

**A UNIVERSITY AND COMMUNITY-DRIVEN SOCIAL FACILITATION MODEL FOR RURAL
DEVELOPMENT PLANNING IN SOUTH AFRICA**

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ABSTRACT

The approaches used in South Africa and beyond to plan rural development programmes suffer from a genuine community involvement deficit. Moreover, universities are increasingly being challenged to find sustainable solutions to socio-economic issues such as poverty and underdevelopment. This situation provided a fertile opportunity for demonstrating the relevance of a rural-based university in development programming through a series of participatory action research studies. Exploratory studies were conducted, aiming to construct a university and community-driven social facilitation model for planning rural development. The hypothesis tested in this study was, "Children, youth, men, women and community leaders have similar perceptions regarding the priorities for developing village communities".

All the 13 villages constituting the Masia Traditional Council Area in Makhado Local Municipality participated in this study. The initial phase of this exploratory study involved organizing orientation workshops for the leaders and members of the participating communities. This was necessary because it helped create awareness of the planned work, apart from securing commitment to participate in the jointly developed plans of action. Multi-stage stratified sampling procedures were used to select the respondents. Since collective views and decisions by various interest groups within villages guided the rural development planning, open invitations were sent to all local residents at least 7 years old to participate. Community-selected Village Development Champions (VDCs) served as paraprofessional researchers in their communities. Before being deployed to lead the village-based engagements the VDCs, university staff members and students received training in participatory action research techniques. Through a series of village-based reflection circles involving children, youth (15-35 years old), men, women and leaders, rural community development issues were determined and prioritized. A uniform semi-structured interview guide, participant registers and questionnaires requiring responses on a Likert-type scale were used to collect data. Thematic content analysis was used to analyze qualitative data. Kruskal Wallis and Mann Whitney tests were used to analyse the nonparametric data collected using questionnaires.

Inadequate social cohesion as evidenced by tensions and conflicts among leaders of local institutions was the most common impediment to people-centred and driven development. Other rural development themes distilled from the community-engaged work were infrastructure; basic services; health and wellbeing; utilization of economic opportunities; human capacity development; and resource mobilization. There were no differences among the interest groups

within the Masia village communities ($P > 0.05$) with respect to most of the perceptions on issues relating to rural development. The perceptions of children, youth, men, women and community leaders regarding the priority issues to address were similar ($P > 0.05$). For this reason, the hypothesis underpinning this study was accepted. However, the mean ranks for the perceptions of community leaders, children 11-14 years old and school-going youth with respect to the need for tarred roads in Masia were higher ($P < 0.05$) than those for 7-10 years old children, out of school youth, men and women. It was not clear why there was such a difference in perceptions among the interest groups.

The step by step social facilitation model developed in this study and confirmed at various village level platforms rests on three fundamental pillars, namely social preparation (planning to plan); rural development planning; and planning to implement community-defined projects. This model generates community-owned, holistic and integrated development plans. It is a unique community engagement process that provides pointers on the roles that a rural-based university should play in the pursuit of sustainable rural development.

It was concluded that the current approaches such as municipal integrated development planning that mainly engage local leaders as representatives of their communities might be appropriate. However, the unique nature of engaging diverse interest groups in rural development planning is crucial because it creates and nurtures a sense of belonging, ownership and commitment to self-driven improvement of the quality of household and community lives. Also noteworthy is the fact that the model has a huge potential of nurturing multiple layers of cross-generational community leaders of development. Although the model was produced through a case study of the Masia community, it has the potential to revolutionize rural development planning in South Africa and beyond.

Key words: Community, community-driven, model, rural development planning, university, University-community partnership