

American Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Research (AJHSSR)

e-ISSN :2378-703X

Volume-3, Issue-4, pp-91-96

www.ajhssr.com

Research Paper

Open Access

Social Organisation, Agency and Self-help: Opportunities, Challenges and Prospects for Community Development in Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT: *The paper interrogates community organisation, agency and self-help in the context of community development. The paper is informed by the interpretive paradigm and qualitative research design. Basing on self-help development projects in selected 10 wards of Madwiza rural area in Shamva district, Mashonaland Central Province of Zimbabwe, the central argument is that the self-help to community development is increasing due to failure of the government to provide for the citizens, economic meltdown leading to unprecedented levels of unemployment and poverty deepening. Core findings are that the initiatives are important as coping strategies and are supported by several factors within the area (collective existence, norms of reciprocity, agency, social capital, labour availability, road and transport network for transportation of produce and natural conditions among other key variables). Several critical challenges are affecting the effectiveness of community self-help groups and their agency to address development challenges experienced by their members. These include low financial base, savings and (re)investment, limited lucrative markets, shortage of technical expertise, non-ownership of trucks, and conflicts, attrition and disintegration. Capacity building, technical and financial support from multi-stakeholders are essential in improving the functioning and outcomes of the self-help initiatives.*

Keywords: Agency, Community development, Rural development, Self-help approach, social organisation

I. INTRODUCTION

Social organisation, agency and self-help are not new facets of societies. Historically, people in Zimbabwe have variedly organised socially and had agency to address challenges experienced by individuals and groups. Despite development being a fluid and contested concept, its achievement is a desirable goal and state at community, national, regional and international levels. In essence development projects are intended to address poverty (a common problem to human wellbeing). At national level, Zimbabwe introduced various policies guided by diverse ideological and epistemological standpoints. At international level, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), often referred to as the 2015-2030 development agenda, replaced the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The SDGs are a macro framework with development indicators and targets that member countries of the United Nations can use in crafting national development.

Rural development is a key theme in Africa, particularly given the relegation of the rural areas under colonial administration (Heldring and Robinson, 2018; Moyo and Chambati, 2013; Mandaza, 1986). Zimbabwe introduced diverse initiatives to address development problems emanating from colonial accumulation by dispossession, including urban biases in development. The post-colonial government of Zimbabwe introduced diverse initiatives, particularly in the early 1980s to enhance rural development (Scoones, 2013; Hebinck, 2011; Davies, 2008; Mandaza, 1986). The early 1980s phase is often presented as the golden era due to the success of most expansionist policies introduced by the colonial government. However, the achievements made in early phases of independence in most former colonies (in both rural and urban development), could not be sustained due to dwindling performance of the economies and the impact of structural adjustment programmes (Mkandawire and Soludo, 2003; Kanyenze, 2004).

Self-help development projects are part of community development and are often organised around self-help groups established by the communities hence the view that they are people's institutions. The self-help approach is an essential component of bottom-up approaches to development (Akpomovie, 2013); and are among the essential ways of improving rural development given a context of urban biased development under

the colonial administration. The development gap between the rural and urban areas 'emanated from neo-classical economic theories which presumed that investments can be concentrated in cities and that rural poverty will be ameliorated by trickle down of benefits from urban industrial growth' (Igboeli, 1992).

All approaches to development – micro or macro, have as their goal, reducing prevalence, levels and intensity of poverty. Poverty, like development is highly contested (variedly conceptualised, measured and tackled). The self- help approach to development is informed by that, individuals (in circumstances of poverty) have potential that can be unleashed to improve one's life circumstances; and that the poor may be powerless, voiceless and vulnerable to various vagaries that reduce wellbeing. Accordingly, bringing the 'poor' together increases and unleashes their agency to address their problems.

This paper takes a micro perspective to development processes by interrogating community agency, organisation and self-help in community development in Shamva district of Zimbabwe. The paper is anchored on the argument that community self organisation, agency and self-help are essential to community development. However, exogenous factors also influence community development. Accordingly, both the process by which the people in a community influence and acquire mastery of their lives and provisions by external stakeholders (government, NGOs, private sector, bilateral and multilateral institutions) are essential in development outcomes. Several scholars emphasise the importance of people's agency and self-help. For example, Babalola and Babalola (2004) argues that development comes through self-help and is not a package of benefits given to the people, but rather a process by which people of a country acquire greater mastery over their destiny.

II. STUDY APPROACH

Madziwa rural area is part of Shamva district in Mashonaland Central Province of Zimbabwe. Broadly, the district is divided into two – north and south. Madziwa is located in the northern segment of the district and 'houses' the Madziwa Township, the largest township in the district. Shamva town is the district 'capital'. Madziwa is connected to Harare and Mount Darwin through the Harare-Mount Darwin highway and to Shamva through the Harare-Madziwa-Shamva highway. Bindura lies to the south, Mount Darwin to the south, Shamva to the east and Matepatapa to the west. Madziwa is primarily a communal farming area.

The study approaches, designs, sampling, data collection methods, ethics of research and data analysis are key themes in the contributions of various scholars on social science research (Creswell, 2012; McGregor and Murname, 2010; Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007; Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Lincoln and Guba, 2000). Application of pragmatic paradigm was most appropriate due to the need for practical significance. The issues pertaining to social organisation, agency and self-help are mainly qualitative therefore a qualitative design was chosen. This design entailed the use of secondary and primary sources of data. This paper is not the first on how communities are socially organised, self-help initiatives and the agency exhibited by the members in a context of development problems. Scholarly and institutional publications were essential in setting the context and providing insights. All data sources have comparative weaknesses and strengths therefore the use of both sources was necessary.

Primary data collection was conducted through indepth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). Indepth interviews were conducted with purposively selected leaders of self-help associations/groups, community leaders (the village heads), village development committees (VIDCOs) and ward development committees (WADCOs). Purposively selected members of self-help associations and conveniently available community members participated in FGDs. The researcher observed ethics as prerequisites of appropriate social science research. These included but are not limited to informed consent, guaranteed choice and decision to terminate participation, avoidance off harm in its diversity, confidentiality, trustworthiness, responsible reporting and provision of feedback.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results and discussion are organised according to key themes. These include opportunities and prospects for community social organisation, self-help development projects and agency; and challenges to community social organisation, self-help development projects and agency.

3.1 Opportunities and Prospects for Community Social Organisation, Self-help Development Projects and Agency

Self-help development projects in Madziwa rural area and generally in other parts of Zimbabwe are diverse. Among other key factors, the self-help projects are determined by the development challenge(s) and the approach chosen to address these. The Madziwa case study reveals several crucial opportunities and prospects for community social organisation, self-help development projects and agency in the context of development challenges. A selection of these is presented in this section.

Community social organisation as an inbuilt part of culture and bottom-up approach to development

Social organisation, self-help and the agency to address challenges to wellbeing are part of everyday existence in the district. Historically, the people in the communities have organised and worked in groups to tackle challenges affecting individual households and communities (Akpomuvie, 2010). The tradition of collective wellbeing as synonymous for individual wellbeing is a quality of the community. Madziwa rural communities is crystallised around social organisation, associational life, reciprocity, collective conscience and common goal of improving the state of the community. This characteristic of community social organisation is not restricted to Madziwa community and Shamva district but is a feature of Zimbabwe's rural communities and most parts of Africa. However, threats to social organisation and cohesion (particularly political and economic), have over the years affected these crucial qualities of community development.

Notable projects which are vibrant in selected wards (11, 17, 27 and 29) due to the pursuit of collective/community wellbeing include road maintenance (off highway Madziwa Growth Point-Bradley, Nyamaruro-Bradley, Nyamaropa-Madziwa Growth Point and Kaziro-Madziwa Growth Point routes); borehole maintenance with technical assistance from the District Development Fund (DDF) in all wards; school construction (Bradley Primary school is a current project based on community initiatives); school maintenance (Mutumba, Nyarukunda, Nyamaropa, Kaziro primary and secondary schools and so on); afforestation and gully reclamation in various parts of Madziwa rural area. The community has agency in the context of a plethora of development challenges experienced in the area. Internal capacity is available and needs to be expanded. Sustainable development cannot take place from outside initiatives, but by the abilities and possibilities of the community (Chambers, 2019).

Through self-help initiatives, Madziwa rural community is re-establishing some broken values and practices of collective existence. Traditionally, the area had been closely knit and was marked by strong value systems of peace and working together. However, these have been affected by party politics, manipulation of the electorate into violence and politics of patronage by both the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) and MDC Alliance (MDC-A). Self-help initiatives in the area have both latent and manifest functions. Rebuilding values and practices of collective existence is a latent function of the self-help initiatives.

Community resources, natural conditions, initiatives and perspectives

The wards included in the study are generally endowed with ready availability of water (rivers, wells and boreholes) and relatively fertile soils (that can be complemented by fertilizer application). Agricultural self-help projects including Eben dam, Kamudyariwa, Chidavaenzi, Zvomuya and Kaziro are aided by easy availability of water for watering the plants. Village group-based tobacco production also falls within this category. Moreover, village-based tree production projects (for timber and fruits) are facilitated by water availability in off-summer seasons and easy-to-work soils. The trees require regular watering stable watering particularly in early phases and mostly after the summer season. The diverse initiatives in the area that are based on local resources, perspectives and effort are consonant with the view that sustainable development is possible with internal activities (and resources) rather than externally-driven and imposed initiatives. Tremendous potential that lies dormant in people can be unleashed for very productive ends through self-help initiatives and by building their capacity to utilise internal resources. Long (2001) emphasises the use of actor perspectives in pursuing and sustaining development. Emphasis on use of community resources to enhance the sustainability of development has been presented by many scholars in sustainable development segment (Chambers, 2019; Chambers and Conway, 1991).

Labour availability and pooling of material resources

The self-help projects rely on community labour and collective work. General labour is readily available in the community given that most able-bodied youth, men and women are available in most wards. Each household avails a member or members to contribute labour at scheduled times. However, allocating labour to household and group activities may be problematic in peak periods (summer) or when households have few members (those with members in urban areas or diaspora). Furthermore, the community self-help groups are pooling additional resources together to improve the performance of projects (financial, draught power, equipment and so on). These initiatives show that community self-help initiatives are important in mobilising social capital through active participation of 'poor' groups so that they can uplift themselves from conditions of poverty. This view is consonant to that by Ebong, Otu and Ogwumike (2013) who analysed self-help initiatives in Nigeria.

Unfortunately, this opportunity is not being complemented by the government due to national economic woes and fiscal deficits; and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) mainly do increasing reduction of these organisations after radicalism adopted by the Mugabe regime. This phase led to deregistration of many NGOs, implementation of the fast track land reform programme (FTLRP) and implementation of various indigenisation initiatives meant for black empowerment. However, radicalism had adverse effects on

Zimbabwe's international relations. The functionality of these initiatives in a context of no exogenous support shows that people in the area have agency, they have potential to address their development challenges and can tap on wide social capital within the community.

Availability of markets

Real and potential markets for agricultural self-help initiatives are available in and near Madziwa rural area. Agricultural markets are available in Bindura, Mount Darwin and Shamva towns. Boarding schools (Bradley and Chindunduma high schools) and technical and teachers' colleges (Chaminuka agricultural college and Madziwa Teachers' college), various shopping centres (for example, Madziwa Growth Point and community members). These can be tapped to enhance the market opportunities of agricultural self-help projects in the community. However, there are issues pertaining to these markets (as explained in the Challenges to Self-help Projects section). The importance of markets to the success of agriculture and rural development is captured by Muchetu (2017) who focused on markets post the Zimbabwe's Fast Track Land Reform Programme (FTLRP).

Road and transport network

The existence of sound road and transport networks in most parts of Madziwa rural area leverages self-help initiatives particularly those producing for markets. The Bindura-Mount Darwin and Madziwa-Shamva highways and several other minor roads that are in good condition are examples. Reliable transport mainly along the highway complements the road network. However, good road and transport network is not a characteristic of all wards. Some areas (parts of Nyamaropa, Chihuri and Mupfure) experience transport challenges. People in these areas are utilising ox-drawn transport (carts) to deliver produce to markets. They are not helpless in the context of roads and transport challenges. Such initiatives show that people, including the very poor have a tremendous, inbuilt, coping mechanism. The wisdom and strength of the people is their big asset and should be developed. External development players may overlook or undermines these community qualities leading to lack of sustainability of interventions.

3.2 Challenges to Community Social Organisation, Self-help development projects and Agency

Despite opportunities ushered by self-help development projects and agency of the members to improve their lives (social protection, social reproduction, social cohesion and accumulation), several challenges and failures are being experienced. In other contexts, Ebong *et al* (2013) and Akpomuvie (2010) explored the challenges experienced by self help groups in their quest for rural development.

Financial constraints

There was wider consensus in Madziwa that the success and sustainability of community self-help projects are limited by financial constraints. Internal sources (household contributions and profits) are meagre. These constraints are being experienced in a context where the government, donors, private sector and so on are not financially supporting community initiatives. Declining macro-economic performance has led to major inability of the government to fund rural development through national budget allocations. Success of the projects is out of the members' contributions and hard work.

Savings and (re)investment

Closely related to poor sources of finance and low profits are savings and (re)investment issues. The capital base and savings of the groups/associations are low. Lack of alternative income by most members implies that they depend more on the income generated from the projects. Income levels are generally low due to production and market constraints. Accordingly, savings and opportunities for investment and reinvestment are decline or are non-existent in such a context.

Lucrative markets

Most of the convenient markets (growth points, schools, colleges and community members) are not lucrative. Prices are low and cannot absorb the produce (in case of self-help initiatives pertaining to gardening and production of small-livestock – broilers, layers, road runner chickens, guinea fowls and rabbits). Garden produce is easily perishable and if it is not absorbed by the market, this implies loss. Marketing skills are also low.

Expert labour and research and technical support

Expert labour is essential in some projects (piggery and production of other livestock, and trees). Agritex officers are readily available in the wards but their mobility is limited by transport challenges in some

areas. Moreover, in the absence of these officers, the project members may lack the essential knowledge and skills leading to limited chances of success.

Own main transport

Approximately 80 percent of the group self-help groups do not have engine transport (for example trucks) and rely on hiring animal-drawn transport (carts) for transporting produce or inputs to or from areas in close proximity; or hiring trucks (transporting inputs from or produce to Bindura, Mount Darwin and Shamva). Bindura lies 42 kilometres; Mount Darwin is approximately 27 kilometres while Shamva is approximately 67 kilometres from Madziwa Township. These distances require use of better transport. Hiring of transport is expensive in the long-term.

People with disabilities

Participation of people with disability in self-help projects in Madziwa is low especially those with visual and mobility-related disabilities. Exploration of this gap brought out poverty, social construction of disability and exclusion or marginalisation. Most of the people with disabilities in the area are poor therefore, may not have income to contribute while in other instances contributing to hard labour requirements of some self-help initiatives may be problematic to the physically disadvantaged. Overall, the concern at macro level is the low participation and exclusion of people with disabilities from mainstream development. Munemo (2019) focuses on a plethora of challenges experienced by people with disabilities in Zimbabwe.

Conflicts, attrition and disintegration

Social cohesion is an essential component of how the self-help groups/associations are organised. However, conflict is also a characteristic of how members interact. As observed by key sociologists who focused on the functions of social conflict while working within the Marxist tradition (Coser, 1956; Dahrendorf, 1959; Collins, 1975), conflict and consensus are two facets of society, and that both may be essential. Societies are *janus* faced. Conflict and consensus characterise social relations in the self-help initiatives. Beyond functionality, some types of conflict have led to attrition of members and in extreme, disintegration and demise of self-help groups and associations. Most such conflicts emanate from sharing of income and real or perceived financial malpractice by the treasurers and leaders.

IV. CONCLUSION

Self-help projects of diverse focus and membership characterise rural Madziwa (and other parts of Zimbabwe). In the chosen study site (Madziwa rural area), self-help initiatives are a core economic activity meant to households' income complement income and food sources, and developing the community. Evidence from the field shows that, most of the self-help groups emerged in a context of economic hardships, low employment in rural areas and declining rural development efforts by the government and NGOs. Despite challenges, people in the area have the prerequisite social organisation and agency to prepare for and respond to development challenges. However, such advantages are hampered by poor performance of the economy, absence of crucial financial, expertise and material support, low performing markets and lack of skill.

A multi-stakeholder approach is essential in improving the stability, success and sustainability of self-help initiatives and their contribution to community development. Members of self-help groups in Madziwa concurred on the need for the government of Zimbabwe to provide legislation, funding and market opportunities that support the development, stability and success of self-help development initiatives. Financial resources and equipment can be sourced by the government through bilateral networks in addition to direct government spending from the fiscus. Finance institutions, particularly micro-credit institutions, are expected to avail financial resources at flexible interest rates to complement the members' savings. The members request corporates, small-scale business operators, non-governmental organisations, community-based organisations, churches and so on within Madziwa rural area and beyond to support their initiatives through provision of financial resources, agricultural equipment, trucks, markets and marketing skills; and various other forms of support within the scope of operation of these organisations.

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