



Community Participation in Constituency Development Fund Projects: A Case Study of Kapiri Mposhi Constituency, Zambia (2021–2025)

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Abstract

Community participation is critical for ensuring transparency, accountability, and sustainability in local development projects. This study investigated the role of community participation in the prioritisation and implementation of Constituency Development Fund (CDF) projects in Kapiri Mposhi Constituency, Zambia, between 2021 and 2025. Using a descriptive research design, the study purposively sampled 160 community leaders across five wards. Data were collected through semi-structured questionnaires and analysed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. Findings indicate that community involvement in project identification and selection was limited, with 69% reporting non-participation and only 5% reporting high involvement. Barriers to participation included poor communication (25%), lack of participation mechanisms (24%), lack of transparency (12%), and insufficient project funds (11%). Despite low participation, 68% of respondents acknowledged the importance of community involvement. The study concludes that improving communication, transparency, and participatory platforms can enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of CDF projects.

Keywords: Community Participation, Constituency Development Fund, Ward Development, Kapiri Mposhi, Zambia.

1. Introduction

Community participation is a cornerstone of decentralized governance, which aims to bring decision-making closer to citizens, enhance service delivery, and legitimize governance processes (Government of the Republic of Zambia, 2002). Decentralization empowers local governments to involve citizens in development initiatives, disperses government power, and provides a framework for accountability and transparency. In Zambia, decentralization has been pursued since independence in 1964, with efforts to transform inherited administrative structures into a framework that fosters sustainable local governance and public participation (Dresang, 1975; Chikulo, 2009; Hampwaye, 2008).

Within this context, the Constituency Development Fund (CDF) was established in 1995 to facilitate grassroots development, alleviate poverty, and provide communities with the opportunity to participate in decision-making regarding local projects (GRZ, 2006; Chileshe, 2011). The CDF allows Members of Parliament (MPs) to implement development projects in consultation with their constituents, targeting priority areas such as water, sanitation, roads, agriculture, education, health, and social amenities. Across Africa and beyond, similar mechanisms have been used to channel development funds to local communities, enhancing participatory governance and improving service delivery.

Although CDF aims to promote community-driven development and participation in project identification, implementation, and monitoring, concerns persist regarding the extent of actual community involvement in Kapiri Mposhi Constituency. This study investigates how local communities participate in CDF projects, exploring the nature, level, and factors influencing their engagement.

The study provides insights into community roles in CDF projects, informs policy for enhancing participatory decision-making, strengthens CDF management and utilization, and contributes to academic literature on decentralized development and community participation.

Geographically, the study focuses on Muteteshi, Kasanta, and Mushimbili wards in Kapiri Mposhi Constituency, Central Province, Zambia. Temporally, it examines CDF projects implemented between 2021 and 2025. The study specifically investigates community participation in project identification, implementation, and monitoring, excluding other decentralized funds or donor-funded projects.

Community participation is widely regarded as a foundational principle of sustainable development, as it enables citizens to influence decisions that affect their livelihoods and to assume ownership of development outcomes. Participation is commonly understood as a process through which individuals and groups engage in decision-making, resource management, and implementation of development initiatives (Sproule, 1996; United Nations, 1981). Although extensively discussed in development literature, the concept remains context-specific and contested, with no universally accepted definition (Theron, 2005). Nonetheless, scholars agree that participation enhances accountability, legitimacy, and effectiveness in local governance systems (Reid, 2000).

The theoretical foundations of community participation are grounded in collective action and empowerment. Meaningful participation occurs when communities mobilise resources, share responsibilities, and collaborate to pursue shared development goals (Marsden, 1984). Empirical studies suggest that participatory approaches strengthen service delivery, reduce inequalities, and improve development sustainability by aligning interventions with local priorities (Kumar, 2002; Kakumba & Nsingi, 2008; African Development Bank, 2001). Participation is therefore increasingly viewed as a governance mechanism rather than a peripheral development tool.

A central debate in the literature concerns whether participation should be conceptualised as a means to achieve development objectives or as an end in itself. While participation as a means can enhance efficiency and project acceptance, several scholars argue that long-term development impact is only realised when participation is treated as an end that empowers communities to control development decisions and processes (Burkey, 1993; Kumar, 2002). Oakley and Marsden (1984) propose that participation can be institutionalised through structured mechanisms such as cooperatives, community-based organisations, and development committees, which integrate community voices into formal planning frameworks.

In the Zambian context, effective community participation has been constrained by institutional and structural limitations. Studies reveal weak governance structures at ward and area levels, limited platforms for citizen engagement, and low public trust in local authorities (Chikulo, 2009; Lolojih, 2003; Erdmann & Simutanyi, 2003). These challenges undermine decentralisation objectives by restricting inclusive decision-making and weakening accountability mechanisms at the grassroots level.

Ethical leadership is also critical in shaping participatory outcomes. Integrity, transparency, and impartiality among local government officials are essential for building trust and encouraging citizen engagement (Georgia Handbook, 2010). Where ethical standards are compromised, participation tends to decline, reducing community confidence in development initiatives and public institutions.

Empirical evidence indicates that community participation enhances the capacity of citizens to identify needs, prioritise development goals, and monitor project implementation (Yadama, 1995). However, studies focusing on Constituency Development Fund (CDF) projects in Zambia highlight persistent challenges, including limited transparency, political interference, and weak accountability structures, which undermine community ownership and trust (Evangelical Fellowship of Zambia & Micah Challenge Zambia, 2012). These findings raise concerns about the extent to which CDF projects reflect participatory development principles in practice.

Socio-economic and political factors further influence participation levels and quality. Income, education, gender norms, and power relations determine who participates and who remains excluded, often marginalising women, youth, and economically disadvantaged groups (Gupte, 2004; Sheikh, 2010). Political elites and dominant stakeholders may also manipulate participatory processes for personal or partisan interests, limiting meaningful community engagement (Samad, 2002; Kochanek, 2000).

This study is anchored in Participation Theory, which posits that development outcomes are most sustainable when communities are actively involved across all stages of the project cycle. Uphoff (1987) identifies participation in decision-making, implementation, evaluation, and benefit-sharing as essential dimensions of empowerment. Contemporary development scholarship reflects a shift from top-down modernisation approaches toward inclusive, locally driven development models that recognise communities as central actors in shaping development outcomes (Midgley et al., 1986; Lane, 1995; Peet & Hartwick, 1999).

2. Methodology

The study adopted a case study research design using a mixed-methods approach that combined quantitative and qualitative techniques. Kapiri Mposhi Constituency was purposively selected due to its consistent receipt of CDF allocations between 2021 and 2025 and its implementation of diverse CDF-funded projects. The target population

comprised Ward Development Committee members, CDF Committee members, ward councillors, community leaders, and representatives of faith-based organisations, cooperatives, women's groups, youth groups, and community-based organisations. A total of 160 respondents were selected across five wards using purposive and convenience sampling techniques.

Data were collected through structured questionnaires, key informant interviews, and document review. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, while qualitative data were analysed thematically through coding and identification of recurring themes. Validity and reliability were ensured through pilot testing, triangulation of data sources, and expert review of research instruments. Ethical considerations were observed through informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and adherence to academic integrity.

3. Results and Findings

3.1 Background Information of Respondents

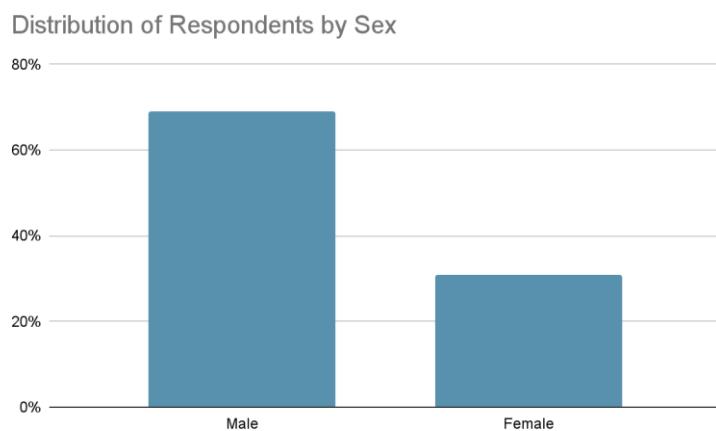


Figure 3.1.1: Distribution of Respondents by Sex

The findings indicate that 69% of respondents were male, while 31% were female. This gender imbalance suggests that men are more actively represented in community leadership and ward development structures in Kapiri Mposhi. The lower representation of women implies potential gender disparities in participation and decision-making processes. This imbalance may result in development priorities that do not fully reflect women's needs, thereby limiting inclusiveness and equity in ward development projects.

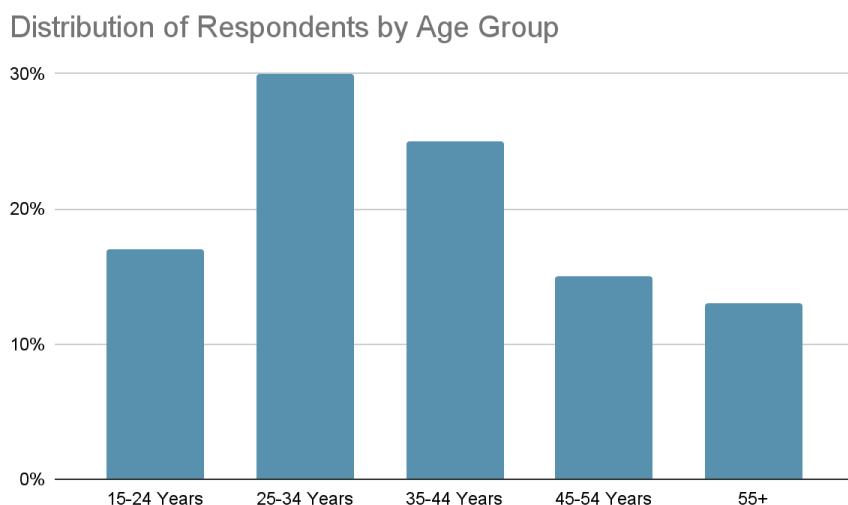


Figure 3.1.2: Distribution of Respondents by Age Group

Most respondents fell within the 25–34 age group (30%), followed by those aged 35–44 years (25%). The low representation of respondents aged 15–24 years (17%) suggests limited youth involvement in ward development processes. Although age representation was uneven, respondents across all age groups expressed a positive attitude toward community participation. This implies that age itself may not hinder participation; rather, access to opportunities and inclusion mechanisms may be the determining factors.

Distribution of Respondents by Marital Status

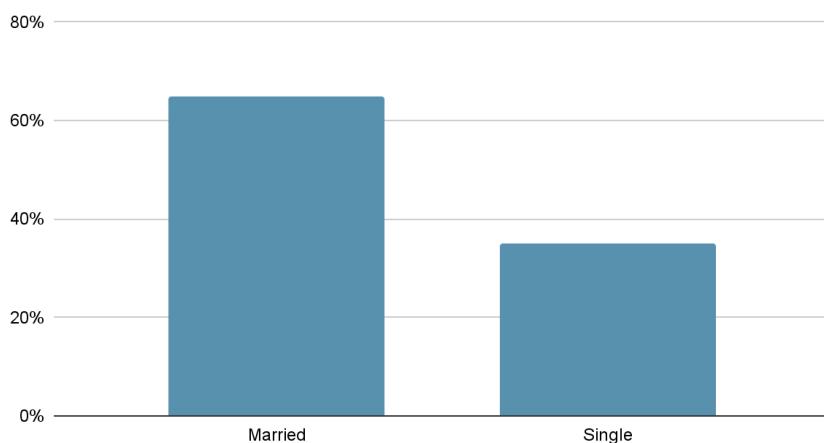


Figure 3.1.3: Distribution of Respondents by Marital Status

The majority of respondents were married (65%), indicating that individuals with family responsibilities are more represented in ward development activities. Married respondents may have stronger incentives to participate in community projects due to long-term residence and concern for family welfare. However, family responsibilities may also limit their availability for active engagement, potentially affecting participation levels.

Distribution of Respondents by Educational Qualification

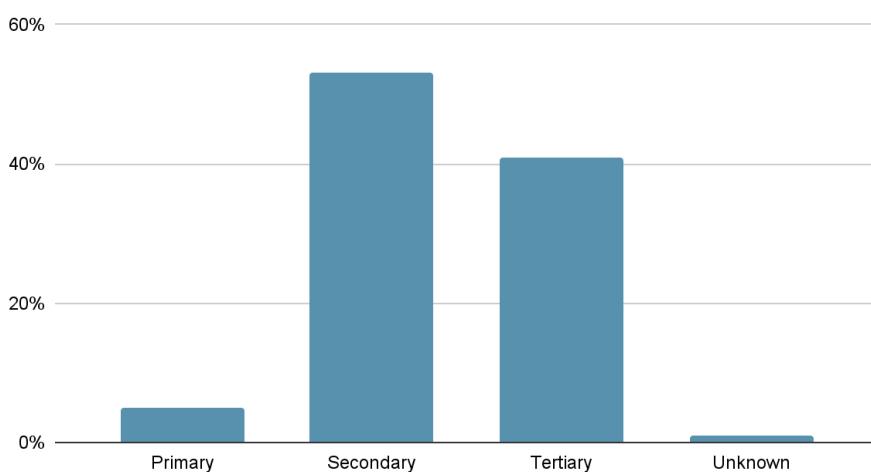


Figure 3.1.4: Distribution of Respondents by Educational Qualification

The findings show that 94% of respondents had at least secondary education, with 41% attaining tertiary education. This suggests a relatively high literacy level among community leaders involved in ward development projects. Higher educational attainment enhances understanding of development processes and enables meaningful engagement in project prioritisation. However, the low proportion of respondents with only primary education indicates that less educated community members may be underrepresented in decision-making forums.

Distribution of Respondents by Employment Status

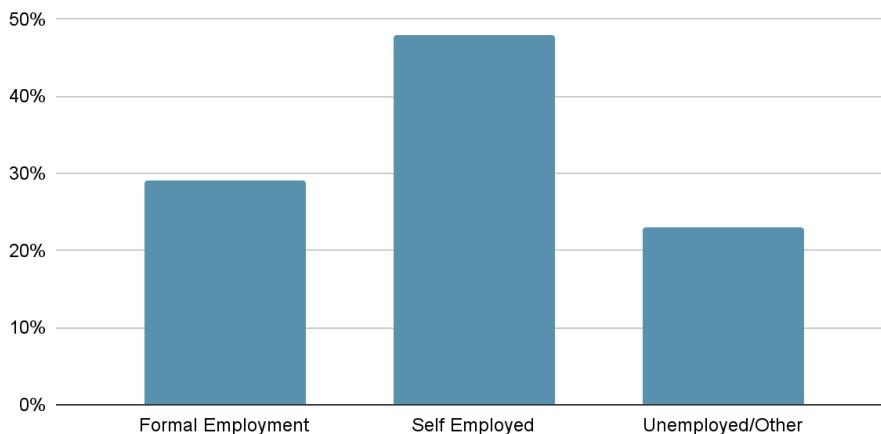


Figure 3.1.5: Distribution of Respondents by Employment Status

Most respondents were self-employed (48%), suggesting greater flexibility to attend meetings and participate in community activities. Respondents in formal employment (29%) may experience time constraints, while unemployed respondents (23%) may lack influence despite having available time. Employment status therefore plays a role in determining the extent and quality of participation in ward development projects.

3.2 Role of the Community in Ward Development Project Prioritisation

Level of Involvement in Project Identification

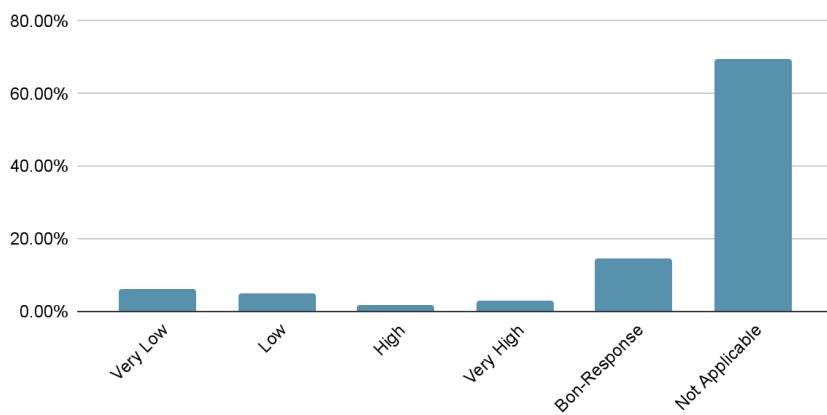


Figure 3.2.1: Level of Involvement in Project Identification

A significant 69.4% of respondents indicated non-applicability, meaning they were not involved at all in project identification. Only 4.9% reported high or very high involvement. This demonstrates minimal grassroots participation in identifying ward development projects, suggesting that decisions are largely made by a few individuals or institutions. Such exclusion undermines community ownership and may result in projects that do not align with actual community needs.

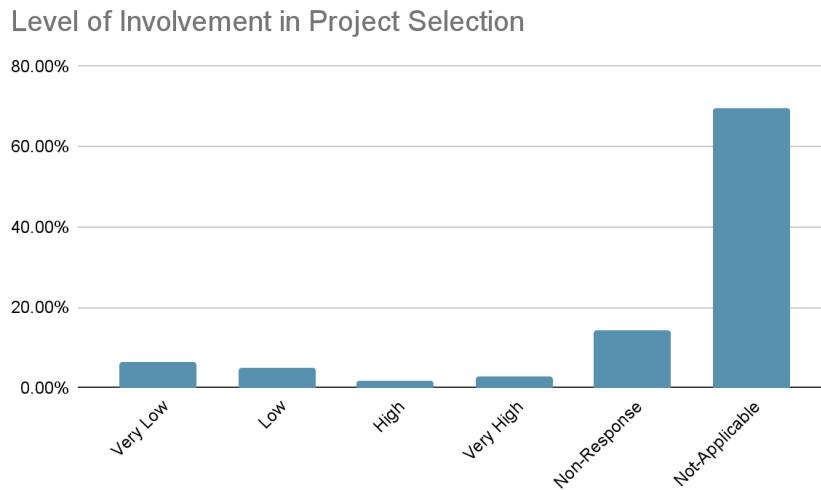


Figure 3.2.2: Level of Involvement in Project Selection

The pattern of participation in project selection mirrors that of project identification. The majority of respondents were excluded from the selection process, indicating a top-down approach to decision-making. Limited participation at this stage weakens accountability and reduces the likelihood of project sustainability, as community members may feel disconnected from the projects implemented in their wards.

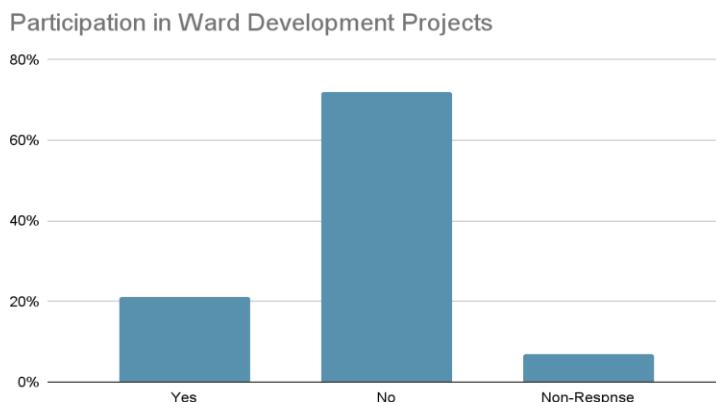


Figure 3.2.3: Participation in Ward Development Projects

The findings reveal that 72% of respondents had never participated in ward development projects. This low level of engagement raises concerns about inclusiveness and effectiveness. Despite recognition of participation as important, practical involvement remains limited, indicating gaps in mobilisation, communication, and empowerment mechanisms.

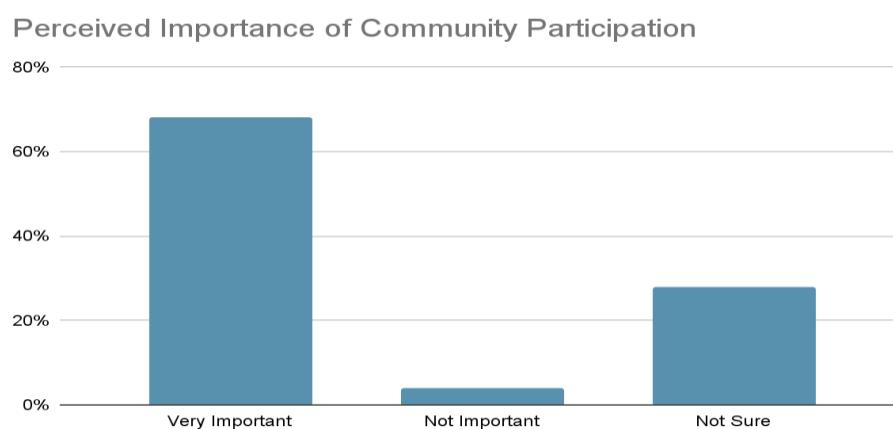


Figure 3.2.4: Perceived Importance of Community Participation

A majority (68%) viewed community participation as very important, highlighting strong awareness of its value. This contrast between perceived importance and actual participation indicates that structural and institutional barriers, rather than lack of interest, are the primary constraints to effective community involvement.

3.3 Challenges to Community Participation

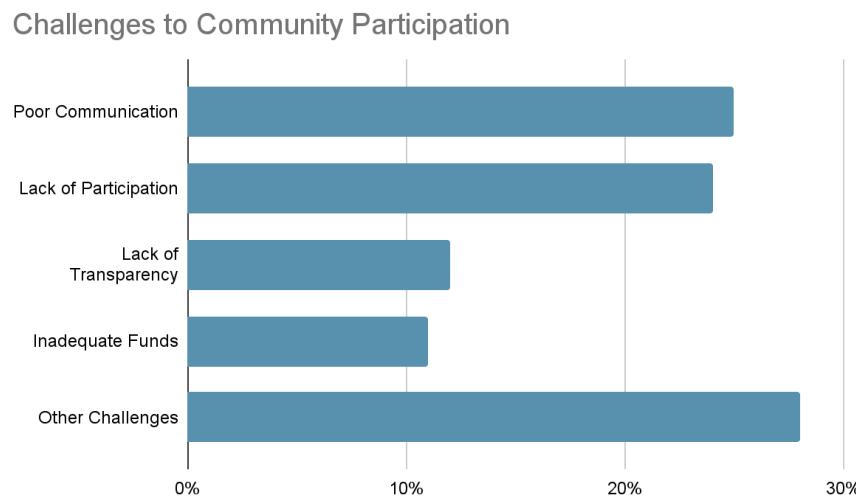


Figure 3.3.1: Challenges of Community Participation

Poor communication emerged as the most significant challenge, followed closely by lack of participation and transparency. These challenges indicate systemic weaknesses in information dissemination and governance, which discourage community engagement and erode trust in ward development processes.

3.4 Access to Information on Ward Development Projects

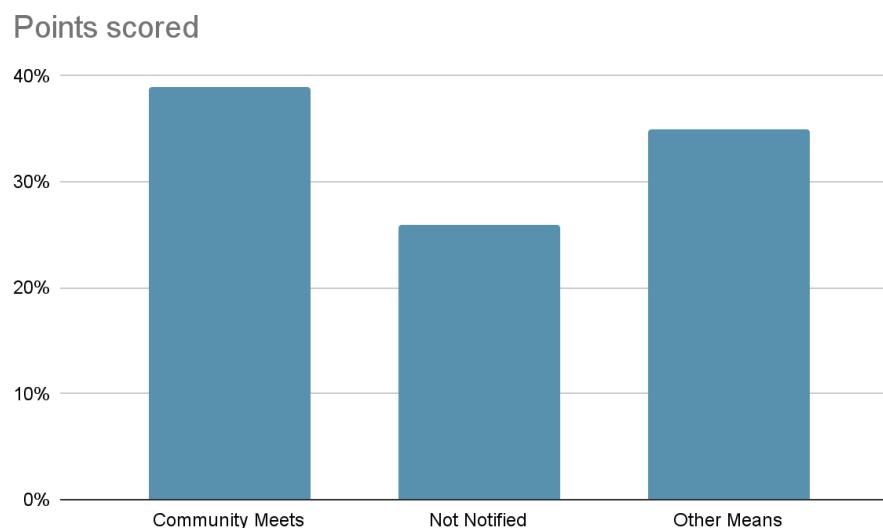


Figure 3.4.1: Notification of Ward Projects

Only 39% of respondents were notified through community meetings, while 26% were never notified. This indicates inconsistent communication practices, which limit awareness and reduce opportunities for meaningful participation.

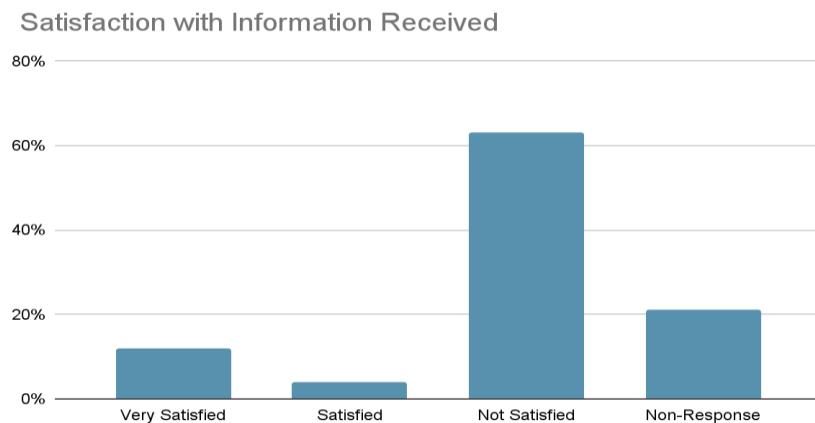


Figure 3.4.2: Satisfaction with Information Received

A majority (63%) were not satisfied with the information provided. Insufficient and unclear information discourages participation and undermines transparency, highlighting the need for improved communication strategies.

Desire to Receive Information on Ward Projects

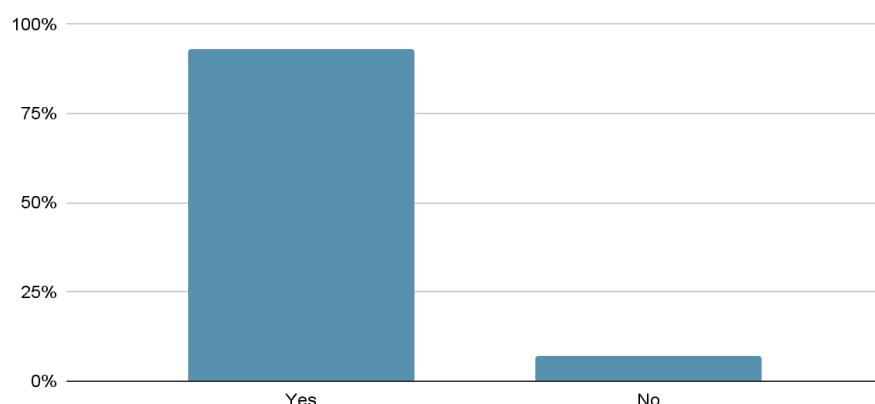


Figure 3.4.3: Desire to Receive Information on Ward Projects

The overwhelming desire for information (93%) demonstrates strong willingness among community members to engage if adequately informed, reinforcing the importance of transparency in participatory development.

Preferred Communication Channel

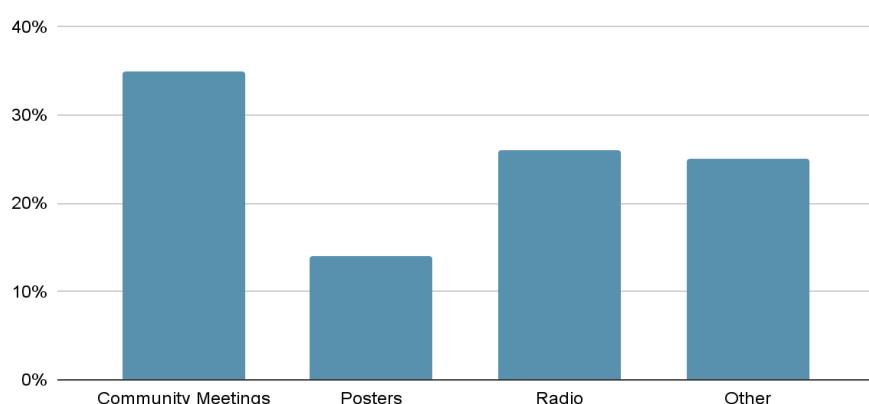


Figure 3.4.4: Preferred Communication Channel

Community meetings were the most preferred communication channel, indicating that interactive and face-to-face platforms are more effective for engaging communities in development initiatives.

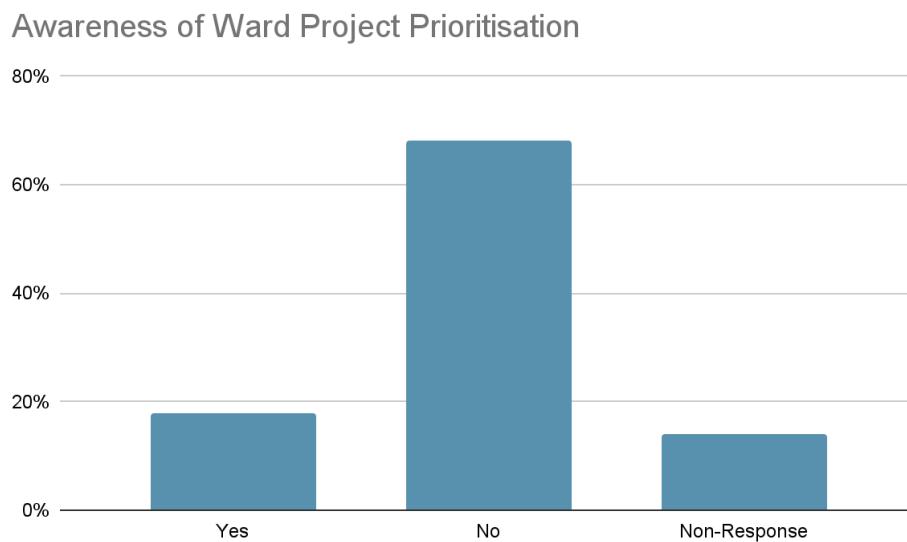


Figure 3.4.5: Awareness of Ward Project Prioritisation

Most respondents (68%) felt that the Council was not doing enough to create awareness. This lack of awareness limits meaningful participation and undermines the objectives of decentralised development.

Overall, the findings reveal low levels of community participation in ward development projects despite strong recognition of its importance. Key barriers include poor communication, lack of transparency, and limited access to information. Addressing these challenges is essential to strengthening community engagement, enhancing project effectiveness, and achieving sustainable development outcomes in Kapiri Mposhi District.

4. Discussion

The findings from Kapiri Mposhi Constituency reveal a significant gap between the theoretical ideals of community participation and the practical realities on the ground. Consistent with Reid (2000), who emphasizes community empowerment as central to meaningful development, the study shows that while communities recognize the importance of participation—evidenced by 68% of respondents considering it very important and 93% expressing a desire for project information—actual engagement remains minimal. Only 21% of respondents reported participating in ward development projects, and nearly 70% were not involved in project identification or selection. This indicates a top-down approach to CDF project planning, where community input is largely absent, reflecting Burkey's (1993, 2000) and Kumar's (2002) assertion that participation merely as a means, rather than an end, limits empowerment and the sustainability of development initiatives.

Socio-demographic factors further contextualize these findings. The predominance of male respondents (69%) and the higher representation of young adults aged 25–34 years suggest gender and age imbalances in participation, supporting Sheikh's (2010) observation that social norms, culture, and socio-economic status influence who engages in development processes. Similarly, the high levels of secondary and tertiary education among respondents indicate that participants possess the skills to engage effectively; however, structural barriers such as limited communication, lack of transparency, and insufficient notification prevent meaningful participation. This aligns with Gupte (2004), who notes that marginalized groups are often excluded from decision-making due to social and economic structures, and with Marsden (1984), who stresses that meaningful participation requires pooling of efforts within an enabling environment.

Challenges identified in the study—including poor communication (25%), lack of participation opportunities (24%), and inadequate transparency (12%)—mirror findings by Chikulo (2009) and Lolojih (2003), who highlight weaknesses in local governance structures and limited civic engagement forums in Zambia. The finding that only 39% of respondents were notified of projects through community meetings, and that 63% were dissatisfied with the information provided, demonstrates the practical implications of these governance deficits. Similarly, studies by the Evangelical Fellowship of Zambia and Micah Challenge Zambia (2012) indicate that CDF projects often suffer from political interference, mismanagement, and insufficient community consultation, all of which are reflected in the low participation rates and limited awareness in this study.

Despite these challenges, the data also reflect opportunities for strengthening participatory development. The overwhelming willingness of community members to engage if adequately informed aligns with Kumar (2002) and Nampila (2005), who argue that meaningful participation requires empowerment and active involvement at all stages of development. Preferred communication channels, such as community meetings (35%), suggest that interactive forums are more effective for participation than passive channels like posters or radio, supporting Sproule's (1996) view that participation is a process enabling individuals to engage meaningfully in decision-making. These insights are consistent with Uphoff's (1987) typology of participation, which emphasizes that decision-making, execution, appraisal, and benefit-sharing are more effective when communities are actively consulted and informed rather than excluded from critical stages of development.

Overall, the study confirms that while the principles of participation theory and empowerment are recognized by community members (Samad, 2002; Gram, 1993; Kaler, 1999), practical application in Kapiri Mposhi remains limited. Structural, socio-economic, and governance-related barriers prevent communities from fully exercising agency over development decisions, resulting in projects that may not align with local priorities. Addressing these gaps requires deliberate strategies to improve transparency, communication, and inclusive engagement, ensuring that community participation is not only valued but operationalized to enhance project ownership, accountability, and sustainability (Yadama, 1995; Ministry of Local Government and Housing, 2010). This reinforces the literature's assertion that meaningful participation is both a process and an end, empowering communities to influence development in ways that reflect their needs, priorities, and capacities (Kumar, 2002; Oakley & Marsden, 1984).

5. Conclusion

This study has shown that community participation in Constituency Development Fund (CDF) projects in Kapiri Mposhi Constituency remains limited despite widespread recognition of its importance. While community members understand the value of participation in enhancing project relevance, accountability, and sustainability, the findings reveal that most residents are excluded from project identification, selection, and implementation processes. Structural and governance challenges—such as inadequate communication, low transparency, limited decision-making forums, and socio-economic constraints—significantly hinder meaningful engagement, reflecting the broader concerns identified in the literature on participatory development and local governance in Zambia.

The evidence underscores a persistent gap between the policy ideals of participatory development and the practical realities on the ground. Although socio-demographic factors, such as education and age, suggest that community members have the capacity to engage effectively, opportunities for involvement are often constrained by top-down project planning and political interference. Nevertheless, the strong willingness of residents to be informed and engaged demonstrates that participatory approaches can succeed if authorities adopt inclusive, transparent, and interactive engagement strategies. Community meetings, for example, emerged as the preferred channel for receiving project information, highlighting the need for direct and participatory communication methods.

In conclusion, enhancing community participation in CDF projects requires deliberate efforts to bridge the gap between policy and practice. Authorities must prioritize transparency, regular communication, and structured opportunities for community involvement in all stages of project planning and monitoring. Doing so will empower communities, foster local ownership, improve project effectiveness, and ensure that development interventions genuinely reflect the needs and priorities of residents. By operationalizing participation as both a process and an end, Kapiri Mposhi can serve as a model for more inclusive, accountable, and sustainable local development initiatives.

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