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## **COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION: RHETORIC OR REALITY?**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Central to any community development project is the notion of community participation and there is widespread agreement that community participation is an essential feature of any community development initiative. It is argued, almost as a matter of course, that people should be involved in identifying their needs and problems and in finding appropriate solutions. The term "community participation", however, has come to mean many things to many people and remains an ill-defined term. It "has popularity without clarity, and is subject to growing faddishness and a lot of lip service" (De Kadt, 1982:574). Written in 1982, this comment still has relevance today as social workers and community development personnel struggle to put the principles of community participation into practice.

This paper examines community participation in relation to an abortive attempt to establish a community garden project in an informal settlement. Examining what went wrong in this project and making suggestions for avoiding these problems in the future will hopefully contribute to improved intervention strategies. The paper begins with a brief overview of the literature concerning community participation and highlights some of the difficulties associated with its definition. This provides the context for understanding community participation in the garden project. It then describes the community garden project and outlines the research process that was used to evaluate community participation in this project. The results of this research study revealed that, although community participation was valued in principle, its practical application was lacking. Reasons for this are advanced and the implications of this for practice are discussed.

### **WHAT IS "COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION": OVERVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

The understanding that community participation in development is important has evolved as people, throughout the world and particularly in Africa, have become disillusioned with the development strategies of the past three decades. From the 1950s through the 1960s and 1970s, in the context of social development, it was professionals who had the answers. However, in recent times this ideology of development problems being solved by education and the transfer of technology has been questioned and undermined. The notion of "community participation" gained increasing prominence in the 1980s, leading Marsden and Moser (1990:4) to comment that this was the "decade of participation" and that "without this magic ingredient, development projects and programmes have little chance of success."

In a newly democratised country such as South Africa, community participation has become a central theme in the broad field of social development as a model for addressing and balancing the injustices of the past. The concept of community participation is highlighted in a number of policy documents relating to community development. The White Paper for Social Welfare (1997), for example, stated that one of the aims of the developmental approach to welfare was to encourage the active involvement of people in their own development. In the field of housing policy housing is seen as a right within a democratic country and as a means towards people-centred development. Again, the importance of community participation in housing is stressed (White

Paper on Housing, 1994). Large development agencies, such as the Urban Foundation and the Independent Development Trust, made community participation a prerequisite for housing development schemes and community participation in upgrading schemes in informal settlements has become an important facet in development work. Summarising the arguments in favour of community participation, Marais and Krige (1997:183) stated that

community participation is essential to the effectiveness of projects, assists in cost recovery, leads to effective resource utilisation, ensures social and political control by the community and community leaders, helps community members develop skills related to the project (empowerment), and helps to ensure that the project is affordable (and) ensures that projects are developed according to the needs of the people.

What then is community participation? Schurink (1998:407) defined community participation “as the creation of a democratic system and procedure to enable community members to become actively involved and to take responsibility for their own development and to improve their decision-making power”. This would seem to be the ideal to which community developers should aspire. In reality there appear to be differing degrees of community participation. Pretty, Guijt, Scoones and Thomson (1995) stated that the ways in which development organisations interpret and use the word ranges from passive participation to self-mobilisation. They identify seven levels of participation:

1. **Passive participation:** People participate by being told by an outside development agency what is going to happen.
2. **Participation in information giving:** People answer questions posed by an external organisation which may or may not take the answers into account in their planning efforts.
3. **Participation by consultation:** People are consulted and an external organisation may or may not modify their views in the light of what they hear.
4. **Participation for material incentives:** People participate by providing resources, e.g. labour, in return for material rewards. De Beer and Swanepoel (1998:20) referred to this as “participation as cheap labour” and White (1996) as “instrumental participation”. Using local labour helps to reduce overall costs and participants in return receive a resource or facility.
5. **Functional participation:** People participate by joining groups to implement projects, usually after major decisions have been made by external organisations.
6. **Interactive participation:** People participate by taking part in joint needs assessments and planning as well as implementation, together with external organisations. White (1996) referred to this as “transformative participation”, which is characterised by a process of empowerment. Decision-making is truly decentralised and control of the projects shared.
7. **Self-mobilisation:** People participate by taking initiatives independently of any external organisation.

Main (1998) pointed out that much of the controversy surrounding community participation revolves around motives for participation. At one end of the scale participation can be seen as an attempt by the external organisation to co-opt communities to “rubber stamp” decisions and to gain legitimacy for funding and personnel. At the other end participation is seen as a liberatory process that leads to empowerment and self-mobilisation.

Participation can be understood as both a means and an end. In some cases participation as a means to an end is emphasised, often by those with a technical or financial background, while in

others participation as an end in itself is emphasised, often by those with a social community-based background (Botes & Van Rensburg 2000).

A further complication in defining community participation relates to the notion of "community". Early concepts of community romanticised the notion of community and communities were seen as friendly groups of people (usually the rural poor) who lived and worked harmoniously together. This term is used with an "inherent assumption that it is characterised by closeness of people" (De Beer & Swanepoel, 1998). This closeness can be manifested in the form of a geographic community or a functional community having shared interests. This, however, is not always the case. Communities may be made up of people with diverse interests and views about what they want from their communities. When talking about "community participation" who do we mean should participate? Often it is those who are most visible and vocal, the local elite or those who already have a strong voice in decision-making who are targeted (Botes & Van Rensburg, 2000; Hollnsteiner, 1982 in De Beer & Swanepoel, 1998). What then about "others" in the community?

### **THE COMMUNITY GARDEN PROJECT: A PROJECT PLANNED BUT NEVER IMPLEMENTED**

Shakashead is a rural informal settlement situated on the Dolphin Coast approximately 75 km north of Durban and is home to about 2900 people. As is typical of many other informal settlements, Shakashead is characterised by a lack of resources in terms of health, water supply, electricity, transport, sanitation and postal and telephone services. Its distance from major industrial and business centres exacerbates the high rate of unemployment and poverty in the region.

During 1999 the local authority began an up-grade project, with one section of the area being transformed into a formal township. The importance of sustainable development projects was acknowledged and as part of a range of such projects a community garden was suggested. Funds from a private funder were allocated and a development consultant was tasked with overseeing the establishment of the project.

A community committee was elected and the local councillor was supportive of the project. The group of committee members, however, expressed reservations about their ability to cope with the project and consequently a training workshop was planned. A social work Masters student from the University of Natal who had shown an interest in development projects in the area agreed to conduct such a programme. After a number of delays (the project facilitator forgot to give the community members the message about the first date; on the second date access to the venue was impossible because the person with the key went missing), the workshop was held with 6 of the expected 12 committee members. While their evaluation of the workshop was positive, the lack of participation by other committee members was a cause for concern.

Attempts to start the community garden then proceeded. A horticulturalist gave advice about location and a site was cleared and fenced. A date to start planting had to be delayed because of heavy rains in the area and, although a further date was set, nothing happened. Twelve months later the garden had still not been established.

### **THE RESEARCH PROJECT**

The purpose of the research study was to evaluate community participation in the community garden project. A synthesis of Murden, Oakley and Pratt's (1994) programme evaluation model and McKendrick's (1989) integrated model of programme evaluation was used to guide the research process. The first stage of the research involved planning and preparation. Key stake-

holders were identified and their co-operation in the study was gained. Purposive sampling was thus used to select informants who had played a significant role in the attempts to establish a community garden and who could speak with authority about the problems experienced. The research participants were:

- A representative from the funding agency;
- A representative from the local authority;
- Four members of the community committee.

The small number of committee members who participated in the research must be seen as a limitation. This, however, needs to be acknowledged in the context of research in informal settlements. Research in informal settlements is difficult – when people are struggling to meet their day-to-day needs, it is unrealistic to expect that research will be a priority for them. Several unsuccessful attempts were made to include more committee members.

The next phase entailed choosing an appropriate research design. An exploratory-descriptive design was chosen. The study was considered to be exploratory because very few research findings regarding community participation in development projects in informal settlements have been reported. It was also considered descriptive because it describes the various factors in the environment of the project that militated against efforts to pursue principles of community participation.

During the next phase the data were collected. Semi-structured interviews were held with each of the key informants. While there were a number of closed questions, open questions were also included to allow the researcher to explore certain issues in more depth. The researcher had spent a considerable amount of time negotiating entry and establishing relationships with key informants prior to the interviews and this facilitated their completion. The themes covered in these interviews included:

- nature of involvement in the community;
- community structures and development projects;
- perceptions about the community garden;
- the importance of community participation;
- support and training.

The final stages involved analysing the data, reflection and reporting back to the stakeholders. A research report was presented to all the research participants.

## **DISCUSSION OF RESULTS**

Each of the respondents was directly involved in the Shakashead community. The representative of the funding organisation was actively involved in facilitating a number of projects in the area and worked closely with the local authority in this regard. The representative from the local authority was tasked with initiating projects within the local authority area. He had been employed by the local authority for a number of years, but admitted to having no training in the implementation and management of community projects. The four community committee members (3 males and 1 female) had lived in Shakashead for periods ranging from 3 to 20 years and had been on the committee since its inception several months prior to the research study.

All the research participants agreed that, in principle, the community garden project was a positive idea. They believed that it would help to create jobs, provide nutrition to families, uplift the community and help people within the community to form bonds through working together. Having said this, one respondent then went on to comment that community gardens “don’t work”. He believed that, in line with free market principles, people would be more committed to individual gardens that would meet their own particular needs.

There were differing opinions about how the decision to establish a community garden project came about. All the respondents had “heard” about the project from varying sources and no-one really seemed to know exactly how the decision to establish a community garden had been arrived at. Furthermore, none of the respondents was aware of the source of funds and there was much confusion about the amount allocated for the project. This highlighted the lack of transparency on the part of the implementing agency and confirmed the top-down nature of the way in which the project operated.

### **Perceptions regarding the importance of community participation**

All the research participants agreed that community participation in community projects was essential. There were, however, differing perceptions of what participation should involve.

The community committee members who participated in the study felt strongly that community members should be involved in all stages of a community development project. Community participation should start with the planning phase and continue through the implementation, monitoring and evaluation phases. There was a strong feeling from these participants that projects should be “owned” by the community and that planning should occur from the bottom up. In other words, they felt that they should be consulted before any projects are suggested and that they should make an input regarding possible projects that would benefit the community. They pointed out that decisions about projects were made by the local authority and the community was then informed. The committee was then expected to market the idea to the rest of the community, gather support for the project and become involved in the implementation of the project. This was clearly an example of “functional participation” (Pretty *et al.*, 1995) in practice. The disadvantage of this was clearly demonstrated in this situation – the committee members never really felt that the project was theirs and thus never really committed to it.

Because of the numerous community problems and the lack of progress regarding the community garden project, one respondent was led to comment that an outside implementing agency or development professional was needed to initiate projects in the community as community members were unable to do this on their own. His idea was that, once the project was established, it should be handed over to the local people. This attitude, while understandable in the context in which it was made, is not conducive to democratic participatory processes that include community members in decision-making from the very beginning. In any event, the thinking is also flawed – if the local people were unable to start a project on their own, what likelihood is there that they would then be able to sustain it once it was established?

It was clear from this study that the hierarchical and organisational procedures of the development organisation involved appeared to control the direction of the project. The local authority and the funder were prepared to sponsor certain projects that they saw as important. Planning was done at the organisational level only and community members were not involved from the planning phase. Craig and Porter (1997:229) noted that one of the problems experienced in development work is that projects tend to be more “managed” than “participatory” and that the “balance of control ends up inside the organisations which are managing the project”. This certainly appeared to be the case

in this instance.

In discussing other development projects in the area committee members again highlighted the fact that they were only informed of projects after the initial decisions had been taken and that they were not involved in the initial planning. They indicated that they agreed that these were worthwhile projects that would benefit the community, but they still believed they should have been involved from the beginning.

### **Factors contributing to poor community participation**

Research participants suggested a number of factors that contributed to poor community participation. These included:

**PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP:** The study findings indicated that a lack of strong leadership had a profoundly negative effect on the establishment of the community garden project. For example, it became evident that there was competition between various people who were in leadership positions regarding the ownership of the project. Comments made by respondents included “the ward councillors and the various structures in the community are in conflict” and “the leadership in the area is not operating well”.

In order to develop a participatory approach to development, leadership needs to be characterised by facilitation, collaboration, co-ordination and suggestion (Lindsey & McGuinness, 1998). Clearly this will not be possible in communities where leadership problems exist and where “power struggles and dominating behaviour inhibits participation (Chambers, in Blackburn, 1998).

**CONFLICT WITHIN THE COMMUNITY:** The conflict between local leaders also impacted on relationship between different sections of the community. One respondent felt that because of this it was almost impossible for people to come together and to participate in the planning and implementation of projects. It was also clear from the study that not everyone in the community supported the community garden project and that conflict between the different groups impacted negatively on this project. This was clearly illustrated by the theft of the fencing on the site of the garden project.

Conflicts such as those described above have been noted to be a factor present in many informal settlements and, for example, Mandizvidza (1998:69) pointed out that in some cases conflict in communities even “destroys projects, premises or products completely”.

**LACK OF COMMITMENT:** The conflict in the community and feelings about ownership of the project also impacted on what was seen by respondents as a lack of commitment to the project. Attendance at training meetings which were intended to help the committee develop relevant skills was poor with only 6 of the 12 committee members attending. Not one person attended a subsequent meeting. The personal attitudes and behaviours of community members involved in such projects are vital to the successful implementation of projects.

A number of respondents also pointed out that community development calls for a lot of devotion and energy. According to them, many people in the committee and wider community perceived their involvement in projects as tedious and time consuming. Emmett, Hagg and Steyn (1997) pointed out that skilled leaders and community representatives are not unlimited and that invariably the same people are involved in a number of community projects. This might have been a factor in Shakashead, where community leaders were also involved in other community projects. For example, two of the committee members were employed in another development project in the area and it is not unreasonable to suppose that a project involving payment would take precedence over attending meetings.

**LACK OF ADMINISTRATIVE AND PROJECT MANAGEMENT SKILLS ON THE PART OF COMMUNITY MEMBERS:** The findings of the study indicated that most participants believed that a lack of administrative and project management skills impacted negatively on the ability of community members to participate fully in the garden project. One committee member stated that "community involvement in projects is new and members are unaware of how to get projects started".

Training and the transfer of skills are an essential aspect of community development projects. Lund (1987:96) pointed out that "...it is in training that the material and social objectives of a project are transferred to a core group of local people, and it is this that makes the project self-sustaining and viable over time". All the respondents agreed that training and support were necessary. However, they differed in their opinion about the nature of this training. One participant, for example, felt that training should be offered to selected community members who showed commitment and a willingness to participate. Training everyone, he felt, would be a waste of time and resources.

Ongoing support was also identified as a factor that could encourage and sustain community participation in development projects. Suggestions were that social workers and community workers could offer this kind of support and regular meetings should be held.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

The discussion of results has shown how various factors contributed to a lack of community participation in the community garden project. The question now arises as to what lessons can be learned from this study and what steps can be taken to strengthen community participation in development projects. Several suggestions and recommendations arise from the research study:

### **The use of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA)**

PRA emerged in the 1980s as a way of facilitating the participation of local community groups in assessing their needs and planning change efforts. Although the term "PRA" is still commonly used, the original meaning of the term has expanded. There is an acknowledgement that the application is not limited only to rural areas, but can be successfully applied in urban areas, and that it is not limited to only appraisal (or assessment), but can be extended to include implementation, monitoring and evaluation (Blackburn & Holland, 1998). Underlying the approach is a commitment to enabling local people to change their condition and situation.

Had a PRA approach been used in the Shakashead community, the outcome of community garden project may well have been different. Community members may, for example, have indicated a preference for a different kind of project to meet their needs. Perhaps when the project was first suggested they may have felt pressurised into agreeing to it and they may have felt that to disagree at that point might influence future possibilities of funding for projects in the area. Had the "outsiders" adopted a listening stance, they would have developed a better understanding of the community and its dynamics and would have been better able to facilitate discussion about the needs of the community. They would thus have been able to encourage open and honest dialogue between the various parties concerned.

### **The importance of training and support**

The representative from the local authority who was tasked with overseeing this development project had little experience or training in the field of development. He was in fact in the difficult "no-win" situation – there were demands on him from both his employers and the community for

“results”, but at the same time he was criticised for not involving the community sufficiently in the planning and implementation of the project. While some community development workers certainly seem to have a natural ability to work in a participative fashion, for many education, training and an opportunity to reflect on their roles, their values and attitudes are the factors that will lead to better development practice.

It was clear from the findings that community members also had no experience of participating in development projects and the need for support and training was evident. Such training and support programmes should include, both the transfer of administrative and project management skills as well as the development of inter-personal skills necessary for effective communication and conflict resolution.

It is therefore suggested that training and support programmes incorporate a consciousness-raising approach (Freire, 1984). This approach has as a fundamental principle the notion that “wisdom comes from below, rather than from above” (Ife, 1996:96). In this way training programmes could empower people and enhance their motivation, coping and problem-solving skills, decision-making power, self-esteem, self-sufficiency and self-determination. In so doing, community commitment and therefore participation in projects could be improved.

The following elements should be included in training programmes:

- Inter-personal communication skills;
- Problem-solving and conflict-resolution skills;
- Assertiveness training;
- Self awareness;
- Committee skills.

Strengthening people’s skills would also contribute to building organisational capacity within communities. This is a crucial factor influencing the sustainability of projects.

### **Role of development agencies**

Development and welfare organisations as well as government departments have developed policies that are often standardised, formal and bureaucratic. People who have worked in these types of organisations for many years bring these attitudes and behaviours to the development effort. If development agencies are to increase their quality of support to communities, they will need to adapt old methods and procedures. In other words, development agencies need to negotiate with local beneficiaries from the onset of the project in order to incorporate their viewpoints in the project objectives and goals. This calls for a collaborative relationship between development professionals and local beneficiaries.

### **Role of social workers**

Social workers can play a vital role in the transformation of the country by converting the principles put forth by the Reconstruction and Development Programme (ANC, 1994) and the White Paper for Social Welfare (1997) into reality. This study has shown that community members, planners and developers need to work together to identify project needs, determine priorities and implement programmes. Social workers, with their holistic understanding of the person-in-environment and their professional interpersonal skills can facilitate the emergence and enhancement of trust, leadership, commitment, accountability and democratic development. This

would ensure that development programmes in informal settlements are implemented in a way that is "equitable, people-driven and democratic" (ANC, 1994).

## CONCLUSION

This paper highlighted the factors associated with insufficient community participation in development projects and illustrated how these impacted on the (unsuccessful) attempt to establish the community garden project. Chambers (in Blackburn, 1998:xii) has reminded us that "participation is about learning to respect and listen to the opinions, feelings and knowledge of all those involved in the project". Furthermore, the findings of the study revealed that all the stakeholders in the garden project embraced the principle of community participation in theory, but at the level of practice the contrary was evident. Clearly then, the challenge that faces development professionals and implementing agencies is to bridge the gap between the principles of community participation put forth by the macro social development policies, which essentially outline a "participatory, bottom-up approach to development" (ANC, 1994) and the need to ensure that this is translated into practice at a local, community level.

It is hoped that the lessons learnt from this study will encourage all stakeholders (funders, development professionals, local beneficiaries, local leadership, development agencies and policy makers) who are involved in the planning and implementation of development projects to embrace the Freirean (1984) notion of "dialogue and consciousness". In so doing, they could contribute to the successful implementation of sustainable development projects. Only then will we be able to say that participation is a reality and not just rhetoric!

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