



## Assessing participatory practices in community-based natural resource management: Experiences in community engagement from southern Africa



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### ABSTRACT

The emphasis on participatory environmental management within international development has started to overcome critiques of traditional exclusionary environmental policy, aligning with shifts towards decentralisation and community empowerment. However, questions are raised regarding the extent to which participation in project design and implementation is meaningful and really engages communities in the process. Calls have been made for further local-level (project and community-scale) research to identify practices that can increase the likelihood of meaningful community engagement within externally initiated projects. This paper presents data from three community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) project case studies from southern Africa, which promote Joint Forest Management (JFM), tree planting for carbon and conservation agriculture. Data collection was carried out through semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, community-level meetings, focus groups and interviews. We find that an important first step for a meaningful community engagement process is to define 'community' in an open and participatory manner. Two-way communication at all stages of the community engagement process is shown to be critical, and charismatic leadership based on mutual respect and clarity of roles and responsibilities is vital to improve the likelihood of participants developing understanding of project aims and philosophy. This can lead to successful project outcomes through community ownership of the project goals and empowerment in project implementation. Specific engagement methods are found to be less important than the contextual and environmental factors associated with each project, but consideration should be given to identifying appropriate methods to ensure community representation. Our findings extend current thinking on the evaluation of participation by making explicit links between the community engagement process and project outcomes, and by identifying further criteria that can be considered in process and outcome-based evaluations. We highlight good practices for future CBNRM projects which can be used by project designers and initiators to further the likelihood of successful project outcomes.

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### 1. Introduction

The emphasis on participatory approaches to environmental management and development more broadly has increased, alongside decentralisation discourses and a rejection of more

traditional top-down, centralised, exclusionary approaches to natural resource management (e.g. Kapoor, 2001; Kumasi et al., 2010; Hulme and Murphree, 1999). The aims of participatory environmental management align with the co-generation of conservation and sustainable development outcomes, enabled through local actions, as emphasised by the Brundtland Report (1987), Agenda 21 (Hutton et al., 2005) and the Millennium Development Goals, and led to revision of policies in many countries (Jumbe and Angelsen, 2007). Community Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM)

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is amongst the more popular approaches to participatory environmental management that have emerged in pursuit of these multiple economic, social and environmental goals. CBNRM encompasses initiatives such as Integrated Conservation and Development Projects (ICDPs), Joint Forest Management (JFM) and community-based payments for ecosystem services (CB-PES) including agroforestry and conservation agriculture activities. While the specifics of these schemes differ in their aims, origin, project design and resource focus, they all broadly seek to address sustainable natural resource management, whilst simultaneously contributing to rural livelihood opportunities. In some cases CBNRM is initiated by communities themselves, seeking ways to manage common pool resources. However, CBNRM projects may also be externally initiated by for example, NGOs, the private sector or government (Measham and Lumbasi, 2013). Evidence suggests that the extent to which CBNRM goals are achieved varies (Dougill et al., 2012; Blaikie, 2006; Phiri et al., 2012). Hutton et al. (2005: 363) highlight some of the major challenges, concluding that the reasons for failure range from 'the poor quality of project design and the unqualified nature of many of those attempting implementation, to major policy failure in the devolution of power and authority'. They also echo the calls of others (e.g. Brooks et al., 2012; Blaikie, 2006) to improve understanding of the factors associated with project success and failure in order that the potential of participatory approaches can be harnessed.

Participatory approaches in CBNRM tend to be evaluated either through process or outcome-based factors, or both. These factors, for example empowerment, ownership and equity, are often hard to define and measure. In this paper, we focus on process-based factors, which we broadly define as 'community engagement', and their links to outcome-based success. The ways in which communities are engaged is one of the critical factors likely to affect whether the anticipated outcomes of an externally initiated project are realised and whether the longer terms aim of CBNRM (that of co-management of natural resources), is achieved. De Vente et al. (in press) explain that the success of CBNRM projects depends on participant selection and the process design. Kapoor (2001) raises questions pertaining to how the process can be made meaningful in practice and institutionalised. Project experiences from Tanzania outlined by Mustalahti et al. (2012) demonstrate the need for improved alignment of community priorities and project goals, while Measham and Lumbasi (2013) assert that one of the most widely recognised factors in CBNRM failure is top-down project initiation and imposition of initiatives as opposed to project initiation by communities. The literature therefore highlights many areas in which further investigation would benefit future participatory CBNRM projects and the ways in which communities are actively engaged in project design and implementation.

There is not an agreed definition of the term 'community engagement' in the literature (Tindana et al., 2007). Indeed, the term 'community' also remains contested and can include geographically-bound populations, groups that utilise shared practices or social norms, or can refer to the extent of and cultural identities (Agarwal and Gibson, 1999). This paper uses 'community engagement' to describe elements of project design, implementation and the mechanisms used to actively involve communities in natural resource management projects. Community engagement therefore begins at the first instance at which the project initiator approaches the community, and continues to consider their ongoing involvement in the project.

This paper aims to assess the factors affecting community engagement within externally initiated CBNRM projects alongside stakeholder experiences in three participatory case studies from southern Africa, in order to:

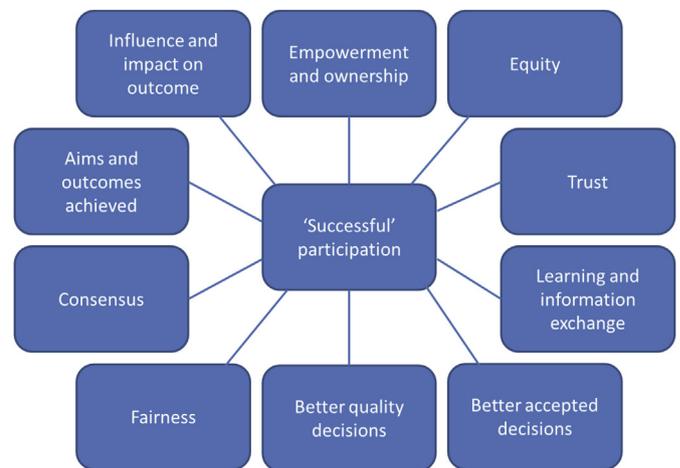


Fig. 1. Summary of outcome-based components of 'successful' participatory processes. Developed from Reed (2008), Raymond et al. (2010), Weblor and Tuler (2006), Chess and Purcell (1999), Twyman et al. (2001).

1. Evaluate a variety of community engagement processes seeking to deliver CBNRM in different contexts across southern Africa;
2. Assess the links between the process-based factors in community engagement and anticipated project outcomes; and
3. Determine key community engagement lessons that can usefully inform future externally initiated CBNRM projects in southern Africa and more widely.

## 2. Evaluating participation and community engagement

Participation in environmental management initiatives is both 'value laden and complex' (Conrad et al., 2011: 762) and there are no standard methods for its measurement (Conrad et al., 2011). Hence, there are very few empirical examples of comprehensive evaluation (e.g. Rowe and Frewer, 2000). While authors agree that ideal evaluation would ask the opinions of the participants in the participatory process (e.g. Blackstock et al., 2007; Reed, 2008), this is not always possible. In addition, for those planning a participatory process to initiate a CBNRM project, it is useful to know what makes the process successful from the outset, and how outcomes can be assessed. This contrasts with *ex-post* evaluation by the participants.

Evaluation of participatory approaches tends to be measured through process or outcome-based factors, or both. The following sections review the current dominant thinking on each of these approaches.

### 2.1. Outcome-based evaluation

Outcome-based evaluation of participation tends towards identifying outputs that signify 'success' of a project. Rowe and Frewer (2004) suggest outcome-based evaluations should start by defining success in the context of the project, developing indicators and procedures to measure success and subsequently evaluating it. There is broad agreement on what constitutes 'successful' outcomes for participation as summarised in Fig. 1. However, many of these factors remain hard to define and measure.

The success criteria in Fig. 1 can be useful in evaluating participation but are often subjective and differ according to the perceptions of the stakeholders involved. Furthermore, many success factors could be considered to be dependent on the process which led to the outcomes, and indeed, be considered as process-based

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