

Like an Inflatable Raft on Rapid Tides: Barriers to Community-Gown Projects at an Emerging Rural University in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Community-gown projects are primarily intended to address the multi-faceted challenges in the developing world where vices such as poverty and inequality are exceptionally high. These projects thus present developing communities and the Global South as a whole with a potential pathway to development because their proponents argue that they are aimed at helping stakeholders actively participate in building sustainable communities. It is contended that universities are strategically poised to deliver sustainable development goals through knowledge production, dissemination, and research by promoting active citizenship and fostering responsible actions. This study examines the obstacles to community-gown projects at a newly established institution in Zimbabwe. To achieve this, the study employed a qualitative research approach through which data were collected using interviews with students, lecturers, and deans involved in community development projects at the university. Essential insights included that undertaking community-gown projects were being impeded by financial constraints, infrastructural inadequacies, and issues surrounding community access and accessibility, among other factors. The researcher recommends that universities consider regular auditing of the impacts of their projects in host communities and also have clear-cut policies on funding and the regulation of community-gown projects.

Keywords: education; inequality; poverty; sustainable development; university-gown projects

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Introduction

Historically, community-gown projects refer to the partnerships often engineered between universities and communities to engender sustainable community development (Bruning et al. 2006; Cherrington et al. 2019; Hart and Northmore 2010). Lately, universities globally are being asked to renounce their detached ivory towers and join hands with local communities to develop solutions to society's many socioeconomic problems (Machimana et al. 2018; Shabalala and Ngcwangu 2021). This is because universities are seen as better positioned to deliver on a sustainable development agenda than other organisations (Bhagwan 2017; Findler et al. 2019; Rieckman 2018). This can be achieved through an institutional focus on economic, environmental, and social factors that policies should support the attainment of sustainable development (Armeanu et al. 2018; Mula et al. 2017). More so, the knowledge production, dissemination, and research roles of universities make them well-disposed to produce active and responsible citizenship—an indispensable ingredient for sustainable economies (Findler et al. 2019; Rieckman 2018). Although there is evidence of success in implementing practical community-gown projects in universities, internal and external constraints still abound.

Previous studies have shown that universities still face many challenges that need to be overcome to achieve sustainable community-gown partnerships (Kang 2019; Mula et al. 2017). Among the challenges experienced are the scarcity of material and human resources, the diminishing importance attached to community engagement, the lack of supportive leadership, and poor networks of cooperation between universities (Akib et al. 2017; Akins et al. 2019; Filho et al. 2017). More recently, studies have argued that the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are poised to affect achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development goals set by the United Nations (Fuertes-Camacho et al. 2021). While universities are seen as centres of societal transformation, whose impact can range from years to centuries, there is evidence of how they often fail to sustain community-gown projects (Akins et al. 2019; Johnson 2017). Studies in this regard argue that rural universities in developing countries are constrained by issues such as a lack of material and financial resources, a lack of project management skills, and a failure to prioritise community development projects (Awuzie and Abuzeinab 2019; Marta et al. 2018).

Investigating obstacles impeding the success of community-gown projects is crucial since universities are quickly taking on leading roles in societal transformation and sustainability (Awuzie and Abuzeinab 2019). Universities have been commended as crucial players in the sustainable development agenda because of their role as knowledge producers, yet the success of community-gown projects is incumbent on factors that enable the smooth running of such programmes (Franco et al. 2019; Kopnina 2020). It is contended that sustainable community-gown projects depend heavily on sound policies. The literature in this domain argues that sustainable policy and practice are the bedrock on which the global sustainability agenda relies heavily (Franco et al.

2019; García-González et al. 2017; Kanie and Biermann 2017). Sadly, universities often lack governing approaches to sustainable development approaches that enable them to tackle and address society's many needs as responsible and active citizens (Franco et al. 2019). A case can be made for the existence of a plethora of global policies that seek to engender sustainability into higher education—including UNESCO's Practical Guidelines to Apply Sustainability Science Frameworks and Sustainability Science in Research and Education (UNESCO 2015; UNESCO 2017)—yet, the effectiveness and uptake of these policies in the context of the developing world has been seen as problematic (Didham and Ofei-Manu 2018; Kopnina 2020). Tikly (2019) thus concludes that if education is to play the transformative role that it is expected to play in the developing world, it must be reoriented to fulfil the interests of justice across all spheres of life.

Studies also reveal that another central factor in the success of community-grown projects is the funding dedicated to these projects. Due to the legacy of colonialism and the lack of political will, most developing countries do not have strong economies because they are based on extractive industries (Akyeampong et al. 2014). According to Babalola (2018), most post-colonial governments have failed to invest adequately in the higher education sector, and this has resulted in the stifling of innovation owing to the lack of facilities and the deterioration of infrastructure. It is also contended that African universities overstretch the carrying capacity of the old, dilapidated buildings because, while enrolment into universities has significantly increased, the quality of the university experience has suffered greatly (Akinmade 2014; Babalola 2018). To this end, it is argued that a country can only be as developed as its higher education institutions are. Underfunded and poorly resourced institutions usually signal the problems extant in the broader fabric of society (Akinmade 2014; Didham and Ofei-Manu 2018; Ubogu and Orighofori 2020). The present study thus seeks to examine the barriers to community-grown projects at an emerging rural university in Zimbabwe.

Methodology

This study was based on a qualitative research approach which helped the researcher to elicit the participants' views flexibly, allowing for the inclusion of diverse perspectives (Creswell and Creswell 2018). The researcher formulated the study as a single case study as Creswell and Creswell (2018) argue that a case study design provides a researcher with a rounded understanding of the subject of inquiry. At the selected university, the study sample comprised students, lecturers, and faculty deans. The inclusion criterion for students was that they had to have been involved in community engagement projects at the university, while that of lecturers and deans was that they had to have participated in at least three community development projects under community engagement. The final sample was therefore composed of ten students, five lecturers, and three deans, making a cumulative total of eighteen participants. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews of approximately fifteen minutes. The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis, which allowed for identifying

patterns of meanings in the data collected (Braun and Clarke 2013); this helped the researcher better understand the complex realities prevailing in the domain of community-gown projects in Zimbabwe. The researcher obtained ethical clearance and gatekeeper permission to conduct the study at the university and embarked on data collection in a manner that ensured that no harm was done to the participants.

Findings and Discussion

When asked about the barriers to community-gown projects at their university, the participants revealed four main sub-themes: funding inadequacies, community accessibility, technological inadequacies, and a lack of policies governing community development projects. The following subsections discuss these sub-themes in greater detail.

Funding Inadequacies

While the university had made great efforts to find money to support community-gown projects, the participants revealed that the financing was insufficient and fell short of implementing community development projects on the scale envisaged by stakeholders. Participants argued that failing to cover community engagement costs significantly sufficiently impedes the institution's sustainable development efforts. One can consider the perspective offered by a student who opined:

There is no funding for good community engagement programmes. We wish to have more community engagement programmes so that we also benefit from hands-on experiences, but funding for these programmes seems to be the major stumbling block. ... There is a lack of enough community engagement processes owing to time and funding. The government's use of RTGS [local currency] to budget for teaching and learning is not sustainable because of high inflation rates. (Student 7)

This was also corroborated in the sentiments offered by a dean who posited:

[The] High inflation rate is making it difficult to adequately budget the costs of research, learning and teaching. This is evidenced by congested teaching and learning spaces, especially in ... [city] campus. The high student ratio makes it difficult for teaching and learning. The use of local currency makes it difficult to budget for teaching and learning costs both as researchers and also as members of an extended learning community. We cannot say that we are adequately doing our role in sustainable community development because while we have brilliant strategies, the lack of funding makes it impossible. (Dean 2)

A case can be made for the utterance of a student who reasoned:

Because of low budgetary allocations for projects, there are simply no allowances for such activities. So, one ends up having to part with their hard-earned money for something that is not directly linked to them. I can say that we, as students, are already

struggling to see out our degrees, so this is just not an expense we can shoulder. If there were allowances or some incentives that we get directly for participating, we would gladly participate. ... For now, it is thanks, but no! That is why there is no interest in community development projects. (Student 3)

A lecturer also validated this position by saying,

While efforts have been made to alleviate financial constraints, the available funding remains very limited, so our community engagement efforts still have gaps. For many, this community engagement thing becomes an additional burden for which they are unpaid. How can one add additional responsibilities when there are no incentives and allowances for community engagements? What I mean is that the lack of sufficient financial resources kills the interest. (Lecturer 2)

However, a group of the participants argued that there was sufficient project funding at their institution. A case in point is the perspective offered by a dean who argued as follows:

[The] University financially supports community engagements, and there are also willing organisations to engage with communities for development. We sometimes make use of the Marketing and Public Relations offices to facilitate sustainable community development projects. Through these initiatives, we have managed to successfully increase the pool of funding available for community engagement. I believe we are making a sufficient contribution to the community. We also have bursary options for students coming from successful partnerships with the private sector. (Dean 1)

The findings suggest that while the university had made efforts to secure financial resources from the government and the private sector, these resources were not sufficient and, thus, could not deliver sustainable development in communities through the efforts of the university's involvement. Studies conducted on the state of education in Africa align with the views of the participants arguing that most African governments continue to invest adequately in the education sector (Awuzie and Emuze 2017; Babalola 2018; Didham and Ofei-Manu 2018). Similar perspectives are also offered by Qablan (2018), who argues that owing to inadequacies in funding, the transformative goal of sustainable community development remains ever-elusive. Without sufficient funding for projects, it is difficult for universities to uphold their social responsibility of facilitating sustainable development and helping students and communities acquire the competencies that go with it (Franco et al. 2019; Lozano et al. 2015). As such, for the success of community engagement efforts by universities, there is a need for sustained funding that helps alleviate disruptive economic environments as this form of funding would be more sustainable in light of the prevailing inflationary environment.

Community Accessibility Issues

The findings further revealed challenges of access to some communities where community-grown projects were critically required. The accessibility challenges were

noted as poor road networks, environmental constraints, transport costs, and language barriers. A case in point can be drawn from a lecturer who argued that:

Transport costs are just too high to carry community engagement programmes. This is worsened by our poor rural road infrastructure that makes it difficult to carry out transformative projects. ... Transport costs are always skyrocketing, and it is just too difficult for us. I can say that this is a considerable challenge when it comes to university–community projects here. Communities are also sometimes not interested in such activities due to language barriers. Also, some lecturers don't understand local languages, and for me, it shows a lack of motivation on these issues. (Lecturer 1)

Similar sentiments were relayed by an emotional student, who cried as they said,

The university is actively involved in motivating and supporting communities in getting a quality education. Rural communities are greatly marginalised in terms of resources; this has seen most rural schools getting zero per cent pass rates because they are in the middle of nowhere. It is so difficult for those willing to go and help with literacy campaigns to get to some of these areas. We really want to make a difference—I know how it feels to be in a forgotten community where you are unreachable. But this issue, the university alone cannot fix. It requires the government to be involved but in this part of the country, there is very little appetite to develop roads and other basic infrastructure. If this is fixed, I believe the university's projects will be more successful. (Student 9)

This was validated by a dean who noted,

Transport costs for research are too high and the environment does not allow agricultural experimental projects. High temperatures discourage research by some lecturers and students who end up not interested in research in our surrounding communities. ... It is not easy, and I can understand why. Another challenge is language barriers. Some of our staff and students are transplants from what can be seen as outside cultures—they neither understand nor speak the local language. This frustrates both them and the locals, they end up opting out. (Dean 3)

Another lecturer also revealed that accessing the communities where the university's involvement was needed the most was very difficult. The lecturer remarked:

Some organisations are not keen on doing or partnering with the university in community engagements because of the dilapidated roads, they want to be involved for the sake of window dressing. Where the most real work is needed, there are no cameras and the showbiz we witness in some places. In my view, the university must work with these communities, starting with the issue of access. We have students and lecturers in different disciplines for a reason. The community must benefit because it houses the university at the end of the day. (Lecturer 4)

These findings suggest that while the university has made considerable inroads into sustainable development efforts, there remain challenges concerning access to these communities. A limited group of the participants argued that because the university was

surrounded by communities that were grappling with social ills and underdevelopment, the university found agency in the many needs abounding in surrounding communities. One can consider a student who reasoned as follows:

The location we are in is the best ... for me, if we claim to make changes and transform, this is where we must do it. Charity has to begin at home, as they say. ... I think we are doing just that. We have received several accolades as a university in recognition of the community work being done here. I am from the communities close by, and I can tell you that my people have seen the influence of the university. I do not know where we could be without this university. For me, this is the true reflection of community engagement and development. (Student 6)

The study's findings revealed that while the needs of the community within which the university is located were attractive sites for community-grown projects, the challenge of accessing some of these sites made it difficult for the institution of community development projects. Although Murphy and McGrath (2018) reveal that community engagement is more important and impactful when done in rural areas where development is much-needed, the findings of this study are corroborated by Tshishonga (2020), who reveals that the experiences of academics and students involved in community development projects are often frustrating and disheartening because of factors that are beyond the influence of the academic institutions. The findings of this study correlate with previous studies that reveal that in some instances, despite the appetite that universities can have to implement community engagement projects, the inability to reach such communities often kills the drive for community engagement projects (Akib et al. 2017; Johnson 2017; Stepanek-Lockhart 2018). Thus, it is not surprising that in such circumstances, community engagement efforts tend to suffer from inconsistent implementation or a total non-implementation (Bhagwan 2017; Cherrington et al. 2019; Kearney 2015). One can thus contend that fixing the poor performance of community engagement projects in universities requires cross-stakeholder synergies that work with institutions to revive and revitalise communities.

Technological Inadequacies

The responses from the participants also revealed that technological inadequacies were hindering the university's successful delivery of community development projects. Participants lamented how the use of outdated equipment was hindering the drive to attain sustainable development through the agency of the university. A case in point can be drawn from a student who opined:

The university's GIS equipment is too old, and it is not very comfortable. ... What we interact with at university should prepare us for a fruitful engagement with the larger community, but we are not going anywhere with these technologies. I believe that community development can only be fostered if modern ways of teaching are employed; this is associated with using modern equipment so that students and the community can solve environmental problems. (Student 8)

A dean also added,

We lack advanced resources here ... ; because of this, the university's work through its various projects is limited. To be competitive and give our local communities a fighting chance, especially in the wake of climate change and as was recently shown by the COVID-19 pandemic, we need to pump in novel technologies that help with research and community engagement. I dream of a day when our campus, rural as it may be, will stand toe-to-toe with global organisations and fight arm-in-arm with other international partners to reverse the ills of poverty in this community. I hope to live and see that day. (Dean 3)

Another perspective offered was that the lack of quality infrastructural resources had reduced the quality of the university's community development projects, ultimately impacting the university's community engagement goals. A student recollected:

The technologies used here have greatly affected the capacity of the university to deliver quality outputs. I have often realised that what we attain dramatically depends on the technologies we use. I can give an example of the agricultural projects we have done in conjunction with locals; the equipment is very old and cannot give us yields as good as our counterparts in more advanced institutions. (Student 10)

However, some participants thought their institution was adequately equipped to deliver community development projects effectively. One can draw from a lecturer who proffered:

We have adequate and equipped laboratories here, and these good working conditions encourage the exchange of ideas on sustainable development and participation in these programs. This university has the best equipment I have seen throughout my career, which is why we are doing well in community development projects. There is widespread appreciation of the university's community engagement projects, which is a testament to how much we are doing. (Lecturer 5)

Based on the findings above, there is a view that the lack of sufficient infrastructure and up-to-date equipment is deterring the university's sustainable development drive. One must remain cognizant of the notion that without sufficient and quality tutelage, the would-be players in the sustainable development efforts by the university suffer greatly (Machimana et al. 2018). These findings are not surprising if one is to consider previous studies which reveal that owing to poor funding and measly budgetary allocations, universities in the Global South are overburdened by over-enrolment, dilapidated infrastructure, and negative student experiences of what used to be a pleasant higher education enterprise (Akinmade 2014; Babalola 2018; Ubogu and Orighofori 2020). This is compounded for emerging rural universities that lament the lack of material and financial resources, competence, and prioritisation of community engagement, and inadequate local, regional, and international cooperation among universities on community-grown projects (Awuzie and Abuzeinab 2019; Marta et al. 2018). If the

community-grown projects are to be successful, there is a need to invest urgently in technologies that enhance the effectiveness of university outreach projects.

Institutional Policies

The findings also reveal that the community-grown projects were being hampered by the lack of policies at the institution that are meant to promote sustainable development in the community within which it exists. One can consider the views of a student who stated:

The authorities only speak well about the problems that affect immediate communities, but no policy adequately articulates the university's social responsibility. There is also no intentional promotion of research on the values and cultures of local inhabitants. ... All we get are speeches not backed by the political will to change the status quo. This makes it difficult for us as stakeholders to take this seriously. (Student 9)

This was challenged by a dean who posited that,

The university has been working steadily towards giving a policy-based expression to its stance towards community development, but policies are not crafted and adopted overnight. They are the result of constant engagement and re-engagement. We are where progress has been made, seeing the positive effects of the community transformation agenda. We are relying on the government's policies, which are giving us direction. (Dean 3)

One can also consider the position of a student who noted:

Research activities are carried out in agricultural production and conservation activities in line with policies that we have at the national level, but this needs to be given a localised perspective that interprets government policies in line with our immediate environment and our institutional capabilities. Without express institutional policies, we are simply operating in a vacuum. (Student 5)

Generally, lecturers also called for adopting policies that promote sustainable development projects. This was more explicitly detailed by a lecturer who said:

Part of my job as a lecturer is to be involved in community engagement, which has never been as critical as [it is] today. This is standard practice everywhere, but it is different here. There is more emphasis on teaching and learning—the conventional type in lecture rooms. To change the outlook and successes of projects initiated at both the institutional and individual levels for staff, we need to re-tailor our policies so that they can speak to what we want to do. For me, this is how to express our aims and objectives best. (Lecturer 3)

In light of these findings, it can be seen that the lack of institutional policies is stifling the community development agenda at the university. If education is to play the transformative role that it is expected to play in the developing world, it must be guided

by sound policies that enable sustainable development and involvement (Kanie and Biermann 2017; Tikly 2019). By extension, one can refer to Akib et al. (2017), who argue that sustainable development is an important concept that requires integration into each institution's economic, environmental, and social components through the practice of limitation and balance. Nonetheless, Mula et al. (2017) contend that most higher education institutions' lack of policies reveals that they do not understand the nature of the global call for these institutions' involvement in critical development practices. Like other developmental concerns, African institutions appear to lag in enacting localised community development initiatives (Didham and Ofei-Manu 2018; García-González et al. 2017). Consequently, universities in developing countries are behind when it comes to effective policies for development that require urgent redress from stakeholders from within and outside these universities.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study explored the challenges affecting the successful implementation of community-grown projects at an emerging rural university in Zimbabwe. The findings reveal that obstacles include inadequate funding, lack of access to communities, technological inadequacies, and lack of institutional policies governing community engagement. One must reflect, however, on the notable potential drivers of community-grown projects at the university, such as being in an idyllic location and having a complement of staff and students who seemed willing to advance the community engagement agenda.

The study, therefore, recommends that in order to increase the effectiveness of community-grown projects, universities must consider regularly auditing the impacts of their projects in host communities. It is also imperative that universities and communities work together to establish a working social contract that can be used as terms of reference. There is also a need to formulate clear-cut policies regarding funding and operations associated with community-grown projects because when communities and institutions of higher education work in solidarity within an environment that is accessible and encourages innovation, the transformation agenda can be reached in poor communities. Finally, the study also recommends deliberate efforts to create fluid synergies with government departments and the private sector to reach far-flung communities sustainably.

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