Developing Sustainable Communities in Africa : Components for a Framework

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Résumé
Développer des collectivités durables en Afrique: éléments d'un débat
Cet article présente les composantes d'un cadre pour le développement d'une communauté durable. Les éléments sont tirés de la littérature. Dans la plupart des tentatives visant à fournir un cadre pour le développement en Afrique, peu de considération est accordée pour des variables cruciales telles que la culture. Ces tentatives ont tourné court ce qui a causé des retournements dans les pratiques. L'une des premières se situe dans le hiatus entre le monde universitaire et le bras pensant de la Banque mondiale et du Fonds monétaire international. Ensuite viennent les groupes des décideurs politiques et les organisations non gouvernementales. La « durabilité » est devenue un point de référence inévitable depuis sa popularisation par la Commission mondiale sur l'environnement et le développement (rapport Brundtland) en 1987. Le terme est toutefois utilisé plus par rapport à l'environnement et l'économie que par rapport à la communauté. L'idée d'une communauté durable met l'accent sur la durabilité au niveau local, ce qui oblige à prendre en compte le difficultés politiques et surtout culturelles associées à des tentatives d'atteindre la durabilité au niveau mondial. Cette contribution soutient que pour le développement de communautés durables, nous devons commencer par prendre au sérieux l'utilisation des pratiques et des systèmes qui maintiennent ou améliorent la capacité des gens à subvenir à leurs problèmes sociaux et à leur bien-être culturel, la viabilité économique de l'agriculture, la base naturelle des ressources de l'agriculture, les écosystèmes influencés par les activités agricoles et la qualité et la sécurité des aliments.

Abstract
This paper puts forward components for a framework for the development of a sustainable community. The components of the framework are drawn from the literature. The premise of the task is the absence of crucial variables, such as culture, in most attempts to provide a framework for development in Africa. These attempts have seen theoretical 'turns', which have been matched by twists in ' practice '. The former is in the academy and the 'thinking arm' of the World Bank/International Monetary Fund. The latter is among socio-political decision makers and Non-Governmental Organisations. " Sustainability " has become an almost unavoidable point of reference in this attempt since its popularity by the World Commission on Environment and Development (the Brundtland Report) in 1987. The term is, however, used more in relation to the environment and the economy than it is to the community. The idea of a sustainable community, as is well known, signalled a shift of focus on sustainability to the local level, which reflects the political and indeed cultural difficulties associated with the attempts to achieve sustainability at a global level. This paper argues that for the development of sustainable communities, we must begin to take seriously the use of practices and systems which maintain or enhance the ability of people to provide for their social and cultural well-being, the economic viability of agriculture, the natural resource base of agriculture, the ecosystems influenced by agricultural activities and the quality and safety of food and fibre.

Since the 1987 World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), also known as the Brundtland Report, the concept of sustainable development has become an influential and widely used term. It became the new planning agenda and was given considerable weight following the Earth Summit in Rio where the concept ' sustainability ' was embodied in the resulting United Nations Framework Convention on Sustainable Development. The concept is now well-rooted in development discourse and within the discourse, has come the suggestion by some commentators that because of the less efficiency of sustainability planning in a large region, the focus is now on sustainable community where the community is seen as a " complex system of humans and natural environment " (Chang and Huang 2004). Those who concentrate on the socio-political and cultural aspects of development discourse suggest that the shift in focus to the local level reflects the political and cultural difficulties associated with attempts to achieve sustainability on a global level. The implication is that with the focus on the level of the community, development policies, with its tendency to focus primarily on national sustainable development, will be richer in the sense of being sensitive to the opportunities and constraints inherent in communities which differ in " terms of environmental problems, natural and human resource endowments, levels of economic and social development and physical (i.e. geological and geographical) and climatic conditions " (Wilkinson, 1991).

A cursory look at the literature reveals that the concept ' sustainability ' is used more in relation to the environment and the economy than it is in relation to the community. In fact if went back to the Brundtland Report and the Agenda 21 (the United Nations Conference of Environment and Development at Rio de Janeiro 1992), we would see how this came about. As Fricker (1998) noted, the concept dates back to the 1970s but with the Brundtland Report, it " exploded into the global arena " with what is now one of the most quoted sentence in development discourse, sustainable development as *development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs* (Brundtland, 1987 : 43). This classic definition contains two key concepts : " the concept of ' needs ', in particular the essential needs of the worlds poor, to which the overriding priority should be given ; and the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment's ability to meet present and future needs " (Brundtland, 1987 : 4). The Rio document, as summed up by Perrings (1994), requires of government to address the causes of poverty, hunger, the inequitable distribution of income and low human resource development The emphasis on environment in the document dealt with limiting its further degradation. The social was emphasised to give priority to the provision of the capacity for people to feed, clothe and house themselves. Governments were thus charged through Agenda 21 with the responsibility towards a more equitable division of wealth. A great number of commentators took their cue from this focusing on environment and the economy. In some of the ensuing commentaries, particularly those that focus on community, the notion of a sustainable community, tends to refer to, as Salfiel (1994), rightly observed, the rural context. This is understandable given the fact that the bulk of the population in most African countries reside in the rural areas.

However, in relation to the rural context, a significant number of rural sociologists have noted that it is highly heterogeneous and resistant to generalisation. For example Scott et al (2000) emphasise its diversity in terms of class, ethnicity and occupational status. They arrived at this based on their observation of the Mangakahia Valley in the North Island of New Zealand, which reveals ethnicity as cutting-across or aligning with class to create deep if often unrecognised difference. Nevertheless, I would argue that such diversity is not as significant as it would appear because, in most cases, the rural areas, especially in Africa seem more homogenous in terms of ethnic composition.

In general, rural areas constitute the space where human settlements and infrastructure occupy only small patches of the landscape, most of which are dominated by fields and pastures, woods, forest, water, mountains and hills. Rural people tend to live in farmsteads, settlements and villages. However as Ashley and Maxwell (2001) rightly point out, beyond these, are core features, which are related to natural resources and population density. We can, in the case of Africa, characterise the rural areas as places where most people spend most of their working time on farms ; they are places with abundance of land, which is relatively cheap ; the rural areas in Africa, arguably with no exception, are characterised by high transaction costs, associated with long distance and poor infrastructure and geographical conditions that increase political transaction costs and magnify the possibility of elite capture and urban bias.

It is against these characteristics that the frameworks for a sustainable community have been variously developed. However, a significant variable that seems absent in such frameworks is culture. What follows elaborates on this. As the discussion unfolds, it would be clear what I mean by culture ; however, at this junction, I need to point out that culture should not be seen to be confined to ' ideas and understandings people simply have or can acquire – it is rooted in realities people experience over time which therefore has a real and continuing history. It should not be seen, as has been rightly noted, to be a dimension that exists separate and apart from the other domains of economic and social existence. And in relation to infrastructural development, it should not be seen as anachronistic. ' Culture ' was invoked in the attempt by the Thatcher government to deal with the lack of development in the British economy, indicated by its poor performance in comparison to major competitors and a growing number of a sufficiently ' enterprising ' culture. The argument then was that Britain lacked the ' enterprise culture '. As Day (1998) noted, " while the meaning of ' enterprise culture ' was vague and confused, and inclined to melt away under close scrutiny, its focus was clear enough : it was concerned with the content of people's consciousness, the understandings and meanings which they brought to their behaviour, especially their economic behaviour, and the goals which they choose to pursue ". The ' enterprise culture ' of Thatcher years has the goal of transformation of values and attitudes, to free the spirit of competition and unlock economic regeneration in the UK. In terms of sustainable communities in Africa, the issue is recognising the values and attitudes of the community in unlocking its development and sustainability. This is a radically different position despite the point of contact – the relevance of culture.

This brings me to the key point of departure in the discussion : that one cannot begin to regenerate a community for infrastructural development without taking into account, fully, the whole set of relationships, social, political and cultural, with which the regeneration will occur. Many who have applied their minds to the issue of sustainable communities would agree with this point. In attempting such a task, which is the objective in this paper, it becomes essential that one clarifies the notion of community; the immediate section that follows does that.

The Idea of a Community

The literature reveals that the word, community, which became rooted in everyday language [in English since the 14th century (Williams, 1983)] has been interpreted loosely resulting in a high level of use, but a low level of meaning (Walmsley, 2000). As far back as 1922, Giddings wrote about community as constructed around what he called a " consciousness of kind ". Community, according to him, evokes the explicit recognition of common and exclusive interests that rests on communal foundations (Giddings, 1922). The " consciousness of kind ", which Giddings wrote of acts to develop self-consciousness, taking the form of a distinguishing label, ' a symbol of community ', which is an " essential part of the development of communal affinity ". Holcombe (2004) cites Parkin (1982) as noting that related to this notion of communal affinity

is ' social closure ', which, according him, was suggested by Weber to mean " the process by which social collectivities seek to maximise rewards by restricting access to resources and opportunities to a limited circle of eligibles ".

In summing up the literature, almost exactly two decades ago, Bell and Newby (1976) point out that community has been used as a simple description of the boundaries of a settlement; to denote a local system centred around interaction between people and institutions and as a communion, what Urry (1995) refers to as a particular kind of human association founded on personal ties and a sense of belonging. This still holds for what we know as community to day ; though, of recent, there has been a growing discussion of the changing nature of community. This derives from studies of the social implication of advanced technology. Spender (1995) wrote about new communities on the net and new human values being forged. Negroponte (1995) went to the extreme by suggesting that socialising in digital neighbourhoods will make physical space irrelevant. As far back as 1963, Webber (1963) observed that instead of individuals having their greatest involvement (sense of community) with those among whom they lived (as defined on the bases of propinquity), a situation was arising where at least for professional and managerial groups, communities might be spatially far-flung, but nevertheless close-knit, intimate and held together by shared interests and values (communities based on common interest rather than propinquity).

As noted by Walmsley (2000), cyberspace might have annihilated distance but not place and this applies when referring to rural communities ; in this context, it implies a locality, a geographically defined place where people interact. For most Africans, the locality and locality-derived relationships are still important in terms of their existence. The community is the primary setting and point of contact between the individual and society. As Bridger and Luloff (1999) remarked " the community continues to be an important factor in peoples' lives because it is fundamentally implicated in the social construction of meanings ". However, it is a dynamic interplay of historic process and complex relationships acted out in environments. As Jones (1995) suggests, it is not enough to describe it as a sense of place or as a product of relationships between individuals or as a social system. Rather, it comes into existence and defines its own form, out of the interaction of the participatory elements, in environments and over time.

In simple terms and for the purpose of the present discussion, community would denote people of a locality, common people, organised society, with something in common, a sense of identity. In common with the traditional usage, it is a whole pattern of life in which members are engaged and in which various aspects and dimensions of social existence are woven together in a kind of seamless web (Day, 1998). It strikes a particular resonance in most part of Africa. When invoked, as is often the case, it serves to differentiate or to draw a ' symbolic ' boundary – one of belonging and non-belonging. One sees an African's experience of localities as imbued with meaning and shared values. As a matter of fact, remarked Kearns and Joseph (1997), the existence of territorial identity and its attendant institutional frameworks within local places imposes a structural context on everyday life . Human agency tends to flourish within this.

With this clarification, the building block of my discussion becomes clear. The question that immediately arises, therefore, is : What is it that we really want to sustain ? Other related questions are : In the African context, are communities *sufficiently* developed to warrant sustainability ? Are we not jumping the gun, so to say, if we focus on sustainability ? Should we rather not focus on community development, which in its broadest is about involving people in a community in educating themselves to improve the circumstances of their lives through health, agriculture, civic education and attention to their natural and social, economic and political environments ? The fact of my raising these questions should not be interpreted as devaluing sustainability but as a caution to any presumed economically reductionist approach, which one finds in very many discussions on sustainability. For example, traditional environmental economics perceives environmental problems in terms of a deteriorating local environment. Solutions are

then cast in terms of finding efficient trade-offs between economic growth and environmental quality and finding policy instruments that will internalize the costs (Roseland, 2000). The focus is thus on " unchecked development " and its negative consequences. Such discussions develop sustainability criteria, which tend to inform policy on sustainability in Africa. A look at government policies in Africa reveals policy prescriptions as founded on, to borrow Scott et al's (2000) general critique of sustainable development, the interpretation of sustainable development that accepts both the legitimacy and efficacy of the conventional economic growth model.

The adoption of the sustainability criteria informed by such economic growth model is misguided in many ways because communities in Africa face distinctly different challenges than those faced by the communities in Europe and America. From the perspective of development, the basic problem that communities face in Africa is one of underdevelopment – many cannot meet their basic needs for food, clean water, clean air and an environment free of disease-causing agent. Poverty is still one of the basic obstacles that must be overcome to maintain development and indeed sustain communities. In fact, it is deepening and given this, agricultural growth still remains the 'critical engine' of its reduction. The centrality of agriculture, as we know, goes back to the 1960s. Agriculture was seen then as a source of wage goods for the manufacturing industrial sector, source of inputs, foreign exchange and support.

Specifically, in relation to rural development, agriculture as an engine of rural development sprang from the dual-economy theories of development as espoused by Lewis (1955) who suggested that the subsistence sector, as possessing negligible prospects for rising productivity or growth, could play a passive role in the process of economic development, supplying resources to the modern sector until the latter expanded to take its place. This influenced the large-scale, highly mechanized farming of the late 1950s and 1960s in many countries of Africa (Oloyede, 2002). Nevertheless, one still has to deal with sustainability and sustainable communities in Africa. What is sustainability ? What is a sustainable community ? How can we develop sustainable communities for infrastructural development in Africa ?

Sustainability and Sustainable Communities

As Bell and Morse (2003) point out, within the academic literature, sustainability is considered a highly contested concept. There are competing conceptions of ' strong ' and ' weak ' sustainability (Pearce, 1998), with the former differentiating between assets, which are " natural " and those, which are not and the latter aggregating all types of assets. The ' strong ' conception puts forward the argument that whatever the level of human-made assets, an adequate stock of environmental (or natural) assets alone is critical in securing sustainability (Daly, 1989). The ' weak ' sustainability interpretation derives from the neoclassical economic interpretation that natural and non-natural assets are substitutable and that natural assets can be liquidated as long as subsequent investment provides an equivalent endowment to the next generation. Critics have been quick to point out that natural and non-natural assets are not substitutable. Roseland, (2000) for example, stated that a sawmill cannot be substituted for a forest since the sawmill (non-natural capital) needs the forest (natural) in order to function.

In general, sustainable communities are regarded as those communities that meet the economic needs of the community residents, enhance and protect their environment and promote " more humane local societies ". The economy still remains what is emphasised though the focus is on a smaller scale. What is critical is increasing local economic diversity. Related to this is self-reliant, which entails the development of local markets, local production and greater co-operation among local economic entities. The environment is then coupled with the emphasis on the reduction in the use of energy and the careful management and recycling of waste products. Berry (1993) sums up sustainable community as a :

> *" neighbourhood of humans in a place, plus the place itself : its soil, its water, its air, and all the families and tribes of nonhuman creatures that belong to it… a complex connection not only among human beings and their homeland but also between the human economy and nature, between forest and field or orchard, and between troublesome creatures and pleasant ones. "*

However, those who emphasise sustainable communities as a development practice see it as a more context-sensitive approach (Van der Ploeg and Long, 1994). To work towards a sustainable community is to be sensitive to context – in the sense in which differences in ways of life and social values are recognised. If what define a community, as discussed earlier, are shared understanding, values and belief, then, it is these that we need to pay attention to in developing for the purpose of infrastructural development. The goal therefore is to stimulate active participation of the community through commitment to the values of the community. What this means in other words is that sufficient attention has to be given to social and cultural prerequisites in developing sustainable communities.

To bring back culture in development is ironic because it has always been seen, as evidenced in Eisenstadt's (1970) well known discussion of development, to be an impediment to progress and development. This has often applied to Africa; as is widely acknowledged, development thinking, in general, is influenced by Weber's Protestant ethic thesis, which explains why capitalism developed in the West and not in the East. He sees particular type of culture favouring development. However unappealing the idea that shared understanding, meanings and values, (what effectively would be defined as culture), is to economists, it is hardly denied. As I did mention earlier, it did not stop the same economists from invoking it in explaining lack of development in the British economy in the 1980s. On both the left and right of British politics, some argued that Britain had never really had a full-bodied ' entrepreneurial ' revolution ; that it was too wedded still to the values and assumptions of a pre-industrial and landowning aristo-cracy. So, a prerequisite for development in the West is the values and attitudes of its people. The opposite is the case for Africa : values and attitudes impede development.

However, as Day (1998) observed, with the failure of development efforts, we are begin-ning to see a new thinking. Keane (1990 : 291) puts it sharply when he writes:

> *" What were held previously to be limitations upon development may even be regarded now, given the right circumstances as potential sources of strength ; and this is leading to new efforts to harness them within more effective strategies for change, directed not just at the economic considerations, but at development of the total human conditions of rural places ? "*

We see in the thinking of instrumentalists the idea that the manner in which people act ' economically ', and therefore the extent to which they can undertake expansive or ' develo-pmental ' action, is wrapped up with kinds of social relationships to which they belong, and that this in turn is connected intimately to the way in which they understand the world. Hence cultural meanings and social bonds are part and parcel of economic action, which as Granovetter (1985) has argued is 'embedded' in social practices and institutional arrangements and cannot be understood apart from them. As a result, we can scarcely separate culture from economic action and treat both as the cause of each other – they have to be seen as fused together, within a framework of established social relationship. We begin to see the significant compo-nents for a more useful framework for sustainable communities in the preceeding discussion. These components are brought together in the section that follows

Components for a framework for sustainable development

Table 1. Suggested components of a framework for the development of sustainable communities in Africa

Cultural
- Indigenous ways of knowing
- Shared social universe of individuals with strong community root
- Cultural bonds of shared commitments, identity and belief (these generate stable interaction, reduce uncertainty, enable resources to be mobilized, encourage learning and permit the development of long-term vision)

Ecological
- Prevention of land degradation soil preservation through the harnessing of local and scientific knowledge for the prevention of soil health and fertility ; crop rotation based on indigenous ways of doing it ; management of organic matter ; soil acidification or pollution ; minimization of erosion 0
- Maintain the ecosystem (encouraging and supporting indigenous ways of maintaining the eco-system
- Protecting biological diversity (of indigenous species)

Economic
- Poverty reduction (livelihood opportunities-rural economy, reduction of landlessness, food security, productivity)
- Security of land tenure (investments in land-productivity)
- Access to resources [capital : credit availability] (Rural inhabitants access to credit for long-term investments and conservation of natural resources)
- Rural economy (diversification of farm operations and livelihood strategies)
- Market information (information on markets ; access to markets)

Socio-political
- Facilitate learning and knowledge sharing (exchange in the community, e.g. farmer-to-farmer ; participatory experimentation; technical assistance)
- Indigenous knowledge promotion (promotion of indigenous ways of knowing)
- Resource mobilization (support and assist communities in mobilizing local resources in material, human, political and cultural toward building a sustainable community)

As is by now clear, the framework under discussion here is informed by the discussion in the preceding sections and is based upon a review of the literature on sustainability and sustainable development summarised in Table 1. What is listed in the Table are in no particular order. They are important components of sustainability and provide a baseline for sustainable communities. However, the cultural, though fused with the economic dimensions, remains central because as Sawyer and Walker (1992) indicated, individuals are imbricated in a social fabric of practices and institutions, outlooks and morals, which it is impossible to dissolve. It has been suggested that the cultural bonds of shared commitment ; identity and belief can sustain a community. The point is that with strong cultural bonds will come movements of ideas, skills and individuals through networks that result from the cultural bonds and these enable common identity, which sustain the economy and helps it to grow (Day, 1998).

In the African context, a sustainable community would be a community that draws from its ways of knowing, its cosmology, its anthropology, its social practices and social arrangements to utilise resources to meet their current needs while ensuring that adequate resources are available for future members of the community. A sustainable community in Africa would seek to use external resources that best suit its needs and within their control to foster a better life for the community. When a community can influence the processes affecting its various activities in order to improve the quality of life of its members in an enduring way, then, such a community

is on the path to sustainability. For Africa, this is what is critical. The ability to pursue strategies based on the ways of knowing is very crucial.

Concluding remarks

What is suggested here in this paper adds the cultural, the ways of knowing and ' doing ' to make sustainable community more meaningful and relevant in African. It derives from the assumption that the activities that the rural communities in Africa can sustain and which they want and can afford are quite different from the activities of the communities in Europe and America. It is this fundamental assumption that informed my focus on the rural area, which still remains where majority of Africans live. Most discussion of sustainable communities focuses on the urban. The concern has chiefly been with reduction of energy budgets, reduction of material consumption, a call for more compact urban pattern interspersed with productive areas to collect energy, grow crops and recycle wastes. Roseland (2000), for example, designed a framework for sustainable community, which basically emphasises efficient use of space, on minimizing the consumption of essential natural capital, on multiplying social capital and on mobilizing citizens and their governments toward these ends. In the African context, we must not lose sight of the fact of poverty, diseases and all the ills of underdevelopment. To develop sustainable communities in Africa for the purpose of infrastructural development, we need to derive the ingredients of the 'development' from the situation, identify the cultural, social and economic characteristics of the community, and examine the interactions of these characteristics. Central in this, are the sets of shared understandings, meanings and values.

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