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


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Article history:
Received 10 April 2013
Received in revised form 29 October 2013
Accepted 4 November 2013
Available online 13 March 2014

Keywords:
Public participation
Community participation
Joint Forest Management
Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)
Zambia
Mozambique

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)

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvman.2013.11.057
0301-4797/© 2014 Published by Elsevier Ltd.
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:

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 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 as 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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