

Citizens Engagement in Decision-Making Process as Pathway to Sustainable Community Development

By

Usman Musa

And

Abdullahi Mohammed

And

Maimunat Usman

Abstract

Community development is a multifaceted and dynamic process aimed at equipping communities with skills, knowledge and values to improve their own well-being. The International Association for Community Development (IACD), a leading global network of community development practitioners and researchers, plays a significance role in promoting best practices in the field. Understanding the thematic areas emphasized by the IACD is crucial for effective and impactful tool in engaging citizens in decision making process; key principles of IACD definition are tools that can foster a more robust citizen's engagement in decision making process. Active engagement of citizens in decision-making processes is not merely desirable, but a fundamental requirement for creating thriving, equitable, resilient communities and sustainable development. This paper examine how citizen engagement in decision making process can ensure sustainable development.

Keywords: Citizens Engagement, Sustainable Development, Decision Making.

Introduction

Community development, as both an academic field of study and a practical profession, focuses on enabling communities to identify and address their own needs and aspirations, ultimately improving their overall well-being. The International Association for Community Development (IACD) serves as a leading authority,

shaping the understanding and implementation of community development globally. Its approach is instrumental in establishing and disseminating best practices, ethical guidelines, and professional standards within the field. A thorough understanding of the core themes championed by the IACD is essential for designing and implementing effective and impactful community development initiatives. These themes act as a guiding framework for tackling multifaceted social, economic, and environmental challenges effectively. Furthermore, they highlight the critical importance of active citizen participation, ensuring that community members are at the heart of the development process. By fostering this active engagement, community development initiatives can significantly enhance social cohesion, build stronger communities, and contribute to long-term, sustainable development that benefits all residents. This, in turn, creates more resilient and equitable local communities capable of thriving in a changing world.

Conceptual Overview

Community Development

Community development is a practice-based profession and academic discipline, It aims to promote democracy, sustainable development, and social justice, It involves organizing, educating, and empowering people in communities, it can take place in urban and rural settings. Connell, Muia, & Clarke, (2022).

It can be deduced from above description that community development is not just merely providing for the communities but it also involves the whole aspect of the community which include economic, social, physical and health well-being of the community, which can be inferred that citizen engagement in decision making process is the foundation for community development practices.

Community development is a complex process aimed at improving the social, economic, and environmental well-being of a specific community. Historically,

community development has often been characterized by a top-down approach, where decisions about projects and programs are made by government agencies, Non - Governmental Organization, NGOs or experts, with limited consultation or engagement with the intended beneficiaries. This approach often overlooks the unique needs, perspectives, and local knowledge of community members, leading to projects that may not be relevant, sustainable, or accepted by the community (Gilchrist,2019).

Fisher and colleagues (2019), community development is a process that involves collective action, social justice, and empowerment. It is a way of addressing the social, economic, and environmental challenges that communities face, with the goal of creating sustainable and equitable communities. Community development is also seen as a means of promoting social cohesion, building social capital, and enhancing community capacity.

Craig and colleagues (2018) emphasize the importance of community development in promoting social justice and addressing power imbalances. They argue that community development is a political process that aims to challenge the status quo and create more equitable communities. This involves working with marginalized and disadvantaged groups to amplify their voices and promote their participation in community decision-making processes.

Another prominent scholar in the field of community development is John McKnight, who has written extensively on the importance of asset-based community development (ABCD). ABCD is a approach to community development that focuses on the strengths and assets of community members, rather than their needs and deficits. According to McKnight (2017), ABCD involves mapping the skills, knowledge, and resources within a community, and mobilizing these assets to address community challenges. This approach emphasizes the importance of building on existing community strengths, rather than relying on external expertise and resources.

Sustainable Development

Sustainable development is crucial framework on how humanity interacts with the planet and each other; it's about navigating a delicate balance. It demands that we meet the needs and aspirations of the current generation in accessing clean water, affordable healthcare, or meaningful employment without undermining the ability of future generations to achieve the same Sustainable development is a profound and ongoing endeavor that necessitates innovation, collaboration, and a deep understanding of the interconnectedness of all life. It is a call to action for all of us to become responsible stewards of our world, ensuring a brighter future for ourselves and generations to come. This goal necessitates a holistic approach that moves beyond solid thinking. Sustainable development is not solely about environmental protection, nor is it simply an economic pursuit. Instead, it demands the seamless integration of environmental, social, and economic considerations into every dimension of human activity, from the products we consume to the policies we enact.

Sustainable development is not merely a goal but a journey towards a future that is more equitable, resilient, and prosperous for all. Achieving this vision requires a collective effort and fundamental changes in behavior. Individuals must make conscious choices and adopt sustainable practices in all human endeavors throughout; governments must implement policies that prioritize long-term sustainability over short-term gains. International cooperation is also paramount, as many environmental and social challenges transcend national borders.

Participatory governance is a governance model that emphasizes collaboration, cooperation, and communication between state actors, civil society organizations, and citizens in decision-making processes. This approach recognizes that citizens have a vital role to play in shaping their communities' development agenda and that their participation can lead to more effective, inclusive, and sustainable development outcomes. Newig, Challies, Jager, Kochskaemper, & Adzersen, (2018)

Participatory governance is rooted in the belief that citizens should have a meaningful voice and role in decisions that affect their lives. This involves actively engaging citizens in planning, implementation, and evaluation processes, ensuring that development efforts are shaped by the needs and aspirations of the community itself

Community Development by IACD & Sustainable Development

The IACD emphasizes several interconnected thematic areas that guide its approach to community development and will enhance citizen's engagement in decision making process. These areas can be broadly categorized as follows:

1. Participatory Democracy:

Empowerment through participation. This theme area underscores the importance of actively involving community members in decision-making processes that affect their lives. It moves away from top-down approaches and emphasizes local ownership and control. This theme is also stressing on utilization of community resources to develop the community to ensure sustainable development. Community members in recent time have developed the habit of appreciating the use of their own local resources to develop their respective communities, this can be achieve only if the members of the communities are consulted in course of planning and implementing any developmental project. In contemporary community development this has been termed Asset Based Community Development (ABCD)

2. Social Justice and Equity:

Addressing systemic inequalities and promoting fairness for all community members. This theme acknowledges that communities are often diverse and that historical and contemporary power imbalances can create barriers to participation and progress. These could be addressed through:

Inclusion and Diversity: Working to overcome discrimination and marginalization based on gender, race, ethnicity, religion, disability, and other social identities.

Rights-Based Approach: Ensuring that community development initiatives are aligned with human rights principles and promote the realization of social, economic, and cultural rights.

Access to Resources and Opportunities: Addressing inequities in access to education, healthcare, employment, and other essential resources.

Conflict Resolution and Peace building: Fostering dialogue and collaboration to resolve conflict peacefully and create more inclusive and harmonious communities.

Economic opportunity:

Creating sustainable economic opportunities within communities. building local economies that are resilient, inclusive, and environmentally sound. This can also be actualized by adopting the following techniques some of which include:

Local Entrepreneurship: Supporting small businesses, cooperatives, and other forms of local enterprise. This will also foster promotion of age-long skills in the community; while these skills are being sustained on the other it is also promoting and ensuring sustainable developing by empowering generational transfer of skills and knowledge.

Skills Development and Vocational Training: Providing community members with the skills and knowledge needed to secure employment. This is also crucial and important technique that if properly utilized it will foster sustainable development, in such a way that various groups in the society will be engage in different skills and it will boast economic viability of the community and development will be sustained for a long period of time.

Sustainable Agriculture and Food Security: Promoting environmentally friendly agricultural practices that strengthen local food systems. Agricultural activities has been identified as one of the major area to engage citizens irrespective of their class, creed or religion, if citizens are empowered with required knowledge, skills and contemporary agricultural practices this will boast agricultural productivity and ensure sustainable development as it will reduce crime and foster unity among members of the community.

4. Environmental Sustainability and Climate Action:

This theme recognizes that community development and environmental sustainability are inextricably linked. Climate change is affecting most Nations as such there is for members of the communities to be engaged in decision making process that are related to climate change information, strategies to be employed to adjust and live with reality of climate change, engagement of citizens in these processes will ensure inclusiveness of members of community in the trend and adapt easily in order to achieve maximum development.

5. Capacity Building and Learning:

Capacity building and learning focuses on Strengthening the skills, knowledge, and confidence of community members to lead their own development. This theme emphasizes the importance of ongoing learning and the development of local expertise.

Training and Mentoring: Providing community members with technical skills and leadership training.

Peer-to-Peer Learning: Facilitating the exchange of knowledge and best practices between communities.

Mobilization Methods of Citizens' Engagement in Community Development

The following methods can be utilized to mobilize citizens in decision making process:

- 1 Strengthening community engagement can be achieved by building relationships, networks, and social cohesion among community members, providing opportunities for training, education, and capacity building, and ensuring that decision-making processes are transparent, inclusive, and accessible.
- 2 Enhanced State-citizen partnerships can be achieved by fostering collaboration, cooperation, and communication between state actors and citizens in decision-making processes, ensuring that state actors are responsive, accountable, and transparent, and providing opportunities for participatory budgeting, planning, and monitoring.
- 3 Effective civil society engagement: can be achieved by providing opportunities for capacity building, training, and support for civil society organizations, ensuring that civil society organizations are inclusive, representative, and accountable, and fostering collaboration, cooperation, and communication between civil society organizations and state actors.
- 4 Policy and institutional frameworks: can be achieved by adopting policies and institutional arrangements that promote participatory governance, ensuring that policy and institutional frameworks are inclusive, representative, and accountable, and providing opportunities for citizen participation in policy-making processes.

Citizens engagement Technique in Decision-Making

- I. Community Consultations: Effective community development and service provision require a deep understanding of the needs, priorities, and perspectives of the people being served. This is why community

consultations are crucial. They offer a structured and inclusive way to engage directly with residents, allowing their voices to shape policies, programs, and initiatives. This can be achieved through:

Open Forums: These are large-scale events, often held in public spaces, designed to provide a platform for diverse groups to come together. They typically involve presentations, Question & Answer sessions, and opportunities for informal discussions.

Town Hall Meetings: These are similar to open forums but are often structured with a more focused agenda and a specific topic for discussion. They may include panel discussions, presentations by experts, or opportunities for residents to submit questions in advance.

Conducting open forums, town hall meetings, and focus groups to gather community input on needs, priorities, and potential solutions.

- i. **Participatory Needs Assessments:** Employing participatory methods to collaboratively identify and analyze community needs and assets. Examples include Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) and Appreciative Inquiry.
- ii. **Community Planning Workshops:** Facilitating workshops where community members can collectively develop vision statements, objectives, and action plans for development projects.
- iii. **Community-Based Monitoring and Evaluation:** Involving community members in monitoring the implementation of projects and evaluating their impact, ensuring accountability and transparency.
- iv. **Community Advisory Boards:** Establishing representative boards that advise and provide oversight for development initiatives, ensuring community voice is continuously integrated into the process.
- v. **Digital Engagement:** Utilizing online platforms and social media to foster communication, gather feedback, and engage a broader range of community members, particularly younger generations.

- vi. **Participatory Budgeting:** Allowing communities to allocate public funds directly through a democratic, inclusive process.

Importance of Citizen Engagement

The importance of citizen's engagement in community development cannot be over emphasized and some of these include:

Improved Decision-Making: Including local perspectives leads to more informed and contextually relevant decisions.

Tailored Solutions: Decisions that take local context into account are much more likely to be successful and sustainable. These solutions are designed to fit the specific circumstances and needs of the area, rather than being generic and potentially ineffective.

Increased Buy-in and Acceptance: When local communities are involved in the decision-making process, they tend to have a greater sense of ownership and are more likely to support the implementation of the solutions. This reduces resistance and increases the chances of successful outcomes.

Culturally Sensitive Approaches: Local perspectives ensure that decisions are culturally sensitive and do not inadvertently harm or disrespect local traditions and values. This is essential for fostering trust and building positive relationships between the community and external project or policy makers.

Locally Viable Solutions: Decisions will be rooted to the specific realities of the area. This might include factors like access to infrastructure, local regulations, and cultural sensitivities. This contextual grounding makes implementation more feasible.

Relevant and Appropriate Metrics: Local communities can help ensure that the success measures are relevant to their specific realities. Indicators that might be appropriate in one region might not matter as much in another.

Increased Legitimacy and Ownership: When development initiatives actively seek and value citizen input, a powerful shift occurs. Citizens who feel heard and believe their contributions are genuinely considered develop a strong sense of ownership over the process and its outcomes. This feeling of ownership fosters a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities, making them more likely to champion the initiatives' success. Consequently, development efforts gain greater legitimacy, moving beyond top-down approaches to become truly participatory endeavors. This legitimacy translates into increased public support, not just in principle but also in practical terms. Citizens are more willing to engage actively, whether through volunteering, providing local knowledge, or complying with new policies, creating a more sustainable and effective development process.

Enhanced Capacity Building: Through participation, community members gain valuable knowledge, skills, and leadership abilities. Community participation is a powerful engine for growth. Through involvement in projects, workshops, and collaborative efforts, residents gain valuable knowledge related to their community's needs, acquire hands-on skills like communication and problem-solving, and develop leadership abilities by taking initiative and working together. This empowers individuals to become active agents of change within their community.

Stronger Social Cohesion: Community engagement fosters trust, builds relationships, and strengthens social capital. When community engagement is prioritized, individuals and groups come together to form connections, build trust, and establish lasting relationships. These relationships, in turn, contribute to the creation of social capital, which refers to the networks, norms, and trust that enable individuals and communities to work together for common goals.

More Equitable Outcomes: When designed well, engagement processes can help ensure that historically marginalized groups have their voices heard and that development benefits are distributed more fairly, well-designed engagement processes lay in their potential to dismantle existing power imbalances and foster a more just and equitable society. When these processes are thoughtfully created and

implemented, they actively work to ensure that historically marginalized groups – those often silenced or overlooked due to systemic inequalities like race, gender, socio-economic status, disability, or other factors have a genuine and meaningful opportunity to contribute their perspectives and shape the direction of development initiatives. This, in turn, can lead to more equitable distribution of benefits, ensuring that development projects and policies are not simply perpetuating existing disparities, but instead are actively addressing them and creating improved conditions for all.

Challenges of Citizen Engagement in Community Development

Despite its numerous benefits, citizen engagement in community development also encounters significant challenges, such as:

Limited participation: Limited participation from marginalized and underrepresented groups is often not accidental but rather the result of systemic barriers. These barriers can include historical discrimination, lack of access to information and resources, language and cultural differences, inflexible meeting schedules, and even outright exclusion. When the playing field is not level, the voices of those already facing other forms of disadvantage become further diminished. This creates a power imbalance in decision-making processes, where the dominant groups' perspectives are prioritized while the experiences and needs of marginalized communities are consistently overlooked or discounted. This systemic issue requires a conscious and sustained effort to actively dismantle these barriers and create accessible and inclusive opportunities for participation.

Financial Constraints: Participatory processes often require dedicated funding for consultation meetings, public forums, data collection, analysis, and impact assessments. If the budget allocated for these initiatives is inadequate, activities may be curtailed, participation levels may suffer, and ultimately, the desired engagement outcomes may not be achieved.

Limited Capacity particularly among citizens, can significantly hinder effective participation in governance. This encompasses various dimensions: a lack of necessary skills, such as communication, critical thinking, and negotiation, can impede citizens' ability to articulate their needs and contribute meaningfully to discussions. Similarly, insufficient knowledge about relevant policies, procedures, and the intricacies of the political system can limit their informed engagement. Furthermore, a lack of relevant experience in participatory processes, such as public consultations or community forums, can lead to feelings of intimidation, disempowerment, or a difficulty understanding how to effectively influence decisions. These limitations can ultimately result in citizens being marginalized or their voices remaining unheard, thus undermining the very purpose of participatory governance.

Limited Political Will: The success of participatory governance approaches, which aim to involve citizens in decision-making processes, is fundamentally dependent on the presence of robust political will. When this crucial ingredient is lacking, even the well-designed participatory frameworks are likely to falter. "Limited political will" encompasses a range of factors that collectively undermine the implementation and sustainability of these approaches. This lack of commitment can manifest in various ways, creating significant hurdles.

Conclusion Engaging citizens in decision-making is not just an add-on to community development; it is the very foundation upon which sustainable and equitable outcomes are built. By embracing a participatory approach, we can move away from top-down models that often fail to address the real needs of communities and towards a collaborative and empowering model that places local ownership at the heart of development. While challenges exist, such as overcoming apathy, ensuring representativeness, and navigating conflicting viewpoints, the benefits of citizen engagement are clear. These benefits include fostering greater trust between residents and governing bodies, leading to more informed and effective policies, promoting a

stronger sense of community identity and belonging, and ultimately, creating solutions that are more responsive to the unique needs and circumstances of each locality. By committing to inclusive and participatory approaches, overcoming the inherent obstacles through innovative engagement strategies and a dedication to genuine dialogue, we can ensure that community development empowers all residents to shape their own futures, building vibrant, resilient, and just communities where everyone has a voice and a stake in their collective well-being.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made for better process of citizens engagement in decision making for community development:

- 1 Strengthening community engagement: Strengthening community engagement can be achieved by building relationships, networks, and social cohesion among community members, providing opportunities for training, education, and capacity building, and ensuring that decision-making processes are transparent, inclusive, and accessible.
- 2 Strengthening state-citizen partnerships: Strengthening state-citizen partnerships can be achieved by fostering collaboration, cooperation, and communication between state actors and citizens in decision-making processes, ensuring that state actors are responsive, accountable, and transparent, and providing opportunities for participatory budgeting, planning, and monitoring.
- 3 Strengthening civil society engagement: Strengthening civil society engagement can be achieved by providing opportunities for capacity building, training, and support for civil society organizations, ensuring that civil society organizations are inclusive, representative, and accountable, and fostering collaboration, cooperation, and communication between civil society organizations and state actors.

- 4 Strengthening policy and institutional frameworks: Strengthening policy and institutional frameworks can be achieved by adopting policies and institutional arrangements that promote participatory governance, ensuring that policy and institutional frameworks are inclusive, representative, and accountable, and providing opportunities for citizen participation in policy-making processes

References

- Gilchrist, A. (2019). *The well-connected community: A networking approach to community development*. Policy Press.
- IACD (2018). Practice Insights magazine. Special 65th IACD anniversary issue
- Inclusive Development", *Building Strong Communities: Ethical Approaches to Inclusive Development (Diverse Perspectives on Creating a Fairer Society)*, Emerald Publishing Limited, Leeds, pp. 47-68. <https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-83549-174-420241003>
- McConnell, C., Muia, D. D., & Clarke, A. (Eds.). (2022). *International community development practice*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- White, S. C. (2010). Analysing the participatory process: Insights from social theory. *Journal of Development Studies*, 46(6), 1043-1
- white, S. C. (2012). Arts-based methods in participatory development practice. *Development in Practice*, 22(4), 541-555.