

Towards Decolonization of Evaluation Practices: A Critical Reflection of Participatory Evaluation Methodologies in Less Developed Countries

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Abstract

For many years evaluation practices in less developed countries have been dominated by scientific, top down, quantitative approaches and methodologies. As the result, many evaluation practices in less developed countries have been largely characterized by skewed power relations with poor adoption and utilization of evaluation findings. Several researchers, writers and development professionals agree that participatory evaluation was adopted in Africa and elsewhere in the world as a strategy to address several weaknesses observed in the conventional evaluation practices. Such practices include too much focus on projects and donor funding, lack of inclusion, poor consideration of local variations, lack of transparency, lack of accountability and lack of 'respect' to local beneficiaries. Inversely, the adoption of participatory evaluation meant to promote evidence-based evaluation designs, which also pay attention to local variations and contexts and include local evaluators and collective decisions at local level. Therefore, promotion of participatory evaluation means making evaluation practices more culturally sensitive and relevant through the use of credible data. From the emancipatory perspective, participatory evaluation methodologies aim at making evaluation practices more transformational and empowering while improving power relations and collaboration between project stakeholders, capturing and bringing to surface the voices of once marginalized and disadvantaged populations. To a certain extent, the adoption of participatory evaluation methodology has contributed to the improvement of quality and relevance of evaluation and increased utilization of evaluation data and findings in decision making and organizational performance. This paper has generally shown that despite a few recorded successes such as the previous participatory methodologies, there have been internal and external constraints to participatory evaluations. There have been constraints to the participation of the targeted communities in evaluation such as limited lack of community interest, high transaction costs, lack of knowledge and skills and meager budget. At the project level, insufficient budget, limited resources, poor timing of implementation and poor quality of evaluation have constrained management participatory evaluations. This paper takes the position, that regardless of problems hindering the performance of participatory evaluation, its benefits outweigh its limitations in short and the long run. The paper recommends that in order to improve the performance and relevance of participatory evaluation, participatory evaluation needs to be preceded with well thought plans, selecting appropriate designs and methods to fit the local situations.

Key words: Decolonization, Participatory Evaluation, Less Developed Countries

Introduction and Background

For many years monitoring and evaluation (M&E) practices have been dominated by skewed power relations, top down, donor driven and quantitative methodologies (Mbava & Dahler-Larsen, 2019, Johnston-Goodstar, 2012; Estrella et al., 2000). Efforts to make evaluation practices and processes more practical and relevant have been triggered many scientists and development professionals to reexamine their conventional evaluation practices towards a more participatory and inclusive evaluation practices (Mbava, 2018; Estrella and Gaventa 1998). Several researchers, writers and development professionals seem to agree that the emergence and rise of participatory monitoring and evaluation (PM&E) was prompted by several pitfalls observed in the top down and donor driven evaluation practices, which dominated the evaluation practices over years (N. P. Mbava & Rabie, 2018) According to Mbava & Dahler-Larsen, 2019; Iddi and Nuhu(2018), Cloete (2016) and Pawson and Tilley (1997), the conventional M&E practices in many parts of the developing world, Africa in particular, have increasingly been criticized for being donor driven, lack of inclusion, lack of transparency, lack of accountability and lack of 'respect' to local beneficiaries. More important to this paper, the practices have been criticized for ignoring local variations and complexities existing in many developing countries and for not providing feedback to evaluation participants and project beneficiaries. Such challenges contradict several proposed criteria for good evaluation practices.

While Mbava & Dahler-Larsen (2019) and Siringetti and Wallerstein (2008) promote the need for evidence based evaluation designs which also pay more attention to local variations and contexts, include local evaluators and collective decisions at local level, other observers such Iddi and Nuhu, (2018), Cloete (2016), Patton (2012) and Cousins & Chouinard (2013) call for evaluation practices that are more cultural sensitive and relevant through the use of credible and practical data, more inclusive by capturing local voices, knowledge and experience. Some observers perceive Participatory Evaluation not as a replacement of the conventional and monitoring and evaluation but rather a continuum of the former (Patton, 2012). Thus, as opposed to the conventional approaches to evaluation participatory evaluation is intended to make evaluation transformational, empowering while improving power relations and collaboration between project stakeholders capturing and bringing to surface the voices of once marginalized and disadvantaged populations (Mbava & Dahler-Larsen, 2019; Patton, 2012). Iddi and Nuhu (2018) and (Patton, 2012) remark that Participatory evaluation is expected to empower local stakeholders through knowledge sharing, sharing of experiences while access critical access to critical decisions about their day today social and development welfares.

Theoretical Frameworks

Critical arguments and meaningful discussions on PM&E can be framed and informed by several theories, including but not limited to utilization, decentralization, stakeholder salient Theory, Coe- management and Citizen Participation Ladder. In order to limit and focus the discussion, in this paper I employed Stakeholder Salient Theory and Citizen Participation Ladder

Stakeholder Theory

Participatory monitoring and evaluation has also been referred to as stakeholder or people-based evaluation (Patton, 2012; Rodriguez-Campos, 2012). This makes the Stakeholder Theory a more relevant theory in the discussion and debates about PM&E. With its background in management and organizational studies, stakeholder theory was conceived and propounded by Richard E. Freeman in 1984. Stakeholder theory is rooted on the argument that an organization, business and for the purpose of this paper development interventions (programs and projects) are composed of different constitutes known stakeholders with competing interests and objectives. Accordingly, success of an organization, business or intervention depends on the extent to which the business or intervention accommodates and fulfills the interests and welfare of their stakeholders (Mok et al., 2017). Stakeholder theory is based on the supposition that different stakeholders have distinct interests at risk, and that aligning these interests is the central process through which business and development interventions will increase their values and relevance for its stakeholders (Freeman & Harrison, 2007). Lim & Bowman (2023) and Mok et al. (2017) observe that in the long run managers and their respective entities cannot survive or be sustained if they ignore the concerns and interests of their key stakeholders, particularly the majority and powerless project beneficiaries. Stakeholder theory fits well with PM&E, particularly because it requires the evaluators and project managers to refocus their evaluation emphasis and strategies towards meeting the objectives and interests of bigger project stakeholder ecosystem.

Citizen Participation Ladder

Arnstein, (1969) provides a useful framework for understanding the nature and levels of participation in his popular participation model known as a ladder of citizen participation. In this typology, Arnstein uses eight different styles to show the degree and extent of community involvement in many development projects as illustrated in Figure 2.1.

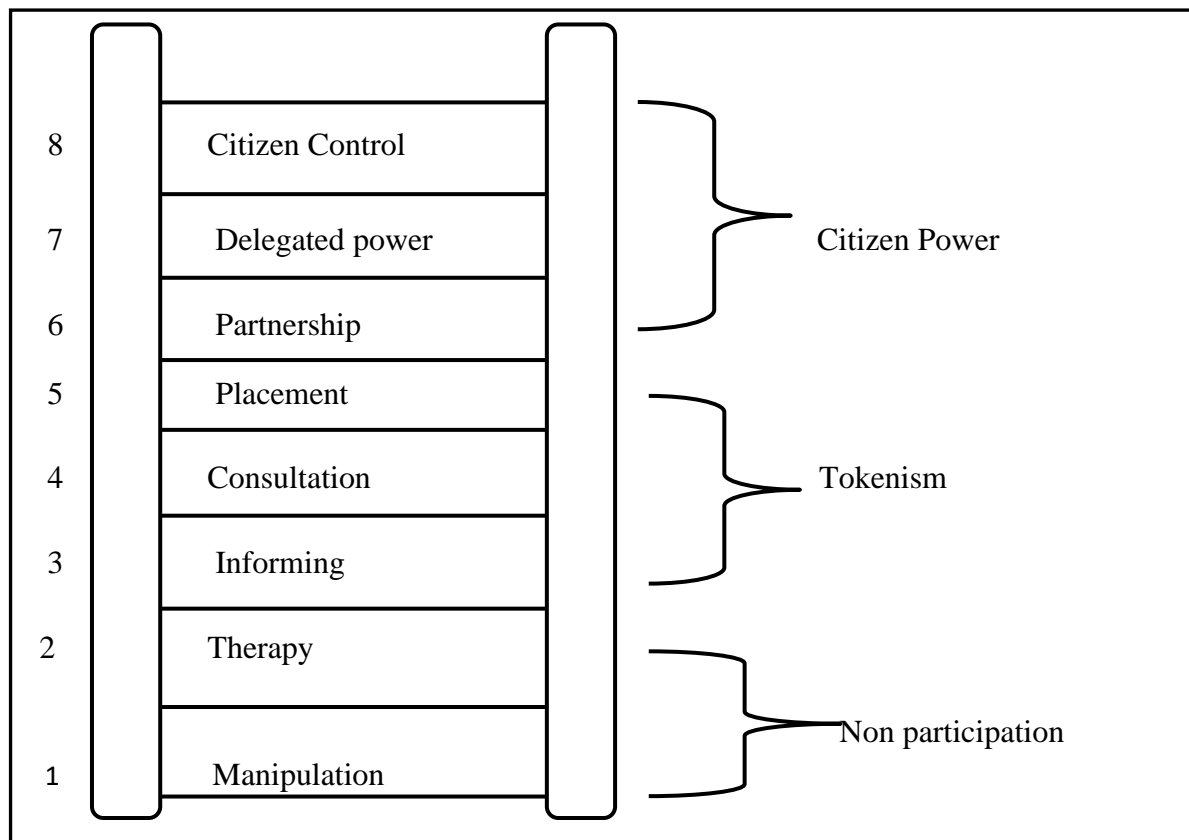


Figure 2.1: Eight rungs on the ladder of citizen participation. Source: Adopted from Arnstein, (1969).

Arnstein, (1969) presented the eight stages of community participation to show different types and levels of interactions between powerful actors and local communities. Based on this framework, community participation can be divided into three broad categories, namely non-participation, little participation and citizen power. The most marginal form of community participation is represented by manipulation and therapy with very minimal or no participation at all (Mbava & Dahler-Larsen, (2019); Kumar, (2002)). Under this category of participation, community serves as a rubber stamp to justify the notion of community involvement by educating the community while addressing their problems through funding community development projects. The second category of the rung represents consultation and informing with little or token community participation. As the name suggests, local communities participate by being consulted and informed by powerful actors over development issues likely to affect their welfare (Mannigel, 2008; Davids & Maphunge, (2005); Junge, 2002; Pimbert & Pretty, 2000). For example, in conventional evaluation project beneficiaries do participate as sources of data while giving logistical information to outside evaluation experts.

Tokenism participation assumes that consulting and informing will provide the community an opportunity to air their views and get feedback and information from participatory development

intervention and its implication to community welfare (Estrella et al. 2000; Mannigel, 2008; Gregory, 2000). Despite the fact that the experiences in many community participation programs in less developed countries have revealed that community views and needs have rarely influenced the implementation and evaluation of many development interventions (Patton, 2012, Estrella et al. 2000), in the Arnstein typology, the highest degree and at least more meaningful participation may be found at the uppermost stage of the ladder comprising community partnerships, power delegation and citizen control. Theoretically, there are three aspects of community participation expected to be common in both participatory development and evaluation practices (Davids & Maphunge, 2005; Kumar, 2002). The implementation of many stakeholder-based development and evaluation have often been geared towards promoting partnerships, power devolution and ensuring community voice and control over their development (Estrella et al. 2000). Nevertheless, achieving equitable and effective partnerships, power devolution, and community control in many stakeholder-based evaluations is somewhat problematic because of unequal power relations, lack of interest from the community side and difference in interests among different actors (Estrella et al. 2000; Ribot, 2004).

A critical observation of the three typologies presented above can help build certain premises and conclusions on the nature and status of stakeholders' participation in the evaluation processes. As Kumar (2002) noted, there is a clear difference between participatory development and participation in development (In view of this paper, this can be translated as participatory evaluation versus participation in evaluation). For this matter, participatory development represents many passive and weak forms of participation. Davids & Maphunge (2005) refer to all forms of passive participation as weak public participation, cooption, involvement, mobilization and top down decision making where everything is predetermined by external agencies. Alternatively, participation in development represents a more active participation whose primary objective is to empower the community through self-mobilization and public control of the development process from the conception to the evaluation of the intervention (Davids *et al.*, 2005; Kumar, 2002). The three typologies have also revealed that many participatory interventions progress from passive to active stages. This observation can be explained by two arguments: firstly, stakeholder-based methodologies as a development and evaluation paradigm should be conceptualized as an evolving process that may accommodate and adapt the complexities of issues different localities. Secondly, as noted by Guijt (2014), Estrella et al. (2000) and Patton (2012, 2002), the nature and approach of participatory development and evaluation are better defined and implemented according to the context in which they are being conducted.

Methodology

Like many desk review studies, systematic review of literature helped obtain data for this paper. This involved a critical reading of articles, studies and reports within the field of monitoring and evaluation with particular focus on decolonization, PM&E. The review also involved a critical analysis and syntheses of various theories and models with particular focus on stakeholder engagement, people's participation, political ecology, and marginalization. Academic and professional search engines such as Goggle scholar and Reference desk helped obtain relevant literature, documents and reports informing the participatory planning and evaluation agenda and professionalism and trends at global, regional and national levels. I critically reviewed various government documents and reports to establish elements and

trends of participatory evaluation across different regions and countries with a particular focus on less developed countries. In general, this paper used content and discourse analysis to uncover meanings and issues raised through published and unpublished reports, including but not limited to journal papers, theses, dissertations and reports focusing participatory evaluation emerging from less developed countries. I arranged the information obtained from this process into themes and subthemes to reflect different issues and subtitles reflected in the current paper.

The Evolution and Trends of Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation

Participatory monitoring and evaluation can be traced back around between 1960 and 1970 with rapid application of Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) and Participant Rural Appraisal, particularly in the field of agriculture and rural development. Robert Chambers comments that to a large extent several publications have influenced the bottom up and participatory development across several development sectors, particularly in agriculture and rural development. His popular writings such as *Whose Reality Counts*, *Sustainable Rural Development* and *Challenging the Professionals* opened the window for discussions and actions towards embracing participatory methodologies and its branches such as participatory research and evaluation (Chambers, 1983; Chambers & Gordon 1992; Chambers, 1993). The recent trend of participatory evaluation have also heavily benefited from the extensive and intensive works and writings of development and evaluation experts such as Michael Patton and David Korten (Aubel, 2004; Patton, 2002, 2012).

Despite the lack of consensus over exactly what and when participatory evaluation emerged in the field of development evaluation, Sipringetti and Wallerstein, (2008) and Iddi and Nuhu (2018) suggested that philosophically and methodologically participatory evaluation has its roots in Participatory Action Research (PAR). Participatory evaluation has often been used interchangeably with other participatory and evaluation methodologies such as collaborative and joint evaluation (Campos, 2005, Campilan, 2000), Internal and self-assessment, Guijt (2014) and Campilan, (2000) Deliberative Democratic Evaluation (House, 1993) Stakeholder Based Evaluation (Weaver and Cousins, 2004; Campilan, 2000). In a view of Campos (2005) participatory evaluation is not a new terminology in the field of development but a deliberate move to enhance and apply the participatory methodologies throughout the intervention cycle, Wallerstein (2020), Estrella et al. (2000), Estrella & Gaventa (1998), and Guba and Linkolin (1989) attribute the rise of participatory monitoring and evaluation to an increasing trend of embracing the performance based and accountability to development management, the growing scarcity of funds which triggered the need for more accountability in donor funded and public projects and a shift of decision making towards decentralization. In line with this argument, other observers such as Edwards and Hume, (1995) Estrella and Gaventa, (1998) and Guijt (2014), Lincoln and Guba (2007) explained the emergence of participatory Evaluation to the increasing capacity and influences of Non-Governmental Organizations and Community Based Organizations. Thus, as noted by Patton (2012), Estrella et al. (2000) the growing donor confidence and trust to work with local stakeholders and non-government actors rationalized the need for stakeholder and collaborative evaluation following the increasing donor dissatisfaction of the conventional top down evaluation approaches.

It is important to make a clear distinction between participatory and conventional evaluation. Yet, despite the few observed differences, participatory and conventional evaluation may not

significantly be different (Guijt, 2014). As summarized in table 1 and according to Aibel (1999), Campilan (2000), Estrella et al. (2000), Sipringetti and Wallenstein (2008), despite the observed congruence and continuum between the two evaluation methodologies, several authors attempted to differentiate participatory evaluation from the conventional by looking at why the evaluation was done, what was being evaluated, who was doing the evaluation, how the evaluation was being done, for whom the evaluation was being done and the power relations between different groups involved in the evaluation.

Evaluation Attribute	Conventional/Blue	Participatory M&E
Objective of the Evaluation	Provide information to the project managers over the use of project resources, the extent to which the project objectives were met and the manner to which project activities were carried out.	Increase ownership, relevance, trust of the results and empowering of the stakeholders and develop lessons from project
Evaluation design	Dominated by scientific and quantitative thinking	Dominated by adaptive and qualitative designs
Working philosophy	Evaluation as tool for improving programme governance, management and decision making	Evaluation as a learning process to understand what works and what does not
Key working principles and approaches	Evaluation as a scientific endeavor which needs to follow a pre-determined and rigorous process	Belief built on the experience of the stakeholders and beneficiaries
Participants	Donor and expert and driven	Evaluation is done collaboratively by project officials, donors and stakeholders and beneficiaries and stakeholders
Focus of the evaluation	Focus on the evaluation objective	Focus on the outcomes of the evaluation and benefits accrued by the project beneficiaries
For whom the evaluation is conducted	For donors and project implementers	All project stakeholders

Table 1: A comparative analysis between conventional and PM&E

Source: Modified from Sipringetti and Wallenstein, (2008), Campilan, (2000) and Aubel, (1999).

The Evolution and Development of Participatory Evaluation in Developed Countries

Like other development and assessment methodologies, participatory evaluation evolved from the work of several researchers and development scientists, particularly participatory action research by Paulo (1970) and Borda (1987) respectively and the popular works of Robert Chambers such as participatory learning and action which are often conceived through a number of participatory methodologies such as Rapid Rural Appraisal and Participatory Rural Appraisal (Robert, 1983). There could be different perspectives among development and evaluation scientists over the forces which triggered the adoption of participatory evaluation, particularly in Africa. Nonetheless, most of the supporters of the participatory evaluation seem to agree on two major issues. One, participatory evaluation came as the result of unsatisfactory results and weaknesses of the conventional monitoring and evaluation (Muronga, 2011, Iddi and Nuhu, 2018). Two, participatory evaluation is employed as both emancipation and political strategy aiming at liberating the poor, especially less powerful actors from long-term domination by western evaluation prejudices and jargons (Mbava and Larsen 2019).

The Relevance of Participatory Evaluation in the Context of Developing Countries

The relevance and strategic importance of Participatory evaluation can be examined by looking at its contribution to both project performance and M&E practice (Estrella & Blauert, 2000; Muronga, 2011). Iddi and Nuhu (2018) and Weaver and Cousins (2004) noted that participatory assessments and evaluation create the conducive environments for project beneficiaries to make proper judgments and provide inputs for improving the future policy and programme designing. According to Chouinard and Milley (2018), the inclusion of local evaluators will shift their roles from being subjects of the evaluation process to becoming partners and owners of the entire evaluation. Observers such as Wallerstein (2020) Mbava & Dahler-Larsen (2019) and Cloete (2016) and Ofir (2013) conceive participatory evaluation methodology mechanism to make evaluation as more culturally and locally relevant at the same time being able to reflect on complex program contexts at national and community level. The increasing push for participatory evaluation is also driven by the need to address the weaknesses of observed in the conventional monitoring and evaluation. Evaluation models adopted from western and developed world have not only not only being impractical but also failed to appreciate the complexities and fragile environment prevailing in a more diverse socio-cultural environment in many developing countries. (Mbava & Dahler-Larsen (2019, Cloete (2016) and Ofir (2013) It is from this backdrop that participatory evaluation seems an adaptive and flexible evaluation system which could accommodate different perspectives of development and social realities in many African countries (Chouinard & Milley, 2018; Cloete, 2016).

From the utility theory and perspective, the quality and relevance of evaluation is judged on the basis of the utilization of evaluation data and findings in decision making and organizational performance (Cousins and Lorna, 2014). Because of the high costs of evaluation, there has been increasing pressure and demand for evaluation outputs, particularly reports and their

associated decisions to respond to specific organizations and projects. Alkin, in Cousins and Lorna (2014) identified evaluation quality, credibility, relevance, communication and relevance of the evaluation findings as the key features of effective utilization of an evaluation. Thus, following the increasing failure of the conventional evaluation methodologies to address critical performance at organizational and project level, are brought as alternative methodological approaches to increase evaluation utility, decision making and consequently organizational and project performance (King, 2005). Rodriguez-Campos (2012) and Patton (2012) conceived participatory evaluation as an extension of people's participation in the entire project life cycle. As noted by Kengera (2016) and Songorwa (1999), following several decades of the implementations of previous forms of participatory methodologies contrary to the expectation of many stakeholders, the first and second generations of participatory methodologies were not only partial but also largely dominated by the top down thinking. For example, the study by Kengera (2016) in the community-based wildlife conservation established that the conception that people's participation in community-based conservation approaches would compel local communities to effectively participate in the conservation programs was limited by several factors, including lack of community awareness, interest and willingness.

The Limitations of the Participatory Evaluations in less Developed Countries

Efforts to decolonize evaluation processes in less developed countries have to a certain extent been associated with some disappointments (Rodriquez-Campos, 2015a, Mayoux, 2005). The desire by development partners to promote people's participation in different types of project assessments and evaluation have largely been hampered by what Iddi and Nuhu (2018), Kengera (2016) and Basheka and Byamugisha(2015) referred to as local resistance. Key to this argument is that people, particularly local communities, are expected to participate, support and take part in activities which they have strong interest, especially those whose benefits outweigh the transaction costs. The study by Nuhu and Iddi (2017) in Tanzania attributed the problem of poor participation of local project beneficiaries in a healthy project to lack of awareness, low benefits, lack of interest and high transaction costs. Such observations are supported by findings by Muronga (2011) and Mbava (2017) in Zambia and respectively that PM&E are likely to suffer the inherited problems of their earlier participatory methodologies.

Mbava and Rabie (2018), Mbava (2017), Iddi and Nuhu (2018) pointed out the problem lack of evaluation capacity as one of the common problems for operationalizing the participatory M&E in South Africa and Tanzania respectively. Studies by Mbayuwayu (2022), Migira (2021) identified a huge gap in evaluation capacity in several African countries, Tanzania in particular. Such observation supports the observation by Iddi and Nuhu (2018) that the inherited capacity related problems for obvious reasoning have been responsible for poor implementation and performance of participatory evaluation. The assumption that local stakeholders have capabilities and could contribute to evaluation-based research activities are too simplistic (Guijt, 2014, Sipringetti and Wallerstein, 2008). Yet, lessons and experiences from the previous participatory and action research in less developed countries have generally indicated that stakeholder-based assessments and evaluation are often subjected to rigorous scientific processes and procedures (Aubel, 2004; Chouinard & Cousins 2013). As noted by Patton

(2002), Patton (2012) and King (2005), the employment of rigorous scientific procedures and standards can have detrimental effects to the participation of marginal and less powerful stakeholders in evaluation practices. As Estrella et al. (2000) noted, experiences with PM&E in Philippines demonstrated that despite the earlier assumptions that PM&E methodologies would employ relatively simple designs and data collection methods, it was apparent that conducting and sustaining PM&E required a considerable time to equip the participants, particularly the project stakeholders with the right mix and basic knowledge and skills in research methodology.

The combined effects of training need and prolonged duration for methodological harmonization and capacity building creates another practical problem which has for years affecting evaluation practices in the developing world (Estrella et al., 2000; Patton, 2002; Patton 2012). Libati and Mulonda (2017), Iddi and Nuhu (2018) in Tanzania and Estrella et al. (2000) in Zambia and Tanzania respectively established that because of high degree of stakeholder participation and engagement in evaluation underling the PM&E, many Participatory Evaluation practices were spending a relatively much financial resources as compared with the conventional evaluation methodologies which employed a few experts. Consequently, given the low level of resource mobilization and funding for both program implementation and evaluation, sustaining the PM&E methodologies in developing countries is likely to be more problematic. As highlighted in the previous sections of this paper, the major claim and the rationale for implementing participatory evaluation are to address the problem of skewed power relations which was dominant in the conventional top down evaluation (Basheka & Byamugisha, 2015; King 2005a; Mayoux, 2005). Unfortunately, like the previous participatory methodologies, the twin problems of unequal and skewed power relations have persisted in many PM&E (Libati& Mulonda, 2017). Several cases of participatory evaluation have demonstrated that most decisions over the evaluation agenda, choice of the evaluation approaches, types of data, groups of stakeholders and respondents to be involved in evaluations are still dominated by powerful actors, particularly evaluation commissioners, external consultants and project technical personnel (King 2005, Libati & Mulonda, 2017, Mayoux, 2005). Wallerstein (2020), Iddi and Nuhu (2018), and Patton, (2012) comment that like conventional evaluation, the participation of weak actors, that is, local beneficiaries in participatory evaluation is limited by lack of knowledge and skills and practical experience required for effective participation and control of the processes and outcomes of the evaluation process. For instance, studies by Mbayuwayu (2022), Migira, (2021) and Iddi and Nuhu (2018) in Tanzania have revealed that even in projects that demand an effective participation of local stakeholders participation of actors in either assessments and evaluation is often limited by lack of technical knowhow, lack of time, high transaction costs and lack of interest. Studies by Mbayuwayu (2022) and Zahor (2015) in Kigoma and Zanzibar respectively revealed that community participation in participatory evaluation and GIS respectively were constrained by lack of interest, time and technological shyness on the community side, especially the use of Maps. Both studies concur with the observations by King (2005) and Weaver and Cousins (2004) that efforts and practices to involve local communities in the assessments and evaluations of development interventions at community level need to be supported with rigorous capacity building programs and sustained awareness campaigns at community level. However, rigorous capacity and building and other performance elements are likely to be constrained by low budgets and other lack of other resources in many community-based projects in less developed countries.

Conclusion and recommendation

As the way of conclusion, this paper has generally highlighted the strategic importance of participatory evaluation in improving the relevance and usefulness of the evaluation in less developed countries. From this paper, one can generally conclude that if well-employed, participatory evaluation can improve project performance, accountability and transparency in people-based development interventions. Other benefits of participatory evaluation include increased voice and powers of once marginalized project beneficiaries, community empowerment and emancipation and improved ownership and sustainability of interventions and their respective outcomes. The paper has generally demonstrated that despite the few recorded successes like the previous participatory methodologies, the adoption and further implementation of participatory evaluations have been constrained by internal and external problems. Internally, the participation of the targeted communities in evaluation has been constrained has been limited by factors such as lack of community interest, high transactions costs, lack of knowledge and skills and low budget. At the project level, management participatory evaluations have been constrained by meagre budget or limited resources, poor timing of implementation and evaluation quality related issues. The position of this paper is that regardless of the problems and issues hindering the performance of participatory evaluation, its benefits outweigh its limitations in short and the long run. The paper recommends that in order to improve the performance and relevance of participatory evaluation, participatory evaluation needs to be preceded with well thought plans, selecting appropriate designs and methods to fit the local situations.

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