University-rural community partnership for people-centred development: Experiences from Makhado Municipality, Limpopo Province

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Abstract
Children, youth, women, the elderly, men and their leaders are integral components of rural communities. It is important to ensure that their unique needs and perceptions shape development programming. However, despite having various policies and legal frameworks introduced to deepen democracy in South Africa, current rural development programming approaches rarely create effective platforms that amplify this true community voice. Also, although Universities must serve as catalysts of rural development through appropriate community engagement, most of them are still unclear about how to realise this. This article presents a step by step community engagement approach that the University of Venda’s Centre for Rural Development and Poverty Alleviation has followed since May 2006 to facilitate people-centred rural development processes in 47 villages of Makhado Municipality, Limpopo Province. About 60 students and nine academic staff members from various University departments are involved. Central to the work are more than 200 village-based ‘Foot Soldiers’. To date, vibrant village-level community engagement platforms have been established. Also, Ward development plans have been crafted with active involvement of grassroots communities.

INTRODUCTION
Throughout the world, Universities are developing smart and strategic partnerships with communities in order to advance their core business of teaching and learning, research and community engagement (Bringle and Hatcher 2002, 503–505; Alperovitz and Howard 2005, 141–142). By so doing, the Universities are broadening the frontiers of knowledge management in which students and academic staff members learn together with community members. However, not all Universities are so seriously committed and involved in community engagement work. In such Universities, the University of Venda (UNIVEN) included, community engagement has for a long time not been receiving the same prominence and attention as teaching and research. Partly, this problem originates from the general lack of conceptual
clarity on what community engagement entails (Bringle and Hatcher 2002, 506–508). This discussion highlights why a rural-based university in South Africa such as UNIVEN must seriously explore how it can contribute to scholarship and intellectual discourse in rural social change. In line with the thinking of Wolpe (1995, 275–277), the contribution must be closely aligned with national and specific community development imperatives.

In an attempt to demonstrate its relevance in societal transformation, UNIVEN adopted a new vision in 2006, which states ‘to be at the centre of tertiary education for rural and regional development in Southern Africa’. This shift in strategic focus posed several key questions which needed attention, viz.:

a) To what extent are we, as a University, well-versed with the realities that we must appropriately respond to?

b) Even if we adequately understand these realities, are we well-prepared and equipped to address the major issues satisfactorily?

c) How can UNIVEN Departments, Centres and Institutes engage the communities we serve such that our efforts lead to vibrant and healthy living?

d) Does UNIVEN have the capacity to grow beyond the individual, and often ‘hit, miss and run’ case study approaches that characterize our work at the moment to something that is more concrete and widespread in its impact?

e) What are the priority issues that are likely to help achieve the new vision?

All the questions raised above highlighted the fact that the principal challenge that UNIVEN faced then was the unavailability of appropriate models of community engagement, which allowed us to be open about our potential contribution to improving people’s quality of lives. There was no way that the questions would ever be addressed satisfactorily without clarifying first what we meant by an engagement relationship between the University and the development priorities of communities that we should serve. Honest reflection on this issue was desirable since it helped to prevent a culture of almost perpetual unchallenged involvement in community development evangelism. Failure to critique our on-going community engagement work was likely to result in mere romantic attachment to rural development practice without well-defined scholarship. Therefore, the point of departure was to ensure that the primary task of a University was not betrayed. This task involves helping people, especially the poor and marginalized, to discover the scope of how to positively interface with their assets and capabilities leading to improved quality of their lives (Figure 1).
After thorough interrogation and introspection of the realities revealed above, the Centre for Rural Development and Poverty Alleviation (CRDPA) elected to make a positive contribution in resolving some challenges that the local government sector in South Africa faced. We embraced effective community development evangelism or ministry in an attempt to promote the spirit of collective action to solve challenges to sustainable social change. Through dialogue and sharing the sorrows and joys
of community engagement, a new integrity would develop. Such a community
development ministry must promote a deep and humble discipleship which is forever
open to new insights. We also anticipated and noted that this community development
ministry had the potential of generating insights that could make those in academic and
community leadership uncomfortable. This belief was based on the fact that emphasis
on participation was likely to raise questions about the styles of leadership within the
University and communities we engaged. The commitment to improving people’s
livelihoods was likely to lead to questions about priorities adopted by Universities,
government and other development partners, in particular local Municipalities. Thus,
any development-oriented community engagement must be underpinned by a solid
understanding of the fundamental imperatives of developmental local government.
This article presents the highlights of how the CRDPA, located within the School of
Agriculture at UNIVEN is responding to issues that rural communities in Makhado
Municipality of Vhembe District, Limpopo Province face in their daily struggles to
improve the quality of their lives. In this article, the key features of developmental
local government which informed our community engagement work in Makhado
Municipality are presented first. Thereafter, the fundamental tenets of our community
engagement thrust are discussed. Lastly, a step by step description of the community
development evangelism is given, including some special milestones and lessons
learnt.

FUNDAMENTAL CHALLENGES OF DEVELOPMENTAL LOCAL
GOVERNMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA

Participation of grassroots community members in their own development is a key
ingredient of sustainable social change (Bringle and Hatcher 2002, 503–513). This
enhances development and service delivery; improves governance; and deepens as
well as entrench democratic values. The African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) of
the New Partnership for Africa’s Development carries a key question, ‘What is being
done to create an enabling environment for meaningful popular participation in all
forms and levels of government?’ In South Africa, Section 152(1) of the Constitution
states that ‘local government must encourage the involvement of communities and
community organizations in the matters of local government’. Linked to this is the
fact that the Municipal Systems Act of 2000, Section 16, demands that Municipalities
‘develop a culture of municipal governance that complements formal representative
government with a system of participatory governance, and must for this purpose,
(a) encourage and create conditions for the local community to participate in the
affairs of the Municipality, including in (i) Integrated Development Planning; (ii) the
performance management system; (iii) performance; (iv) the budget; and (v) strategic
decisions relating to services’. All these anchor developmental local government.

Successive post-1994 governments in South Africa have been implementing
developmental local government as one of the strategies for achieving people-
centred rural development and poverty eradication. In order to ensure that
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communities participate in their own development, the Municipal Structures Act of 1998 was enacted. It paved the way for establishing Ward Committees as agents of public participation and deepening democracy. The introduction of Community Development Workers (CDWs) in 2003 was also informed by the dire need for entrenching public participation at grassroots community level. In his State of the Nation Address of 14 February 2003, President Thabo Mbeki emphasized the need for ‘a new public service echelon of multi-skilled community development workers’, whose specific role is ‘to maintain direct contact with the people where they live and to ensure that government sharply improves the qualities of the outcomes of public expenditure’. Also, the Draft National Policy Framework for Public Participation of 2005 states that public participation ‘could be promoted in order to make development plans and services more relevant to local needs and conditions, in order to hand over responsibility for services and promote community action, and to empower local communities to have control over their own lives and livelihoods’. All these frameworks affirm the pronouncements of the White Paper on Transforming Public Service Delivery of 1997, commonly called Batho Pele and the White Paper on Local Government of 1998.

Both government and civil society sectors in South Africa continue to emphasize the need for community participation in decision making platforms. Aligned to this is the acknowledgment of the fact that existing policy frameworks, institutional mechanisms and programme interventions are failing to comply with the government’s constitutional and statutory obligations (Buccus, Hemson, Hicks and Piper 2008, 4–8). This is particularly evident in local municipal processes where the outsourcing of integrated development planning (IDP) processes to consultants or town planners and secondment of junior civil servants to participate in IDP Representative Forums render the crafting of viable municipal plans impossible (Francis 2007, 3–6). In the few cases where attempts are made to engage communities especially in rural areas, rarely is the wide range of stakeholders that makes up a typical community appropriately engaged.

Although various reasons (Francis 2007, 3–6; Buccus et al. 2008, 1–13) have been highlighted to explain the state of affairs described above, it remains unclear how best participation of communities in their own development, in particular IDP and local economic development (LED) planning, can be achieved. Development planning in most Municipalities tends to view a community as a homogeneous entity, ignoring the fact that there are different social groups, for example children, youth, women, the elderly, men and various community leaders, among many other categories of people. All these social groups have unique needs, aspirations and views on issues that affect the development of their communities. They know what their communities want, what is feasible and other critical dimensions. It is, therefore, important to find solutions to this state of affairs.

The reality projected above underlines the urgent need for appropriate community engagement approaches that can help amplify the voices of a wide spectrum of social groups and stakeholders in communities. It is also vital to ensure that affected people
in rural areas take charge and champion their own development. Thus, this project which is popularly known as *Amplifying Community Voices in Makhado Municipality*, is premised on the need for creating grassroots community ‘ventilation’ platforms and incorporating the needs, views and aspirations of a diverse range of social groups within the communities into municipal development plans. A phased approach guides implementation of this community-based research and development project. The project mobilizes, organizes and strives to develop the capacities of grassroots communities to influence municipal development planning and implementation.

**KEY FEATURES OF AMPLIFYING COMMUNITY VOICES IN MAKHADO MUNICIPALITY**

*Amplifying Community Voices in Makhado Municipality* strives to mobilize and organize all the segments of society to play more meaningful roles in their own development through collective action against poverty and underdevelopment. It is funded mainly by the WK Kellogg Foundation and has been running since May 2006. Wards 1, 17, 29 and 37 of Makhado Municipality are the pilot sites. A total of 47 villages make up these Wards. As reported earlier, the CRDPA at UNIVEN initiated and drives implementation of the project. It is implemented in partnership with Makhado Municipality, which is one of the four local Municipalities in Vhembe District. The other local Municipalities are Musina, Mutale and Thulamela. But what are the critical imperatives underpinning the project?

**CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF THE IMPLEMENTATION APPROACHES**

Our point of departure in this project was that community development could not occur if the people affected by the issues that we focused on did not believe that working together and organizing to address shared needs and perspectives collectively could make a positive difference. Figure 1 summarizes the conceptual or analytical framework that shaped the *Amplifying Community Voices in Makhado Municipality* project. Mobilization empowerment, social inclusion which is anchored by the establishment of strategic partnerships, and livelihood improvement were adopted as the core implementation strategies.

Mobilization empowerment refers to an approach that assists the majority poor and socially excluded people within Wards 1, 17, 29 and 37 of Makhado Municipality to realize the power that they could gain through collective action. Linked to these processes was the need for social inclusion. This encompasses processes, and activities that the UNIVEN project team initiated and continues to facilitate with the aim of removing institutional barriers for rural communities to access livelihood improvement opportunities. We adopted this two-pronged approach based on the belief that strengthening the ability of rural community institutions or coalitions to demand service from government and other development agents in isolation would create more serious conflicts than is the case at present. A desire to achieve
livelihood improvement drives these efforts. In simple terms, this entails enhancing assets (physical, financial and natural capital) and capabilities (human and social capital) of people in the rural communities. The key pillars that create an enabling environment for achieving these goals include mindset or behaviour change, effective communication, community mobilization and policy advocacy as well as the social change processes and ideals that acknowledge grassroots community members as a solution to the challenges that they face.

**PROJECT PHILOSOPHY, VALUES AND PRINCIPLES**

At the centre of the project approach is the need for nurturing democratic behaviour and attitudes of all development practitioners and community leaders. Active listening and facilitation are integral to the success of this project. Our role as outsiders is mainly to steer the social change process. Participatory approaches as defined by Chambers (1997, 953–969) and Catley and Leyland (2001, 95–103) anchor the approach. These are a family of approaches, methods and behaviours that enable people to express and analyze the realities of their lives and conditions, to plan for themselves what action to take (Chambers 1997, 955–960). Through application of participatory approaches, locals analyze their own sets of problems and develop solutions for them, with outsiders serving the community as catalysts (Francis and Moyo 2008). This generates considerable volumes of information on community needs and expectations. We also embrace the fact that involving communities in collecting and analyzing data about their own situations improves the value and quality of information we get as well as the appropriateness of the resultant programmes.

This project places special emphasis on participation of grassroots communities at village level in crafting and implementing their own development plans. For this reason, we believe that the project can only succeed if we ‘break the four walls of the University and deliver it to its rightful owners, wherever they are’. Because of this people-oriented approach, we recognize the fact that for meaningful transformation to take place, a strong supportive atmosphere must prevail. Thus, there is a need for strong leadership and commitment to participatory approaches and provision of free space for social experimentation and integrated field-based training whenever the need arises. In this respect, the project always strives to promote and assist local community institutions to develop into viable organizations that also believe in the involvement of people when dealing with issues that affect them.

There is a strong belief in co-learning with community members as social experimentation proceeds. At the same time, the roles that Chambers (1994, 1253–1266) assigns to an external facilitator, viz. convenor for groups; catalyst and consultant to stimulate, support and advise; facilitate community members’ own analysis; and tour operator who enables community members to learn from one another, reign supreme. This represents a total departure from our normal professionalism to a new one that has new concepts, values, methods and behaviour.
Operating in an interactive learning mode that promotes participatory attitudes, excites interest and commitment and above all, contributes to jointly negotiated courses of action is important. Success, no matter how small, must be recognized and celebrated. Lessons learnt, be they positive or negative, must be effectively communicated.

We recognize the overemphasis on service delivery in local government. This tends to cloud the real meaning of what community development constitutes. Our approach seeks to stimulate rethinking and deliver social networks or leadership that promotes the ability of communities to manage and sustain social change. Since
there is no recipe for achieving this, as practitioners we always try to be innovative ‘on our feet’. Also, we recognize that the capacity of a community results from the combined influence of its commitment, resources and skills that are deployed to build on strengths, take advantage of opportunities and address existing problems. As shown in Figure 2, our road map for facilitating development work is made up of a programme of procedures and movement that arouse emotion and belief. In the process, the approach helps to effectively galvanize grassroots communities to take a lead in their own development initiatives. Alperovitz and Howard (2005, 145) concur with this belief.

THE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT APPROACH APPLIED IN MAKHADO MUNICIPALITY

As shown in Figure 2, social preparation, participatory situational analysis and Ward development planning have so far been the core social change activities. These activities are described one after the other in the following sections.

Step 1: Social preparation

Social preparation refers to the various activities undertaken with the aim of mobilizing a wide range of critical stakeholders so that they commit to support or participate in the community engagement work. Awareness of the project was created within UNIVEN, Makhado Municipality and rural community-based institutions, including ordinary residents.

Debriefing meetings were held with members of senior management, in particular the Dean of the then School of Postgraduate and Integrated Studies. After securing his support for implementing the project, it served on the agenda of one School of Postgraduate and Integrated Studies Board meeting. In that meeting it was resolved that the Project Director should present a seminar to the University community as a way of popularizing it. Academic staff and students from various units within UNIVEN participated in the seminar. Initially, eight academic staff, and 13 undergraduate and five postgraduate students expressed interest in participating. In this team were people with expertise in youth development, entrepreneurship, public management and administration, gender studies, environmental sciences, family ecology and consumer sciences, rural development and communication. A workshop was held to orientate the team members on the project’s philosophy, principles and organizational structure/ issues. Special emphasis was placed on the centrality of developing and entrenching team work. All the project members were assigned to specific Wards, under the leadership of an academic who had someone deputising him or her. Students served as ordinary but critical members of the teams. Till today, the team leaders report to the Project Director.

Various activities were carried out with the goal of securing the support and commitment of Makhado Municipality’s political and administrative leadership for the project. The first activity was a debriefing meeting with the Municipal Manager.
This paved the way for similar engagements with senior managers, the Speaker and Mayoral Committee of the Municipality. The CRDPA and Makhado Municipality co-hosted seven seminars, all focusing on the theme, *democratizing local government*. This was necessary because the seminars served to orientate Councillors, Traditional Leaders, Ward Committees, CDWs and other critical stakeholders on the project. Two such seminars were meant for Municipality-wide stakeholders. Thereafter, a similar seminar was held per administrative region of the Municipality, namely Dzanani, Makhado, Vuwani and Waterval. After this series of orientation seminars, the Municipal Council adopted a resolution that spelt out its role in the project and selected one Ward per region where this would be piloted.

In order to deepen awareness of this project and secure the support of the leaders of community-based institutions at Ward level, a *democratizing local government* seminar was held in each of the pilot Wards. At the end of each seminar requests were made to the Ward leaders to facilitate the identification and recruitment of village-based change agents whose specific role would be to co-champion and drive implementation of the local development agenda.

**Recruitment of resident social change agents at village level**

A pool of 3–4 volunteers or change agents was recruited to serve each one of the 47 villages in Wards 1, 17, 29 and 37 of Makhado Municipality. All of the agents of social change, affectionately known as ‘Foot Soldiers’ of community development were identified and recruited by their respective village communities. The project team did not provide any set of criteria to use when selecting the ‘Foot Soldiers’. More than two-thirds of them in each Ward are female school leavers with secondary school education but without full matriculation certificates, single and aged 21–35 years. Another factor which the villagers seemed to have considered when selecting them was the fact that they were already actively participating in other development initiatives or were members of local community-based organizations.

**Step 2: Situational analysis**

Training in facilitating participatory development was offered to all the ‘Foot Soldiers’ and eight Makhado Municipality Ward Councillors. The training equipped the participants with knowledge, facilitation and team building skills as well as tools used when engaging communities in a truly participatory manner. Technical content was biased towards a wide range of participatory rural appraisals (PRAs). Among others, the following techniques were covered: social and resource mapping; ranking tools (matrix scoring, pair-wise); problem tree analysis, stakeholder analysis with special emphasis on Venn diagramming; focus/nominal group discussion; semi-structured interview guides with open-ended questions; key informant interviews; seasonal diagramming; wealth ranking; and direct observation.

After the training, the ‘Foot Soldiers’ carried out situational analyses in their respective villages. This involved separately soliciting the perceptions of the elderly, youth, women, people with disabilities and men in each village. During this period
community members self-examined and analyzed their local realities, re-interrogated problems and issues, and identified shared new options. The following questions were used to guide the situational analysis:

- What significant events occurred in this village in the past resulting in joy and sorrow?
- For you to say development has taken place in this village, what should happen?
- What are the current key features of this village that you regard as development?
- What do you regard to be the major signs, causes and possible solutions to poverty in this village?
- What organizations or institutions are championing development in this village? How strongly are they connected to the village community?
- What are the tasks that men, women, boys and girls commonly carry out in this village?

Comprehensive village profiling

In addition to the qualitative situational analysis, quantitative village profiling was undertaken. The ‘Foot Soldiers’ compiled the profiles through visiting all the households in each village. Detailed information on individuals and whole families was collected. The main aim was to make available the information to Chiefs, Village Headmen, Civic Associations in each village and Ward Committee, including the respective Ward Councillors. This scoping exercise was undertaken after the Councillors and traditional leaders made formal requests to the UNIVEN team. This request was made after the leaders realized that they did not have reliable information on the state of affairs in the Ward. Many critical decisions were pending and could not be made in the absence of such reliable information.

Service delivery-focused community engagements

South Africa is currently experiencing a wave of discontent triggered by poor service delivery. This implies that any planning that ignores service delivery issues is unlikely to meet the aspirations of the grassroots communities. With this understanding in mind and building on the outputs of situational analysis, the project devoted considerable time and other resources to further interrogate the realities of each Ward. Sector-specific workshops were held in all the Wards. The sectors, identified on the basis of the Ward Committee portfolios for the four Wards, were: LED; education; water and sanitation; safety and security; energy; roads and transport; environment and disaster management; health and social development; housing; and sports, arts and culture. In all these Ward-level decision-making forums the focus group discussion questions that the participants were asked to use were:

a) What are the challenges you face in this sector in the Ward?

b) What causes the challenges?

c) What can be done to address the challenges?
Step 3: Ward development planning

The situational analyses carried out in all the villages generated a lot of insights about the daily lives of people, both young and old. Working with various community leaders and community-based institutions in all the four Wards, it was agreed that the following strategic goals should guide the construction of village and Ward plans:

a) foster and nurture social cohesion or connectedness in the joint fight against poverty;

b) reduce resistance to change by individuals and institutions within the Ward and its constituent villages;

c) develop the capacities of community members and their institutions to cope with change in a dynamic global environment;

d) improve the well-being of people and their communities;

e) improve integrated service delivery within communities in the Ward;

f) promote wealth creation by a broad range of community members and their institutions;

g) empower and develop the disadvantaged segments of society, especially children, youth and people with disabilities; and

h) revive and strengthen adherence to African culture, tradition, norms and values of humanism.

Prior to village-level development planning, relevant training was provided to the ‘Foot Soldiers’. Thereafter, they mobilized their respective communities to actively participate in formulating their village-level development plans. When doing so, they worked closely with both elected and traditional leaders. The development planning process was democratic and all-inclusive. Children (7–10 years old boys and girls; 11–14 years old boys and girls), male and female youth attending secondary or high school, male and female youth out of school, men, women and community leaders were engaged through ‘Foot Soldier’-facilitated workshops within their villages. During these workshops, separate social group-specific focus groups were constituted. Each group defined its vision and mission, in addition to spelling out its five core values. Further, every group identified potential partners that could be useful when implementing each one of the eight strategic goals listed above. Other aspects considered in the social groups were activities to be implemented and perceived performance indicators for each strategic goal. This meant that although the primary aim was to develop a consolidated community-wide development plan, specific social change plans for each group were formulated. The village development plans were then consolidated into Ward development plans. Currently, efforts are under way aiming to establish how best to upscale this work to the remaining 33 Wards of the Municipality and also to use the plans to review the Makhado Municipality Integrated Development Plan.
THE PROJECT’S MILESTONES TO DATE

Now we turn to what we believe stands out as the project’s successes and challenges. Also, we distil some of the factors that enabled us to score these successes and fight some of the challenges encountered. The fact that the Makhado Municipality Council adopted a resolution stating that this was its project, which would be incubated in the Speaker’s Office was a colossal achievement that we will forever be proud of. The Council resolution went further to detail how the Municipality would co-resource implementation of the project. It defined the roles that the Municipal Manager and other Municipal Executive Offices would play as implementation proceeded.

One of the most significant milestones in this project was winning the Impumelelo Innovation Silver Award on 17 May 2008 (http://sadelivery.co.za/files/back_issues/delivery/Edition16/WW_impumelelo3007.pdf). This annual national competition seeks to identify the most innovative projects nationwide. Specifically, it is designed to recognize and reward those initiatives that seek to improve the lives of South Africans. The prize won included R20 000 from the Development Bank of South Africa (DBSA), a trophy and a certificate. In awarding the Silver Award, the judges characterized it as a vital project, which every Municipality in the country should consider implementing as it helps lessen the many violent service delivery tensions and confrontations involving Municipalities and the communities they serve. Winning this award helped to place firmly the Amplifying Community Voices in Makhado Municipality Project, Makhado Municipality and UNIVEN on the national map of innovative and best achievers. There is a need for building on this significant achievement.

In the course of Amplifying Community Voices, we have experienced some unintended consequences. During the initial stages of implementation, turn outs of community members averaged 20–50 people. However, this gradually improved over time. Now, turnouts of up to more than 400 people even at village-level engagements are common. This has created a new type of problem, viz. inadequate facilities that can accommodate such large numbers. Thus, more and more engagements are taking place outdoors, in particular under trees or in pitched tents when there is unfavourable weather.

In Ward 1, one of its alumni donated R70 000 (about US$ 10 000) to support a winter school programme after the project had organized an all-stakeholder education summit that recommended that such an intervention be introduced. Also, the Vhembe District Municipality’s LED unit provided training on various aspects of entrepreneurship and tendering to some community representatives including youth, men and women. This was a special request made during LED-focused community engagements in the Wards.

The last notable milestone is that six honours degree students successfully carried out their mini dissertation research through the project. All of them graduated. Currently, four more honours degree students are undertaking their mini dissertation work within the project. In addition to this, two Masters and one doctoral student in rural development are attached to the project for their thesis research.
LESSONS LEARNT

The Amplifying Community Voices in Makhado Municipality project has taught us that there is a lot to learn from community members. Indeed it has been proved that the ‘if you want to know how a shoe fits, ask the one who is wearing it and not the one who made it’ principle applies. In short, having faith and belief in community members’ ideas for local development helps. As we worked with various segments of society in Wards 1, 17, 29 and 37, we always searched for opportunities that could benefit the communities. We created platforms that ensured that the local people, their leaders and institutions saw and took advantage of the opportunities.

One major lesson learnt is that entry into a community through routes that do not have the support of the various community institutions, especially traditional and elected leaders is unlikely to guarantee sustainable development. This observation confirms the views of Boser (2006, 10–14) on ethical conduct and need for devoting time to build relationships with community members before actual conduct of planned work. In this respect, the centrality of effective social preparation as reported earlier which is anchored on trust building and sustenance processes should be noted. Hard work, devotion, passion and adherence to fundamental facilitation principles to bring about change in mindsets of community members and their institutions to work as a collective unit have considerably contributed to the success of this project. According to Hoffman et al. (2005, 10), ‘The kind of engagement that transforms a person is more than mere participation. It is risk-taking, spontaneous, socially supported, heart-pounding co-creation. Some campuses … are taking small steps to foster this kind of engagement. They have found it’s good, hard work’. We have learnt that there are numerous conflicts in communities, which require careful attention if people-centred and driven rural development is to become a reality. It is also becoming increasingly evident that people-centred development requires patience on the part of external agents of social change.

It is evident that community members are deeply knowledgeable and aware of what works in their environments. What is needed to unlock this are viable engagement approaches that provide them with sufficient ‘ventilation platforms’ and guarantee respect for their views. Adoption and implementation of structured dialogues that serve as community ventilation, discussion and all-stakeholder embracing decision-making platforms seem to be helping to build bridges and networks across communities and their organizations thereby precipitating collective action and nurturing self-driven community development. Apparently, equipping leaders and community members with tools for use in facilitating participatory community engagement is entrenching democratic values and practices, thereby harmonizing and promoting sustainable development. However, men are not participating in the development work to the same extent as women. This is so in spite of the fact that men occupy most leadership positions in the Wards.

We have noticed a general improvement in understanding and appreciation of the role of the Ward Committee as a government at Ward level. The value of civic associations as pressure groups is now well understood and acknowledged.
Traditional leaders are increasingly recognised and respected. Because of this improved understanding and recognition of the roles of various critical institutions within the rural communities, tensions are less noticeable and more collegial relationships appear to have taken over. The ventilation and discussion platforms that Amplifying Community Voices in Makhado Municipality created seem to have helped clarify the roles of these institutions, resulting in the observed harmonious co-existence.

Another lesson that we have learnt is the fact that as long as what we do is not in tandem with the cultural diversity and genuine aspirations of the villagers, we would never succeed. The prevailing apathy towards involvement in community development, particularly displayed by men and at times, young people remains a mammoth challenge. Thorough investigations that seek to build an understanding of the causes and deal with them are desirable. Implementation of Amplifying Community Voices in Makhado Municipality has also demonstrated that application of participatory tools of community engagement, in particular those involving small groups, that appreciate the lives, culture and language of villagers of all age groups helps to build bridges that connect us as outsiders with people’s daily realities. As we facilitate the social change processes the following question remains on the horizon, viz. ‘How can we facilitate change that touches individuals within families and communities?’ Also, we have observed that the villagers have very high expectations of the University. Remaining humble, modest and ensuring that we do not promise what we cannot deliver are some of the strategies that we are using to manage the high expectations. Also worth noting is that since this project is a social experiment, we must always be prepared to fail at some point and be magnanimous when it happens. There is a need to view the failures as fertile pedestals upon which we stand as we survey the possibilities that lie ahead. Only when this happens can we co-learn with the communities we are working with.

CONCLUSION

This project has demonstrated that it is possible to have a viable partnership for community development involving a Municipality, University Centre and rural communities. Devoting ample time to social preparation led to awareness, commitment and ownership of the project by most existing community institutions, in particular the traditional and elected leaders. This is vital for the viability and sustainability of the project. In this project, UNIVEN is only enhancing the capacities of individuals, communities and their institutions to construct and champion their own development. Of particular significance in the project have been the many sector-specific service structured dialogue platforms at village and Ward levels. In the process, critical decisions were made collectively. The deliberation platforms seem to be effectively diffusing tensions and role conflicts.

It appears that the approaches we are applying are triggering the desire of communities to take charge of their own lives instead of waiting for externally
driven social change. Apparently, the successes scored to date have been due to the special attention paid to strengthening what communities are already doing. As we do this, we continue to be aware of the need to strategically construct strategic partnerships that organically arise from the realities of what we co-implement with the communities. This makes it possible for the affected people to occupy the centre stage in their own development initiatives. We believe all these are critical pillars of democratizing the development space and empowering grassroots communities. Linked to this is the fact that deft facilitation skills are required when facilitating the building of social capital among the various development players. The fact that we ‘handed over the stick’ to communities to manage their affairs at an early stage of project implementation, with our role being to coach and mentor them as they defined and implemented their development agenda helped to unlock the latent potential in a lot of people in the villages. However, as we do so, we need to be always on the look out for any evidence of tensions and conflicts, which we always try to tackle in an impartial manner.

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