Reducing poverty through community participation: The case of the National Poverty Reduction Program in the Dangme-West district of Ghana

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Abstract

Community participation has been mostly applied in mainstream development approaches to reduce poverty. However, there is little understanding about the nature of the association between community participation and empowerment in development projects leading to poverty reduction. This paper examines the instrumental use of community participation in the National Poverty Reduction Program in the Dangme-West district, Ghana to promote participation and reduce poverty. A total of 210 respondents, including project beneficiaries and staff of the facilitating NGO, ProNet, constituted the sample for the study. This paper demonstrates that community participation is more effective and has the potential to result in empowerment when the primacy is on training and building the capacity of beneficiaries. Providing skills through training to beneficiaries enhanced their participation as well as their interest and involvement in group activities. Beneficiaries' level of participation in poverty reduction related interventions was generally high with the majority of beneficiaries participating in at least one phase of project planning. The rate of their participation varied from one project component to another even though the intensity of participation did not differ significantly among the sampled communities. The study recommends that for poverty reduction projects to meet their potential for alleviating poverty, more attention must be focused on periodic skills training and capacity building programs.

Keywords: Four to eight keywords come here. Divide the keywords by semicolon.

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1. Introduction

Contemporary development approaches perceive community participation as one of the key ingredients for poverty reduction. Effort to stimulate community development through participation is to address the increasing poverty and disempowerment that accompanied the modernistic development discourse (Bryld, 2001). The intention of community participation in development policy and practice is to promote the active engagement of individuals working in collectives to change problematic conditions as well as influence policies and programs that affect the quality of their lives or the lives of others (Mansuri and Rao, 2003).

Community participation is assumed in policy circles as the main channel for the active involvement of community members in shaping the outcomes of the development projects. For Kaufman and Alfonso (1997), effective community participation may lead to social and personal empowerment, economic development, and socio-political transformation. The potential of community participation in reversing power relations and providing the poor with agency and voice is well noted in the development literature. As such most development projects are expected to have some modicum of community participation revealing the widespread appeal for community participation in contemporary development thinking and practice.

Community participation is a widely used concept in development policy and practice (Cornwall, 2008). Community participation in development practice puts emphasis on getting community members involved in the entire planning process from project initiation to closure (Skidmore et. al., 2006). Structures of community participation create social capital for community engagement as well as motivate people to get involved in the affairs of their communities. The role of community members in shaping the outcomes of development projects is critical for the success of development intervention and possibly for poverty reduction.

Community participation has featured very prominently in development is poverty reduction and rural development. Cornwall and Coehlo (2007) writes that the concepts of participation and poverty reduction carry the allure of optimism and purpose and has shaped development discourse and policy for some time now. A growing body of evidence confirms Cornwall and Brook assertion that community participation in development projects leads to poverty reduction and sustainable development (Hoddinott, 2002; Narayan, 1995). Specifically, community participation empowers the poor by building their capacity through skills training to actively engage with the development process. Active empowerment in community activities often leads to the empowerment of local community members (Buysse, Sparkman and Wesley, 2003).

Participation and empowerment are mutually reinforcing (Hindsworth and Lang, 2009). For Labonté and Laverack (2008), empowerment is the process by which people gain control over the factors and decisions that shape their lives. The empowering effects of community participation in poverty reduction manifest at the individual and collective levels. At the individual level, giving people the knowledge, skills and confidence to address their own needs and advocate on their own behalf improves their capacity for collective. Participation in collective action gives individuals the resources to exercise agency through voice (Barry, 2007). Empowering people through capacity building increases the likelihood of their participation in community activities. Increased levels of empowerment allow the community to have influence over things that matter and obtain power over decisions, enabling them to move from powerless non-participants to

active and effective citizens. Community empowerment goes beyond consultation and information sharing and offers the possibility for active involvement in the decision-making process.

The ambiguity surrounding the use of the word community in community driven development or community based development affects the application of the concept in development thinking and practice. Again, community is often uses in a simplistic manner to portray a culturally and politically homogenous unit that is ready to participate in any development intervention (Whitehead, 1996; Pretty, 1995). In practice, the term community masks people with a complex range of interests, many of whom will have different priorities. The motivation to participate will differ among community members. Some may wish to be closely involved in an initiative, others less so. Thus, the concept becomes instrumental in achieving the objectives of development rather than transforming the underlying structures of inequality existing in the community. Constraints shaped by culture and tradition preventing members within the community from actively participating in development intervention are not considered (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Cleaver, 1999). In every community there exist diversity in relation to gender, wealth and ethnicity that influence the level of involvement in community affairs yet these differences are ignored and community participation introduced as an all embracing benign activity.

The inception of Community Driven Development initiatives alongside decentralization reforms in Ghana during the late 1980s was to enhance the practice of community participation. Community participation was given prominence by the promulgation of the Local Government Act, Act 462 that made it mandatory for local government authorities to ensure that people in a particular local government area are offered the opportunity to participate in their governance. The introduction of the Ghana Poverty Reduction Program in 1999, by the Government of Ghana as part of its poverty reduction agenda in five pilot districts in the country sought to use community participation to reduce rural poverty and to build and strengthen capacities for effective local government administration. Through the NPRP, the Dangme West District implemented various interventions and other traditional activities aimed at promoting the livelihoods of the vulnerable and the excluded in the localities. The traditional activities undertaken in the district included farming, petty trading and fishing. Other interventions included the formation of occupational or activity groups at Sota, Agomeda, Kordiabe and Doryumu.

These groups were to serve as conduits for collective action and also to provide beneficiaries with skills training in income generating activities as well as strengthen their capacities to actively participate in community development activities. The groups through their leadership were to facilitate and assist group members to assess funds under the Social Investment Fund component of the project. Through workshops, meetings, and training activities that were organized at the Community, and District levels to inform and educate potential beneficiary communities on the mechanisms for collectively accessing, the projects funds. However, an evaluation document for the National Poverty Reduction Project highlighted the appropriateness of the concept, design and institutional arrangements but criticized the ambiguity in the projects design for not clearly indicating the capacity building outputs to be attained downstream by Community Based Organizations and other community members.

Therefore, this paper argues that building the capacity of individuals through skill training enhances participation leading to empowerment and eventually poverty reduction. The level of beneficiary participation in community driven poverty reduction interventions is shaped by individual characteristics such as age, gender, wealth and education. The next section reviews community participation using the concept of space followed by the methodology that guided the study. The final section of the paper comprises the conclusions based on the findings and the policy implications.

2. Conceptualizing community participation

Community participation is a well known concept in development practice and it is defined differently by different authors based on the approach and perspective for which the concept is applied. The concept emanates from community driven development approaches that sought to actively involve project beneficiaries in the design and management of development projects. Community participation leads to transformation in the way the community partakes in any intervention. The use of the term community to qualify participation implies that members of a particular location have something in common that they share with each other. According to Paul (1984) community participation contribute to objectives such as; sharing of project costs, increasing project efficiency, increasing project effectiveness, building beneficiary capacity and increasing empowerment.

However, contemporary development policy simplistically uses community participation to evoke almost anything that involves people or the community. Little emphasis is placed on the level and dearth of participation by the community and the extent to which it provide active voice and agency (Cooke & Kothari, 2001).

Efforts at mainstreaming community participation in development projects must focus not only on promoting community involvement but also on the typology of participation. The level that it offers a useful starting point for differentiating degrees and the nature of participation envisaged for the community. The form that community participation takes is informed by the intentionality, and associated approach, of those who initiate participation (Cornwall, 2008). This has made community participation be seen in development policy and practice as an invited form of participation that fails to adequately provide meaningful form of participation for community members beyond "tokenism" – consultation, informing and placation (Arnstein, 1969). From the perspective of the community, participation must give citizens power to shape the affairs of their community in the form of partnership, delegated power and citizen control. According to Pretty (1995), community participation can be explored from a continuum of manipulative and or passive participation, through either participation by consultation or participation for material incentives to higher forms of participation including functional participation to self-mobilization. When participation is at self-mobilization community members take the initiative independently of external organizations, developing contacts for resources and technical assistance, but retaining control over these resources.

3. Community participation as invited participation

Community driven development projects are usually implemented in delimited units referred to as community. Therefore, this paper conceptualizes community participation using the metaphor of space. The intention for using the concept of space is to understand the dynamics of community participation and the associated notion of empowerment by exploring the issues of power and difference within participatory structures and practices. According to Cornwall (2002), conceptualizing participation as a spatial practice reveals the issues of power effects that permeate these spaces highlighting.

The theoretical literature on participation evokes the 'community' as sites for public engagement where citizens are provided with opportunities to come together to deliberate and make decisions on issues that affect them (Cornwall and Coehlo, 2007; Gaventa, 2006). The community in this sense can be perceived as a bounded entity, metaphorically akin to a physical space' but not identical to a space conceived in terms of distance. Space is seen as one "which is colonized, reproduced and transformed by human societies" (Sayer, 2000, p. 110). Sayer writes that space only exists through its constituents and embodies the social relations that permeate that space. For Cornwall (2002), attempts to engage participation among different individuals within a community can be conceived as an effort to create space for them to be involved in the affairs of their locality.

Getting the community to participate in collective action to solve some common problems then involves the reconfiguration of the space between citizens and the state to design and create new institutions. Cornwall uses the mode of emergence of participatory spaces to distinguish between participation in invited and popular spaces which seems to have had considerable impact on debates on participatory governance. Invited spaces are often brought into existence by external resource bearing agents. Such spaces may be transient or more durable in nature. Invited spaces are conceived as arenas in which people are invited to participate. Forms of invited spaces include community participation and citizen participation. This form of participation requires inviting all shades of people within a defined locality to participate within the space provided. Community members invited to the new spaces are assumed to be capable and willing to participate. Emphasis is on the community using the existing social capital to organize and get involved in the development of the community.

Often associated with community participation is the assumption that these spaces are neutral and apolitical which simply allows for an open, all inclusive, equitable deliberation and negotiation among various actors irrespective of individual's social positioning and access to resources (Kesby, 2006). Community participation as based on the logics of the invited space fails to fully recognize the forms and functions of power operating in different segments of the community and its association with marginal and excluded groups. According to Kapoor (2004), micro power processes operating within the invited space affects the ability of marginal actors to actively participate in project intervention.

Critics also question the conception of the invited space as the site that offers the possibilities for meaningful social transformation since it fails to engage with issues of power and politics (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). Unqualified invitation obscures local structures of economic and social power that are likely to affect the outcome of participation (Mansuri et al., 2004). The conceptions of power within the invited space fails to

illuminate the underside of everyday aspects of power relation to understand ways in which power and difference define the participatory space, privileging certain voices and excluding others and reinforcing the power of the elites and reinforcing the status quo (Brock et al., 2001; Kapoor, 2004).

Kesby (2006) writes that participatory approaches are inseparable from the exercise of power hence the need to understand the workings of power within the participatory arena. The way spaces for community participation are organized and occupied reflects the workings of power. The issue of power is at the helm of community participation and so development initiatives that seek to empower people must pay attention to addressing the existing unequal power relations that shape the possibilities for participation. Power is conceptualized as a complex product working within the boundaries of the invited space before interrogating the literature on power and participation to explore the links and highlight some of the gaps identified. Taking an in-depth look into the spaces of participation enables us to understand more closely the dynamics of power, agency and knowledge in shaping the invited spaces.

Aside the effects of power, within the participatory space, certain factors are noted in the literature as shaping community participation in development interventions (Cleaver, 2009; Davis & Negash, 2007). According to Cleaver and Toner (2005), three clear factors namely; wealth, gender and age explain individual's differential participation in collective activity. Cleaver and Toner argue that there is a strong correlation between these factors and active participation in community development activities. Davis & Negash, (2007), add educational level of the beneficiary to the three factors of wealth, gender and age. Wealth shapes the outcome of participation for the well to do as compared to the poor even though it cannot be said that wealth and participation have a direct relationship. Furthermore, in community participation driven projects, participation is often noted to be gendered with women's participation in village level organizations and leadership position being lower than men's. Another key factor patterning participation in community interventions is age. The claim is that younger people participate in collective activities than the older but the older people tend to dominate in leadership.

Central to community participation is its language of empowerment. Hickey and Mohan (2004) assert that participation can facilitate the poor with capabilities to maneuver within local power relations and hence bring those in positions of responsibility to account. Within mainstream development, the spaces generated as a result of community participation are viewed as sites that empower people and widen their scope of action. Invited arenas of participation become an appropriate space that provides the actors, who populate it with voice, skills and the resources to engage, and deliberate within these spaces. Experience garnered within the invited spaces can also transform participants into active citizens who can claim their rights (Kabeer, 2002). Similarly, skills learnt can seep into other spaces helping to reconfigure such arenas of participation (Mohanty, 2004).

Many poverty reduction projects seek to reduce poverty through capacity building in the areas of financial literacy, rights based issues and governance. According to Mansuri and Rao (2013) an effective strategy for getting participation to benefit beneficiaries is through skills training. The claim is that skills training provide significant mechanisms for improving the livelihoods of poor people. Participation in skill training and capacity building programs contributes to social and economic integration. Providing training in vocational

skills plays an important role in equipping beneficiaries with the skills required for work and social integration. In a rapidly changing environment, strengthening the skills of project beneficiaries can reduce their vulnerability and help them to cope with new economic and social conditions. Therefore, skills development can certainly constitute a powerful tool for poverty reduction.

4. Methodology

A multiple-stage approach was used to obtain data. The multi-stage sampling was used to select 210 respondents for the study. This number was made up of 190 Project Beneficiaries, 16 Group Leaders and 4 Project Staff. The sampling procedure, which was to ensure representativeness, involved two stages. First, five out of the ten communities that had benefited from the project, namely, Agomeda, Amenakpo, Kordiabe, Kponhe and Sota were selected for the study using simple random sampling. The selection of the five communities was to ensure that views from the sampled respondents were a fair representation of all ten beneficiary communities. Second, a list of 16 beneficiary groups in these five pilot communities was obtained from the NPRP district office in Dodowa. Each beneficiary group consisted of members who were engaged in the same activity. All the 16 beneficiary groups were purposively selected for the study. The combined population of all the 16 activity groups in the five communities is 385 and a representative sample of 190 respondents was selected for the study using the table for the selection of sample size designed by Krejcie and Morgan (1970).

Using simple random sampling, a proportionate sample of beneficiaries were selected and interviewed from each activity group in the five communities. In each activity group, simple random sampling was used to select to the respondents. Purposive sampling was also employed to seek the views of each of the sixteen group leaders. In short, 190 beneficiaries and 16 group leaders of the NPRP projects from the five selected pilot communities and four project staff were interviewed. In addition, all the four project staff of the local facilitating NGO, ProNet were interviewed. At the national level the program officer at the NDPC responsible for the District was interviewed. The approach used generated both quantitative and qualitative information to answer the research questions.

Data for this study were collected from both primary and secondary sources. The secondary sources of data collection involved the review of secondary materials in the form of project appraisal reports prepared by the PMU and ProNet. The primary data collection instrument used was the interview schedule. Four local residents who were literate and could communicate effectively in the local dialect were engaged for a one-week period to administer the interview schedule. This helped reduce measurement error as field assistants recorded responses correctly and efficiently, producing reliable field data for the study. The interview schedules that were arranged with NPRP officials, the Program Manager of the NPRP and staff of ProNet, the implementers of the program aimed at soliciting information on community participation in NPRP projects in the study area. All beneficiaries of the various poverty reduction projects in the Dangme-West District, staff of the district project management unit and facilitating NGOs, members and leaders of the various activity or

occupational groups in the district who are directly involved in NPRP activities constituted the population for this study.

5. Results and discussion

This section of the paper discusses the findings of the study in relation to the objectives of the study. The discussion centered on the characteristics of respondents, community participation in the NPRP, the intensity of beneficiaries' participation. Other issues discussed include training and capacity building programs and empowerment and levels of participation of beneficiaries.

5.1. Characteristics of respondents

The study considered the characteristics of respondents namely sex, age, and education and this is shown in Table 1. Out of the 190 beneficiaries interviewed for the study, less than half (31.8%) were males with the rest (69.2%) being females. This shows that more women were involved in the NPRP activities than men. A greater number (81.3%) of the group leaders interviewed were also females. Women were noted to dominate in a wide variety of ongoing activities for both sexes. Women tended to join activity groups that focused on production of a commodity for onward sale. For example, Sota had a higher number of women in gari food processing, while in Agomeda women dominated in the pottery industry. In Kodiabe, however, beekeeping seems prominent and this involved both sexes. The apparent domination of women in NPRP projects was as a result of the initial project intention of targeting more vulnerable women in the ten pilot communities to have means of livelihood and to adequately participate in group and community activities. Targeting more women as compared to men reinforces the national policy of redressing intractable socio-economic inequalities arising from systemic cultural and social factors that disadvantage women in Ghana. The study also noted that gender played a key role in informing individuals on the type of associational groups that they joined in accessing the benefits of the NPRP programme. Again, women were in more different activity or associational groups than men.

Another key factor that informed the pattern of community participation in the NPRP was age. The study noted that young people appeared to participate more actively than the older population. With respect to the age of respondents, 17 percent of the beneficiaries were below 30 years while 7 percent were above 60 years with 76.4 percent of the beneficiaries between 31 to 60 years. Individuals above 40 years over-represented in the leadership positions. About 52 percent of the group leaders were between the 41- 50 age bracket as compared with 18.8 percent that were between the ages of 31- 40. Individuals below the age of 40 years were not adequately represented in NPRP leadership. The cultural values of respect for elders informed beneficiaries' decision to allow the group members above 40 years to assume leadership position as majority. Beneficiaries above the 60 years category were mostly pensioners and often males who were participating in the NPRP activities. They were mostly involved in bee keeping activities since they could not undertake major farming as well as other group activities that were robust in nature.

Table 1. Descriptive data for individual's interviewed

Variable	Sub-level	Beneficiaries		Group Leaders	
		Frequency n=190	Percent	Frequency N=16	Percent
Gender	Male	61	31.1	6	31.6
	Female	129	67.9	13	68.4
Age	Below 30	32	16.8	0	0
	31-40	76	40.0	3	18.8
	41-60	69	36.4	9	56.2
	Over 60	13	6.8	4	25.0
Educational level	None	77	40.5	2	12.5
	Basic Level	64	33.7	8	50.0
	Secondary	47	24.7	5	31.2
	Tertiary	2	0.1	1	6.3

Source: Fieldwork, 2012

Beneficiaries' educational level revealed that about 40.5 percent of the beneficiaries had no formal education compared to only 1 percent that had tertiary education. The rest of the respondents either had basic education (33.7%) or secondary (24.7%). The proportion of beneficiaries in the leadership category who had acquired at least basic education constituted about 87.5 percent.

5.2. Source of information on NPRP activities

According to the four Project Staff interviewed, one main strategy of the NPRP is to create awareness of poverty reduction projects among the populace by introducing its programmes to civil society, through social and political mobilization, the establishment of community based activities and radio discussions in the local language. Table 2 presents beneficiaries source of information about NPRP activities in their communities. Results indicated that most of the respondents received such information from group leaders (51.1%), field staff (27.4%), other beneficiaries of the programme (14.7%) and 6.8% became aware of the NPRP through radio discussions as shown in Table 5. Respondents indicated that although their first source of information on NPRP activities was from group leaders, field staff of the facilitating NGO, ProNet met their group and informed them of the poverty programme.

The results indicate that group leaders as members of the community have another responsibility for informing other community members about the activities of the NPRP. The implication of this result is that many group leaders, once they were satisfied of the benefits of the NPRP, become either personally involved

in stimulating collective action or supportive of others, thus allowing the emergence of new beneficiaries. Such group leaders often disseminate information about the program to others making group leadership the important avenue for obtaining information on the NPRP and its activities. Field staff, on the other hand were the major channel for community mobilization activities for poverty reduction projects in the study area.

Table 2. Source of First Information on NPRP Activities

Source of information	Beneficiaries (n= 190)	
	Frequency	Percent
Group/Community leaders	97	51.1
Field staffs	52	27.4
Other beneficiaries and friends	28	14.7
Radio Discussions	13	6.8

Source: Fieldwork, 2012

5.3. Training and capacity building

The association between participation in training and capacity building and empowerment is discussed in this section with emphasis on project beneficiaries. In view of the capacity constraints of beneficiary communities, which might inhibit community participation in project planning and management, the NPRP in its activities introduced support mechanisms to empower the beneficiaries to participate effectively in the program. Such support mechanisms was to improve the capacity of beneficiaries to plan and manage development activities at the community level. The Community Implementation Committees (CICs) were constituted as the lowest ladder in the management structure of the NPRP and they work under the overall supervision of the legally established Unit Committees (NPRP, 2000).

As shown in Table 3, the training programs focused either on management capacity building or skill training for the different beneficiary groups. Within the sampled communities, an analysis of the management-training programs for the occupational groups was undertaken. This involved the training of 40 CIC members, 12 Management Committees members for the Disabled and 60 Chiefs, Queen Mothers and Assembly Members on Land Title and Registration, and program evaluation workshop. About 40 people participated in the Training of Community Implementation Committees (CIC) program with 12 people participating in the Training of Management Committees while 60 people took part in the Training of Leaders program. Majority of respondents (95%) participated in the skill training program. The high number of participation in the skill training program was expected as the NPRP focused on reducing poverty through empowerment.

Table 3. Types of beneficiary training workshops

Type of workshop	Responses (n = 190)					
	Yes		No		No response	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Sensitisation Workshop	152	80.0	27	14.2	11	5.8
Skill Training	180	94.7	6	3.2	4	2.1
Land Title and Registration	141	74.2	42	25.9	7	3.7
Management Training	49	25.8	140	73.7	1	0.5

Note: The total numbers of responses are more than the total number of respondents due to multiple responses.
Source: Fieldwork, 2012

The study examined the effects of the training programmes on the beneficiaries. Emphasis was put on how the program had brought about changes in terms of participation in group activities and in their lives. Respondents indicated that they had attended training that sought to promote their participation in the NPRP projects. About 80 percent of the respondents indicated that they had attended sensitization workshop organized for activity groups in the beneficiary communities, while 74 percent said that they attended workshops on land title and registration. Nearly 26 percent of the beneficiaries' majority of who were group leaders indicated that they have attended management-training workshops. Almost 85 percent of the project beneficiaries mentioned that the skills gained from the various training workshops had brought some benefits to them.

About 78 percent of respondents, most of whom were women (64%), noted that they had seen improvements as a result of their engagement with the NPRP and gave varied reasons for this response. Most of the beneficiaries (72%) stated that they had gained skills. The dominant response was the acquisition of livelihood skills through group trainings in soap and ceramics making. Others, about forty percent stated that they were trained in bee keeping. The essence of these skill training programs was to empower the individuals in the various activity groups to undertake economic activities aimed at providing them with income.

The study noted that the beneficiaries were empowered through training to enable them to implement and manage their group activities. These groups were formalized with operating rules and norms that shaped membership and benefits. The groups operated as cooperative groups saving some of the income that accrued from their group activities enabling members to benefit from credit.

5.4. Community participation in NPRP activities

This section specifically looked at community participation in the NPRP project life cycle namely project identification, feasibility, design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation. These stages involve various activities aimed at producing unique products. The cycle begins with the project identification phase where the main activity involves an initial needs assessment, prioritization of needs and generation of solutions by the beneficiary community. The various communities identify and prioritize needs with the facilitating NGO and state the goals and objectives of the project.

During the feasibility phase beneficiaries are supposed to prepare a project proposal and the budget with the help of either the NGO officials or District Project Co-ordinating Unit (DPCU). These processes entail, among others, the selection of beneficiaries, identification and valuation of land, price negotiation, preparation of project business plan, and the formation of legal entity. The beneficiary communities are required to actively be involved in these activities.

The project beneficiaries have a minimal role to play during the designation and transfer phase. During this phase, the District Office of NPRP prepares and submits the project proposal to the DPCU. The proposal is thereafter transferred to the Technical Committee of the NPRP for discussion. At this stage, the Policy Committee prioritizes all the applications for selection. All the applicants are required or would have completed an affidavit stating that the information they have provided relating to their names and addresses are correct and that they have not previously received a grant from the NPRP.

The purpose of the detailed design phase is to prepare detailed plans for project beneficiary. If it was not covered adequately during feasibility stage, further planning for productive use of resources may be done at this stage. In this phase, the consultants are required to involve the beneficiary communities in the planning of the project plan. The detailed project plan is submitted to the National Office of the NPRP for approval. Funds for the approved projects are released to the district.

The project implementation stage involves both the acquisition of resources and management of the project. The final phase of the project cycle is monitoring and reporting which uses participatory approaches. The NPRP project cycle not only envisages beneficiary participation, but also suggests that there should be proper mechanisms to engage communities in the life of projects. The involvement of facilitators in the early stages of project is one of such mechanisms designed to empower the community. Generally, beneficiaries were involved in all the phases of the project, although the rate of their participation varied from one component to another. The activities participated in by beneficiaries in each of the five phases of the NPRP project cycle were re-arranged to suit Hamilton (1985) four principal components of participatory projects namely decision-making, implementation, program benefits and monitoring and evaluation stages.

Beneficiaries' level of participation in poverty reduction was generally high with the majority (55.7 %) of beneficiaries participating in at least one phase of project planning. About 34.7 percent of the beneficiaries participated in two phases, 6.8 percent in three phases and only 2.6 percent in all four phases of project planning. Being involved in some aspects of the program did not imply that all the community members were able to shape the final decisions on the activities of the NPRP. The frequency of beneficiary participation (i.e. the actual activities in program planning that the beneficiaries participate) was also explored in the study.

Beneficiaries were asked to specify which activities under the four components of participation in (i.e. decision-making, implementation benefits and monitoring and evaluation) they actually took part in.

Analysis of the results in Table 4 shows that 92.4 percent of the beneficiaries were involved in the implementation component followed by 84.8 percent in project benefits. While about 80.8 percent participate in the decision-making program only 6.1 percent participated in the monitoring and evaluation program.

Table 4. Participation of beneficiaries and group leaders

Participation Component	Beneficiaries (n= 190)		Group Leaders (n = 16)	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Decision Making	160	80.8	16	100.0
Implementation	183	92.4	16	100.0
Benefits	168	84.8	16	100.0
Monitoring	12	6.1	14	87.5

Source: Fieldwork, 2012 Note: Multiple responses exist

Claims by the community members to be involved in the project really bothered on consultation by project officers about the activities in which they were interested in. As explained by Cornwall (2008), being involved in a process is not equivalent to having agency, especially, when the tenor of the voice fails to go beyond the decisions making arenas of the project. About 64 percent of the respondents indicated that the main decisions were made by the project officers and the group leaders. Thus, the level of participation in the NPRP was beyond manipulative and passive participation because all the beneficiaries indicated that they had being consulted or by answered questions about the project.

Again, the main mechanism used by the NPRP was for project beneficiaries to work in groups suggesting a functional form of participation. The beneficiaries, however, revealed further that, field staff and group leaders facilitated the problem identification and needs assessment when they attended group meetings. The approach, as outlined by the project staff, was based on a problem-solving cycle, which began with the detection of the problem, by the beneficiaries themselves with the assistance of their group leaders. After this, the beneficiaries identify solutions, take actions and evaluate its effect on the problem.

Interactive participation occurred among the group leaders as all of them indicated that they were involved in final decisions even though these decision were not independent of project officials. Group leaders were responsible for strengthening of the local institutions formed by the NPRP. The project documents of the NPRP emphasize on community participation but in practice, the form that community participation took differed in terms of group activity and the magnanimity of the group leader to involve group members in the final decisions of the group.

6. Beneficiary empowerment and level of participation

Empowerment is seen as the development of skills and abilities of beneficiaries to manage existing development systems better and have a say in what is done. The term 'empowerment' was used to describe any development process or activity, such as skills training, management techniques and capacity-building, which might have some impact upon people's ability to influence decision making. The study hypothesized that, there is no relationship between beneficiary participation in training and capacity building programs and the level of participation.

The participation of beneficiaries in training and capacity building programs was cross tabulated with beneficiary level of participation in NPRP projects and the chi square test performed at 95 percent confidence level. The results are shown in Table 5. The chi-squared value of 18 at 1 degree of freedom and the tabulated value at 1 degree of freedom and 5 percent significance is 3.84. The calculated value is greater than the tabulated value. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected. That is, there was a significant relationship between beneficiary participation in training and capacity building programs and the level of participation in poverty reduction programs.

Table 5. Beneficiary participation in training and capacity building and Level of participation

Level of participation	Ever attended training workshop by the NPRP		
	Yes	No	Total
High	108(66.7)	7 (25.0)	115 (60.5)
Low	54(33.3)	21(75.0)	75(39.5)
Total	162 (100.0)	28(100.0)	190(100.0)

P=0.005, χ2=18 (Yates continuity correction) df=1
Note: Figure in parentheses are row percentages

From Table 5, out of the respondents who had ever attended training workshop by the NPRP, 66.7 percent had high level of participation and 33.3 percent had low level of participation. However, of beneficiaries who had never attended any training workshop, 75 percent had low level of participation. However, the provision of more and periodic training and capacity building programs by the NPRP are a means of empowering the project beneficiaries to improve their level of participation in NPRP projects.

7. Intensity of beneficiaries' participation

Intensity of participation in this section is defined as the extent to which project beneficiaries were involved in information sharing, consultation, decision-making, and initiating action. A beneficiary's level of participation was scored on a 1- 4 point scale with 1 being little or no participation and 4 indicating higher

levels of decision-making. Using Paul's (1987) classification of participation, information sharing and consultation present ways to exercise influence, which is termed low participation, and decision-making and initiating action, offer ways to exercise control, this is termed as high participation. The results based on this categorization are shown in Table 6.

The findings show that while 60.5 percent of the beneficiary respondents had higher levels of participation 39.5 percent had low levels of participation. The implication of this result is that most of the respondents participated in higher levels of participation in the form of decision-making and initiating action on poverty reduction projects. On the other hand, those who had low participation levels were either consulted or informed on their group's poverty reduction projects and were not involved in decision-making. The intensity of beneficiary participation among the sampled communities was found to be high. The details of this result are presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Beneficiary participation among communities

Community	Level of participation					
	High		Low		Total	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Agomeda	34	64.2	19	35.8	53	100.0
Amenakpo	21	67.7	10	32.3	31	100.0
Kponhe	17	48.6	18	51.4	35	100.0
Kordiabe	28	62.2	17	37.8	45	100.0
Sota	15	57.7	11	43.3	26	100.0
Total	115	60.5	75	39.5	190	100.0

Source: Fieldwork, 2012

An analysis of the intensity of participation among the sampled communities reveals that on the whole members of the activity groups in Amenakpo (67.7%) had the highest number of respondents participating in higher levels of participation. This was followed by Agomeda (64.2%). The least in this category was Kponhe (48.6%). The differences in the intensity of participation among the sampled communities were tested for statistical significance using a Kruskal Wallis test. The results from the test showed that Amenakpo had the highest mean rank (105) followed by Agomeda (98) while Kponhe had the lowest mean rank of (63).

At the 5% significance level a chi-square statistic of 4.755 and a p-value of 0.191 indicate that the differences in the intensity of the performance were not statistically significant. This means that the study communities participated at the same level of participation. The above finding can be explained by the fact in

almost all the sampled communities had a higher percentage of beneficiary respondents participating in the training and capacity building programs of the NPRP. Again, the study findings revealed a significant relationship between beneficiary participation in training and capacity building programs and level participation.

In summary, the majority of beneficiaries were involved in three components of the project cycle i.e. decision making, project implementation and benefits components. However, the low participation of beneficiaries in the monitoring and evaluation component could be explained by the fact that, the NPRP in the study area was in its fourth year. The intensity of beneficiary participation in the poverty reduction projects in the study area was generally high.

8. Conclusions and policy implications

This paper presents community participation as empowering when people build their skills and capacities through training to undertake certain activities that seek to reduce poverty. Beneficiary empowerment was associated with the participation of the beneficiary in capacity building training programmes. That is, beneficiary level of participation increased with the participation of the beneficiary in capacity building training programmes.

Community participation has the potential to enhance poverty reduction initiatives through capacity building. Organizing beneficiaries along activity or associational groups enhanced both individual and community participation in poverty reductions projects with participation in activity groups being influenced by gender. Group leadership was dominated by the elderly and constituted the main channel for information dissemination about the NPRP and its activities. The findings of the study indicate that beneficiary's level of participation in NPRP projects was high. Individuals and groups acquired new skills and knowledge to enhance their participation in communal activities.

There was a significant relationship between beneficiary empowerment and the level of participation. Participation of the beneficiaries in training programmes was high in the sampled communities. Higher percentage of the project beneficiaries were provided with skills training empowering them participate effectively in the NPRP.

Poverty reduction initiatives that use the community as the main channel for mobilization and involvement must focus on the dynamics and the specificity of context as different kinds of participation imply significantly different levels of engagement. Community participation has a huge potential to engage citizens, including poor citizens, in debates about public policy from local to national level and in a range of sectors. However, creating new spaces for community participation is not enough by itself to reduce poverty. This study has shown that community participation can deliver positive outcomes for poor people. First, the facilitating NGO must put in place the mechanisms to support community engagement. Secondly, the capacity of project beneficiaries must be built through effective training.

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