a severe economic crisis characterized by a dramatic fall in commodity prices, and government revenues that precipitated a contraction in public spending on education, health and infrastructure

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(IFAD, 2007; UNDP, 2006). In addition, this led to a decline in per capita income by nearly 50% between 1986 and 1993, prompting the Government to initiate a series of policy reforms aimed at improving macroeconomic stability and restoring export competitiveness.

Key among the reforms was the 1994 nominal devaluation of the CFA Franc. However, the Government's cash flows were insufficient in meeting domestic obligations and servicing external debt and additional reforms were initiated in 1997 by adopting a three-year enhanced structural adjustment facility with the IMF. This programme resulted in a substantial reduction in state support for production, the elimination of price and quality controls on key agricultural commodities and their marketing, a freeze in further employment and a reduction of more than 60% in the salaries of state employees in 1993. Completion of this initiative in 2000, along with a poverty-reduction and growth facility, worked with the World Bank, made it possible for Cameroon to become eligible for the enhanced Debt Initiative for Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (Amin, 2008).

It is within this framework that the Government formulated the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) that has been guiding its development actions and setting the principles of engagement with the donor community (Tollens, 2000). Under the Rural Sector Development Strategy of the PRSP, poverty, food insecurity, poor market integration, and unsustainable utilization of natural resources were identified as major challenges to rural sector growth. The Grassfield Rural Development Project was initiated within this context of poverty, and implemented over a period of 6 years, to accompany and support underprivileged rural communities in their development process.

Funded by the Cameroon Government in partnership with the African Development Bank and the rural communities of the North West Region, the project's implementation package comprised three specific objectives: Agricultural development, capacity building, and rural infrastructure. Increasingly, governments and other development agencies like Heifer Project International which promotes livestock extension in Cameroon, now see the wisdom in providing support and encouragement for community-driven initiatives instead of the dominant top-down approach, which directs development practice solely from the perspective of the government. Because of their serious comparative disadvantages in the context of poverty and growing global market competition, rural areas need different development approaches and solutions to their specific problems. The 'comparative disadvantages' result, first, from underdevelopment of physical infrastructure, leading to limited communication of people, products, money and information; and second, from the limited ability and resources to produce saleable goods and services.

The Grassfield Rural Development Project adopted a participatory approach, which aims to overcome comparative disadvantages, helping farmers, largely through advice and capacity building to be more productive and competitive (IACD, 2005; Aigner et al., 1999; Bhattacharyya, 1995).

A genuinely participatory approach encourages a marked shift from the traditional dependence and reliance on elaborate and detailed blue-prints, providing a basis for control and prediction of development outcomes (Littrell and Littrell, 2006; Taylor, 2005; Odeleye-Lagbedu, 1997). Persistent failures of past development strategies in Africa have proven that development is not simply a matter of aid and striving to 'close the gap' to catch up with the more advanced societies. The failures can be attributed to neglect of the critical role of people's participation in the development process (Dia, 1996; Adedeji, 1990). However, as shown in this research, even this approach does not solve all community problems; in fact it raises new challenges, which should be taken into account in future development policies.

The objective of this paper is to examine the rationale, outcomes and challenges of participatory development in an African context drawing from the experiences of the Grassfield Rural Development Project in Cameroon. According to Green et al. (2000), *outcomes* are long-term measures of change in peoples' quality of life or their community, such as decreased poverty or more people accepting leadership roles.

The measurement of development outcomes is a difficult issue because of the various ways of defining project success (Beslam and Mullin, 2007; Koster and Randall, 2005). As Berlie (2002) remarks, success has many connotations when it comes to public participation, depending upon who you ask. He suggests that success in public participation includes incorporating public values into decisions, improving substantive quality of decision, resolving conflict among competing interests, building trusts in institutions, and educating and informing the public.

Emery and Flora (2006) opine that there are many different types of outcomes that must be considered when measuring "success" such as behavioral, social, economic, physical and learning outcomes. Some outcomes are tangible in nature, whereas, other outcomes, like social capital and the enhancement of community capacity are less tangible (Cleaver, 2001; Flora and Luther, 2000). Subsequent to this introduction, the structure of the paper includes the problem, methodology, results and discussion, and conclusion.

The problem

Feasibility studies to establish a reference situation in the North West Region before implementation of the Grassfield Rural Development Project revealed an

estimated 70% of the rural population living below the poverty line (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, 2006; African Development Fund, 2003). The productivity of smallholders in the region was low due to the limited use of modern farm inputs, high input prices and low output returns; poor quality of advisory services, seeds, animal species and feed; limited access to markets; lack of credit facilities; inadequate water supply; and poor linkages between research and extension services. The rural areas lacked decent road infrastructure, classrooms and health facilities.

The involvement of local communities in project design and management was weak and there was widespread poverty in the rural areas. In order to remedy this situation, the Government deemed it necessary to mount a project in which the rural population will participate in the identification of its planning needs and development actions. This paper focused on the outcomes of this initiative. Rural people who are better placed to understand their development problems to determine their own priorities for poverty alleviation and improvement of their well-being have often been marginalized, thus aggravating the rural poverty situation.

METHODOLOGY

Description of the study area

This study was undertaken in the North West Region found in the Western Highlands between Longitude 10 and 11° East, and Latitude 6 and 7° North within the Cameroon Volcanic Line. The vegetation is predominantly Savannah with some patches of forest. The topography is undulating and composed of steep hill slopes, narrow valleys and strong ridge crests with a variety of waterfalls and crater lakes. The region is bordered to the south by the West and South-West Regions, to the east by the Adamawa Region and to the north by the Federal Republic of Nigeria. It is made up of seven administrative Divisions: Boyo, Bui, Donga-Mantung, Menchum, Mezam, Momo and Ngoketunjia with Bamenda as the regional capital town.

The basic unit of local government is the council or municipality, and there are 34 councils in the region with a total of 560 villages, comprised of a variety of ethnic and linguistic groups. The economy of the region is predominantly agricultural with over 75% of it involved in this activity for livelihood. This study was concerned with 140 villages of the seven administrative divisions of the North West Region with a total population of about 1.73 million inhabitants (ADB, 2008).

Sampling procedure

The purposive sampling procedure was employed in this study. The 140 village communities were sampled from the 560 villages of the North West Region in accordance with the government policy guidelines and the project's selection criteria. The criteria included the existence of a village development plan, a development committee and financial contribution towards prioritized projects. This procedure targeted individuals (key informants) who were particularly knowledgeable about the issues under investigation in the Grassfield Rural Development Project. Each sample element was selected for a purpose, usually because of the unique position

of the sample. The research strategy sought to generate contextual information on participation and decentralization processes as well as project outcomes in the villages with community projects.

Data collection

This study relied largely on primary and secondary data sources with a focus on outcomes evaluation. Qualitative methods relying on project documents and evaluations, participant observation and interviews with key informants (stakeholders) were employed to obtain the data to assess the extent to which stated goals and objectives of the Grassfield Rural Development Project (the case study) were met.

Besides accumulating a breadth of information on particular cases, case studies give greater depth of projects (Herman et al., 1987). After analysis of project documents and discussions with project management, field visits were conducted from February 2008 to May 2009 in all the seven Divisions of the North West Region to assess how project activities and services fit into the experiences of the rural communities. Visits to project construction sites made it possible to undertake consultations with project stakeholders and participate in planning workshops to make observations.

The participant-observation technique was triangulated with other tools like semi-structured interviews and study of project documents to improve the degree of reliability and validity of the study results. In participant-observation, researchers join the group or programme they intend to study, and working 'from the inside', conduct observations to understand their structure, process, problems and attitudes, without it being known that they are researchers. Further information was elicited through personal interviews with key informants and secondary sources including press releases, project plans and reports. Interviews were conducted to assess the communities' level of participation and inclusion as well as the level of consensus around shared goals. Project reports serve as an action plan for stakeholders to follow and forms a baseline by which they can benchmark the progress made in project implementation. A descriptive analysis of data was adopted. This type of analysis makes use of narratives to evaluate what is being studied to bring its content or process close to the natural setting.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Agricultural development

One of the major issues addressed by the Grassfield Rural Development Project was that of low agricultural production in an attempt to increase crop yields to satisfy the high demand for food in the region. In this light the project procured and distributed 13 tons of improved maize, 88.5 tons of potato, 2 tons of beans, 16,000 tons of cassava cuttings, and 46 tons of rice as well as 265,000 day-old chicks, 543 piglets as support to farmers.

As for infrastructure, the local communities had to contribute 30% in the form of labour, building materials or cash. Thirty-two percent of feeder roads, 53% of the water supply schemes and health centres were constructed as well as 67% of classrooms, leading to an increase in school enrolment as a result of the added space (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development,

2010). These were identified and prioritized through a participatory process and the farmer groups targeted had to contribute 25% of the total cost. Although such interventions were intended to increase the productivity of small farmers by offering better technology and bringing clean water, good roads and schools to rural areas, in the final analysis the better-off farmers enjoyed project benefits more than the poor. The widespread use of service providers in the infrastructure projects raised a particular challenge about the sustainability of community development initiatives. This challenge was addressed by offering training to the village development committees specifically related to proper utilization and maintenance of the completed projects in a participative spirit.

Capacity building

The capacity building component was aimed at strengthening the skills of village development committees and farmer organizations to enable them apply participatory approaches in the planning and management of their project activities. The project envisaged the training of public sector community development field staff and the staff of civil society organizations in Information, Education and Communication methods with regard to raising public awareness on the prevention and control of endemic diseases and HIV/AIDS.

This pandemic is changing the profile of rural poverty in Africa as it puts an unbearable strain on poor rural households, where labour is the primary income-earning asset. This component also targeted community mobilization and the professionalization of farmers through advisory services. The project made provisions for the establishment of rural radio stations designed to raise public awareness about economic and social change issues; and the establishment of a self-managed village savings and credit fund. Training was also provided for members of community infrastructure management committees relating to water and sanitation and timely repairs of any damages on completed projects.

The project's vision was that of enabling communities to take on more responsibility for managing their own development, including project design and implementation. This requires a culture of public administration that views the rural communities as development partners, rather than mere recipients of the benefits of public expenditure. The project attempted to give local groups and organizations decision making and resource allocation authority in project identification, implementation, monitoring and evaluation with respect to their priorities. The project introduced new approaches to poverty reduction, including decentralized project funding, promotion of food security, building the management capacity at the rural community level. Members of village

development committees were trained in participatory planning and management of community projects to enhance local organizational capacity and sense of ownership. Village Development Committees are set up within the participatory process to oversee matters related to project design, fund-raising, implementation, and maintenance.

Community needs were assessed and formalized into village development plans to guide the choice of projects for funding. However, many of these plans were never implemented due to technical and financial reasons, raising questions about the effectiveness of involvement of the rural population in the decision-making process. In some cases, delays in collecting the communities' own quota of project contributions affected the implementation process (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural development, 2010).

Some agricultural extension literature strongly advocates greater farmer participation and reliance on community-based indigenous institutions (Schafft and Greenwood, 2003; Cleaver, 1999). In collaboration with the Agricultural Research Institute (IRAD-Bambui), and the Regional Delegation for Agriculture and Rural Development, farmer organizations received training in appropriate techniques of production, storage and marketing of seed and ware potatoes (*Solanum Tuberosum*), cassava (*Manioc Esulenta*), and yams (*Discorea species*). Such trainings were conducted in the key producing areas involving in-house discussions and field demonstrations with opportunities for participating farmers to adopt the innovations.

Participants were chosen purposively based on their role in the farmers' group and literacy, because they had to train their group members afterwards. The workshops provided an interactive learning forum on appropriate techniques of crop cultivation to improve productivity and generate more income and also helped to make the project's activities really process-oriented. Extension Booklets were produced on these crops and distributed to farmers and extension staff.

Thirty five community development field staffs of the Regional Delegation of Agriculture and Rural Development were trained in Information, Education and Communication methods, while 320 members of deliberating organs of municipal councils were trained in techniques of community mobilization and rural outreach work. The project raised public awareness among 12,700 persons regarding prevention and control of endemic diseases and HIV/AIDS.

Thirty-two motorcycles were purchased for use by agricultural extension workers in their contacts with farmers. Extension messages were published on a monthly basis in the '*Farmers' Voice*' News Bulletin and equally broadcast in local languages and Pidgin English (a lingua franca) over 5 rural community radio stations. These radio stations were established with support from the project to raise awareness among the communities

on issues related to economic and social change. Tracking capacity building outcomes from project interventions required enormous time. Apart from the difficulty in tracking project outcomes due to the tendency to go for tangible or physical results, there is the risk of leaving intangible outcomes, which in fact constitute the process aspects of community development.

Rural infrastructure

The rural infrastructure component was geared towards facilitating the farmers' access to input and output markets, empowering local communities for income generation, and networking for improved service delivery. The project supported the construction of community infrastructures to facilitate the marketing of agricultural commodities and improvement in rural living conditions. In this regard over 200 km of feeder roads leading to the most productive and remote farm areas and selected in the local development plans, were rehabilitated.

Funds and technical assistance was provided for community development works like water supply, health centres, abattoirs, storage warehouses, community education and action centres and classrooms. Works for the various infrastructures were carried out on contract basis with the participation of the beneficiaries, in the form of labour, local construction materials cash, estimated at 30% of the total project costs. Awareness-raising campaigns were conducted in the beneficiary communities to elicit their participation in the various micro-projects.

The challenges

Problems encountered in the project did not end with making adequate financial and technical provisions but extended to the construction and management phases. Contrary to expectations and promises, the rural communities became reluctant to make timely contributions towards community projects arguing that these were mandatory support from the government. Delays in providing farmers with planting materials contributed to the slow process of monitoring agricultural outcomes in the communities that received advisory and financial support.

Among the challenges that make participation unlikely to attain full success in rural community development, are: The constraints of everyday life, rural poverty, contextual factors and the role of the state (ESCAP, 2009). The Grassfield Rural Development Project did not go far enough to remove the constraints of everyday life despite the efforts made to increase agricultural output, supply clean water and build schools, health centres and feeder roads in the rural communities. The participatory process within rural community projects needs to go

beyond the rhetoric of poverty alleviation towards empowering people to become less dependent on relations of patronage for daily subsistence.

The rural communities face multiple deprivations from lack of assets, isolation, dependence, to powerlessness. Disparities exist within rural areas: In particular, disparities between the ruling elite and small farmers; and disparities among farmers over access and rights to fertile lands. In this context, a lack of income and productive assets; a lack of access to essential economic and social services; and a lack of power, participation and respect constitute a challenge to participatory rural development projects. Such factors reinforce each other, keeping the poor trapped in poverty (ESCAP, 2009, 2007). A lack of awareness of this multi-dimensionality of rural poverty or a reluctance to confront it, may explain much of the failure of past rural development strategies in reducing rural poverty.

Another challenge of the participatory approach concerns contextual factors and the role of the state. Efforts were made by the Grassfield Rural Development project to empower rural people to identify, plan, implement, and evaluate project interventions that give them an opportunity to realize their development goals. Nevertheless, their state of poverty is unlikely to be resolved without deliberate and proactive government policies, backed by appropriate and timely resource allocation. For this to occur, the state must work with the rural communities on a partnership basis, creating the conditions for their participation and supporting it with resource transfers, capacity building and working to reduce inequality and promote social justice.

Van Heck (2003) advocates that rural development policies targeting participation should include legislation for rural people's organizations, including full freedom of association; reorientation of the extension services towards the needs of the rural poor; full integration of women in development; decentralization of decision-making, planning and resource allocation; rural poor-oriented research, input supply, credit and marketing, supported by the necessary financial resources and aimed at enhancing income-generating activities and just fiscal and pricing systems.

Biggs (2006) points out in relation to poverty reduction programmes that effective innovation in the policy and institutional arenas can only be understood with reference to time, place, culture and political context. This dimension can contribute significantly to participatory rural development by providing a spatial and social context for the process to become more meaningful to marginalized people.

The employment criteria adopted by some service providers, increased the costs of building materials and the ravages of torrential rains contributed to delays. The difficulties encountered in transporting building materials to project sites led to further delays in meeting up with project time schedules. As more field activities

commenced, the project implementing unit could not effectively handle all the supervisory work and decided to engage full-time field supervisors who did not always live up to the task. Some stakeholders made impromptu visits to project sites, accompanied by some members of the project implementing unit and causing further delays. Chambers (1997) describes such phenomenon as 'rural tourism'.

A lesson learnt at virtually every stage of implementation of the project was the near-unpredictability of the situation on the ground, leading to modifications in the programme on several occasions. Contrary to expectation and promises, the local populations were not only unfamiliar with the procedures of engaging project funds in their favour, but they were also not always ready to provide free labour in situations where contractors employed labour from communities other than theirs. Tracking capacity building outcomes from project interventions required enormous time.

Apart from the difficulty in tracking project outcomes due to the tendency to go for tangible or physical results, there is the risk of leaving intangible outcomes, which in fact constitute the process aspects of community development. The intangible outcomes included improved interaction on project matters in the community, increased social capital, and greater involvement in decision-making and leadership roles based on acquired rather than ascribed skills.

The feasibility study envisaged the entire North West Region but when project implementation started, only 140 of the 560 village communities in the region were targeted (African Development Bank Group, 2008). At the implementation phase, the study, proved to be inadequate in a number of key areas. The contributions from the government and the local population towards the project were not always done in time, causing the African Development Bank to delay providing its own quota of funds.

Among other things, some contractors did not always find ready labour in the project localities and had to employ people from outside, and this affected the local people's spirit of participation in the projects. Perhaps the worst areas were in technical details. Project plans had not paid sufficient attention to the issue of inflation, local soils and topography.

Apart from the issue of inflation which could not be entirely controlled or predicted by the local stakeholders, the other challenges might have been resolved with a well-implemented participatory process involving the local communities throughout the project cycle from project identification through implementation to evaluation. Initial cost estimates were made in 2002 while the project effectively started three years later when prices of constructions had increased.

The participatory approach fails to take into account what Cleaver (2001) describes as the recursive relationship between structure and agency.

Consequently, it ignores the complexities of power, and how these are embedded into social and cultural practices which tend towards treating participation as a technical method of project work, laying emphasis on collective action, while depoliticizing what should be an explicitly political process. For Chambers (1997) an essential aspect of participatory ideology and practice is self-criticism.

The greatest challenge for managers of rural development projects revolves around best strategies for managing unpredictability, especially those that reduce the unknown elements to facilitate timely implementation. The government at all levels must continue to play its traditional role of providing an enabling environment for the initiatives of the local communities to translate into development-oriented action.

The success or failure of rural development interventions depends as much on the conditions surrounding the particular intervention as on the quality of the work done at the local level. Among the conditions most frequently mentioned are economic growth, a favourable political and administrative environment, good governance, and the presence of cultural traits or ideologies that favour participation, self-reliance and collective action (ESCAP, 2009).

Conclusion

There is growing interest among development planners to emphasize on what governments intend to do for the rural communities rather than strengthening their capacity to participate in their own socio-economic development. Using the outcomes of the Grassfield Rural Development Project, this paper shows the partnership between the Government of Cameroon, rural communities and the African Development Bank as a new trend in rural community development practice. In its current, mainstreamed and populist form, participation highlights the importance of placing local realities at the heart of rural development interventions.

Field experience in the project shows that people embrace participatory projects for what they stand to gain. The interest among project service providers seemed to be more on how much benefits they could reap quickly from the project rather than on the timely completion and delivery of infrastructures for the benefit of the rural population.

Despite tangible project outcomes, the full import of the participatory approach has yet to be realized because the process aspects of community development take more time to bear fruit. The frustration that attends most participatory development efforts calls for a lot of commitment on the part of policy makers and extension agents.

Apart from a long waiting period spent on fund raising, short-listing and appointment of the management

personnel, the constantly changing project scenarios are enough to kill the participatory spirit of local communities.

The lessons gained from this assessment show, first, that due consideration must be given to the rural communities' capacity to plan, organize and implement projects that fulfill their aspirations. Second, that it is important to incorporate intangible aspects into community development right from the start without rushing to accomplish infrastructure which may sooner or later go into ruins due to lack of a maintenance culture.

Engaging private, non-governmental agencies in community projects is gaining ground as a best practice and successful case of management contracting. As the outcomes of the Grassfield Rural Development Project indicate, its goal of strengthening local capacity for development of the agriculture and infrastructure base reasonably reflects rural community development. However, challenges remain due to persistent economic constraints and dependence on external sources of funding community projects. These challenges and the long-term neglect in providing rural communities with quality services must be overcome to improve the chances for success of participatory programmes.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have not declared any conflict of interest.

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