Ngo’s Strides towards Sustainable Rural Development in Zimbabwe

Vusumuzi Tshuma
Development Practitioner and Lecturer, Development Studies, Zimbabwe Open University

Abednico Siambombe
On-going Student: Department of Politics and Public Management, Midlands State University, Zimbabwe.

ABSTRACT

The paper examines the subject of a seemingly endless debate on complex relationship between NGO interventions and sustainable growth in rural Zimbabwe. It examines how despite numerous strides by NGOs in their frantic effort to avert poverty in its various forms, the marginalised groups of the poor, women and children continue to wallow in deprivation. This has drawn rotational criticism from a section of development practitioners’, who dismiss NGO work and aid in general as both “dead” and unsustainable as it creates more of dependence than safety nets and creativeness on localised solutions. On the contrary, the proponents of developmental aid perceive NGOs as an alternative to the rolling back state which is apparently bankrupt on sustainable development models of promoting grassroots economic growth and provision of basic services. Thus, this research stands at the cutting edge of development aid paradox vis a vis sustainable rural development. The research sought to review the sustainability of projects implemented by various NGOs after the end of funding phase against a common tendency by NGOs to emphasise on people’s centred approaches of participation, capacity building and empowerment. In this enquiry, both the quality and quantity of aid will be examined through a scrutiny of project viability and long term impact on the targeted communities.

Key Terms: NGOs, Sustainability, Rural Development.

“Aid is and has been used in wrong ways many many times in its sixty years history and thus produced often poor results, but that doesn’t say that the instrument in itself is wrong or inadequate and cannot be used to bring economic and social progress.”

Paul Hoebink
Introduction

Sustainable Development which premise the current wave programming on poverty alleviation, people basic needs and rights can be defined as the continued existence and maintenance of institutions or programmes established by NGOs during an interlude of intervention despite the absence of funding of such projects. The common phenomenon on the projects functionality among rural communities after the intervention phase is more of abandonment resulting in almost a total collapse with isolated benefits to a few project members. This seemingly short impact type of projects have led to this enquiry examining whether community projects by NGOs are either not sustainable by their nature, ill designed with no community participation or aid recipients are generally not proactive to graduate from the entanglement of poverty. Objectively, sustainability should be more of a concern rather than a paradox for NGOs in their wholesome interventions in rural communities.

1Corresponding author. e-mail: drvusumuzi83@gmail.com

IFAD (2009) in one of its occasional papers entitled Sustainability of Rural Development Projects noted that sustainable development is not only one of the principles of engagement to NGOs’ identities and roles, but a critical challenge for all development agencies. It is not possible to claim lasting impact in terms of rural poverty reduction without ensuring projects sustainability in the benefitting communities. Despite the continued interventions by NGOs in rural communities to alleviate poverty, working mostly within the premise of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, the sustainability of the interventions has remained more of a rhetoric rather than a practice. Models of rural development have been rolled out but the output inversely minimal to justify aid related support. The reality has been that most community projects functionality ends when funding or direct support ceases. The sudden or gradual death of these interventions is a result of several factors which among them include lack of consultation and engagement of communities during the initial project identification, total dependency of communities on external support and internal dynamics by the beneficiaries. Taylor and Mackenzie, (1992:257) argues that, when communities
are given the opportunity to participate meaningfully in development initiatives, “…they have shown themselves to be perfectly capable of making rational choices regarding their own destinies”. This stance by Taylor and Mackenzie suggests that meaningful involvement and participation of communities in project implementation yields to full ownership which results in projects sustainability.

However, it should be noted that despite some pitfalls in NGO interventions especially on project sustainability, NGOs remain the central government partner in rural development. In sectors such as education and health, there is notable continued support of the interventions especially by the respective line ministries with traceable imprints. For example, Plan International Zimbabwe has built several schools in Tsholotsho district, rehabilitated dip tanks and dams, sunk boreholes while World Vision has constructed a massive dam in Inkosikazi area under Bubi district that serves almost the entire district through drinking water for animals and there is a viable irrigation scheme by the communities within the dam proximity. These are some of the lucrative interventions by NGOs that has a large bearing on sustainable rural development. It is in this line that NGO interventions have proven to be pivotal in rural development as the government of Zimbabwe is economically handicapped in terms of service delivery for its people and the national budgets barely caters for rural community needs. However, in terms of prioritisation, the rural populace in Zimbabwe is not much concerned with interventions on advocacy or much software but rather infrastructural development such as building of schools, clinics and dam construction which is hardly done by most of the third generation NGOs who are more into emergency programs and other short term projects. Nutritional gardens, goat pass on and conservation agriculture projects among other interventions have proven unsustainable. Christian Care (a local NGO) has implemented several of these projects but very few are still operational to date both in Lupane and Binga districts. In Binga, the goat dip tanks at Saba and Lubanda wards and the Fresh Fish Market at Siachilaba ward has failed to operate despite massive capital injection into these projects. The structures are just lying idle since the project completion in 2012.

The role of the Zimbabwean government as the regulatory authority of the NGO operations has remained peripheral,
offloading wholly its development mandate to NGOs especially when resource injection is required. The Government NGO partnership is mainly at technical level which ceases when the NGO implementation phase ends. Thus, the lack of continued monitoring and technical support from government line ministries together with Rural District Councils who have no capacity to finance their own monitoring visits to project sites has contributed immensely to the unsustainability of many NGO projects.

**Methodology**

This research covers a range of works done by NGOs in Binga, Lupane, Tsholotsho and Bubi areas in Matabeleland North province of Zimbabwe. These four districts which ranks among the top in terms of poverty levels according to National Vulnerability Assessments were purposively sampled. In terms of numerical presence of NGOs, these four districts have a higher number of NGOs operating though a trace on the sustainability of the projects implemented points to a regression. The data was collected through participatory observation by researchers. There was also a wide consultation of previous research works, published books as well as reports for secondary data.

**The Role of NGOs in Rural Zimbabwe**

Enyioko (2012) argued that the essence of non-governmental organizations remains the same: to provide basic services to those who need them. In the same vein Enyioko went on to articulate that many NGOs have demonstrated an ability to reach poor people, work in inaccessible areas, innovate, or in other ways achieve things better than by official agencies. Major rural development programmes by NGOs borders around agricultural programmes, health, human resource development (capacity building) and community development.

The critical role of NGOs in the development process attest to their timely responsiveness to the needs and problems of the grassroots masses who are normally at the tail end of the national resource allocation. In terms of rural development, the government has traditional fallen short of both the resources and sustainable turn around strategies to support the rural populace. Despite issues of resource deficit by the national government, instances of marginalization has come to the fore.
especially when comparing districts and provinces across Zimbabwe in terms of their developmental milestones. Although the mandate of development squarely lies with the national government, the plethora of community challenges are often beyond the government’s capacity to handle hence the exponential rise of NGOs to fill in the gap left by the rolling back state. NGOs’ empowerment interventions are mainly meant to improve the people’s livelihoods, standard of living of the so called marginalized citizens. Also, among its contemporary paradigm, NGOs are into advocacy, lobbying the state apparatus especially on various policy issues as well as on democracy which is regarded by the powers that be as a more frontal political assault. It is this role that has put the civil society at the verge of logger heads with the Zimbabwean government due to its confrontational nature of probing institutions and structures of power aligned to policy formulations.488113

**Sustainability of NGO Interventions**

Hailey (2014) noted that sustainability should be seen as an ongoing process, rather than an end in itself. It is a process that involves the interaction between different strategic, organizational, programmatic, social and financial elements. Most NGOs’ interventions have failed to be sustainable in pursuance of rural development mainly due to ambiguous deductions ranging from wrong targeting of project users, inconsistent technical support from government local structures and the general attitude of the communities towards development, which is evidenced by minimal community contribution to the projects implemented with the aid from NGOs.

NGOs’ interventions are a paradox of sustainable development in Zimbabwe due to priority setting by the donors. Community participation is largely yet to be a fulfilled idea. The trend of some community development is based on plans formulated elsewhere, lacking contextual setting which forms the bases of project unsustainability. Most of the NGOs’ interventions are determined by the nature of funding which comes as a prescribed package for NGOs to implement.

The context within which rural development is understood in this study is a process of people taking charge of their lives through meaningful involvement and participation in the community development agenda. In this respect,
development for the rural populace has little trace of beneficiary involvement hence suffice to dismiss it as parallel to their needs. The developmental initiative should be flagged by communities at grassroots, a buy in that informs active participation blended with ownership which resultantly leads to sustainability. There is need to devise more people centred approaches which stress empowerment and participation. Borrowed solutions or universalised approaches have failed development. Third world countries including Zimbabwe are very heterogeneous, dissimilar in terms of population, resources, climates, culture, economic structure and locations. It is within this premise that Taylor and Mackenzie, (1992:xiii) summarises the weaknesses of participatory development as “problems emanated from the lack of theorizing of social relations with respect to the composition of the state, the existence of class and gender differentiation, and, in turn, state local relations”.

Busiinge (2008) argues that, the NGOs or donor aided programs do reduce some of the worst forms of poverty, although a modest achievement, for the people helped can be very significant. This reduction of poverty is mainly in the form of employment of the undetermined employees from different worlds with a common goal of getting paid with lump sum money in the poor economies. This is a draw back to the NGOs’ interventions as the programmes are not implemented with passion by the employees. Busiinge (2008) also stressed that, on the other hand, literature has shown that NGO interventions do not reach the bottom. The most vulnerable, for example people living with disabilities, the elderly and children rarely participates in NGO initiated community projects.

Moyo (2009) argues that Aid has not lived up to expectations. It remains at the heart of the development agenda, despite the fact that there are very compelling reasons to show that it perpetuates the cycle of poverty and derails sustainable economic growth. This has mainly been due to conditionalities and program duration which at times are too short to establish a well-meaning intervention that will continually benefit the masses. NGOs are mostly concerned with targets rather than the impact which explains why most of the community project collapse. In terms of accountability, NGOs are more accountable to their donors who are given updates on routine intervals.
Unlike communities who are commonly involved during programme inception for programme endorsement. Some project baseline studies are done way after the program has been implemented though in essence the results of the baseline are to inform the programme design and scope. Moyo (2009) in her book ‘Dead Aid’ went on to present an unfortunate scenario of Africa’s addiction to aid. For the past sixty years it has been fed aid. Like any addict it needs and depends on its regular flow, finding it hard, if not impossible, to contemplate existence in an aid-less world. Most communities have failed to maintain projects after the donor funding dried up with a presumable hope of a cycle of perpetual support. Communities have left many projects as white elephants, an indicator of lacking initiative and will power to take over from the start up injection of aid support. It seems communities prefer a fish over a fishing rod hence unsustainability of many projects implemented through NGO support.

Most communities do not participate in their projects but rather they act to fulfil the expectations by NGOs. Acting is for a moment hence most of the projects collapse. There is often a lack of trust between citizens and local officials as was observed by Bassler et al, (2008). Citizens are usually eliminated during the decision making phase in identifying the problems that affect them at grassroots before determining an intervention. However, they are only involved in these interventions at implementation stage. Decision making is usually done by the central and local governments which accept the operations of both international and local NGOs in a bid to cover up their flaws in service delivery without considering the impact and sustainability of the programmes on beneficiaries. It is not surprising that NGOs identify “suitable” projects, suggest operational areas which are normally close to the main roads (development tourism) and influence the operation of parallel structures in the name of Volunteers. The centre of power within communities is moved from the traditional leadership and councillors to adhoc structures of volunteers hence the rotational challenge of project sustainability. Community structures of patriarchy are subdued by promoting purely women projects though culture especially in Binga position man as the finally decision makers. A blend of both sexes normally ensures programmes sustainability from the observations made.
The implementation of sustainable development programmes in rural Zimbabwe has been largely unsuccessful. NGOs interventions have made little progress in implementing sustainable programs to improve the lives of the poor, and sustainability remains a revolving challenge. Sustainable development is not easy and will take considerable time and effort (John Drexhage and Deborah Murphy, 2010). This has been greatly attributed to the shrinking world economy and the unfair trade practices faced by developing countries such as Zimbabwe and the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will remain an illusion for developing countries.

The concept of sustainability of NGOs interventions in rural Zimbabwe will remain amorphous due to the lack of will power especially by politicians who normally drive a wedge of divide in a desperate attempt to prove their relevance in aiding development. A closer scrutiny of NGO work in rural communities should be applauded especially by the political elite whose failures and incapability are covered up by NGOs in their developmental and humanitarian drive. Sustainability is not just about lining up fund raising campaigns or writing competitive funding proposals, but rather much more about ensuring that there has been sufficient investment in organisational systems and processes (Hailey, 2014).

NGO interventions in rural Zimbabwe are being hammered by a phenomenon of climate change which is continuously accelerating food shortages, eroding the local resource base of livestock through persistent droughts. Zimbabwe receives very little development aid either by design and or due to several humanitarian challenges that calls for an emergency redress, thereby setting priority needs for intervention. World Food Programme, Save the Children, Christian Care, World Vision, Plan International among other NGOs have devoted much of their funding on food aid which is not developmental due to climate change induced emergences of food insecurity.

There is minimal coordination amongst NGOs operating in rural areas to ensure positive results and to achieve successful rural poverty mitigation measures. Coordination is lacking from NGOs leading to duplication of work and project beneficiaries’ double dipping. For example,
in Manjolo and Siachilaba wards of Binga district the same beneficiaries were targeted for the Internal Savings and Lending Schemes by Christian Care and World Vision. Thus, coordination meetings of who is doing what and where should be religiously conducted through the Rural district Councils as a way of spreading across the scarce aid resources to benefit a large population. This is one of the typified examples of aid being used as a blunt instrument of fighting poverty.

Conclusion

The persistence of poverty in rural Zimbabwe is a source of both concern and impatience in the prevailing institutional, policy making and political systems of both donors and recipient communities. It is a litmus test for the relevance and effectiveness of aid in rural sustainable development. A compelling question that comes to the fore is: after so many decades of NGO operation, why is sustained growth elusive and aid effectiveness uncertain. The recent debate on rural Zimbabwe’s poor growth performance has tended to shift the focus away from whether or not aid is necessary or whether it is provided in the right quantities, to a discussion of the factors influencing the effectiveness of NGO program implementation in addressing growth, development and poverty alleviation in Zimbabwe. Emerging critics of foreign aid which is channelled through NGOs argue that the development problem was not one of inadequate aid flows but one of shortcoming in political and economic institutions governing receiving or giving aid. Meanwhile there is a severe shortage of professionally trained people who are equipped to deal with problems arising from the increased dependence on foreign aid, and to effectively manage the unintended consequences of such flows on the general economic and social fabric of the receiving rural communities.

Recommendations

To reinforce its relevance within the communities of interventions, NGOs will need to engage benefiting communities at all stages of the project cycle. Programmes will need to be crafted basing on grassroots developmental gaps not the desk reviews of failed interventions by directors and the management boards some of which have limited knowledge of activities on the ground. In addition to this, annual programme reviews should involve the
field level personnel who has hands on experience.

Whilst the needs of the people living in poverty are many and varied NGOs have to at least prioritise sectors such as infrastructural development that are a spring board for developmental activities such as irrigation, marketing among others. More so, the NGOs premise should revolve around aiding people to develop rather than vainly attempting to develop them.

The government and local authorities should have shared strategic plans with development partners as a way of bringing into context any intervention. Regular reviews should be coordinated at district level in line with signed memorandum of understanding (MoUs) as a way of checking on compliance and impact of programme(s) being implemented. Responsible line ministries should then play a frontal role in any intervention, for example AGRITEX officers are to always participate when their farmers are trained in any farming methods as a way of guarding against conflict approaches and enhancing continuity beyond programme implementation phase.

For coordination and support among development partners, there is need for interactive platforms of who is doing what, where and targeting who. Such platforms will ensure that various players will by design complement each other, sharing best practices for sustainability purposes. Also, through such interactive platforms, resources are shared across all wards and villages unlike a situation where NGOs compete for the same wards closer to the main centers leaving the most vulnerable and hard to reach communities.

Development is a complex phenomenon that should not be limited by universalised approaches to development. Context specific interventions informed by in-depth and current researches should be the bases of any project or programme. Reactionary programming should be avoided through a thoroughly, well thought and participatory districts strategic plans. Communities should be positioned as implementers of their development being aided by NGOs not the other way round.

The local leadership through the local government authorities should have clear
policies that guides grassroots roles on any project being implemented. Local governments and local leaders need to strengthen their efforts to monitor the implementation of NGO projects and should have their representatives to create and participate in information sharing platforms to discuss development progress in their communities. Ideally, local governments should be in a position to demand for NGO accountability in their areas of jurisdiction.

REFERENCES


Hailey, J. (2014). Models of INGO Sustainability: Balancing Restricted and


