

## Community participation for social transformation: Experiences from a water by gravity project

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Community participation in rural development is considered as an important factor in promoting sustainable development. However, consumers of community projects are often regarded as passive recipients of externally crafted models of development, especially because power dynamics within the community and the role of the elites and other stakeholders affect the level of community participation. A qualitative research approach was followed whereby data was generated with the use of in-depth interview guides and observation. The participants were selected using simple random sampling and they were made up of officials of the local water committee, workers of the council and local elites. The data generated indicated low community involvement in the planning and management phase but this improved during the implementation phase, making the entire participatory process passive. Members of the community also demonstrated little or no sense of ownership due to elite control, clientelism and local politics. The findings of the study also indicated that the most effective method of social mobilization in such development initiatives was the quarter-based association (Ndakum), which served as the focal point for political and social mobilization and bonding. The results also established that 'who' participates in a project and 'how' they participate is very important since these answers determine the success or failure of the project. The paper recommends that some structural changes be instituted whereby the user population will be the focus of development projects since they better understand community needs. This will ensure the involvement of all stakeholders, including leaders of all Ndakum (men, women and youth representatives) in the planning and execution of developmental projects. Additionally, conclusions arrived at public and local meeting groups (Ndakum) concerning the project should be respected. This will enable the needs of all stakeholders to be addressed.

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**Introduction**

Increasing community participation in rural development is considered an important element in promoting sustainable rural development. However, consumers of community projects are most often regarded as passive recipients of externally crafted models of development. The revival of the concept of community participation in the African continent was marked by the International Conference on Popular Participation in the recovery and development process in Africa held in

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Arusha in 1990. Shaw (1991, p. 20), citing Adedeji's opening statement at Arusha in 1990, stated: "the democratization of the development process by which we mean the empowerment of the people, their involvement in decision making process, in implementation and monitoring process is a condition sine qua non for socio-economic recovery and transformation. African leadership and people should not just desire self-reliance but should will it." This has made the concept of participation the most frequently discussed subject matter in various disciplines that have need for human input in development processes such as social policy, community planning and community development.

As noted by Koffi Annan in a UNEP report, without the fullest participation of people at all levels of society, the goal of full coverage of water supply and sanitation is unlikely to be obtained, considering the fact that water security was declared by the Second World Water Forum in the Hague Netherlands in 2000 to be the principal concern for sustainable development in the 21<sup>st</sup> C and that water, being directly related to socio-economic development, has become both a vulnerable and valuable resource. In order to find a lasting solution to water security, a new paradigm was developed at the International Conference on Water and Environment held in Dublin in 1991. This new paradigm emphasized a holistic, comprehensive and multidisciplinary approach to solving water problems and the involvement of all stakeholders. The Bali Nyonga water by gravity project is an example of a self-help community development initiative aimed at improving the livelihoods of a local people. The first community water in Bali Nyonga was built in 1957 during the British colonial administration by the Native Authority under the leadership of Galega II. In 1967, the water management was given to SNEC following a 40-year concession contract in which the Cameroon government rehabilitated the entire water system, replacing the hydraulic ram with electronic motors and pumps. On the 10<sup>th</sup> of June 1994, water management was returned to the community. In 2004, the newly created water commission came up with the Koplab water by gravity project, which aimed at bringing clean and portable water to the community by gravity in order to reduce the high cost of electricity bills and water treatment on the Ngola catchment installed by the government (Ngefor, 2014). The rising importance of community involvement in development was first felt when the growth model (modernization) of development failed to bring about desired results. In the late 1970s, emphasis was diverted to 'peoples' participation where the ultimate objective was to involve people in the decision making processes. This idea was buttressed by the increasing importance of the concept of

decentralization which was attracting the attention of development practitioners as a strategy for ensuring peoples participation in development initiatives. The participation of local people in this project is often spoken of with much enthusiasm, but there has been little or no research to prove the extent and nature of community involvement experienced during the project. This study therefore seeks to examine the nature, extent and role of community involvement in the sustainable development and management of the Bali Nyonga water by gravity project.

## **Conceptualizing community participation**

The concept of community participation in development gained prominence in development discourse in the 1970s. According to Winder (1981), it owed its influence to Paolo Freire's work on the concept of conscientisation and his analysis of the structural obstacles to development. He argued that people should be the subject and not the object of development. Oakley (1991) described community participation as an end and as an empowering process for individuals and communities in terms of acquiring skills, knowledge and experience, leading to greater self-reliance and sustainable rural Development. Dale (2004), adding to this, viewed participation as contribution which is one of the primary elements in the implementation of programs and projects or in the operation and maintenance of created facilities. The contribution may be entirely voluntary, induced to various extents, or even enforced. It may be provided in the form of ideas, judgments, money, or materials. Bretty (2003), on the other hand, regarded participation as an empowering process in which people in partnership with each other and those able to assist them identify problems and needs, mobilize resources and assume responsibility to plan, manage, control and assess the individual and collective actions that they themselves decide upon. As a process of empowerment, participation is concerned with development of skills and abilities to enable rural people to manage better: to have a say in or negotiate with existing development systems (Oakley, 1991). Eade and Roulands (2003) add that powerlessness is a central element of poverty and any focus on poverty, inequality, injustice or exclusion involves analysis of and/or challenging or changing power relations. Participation as a tool for empowerment helps to amplify unacknowledged voices by enabling the rural people to decide upon and take the actions which they believe are essential to their development (Oakley 1991; Slocum et al, 1995).

According to shepherd (1998), gender analysis comprises information to access and have control over resources to men and women, division of labour within the community, and the participation of men and women in public decision-making and organization. Despite the importance placed on community participation in development initiatives, many agencies still experience poor participation of women, (Guitz and Shah, 1998; World Bank, 1996). According to Slocum (1995), many participatory approaches such as participatory rural development do not explicitly address issues of social relations, including gender. Rarely do these methodologies take into account gender analysis, gender based differences in labour allocation and gender differences in access to and control over resources and their benefits. Gender is usually hidden in seemingly inclusive terms such as “the community”, while in most cases what is referred to as community actually means “male community” (Guijt & Shah, 1998). Assaduzzaman (2008) examined community participation from a different perspective, by arguing that people’s participation in development was and still is an elusive golden deer. Assaduzzaman emphasized that clientilism, which came as a result of the undemocratic set up of the administrative system is a major threat to participation. This relates to the work of Khan (1999), who identified corruption and class bias as a major hindrance to people’s participation. The complicated nature of community participation makes the analysis of the same a herculean task. To effectively make sense of community participation, the Cohen and Uphoff model (1980) model of community participation was chosen as the theoretical lens upon which the analysis will be built.

The Cohen and Uphoff model (1980), which was revised by Ichwaga (2004), identified four approaches to community participation: participation in decision making, implementation, benefits and evaluation. This model can be summarized to answer three distinctive questions: 1) What were they participating in? 2) Who participated? 3) How did they participate?

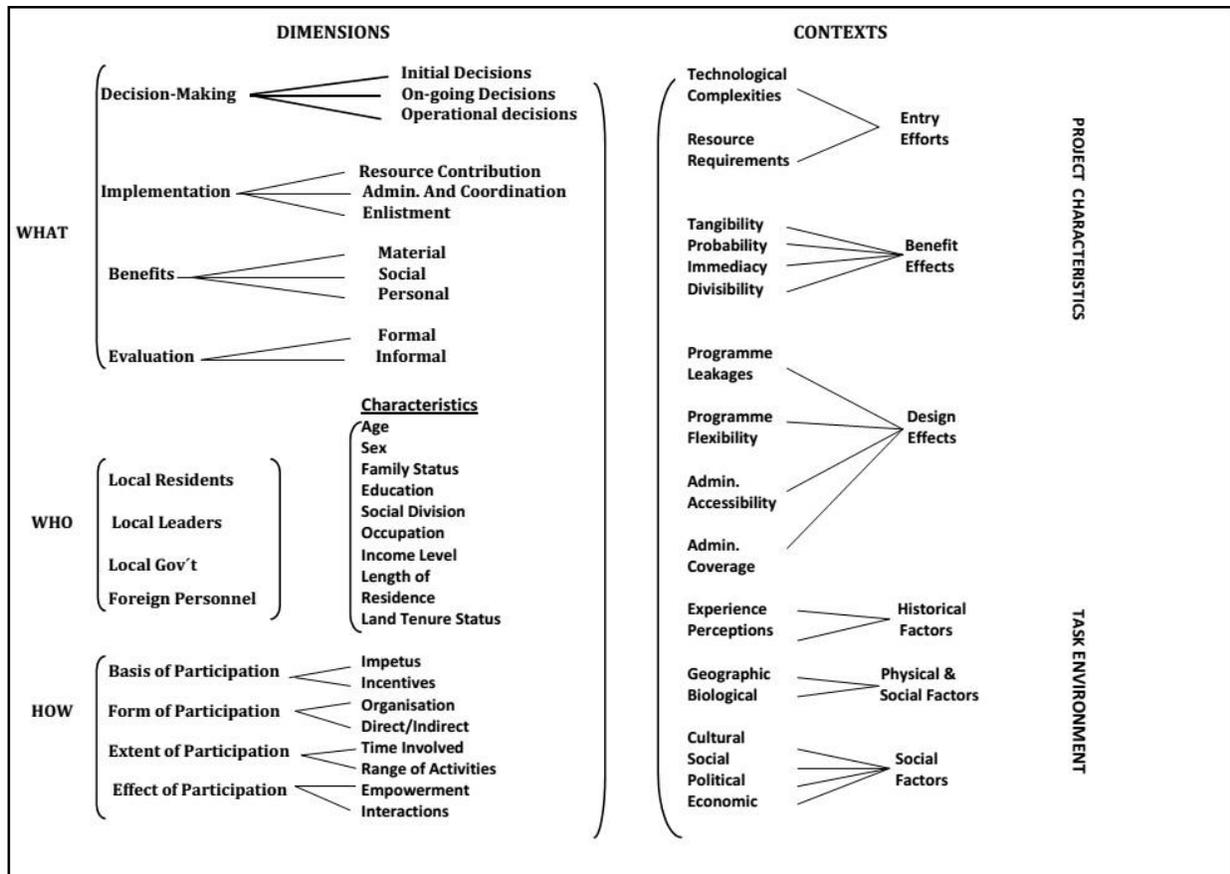


Figure 1. Framework for Community Participation Cohen and Uphoff (1980, p. 219)

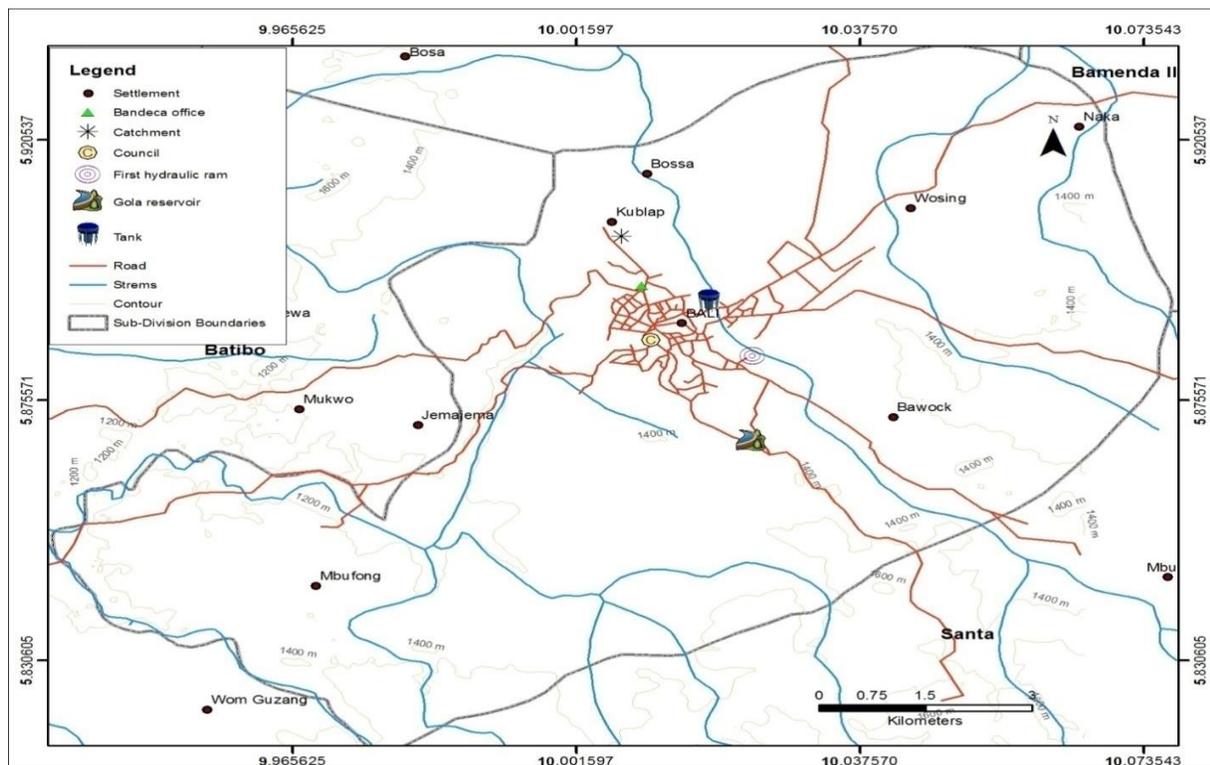
This model gives a new thrust to old community development approach. It identified four approaches to community participation: decision making, implementations, benefits and evaluation. Cohen and Uphoff developed a model which sought to clarify the notion of rural development participation in relation to externally and/or internally implemented development projects. They argue that to understand participation in any given situation, it is necessary to be specific and they see rural development participation not as quantifiable and measurable but as a framework or a rubric under which a number of clearly definable goals can be assembled.

### Research Methodology

The research made use of the case study design as it focused on a limited subject (community participation) and on a single community. Primary data was generated through the use of interview and observation. The study made use of purposive sampling and the sample included workers of the water commission/council and local elites. The researcher obtained a list of community members who had in-depth knowledge of issues relating to water supply and water

management in the community. This list was regarded as the sample frame from which the final sample was drawn. The participants included men and women from 30 years upward, who participated in the water project and had the ability to remember the events concretely. After data generation, analysis was done as follows: description of the sample size, an in-depth description of the study population in terms of age, gender, occupation, and educational status was done. We next did ordering and coding in which labels were used that enabled us to remove less essential details from the data generated. The data was further summarized under different objectives, and themes were generated under which the different opinions were analysed. Narrative text was used to explain the figures and tables used and also present the findings.

This study was carried out in Bali Nyonga, which is located in the North West Region of Cameroon, lying about 20km south of the North West Regional capital Bamenda. It is the home of about 30,000 residents in 17 villages and the mainstay of its economy is agriculture (Bali council, 2014). **Figure 3** below shows Map of Bali Nyonga Showing Water Catchment Areas



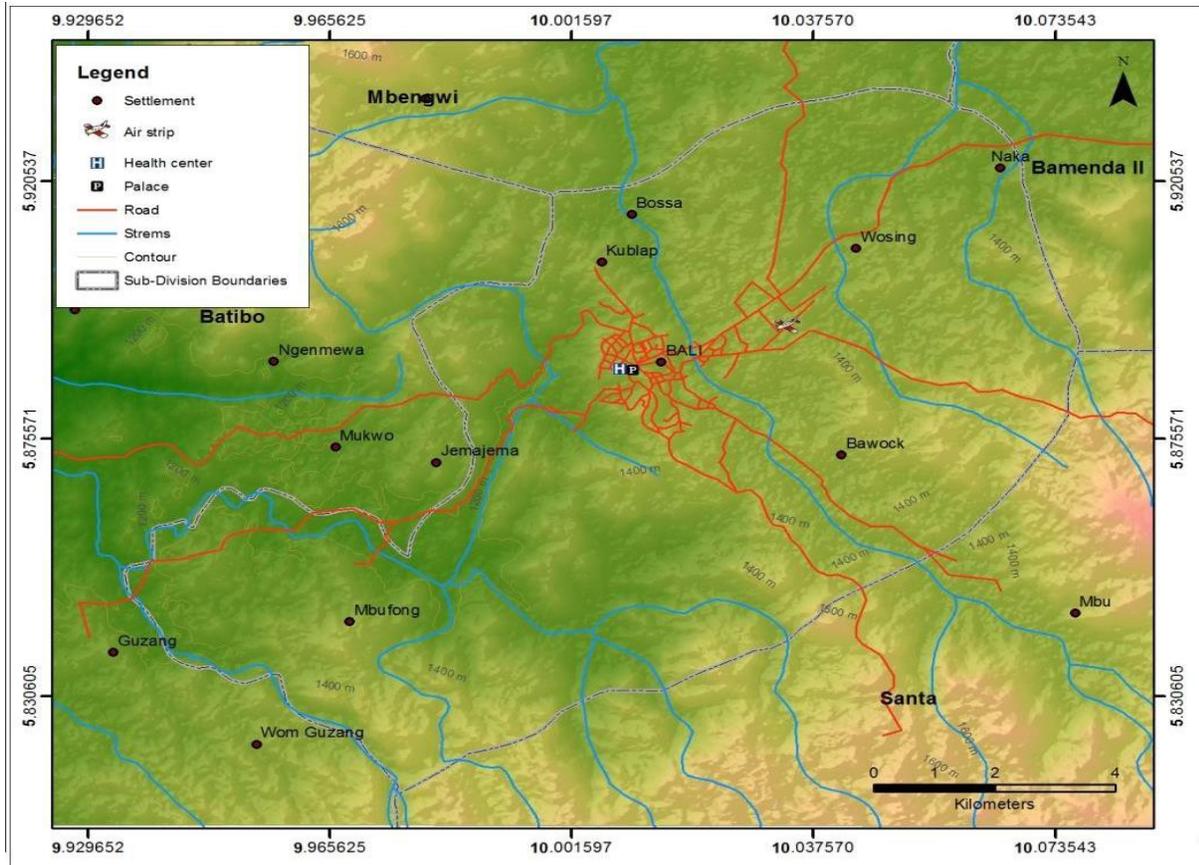


Figure 3. Map of Bali Nyonga

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Age –Sex distribution**

Out of the 30 participants, 35%, 23%, 32% and 12% were aged 30-39, 40-50, 55-60 and greater than 60 years respectively. On further probing, respondents indicated that issues of community development are concentrated mainly within the older generation, who attend meetings frequently and are most often considered as the custodians of the community. The findings indicated a positive correlation between age and community participation. Of the thirty people interviewed, 39% were women while 61% were men. Although the study aimed at a well-balanced gender representation, this goal could not be attained. However, the proportion of the women that took part in this study does not reflect those that participated during the implementation of the water development project. It was reported by one of the respondents that even more women than men participated in the

implementation phase of the project. An intriguing fact about the entire process was the nature of community participation, which focused on labour giving and material resources. The elites regarded community participation as communal work, i.e., collective action under the guidance of the dominant authority to bring change or development. This reflects the Bafut experience described by Yenshu (1990), where emphasis was on collective action to get work done, not on community involvement from need assessment through decision making to implementation phase, as proposed by proponents of the participatory development approach.

### **Nature of Participation**

The nature of community participation in the Bali Nyonga Water by Gravity Project can be described as essentially material. This is a situation where the receiving community gives or contributes materials to support the project conceived and coordinated by the elites or government. This was the case in the Bali Water by Gravity Project, where the local population participated only by giving money and labour to support the idea conceived by a few powerful elites. The people's participation in the project was limited to digging pipelines, manual transportation of pipes and other materials to and on the site, clearing the catchment site and filling the holes and trenches. As reported by one of the respondents;

Circulars were sent by BANDECA to churches, Njangi houses, and the various Ndakum; and the town crier came out on a market day (Njifung) to sensitize the community about the project. We were told that our labour will be needed to dig a pipeline from Koplal (catchment site) to Jamjam (water tank), as our contribution to the water project.

### **Potential of the community**

For rural communities to play an active role in rural development projects or any other rural development project initiative, it is necessary for their members to have access to resources. These resources include adequate funding, expertise (technical skills, labour), and support to the initiatives. When a community lacks these resources, this impacts the project negatively as it reduces community ability to effectively influence and develop policies for the project. Looking at the human resource potential of the community, the 2004 census carried out by the Bali Council estimated the immediate population at 30,000 inhabitants (Dohvoma 2015). This number supplied both skilled and unskilled labour needed in the project, with the assistance of the Bali Nyonga elites in the diaspora. The skilled labour was

used for managerial and technical aspects of the project, while the unskilled labour provided by the local community was used to meet the labour needs of the project (digging of pipelines, manual transportation of materials to and on the construction site, and clearing the catchment site). In terms of financial resources, the water project had many sources of financial aid. The project was supported with large resources by BANDECA (Bali Nyonga Development and Cultural Association), the Cameroon government and members of the local community, who contributed financially by meeting their obligations levied at the various assembly (Ndakum) quarters as well as youth, men and women's groups. Political willingness and volunteerism emerged as a great asset. The willingness of the local community to come together to support this cause was a positive push to the entire process. One of the respondents had this to say about the potential of the community to support the water project.

It will be unfair for the elites or people in authority to blame the failure of the water project on lack of resources. It will be an abuse to the strength of a Bali man. We had and still have enough resources to generate water that can supply the entire community. Looking at the natural resources, the water at koplab has the potential to supply the entire population. The project was also supported financially by our brothers, sisters and children in the diaspora. Talking about labour, our people are strong, united and they know how to support a cause. At the time of the project when I was the quarter head of this place, the people participated massively, the young and the old alike. The old people did not go to the site because of strength, but because of the passion they had for the project and their presence was to act as a motivation to the young people.”

### **Favouritism and Elite Control**

According to *Miriam Webster Dictionary* (1828) favouritism is the act of giving favours to some people at the expense of others. At the start of the project, people were given positions in the water commission not on the basis of merits but on the basis of favouritism (man know man), thereby placing the water project in incompetent hands. Technicians who knew very little about hydraulic engineering and water management were appointed because they knew somebody at the top, either in the development association or the Traditional Council. As accounted by one of the respondents, “of the 8 (eight) people who have been managers of the water commission only one had sufficient knowledge in hydraulic engineering and water

management. Technical inefficiency is at the centre of the water crisis that the community is facing now, as the authorities failed to put a square peck in a square hole.” The project was associated directly or indirectly with the scheme of power relations in Bali Nyonga. Only certain people influenced the decisions of the water commission economically and socio-politically. This is common amongst the local, national and diaspora elites, who contribute huge sums of money for the development of the community and put the local people in a fix, thereby limiting their choices in the project. This is better explained by the theory of gifts and counter-gifts and reciprocity elaborated upon by Mauss (2007), Polanyi (1994) and Sabourin (2005). This theory holds that charity is meant to be a free gift, an unrequited surrender of resources. They argue that gifts in themselves are not wrong; rather, it is the donor’s intention in giving the gift (the exchange of gifts and the obligation to reciprocate) which is often full of ulterior motives. Reciprocity seems to be a driving force in community organizations and development in most communities. The decisive element of reciprocity is the people’s recognition that most of their own needs cannot be satisfied efficiently based on their own capacities and resources. As De Benoist (2004) puts it, imagining an individual free of community ties is imagining a being with no depth and no personality. The interacting partners in a community therefore establish forms of cooperation based on ‘exchange’ of gifts and counter-gifts that are beneficial to all actors involved (Mauss 2004; Polanyi, 1944).

Practically, reciprocity implies a dialectical relationship between material and social goods and these social goods are of high importance for every community. As such, a lot of investments are being made by community leaders and elites in terms of time, energy, material and financial resources in the social network of the community in order to get counter-gifts and social prestige. It is in this light that De Benoist (2004) defines community as a “privileged place where reciprocal recognition (inter-subjectivity) and self-esteem have a chance to develop.” This therefore reveals that preventive use of power relations is a limitation to institutional thinking. Local elites are capable of mobilizing, accumulating and investing their political, social and economic capital to hijack and manipulate projects to their advantage. A respondent mentioned that: “Since the initiation and implementation of the Koplak water by gravity project, the water committee has been run by different cliques.”

## **Technical Issues**

A lot of miscalculations were made at the beginning of the project. The Koplalab source which consists of 5 spring catchments and 2 streams were poorly constructed, with a biological treatment unit and a slow sand filtration component functioning at 50% of its capacity. As a result, the water supplied by the Koplalab catchment became insufficient, with a yield of 3.21/5 (276.5m<sup>3</sup>/day), which could supply only 5,529 people at 50 liters per day (Dohvoma, 2015). This constituted a dilemma for the entire community, who were made to believe that the Koplalab water by gravity project was going to mean that Bali would have plenty of water free of charge. Another misconception in the project was the impression that the water source could supply the entire population. The estimation done by the development association focused on Bali Nyonga Centre to the exclusion of the interior villages and other dependent chiefdoms like Bossa, Bawock, Gungong. One of the respondents reported that “the ‘people’ told us that there was more than enough water in Koplalab to supply the entire community and the neighbouring villages and that if we joined our brothers and sisters in the diaspora who were ready to support the project financially, the water crisis in the community will become history.” In addition to this was the fact that the spring yield tests were conducted during the rainy season, when the water table was high. The quantity of water and variations in seasons were not taken into consideration; as such, the water engineers gave a faulty report about the capacity of the Koplalab source and its ability to supply the entire community, falsely raising the expectations of the people (Dohvoma, 2015).

Another misconception was at the level of the population count. The population was estimated at 20,000 instead of 30,000 inhabitants in 2004 (Bali Council, 2004). The classification of Bali as a rural community led to the use of 30 liters of water for the calculations per capita/day consumption instead of 50liters as the norms for townships (Dohvoma, 2015). This underestimation of the population and inability to project future population growth rates was to inevitably lead to a crisis. Water crisis seemed to be inevitable as rapid population increase has added pressure on the water resources, making it difficult for the water needs of the people to be adequately met. Added to this is the fact that at the time when the project was conceived, just a few houses had the water system design, but now things have changed and more and more people now live in modern houses with water systems. There has also been a marked increase in economic and social activities like

the community's nearness to the Regional capital Bamenda, which makes commuting possible. The presence of a university in the community has also increased the water needs of the community.

According to Dohvoma (2015), the daily water demand at present in the community stands at 2500m<sup>3</sup>/day while the daily production from the Ngola stream (water by electricity) is 537m<sup>3</sup>/day. We therefore have a deficit of -1963m<sup>3</sup>/day. There is need to increase the quantity of water per capita/day from 30liters to 50liters. Due to these shortages in water supply, people tend to develop and use other subsidiary sources for survival. The pictures below show the main subsidiary sources of water used by the community.



**Figure 4: subsidiary sources of water in the community**

### **Leadership**

Community participation in public development projects depends on how people are led. The level of democratic governance has a direct relationship with people's participation in a development initiative and with the eventual success of the initiative. We found out that more than 95% of the leaders of the water commission were appointed by the executive board of the development association and not democratically elected by the local community. The leadership style used in the water project was the traditional top-bottom approach, as opposed to the bottom-top approach as emphasized by development experts such as Richardson (1983), Oakley (1989) chambers (1992) etc. The elites spent time telling the people what to do and how to do it, without listening to the opinions of the local community. The elites failed to include the local people in the entire process. The findings of the study also pointed out that the centralized nature of the leadership in both the water committee and

the development association does not create a levelling platform to accommodate the local people and also inhibits the flow of information. This explains why members of the local community see the development association as belonging to a particular group of people and therefore stay away from the General Assembly meetings because they do not see themselves as part of it.

### **Conflicting development initiatives and projects**

Conflicts in developmental objectives occur when, in an attempt to achieve an objective, another objective is sacrificed. When the Cameroon government announced the construction of the second access road into Bamenda city designed to connect Akum-Mile 8 (on the Bamenda-Bafousam high way) to Bali (on the Bamenda- Mamfe high way), the entire population was very excited. They boasted that the new road was going to open up untold avenues for development in their sub-division. Hardly had the road construction started than troubles arose and generated a dramatic water crisis. When the road construction started, the tractors and other road construction vehicles used on the road destroyed pipes connecting the spring at Ngola to the main tank at JamJam. This situation became worse when the commission for compensation of property destroyed on the second access road to Bamenda city forgot to enclose its report on water and electricity when submitting the report to the Ministry of State Property in Yaoundé (Dohvoma, 2015). Another setback was the road construction project to the Cameroon Christian University (CCU), which disconnected Njenka from the main tank at JamJam. These road construction projects have posed a big threat to water security in the community as nothing has been done so far to reinstall the pipes and reconnect the people to the water. It would, however, be biased to lay blames entirely on the construction project as a main cause of the water since the community had already been experiencing water crisis long before the project was launched.

### **Conclusion**

Full community participation/involvement was not really implemented or integrated in the project, partly because the idea of stakeholder participation is still fairly recent and because much of it remain in books rather than practical implementation. However, this study shows that in order to ensure a more sustainable water supply, the beneficiaries (local community) have to be involved from the planning phase to the implementation phase.

In order to ensure maximum community involvement and participation in community

development projects, some structural changes need to be instituted where the local elites will no longer be at the centre of development projects but, rather, the focus will be on the user population who are the most affected by such development initiatives. By this, the local population will not only be involved at the implementation phase of the development project but will be able to take part in decision-making, planning, evaluation, monitoring and control, thereby increasing the chances for sustainable water development and management in rural areas. Most elites and local development administrators lack adequate knowledge on the benefits of maximum community participation in a project. This lack of knowledge has contributed to the misunderstanding of the concept of participatory development. Workshop sessions should be held at the level of the development association to train the executives on the nature and extent of community involvement in a project that can bring about sustainable development. To ensure the involvement of all stakeholders, conclusions from public meetings and local meeting groups (Ndakum) concerning the project should be respected, and leaders of all Ndakum (men, women and youth representatives) should be present at all levels of decisions and meetings regarding the project. This will ensure that the needs of all stakeholders are met and will eventually lead to social transformation.

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