

Critically discuss the
life of a project in the
context of community
development



Good community development is action that helps people to recognize and develop their ability and potential and organize themselves to respond to problems and needs which they share. This is usually achieved through community development projects, in which there is active participation of the people in all the phases of the project cycle. These phases include the initiation, planning, implementation and evaluation of a project. It is the intention of this paper to critically examine the life of a project in the context of community development.

The approach used in this paper is of looking at each of the phases of the project life cycle separately and also to discuss how they are correlated in a continuous process. A project is defined as a temporary endeavor with a defined beginning and end – constrained by time, funding or deliverables, undertaken to meet unique goals and objectives, typically to bring about beneficial change or added value (Enriquez; 2003). It is an individual or collaborative enterprise planned and designed to achieve an aim.

Community development is a structured intervention that gives communities greater control over the conditions that affect their lives. It is the process of increasing the strength and effectiveness of communities, improving people's quality of life, and enabling people to participate in decision making to achieve greater long term control over their lives (Chambers; 2003: 03). A community development project will therefore not only lead to the achievement of certain objectives, but also improves the capacity of the community members and empowers them to undertake future projects.

Community development is a process whereby community members come together to collectively generate solutions to common problems or take advantage of opportunities that will benefit the whole community (Cernea; 1998). Enriquez (2003) is of the view that community development should be long term, well planned, inclusive and equitable, holistic and integrated into the bigger picture, initiated and supported by community members, benefit the community and must be grounded in experience that leads to best practices.

These characteristics are important in the life of a community development project. This is because community development aims to empower community members, to give them a sense of ownership and to equip them for the future. It is therefore important to keep in mind that community development is not service delivery, social work or welfare nor is it a “feel good” exercise. It is actually a self-directed process aimed at a broad range of economic, social and environmental community benefits that involves a lot of action and work and builds the ability of the community to manage change.

According to Green, Haines and Halebsky (2000) the project life cycle refers to a logical sequence of activities to accomplish the project's goals or objectives. Regardless of scope or complexity, any project goes through a series of stages during its life. There is first an initiation or birth phase, in which the outputs and critical success factors are defined, followed by a planning phase, characterized by breaking down the project into smaller parts or tasks, an execution phase, in which the project plan is executed, and

last, a closure or exit phase, that marks the completion of the project (Green et al; 2000).

Project activities must be grouped into phases because by doing so, the project manager and the core team can efficiently plan and organize resources for each activity, and also objectively measure achievement of goals and justify their decisions to move ahead, correct, or terminate (Burchell and Sternlieb; 1995). Diverse project management tools and methodologies prevail in the different project cycle phases, as discussed in this essay. In the context of community development, however, the project life cycle is a continual process.

It begins when the community development worker makes the first contact with the people in the community and continues through the stages, right up to the evaluation stage, where another cycle may begin. However, the phases, though distinguished by the activities carried out in each of them, are not rigid in nature. This means that there is a constant interplay between stages (Swanepoel and De Beer; 2007). For instance, during the implementation stage, it may be found to be imperative to revisit the planning stage and make some corrections or adjustments to meet any challenges faced.

In community development, there is active participation of community members in the project from conception to closure, or the start of another cycle. Committees may be selected to oversee the project implementation, but everyone will be involved in decision making, needs identification, objectives setting, planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. This

is critical in community development as it leads to the development of skills and abilities in individuals, motivates the people to be cooperative and fosters social cohesion.

It therefore ensures that the project is taken to completion. The role of the community development worker is mainly to give advice and link the community with key experts and stakeholders who can assist in the development project. This is the first and most important stage in the life of a project within the context of community development. Swanepoel and De Beer (2007: 148) note that “ what happens at this stage can make or break the development effort”.

As the common saying goes, “ the first impression lasts”, a negative first contact is likely to negatively affect the life of a community development project, while a positive first contact is likely to enhance the project life cycle. For instance, if the community development worker takes the position of an expert while placing that of the people as of novices, the people may resent the attitude and/or develop a grudge against him or her for disrupting their lives. This is an example of a negative first contact. As such, they will withhold their cooperation and support, which will hinder the effectiveness of project implementation.

A public meeting should not be used to establish contact because it places the community development worker in the position of a redeemer. The people may assume that they cannot do anything without him or her (Swanepoel and De Beer; 2007). This is also a negative first contact. It defeats the main goal of community development, which is appraising the

people's innate abilities (Swanepoel and De Beer; 2007: 148). The contact making process starts with the community development worker's entry into the community (Swanepoel and De Beer; 2007). As such, he or she must make preparations in advance.

This includes getting organizations to support him or her, obtaining funds for the venture and deciding on how to approach the community and putting a strategy in place for both the good and bad scenarios. Swanepoel and De Beer (2007) reiterate that community development workers, however, must follow the "learning process approach", that is, enter the community without a preconceived objective or programme for the people to adopt and follow. The community development worker can have an operational strategy, but that only covers what their approach will be, not what the people should do.

A community development worker enters into a society where people have adapted to their situation and have come to accept it. Thus, entering a community with the proclamation of change is not advisable. It is very likely to turn into a negative first contact. What is best at this point is to display empathy and interest. The psychological effects of these attributes are so profound. Swanepoel and De Beer (2007: 159) support this notion by pointing out that "people accept a community development worker so much more easily if there is obvious compassion present and this compassion generates enthusiasm for a project."

Thus, expressing these attributes should be the main concern of the community development worker during the first contact. Later on, through a process of awareness creation, the people will reach a point where they will

realize that change is needed. As the community development worker makes first contact with the people, he or she needs to establish rapport (Kahn; 1991). This is done as he or she learns more about the people and their area and they also learn about him or her. The community development worker should not just expect people to come to her.

He or she should go to where the people are or meet and must show an interest in their lives. Thus, there is also need to participate in their activities and talk to them in the course of the activities. For example, chatting with the women while helping them to fetch some water at the well. This makes them appreciate the community development worker and regard him or her with respect and acceptance. To aid this process, the community development worker can engage in informal talks, friendliness and show a keen interest in the people and their circumstances, and by just being present (Bryson; 2005).

Regular presence builds a strong relationship. It is also best to blend in with the people by dressing in a way that is acceptable in their area, and behaving in a way that compliments their behavior. Appearing aloof may have them cast the community development worker as an outcast. The community development worker also needs to ask for advice from community members about who to contact and how to best approach them, so as to avoid negative first contacts. All these activities are necessary because the community development worker needs to first gain the confidence of those he or she intends to help.

Trust is the foundation of a community development worker's success and it must be carefully developed and nurtured (Swanepoel and De Beer; 2007). The community's acceptance must be earned and based on the correct understanding of the situation. During this contact making phase, it is also important to find out who else is working within the area (Mansuri and Rao; 2003). This will prevent conflicts, duplication of activities and will foster cooperation. If the community development worker just comes and initiates projects without acknowledging the ones already in progress, confusion is inevitable.

This is because key participants in the projects may also be playing the same role in the other projects already in progress. It is also necessary for the community development worker to acknowledge the leaders in the area and ensure that they know that he or she is working in the area (Swanepoel and De Beer; 2007: 158). Besides establishing good relations with them, this acknowledgement will ensure that their permission or assistance in later ventures within the project will be guaranteed. However, there is need to be vigilant so that the community development worker avoids being associated with false or unpopular leaders by the community.

Such an association will destroy the trust that would have been built and ultimately hinder the effectiveness of the project, as the people will be unwilling to cooperate. In essence, the contact making process is about the community and the community development worker getting acquainted and getting to a point where they can identify a need that they can address through a project (Swanepoel and De Beer; 2007). The primary concern of the contact making process is to get acquainted and be accepted. Through <https://assignbuster.com/critically-discuss-the-life-of-a-project-in-the-context-of-community-development/>

talking and listening, the community development worker can really get to know the community.

However, there is also a need to make a demographic and sociological study of the area and augment information gained locally and information shared in government and agency offices (Swanepoel and De Beer; 2007). This will enhance the accuracy of the information and will be useful in the drafting of formal reports about the project. Contact can also be made with formal and informal groupings like women's clubs, youth associations and relief organizations to obtain more information (Chambers; 2003).

Research is very important as it helps the community development worker to identify the community's needs. However, as mentioned earlier, community development projects involve participation of community members in all phases of the project life cycle. Thus, during the contact making phase, where needs are identified, the community members are also involved in the research process. The objective of participatory research methodologies is to gather field data in a simple yet reliable manner and to analyze it using local indigenous knowledge and perceptions of reality (Swanepoel and De Beer; 2007).

It has a mobilizing effect that leads to further action and is a part of the contact making phase. According to Wade (1987), the decision to launch a project is merely an outflow of what has been learnt through participatory research methodologies. Participatory research methodologies can be used to identify community needs, survey resources in a community, record history and measure perceptions (Green et al; 2000). This is made easier and

faster as the community members, who are playing the role of researchers are also the subjects of the research.

As such, there is instant collection of information. The community development worker takes the role of development generalist, but that does not mean it is his or her job to address all the needs. Swanepoel and De Beer (2007) explain that it means that he or she must use the information and bring the community into contact with people with relevant knowledge and interest to address the need. For instance, he or she may link the community with agricultural extension officers to help them solve their farming issues.

Participatory research methodologies involve neutralizing biases, learning from and with the people, learning progressively, planning together and triangulation by cross-checking (Chambers; 2003). The advantages of participatory research methodologies are that they empower the community members to take charge of their own lives, they lead to community ownership of projects, they foster social cohesion, they take less time and have low costs, they enable everyone to gain more information and they foster community development.

Some participatory research methodologies techniques include interviews, report writing in the field, workshops and brainstorming. Throughout this process, the role of the community development worker is that of catalyst for social change, as well as co-learner with the people (Swanepoel and De Beer; 2007). It is important for the community development worker to be aware of the limitations of participatory research methodology. This will enable him or her and the community to watch out for them and work to address them.

Some of the barriers include language and cultural differences, which can become a communication barrier, the speed of the process, which can hinder the participation and inputs from the community and the fact that some communities may simply not be interested or may have other pressing issues to address. By anticipating the limitations likely to be faced, the community development worker can make efforts to prevent their negative effects during the initial contact. For example, a community development worker may find that women are lowly esteem in the community.

This may hint that in community development project life cycle the participation of women may be minimal. Thus he or she may look for ways to address the disparities or ensure that the women get a platform to freely participate in the project. This may mean working with “gender equality” advocates or approaching the local leadership with sincere requests to allow the participation of women. Uneven or lack of representation of some groups can occur and the use of several methods can confuse the understanding of community members. It is important not to generalize about people based on a few individuals.

People are different therefore not all the needs are the same. Thus, during the contact making period, everyone must be involved, not just the representatives. Everyone has to participate in the process to identify their needs. There is also the need to find out how the people perceive their needs and to start changing any negative feelings the people may have about their circumstances and their capacity to do something about them. This is done through the motivation and mobilization of community members, through awareness creation.

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The nature of the needs identified determines the kind of action group that will concern itself with addressing them, for example, farmers will form an action group running a pesticide project while nursing mothers would form an action group concerned with immunization issues. At this stage the community would have entered the initiation phase of the project. Project Initiation is technically the first phase in the Project Life Cycle and essentially involves starting up the project (Cernea; 1998). However, in community development, it is preceded by the contact making process as has been discussed in this paper.

A project is initiated by defining its purpose and scope, the justification for initiating it and the solution to be implemented. There will also be need to recruit a suitably skilled project team, set up a project office and perform an end of phase review (Cernea; 1998). However, in community development, this phase is not so rigid or technical like this. It is flexible and takes a participatory approach based on learning that builds individuals' capacities and enhances their skills. During this phase, the community development worker and the community members are “preparing to set sail” (Enriquez; 2003).

They do this with a focus on clearly defining the needs that have been identified in the contact making phase, creating an inner motivation to want to address the needs, establishing who will be in the action group and identifying the resources to be utilized in the project. The first project meeting brings the contact making process to a natural conclusion (Swanepoel and De Beer; 2007: 179). Formal meetings in order to launch a project will be more concerned with need formulation, not need

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identification. The latter has already been done in the contact making process, using participatory research methodologies.

Invitations to the first project meeting should be extended only to those people who have already shown a clear concern for or have aligned themselves with the problem. This is not a public meeting (Gusfield; 2003). The meeting does not have an open agenda. It is not a needs identification meeting. The need has already been identified. This meeting has a closed agenda with just one objective, which is to talk about a specific problem or need already identified by those concerned and to discuss what can be done about it (Swanepoel and De beer; 2007).

The starting point of any project is a need (Swanepoel and De beer; 2007). However, a project can only address a need if it is clearly defined. The needs then need to be clearly formulated. Burchell and Sternlieb (1995) are of the view that the people participating in a project need to reach a consensus on the definition of the need they are trying to address. It is imperative that people forming the action group should feel the identified need as their own.

This will foster a sense of ownership in addressing the need and the people will be cooperative in such a situation. They will be guided by the community development worker through this process but he or she needs to be careful not to impose the needs on the people. Conflicting views need to be ironed out before the start of the project (Chambers; 2003). This is not any easy process as each individual has his or her own unique values. However, by constantly meeting and discussing the needs, the community members will eventually come to agree on the definition of the needs.

Different people are concerned about different needs thus there is need for different action groups focusing on different needs (Swanepoel and De Beer; 2007). For example, a parents' action group working on building a school for their children and a youths' action group venturing into small scale mining. The parents' need in this case is establishing a proper learning environment for their children while the youths need a source of income and/or to improve their livelihoods. Having the same need as others fosters social cohesion and cooperation. These are some of the goals of community development.

After the group clearly identifies what it needs to address, a committee is elected (Wade; 1987). It is important that the committee is not selected too early. The people need to first define the need, know exactly what it is they want to achieve and who should do what. Only then can they select an effective steering committee, as its task will be much clearer and it will have a basis from which to work. The community development worker can serve on the committee as an advisor while the decision-making function lies with the committee (Kahn; 1991).

If not done properly, the community development's advice and guidance may cast them off as an expert and people become dependent on their advice. This defeats the purpose of community development, which is to empower the community members and make them participate in the decision-making process. The best way to give the advice therefore will be by offering the committee several options and assisting it to work out the consequences of every option (Swanepoel and De Beer; 2007). The committee then makes the choices. The committee, however, does not have the ultimate decision-making power.

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All the members of the action group do contribute to the decision making process and can make suggestions which the committee can adopt. In this initiation phase, the scope of the project is defined along with the approach to be taken to deliver the desired outputs (Mansuri and Rao; 2003).

Swanapoel and De Beer (2007) caution that no community development project can function without resources. People are never entirely without resources, though these may not be enough to run projects. However, sometimes external resources come with strings attached (Wade; 1987).

Donors may have their own agendas for funding development and people may be manipulated for resource grants. This may also lead to the development of the dependency syndrome which will work against their obtaining self-reliance and accepting ownership of projects. Therefore, there is need to carefully analyze their intentions before accepting the funding. It is important to ensure that if funding is obtained, it will not undermine the fundamental goals of community development. These goals include building people's capacities, fostering community ownership and ensuring community participation.

Enriquez (2003) stresses that there is also the need to know where to go to get help to refine the project, for example, to sponsors and advocates, and to also establish who will support its ongoing operations, for example councils and associations within the community. This is important to know in the initiating phase of the project so that there is no getting caught off guard when challenges present themselves during the implementation of the project. Natural resources, though provided by mother nature, are usually

shared with other communities and generations (Swanepoel and De Beer; 2007).

Therefore, they must be enhanced instead of abused. In this regard, community development workers must make use of expert advice (Gusfield; 2003). For example, the community development worker can seek for advice on how to prevent environment degradation from mining activities undertaken in a developmental project from environmental management experts. It is also important to bear in mind that the existence of infrastructure does not necessarily mean that it is available and can be used for community development (Swanepoel and De Beer; 2007).

There is need to seek for permission from the relevant authorities and to find out how much access the community has to them. For instance, there may be a dam in the community that provides water for drinking. If there is need to use the water for irrigation, there may be need for making certain payments and there may not be such funds available. Money can come from the community's fundraising or from external sources as loans or grants. Their conditions must be taken into account as discussed above. Human faculties and skills are extremely important resources (Swanepoel and De Beer; 2007).

One of the objectives of community development is to make better resources of people. The community development worker must assist people to become better human resources by providing learning opportunities in the normal process of development projects (Green et al; 2000). Participation enables the people to engage in debates, decision-making, experimental

implementation and evaluation. These activities enhance their skills and faculties. According to Swanepoel and De Beer (2007) norms and traditions need to be handled carefully so that they can be used to tackle poverty situations, to bring stability and harmony and strengthen discipline.

Shared norms and values bring people together and guide them to behave in socially acceptable ways. Thus, the community development worker can take note of the norms and values that compliment the project's activities and bring them to light. Societal structures and external structures influencing a society are examples of organizational resources. Community based organizations are important organizational resources (Swanepoel and De Beer; 2007). These include burial societies, youth clubs and sports clubs, among others. They are fairly well organized with clear membership and leadership structures.

The track record of these types of organizations is quite good. People's participation through such groups seems more intense and authentic and they are able to mobilize local people. The ability to organize is a resource that cannot be depleted through use. Infact, the more it is used, the better it becomes. The entry point of a community project is a group, and these community based organizations are already well-formed groups which have a high probability of having and conceptualizing the same needs for development (Chambers; 2003). Closely following the initiation phase is the planning phase of the project.

This phase includes a detailed identification and assignment of each task until the end of the project (Bryson; 2005). Cernea (1998) notes that the

governance process is defined, stake holders identified and reporting frequency and channels are agreed during this phase. After defining the project and appointing the project team, the community will be ready to enter the detailed project planning phase. Planning is a process in which an individual or group of people decide on what is to be done, and how it must be done to reach a certain objective (Swanepoel and De Beer; 2007).

This phase relies on participatory and learning approaches in order to attain the goals of community development. Participation and learning are also goals of the community development process. There are two main and opposing approaches to planning, which are identified as a rationalistic and synoptic approach versus an adaptive and incremental approach. According to Swanepoel and De Beer (2007), the rationalistic synoptic approach is a top-down approach in which planners and policy makers are authoritative and determine the correct action for others to follow.

It has a hierarchical structure and a strict plan and deviations are seen as adverse and irrational manifestations of politics. Kahn (1991) notes that it requires concise definitions of goals and objectives. However, this is difficult to achieve with social values because they are usually subjective. As such, using this method, analysts and interest groups may disagree on them. A community development worker must therefore be careful not to guide the planning process using this model. Community Development is largely qualitative and requires flexible methods that this systems analysis cannot offer.

Cernea (1998) points out that systems analysis ignores and discounts complex processes of social interaction. It tends to think that planning emulates a machine and regards it as a technical process (Swaenepoel and De Beer; 2007). This is a demerit because in community development it is the ordinary people, with just basic knowledge, who are responsible for planning and the planning takes place in a fluid situation that is constantly changing (Swanepoel and De Beer; 2007). Therefore, a predetermined sequence of events may not always occur as planned.

Also, making the planning too technical will deter participation because it will tend to tell people what to do instead of them determining their own actions. The goal of community development is to give the community members control of the project, and therefore this planning approach is not feasible. Furthermore, in community development, the planning process is supposed to be a learning opportunity and excellence is achieved through trial and error (Green et al; 2000). Some constraints may remain hidden in the planning process and are only discovered in the implementation phase. Thus, there is need for a more flexible planning approach.