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Effective Project Management for Sustainable Rural Development in Africa

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Abstract

There has been a shift in development focus to rural areas mainly due to the realization that rural areas can no longer be neglected given that rural and urban areas have become critically interdependent. Attendant to this has been the phenomenon of many development agencies increasingly turning to projects as a critical wheel upon which sustainable rural development can be realized. However, many projects that are meant for rural development do not succeed to fulfill this goal for which the projects are designed and implemented. This article is partly based on an empirical study that explored challenges of managing rural development projects with reference to 4 case studies that were conducted in Vihiga County of Kenya in 2016. This article takes a qualitative approach. Secondary data from various journal articles and research reports that were purposively selected were reviewed. Document review was the main data collection method while data analysis was done using content analysis. This article finds that largely, inherent challenges of conventional stakeholder-participation models, failure to apply project management principles and lack of project management skills inevitably curtails not only rural development projects; but also all other projects from fostering the much needed development for which the projects are planned and implemented. This article also finds that there is an alternative stakeholder-participation model as well as various approaches that can be applied to enhance effective management of rural projects. This article recommends that projects ought to be managed by professional project managers as a key variable of ensuring that value for investment in development projects is attained. The alternative recommendation is that all non-professional project managers should be trained on the basic skills, tools and techniques of project management.

Keywords: Project Management, Sustainable Rural Development, Participatory Development, Endogenous Development, Exogenous Development

Introduction

Rural areas are territories that lie outside the urban areas and are largely characterized by low population density, sparse settlements and agriculture as the major economic activity. On the other hand, rural development is the process of undertaking initiatives that are aimed at overall improvement of the quality of life of rural people (Nchuchuwe & Adejuwon, 2012). The desire to sustainably improve the standards of living in rural areas in many parts of the world is motivated by various factors key among them being poverty, overdependence on agriculture as the main economic activity, and the critical role that rural areas have come to assume socially and economically (Mwabu & Thorbecke, 2004). This is discussed later in this paper. Consequently, many nations and development agencies have prioritized rural development as one of the pillars of realizing various sustainable development goals (SDGs). Effective project management as the art or science of applying knowledge, skills, tools, and techniques to project activities to meet the project requirements (PMI, 2013); can therefore be viewed as one of the means by which the desired levels of sustainable rural development can be achieved.

Emerging Focus on Sustainable Rural Development

Sustainable rural development can be defined as the purposeful and sustained improvement in the well-being of rural people and their environment. The increasing focus on sustainable rural development by a multiplicity of development agencies is attributable to various factors as discussed hereafter.

Across the globe, there has been a deliberate effort to improve the welfare of over 75% of the world population who live in difficult conditions in rural areas (Anríquez & Stamoulis, 2007). This is supported by Nchuchuwe & Adejuwon (2012) who observe that the majority of poverty in Africa exists in rural communities and this calls for a program for sustainable development of these areas.

Another impetus for rural development is the need to stem rural underdevelopment. According to Nchuchuwe & Adejuwon (2012), most of the rural areas are underdeveloped, a situation that has become the main cause of rural poverty. This is the case for many parts of the world as it is for Africa where about 70% of Africans and about 80% of the continent's poor live in the rural areas and depend mainly on agriculture for their livelihood (Nchuchuwe & Adejuwon, 2012).

Agriculture in Sub-Saharan Africa comprises nearly one third of the continental gross domestic product and two thirds of employment, thereby making rural Africa a vital component in the overall economic development of the region (Donovan, 2013). In terms of overall income, agriculture is the main source of income for 90% of rural population in Africa (Nchuchuwe & Adejuwon, 2012), a situation that calls for diversification into and development of other sectors of the rural economy. Owing to this unique place that agriculture holds within the economy and for the rural population, sustainable rural development should entail the mounting of not only projects that are meant to boost agriculture, but also those that are meant to encourage the development of other sectors of the rural economy.

Africa which is the focus of this article, is the region with the most low-income countries, where most countries remain rural and agrarian, and where agricultural and rural development is seen as most problematic (Wiggins, 2016). At the same time, Wiggins (2016) notes that the need to make agriculture more environmentally sustainable as well as a

business has become more prominent, alongside the need to adapt to and mitigate climate change; thereby shifting development focus to the rural areas.

Other sectors that can be introduced or strengthened in order to develop rural areas may include manufacturing, tourism, mining, fishery, small and medium size enterprises, cottage industry, among others.

The renewed interest in the development of rural areas can also be attributed to the realization that rural areas can no longer be neglected given that rural and urban areas are interdependent and do not evolve separately; and besides, rural areas also fulfill functions that are now critically essential to the lifestyles of the urbanized sections of the population (Leon, 2005). For instance, most of the food that sustains urban areas today is grown in the rural areas (Tacoli, 2003). Rural areas also provide scenic recreational sites for the urban dwellers.

Renewed interest in the development of rural areas has also arisen due to a steady decline in farming as well as the opening up of rural areas to new activities like rural tourism which in turn require structural developments (Leon, 2005). There has also been neglect of rural areas for a long time characterized by the absence of infrastructures like water, electricity supply and motor-able roads (Nchuchuwe & Adejuwon, 2012); as well as general underdevelopment of the rural areas (Mwabu & Thorbecke, 2004).

According to Mwabu & Thorbecke (2004), the harsh living conditions in the rural areas are a push factor for people to migrate into the urban areas and this can be avoided by developing the rural areas. Such rural-urban migration has been known to lead to urban poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa. Mwabu & Thorbecke (2004) thus submit that rural development would not only reduce rural poverty, but would also reduce rural-urban migration as well as urban poverty by making the rural areas attractive to the rural dwellers.

Resurgence of interest in the development of rural areas is also attributable to their importance. This is supported in literature by Leon (2005) who observes that changes in rural and urban areas are intertwined and that rural areas fulfill functions that are now essential to the lifestyles of the urbanized section of the population. An example of this interdependence has been given by Tacoli (2003) who says that flows of agricultural and other commodities from rural based producers to urban markets, both for local consumption as well as for forwarding to regional, national and international markets; and conversely, flows of manufactured and imported goods from urban centres to rural settlements are interdependent.

Therefore, there is ground to conclude that rural areas have become critical to the development of not only the urban areas, but of the entire society as well. Moreover, since many poor people in urban centers are migrant workers and farmers who have left rural areas, if living standards and income generation in rural areas are enhanced and rural immigrants to urban centers return to rural areas, it is hoped that excessive population influxes to urban areas can easily be reduced, with the attendant effect of lowering poverty in the urban centers. This position has been underscored by World Bank (2001) that improvement of rural areas can be a safety net when there is a lack of job opportunities in cities due to depressed economic conditions. It is against the foregoing backdrop that there has been a global effort to develop rural areas via rural development projects.

The Problem

Confronted by the foregoing realities, many African Nations have initiated rural development projects – and programs – as one of the ways to realize rural economic development in particular and economic development in general. As a result of these initiatives by African Nations and other development actors, a multiplicity of rural development projects has been witnessed across the entire African continent. For instance, many countries in Africa including Ghana, Malawi and Tanzania have initiated small-scale irrigation development projects; about which Sakaki and Koga (2013) observe that the projects are important as a way of increasing agricultural development, that helps to reduce poverty and ensure food security in rural areas of Sub-Saharan Africa where the majority of the poor live.

In Southern Africa, non-governmental organizations are actively promoting unique small-scale agricultural projects as examples of best practice for rural food security; three of which Leahy and Goforth (2014) have examined. In Ghana, Badu, Owusu-Manu, Edwards, Adesi and Lichtenstein (2013) have examined the initiatives that have been made to improve rural infrastructure and the challenges that must be overcome in this process. They have consequently suggested ways of addressing these challenges including giving incentives to all the stakeholders in this sector.

In Kenya, the Economic Stimulus Program (ESP) that was implemented in the year 2009 was one of the ways by which the government of Kenya sought to spur rural development (GoK, 2009). Indeed, one of the objectives of the ESP was to expand economic opportunities in rural areas for employment creation. One of the flagship projects that were designed to attain this objective was the construction of market stalls in the rural areas of all the 210 constituencies in Kenya then.

Nevertheless, the increasing number of rural development projects has not been matched with equal project success. Indeed, based on a study of four rural development projects in Vihiga County of Kenya, Muronga (2019) has elaborately discussed some of the challenges that continue to stifle such projects. This study is thus motivated by the need to explain why many rural development projects fail and the possible ways of alleviating this enormous failure where in Nigeria alone, 11,886 federal government projects (including rural projects) were abandoned from 1971 to 2011 (Chima, 2017).

Gap in Literature

The reviewed literature details the vitality of the rural areas not only to urban areas but also to general development. The reviewed literature also discusses various challenges that are bedeviling rural areas in Africa including poverty, overreliance on agriculture for income, decline in income from farming, and underdevelopment. The literature goes a step further to suggest ways by which the challenges can be addressed. Nevertheless, although the reviewed literature seeks to suggest ways of alleviating challenges that are facing rural Africa, none of them has considered the importance of prudent project management as one of the options; given that there are hundreds of thousands of projects that are geared towards pulling rural Africa out of poverty and underdevelopment. This is why this article is dedicated to this subject of effective project management for sustainable development of rural Africa.

Research Objectives

This study was guided by the following objectives:

- i. To explore challenges of managing rural development projects.

- ii. To examine strategies of enhancing effective management of rural projects.

Methodology

This article is a result of a study that relied on qualitative data collection, analysis and presentation techniques.

Data Collection

This article is based on study that relied largely on empirical literature. Document review was used to collect data that was used to arrive at the findings as detailed in this article. The documentary sources of data that were used in this paper included books, journal articles, websites, and research reports. Sampling was purposively done to get the various relevant documents that were reviewed. The main tool for data collection was the document review checklist that was used to ensure that all the relevant documents were reviewed.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using content analysis technique. In content analysis, two strategies were applied namely thematic networks analysis and discovering of patterns. The technique of thematic networks analysis was used to identify various themes that addressed the study objective; where various themes from the documents that were collected were identified for the purpose of this paper. The identified themes were organized using the thematic networks tool. Themes that emerged from the data were then synthesized to discover patterns (conclusions) that constituted the findings of this study.

Findings

One of the major findings of this article relates to the existence of many challenges of managing rural development projects. Specific challenges that arise from stakeholder-participation models that are applied in projects as well as general challenges of project management have been discussed. The other major findings of this study are about ways of managing rural development projects for sustainable rural development. A new stakeholder-participation model that was developed by Muronga (2019) has also been suggested as a means of responding to the shortcomings of the conventional models of stakeholder participation in the management of projects.

Challenges that Arise from Stakeholder-participation Models

This article finds that there is a myriad of project management challenges that individually and collectively undermine the success of many rural development projects. Some of these challenges have been considered here.

Challenges Related to the Top-down Stakeholder-participation Model

This article finds that the type of stakeholder-participation models and the manner in which they are applied in the implementation of rural development projects determine the level of success of the subject projects. This is based on empirical findings. In a study conducted by Muronga (2019) to explore the role of various stakeholder-participation models in the implementation of selected rural market stalls projects in Vihiga County of Kenya; he concluded that the top-down stakeholder-participation model that was applied served to hinder project success and eventually led to the stalling of the four projects that were being

implemented. Using a multiple case study design, Muronga (2019) studied Jeptul, Chavakali, Majengo and Wemilabi rural market stalls projects in Vihiga County.

One of the findings of Muronga's (2019) study was that although the projects were managed using the top-down, bottom-up, contractual and collaborative stakeholder-participation models, it turned out that the top-down model was the one that largely negatively affected the projects and eventually led to their stalling. This conclusion was arrived at based on several findings as detailed hereafter.

Muronga (2019) acknowledges that the top-down stakeholder-participation model had merits for the projects for it ensured that they were fully funded by the sponsor besides the availing of space and technical team for the projects. However, for the demerits, Muronga (2019) established that the prospective vendors for the market stalls were not engaged during the top-down project planning and implementation and their needs were not taken into account. As a result, the prospective market stalls vendors shunned the four projects and insisted that they were not going to accept to occupy them in the state in which they were at the time of the study in 2016. Echoing Reed (2008); Muronga (2019) thus concluded that the alienation of key stakeholders in this project pointed to the project team's failure to observe expert opinion which holds that by incorporating local interests and knowledge and even other material resources, policy solutions may be better adapted to local conditions thereby improving the results of any development endeavor.

The monitoring of the four market stalls projects was another aspect in which some of the key stakeholders (local political and administrative leaders, prospective market stalls vendors, and project workers) were not involved. Monitoring is the process of overseeing the project to ensure that input deliveries, work schedules, target outputs and other required actions proceed according to the project plan (Nyonje, Ndunge, & Mulwa, 2012). Muronga (2019) established that the non-involvement of some of the key stakeholders in the monitoring of the four projects was mainly attributed to the top-down approach that was applied in these projects in which the project team mistakenly did not find it necessary to involve all the stakeholders in the monitoring of the projects. This diminished the chances of the excluded stakeholders to advance their interests in the subject projects.

Generally, Muronga (2019) found out that across the four projects, the top-down stakeholder-participation model led to the following: Non-attainment of project scope, project delays that were caused by the client or by additional project activities that arose from non-inclusive planning by the client, escalation of project cost arising from the said delays and extra project activities, and eventual lowering of the quality of the project structures as a way by which the project contractors sought to mitigate the rising project cost.

The combined consequence of these shortcomings on the projects was that Jeptul, Chavakali, Majengo and Wemilabi market stalls projects eventually stalled and that was the state in which they were at the time of Muronga's (2019) study that was conducted between April and May of 2016. This meant that the life-cycle scope of the projects had not been attained. The projects had thus not progressed from implementation to the termination phase of the cycle.

In a nutshell, this article concludes that although the top-down stakeholder-participation model had common positive and negative roles across the four projects; negatively, the top-down model contributed to the stalling of the projects and consequently turned them into failed projects.

Other than Muronga (2019), Dadvar-Khani (2012) studied the rural tourism project in Kan area of Tehran (Iran) with the purpose of examining the Kan area rural community's

participation in, and attitudes towards implementation of the rural tourism project. According to Dadvar-Khani (2012), the main findings were that the government of Iran used the top-down planning model for the rural tourism project which limited meaningful community participation in the implementation of the rural tourism project in the Kan villages; eventually alienating the rural communities from the project.

Similar findings were made by Tseng and Penning-Rowsell (2012) who studied barriers to stakeholder engagement in flood risk management in the Shuanghsi River basin of Taiwan. Tseng and Penning-Rowsell (2012) found out that in this project that applied a top-down participation model, the local residents were mainly involved much later during project implementation and this diminished the value of the project to the beneficiaries.

On the basis of the foregoing, this paper finds that top-down stakeholder-participation alienates beneficiaries from the projects and leads to dismal performance of the subject projects. This resonates with Muronga, Nyonje and Ndunge (2017) whose study found out that one of the biggest disadvantages of the top-down approach to stakeholder participation in projects is that it contributes to lack of ownership of projects by local communities, yet the model does not have a remedy. Nonetheless, based on the positive influence of the top-down model in projects, it should be noted that not all projects that adopt top-down stakeholder-participation completely fail because any top-down stakeholder-participation initiative that meaningfully engages all stakeholders will definitely attain some degree of success.

Challenges that Relate to the Bottom-up Stakeholder Participation Model

This study found that the bottom-up model – just like the top-down model – has limitations that diminish project outputs as established by Smith (2008) and Boon *et al.* (2012); and for which the model does not have a remedy. The bottom-up stakeholder participation model lays emphasis on decisions that stem from the lowest level of stakeholders, and all the other stakeholders come in to provide the support that is required to accomplish these decisions. This model is predicated on the assumption that local communities are cohesive and can easily organize themselves to champion and undertake initiatives that are meant to improve their way of life; and have resources to do so (Smith, 2008). Having studied the bottom-up approach in the Punjab Rural Water Supply Project in Pakistan, Smith (2008) established that the Punjab Rural Water Supply Project was the first bottom-up participatory water management project in Punjab Province, in which the design and construction of wells and water supply distribution systems were completed according to local community input. Although this approach brought many successes to the project, it had its limitations. According to Smith (2008), such limitations included but were not limited to tokenism, the assumption that communities were cohesive and would smoothly execute the project, and the critical lack of facilitator knowledge about community participation by those charged with the responsibility for its facilitation. These turned out to be major challenges that delayed project implementation.

Other than Smith (2008), Boon *et al.* (2012) have demonstrated in their study that the multiplicity of stakeholders in the bottom-up approach creates conflicts among them thereby making project management and progress difficult. In the same vein, Muronga, Nyonje and Ndunge (2017) observe that although the bottom-up stakeholder participation model is sensitive to the critical role of the grassroots people in a project; the model appears to lack capacity to address many of its challenges that may impede stakeholders from effectively and efficiently taking part in the project. Therefore, the assumption that the bottom-up model is the best and has the capacity to address the limitations of the top-down model – let alone its

own limitations - is not realistic. Many projects still fail or face major challenges even when they are applying the bottom-up stakeholder participation model.

Challenges that Relate to the Collaborative Stakeholder-participation Model

This model emphasizes the sharing of decision-making power among different stakeholders in a project and in this case, all stakeholders are considered to be equally important and are linked through sharing knowledge about various aspects of the project. According to Scott (2015), collaboration in project management has been shown to not only enhance cooperation and foster belief change among stakeholders; it is also credited for generating funds and support for alternative policy measures when problems are too diffuse or difficult to address through regulation. It also increases the implementation success of policies and programs. Heravi *et al.* (2015) observe that improving effective stakeholder involvement will not only help project stakeholders to efficiently collaborate with each other, it will also play the role of facilitating the possibility of a decrease in negative environmental impacts and increasing the economic sustainability and quality of the project.

Nonetheless, as Boon *et al.* (2013) observe, the collaborative model is not problem-free and that the biggest pitfall in this model is that the coming together of many stakeholders often comes with conflicts which may be quite debilitating to the project. Moreover, the collaborative model does not have an inbuilt mechanism of addressing this limitation. This is corroborated by Berardo, Heikkila and Gerlak (2014) who caution that the performance and effectiveness of collaboratives is tied to their ability to ensure a process of engagement or regular dialogue and discussion among diverse actors. Based on the foregoing, this article finds that this model can be problematic in situations where project stakeholders become conflict ridden, a situation that makes it difficult for the project to progress.

Challenges that Relate to the Contractual Stakeholder-participation Model

According to Muronga, Nyonje, Onguko and Kyalo (2016), the contractual stakeholder-participation model is one in which an influential stakeholder who is regarded as the project owner or manager has sole decision-making power; and other stakeholders participate in activities defined by this main stakeholder in the sense of being formally or informally contracted to provide goods, services and other kinds of support to the project. In their study of flood risk management projects in England and Wales, Geaves and Penning-Rowell (2014) found that stakeholders were engaged in contractual as well as collaborative participation while undertaking these projects which helped to enhance productivity of the project.

Just like for other stakeholder-participation models, the contractual model has its own limitations. According to Muronga (2019), one of the limitations of the contractual model on the Jeptul, Chavakali, Majengo and Wemilabi Projects was that it aided the client to delay all the four projects and this escalated project cost without the client being made to bear any responsibility or penalties because the contract did not provide for such remedies to the contractors. The contract also made it easy for the client to pass over extra project cost to the contractors regardless of who caused the extra costs. Muronga (2019) thus concluded that by design, the contracts were skewed in favor of the client who in this case was a government agency in the name of the then Ministry of Local Government of Kenya.

The foregoing is a testimony that stakeholder-participation models can indeed become a major challenge to project planning and implementation depending on how they

are applied. For the four rural market stalls projects in Vihiga County, the models played a major negative role that led to their stalling.

Other Challenges of Rural Development Projects

This article reviewed various studies on challenges that face rural projects and some of the findings have been addressed here. Having explored the practical strategies and challenges that characterized the implementation of an evaluation of a community-based abstinence project in Polk County rural community in Arkansas (USA), Stauss *et al.* (2012) found out – like Dye *et al.* (2011); Tseng and Penning-Rowsell (2012) - that the geographical dispersion of settlements in the community posed challenges to communication between the project staff and the other rural-based stakeholders. Stauss *et al.* (2012) also reported lack of trust by stakeholders in the project staff owing to the fact that many of the project staff were strangers to the rural stakeholders. There were also challenges related to high levels of poverty, conservative political and social views, and lack of critical information at the grassroots level. Other than that, language barrier was found to be a big challenge as some of the stakeholders spoke only Spanish, yet the common medium was English.

In their study, Gbadegesin and Olorunfemi (2011) set out to explore the extent to which stakeholders were willing and able to adopt and implement sustainable, cost-effective and environment friendly management options for water resources in selected rural areas of Oyo state, Nigeria. They established that local people still made use of indigenous technical knowledge of water management which were cumbersome, time consuming and prone to health risks. Moreover, they found that many people were poor and could not afford modern technology in water management like installation of underground tanks. There was also lack of regular electricity supply to power the machines besides lack of enough technicians to service them.

Other than the foregoing, challenges that relate to poor project planning and implementation (PMI, 2013) also negatively affects implementation of rural projects. These include but are not limited to poor project planning in the domains of definition of objectives, scope, timelines, financial resources, human resources, quality specifications, stakeholders and stakeholder management, change management, and project cycle management. In some cases, projects are normally characterized by total lack of project planning that leads to poor implementation, and this often results out of lack of qualified project managers.

Poor or lack of project monitoring and control has also led to project failure (Nyonje, Kyalo, & Mulwa, 2012). Project monitoring is the regular collection and analysis of data to assist in timely decision making about the project progress and to provide the basis for evaluation. On the other hand, project control is a project management function that involves comparing actual performance with planned performance and taking appropriate corrective action - or directing others to take this action – in order to gain the desired outcome in the project. Poor project planning, implementation, monitoring and control are closely linked to general problem of lack of skills in project management.

Many projects have been adversely affected by lack of funds. In Africa, a big percentage of projects is aid dependent (Awojobi, 2014). A change in foreign policy of the countries involved has in some cases in the past led to cancellation of the aid facility leading to project collapse. In other cases, due to the high levels of poverty at both individual and national levels, projects are often poorly resourced leading to numerous project stoppages and even total stalling.

Corruption is endemic in some of the African nations, and the problem is so acute that projects in such nations have become an avenue of siphoning project resources for individual person's gain. Awojobi (2014) found that although Africa is endowed with abundant natural resources and it has further attracted development aid from the rich nations of the world, the continent remains undeveloped partly due to corruption. For Kenya, Hope Sr. (2014) observes that corruption persists in Kenya primarily because there are people in power who benefit from it and the existing governance institutions lack both the will and capacity to stop them from doing so.

In summary, this article finds that there are fundamental challenges that limit rural projects from realizing their objectives as expressed by Stauss *et al.* (2012) and St. Lawrence and Ndiaye (1997); who summarize that rural communities in particular have unique challenges related to infrastructure, social and economic contexts. These are the among the many challenges that dwarf rural development projects and which ought to be analyzed, understood and addressed in order to improve the performance of projects.

Enhancing Effective Project Management in Rural Areas

The foregoing challenges that are associated with rural development projects can be adequately addressed by adopting various strategies including adherence to principles of project management, and the application of various other approaches that support effective project management. These have been discussed in this section.

Principles of Project Management

Managers of rural development projects can improve the outputs of such projects if they apply the established basic principles of project management, which include strategic leadership. Strategic leadership is about the ability to influence stakeholders and rally their support towards the realization of the organization's strategic goals and mission (Pearce & Robinson, 2015). Another principle calls for mandatory project planning which is the process of defining, preparing, and coordinating all subsidiary project plans and subsequently integrating them into a comprehensive project management plan (PMI, 2013). Moreover, all projects ought to manage project scope. Scope management in projects includes the activities and processes required to ensure that the project encompasses all the work required to complete the project successfully. Some of the key elements of scope management include scope definition, scope planning, scope verification and scope control. Scope creep - the gradual expansion of the original project scope while implementation is underway - is one of the major challenges of scope management which should not be allowed to occur in a project.

A project should also operate on the basis of effective time management which consists of activity definition, activity sequencing, activity resource estimating, activity duration estimating, schedule development, schedule implementation, and schedule control (PMI, 2013). Careful project cost management is also key to project success. It refers to the undertaking of the processes that are involved in planning, estimating, budgeting, financing, funding, monitoring, and controlling costs so that the project can be completed within the approved budget (PMI, 2013). Successful project management is further enhanced by proper project procurement management which consists of procurement planning, solicitation planning, solicitation, source selection, contract administration and contract closeout (Burke, 2003).

Quality can be defined as the degree to which the inherent characteristics of products fulfil the (customer) requirements. The PMI (2013) directs that for any project to be

successful, it has to manage quality carefully by undertaking the processes of planning for quality management, performing quality assurance, and controlling quality of activities, processes and products. Besides that, it is important to prudently manage project human resources in order to make the most effective use of the people that are involved with the project; and this consists of organisation planning, staff acquisition and team development (Burke, 2004). Project communications management can be viewed as the main software upon which project activities and processes proceed. It is a key principle of project management and it consists of project communications planning, information generation and distribution, information storage and retrieval, and performance reporting.

Project risks as uncertain events or conditions that are capable of having a positive or negative effect on a business or organization have to be cautiously managed. It is recommended by PMI (2013) that all projects must integrate risk management in order to succeed because risks are always present in any project. Other principles of project management include prudent stakeholder management (Caux Round Table for Moral Capitalism, 2018), effective project monitoring and control, as well as adopting change management. About change management, the theory of change requires that every project manager has to put in place a system that enables the project team to easily manage change in order to realize a successful project (Anheier, 2005). Another principle is project integration management that requires project managers to address all the five project process groups of the project management as follows: Initiating, planning, execution, monitoring and control, and project termination. Last but not least, top management commitment should be ensured, since it is an aspect about whose absence many projects fail.

Approaches to Successful Project Management

Several useful approaches to project management exist, and where appropriately applied, successful projects will always be attained. Some of them are considered hereafter and implementers of rural projects need to take advantage of them.

Endogenous Development

Endogenous development is an approach of development that is characterized by three main aspects: The use of resources available within the territory, local control of the development process, and retention of profits in the local area (Guinjoan, Badia & Tulla, 2016). This is unlike exogenous development that lays emphasis on developing the country by use of imported capital, technology and human resources where external agencies play a critical role. The focus and benefits of endogenous development are based on the hypothesis that each territory has its own economic, social, technological, institutional, infrastructural, environmental and cultural resources that comprise its development potential (Hernando, 2007). Endogenous development is thus focused on empowering the local people. According to Woods (2011), this model of development has brought with it three major changes when viewed against the previous exogenous model: It has shifted attention toward the territory's own resources, converted local communities into the protagonists of development efforts, and allowed integrated development at the territorial level. The major challenge to this approach would be insufficient or absence of resources in the area under focus. This is why a careful balance between endogenous and exogenous approaches to rural development would yield better project outcomes.

The 'Web model' of Rural Development

The 'rural web' theoretical model is a new approach to rural development. It holds that rural development can best be achieved by bringing together all the relevant players, resources, activities, processes and contexts that form a web-like system that can be referred to as the 'rural web' (Guinjoa *et al.*, 2016). In their view, 'rural web' can be defined as a constellation of individuals, resources, activities, processes and contexts that encounter each other and interact in a territory. From that point, rural development should be viewed as a continuous process of unfolding or revitalization of a local 'rural web'. According to Guinjoan *et al.* (2016), from a conceptual point of view, a 'rural web' has six theoretical dimensions that can combat agricultural decline and improve the quality of life in rural areas. These dimensions are endogeneity, novelty production, sustainability, social capital, new institutional frameworks and market governance; and the interrelationships that are established between these dimensions are fundamental to the strength of the 'rural web' of a territory and, in the end, to its development. Therefore, the central hypothesis guiding this model is that when a territory's 'rural web' is broad and functioning well, it translates into a more competitive local economy and better quality of life for its population.

This article is in support of the need to apply the 'rural web' model in rural projects from the perspective that it considers the totality of all players, resources, activities and contexts necessary for rural development as being critical ingredients.

Conservation of the Natural Environment

Most of the rural development projects depend on the natural environment for their success. For this matter, sustainable development of rural projects demands that the rural dwellers should be empowered to take charge of conservation of their own environment. This is based on the fact that rural people are the main users of natural resources and this makes them become the key persons for the conservation and sustainable use of the natural environment and its inherent resources.

Adopting Green Infrastructure Initiatives

Green infrastructure involves the use of vegetation, soils, and natural processes to manage water and create healthier environments (Baró, 2016). Since all projects depend heavily on the natural environment, sustainable projects will be achieved when as much of green infrastructure as possible is adopted into development projects. Even for projects that are generally grey oriented, creative ways of infusing green infrastructure into grey infrastructure can be devised.

Participatory Rural Development

This article finds that people participation - or more specifically, stakeholder participation - is an approach in project management when if well applied, can enhance success in rural development projects. Stakeholder participation in project design, planning and implementation is increasingly gaining importance owing to its merits which include enhancing efficient management of resources, promotion of democratic values, and the fostering of sustainable development (Boon *et al.*, 2013). Muronga (2019) recommends that there is need to empower stakeholders as well as increasing their role in project management as a way of improving project performance.

Adoption of an Alternative Stakeholder-participation Model

Earlier in this article, the pitfalls of using some of the conventional stakeholder-participation models have been discussed with illustrations from Muronga's (2019) study of Jeptul, Chavakali, Majengo and Wemilabi rural market stalls projects in Vihiga County of Kenya. Findings of Muronga (2019) bear similarities with Smith (2008) and Tseng and Penning-Rowell (2012) who found that there is evidence that indeed, all conventional stakeholder-participation models lack capacity to efficiently deliver successful projects. These models include the top-down, contractual, consultative, bottom-up, collaborative, quadripartite project participation and collegiate stakeholder-participation models. Thus, there is need to build the capacity of all project stakeholders as well as stakeholder-participation models as a means of bolstering them to aid in the delivery of successful projects.

Based on this need, Muronga (2019) has developed and suggested an alternative model of stakeholder-participation called the capacity building stakeholder-participation (CBSP) model which offers an opportunity for improving stakeholder participation in a project. According to Muronga (2019), this model is versatile because it can be used independently or together with the other conventional stakeholder-participation models including top-down, bottom-up, contractual, collaborative and consultative models. A graphic representation of the capacity building stakeholder-participation model is shown in figure 1.

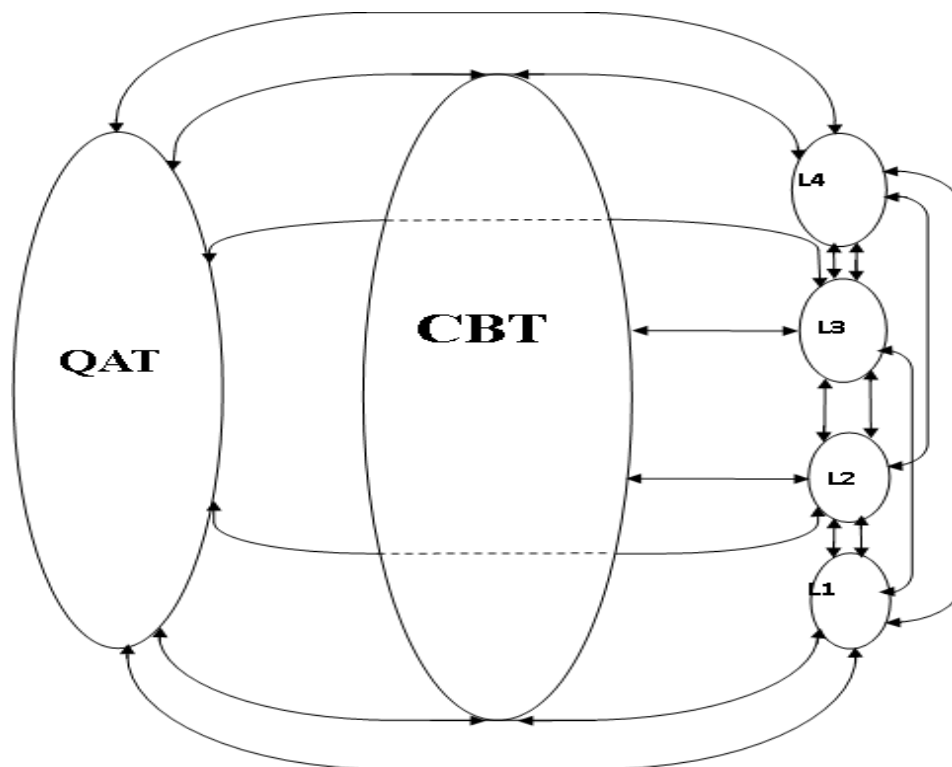


Figure 1: Capacity building stakeholder participation model (Muronga, 2019)

Key:

- L1** - Level 1 Stakeholders
- L2** - Level 2 Stakeholders
- L3** - Level 3 Stakeholders
- L4** - Level 4 Stakeholders
- CBT** - Capacity Building Team
- QAT** - Quality Assurance Team

According to Muronga (2019), in the CBSP model, various groups of stakeholders have to be identified and ranked according to their status and influence in society, giving rise to as many levels of stakeholders as possible. These stakeholders have to be empowered to interact freely amongst themselves as shown by the arrows. The arrows show that in this model, each group of stakeholders has the opportunity to contact or interact with any other group when there is need to do so. This helps to break communication barriers between the various stakeholders. This model also provides for a capacity building team (CBT) that is charged with the responsibility of enabling the various stakeholders to perform their functions by providing information, guidance, material resources, training, translation services, moral support and any other capacity building support. The model also provides for a quality assurance team (QAT) that should ensure that high quality project outputs are realized, thereby minimizing the use of resources on deliverables that do not meet project quality requirements. This model can be of more benefit for rural projects where majority of stakeholders have no capacity to gainfully participate in development projects. This model helps to build this stakeholder capacity.

This article is in support of Muronga's (2019) recommendation that once a project manager opts to apply this model, then the model should be fully applied as described above. Otherwise, the desired results will not be achieved.

Conclusion

Challenges that relate to inappropriate application of stakeholder-participation models – top-down, bottom-up, collaborative and contractual – are emerging to be a major impediment to the management of rural development projects. Other prominent challenges to rural projects include the geographical dispersion of settlements, lack of trust by stakeholders in the project staff, high levels of poverty, conservative political and social views, lack of critical information at the grassroots level, language barrier, poor project management, lack of funds and corruption. These challenges have to be carefully managed in order to deliver planned project outcomes.

Effective project management is not a walk in the park. It requires specialized knowledge, tools, techniques and approaches so as to be able to resolve the aforementioned challenges. It thus calls upon project sponsors to engage professional project managers as one of the critical aspects of undertaking a project. Since rural environments have unique orientations; the techniques and approaches that are best suited for rural projects should be adopted – as discussed in this article – for optimum results. In so doing, sustainable rural projects can then become critical building blocks for sustainable rural development.

Adherence to principles of project management, and the application of various other approaches that support effective project management (endogenous development, the 'web model' of rural development, conservation of the natural environment, adopting green infrastructure initiatives, and embracing participatory rural development); is a guarantee to improved project management and performance.

Significance of this Research

Rural development in Africa is a key plank in the overall development of the continent. Since there are many projects that development agencies are implementing with a view to enhancing rural development in Africa - most of which have actually failed or are facing major challenges - it is prudent to understand what effective management of rural

projects should entail. Consequently, this study serves to expand the horizon of literature that is available especially on the approaches that can be relied upon to improve the performance of rural development projects.`

At the level of application, development agencies will find this study to be useful for it forms the basis upon which policy can be formulated or revised. Such policy should include aspects that make the planning and implementation of all projects to be inclusive of all the stakeholders as the best way of harnessing all stakeholder views and interests, fostering teamwork and minimizing disputes about the projects.

This study also discusses major challenges facing rural development projects and proposes practical approaches that guarantee improved project management and performance; which all actors in rural development should adopt. These approaches are endogenous development, the 'web model' of rural development, conservation of the natural environment, adopting green infrastructure initiatives, and embracing participatory rural development. Although a case has been argued (Guinjoan, Badia & Tulla, 2016; Hernando, 2007; Woods, 2011) for promotion of endogenous approach to rural development, this study holds that a careful balance between endogenous and exogenous approaches to rural development would yield better project outcomes.

An alternative model of stakeholder-participation called the capacity building stakeholder-participation (CBSP) model which offers an opportunity for improving stakeholder participation in projects has been presented. This model has the potential to improve project management since it provides for a capacity building team (CBT), quality assurance team (QAT) and flexible interaction between stakeholders. Thus, the new model offers an opportunity to improve project management and project outcomes.

Recommendations

All actors in rural development projects should seek to analyze and understand all the challenges that curtail planning and implementation of their projects, in order to devise ways of resolving them for effective management of the projects. Likewise, approaches that guarantee improved project management and performance should be adopted. These approaches include but are not limited to endogenous development, the 'web model' of rural development, conservation of the natural environment, adopting green infrastructure initiatives, and embracing participatory rural development.

This article recommends that project sponsors should engage professional project managers who should apply appropriate skills, tools and principles; in order to gain value for resources that they invest in rural projects. Where there is a shortage of such skills, those who are hired to perform project management tasks should continuously receive relevant training. Together with that, tools, techniques and approaches that are best suited for rural projects should be adopted because of the unique nature of rural environments.

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