The Mismatch Between the Theory and Practice of Participatory Rural Development in Botswana: Prospects for Transformative Social Change

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Abstract: The economic situation of Botswana at independence was characterised by net dependence on international aid to maintain a minimum of public services. This state of the economy laid down the foundation for a development process based on the centralisation of decision making wherein urban officials prescribe development interventions for the intended beneficiaries. Such centrally determined support ultimately metamorphosed into direct provision of livelihoods for the majority of the rural people. This approach has established a culture of dependent development where a majority of people in Botswana especially those residing in the country side expect government to provide them with livelihoods. With persisting high levels of poverty, Botswana's top-down approach to rural development came under criticism specifically for marginalizing the poor and failing to promote equitable development. The criticism led to a shift in thinking culminating with the adoption of the Community Based Strategy for Rural Development in 1997– a benchmark for a long-term rural development strategy for Botswana. The strategy sought to give a prominent role to local communities in identification of their own needs and determination of intervention measures. Using case studies from the villages of Dibete and Khumaga, this paper argues that in spite of the hype surrounding bottom-up planning as stated in various official documents, the reality is that government's commitment to empowering communities is half-hearted and reluctant. This paternalistic posture is further fostered by what appears to be lack of a desire to participate in local development by rural people. Adult Education which seeks to offer opportunities for communities to undertake systematic and sustained learning and developmental activities to bring about change in knowledge, attitudes, values or skills is used to provide a conceptual framework for this discussion.

Keywords: Centralised decision making, Rural development, Adult education, Dependent development

1. Introduction

Participatory rural development assumes that local communities will contribute to the success of development projects and therefore of rural development if they have the responsibility to plan and implement projects relevant to their needs. The need to integrate communities into development activities in Botswana has been necessitated by the realisation that despite the high rates of economic growth recorded since independence in 1966, most people in the rural areas still live below the poverty datum line. One way to explain this is that since independence the Government of Botswana has placed emphasis on the provision of infrastructure and services as a deliberate move to correct imbalances between urban and rural areas, although with limited involvement of rural people in the planning and implementation of these projects.

This approach is widely believed (Colclough & McCarthy, 1980; Picard, 1987; Miti & Chipasula, 1989) to have created an excellent breeding place for dependence on government provision and the erosion of the spirit of self-reliance. The Botswana Government argues that: "There is a considerable appreciation in Botswana and elsewhere that one of the basic factors determining success in rural development is the extent to which communities are involved in planning and undertaking development activities that are intended to benefit them. This applies particularly to schemes aimed at helping rural poor communities to improve their livelihood (Republic of Botswana, 1997: 476).

Consequently, in order to stimulate the participation of local communities in development activities the Government sought to conscientize them about their role in activities intended to benefit them through a variety of activities key amongst them being training in Participatory Rural Appraisal. However, a culture of rural development has been established and consolidated for years such that new approaches representing a radical departure

from the established ways of doing rural development were likely to be resisted by both development practitioners and local communities. The next part provides the context for this discussion by presenting a framework for rural development in Botswana.

2. A Framework for Rural Development in Botswana

In geographical terms, Botswana's area is vast relative to its population. With a landmass of 582 000 km² and a population of 1,680 683, human settlements are relatively many and dispersed (Republic of Botswana, 2002). A majority of Batswana live in rural areas known as villages. In view of this, the Government of Botswana established district institutions to oversee development at the district level, though many projects implemented in the districts are under the authority of the central government through state ministries. This has tended to consolidate the belief among state officials that they have unmatched powers and the monopoly of wisdom in so far as they have to plan and implement projects for rural communities. Power is often related to the ability to give to others what we want regardless of their own needs and interests (Weber, 1946)

Similarly, given the desperation of rural communities for development in the context of Botswana's situation at independence and a subsequent leaning towards a developmental state, rural communities were less bothered about the centralised, prescriptive and disempowering manner in which their development was planned and implemented. Rural people needed development more than they needed power and opportunities to participate and/or influence planners to make decisions that addressed their felt needs. The net effect of these variables – the superiority complex of the development planners and the desperation of the rural communities – was the institutionalisation of the centralised style of development planning resulting in a situation where communities merely presenting a 'shopping list to the government for the provision of livelihoods (Dipholo & Mothusi, 2005), and planners being too happy to 'initiate, sign, seal and deliver turnkey packages' (Dipholo & Mothusi, 2005). However, despite massive investment in infrastructure and social services in the rural areas, poverty persisted. It has since become a general appreciation in Botswana and elsewhere that the exclusion of local people from the development process often under the pretext of accelerating development has tended to lead to inappropriate, wasteful and unsustainable development interventions. It is maintained that in spite of this realisation, efforts or commitment in adopting participatory approaches are indifferent and lackadaisical mainly because the top-down approaches have become a way of doing things at the same time eroding the spirit of self-reliance amongst Batswana and in the process creating dependence on the state.

3. The Concept and Practice of Adult Education

Adult education practice in the developing world is often rooted in the radical tradition, which has always been concerned with the struggle for social justice through collective action. In support of collective action, Freire (1972) proposes that nobody liberates anybody else and nobody liberates themselves all alone. The philosophy of radical adult education is based on the need to develop the consciousness of members of the community in order to facilitate social change (Lovett, 1988). Radical adult education has been influenced by various philosophical positions, particularly Marxism. The relationship between Marxist theory and the practice of adult education can be understood clearly within the concepts of working class consciousness and class struggle in Western capitalist societies. Adult education within Marxist radicalism seeks to develop class-consciousness so that men and women organize themselves to challenge the deplorable conditions under which they work and live.

Freire (in Newman, 1995) writing from experience in Brazil and Africa, linked adult education to social action in which people are motivated to learn from and through the problems they face. The point of departure here is that adults have special needs and aspirations that motivate them to learn. Paulo Freire held the view that: "Adult education has a role in providing learners with the tools and information they need to understand their own histories, to analyse and understand their social contexts and to begin acting on those contexts (Newman, 1995:56)". Freire, through what came to be known as Conscientisation or Dialogic Education proposed dialogue to specify educational relationships and processes that he regarded as necessary aspects of a socially just way of life. Significantly, dialogue is not primarily to make friends with the students but to challenge them to become critical cultural researchers and actors within their own circumstances

(Linden & Renshaw, 2004). Accordingly, dialogue promotes the sharing of information and experiences leading to critical reflection in a way that ensures appropriate remedial action.

Mezirow (1990) adds that through critical reflection the learner is enabled to have the will to act upon his or her new convictions, whereas Smith and Pourchot, (1998:15) comment that "to survive in today's world, adults must be able to change". Kaye elaborates that critical adult education based on transformative learning presupposes that 'one learns to see oneself and the world differently from the way one previously did, and this represents a transformation in attitudes and beliefs about one's identity' (2003:48). In this sense transformation suggests that what an adult learner has learned represents new knowledge and understanding of a superior type which is by and large a step towards empowerment and ultimately emancipation (Freire, 1970). The paramount moral orientation of adult education is the conviction that adult learners are willing to understand their world not in their desire to adapt to it but rather as part of their efforts to re-form or change (Freire, 1972). Adult education further attempts to aid individuals to regain self-confidence and identity. It creates new attitudes and enthusiasm for social change by engaging in action to free themselves from externally induced dependency roles and relationships, adults seek to be self-directed and proactive.

Thus, extension workers and villagers could be viewed as potentially critical thinking adults. Yet extension workers' previous education, based on a traditional curriculum, has inducted them into the language and knowledge of the ruling class (the 'oppressors' to use Freire wording). In the traditional system of education, the adult participant is presented with information in a manner that often does not encourage any kind of critical thought or analysis but rather encourages passive acceptance. In this part, it has been argued that adult education has the overarching role of stimulating social transformation, mainly through critical reflection; that development in this respect is an attempt to correct distortions in relation to the exclusion of poor people from the decision making process and access to national resources.

4. Research Design and Methodology

Using the case study method, this study draws from a more qualitative research as its methodological framework. A qualitative methodology was deemed appropriate for this study as it explores the perceptions and experiences of community members and government officials on participatory rural development that is intended to offer local communities an opportunity to spearhead their own development. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) argue that the word 'qualitative' implies an emphasis on processes and meanings. In this respect, qualitative research wants to know what kind of purposes and goals inform participants' acts, what kind of problems, constraints and contingencies they see in the worlds they occupy. As with adult education, qualitative research offers participants the opportunity to examine the beliefs and attitudes underlying their actions or inactions; they are invited to consider alternative ways of believing and acting. As a naturalistic and multidisciplinary enquiry, qualitative research seeks to gain access to the meanings people attach to things they do or don't do since it is from these meanings that they construct their own personal views of realities.

4.1 Case Study Method

Case studies are good at bringing about an understanding of complex issues and can actually extend experience and add strength to what is already known or being done. Case study research is the method of choice when the phenomenon under investigation is not readily distinguishable from its context. A case study is one of the most familiar methodologies used in qualitative research (Yin, 2003a; Rossman & Rallis, 2003; Yin, 2003b) A case study is defined by interest in individual cases, not by the methods of inquiry used. It is both the process of learning about the case and the product of our learning.

4.2 Sample and Sampling Procedures

This study was conducted in two rural villages in Botswana – Dibete and Khumaga. It has been indicated that this research sought to illuminate the strengths and weaknesses in the practice of participatory development in Botswana. The underlying criterion for selection of participants was the individuals' willingness to participate in the discussions and her/his ability to communicate well and freely. The study sought to select participants in a position of authority, especially an expert or authoritative individual who was capable of giving answers with insight, what Gillham (2002) calls 'elite interviewing'.

In the case of this research, for instance, elderly people were more likely to give a helpful and comprehensive account on trends in the development of their communities than younger people who could not readily appreciate traditional practices whose disappearance was often blamed for the present high levels of poverty. Key informants such as extension workers and local influential people generally constitute guides. It is however noted that the opinions of the guides were not instructional but rather advisory, and the researcher reserved the right to make the final selection. This was meant to inhibit the guides from stage-managing the selection process and by extension the research project. A further criterion was based on gender and age but this criterion was fairly flexible taking note that in some societies women are culturally forbidden from talking to strangers, whereas the youth tend to lack sound understanding of traditional practices. Acknowledging that it was unrealistic to expect everyone to be willing to participate in the research, the researchers approached 'brave' and 'willing or inquisitive' faces. These are described as villagers whose faces tend to suggest that they are wondering what the mission of the visitor is and are willing to help. These are the people who seem less threatened by the presence of strangers; villagers who normally wouldn't shy away from enquiring about one's visit. Those who indicated willingness to participate were asked to recommend others who could make a meaningful contribution to the study.

5. Results and Discussions

The results and discussions which are in line with the aim and objectives of this paper as hereunder presented as follows:

5.1 Perceptions and Experiences of Participants

From the findings, compelling evidence suggests that while recognizing the centrality of people's participation in development, some participants are at the same time ambivalent towards participation. The two case studies show that despite efforts by the Government of Botswana to facilitate the application of participatory approaches in rural development, there has been very limited enthusiasm from both planners and community members. It appears that this lack of interest is due to lack of results on investment or at least commitment to implementing the participatory approaches to improve the lives of the community. One extension worker retorted that,

> *'we are only responsible for training the community. We are not responsible for implementation or follow ups' (Extension worker).*

Rowlands (2003:15) comments that, for participatory approaches to be sustainable, people need to see the results or at least that the results will be forth coming as these approaches require an investment of time and effort that could easily be directed elsewhere if no positive changes emerge.

The case studies further reveal that in most cases the training of communities in the application of participatory approaches by extension workers was rushed and perhaps geared towards familiarisation with the concepts, rather than the practice. Leurs classifies this short training as 'short-term classroom-based events for people who will not be facilitating PRA in the field, but whose support might be required for a PRA application' (2003:222) and warns that "growing experience is showing that an understanding of the methods and practice of PRA principles is not enough. Facilitation and communication skills are crucial" (2003:223).

While the government has incorporated the district planning process as a means to provide decentralised planning and implementation capacity which is sensitive and responsive to needs, problems and priorities of local communities, many of the projects that are planned and implemented at the local level are under the authority of the central government via planners at the Ministry of Finance and Development Planning. 'Development expenditure' for the district authorities is set by the central government and so is the disbursement of funds for district level projects. Central government retains the final authority to approve or reject all new state funded development projects. The central government can strike out projects planned by local authorities and replace them with ones conceived by central government bureaucrats without giving reasons. A participant explained that,

> *We are so eager to implement our plan but we still have to seek financial assistance from elsewhere. This is one of the greatest impediments to self-development initiatives in the rural areas (community member).*

Under this arrangement, extension officers at the local level are not motivated to embrace the practice of participatory development since they are themselves excluded from development planning and are required to refer even trivial matters to the centre for endorsement. Swanepoel (2002:46), points out that "community workers who feel powerless and uninvolved are unlikely to empower the people they work with".

As noted above, existing planning procedures are not favourable for participatory development. Central government agencies dominate district and village institutions. The government's approach to decentralisation is excessively cautious, reluctant and half-hearted. Extension workers on the other hand lack motivation to involve local communities branding them lazy and risk averse or unwilling to change. At the other end of the spectrum, local communities are resigned to the centralised mode of development that gives development experts, extension workers included, the responsibility to deliver development packages. Resistance to change must therefore be attributed not only to deliberate hostility or lack of interest by bureaucrats but to the culture of perpetuating existing ways of doing things hence there is very little support for participatory development in general from the government.

5.2 Dependence on Government Assistance

The case studies show that, by and large, Botswana still adheres to a centralised mode of development planning that perpetuates dependence on the state. For instance, the Kumaga case study reveals that until the collapse of crop farming (arable agriculture's contribution to the national economy has been on the decline since the discovery of minerals in the 1970s), the Khumaga community was relatively self-sufficient and self-supporting. Even during dry seasons occasioned by poor rains, the community would normally take advantage of the wet riverbanks for cultivation, which came to be known as molapo farming (flood plain farming). Livestock farming was also a viable subsistence economic activity supported by the availability of both surface and underground water sources. The nearby Makgadikgadi Game reserve ensured the availability of wildlife resources, which was another source of food.

Community members interviewed contend that families no longer take farming seriously because there are no rains. They argued that even during times of good rains only a few families tilled the land while the majority idled in the village pleading for government assistance. Participants observed that,

You see the grass over there? (Pointing to some bundles of thatching grass). I cut it and sell it to sustain my family. I also sell farm produce such as watermelons and sweet reed. Farming has always been our means of livelihood. But suddenly people want the government to give us food, water and everything while we sit down. I don't think it is proper. Families who used to be self-sufficient in food are now beggars because they abandoned farming to depend on government food supplies. But of course I appreciate that circumstances have changed. For example, rains are unpredictable these days and are inadequate. I understand why the government has to help the poor (community member).

Politicians promise people food if they vote for them, and because of low levels of education among most of the villagers, they believe in these promises and simply sit back and wait for food hand outs after voting them into political office (extension worker).

Some respondents cited alcohol abuse as another factor contributing to lack of participation and high levels of poverty. Most able-bodied people, especially the youth, spend most of their time consuming alcohol, usually the local brew called *mbere*. This prevents them from engaging in productive activities and instead they depend on the government's relief schemes. Most residents line up to register themselves as destitute persons so as to receive monthly food rations/stipends from the government through the Destitute Scheme that is meant to cater for people unable to survive on their own. In the past it was repugnant for a person to clamour for membership to this group but nowadays a person is not ashamed to be identified as destitute. In any case they queue up for registration and according to extension workers interviewed, those who are turned away because they do not meet the requirement for registration blame social workers for denying them the chance to benefit from government subsidy. A participant observed that:

In the good old days it was an insult to be classified as a destitute. These days everyone queues for registration as a destitute so that they receive monthly food rations (community member).

Yet, some participants consider the quest for participatory development as being insincere because governments exit to provide citizens with development and therefore it is wrong to expect people to do what government is supposed to be doing. A participant retorted that:

> *Isn't it the responsibility of the government to provide development to its people? Why would we have a government in the first place? What will be the use of government planners if we are expected to do the planning ourselves? What are they paid for? My point is that the decision to create institutions for development and man them with educated, qualified and competent professionals was a deliberate one (community member).*

Perhaps this issue invalidates the commonly held notion that people are always willing to take part in the development of their communities. As argued by Budiriwanto (2007), participation begins from within. It is rooted in how people see themselves and their sense of self-worth. This implies that if people have acquired low self-esteem or helplessness, they may not rise up to the participation opportunities. It is in this instance that adult education is required to help develop the consciousness of members of the community in order to facilitate social change (Laet, 1988).

Botswana is a dry and drought prone country. The government is repeatedly required to provide drought relief packages to cushion families that have been affected by droughts. These drought relief grants come in the form of food supplements, free seedlings and generous subsidies. Whereas this intervention by the government is pragmatic and reasonable, beneficiaries of the packages consider this assistance to be permanent and part of an obligation on the part of the government to provide livelihoods, to the extent that even when conditions have significantly improved, rural people still expect drought relief packages to be rolled out. Thus, well-intended relief programmes end up perpetuating and consolidating a culture of dependence on the state as shown by the case studies.

5.3 Dysfunctional Extension Support Structures

It has been argued that training in PRA was meant to lay down a foundation for participatory rural development planning. It may therefore be assumed that the quality of the training determines, to a great extent, commitment to the use of participatory approaches in community development. The case studies reveal that there is limited commitment towards participatory development from state officials. The findigs suggested that district and village based extension workers who have the responsibility to sensitize communities about participation in planning may not be providing the support they are expected to give to communities. For instance, support for village level institutions of rural development such as Village Extension Teams (VETS) from superior structures such as the District Extension Teams (DETs) is said to be unsatisfactory resulting in such structures becoming dysfunctional and therefore unable to offer support to the communities. This concern is captured and explained below:

> *Our Village Extension Team (VET) is not active at all and we might end up implicating ourselves or others who are expected to take lead in seeing to it that the VET is operational (Extension worker).*

> *We only appreciate the contribution of the nurse in the village. We never see other government officers except when the Member of Parliament for the area is visiting the village (community member).*

These observations raise two critical matters. Firstly, that once the structures become dormant, the extension workers fail to extend support to communities. Secondly, interdepartmental coordination, joint planning and communication which are key to meaningful participation are compromised.

5.4 Ethnicity and Participatory Development

The Khumaga case study revealed that differences between ethnic groups in a village might scupper community development especially through the participatory mode if the ethnic groups are engaged in a struggle for resources and power as captured below:

> *Our kgosi (village leader) is very negative and divisive. Maybe it is because he does not have the interest of the village at heart. We do not consider him as our own because he originates from Mookane (a village east of Dibete) (community member).*

A power struggle is often characterised by sabotage and counter attack whose intention is to frustrate

other groups' efforts. Participatory development appears more likely to succeed in homogeneous groups where hostility and suspicion on the basis of ethnicity are limited.

The case studies have shown that participatory rural development in Botswana is failing because of, among others, poor quality training; lack of commitment on the part of the government including, extension workers and development practitioners; the ambivalence of communities; and a generally unfavourable environment for participation. Nevertheless, the case studies also show that there are opportunities for real participation in Botswana especially noting that before the proliferation of government assistance schemes, many rural households were relatively independent and self-supporting.

5.5 Steps Towards Meaningful Participatory Rural Development

The challenges plaguing participatory rural development indicate that a lot of work still needs to be done by the government and its development partners to ensure that peoples' participation in development is taken seriously. A significant challenge for government is to supply unequivocal commitment to district and village based extension workers in terms of providing training in participatory development methods to those who do not have training; encouraging and supporting those with training to apply their knowledge in order to acquire the necessary expertise, and most importantly supporting the implementation of community projects conceived through participatory approaches in order to raise motivation and instil confidence in the approaches.

It is not enough for the government to simply 'sell' participatory approaches without walking the talk. There must be commitment on the part of government officials, especially bearing in mind that 'the people who set priorities for change on behalf of others very often have good intentions, but do not always have sufficient information or skills to interpret it accurately' (Rowlands, 2003:p.7). Existing structures for the coordination of extension services and rural development activities such as VETs and DETs are presently ineffective and cannot be entrusted resulting in lack of application of the approaches. It has been shown that these structures have been inactive for a long time and any hope that they can be revamped may be misplaced.

It will be important to win the support of district and village based extension workers so that they feel appreciated, noticed and valued. This will require deliberate efforts to re-orient existing planning and administrative structures, especially in terms of promoting greater decentralisation and flexible budgeting in order to accommodate participatory approaches.

Although necessary, the numerous relief schemes implemented by the government have invariably cultivated a mixture of indifference and passivity among the people of Botswana. People's dependence on government means that they may find it obscene to demand to participate and influence decisions. There is need to find a way to balance the provision of social safety with the need for beneficiaries to be required to graduate from destitution after a specified period of time. Little progress will be made in institutionalising and implementing participatory approaches unless consideration is given to creating interest among community leaders and local communities in the philosophy of citizen participatory in development through advocacy and experimentation. Seminars and workshops using principles of adult learning are ideal for these groups.

6. Conclusion

While it is true that participatory approaches are designed to foster the traditional self-help mode of operations, implementation failures suggest that circumstances have changed so much that what was traditionally envied is now despised and unwelcome. Botswana's society has changed since independence in 1966 and continues to experience rapid change. Traditional methods of extension work encompassing consultation, planning and delivery are encountering difficulties in attracting people's attention and motivating them for active involvement in planning and implementation. Many extension workers interviewed indicated that unless welfare is provided, people are not motivated to actively take part in development planning and implementation.

Historically, Botswana society was relatively self-supporting and self-sufficient. The study has also shown that Botswana society has not suddenly grown dependent on government, but that government's sincere intervention measures especially in its efforts to cushion rural families against the

effects of persistent droughts have had the effect of increasing dependency. The general situation of poverty in rural areas is a disincentive for voluntary work. Existing centralised structures and procedures, especially for planning and budgeting, combined with a long history of paternalism promote dependency. Participatory development is important as an initiative to stem the tide of the dependency syndrome. This need derives in large part from international and national demands for political and economic empowerment of the beneficiaries of development. These demands comprise the right to full participation in the opportunities and responsibilities of citizenry, especially the responsibility to play a leading role in identification, planning and implementation of community development projects. However, this research has shown that government planners are not keen to support the participatory initiative perhaps because they consider themselves as development experts whose responsibilities include planning for the people. These paternalistic attitudes are not helped by what appears to be resistance to change on the part of rural people.

Nonetheless, many of the problems afflicting participatory development could be addressed by exploiting some of the key principles and techniques of adult education such as involving adult learners in the design of the training curriculum; valuing learners by acknowledging their past experiences and applying them to construct new knowledge and skills; creating a climate of mutual respect and trust to enhance their self-esteem and creating a conducive environment where each person has something to learn and teach.

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