

Scholarship Community Engagement for Sustainable Development: A Case for Intervention by The Midlands State University in Mberengwa District In Zimbabwe

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Abstract

University involvement in communities is not a new idea. Universities have been known to be engaged with communities as a way of taking scholarship and knowledge outside the confines of institutions. They have not remained ivory towers but have established a tradition of active participation in communities. In the last three decades, the idea of engagement has re-emerged as a key theme in two different but related literatures. First, community engagement is a central theme in the new literature about the nature and meaning of higher education. Scholars and policy makers have been raising issues on the potential value of higher education. Second, focus is on problems and limits of prevailing academic research methodologies, assumptions, aims, politics and practices of professional scholars. In the same breath, the Midlands State University in Gweru, Zimbabwe has been engaged in dry drought prone Mberengwa District in an effort to intervene on poverty issues to foster sustainable development. This paper sets out to discuss the processes of the development of a model based on the utilization of local resources and the application of science and indigenous knowledge. Methodologically, the paper realizes that sustainable development is a multi-disciplinary phenomena requiring participation by various faculties for diversified expertise. The study shall also benefit from literatures from around the globe on previous studies and conferences on community engagement. Findings are largely derived from progress recorded from the project through interviews, participation and observation. The project named Community Engagement through Science and Indigenous Knowledge (CESIK) – the Gomututu project, is already enjoying tangible results. Recommendations are that educational institutions should be encouraged to participate actively within communities they draw students from and members of staff should work with communities to marry their theory with practice.

Key words: Community Engagement, sustainable development, role of higher learning institutions and meaning of expertise

Background

The origins of the Zindowe project lie in the quest to intervene in the persistent and intensifying drought experiences of the Mberengwa communities. Mberengwa lies in the agro-ecological - region 5 of Zimbabwe together with Chivi and Matebeleland south. The region receives little rainfall which has continued to dwindle over the years. The maize crop fails each year in the region but members of these communities continue to try their luck with it. Those who have resorted to small grains have been harvesting considerably. The realization that the Midlands State University could chip in with knowledge and skill to reorient the Mberengwa communities towards sustainable practices of farming, livestock, poultry, and hot-culture is the major inspiration behind this attempt. The genesis of the Zindowe project dates back to October 2010 according to Community Engagement for Science and Indigenous Knowledge minutes of 2010 October.

Introduction

The assertion that engaging campus and community adds transformative value to community work is not in question in this presentation. Just at the onset of 2012 a joint conference was held in Thailand whose aim was to create a venue where interested participants could contemplate on the central question of how universities can vigorously become an integral part of a global effort to create and maintain a just and sustainable world. Contrary to assertions by defensive university professionals that academics do not owe it to the community to prove their worth, vigorous re-assertions of the practicality of bringing universities to the communities have taken center stage. Universities in the 21st century are at a crossroad. With a student population of 20 000 and still growing, the Midlands State University together with many other institutions of higher learning have the potential of making a difference to local and global concerns. While universities have to produce graduates who have skills to operate effectively in a globally competitive environment, it is also widely recognized that its fundamental challenge is to provide an ethical knowledge base responsive to societal needs, and contribute to the common wealth and well-being of its entire people. Indeed the complexities of our

unsustainable societies can present new opportunities as well as challenges for universities to reclaim their relevance and responsibility to society.

Themes, goals and declarations of international conferences on higher education in the past decade have indeed pointed to a perceived need for a new vision and paradigm of higher education. The vision has to be underpinned by participatory development ideals. There is a clarion call for university to critically examine itself in order to move beyond its traditional role of educating the younger generation through “teaching and research.” Various attempts in different parts of the world have started to address these concerns. An effective and high-impact approach is the engagement of universities with communities, be they local communities, neighborhoods, industries, civil societies, government and non-government agencies. Engagement goes beyond mere outreach, as universities seek mutually beneficial relationships with communities to address community issues and needs with a commitment to sharing and reciprocity which embraces two-way partnerships.

Nevertheless, given the crisis-ridden world in which we now live, questions posed to universities in terms of their roles, responsibility, relevance and contribution to the creation of a sustainable future have never become more vital. The taken-for-granted goals and missions of universities based on the premise of supplying societies with “capable pools of human resource,” may continue to hold if sustainable development goal is left untouched. Thus, we need to self assess as academics to see why we are producing more and more graduates with less and less social commitment and concerns in maintaining the balance in both human and natural ecology and what can we do to reinvent ourselves so that universities can become more relevant and responsive to the changing global challenges.

Universities with their vast resources and insufficiently-tapped capabilities have to make a critical step in becoming a genuine partner in creating a sustainable future. By engaging with communities, with respect and appreciation for mutual learning, participatory knowledge creation and social

justice, communities will help universities earn the position and status in the society.

The Midlands State University

As a University in its nascence, the Midlands State University is well placed to begin with a difference, to make an impact in the community from an early stage. Given the competition among institutions of higher learning to make a lasting impression in different communities, to fail to join hands with the community would be a step in the wrong direction. At a conference in Madrid, Spain, on Building the Engaged Universities under the theme “Moving beyond the Ivory-Tower, on June 14-16, 2011, Professor Bhebe, Vice-Chancellor of Midlands State University, said:

“Midlands State University (MSU) was established in 1999 as the fourth state university with a mandate to widen access to higher education in Zimbabwe. MSU is one of the nine government –funded public institutions in Zimbabwe. The University’s commitment to civic engagement is distinctly encapsulated in its vision. Our strategic plan reflects a heightened consciousness to social responsibility through collaboration with diverse stakeholders. The University has established a multidisciplinary Community Research and Training Centre in Zindowe Village, Mberengwa, a rural district, after observing the hardships experienced in the locality due to global climate changes in the Eastern and Southern Africa. The project is designed to improve food security and health through education and training of youths and women.”

Note should be made that community engagement by Midlands State University, coupled with other achievements though, have raised the flagship of the University leading the Vice Chancellor to scoop the Manager of the Year Southern Region Award as well as the much coveted Manager of the year in Zimbabwe as a whole.

Unreliable rainfall patterns have caused most rural communities in Zimbabwe and in Mberengwa specifically to depend on food donations during drought

years, despite the fact that the local environment traditionally supplied alternative food sources in such need. Baughan M. (2005) to restore equilibrium in the nutritional chain, the engagement seeks to increase food security through the utilization of local resource such as wild fruits, vegetables, medicinal herbs, honey and fish, as well as cultivation of small grain and drilling of boreholes for each headman. Restoring the productive contribution of wild resources is a vital step towards increasing food security and child nutrition, as well as fostering a culture of preserving the woodlands. Wild fruit trees are being incorporated into environmental programs, agro-forestry, agricultural projects and programs dealing with sustained food security for the peoples of Mberengwa, Zimbabwe and Africa at large

Implementation Phase

In implementing the concept of scholarship community engagement, cognizance was taken of the fact that development planners and international agencies who attempted to promote social and economic reforms for rural sustainable development failed because they had relatively little knowledge of the conditions they were seeking to transform and with little certainty that their theories, policies and project would produce the desired effects. (Rondinelli p15) In our case one weekend I (Gumbo) went home to discuss my idea of establishing a community centre for sustainable development, fortunately my visit coincided with a meeting that had been called by the local councilor together with the sub-chief. The meeting was attended by all village heads under Sub-chief Shopera and all the men in that community. I briefed the Sub-chief initially and, he in turn asked me to address the people, on the concept of sustainable development which was received with joy and open hands. The only comment was that we should not be like politicians who promise heaven and earth but deliver nothing. I promised them that it would not be the case.. The following week I was back with a team from different departments of the University to listen to the community's needs and challenges so that we could use the information as the basis of our implementation strategies. On the same day, a community committee was elected representing each of the 12 village head for the implementation of the project

Infrastructure

In 1902, Perry Holden was offered a position as professor of agronomy at Iowa State university. In accepting this position, he said the following:

Take the college to the people. Go to the people and help them where they are, as they are, under their conditions, with their problems. See that knowledge is translated into actual life, and living by the people of the State. (Holden quoted in Lord 1939, p.50).

To ensure that the university would live by the people, we decided to put up infrastructure on the four and half hectares I offered for the establishment of a community centre. While construction is in progress, the following are in place now, a shed for meetings and training, two boreholes, a generator, student residence, ablution facilities, fowl-run students' and community gardens. The whole area is fenced. Other planned buildings, include: A big hall for vocational skills development that include among others sewing, computers, carpentry, and library, cum education centre. We will develop sports facilities.

Our approach to community engagement is that it should not be viewed as being separate from or unrelated to, teaching and research mission of university but rather as a way of pursuing them in collaboration with the community. In a way our approach addresses questions raised by Boyer (1990) in which he raises practical and theoretical questions relating to Scholars engaging in community work. First he raises questions on how and why might scholars choose to become engaged in public work beyond the campus and secondly, what roles would scholars play, what contributions would they make as active participants in public work? And lastly what kinds of challenges and barriers would scholars encounter in their efforts to become engaged in public work, and how should they respond to them?

Community Participation and Challenges

To begin with, we allowed the community to elect their committee as they saw fit. Whilst they tried to make sure that all village heads were represented in the committee, some vocal individuals who had doubts about the project

did not attend the meeting in which committee members were elected. The community committee worked very well in mobilizing the community to mould bricks and providing sand and required materials for the construction of the structures identified above. However, the speed and enthusiasm waned during the rain season when the community was fully engaged in tilling their lands through to harvest period. After the harvest, a ward councillor who is also a headman organised his people to say that the existing committee had failed to deliver the required services such as making sure that the pre-school was functional and the community garden was established. The meeting which was called to dissolve the committee had a heated argument in that the majority of the people did not agree with the suggestion to dissolve the committee. A date was set for the election. We happened to be on site and pretended that we had no interest in what was happening. After the meeting a number of people from the community spoke to us expressing their displeasure in regards to the intended elections because it was going to divide the community since the village head who had suggested removal of the committee has over 40 homesteads yet others have less than 10. Power struggle was emerging, and such unanticipated situation required a carefully thought out solution. We indicated that we would be present during their meeting set out for elections. On the day for elections, we came with a solution that made everybody happy.

We suggested that the existing committee continue with their construction of the infrastructure while the rest of the community was divided into 13 subcommittees responsible for specific activities such as garden, mushroom, beekeeping, rabbits, chickens etc. In a way shared power became a central feature of our partnership in which all parties had a hand in negotiating strategies that shaped strong flexible relationship. One of the challenges we realised was that the initial committee was made up of professionals who did not have much time for the project and did not include the powerbase of the community that is village heads who sometimes made decisions on the project without consulting committee members. In the new structure that we created we established what we called the senate which was made up of the 12 village heads and the main committee which now includes chairpersons of the subcommittees, while the subcommittees were ministries of government with specific responsibilities. This structure ensures participation

by all members as defined by Bandura (1986 in Roberts (2000) report in which he said “ there should be adequate shared knowledge and skills with effective interactive and synergistic dynamics to expand to find solutions to challenges.” We have incorporated government workers within the community to be part of the project. In our discussion with them it became clear that the disgruntled government workers in rural areas are not champions of development or agents of change. Therefore in the face of global climatic change, the quality of life of rural people continues to deteriorate because as we have seen government employees in the rural areas cannot adequately direct and control social and economic progress, let alone initiate change.

Students Participation

As has been pointed out earlier on, the main objective of this project is food security, improve the quality of life with special focus on nutrition. The University students working with the community carried a simple nutrition gap analysis by finding out what people eat. The students from the department of food science collected indigenous fruits local crops, vegetables and tubers for nutrients analysis. As a result the students have produced 21 products of local resources with a list of nutrients found in each product. The students from the psychology department address social issues within the community. As a result of students involvement in the community, they were judged the best among all universities in Zimbabwe and they went to compete at International level in the United States of America where they came fourth out of 38 regional and international universities. Some of the students have paid their school fees through joint projects with the community.

Socio-Economic Impact

Members of the community no longer buy vegetables for their consumption. Some are selling to the adjacent communities. Some members of the community have started keeping both indigenous chickens and broilers for commercial purposes. Over a thousand birds have been sold and an estimated gross of \$14 000 (USD) has been realized among the members of

the community working together with the students. White meat and eggs are now available for domestic consumption. Those who were unable to pay school fees are now able to do so.

The impact of the project can be assessed through the achievement or lack of it by each department. While all faculties in the University were challenged to demonstrate their relevance and commitment to rural community sustainable development twelve departments have so far submitted their project activities, and only seven activities have so far taken off to a good start.

The history department was the first to clear the ground through community participation in which the community was challenged to identify factors that negatively affect the growth and development of rural projects. Politics, laziness, illiteracy and unfair distribution of resources were identified among others. The community provided solutions as to what should be done to ensure the success of this particular project. As a result the community is operating as a team providing labour when required to do so at the project. Teamwork has resulted in the community together with the university students building a small dam which has provided drinking water for their animals. In response to illiteracy among some members of the community, the department of adult education introduced adult literacy classes at two primary schools, there are very few men in these classes. This is functional literacy in that, the women and men are involved in projects so that they see the relevance of going to school at that age. To improve the pass rates at the neighbouring schools, the department of applied education organized workshops for all teachers, the results were positive in that the local school near the project produced the best O'level examination results among the rural secondary schools in the district while the other school received a prize for the best improved secondary school in the Midlands Province.

Training (education phase)

The community has had training in mushroom growing, construction of beehives and beekeeping, construction of simple fowl runs and keeping of rural indigenous chickens for commercial purposes. It is hoped that each village

head will be able through the chicken project drill a borehole for his community. However eight boreholes have been so far drilled while two have had water points sited in preparation for drilling boreholes. This chain reaction is driven by sons and daughters from the communities who are working in cities.

The community is also being educated on the relationship between themselves and the ecosystem because ecosystem degradation has dangerous consequences on human well being. We have common needs with nature we need more knowledge of services that nature offers to us. The community is being taught the economic value and financial capacity needed for ecosystem conservation.

Opportunities and Challenges

This project offers opportunities and challenges to the community, lecturers and students. The students and lecturers have an opportunity to carry out practical intervention or case studies in which they can provide possible solutions to socio-economic problems of the community and that lessons learnt in this project can be applied in other communities. However some of the challenges relate to the fact that the concept of community engagement is still new to many academics within the University. Many of the young lecturers are not used to voluntary work and have no rural experience. As a result, some of the proposals that have been presented have not been implemented because they claim that they are too busy teaching and researching for their graduate studies. Those who have linked the studies to the project have started in earnest. Our education system regarded practical as inferior which was meant for those who are academically weak. The other challenge is that some members of the community perceive the university as a donor.

Gomututu at a Future Date

We envisage a situation in which the community will have through the various project improve the quality of life. A community that will continue to be self motivated to value a high standard of living as opposed to seeing richness in the number of livestock while they live in poverty. We see a community that will have clean water and using solar energy instead candles wood to light their homes

Conclusion

We live in an academic world where the concept of interdisciplinarity is given a great deal of lip service, yet we know that sustainable development is a multi-sectoral phenomena which requires an interdisciplinary approach. This project makes an attempt to bring all disciplines together to address challenges faced by the community as a result of the global climatic change. It is hoped that the successful components of the project can be replicated in other communities.

This article presents an opportunity to share knowledge about implementing projects that advance social development. As aptly observed in the UNDP Global Event Working Paper, with enhanced capacity, communities will be in a better position to hold their local and national governments accountable, adapt to change and to chart their own future. Universities can contribute to developing such capacity and better fulfill their research and education mandates if they engage directly with communities.

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