

CHAPTER NINE: THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

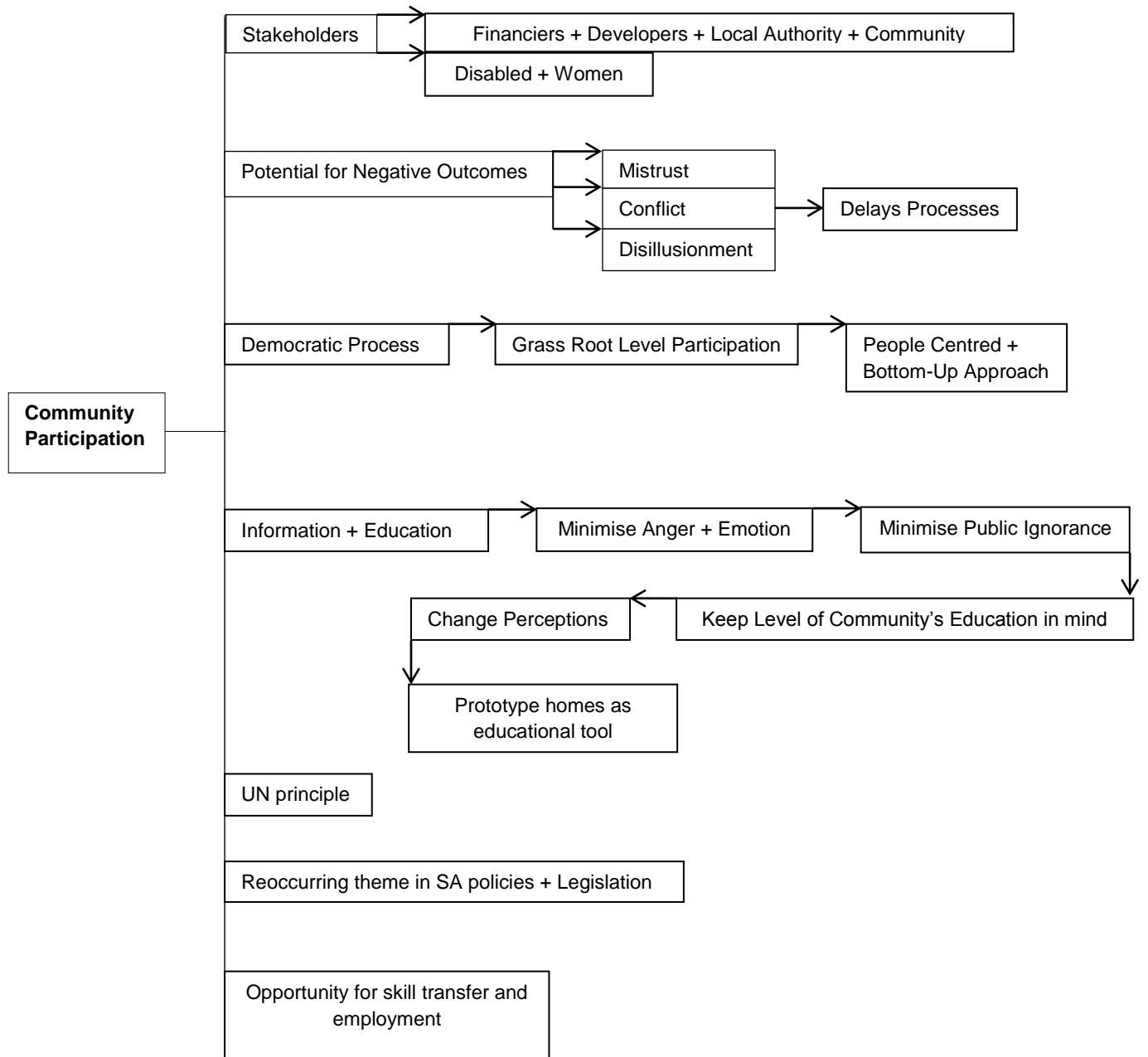


Figure 24: Summary of Chapter 9: The importance of community participation

Source: Own construction (2012)

Chapter 8 discussed the value of alternative construction materials in low-cost housing development. In order to facilitate the sustainable implementation of alternative construction materials, increased densities (as discussed in Chapter 6) and any other design concepts, community participation and stakeholder involvement becomes crucial.

Chapter 9 will discuss community participation within low-cost residential development in South Africa, given the focus placed on participatory planning processes in modern day development. Public participation is not only a South African objective, but is a key focus of the United Nations to ensure sustainable human settlements. The UN Habitat Agenda of 1996 states: 'We commit ourselves to the strategy of enabling all key actors in the public, private and community sectors to play an effective role - at the national, state/provincial, metropolitan and local levels – in human settlements and shelter development' (UN, 1996:16).

9.1 Background and introduction to community participation

Community participation could be understood as the direct involvement of the citizenry in the affairs of planning, governance and overall development programmes at local or grassroots level (Mafukidze, 2009:12). Public participation has become a key aspect of South African planning and is a reoccurring theme in several legislative and theoretical documents. According De Villiers (2001:7) the South African Constitution provides the framework for a representative and participatory democratic system. The Department of Human Settlements (SA, 2009:12) states that the South African government seeks to create an enabling environment in which the human settlement process is people-centred. A process which is people-centred and promotes thriving partnerships will encourage the establishment of human settlements which improve housing opportunities and realise a sustainable housing vision.

It has become clear since the adoption of democracy that input from the communities affected by planning and housing provision is of immense value. The Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) emphasises the essential role of community participation to ensure a democratic process down to grass-roots level (CSIR, 2002:73). According to Imperato & Ruster (2003:15) participation is essential for sustainable development. Where stakeholders are involved in decision making at all stages of a project cycle, development problems and needs will be better understood.

Participation should also focus on community-organisations such as civic groups, and labour unions, which can all enhance democratic participation. The Department of Human Settlements (SA, 2009:33) states that communities and community-based organisations should be mobilised to ensure a more effective engagement with housing programmes. In this regard communities need to be made aware of these programmes and need to be educated. The White Paper of 1994 furthermore highlights the importance of gender equity, economic viability and environmental sustainability in the implementation of land-reform programmes (SA, 1994:75). CSIR (2002:34) states that community participation should also extend to persons with disabilities to ensure adequate planning and housing solutions which comply with the needs of entire communities. Without sufficient community participation, self-determination cannot be achieved sufficiently and this may hamper the sustainability of human settlements in a significant manner. (CSIR 2002:73) The White Paper emphasises the importance of local participation in decision-making as one of the indicators of sustainable human settlements (SA, 1994:17).

According to Skidmore et al. (2005:1) policies which promote community participation value social capital. By providing communities with the opportunity to involve themselves in issues of governance and service delivery, communities establish relationships with public officials and institutions.

These relationships may provide communities with the opportunity to access external financial, political and supportive resources. According to the Department of Human Settlements (SA, 2009:13) a decentralised approach to participation will prioritise opportunities at local level and will enable the broader contribution of skills, labour, creativity and financial and other resources.

The Urban Development Framework (SA, 1997:33) states that for successful local economic development to take place the process must include the participation of the local political sphere, the community and the business sector. Figure 25 illustrates the role players in community participation according to Smith (1999:6).

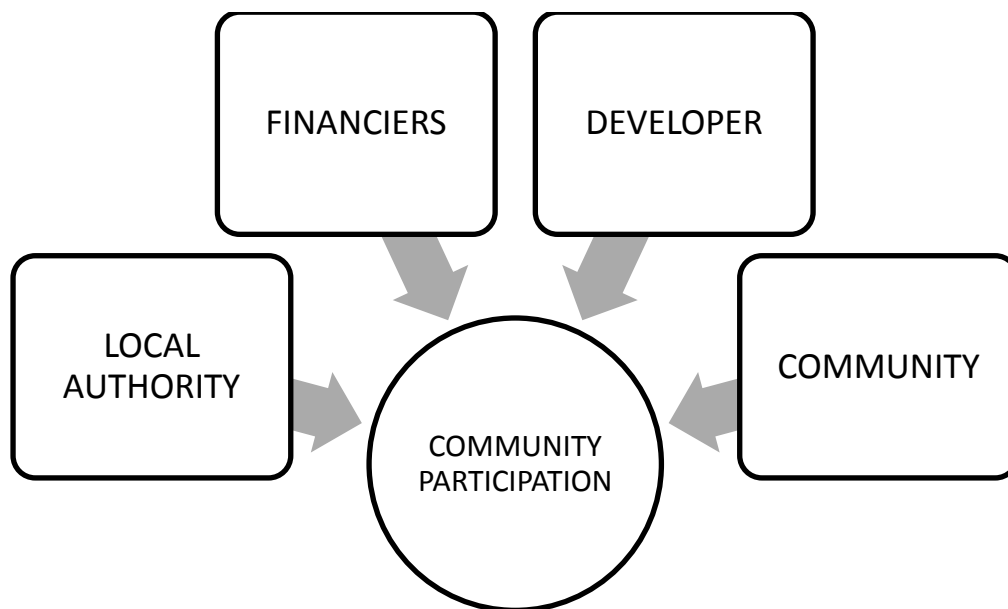


Figure 25: Role-players in the community participation process

Source: Own construction from Smith (1999:6)

The White Paper on Housing Delivery (SA, 1994:49) states that the maximum degree of public participation should be sought. Public participation is promoted because it minimises public ignorance, anger and the high level of emotion surrounding the release of land and the provision of housing.

The Breaking New Ground Initiative (SA, 2004:22) states that community participation should always be a key component of the planning process. According to the White Paper on Housing Delivery (SA, 1994:80) the South African housing inheritance can be attributed to a top-down ideological development approach in the past. The disadvantages of this ideology can be overcome by a more people-centred development approach.

9.2 Constraints to participatory processes

In South Africa a foremost constraint is a lack of capacity amongst the underprivileged in terms of access to education and mediums of communication. Whilst public participation is viewed as a form of empowerment, it often benefits those who are better equipped to harness its potential (De Villiers, 2001:13). CSIR (2002:54) states that communities have firstly to be fully educated about newly planned developments and changes in government policy with sufficient and in depth information. Only when fully equipped with information and an understanding of said information, can public participation be of true value. With this in mind serious consideration needs to be given to the level of education and the ability of the community to understand planning principles and elementary planning tools such as maps and planning terminology.

The difference in education levels between people in urban and rural areas has shown that public participation is necessary in a more in-depth manner in rural areas (CSIR, 2002:63). In most cases the need for development is strongest in rural locations. Imperato & Ruster (2003:3) states that there exists a desire and potential within low-income communities to manage their own affairs and financial matters and to produce sustainable infrastructure and shelter assets. With an appropriate enabling environment, which includes a commitment to participation processes, this potential can be realised.

It is of extreme importance to establish new and innovative ways of accommodating public participation through the education of especially rural communities and communities in informal settlements. Participation at a broader scale is much more difficult given the sheer number and often diversity of larger areas, thus participatory processes have shown to be much more successful at a projects scale (CSIR, 2002:55). Subsequently measures should be taken to reduce project size and the potential for negative outcomes associated with large scale development. The local context and area-specific conditions should guide the approach followed when striving for successful participation. Methods which are flexible and supportive to local circumstances need to be adopted (Larsen, 2003:1). In this regard it is important that communication processes are focussed on imparting the merits and benefits of proposed development approaches, especially where alternative concepts are advocated.

9.3 Community participation and alternative approaches

In cases where beneficiaries are reluctant to accept alternatives, construction is put on hold and costs increase. Housing departments are often forced to invest in intensive consumer education and intervention strategies (National Department of Human Settlements, 2010: 273). Where alternative construction materials for low-cost housing are to be introduced, it is important to educate and inform the community and its leaders regarding the pros and cons of these alternatives. An example is the construction of prototype or show homes where new materials and layouts are considered. The construction of prototype homes will give uneducated members of the community the opportunity to experience the alternatives suggested and to form opinions about these new options. The size and finishes of prototype homes have to adhere to the same quality and size as the final suggested product would. Any misguidance would denote an unsuccessful participation process, as participation would be guided by the product experienced and seen beforehand. Where the building of prototypes would prove impractical due to resource limitations, the alternative materials suggested have to be demonstrated in a visual and understandable manner.

Out of empirical research conducted in Rose Valley, Oudtshoorn, (see Chapter 12, p 185) it is ascertained that only when members of the community understand the benefits of alternatives such as higher density living, will they consider them as equal or better alternatives to traditional practices. Many of the Rose Valley settlers were opposed to concepts which did not meet traditional expectations until the benefits made possible by the delivery of alternative development concepts were explained.

When trying to implement alternative layouts and construction materials in low-cost housing delivery, community participation becomes of even greater importance. Residents have to understand and agree to the materials and configurations which their home will consist of. Providing alternatives to which the community is apposed will contradict the aim of implementing alternatives: to better satisfy the needs of the people and create thriving communities in the form of sustainable human settlements. According to the National Department of Human Settlements (2010: 274) the most prominent measure to ensure the implementation of alternatives is an investment in consumer education. Beneficiaries need to comprehend the materials, their strengths and weaknesses and maintenance requirements. In order to secure the successful realisation of alternatives, community buy-in should be secured prior to the construction of houses using alternative building technologies. Participation should not only impart physical benefits in the form of delivering homes of a better quality, but should also provide for longer term benefits such as economic growth and development.

Participation should thus provide the opportunity for skill transfer to take place. The Housing Code (SA, 2000:7) states that housing should be developed in a manner which empowers communities and individual beneficiaries, through skills transfer and economic development. Low-cost housing projects should as far as possible provide the community with employment opportunities and the opportunity to practice skills learnt as a trade. Transferring these skills can be accommodated and facilitated with the use of effective participation and communication between stakeholders.

A change in the perception of what the right to housing entails is also needed. It is sadly practically impossible to provide every South African needing a home, with a freestanding sizeable home on a separate stand. The resources in terms of available land and the financial implications given the size of available subsidies, makes this unfeasible. Convincing communities of this fact has to start with public participation processes and personal interaction with communities by planners, authorities and political leaders.

9.4 The consequences of participatory processes

According to CSIR (2002:73) community participation has had a varied success rates. The process works well in the People's Housing Process (PHP), but has also caused the collapse of certain water projects and urban service-delivery programmes. According to Twala (2006:2) the focus on participation in South Africa can be observed most clearly in the People's Housing Process programme. The PHP programme endeavours to support community efforts, facilitate access to subsidies, promote the cost effective use of resources, foster partnerships between government spheres, civil society and the public sector, regularise settlements, build capacity and skills, facilitate skills transfer for economic empowerment and employment and apply state funding to achieve maximum leverage of non-governmental resources. The level and type of community participation therefore needs to be clearly defined in both policy and program planning.

Mafukidze (2009:12) states that participation has the potential for negative outcomes such as the entrenchment of mistrust for the government, disillusionment, conflict and fragmentation. To combat these potential negative outcomes community participation should be considered as one of central components to any development approach, instead of being included in the process as an added extra. Empowering communities should become a key outcome in its own right (Morris, 2005:7).

Lizarralde (2008:2) argues that: 'participation has become extremely fashionable but has been so widely expressed that it does not seem to mean anything clear anymore.' According to Lizarralde participation has thus become a catchphrase and a box to tick for developers wishing to receive governmental approval of their plans. Lizarralde's constraints to community based approaches are illustrated by Figure 24.

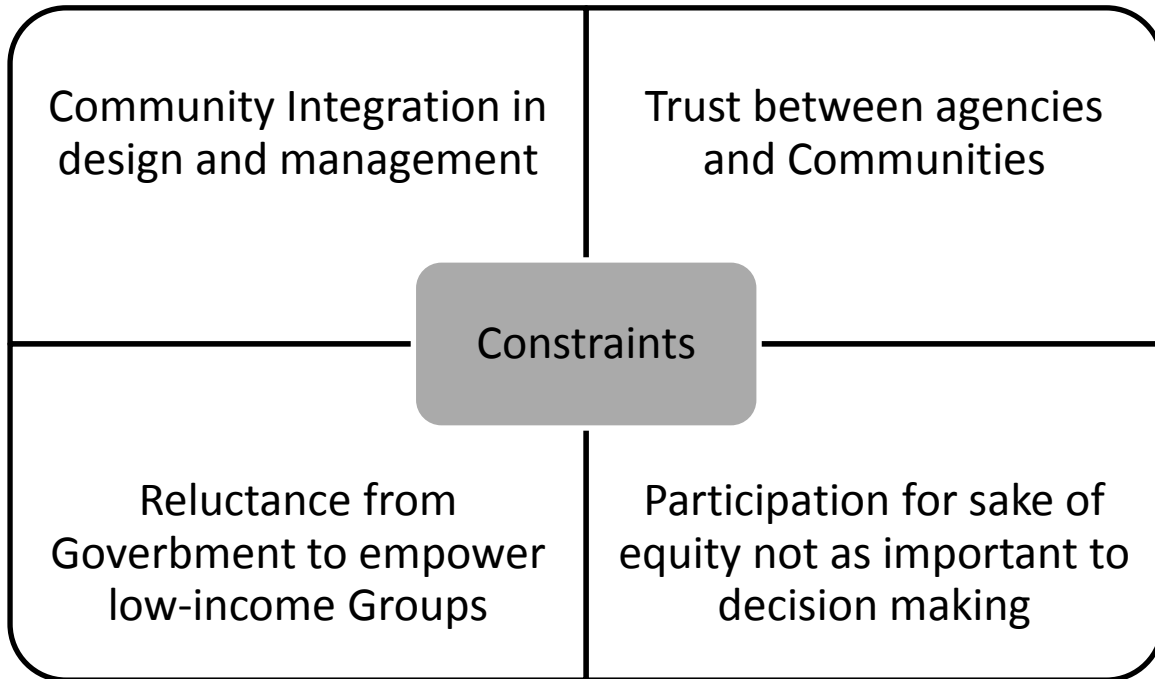


Figure 26: Constraints to community participation

Source: Own construction based on Lizarralde (2008:4)

Lizarralde (2008:6) further argues that political and administrative barriers delay community based projects when project objectives and outcomes do not sit well with authorities, leaving the needs of the community as secondary. He also argues that the public/private partnerships promoted by government can often reduce the level of participation by communities by transferring large stakes in projects to non-governmental organisations (Lizarralde, 2008:11). A balance between the inputs and interests of all stakeholders will facilitate the highest success rate. In this regard one should not place too much focus on either the community or on development agencies.

According to Senyal (2008:227) a preoccupation with community participation and a bottom-up approach could imply a disregard for planning at the top which remains a critical institutional mechanism for initiating change. Institutions commonly associated with planning from the top, such as political parties, labour unions, and private enterprises, are significant players that can facilitate or obstruct development trajectories.

The risks associated with community participation can be largely associated with poorly planned, structured and managed participatory initiatives. Where incompetent planners are at the helm conflict intermediation may lack effectiveness, credibility may be lost, discussions may lack focus and projects may be susceptible to be commandeered by political parties for their own gain (Imparato & Ruster, 2003:16).

Participation processes can also be costly to undertake and depend heavily on political will, time investments and resources. Given the extensive demands on governmental resources and the strained nature of delivery, the justification of a commitment to participatory programmes, is often an issue. Many argue that money could be better spent on more pressing needs such as physical housing and service delivery (De Villiers, 2001:73).

Community participation is a very controversial subject and in light of this many authors have expressed different opinions on the matter. Table 12 summarises some of these outlooks.

Table 12: An overview of different views on participation

DOCUMENT	QUOTE	VALUE
BNG (2004:22)	'...always be a key component of the planning process.'	Even when participation poses extreme challenges.
CSIR (2002:73)	'Participation should also focus on community-organisations such as civic groups, labour unions'	Ensuring equal participation and representation
Habitat Agenda (UN 1996:16)	'We commit ourselves to the strategy of enabling all key actors in the public, private and community sectors to play an effective role'	Sometimes difficult to comply with everyone's needs and visions
Housing Code (SA 2009:7)	'Empowers communities and individual beneficiaries, through skills transfer and economic development. This is achieved through participation.'	Education is an important aspect.
Lizarralde (2008:6)	'political and administrative barriers delay community based projects'	Input from communities not always first priority in planning.
Mafukidze (2009)	'participation has the potential for negative outcomes... disillusionment, conflict and fragmentation'	Different opinions and backgrounds create conflict.
Smith (1999:6)	'social compact' that must be signed between key players: the community, the developer, local authorities and financiers...'	Each player should understand its role and the importance of others.
Urban Development Framework (SA, 1997:15)	'For LED to be successful, the process must include the participation of local political, community...'	Politics should set community upliftment as a priority, secondary to its own agenda.
White Paper (SA, 1994:76)	'emphasises the importance of local participation in decision-making'	Can only participate when properly informed.

Constructed from various sources as stated (2012)

9.5 Conclusions on the importance of community participation

This chapter clearly demonstrates the increasing importance and relevance of community participation in a democracy such as South Africa. Care should however be taken to ensure that the processes and role players involved in participation are managed to arrive at the best possible outcome: a development which bares the needs of the community in mind and reflects their preferences and way of life. It should also be noted that planning professionals should use their professional expertise to guide processes and to manage expectations, thereby ensuring that the often ignorant community does not become the project leader. Care should thus be taken not to fall into the pitfalls and problems which participation can often bring.

The following section of this study will capture the empirical evidence collected in the form of structured interviews, the investigation of South African case studies and the distribution of questionnaires.

Chapter 10 of the empirical investigation will capture structured interviews held with planning professionals from various South African provinces.