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Community Participation in Rural Development: A Case for Environmental Assessment.

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ABSTRACT

In the face of the popularity of sustainable development, rural development must have an environmentally - friendly posture-thus the need for environmental assessment of proposed projects. This paper makes a case for community participation in environmental assessment addressing the obvious advantages therein. It asserts that the low level of community participation in environmental assessment may have a negative effect on the effectiveness of the performance of the project. It finally makes a call for proper legislation that will give the community a greater and higher level of participation in environmental assessment.

INTRODUCTION

It is now an obvious reality that development cannot be sustained if it lacks adequate concerns in the management of the environment. As such, the carrying out of the environmental implications (i.e environmental assessment) of policies, programmes and project before they are embarked upon is becoming a popular world-wide activity.

In Nigeria, the promulgation of the environmental impact assessment decree 1992, legislated the compulsory activity of environmental impact assessment of specified 'mandatory study activities' (section 13) and other provisions concerning environmental assessment has been promulgated. This is obviously a positive step in the management of the Nigerian environment as it will guarantee a pattern of sustainable development. This paper however, identifies as missing the participation of the community in environmental assessment.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PARTICIPATION: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The concept of community is poorly defined in literature as most definitions are informal but are used loosely to denote a socio-spatial entity (Midgley 1986:24). This notion of locality in these descriptions are ambiguous as the United Nations (1975a) asserted that it can refer simultaneously to neighbourhoods, villages, districts, towns and even cities.

Marcia (1974) opined however that communities are solidarity institutions, primary interaction and institutionally distinct groups. Community as solidarity is defined by those spheres or institutions of the society whose functions are to produce solidarity e.g family, ethnic groups, residential groups. Community as primary interaction is defined not only on institutional context but on the nature of interactions. Thus community may refer to interpersonal interaction characterised by informal relationships. As institutionally distinct a community may be involved as group of people that share a range of economic, social and political institutions. He also asserted that the most basic criteria in defining a community are common ties and solidarity. Thus, while all communities are societies, not all societies are communities.

Although there are different views, about what participation entails, many writers quote United Nations economic and social council resolution 1929 (LVIII). This resolution states that participation requires the voluntary and democratic involvement of people in contributing to the development efforts. Sharing equitably in the benefits derived from these and, Decision-making in respect of setting goals, formulating policies and planning and implementing economic and social development programmes. Thus, Midgley et al. (op. Cit), opined that these three elements suggest that an authentic community participation in social development programmes is when the present groups in the community have an effective role in choosing social development programme, if they contribute together with the rest of the community in the implementation of decisions and if they derive equitable benefits from the programmes.

White (1982:19) observed that the involvement of the population in implementation can hardly be identified as community participation, while Bugnicourt (1982) noted as in the typical Africa co-operative whose status, internal resolutions and modes of operation have been predetermined by officials whom local people do not support.

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

According to Poloamina and Fajingbesi (1990:125), Environmental Assessment generates information on conditions and trends of changes in the environment as a basis for making decisions and taking actions necessary to minimize potentially negative inputs and to enhance opportunities for beneficial environmental effects. In Nigeria today, with the enactment of the environmental impact assessment decree 1992, specific projects - which are vital for rural development cannot proceed except an extensive environmental assessment is done. Such project include large scale agricultural activities, large scale drainage and irrigation, land reclamation, forestry projects, building of large-scale housing, industrial, transportation facilities, power generation and transmission, waste treatment and disposal and water supply.

By the provision of section 7 of the decree, the public is empowered to make comments on the environmental impact assessment of an activity before the Federal Environmental Protection Agency (FEPA) gives its verdict. This paper opines that this provision needs a change in that the public input is only expected when the impact assessment has been made and not while the assessment is made. It seems to be a kind of Pseudo-participation which has not proved to be beneficial to the environment. According to Shepherd and Bowler (1997:725) citing various authorities, there are four basic positions for public involvement in environmental assessment. They are: regarded as proper, fair conduct of democratic government in public decision making activities. Ways of ensuring that projects meet citizens' need and are suitable to the affected public. It guarantees that the project carries mere legitimacy and less hostility if potentially affected parties can influenced the decision making process. Decisions are better when local knowledge and values are included and when expert knowledge is publicly examined.

Renard (1991:4-9) asserted that with respect to resource management, the community should have a first place in that only the local people know how they value their environment, local resources and their premium on development alternatives. Bambergam (1988:5-6) also listed the benefits of community participation to include the sharing of project cost, increased efficiency, building beneficiary capacity and increased empowerment. Though opponents of community participation in environmental assessment usually build their stand point on the fact that it can reduce the speed of project initiation, or that the community are not knowledgeable, it could prove more difficult and that planners can loose control over the project.

THE WAY FORWARD FOR NIGERIA

This paper has reported that in Nigeria, the contribution of the public to environmental assessment is usually late and in real terms, ineffective due to legislature and socio-economic factors like poverty and ignorance. For example, advertisement column for public participation are usually placed in the newspapers, however, several Nigerian's especially in the rural area, don't read such. The implication of the situation is that: The community only minimally influence the projects location, size or type or in the extreme case, be totally ignored. The community's role is limited to the project feasibility stage instead of their participation during the life of the programme.

The community is not legally empowered to question the establishment in any deviation in the use of the technology, waste disposal or any other changes the establishment made after the environmental assessment was done. Consequently, the community may prove hostile to the project and as is the case in the Niger-Delta today, where Shell Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria (SPDC) estimate that over 60 percent of spills and leakages affecting its installation are caused by sabotage (The guardian, 28th December, 1992:7) apart from looting of equipment, maiming of lives, etc. in fact. The case of the Niger-Delta State is most obvious case of the need to mobilize community participation early in the environmental assessment of projects.

As a result we propose that: The environmental impact assessment decree 1992, should be reviewed with the aim of giving the community a much earlier participatory role in environmental assessment before project planning and decision taking are too advanced and the ability to monitor the adherence to accepted programmes, policies and plan of the establishments. The community must be made to be aware of all intended projects that need environmental assessment, the potential impacts of the activities, the magnitude and ameliorative measures. In reality, the state environmental protection agency should be adequately empowered to supervise and control environmental issues. It has been argued that the highest level of social development in any community prevails when the grassroots people participate fully in decision making that affect them and the goals of rural development (UN. Op. Cit)

CONCLUSION

If rural development is all about improving the lot of the rural environment and her people, it is just reasonable that the people have an input in decision making. This paper has shown the obvious benefits of such. It is

expected that rural development activities be geared towards reduced conflicts and better environmental consideration - which early community participation will guarantee.

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