

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND THE PROCESS OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT: THE RHETORIC AND REALITY IN UGANDA

*U. Kakumba
School Public Management and Administration
University of Pretoria*

*S. Nsingo
School of Public Management and Administration
University of Pretoria*

ABSTRACT

Citizen participation is acknowledged in the governance and development discourse, as a mechanism for building capacity in the rural poor in the quest for poverty reduction and good governance. This article synthesizes recent studies on Uganda's decentralised system of local governance and examines the extent to which participation in local programmes has enhanced the process of rural development. It is argued that, while some participatory framework exists as a result of devolving some powers and functions to local government units, the structures and processes remain feeble and do not support a genuinely participatory system. This is mainly due to the excessive central government whims and the local *elite* capture. While the central and donor-conceived plans may still be necessary for the rural poor, such strategies should be integrated into the rural schemes to enable freedom of choice, action and decision in order to attain strong local ownership and empowerment. This calls for political will from the central government leaders and the need to strengthen capacity for the local forces and social groups to infiltrate the hierarchies of officialdom associated with the local bureaucracies.

Article

INTRODUCTION

Citizen participation continues to capture a centre-stage position in many policies of nation-states and international development agencies in recent years. The common belief is that involving citizens in rural programmes and empowering them have the potential to boost their livelihoods and foster development. As such, many projects in poor countries will hardly receive any donor funding without a component on integrating the community in their proposals.

Participation in Uganda is associated with the current decentralisation policy, adopted in 1992. The argument raised in favour of this policy is that it promotes devolution of powers to local government units (LGUs) and popular participation in planning, decision making, and implementation of development projects at the local levels. Like it has been the case elsewhere in many developing countries on the African continent, decentralising local government in Uganda was an attempt at reorienting the system from a highly centralised state, inherited at independence and from the subsequent dictatorial regimes, to a system that owes allegiance to the citizens. Accordingly, participation has been cultivated as a response to the past development failures that were caused by implementing development initiatives in a largely top-down fashion.

While this system of local government is regarded as capable of enhancing citizen participation and the process of rural development, the unfolding events over time do not seem to suggest so. Hence, this article examines the mismatch, by making a critical analysis the existing participatory framework in order to establish whether the underlying mechanisms are translated into the socio-economic and political aspects of development to the rural folks.

The subsequent sections in this article begin with defining and conceptualising citizen participation and rural development before giving highlights on the local government structure and legislative framework in Uganda. This is followed by an examination of the participatory mechanisms in place, while highlighting their appropriateness. An elaborate section provides the challenges to participation and rural development.

THEORETICAL EXPLORATION

The orientation of people's participation or citizen/ community participation as fondly known, has evolved through liberal democratic traditions of trying to reduce the frontiers of the state, while extending public choice. It has manifested itself through the neo-liberal policy prescriptions, spearheaded by the international multilateral agencies led by the World Bank and IMF. Participation today forms part of the New Public Management (NPM) paradigm that seeks to re-invent government by breaking rigid bureaucratic structures and open them up for transparency and accountability. According to the African Development Bank (ADB), the contention is that offering citizens more choice would stimulate competition, geared at making the public service more efficient and service oriented by capturing the larger citizens' public interest (ADB Report, 2005:

128-129). Consequently, citizen participation is seen in the context of the larger public sector management reform, with a theoretical base traceable in Plato's view of democracy, which had fundamentals like assembly, voting, freedom of speech and equal representation (Holtzhausen, 2004: 117-118).

Citizen participation

Fox and Meyer (1995: 20) define citizen/community participation as:

the involvements of citizens in a wide range of administrative policy-making activities, including the determination of levels of service, budget priorities, and the acceptability of physical construction projects in order to orient government programmes toward community needs, build public support, and encourage a sense of cohesiveness within society.

With regard to the likely questions on: who the participating citizens are; how they take part in decision making; and with what interests and values, Brynard (1996: 40) looks at citizen participation as "a process wherein the common amateurs of a community exercise power over decisions related to the general affairs of a community". He notes that these common amateurs are the non-elite citizens; persons without paid office, wealth, special information, or other formal power source beyond their own numbers; and whose control is only gained from the participatory process. Brynard (1996: 44) outlines the following as the objectives of citizen participation:

- provide information to citizens;
- get information from the citizens;
- improve public decisions, programmes, projects, and services;
- enhance acceptance of public decisions, programmes, projects, and services;
- supplement public agency work;
- alter political power patterns and resource allocation;
- protect individual and minority group rights and interests; and
- delay or avoid complicating difficult public decisions.

It emerges from the above that, participation earmarks involvement of people through their established institutions and groups at various level, to influence the social, political and economic processes, through making decisions.

Citizen participation does not necessarily lead to empowerment. Empowerment, as Narayan (2002: 14) contends, requires a process through which peoples' freedom of choice and actions are expanded to enable them to have more control over resources and decisions that affect them. For empowerment to happen, participation must therefore be effective, in a way that enforces accountability and changes in behaviour within relevant government bureaucracies and ensure changes that make participation more inclusive of the poor and the underprivileged (Crook, 2003: 4).

Rural Development

Rural development is used to refer to schemes aimed at improving the countryside or peripheral areas, with a characteristic agrarian population. It deals with a range of activities, involving the mobilisation of resources (human and material) in order to empower the people to break away from all structural disabilities that prevent them from enjoying better living conditions. The poor tend to define their plight in terms of lack of basic needs such as food, shelter, clothing, health care and education; powerlessness and inability to influence one's condition; social exclusion; poor governance; low community status and lack of awareness (Kiyaga-Nsubuga, 2004: 8-9). The rural poor tend to have minimal or no ownership to land, access to capital, employment, information and very little opportunity to influence decisions that affect their lives and localities.

Since poverty forms part of a catabolic spiral that impacts on virtually every sphere of human existence, its reduction, especially in rural areas with the worst cases, requires a multi-faceted approach from the different dimensions of development involving the social, economic and political interventions (Van Rooyen, 2004: 83). The crux of the matter is that programmes and projects that are *people owned* are likely to have a greater impact and therefore, more sustainable in pursuit of improved rural livelihoods.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT STRUCTURE AND LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK

Historical highlights

Like it was the case elsewhere in the new independent states on the African continent, the severity of Uganda's political and economic crises for some two decades shortly after independence in 1962, were devastating. The independence Constitution of Uganda of 1962, under *Chapter One* on territories, gave significant powers and autonomy to local authorities to manage development programmes with the obligations to provide a wide range of services to the communities. However, in 1966, there was a military coup and the office of the then President, Sir Edward Muteesa was overrun by an army, loyal to the then executive Prime Minister Apollo Milton Obote. The 1962 Constitution was repealed and the new Republican Constitution of 1967 ushered in a strict centralised arrangement that severely constrained the centre-local relations. The subsequent *Local Administration Act*, 1967 did not only establish an administrative structure that stifled local initiatives, but also provided fertile ground for a dictatorial central government regime (Nsibambi, 1998: 1). Following this Act for example, local government councils had very little powers in their respective areas of jurisdiction (Nsibambi, 1998: 1) as:

- even the lowest employee in a local government was appointed by the President;
- the Minister of Local Government had to approve the budget of local councils;
- the Minister of Local Government had to approve the local councils' by-laws and had the powers to revoke them;

- immediate accountability for transferred resources was to the Minister of Local Government and not to the local people; and
- the Minister had powers to terminate the mandate of local councillors and to dissolve local government councils.

The following two decades (1966-1986) saw a reduced degree of staff responsiveness to the citizens' needs. When the National Resistance Movement (NRM) government captured state power in January 1986, it found a public sector characterized by institutional decay, managerial ineptitude, poor service delivery, and a local government system that did not owe allegiance to the citizenry (Mamdani Commission Report, 1989: 78-80). The *Commission of Inquiry into the Local Government System* (chaired by Mahmood Mamdani, 1987-1989), identified the rigid centralised structure and the degenerating gap between the service providers and service beneficiaries, as having inhibited service delivery at the local levels.

Legislative framework

The decentralisation policy was launched as a system of local government in Uganda in 1992. The enactment of the 1993 Local Councils Statute was a way of broadening the space for citizen participation from local councils (LCs) 1-5 (See Table 1) Later, the *Constitution of Uganda*, 1995 and the *Local Governments Act* (LGA), 1997 facilitated the devolution of powers and transfer of functions to local authorities. Article 176 of the *Constitution of Uganda*, 1995 establishes the district as the highest level of local government with are other lower local government units below it (LGUs) like, the sub-counties (rural areas), municipalities, city divisions, town councils (in urban areas). Accordingly the legislation empowered LGUs as focal points of managing development and social service delivery through citizen participation.

As opposed to the other administrative units (LC1, LC2 and LC4), LGUs in Uganda are bodies corporate, with powers enshrined in the *Local Governments Act*, 1997 (LGA) to:

- make and implement development plans based on locally determined priorities;
- compile, approve and execute their own budgets;
- raise and utilise resources according to their own priorities after making legally mandated disbursements;
- appoint statutory committees, boards and commissions;
- pass ordinances and by-laws which are consistent with the Constitution and other existing laws;
- hire, manage and dismiss personnel as well as managing their own payrolls; and
- implement decentralised services, hitherto handled by the central government, as contained in the 2nd Schedule of the LGA.

In view of the above, LGUs have the obligation to foster citizen participation and the process of rural development.

Table 1: Key features of Uganda's decentralised local government structure

Local Council (LC) Level/Area	Status of LC & Political Head	Political Head & Selection of Representatives	Administrative Head
District Council (LC5)	Local Government	District Chairperson, elected by universal adult suffrage (UAS) and councillors from sub-counties, women (1/3), youth, disabled	Chief Administrative Officer (CAO)
County Council (LC4)	Administrative Unit	Chair; Council made up of all LC3 executives, who then elect LC4 executive and Chair	Assistant CAO
Sub-County Council (LC3)	Local Government	Chair elected by UAS; councillors from parish & women (1/3), youth	Sub-county Chief
Parish Council (LC2)	Administrative Unit	Chair elected by all LC1 executive members who make up the council	Parish Chief
Village Council (LC1)	Administrative Unit	Chair elected by UAS, & all adults (18 years) are council members	

Adapted from: Uganda; Local Governments Act (LGA), 1997 as amended in 2001

MECHANISMS OF PARTICIPATION AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

As noted earlier, development is a multifaceted notion that embraces the socio-economic and political progresses made towards society's well being. Under the current system of local government in Uganda, there have been different avenues for political participation, seeking to promote *inter alia* a democratic dispensation, peace, stability and security. Likewise, there have been schemes for socio-economic participation that have been geared towards promoting; e.g. civic awareness, education, health, employment and resource mobilisation. The foregoing discussion considers how the various initiatives have tilted the socio-economic and political platform for the rural community.

Community mobilisation and decision-making

The legislative framework mandates the local councils to devise mechanisms to facilitate the effective involvement of communities in articulating their needs and design programmes that suit local priorities. Accordingly, local councils have continued to take decisions relating to administrative and legislative (by-laws), planning and development of local projects within their areas of jurisdiction (LGA, Sections; 36-40), within the ambit of the Constitution. The lower local councils (LC1 and 2) have played a role in mobilising people through village/ parish meetings, where they discuss various issues affecting localities. Normally in such meetings, LCs call upon the community for collective contributions to solve local problems in the spirit of *self help*. Accordingly, there have been schemes of participation by the community to use their vast and cheaply available labour force to promote education, water, health, and road construction. The LCs assist in regulating village life and often make such resolutions as to utilise resources remitted from the sub-counties/ municipal divisions.

Through the established local statutory commissions and boards, the districts have engaged a local people and firms to do various jobs locally available. Local entrepreneurs have formed their own companies, won tenders and given some employment opportunities to the population (Francis and James, 2003:329; Kiyaga-Nsubuga, 2001:2).

The LGA (Section 36) establishes a district local government as a planning authority, required to prepare an integrated development plan (IDP) which must incorporate plans of lower local councils. District plans are supposed to be developed using a bottom-up approach, with each village making its community action plan. The parish committees incorporate these into the parish plan, then sent for integration into the sub-county or division plan. The sub-county plans are submitted to the district and the *District Technical Planning Committee* is supposed to produce an integrated plan for discussion by different stakeholders, before approval by the district council. In principle, the district plans have to observe and make their plans in accordance with the priorities based on national priority programme areas (PPA).

Election of local leaders

Participation in local elections is arguably the most successful activity involving a majority of the local citizens. It has created an opportunity for the electorate to exercise their freedoms and rights in choosing their own leaders in local government councils, through elections held after every five years. In some cases, those who do not perform well have not been returned to office, which enhances political accountability.

Citizen awareness and capacity building

According to the various surveys done, people participation in Uganda through the LC system has promoted a great sense of ownership of local projects, as well as enhancing learning different skills, enhancing capacity building (Onyach-Olaa, 2003; MISR, 2000; Nsibambi, 1998). Under the Local Government Development Programme (LGDP) vote, there has been a deliberate effort towards community training and awareness. This enthusiasm of community involvement is indicated by the growing number of CSOs in rural Uganda, which draw membership from almost all social groups (DENIVA-CIVICUS Report, 2006: 28). CSOs supported by LGUs have engaged underprivileged groups in acquiring knowledge and skills related to environmental conservation, health, especially on HIV/AIDS and community health, utilisation of indigenous knowledge in production, food security, micro finance activities and community policing.

Poverty reduction strategies

Uganda's programme for rural development is contained in the national policy framework, consisting the Poverty Eradication Action Plan (PEAP), which is also implemented in another sectoral programme called the Plan for Modernisation of Agriculture (PMA) (MFPED, 2002). The PEAP is part of the IMF's and World Bank's recommended poverty reduction strategies and earmarks LGUs for its implementation. The PEAP has four pillars including:

- achieving rapid economic growth and structural transformation;
- good governance and security;
- increasing the ability of the poor to raise their incomes; and
- enhancing quality of life of the poor.

The PEAP is implemented in a sector wide approach with a budget line indicated in the Mid-Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF), out of which is the Poverty Action Fund (PAF) avails resources for poverty reduction and service provision (Kiyaga-Nsubuga, 2004). The PEAP promotes participation through partnership with CSOs, especially NGOs as intermediaries in filtering information relating to the poor and helping to implement or

supervising publicly funded programmes (MFPED, 2002). The PEAP provides a poverty monitoring system through their annual biannual poverty status reports and the annual PEAP progress reports, allowing incremental policy formulation and implementation. The PEAP is forging a collaborative effort between various stakeholders including the central and local government, the donors, the private sector, NGOs and CSOs.

CHALLENGES TO PARTICIPATION AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Political patronage

There has been general lack of political commitment on the side of the central government towards effective devolution of powers, which is evident in the continued influence and interference in the functioning of local government units. The growing political culture is that of polarisation, where top central government politicians do not only interfere in local elections, but also frustrate the local communities that do not seem to subscribe to the ruling party (Olum, 2004: 4). Even during the election campaign where local leaders were, by law, supposed to be non-partisan and elected on *individual* merit, the central government officials openly campaigned for some candidates, seen as sympathisers to the regime. Top politicians also continue to be cited in local tender controversies (Francis and James, 2003; Olum, 2004).

Whereas the Constitution, 1995 (Article 180 (1)) makes the district council the highest political authority in its area of jurisdiction and the council chairperson as its political head (Article 183 (1)), on many occasions, the official from the President's office has rescinded district council decisions. For example, during 2004 and 2005 the payment of fees and levies to Kampala City Council (KCC) by the roadside motorists (Popularly known as *Boda Boda*) and market vendors were cancelled by presidential aides. A major development plan passed by KCC to modernise *Naguru* estates in 2003 was halted.

In a classic case during 2002, the central government wanted four districts to dismiss their chief administrative officers (CAO) allegedly for mismanaging funds entrusted to them to help run elections. The district councils, refused, arguing that they could not interdict their CAOs concerning functions and funds that were outside their jurisdiction. Running such election is a duty of the Electoral Commission, for which, the districts did not appoint their CAOs. The districts feared that such action would cause them severe court action in case the CAOs sued them, and instead advised that, the powers entrusted to the CAOs be pursued through court charges. As a result of the stand-off, the central government ordered that the Department of Finance withhold transfer of funds to those districts. The ensuing loss of funding made the districts recapitulate by requiring the CAOs to resign. In 2005, the central government successfully pushed for several constitutional amendments to enable them to exercise more control over LGUs, among which, is the appointment of the CAOs (hitherto appointed by the District Service Commissions). The constitutional amendment (Article 188 (2)) now provides that CAOs be appointed and dismissed by the Public Service Commission.

Certainly, such patronage and influence peddling only works to suffocate local citizen participation, as well as facilitate the alienation of the citizens from the sense of ownership of the *people's power*. This cannot be overemphasized as Mamdani (1996) argues that, "in Africa, the patrimonial state continues to perpetuate the rule over subjects rather than a rule by citizens". In a political environment where the local government system is characterized by clientage, and as Kakumba and Kuye (2006: 819) have argued "rational policy making does not thrive, as goal setting becomes an expression of personal convictions of the political leaders and their closest advisors".

Elite capture

LGUs have councillors and civil servants who become powerful and influential by taking decisions relating to *inter alia* planning, allocation of resources, awarding of tenders and contracts for projects. It is not uncommon for some members of the public to offer sponsoring campaigns for local government representatives, in anticipation of returns, in the form of preferential treatment. In rural areas local councillors are increasingly being drawn from the well-to-do households who give inducements to the poor in the form of household goods in order to be elected (Francis and James, 2003:329; Olum, 2004: 6). Such local councillors and a few well-to-do members of society have become the local *elite* whose interests preclude the rest of the society's poor.

While planning is required to be participatory, the limited capacity and experience of elected representatives and officials at rural sub-county level and lower parish and village units, only perform to the advantage of the local *elite*. Secondly, these district plans rarely incorporate priorities of lower local councils, and when this is done, the plans are not necessarily adhered to as the top politicians in their council committees at the district level often create so called hot priorities and *urgent* projects which have to be financed from time to time (Kakumba, 2003: 85; Francis and James, 2003: 331).

While discussing the two contrasting forms of local government and development in Uganda, relating to the *technocratic* and *patronage* modes, Francis and James (2003: 326) insist that the latter only draws on the language of participatory planning. In actual sense the performance is ritualised with little citizen involvement, owing to lack of resources and monopolisation by local *elites*. The more the local council structures have gained legal recognition and political authority they became less of the people's institutions and more of state bureaucratic institutions (Sabiti Makara, 1998: 43-44).

Inadequate financial capacity

The weak financial position of LGUs not only reduce their capacity to integrate the local community into development projects, but affects responsiveness to community needs. Matters are not improved by the low tax base and the continuous control of sufficient sources of revenue by the central government. Analysis of the budgets of several districts

in 2002 revealed that they could only collect an average of 7% locally to finance their budgets (Francis and James: 330). The districts continue to rely on the central government resources which are not only insufficient, but also comes as conditional grants. Conditional funding accounts for over 80% of the central transfers and it earmarks support to specific national programmes at the local units. The unconditional grant is largely spent on general management and administration, and there is, therefore, little, if no room for local governments to use these resources for their own development priorities. Unconditional grants are arbitrarily cut and funds withdrawn from particular services, and abrupt changes made in modalities of fiscal transfers to LGUs (see Kakumba, 2003: 43).

The poor financial state of LGUs make them inclined to rather cumbersome conditions and requirements from the donors and central government. In the end, they become agents of these higher level structures and not of the local citizenry. For example, central government and donors are often interested in establishing new facilities like schools, health units and officiate at opening ceremonies. Yet as Onyach-Olaa (2003: 7) argues, it might be suitable for a local government to improve on the quality of the existing facilities, given that a new school would require, desks, text books and teachers salaries; and a new health unit would require, drugs, staff salaries and hospital beds, all of which burden the recipient LGUs. While the high level of central transfers to the districts may not necessarily mean lack of local autonomy, the conditions usually attached to these transfers can undermine genuine local decision making and citizen participation.

Accountability

The doctrine of public accountability is acknowledged as a pivot around which good government rotates. It places a liability and an obligation on public functionaries (elected office bearers and appointed officials) to give satisfactory explanation to the public (tax payers) concerning the exercise of power, authority and resources, which are entrusted to public office bearers ordinarily as a trust from the citizens. Gildenhuis (1997: 59) points out the necessity to exert public control over public office bearers to be accountable, otherwise, the danger of government becoming non-representative may arise.

Accountability to the public require citizens' access to information, transparent procedures, effective consultation and publicity on the side of the government machinery, but this is hardly the case in LGUs. While the citizens can regularly elect their own local leaders into office, these executives remain effectively detached from the electorate once they are in office. Research done in several districts of Uganda on how often the electorate interacted with their district councillors, revealed that: 20,6% of the respondents did not meet them at all; 16,5% only met them when elections imminent; 3,1% saw them during local fundraising; while 30,9% met them very rarely; and 2,1% could only meet them in bars (Tukahebwa, 1998: 27). Where 70% cannot easily interact with their community leaders, accountability becomes endangered. This is attributed to failure by local authorities to mobilise the people, poor information flow and civic incompetence to interact. Matters are worsened by the reported cases of

endemic corruption in LGUs arising from weak systems and values (Nsibambi, 1988: 66-68; Kiyaga-Nsubuga, 2001: 8; Kakumba, 2003: 17). This means that even the meager resources at the disposal of LGUs are squandered, thereby posing a serious deterrent to rural development.

Local conflicts

Conflicts between various levels of local administration have been identified. There is resentment by the villages and parishes on one hand against the sub-counties and districts on the other, over the failure by the latter to include them in decision making processes, and failure to remit part of the revenue collections to the villages and parishes as they are entitled to (Francis and James, 2003:333). The interface between politicians and civil servants has also exhibited conflicts of roles and interests, factionalism, confrontation, intimidation and power struggles (Sabiti Makara, 1998: 39). In many instances, conflict arises out of differences in policy approaches. For example, while the politicians would seek to please their constituents at all cost to keep political support; the technocrats (civil servants) are concerned about adequacy of processes and frugality of resource use thus the danger of conflict between the role players. There are reported cases where politicians harass civil servants over alleged frustration of their (politician's) development projects (Kakumba, 2003: 93). Acrimony is arising civil servants are in many cases better educated than the political leaders in the districts, yet their emoluments are considerably lower than that of the politicians. For example, a graduate assistant CAO earns about Shs. 210 000 per month, while a non-graduate chairperson earns Shs. 1 300 000 and US \$ 1 is equivalent to Ushs. 1700 (Francis and James, 2003:333). Such episodes preoccupy the local officials and obstruct them from engaging the larger citizen interests.

Socio-economic structure

The weak socio-economic position of the rural people obstructs them from meaningful participation. In addition to being poor, disguisedly unemployed, the rural population is associated with low levels of education, high illiteracy rates, poor infrastructure and communication means obstructing their civic competence. Although the number of NGOs has increased in almost every rural district, they are increasingly being accused of collusion with the local bureaucrats to represent the *elitist* preferences (DENIVA-CIVICUS, 2006: 49). The weak internal structure of most NGOs and lack of a broader representation of the *people's voice* make them rather superficial. While reflecting upon their internal weaknesses, Rugambwa (2004: 43) notes the following about NGOs:

- a significant number of NGOs lack clear accountability channels;
- there is limited shared values and lack of a common ideology;
- have limited capacity to document and demonstrate impact to the wider society; and

- their relationship with LGUs is still characterised by *inter alia* mistrust, conflicts, poor communication and information sharing, and lack of transparency.

Effective participation by the rural poor is also affected by the fact that their agricultural produce raises little income and they are mostly exploited by middlemen. Those that make attempts to take their produce to urban markets, face a number of prohibitive local farmer taxes from the district administration agents, who sometimes, use high-handed means. A study conducted in the different districts of Uganda in 2002, as part of the LADDER (Livelihoods and Diversification Directions Explored Research) concluded as far as these taxes are concerned (see Francis and James, 2003: 331) that:

(t)o make matters worse, producers and traders face demands for informal payments by administrative or political office holders in addition to the official taxes. The taxes, licences and levies imposed on agriculture and trade combined with unofficial rents, constitute a dense thicket of fiscal oppression and a drag on the poor's livelihoods.

Such a strain on the rural poor can only serve the local community to view their leaders in LGUs as parasitic agents, trying to frustrate their existence, as opposed to being agents of development. In this case, effective participation also suffers.

THE CLAMOUR FOR CREATING NEW DISTRICTS

The pursuit of centrally funded patronage is exhibited in the continued sub-division of districts in Uganda. More than 30 new districts have emerged in less than two years, preceding the presidential elections of February 2006 and shortly after. These were carved out from sub-counties of the already existing poor and under-funded districts, as a result of popular agitation from local *elites*. Crook (2003: 13) contends that the clamour for new districts in Uganda “is used by the presidency as a device of manipulating rival ethnic groups to consolidate his position, under the guise of trying to assuage ethnic nationalism”. Whether, it is true or not, the fact remains that these demands were hastily supported by President Museveni and district statuses were granted to several poor local communities without much consideration their economic viability and the strain on funding existing local structures; and as Crook (2003:13) puts it, “it is no accident that the trend for minorities at district level to demand creation of new districts has been encouraged by central government”.

Similarly, whether the new districts' agitations represent a genuine need to create new jobs, extend the sharing on the *national cake*, and take *services nearer to the people*, in a situation of under-financed and ineffective local authorities, one wonders whether it is not simply *spreading the jam too thinly* (Crook, 2003: 10) to create such large numbers.

It should also be noted that each one of these new districts, requires a huge expenditure on administrative overheads and political emoluments. Office blocks, salaries and allowances to staff and councillors, all of which put strain on a country with a huge debt burden of \$4,6 billion, a debt amortisation of \$115 million per financial year, and

whose national budget is 50% supported by donors in excess of 50% (*The Daily Monitor*, August 21, 2006). Secondly, it exacerbates the already poor central government funding of local authorities. As it is, the rural citizens' empowerment and development easily gets lost in the wilderness.

PARTICIPATION AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Tackling rural development and poverty in predominantly agricultural economies like that of Uganda, heavily depends on foreign aid, and it requires increased productivity and returns on produce, as well as increasing employment (see Crook, 2003; Belshaw and Livingstone, 2002). Yet the emphasis on citizen participation in Uganda is plainly bent on human development as opposed to integrating aspects that can boost agricultural capacity. For example, increasing representation of groups like women, disabled, youth on local councils and awareness programmes on rights, security, education, and health largely represented human development. While these schemes are important to development, they are hardly linked to increased production, adding value on agricultural produce, household incomes and employment.

As noted earlier, the PEAP and the PMA are effective interventions, but they remain central government's handmaiden policies, where LGUs merely participate in implementation, with the citizens largely on the receiving end. The high tax burdens that falls on the poor farmers in rural districts discourage expansion and commercialisation, which are core objectives of the PEAP and PMA (Francis and James, 2003:334). This creates a mismatch between the objectives of citizen participation and the quest for rural development, whose positioning would require greater links to agriculture as a priority sector. Indeed Belshaw (2000:100) finds little evidence to support the concept that purely local programmes, which ignore the need for macro-economic investment, would stand a chance to do more than scratching the surface for rural poverty.

The disbursements from central government under the local government development programme (LGDP), provide for non-sector specific development and capacity building. However, they hardly capture the facilitation required in agriculture, owing to its limitation in terms of the amount released and focus on too many priority areas at the same time. Besides, the LGDP allocation formula is not poverty sensitive as it basically considers population and land area, as opposed to other indicators like household incomes. LGDP is also associated with a *carrot and stick* approach, with sanctions meted out to districts that may fail to meet the *performance criteria* (Onyach-Olaa, 2003:3).

It is evident that most of these development projects have not yet captured citizen participation, as LGUs are basically involved in implementing central government's programmes. Similarly, LGUs take more time to find a stable balance in their central-local and donor-local relations, than on effectively engaging citizens in the development process. There are examples to show that the decentralised local government in Uganda has enhanced participation. However, Crook (2003: 4) rightly puts it, "there is very little evidence that it has resulted in policies that are more responsive to the *poor*, or indeed the citizens generally".

CONCLUSION

The discussion has indicated that there is a wide gap between the rhetoric and the reality of citizen participation and rural development. Whereas several strides have been made, since the NRM government took over state power in 1986, especially in electoral participation and extending representation of groups hitherto excluded like women, youth and disabled; this has not yet translated into *empowerment*; which is only realised when people's freedom of choice and action are expanded to enable them to have more control over resources and decisions that affect them.

Local leadership is increasingly being usurped by the *elite* and *executives* who, once in office, remain effectively detached from the electorate. LGUs are steadily losing their grip on deepening citizen participation, because they continuously play a local-agent role to the central government in a patronage-like fashion. This is accentuated by the resource dictates where the centre has to fund over 80% of the local budgets. While the PEAP is a vibrant instrument in poverty reduction, it largely negates the principle of participation and local decision making, since it is a development ideology masterminded by the centre and donors, only to be executed at the local levels.

It ought to be emphasised that the quest for citizen participation does not mean that the centre and donors should cease conceiving plans and making development strategies for the rural poor, but rather, such strategies should be integrated into the rural schemes, to enable freedom of choice, action and decision in order to attain strong local ownership and empowerment. This requires from central government leadership, political will and commitment towards a genuine devolution of power to LGUs. It also calls for strengthening capacity for the local forces and social groups to infiltrate the hierarchies of officialdom associated with the local elites.

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