

Challenges Facing Decentralization and Community Participation in Local Development in Capricorn District Municipality, South Africa

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ABSTRACT This study aims to investigate the key challenges facing decentralization and community participation in local development processes in Capricorn District Municipality (CDM). A qualitative case study design was adopted to examine critical factors influencing decentralization and community participation in the two local municipalities under CDM. Primary data was collected through interviews with officials and community representatives using non-probability purposive sampling, and cross-examined along with secondary sources. It was found, inter alia, that poor decision-making, weak institutional capacity, lack of commitment, poor responsiveness, and lack of inclusiveness were the major critical issues facing the local municipalities. In conclusion, if the local government embark on drastic measures to address such deterring factors, the decentralization process, which has taken place through the formation and functioning of the CDM will lead to a comprehensive citizen participation in the design and delivery of services and development.

INTRODUCTION

Development discourse has recently shifted towards decentralized and participatory frameworks in which the local government plays a vital role in building strong, functional and effective mechanisms and processes for inclusive and broad based engagement at grass root level.

In a broad sense, decentralization entails the devolution of decision-making power and delegation of responsibility and resources from the national government to regional and local levels institutions (Isufaj 2014). Different scholars indicated that decentralization is considered as a tool to enhance public participation in local service delivery and development activities (Daniel 2014; Arcand and Wagner 2016). Isufaj (2014) echoes similar sentiment when the researcher argues that decentralization plays a role in improving civic participation in decision-making by allowing citizens to control major decisions of the local government, to increase communication between citizen and government. The implementation of decentralized development

can also improve accountability of local authorities by promoting their responsiveness to the needs and priorities of citizens pertaining to quality and adequate services to communities at large, and also by enhancing efficiency in delivering of basic services.

Participation is a key element of decentralization (Reddy and Govender 2013). Participation consists of capabilities of local people and their involvement in the decision-making process (Hofisi 2014). Advocates of decentralization argue that a decentralized government can improve community participation in local development process. One of the fundamental arguments in favor of decentralization is that it can increase government accountability and responsiveness to the needs and priorities of citizens (Faguet 2014). Ahmad et al. (2011) also indicated that effective implementation of decentralization has a potential effect on government efficiency and accountability by enhancing the involvement of local people in decision-making processes.

Critics disagree that decentralization necessarily leads to greater people's participation. Some of the critics include Mansuri and Rao (2013) who argue that decentralization of government functions could simply result in the decentralization of government failure. Carrying on this argument further, Bardhan et al. cited in Ojambo (2012) contend that local authorities fail for various reasons, including the lack of democratic mechanisms by which people can make

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decisions on priorities, absence of active political rivalry, and absence of municipal capacity. Ojambo (2012) also argues that in the absence of adequate awareness about decentralization by local people, decentralization cannot guarantee community participation.

In South Africa, since the democratic transformation, the government has developed one of the most comprehensive and institutionalized forms of decentralization. Enshrined in the Constitution and supported by various policies and legislations, the decentralization process in the country focused on enhancing citizen participation in local governance (Fuo 2015). The White Paper on Local Government of 1998 provides a model of developmental local government that requires the local government to work closely with communities to find sustainable ways to improve services and development at local level (Asmah-Andoh 2015). Additionally, the Municipal Systems Act of 2000 stipulates that the local communities and community based organizations should be involved in the process of planning, implementation and performance evaluation processes (Asmah-Andoh 2015). It is apparent from the legislations that local governments play a significant role in promoting local development in the country. They are expected to achieve local development through the Integrated Development Plan (IDP) and to do so in consultation with local communities under their respective jurisdictions. However, the biggest challenge is that not all municipalities have been successful in participating local communities despite the existence of decentralized local level structures and procedures (Mautjana and Makombe 2014; Maxegwana et al. 2015).

Objective of the Study

The main purpose of this study was to determine key challenges facing decentralization and community participation in local development processes in Capricorn District Municipality (CDM). To that end, firstly a thorough discussion was provided on the linkages between decentralization and community participation. Secondly, critical factors that affect the ongoing effort to decentralize development were examined in the context of local municipalities of CDM. Thirdly, this study identified and recommended

strategic interventions, which should be considered towards effective decentralization and greater community participation in local development process of CDM.

METHODOLOGY

The CDM is one of the district municipalities that fall under the Limpopo Province, South Africa. The CDM has five local municipalities including Polokwane, Lepelle-Nkumpi, Blouberg, Mollemole and Aganang. This study was conducted in Polokwane and Lepelle-Nkumpi local municipalities, which were purposely selected for their urban-rural context and convenience. The Polokwane local municipality had the highest number of population in 2011, which was 629,999 and a total 178,0001 households, whereas the Lepelle-Nkumpi local municipality had a population of 2,030,350 and a total of 59,683 households (Statics South Africa 2014).

A qualitative method was adopted to investigate the perception of different stakeholders on the critical factors that influence decentralization and community participation in the study area. Qualitative research approach commonly employed to address questions that need explanation or understanding of social phenomena and their context, more specifically includes observation, in-depth individual interviews and analysis of documents and texts, involves interpretative approach in which a researcher identifies emerging categories and themes from the data, uses non probability samples, notably purposive sample, and samples that are small-scale (Snape and Spencer 2003).

The target population for this study included municipal officers and community representatives who have got in-depth understanding about local government functions and community participation. Purposive sampling technique was used to identify a total of 30 key informants including municipal officers, ward committee, community development workers, and traditional leaders. Data was collected by using an open-ended interview schedule. Additionally, data was collected from both secondary sources and observations. Data analysis involved a qualitative interpretation of data through transcribing field data, classifying and looking at patterns. Then data was presented in textual form.

FINDINGS

The finding of this study shows that despite decentralization, which has taken place through the formation and functioning of the CDM, it has not entirely led to effective, democratic, participatory and comprehensive citizen participation in the design and delivery of development in the municipality. The finding also highlighted the fact that a number of factors are influencing the ongoing efforts by the government to decentralize development so as to further encourage community participation at the local level.

Difficulties in Decision-making

In South Africa, municipalities should work in cooperation with traditional leaders in terms of rural land utilization and management. However, conflict of interest between the aforementioned parties makes decision-making difficult, especially on implementation of IDP projects. Respondents from Polokwane local municipality highlighted that municipalities have limited power over traditional land. As echoed by one respondent:

“The large part of the municipality is rural. The land belongs to the traditional authorities. The municipality requires permission for using the land for different purposes including feeder road construction and other projects, which are intended to benefit rural people.”

This situation did not only delay project implementation but also created difficulty for rural communities to access land for various agricultural projects.

Local municipalities have limited decision-making power over certain activities in their area of jurisdiction including management of extended public works programs and construction of low-cost houses. Furthermore, ongoing conflict of interest between politicians and administrators contributes to delayed decision-making. Findings from Lepelle-Nkumpi local municipality show that respondents have a serious concern regarding inconsistent decisions taken by politicians and administrators. This condition affects private business owners, especially the small business entrepreneurs. A respondent commented,

“There is lack of consistency in decisions by previous as well as new councilors and administrators. This event hampers development of the area.”

Inadequate Capacity

It was found that the municipalities under study have faced challenges and constraints in relation to their implementation capacity. Respondents from Polokwane local municipality highlighted that insufficient human and financial resources as well as inadequate knowledge about IDP have negative effects on the design, implementation and evaluation of service delivery and infrastructural projects. Furthermore, other respondents from Lepelle-Nkumpi local municipality revealed that poor audit outcomes, insufficient oversight by politicians, inadequate council capacity, discouraged and unskilled staff, and budget shortages are major deficiencies in institutional setup of the local municipality. A respondent indicated,

“Community Development Workers (CDWs) being close to the community, they should attend IDP forums so that they become aware of what is going on, otherwise they do not know about the programs of departments. This empowers us.”

Inadequate Commitment from Stakeholders

Commitment from stakeholders is a key element for successful service delivery and local infrastructural development. South African local authorities have legislative mandate to participate communities, special groups within communities and other relevant stakeholders in designing, implementing and evaluating local development initiatives. Respondents from Polokwane local municipality indicated that the municipality has promoted consultative meeting and collaboration among various existing IDP stakeholders and other potential partners including institution for higher learning, commercial farmers and traditional authorities.

The Polokwane respondents also highlighted certain challenges related to stakeholders commitment such as, some groups within community do not want to attend consultative meetings, lack of sense of ownership of projects, especially by community members, lack of clarity regarding the role of various stakeholders, empty promises by municipal officers during consultative meeting, which creates tension and conflict, and inadequate role by the ward committee. During an interview a respondent remarked that,

“The municipal officers make promises during IDP consultative meetings, but they are not fulfilling their commitment, hence empty promises create conflict between government and communities.”

Furthermore, respondents from the Lepelle-Nkumpi local municipality indicated that communities and community-based organizations tend to develop a dependency mentality specifically expecting almost everything from the government.

Inadequate Responsiveness

One of the key features of a decentralized development approach is responding adequately to the local needs by the local government. Respondents from Polokwane indicated that the five-year strategic plan of the municipality, that is the IDP document, reflects the needs and priorities of communities. However, the major challenge lies in implementation of service delivery and development projects. This situation contributed to deficiencies in service delivery and delayed implementation of infrastructural projects by the municipality as revealed by one participant as follows:

“The quality of RDP houses is poor and very low, windows and doors are not properly fitted.”

Respondents also indicated that local authorities fail to provide low-cost RDP houses within planned period of time. Furthermore, respondents from Lepelle-Nkumpi local municipality raised their concern regarding inadequate response from the municipality to their needs. Respondents indicated that communities had participated by providing their inputs in IDP review consultative meetings yet the municipal officers did not sufficiently attend to issues of concerns raised by local people.

Lack of Inclusive Approach

Inclusive approach is crucial for addressing the needs and priorities of disadvantaged groups within communities in local development affairs. Polokwane local municipality respondents revealed that the office for special needs promotes inclusive approach in the municipality through active involvement of marginalized groups including young people who are not employed, disabled people, old people and women. The office arranges a special session to address the needs and priorities of such group during IDP consultative meetings.

However, respondents also indicated some challenges facing the local municipality towards achieving broad based involvement. These include lack of community involvement during IDP strategic planning process, and inadequate community involvement in implementation of IDP projects. Furthermore, Lepelle-Nkumpi respondents highlighted that the municipality faces challenge regarding communication, especially timely exchange of information. Additionally, traditional leaders and private sectors did not actively participate during IDP consultative meetings. The finding shows that community members were not actively involved at strategy formulation stage of IDP.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study is to determine key challenges facing decentralization and community participation in the design and execution of local developmental initiatives in municipalities. It has been indicated that despite the decentralization, which has taken place through the formation and functioning of the CDM, it has not entirely led to effective community participation in the design and delivery of development in the local municipalities. The finding is consistent with several studies. According to Koelble and Siddle (2013: 343),

“Decentralization has not fulfilled its promises. Sixteen years after the adoption of the Constitution, municipal governance in South Africa is in a state of paralysis, service delivery failure and dysfunction.”

In general, different studies uncovered that municipalities in South Africa, regardless of their context, have been struggling to achieve community participation as a bottom-up approach (Mautjana and Makombe 2014; Molepo et al. 2015; Sinxadi and Campbell 2015). Bossyut (2013) maintains that in some instances decentralization does not lead to empowerment and enhanced local participation. However, there are some success stories about the role of decentralization towards promoting local participation in key decision-making processes in development (Heller et al. 2007).

This study found that the ongoing decentralization towards fostering local community participation in planning, implementation and evaluation of development interventions has been affected by various challenges and con-

straints. These include, most notably, implementation delay due to decision-making difficulties, inadequate institutional capacity, insufficient commitment of stakeholders, inadequate responses to local needs and priorities, and limited inclusion and involvement of marginalized people in development affairs.

This study indicated that the local government implementation is a major problem manifested in terms of limited power over decisions. Local authorities are faced with limited funding and lack of capacity or skills shortage for implementation (Ramutsheli and van Rensburg 2015). The absence of implementation capacity in local government affects decentralization and local participation for addressing community needs and priorities (Yadama and Dauti 2010). Additionally, Nkuna (2011) argues that local authorities have limited power over decisions because they tend to operate within strict legislative control from other spheres of government such as the provincial and national governments. In theory, decentralization seems to be feasible for effective local participation. However, in practice, the main challenge lies with implementation delay due to limited power over decisions.

Concerning institutional capacity, local municipalities have insufficient capacity to carry out their developmental mandates. Inadequate institutional capacity includes the following, that is, inadequate staffing levels, lack of experienced staff, shortage of qualified staff, poor performance management, lack of capacity at councilors level, and shortages of critical skills (DPLG and SALGA cited in Vyas-Doorgapersad 2010). Mautjana and Makombe (2014) noted that lack of capacity to facilitate participation is one of the main reasons behind poor participation by communities in municipal affairs. Similarly poor communication channels, ineffective information dissemination processes and limited technical knowledge contribute to low level of awareness and lack of participation (Swarpan 2016). This suggests that the process of decentralization alone does not guarantee local participation without adequate capacity at municipal level.

This study found that stakeholders' commitment was also inadequate in local development affairs despite the efforts by government to improve stakeholders' commitment through participatory structures including IDP stakeholders' forums. Tsheola et al. (2014) argued that the legislative structures meant towards democrati-

zation of local services and developments have faltered over the past twenty years. As a result, participation of ordinary people and different social groups remains a serious challenge facing developmental local government in South Africa (Reddy and Govender 2013). Commitment and active participation of all relevant stakeholders, especially in integrated development planning and implementation processes is vital to the realization of basic service delivery and development at the local level.

Other challenges confronting the local government are addressing the needs and priorities of communities. The finding shows that communities are frustrated by the poor responsiveness of local authorities regarding services provision. Poor performance of local government as perceived by residents during post-apartheid era (Ramutsheli and van Rensburg 2015; Tsheola et al. 2014) has paved ways for citizens' engagement in violent service delivery protests in many areas of South Africa (Netswera and Kgalane 2014). The protests are mostly associated with dissatisfaction with municipal responsiveness. For instance, local communities are engaged mostly by giving their input during IDP gatherings, however they do not get adequate feedback from the local municipalities. In most cases there was a consultation to engage communities for the sake of compliance with policy and legislative requirements (Mautjana and Makombe 2014). This suggests that local municipalities should offer more opportunities to ordinary local people to identify and prioritize their own developmental needs.

The results of this study also show that municipalities are faced with inclusive stakeholders' participation challenge during the integrated development planning processes. In planning, preparation and designing process, there is inadequate stakeholders participation by relevant institutions, community groups, women and youth. This situation tends to undermine inclusive and broad based participation in local development affairs. In his study regarding the root causes of low-level participation in developing countries, Swapan (2016) noted that only few citizens have interest in participating in planning processes. He identified poor communication channels, ineffective information dissemination processes, and limited technological knowledge as factors linked to low level of local participation.

The local government can enhance community participation towards improving people's quality of life at grass root level given that certain critical conditions exist. These include autonomy of local government to exercise its power and functions, adequate institutional capacity, commitment from stakeholders, responsiveness to the citizen needs, and inclusive approach.

CONCLUSION

It was indicated that decentralization, particularly the devolution of power to the local sphere, promotes active participation of local communities in design and delivery of services and developmental infrastructures at grass root level. It was also argued that decentralization alone is not adequate to ensure genuine participation of citizen. Accordingly, certain conditions and factors should be considered to achieve effective decentralization and community participation within the local government structure. As stated in literature, contemporary debates on development are increasingly advocating more decentralized approaches where the local government, as part of state is tasked with designing and implementing local development in partnership with the local citizenry or communities.

In South Africa, since the democratic transformation, the government has developed one of the most comprehensive and institutionalized forms of decentralization. Enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic, and supported by various policies and legislations, decentralization has devolved administrative, fiscal, and some political powers to municipalities. This study pointed out that despite the decentralization, which has taken place through the formation and functioning of the CDM, it has not entirely led to effective, democratic, participatory and comprehensive citizen participation in the design and delivery of development in the municipality. There are various challenges and constraints, which should be considered in the context of CDM for promoting the ongoing effort to decentralize development and encourage community participation. These challenges and constraints include limited and delayed decision-making, weak institutional capacity, insufficient commitment of stakeholders, inadequate response to the local needs and priorities, and limited inclusion and involvement of local community in development processes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that municipalities should strengthen their relationships with stakeholders, especially with traditional leaders and administrators to enhance decisions over services and development. Stakeholders' commitment was low in taking forward the development agenda of local authorities. It is important for local municipalities to devise effective partnership strategies for improving collaboration among different stakeholders in the Integrated Development Planning (IDP) process. Municipalities should avoid raising expectation of people, promote active participation of special groups in IDP consultative meetings, promote sense of ownership of projects by ordinary people, and elucidate various stakeholders' roles and responsibilities including business sectors and community based organizations.

It is also recommended that the national and provincial governments should seriously consider embarking on a capacity development program, which entails building and capacitating community-based institutions, structures and networks and improving the methods, modalities and processes of their engagement with CDM. Municipal officials, councilors, CDWs and ward committee members should be equipped to effectively exercise their roles in services and development. Municipalities should assign appropriate skills to suitable positions and revise their strategies regarding attraction and retention of qualified and competent staff. Municipalities should also uphold accountability and transparency to enhance quality internal controls and efficient utilization of public finance.

This study further suggests that municipalities should promote inclusive approaches to enhance public participation. Members from ordinary communities and disadvantaged groups should attend strategy formulation stages of IDP. Consultation meetings should be done with a view to empower communities. Municipalities should frequently review the efficacy of existing public participation structures and mechanisms.

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