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A Case Study of Citizen Engagement in Fostering Democratic Governance in Rwanda

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Abstract:

In the past two decades, the main lesson that Rwanda has been trying to offer to other post conflict countries is that sustainable progress can be built on a strong leadership where leaders and citizens have a shared vision of the future and of how to arrive there. An adequate local capacity is critical in making it happen and in creating a social capital. Ubudehe, a traditional practice of working together that existed in Rwanda for centuries was recently revived by the government.

This paper looks on how the program helps citizens to engage in local problem-solving using their own locally designed institutions and by creating spaces. To discuss practical aspects of this program, we use some of the findings an ethnographic field research that was conducted in 2011 in two Districts of Rwanda; Nyamagabe and Musanze. We demonstrate that if given a space to do so, citizens in their villages often understand the problems they face and know their priorities. The initiative helps them address these problems in a participatory, transparent and solidarity manner. The villagers in their public meetings evaluate each household's wealth (income, financial assets) and therefore classify themselves into one of six categories of ubudehe. In this nationwide classification, the poorest are put in the first two categories and are the first to benefit from the government's support in terms of health insurance, education and income generation projects. Our findings from the field research showed that ubudehe initiative has had good impact on the living conditions in the studied population and the initiative had entailed the opening of access to health care services to all categories of Rwandans.

Finally, the paper discusses challenges faced by the initiative during the implementation process especially the categorization of the households at the local levels.

Key words: Poverty reduction, transparency, ubudehe, local institutions, citizen engagement

I. Background

In the aftermath of Genocide of 1994, the underlying concern was faced by the new government of Rwanda was to rebuilt the country, reconstitute trust among the citizenry, restore good and participatory governance and therefore reduce the prevalent poverty. The government initiated different programs to address these issues; among these was decentralization and *Ubudehe*, a culture of collective action of solidarity at community level. The objective of the program was to revive and foster collective action at the village level, the smallest administrative entity in the country.

Administration hierarchy

The country has a highly decentralized system divided into four (4) provinces plus the city of Kigali. These provinces are made up of 30 districts, 416 sectors, 2,148, cells and 14,744 villages (Imidugudu). The district is the basic political-administrative unit of the country with the village being the closest to the people. It is at this grassroots level that problems, priorities and needs of the people can be identified and addressed (Mupenzi 2010, 18). Among other responsibilities of the village are the maintenance of security and the promotion of peace and social harmony among the citizens. In addition, it is responsible for mobilizing the village community for various development and social agendas. The administrative organs of the village include the village council which comprises of all people living in the village who are 18 years old and above; and the village executive committee elected for five-year term and is composed of five people from the village coordinator to the members in charge of security, social affair, information, and development.

The cell, the next level above the village, is responsible for collecting basic statistics about the population and their welfare. The data are then used for planning purposes at the sector level to facilitate service delivery. All citizens living in a particular cell who are aged 18 and above are members of the cell Council. The council mobilises local residents of the cell to identify, discuss, and prioritize their collective problems, and make decisions about their resolution. The cell council elects the 10-member executive committee that executes functions related to administration and community development, including the day-to-day administration of the cell and the implementation of the decisions taken by the council.

The sector is the principal service delivery point where most services are rendered. A sector has five employees, including the executive secretary who is the overall coordinator. The others include individuals in charge of agriculture and livestock; social affairs, and the secretary who also works as the cashier. The sector also supervises cell-level employees. The sector is governed by a council which oversees policy implementation decides on priority programs and also monitor the performance of sector-level staff.

Next are the Districts, originally created as the focus of decentralized service delivery. The district plans, coordinates, and promotes socio-economic development in areas within its jurisdiction. It also mobilises resources from different sources including the central government, the private sector, civil society groups and development partners. Districts have their own elected councils and mayors and prepare their own budgets. In addition to receiving transfers from the central government, districts have taxing powers which allow them to mobilise resources locally. The cells and sectors serve as constituencies within districts and provide an important vehicle for citizens' voices. It promotes and supports activities in which the population participates at grass-roots level and is responsible for maintaining infrastructure.

It is required and reported that in planning development activities, a district administration takes people's wishes into account. District administrations work hand in hand with community-based associations and cooperatives. All civil servants at the district, sector and cell levels are recruited by the district council which reserves the right to punish, fire, or promote any employee based on a report from the executive committee and evidence from his or her immediate supervisor. However, in doing so it must respect the rules and regulations which govern the employment of public servants. The district also pays the salaries of all local administration employees at all levels

The Province serves as a coordinator between the districts and the central government in the planning, execution and supervision of decentralized services. In addition it serves as a channel through which the central government receives complaints from the population concerning the quality, quantity, and fairness of service provision. Its other responsibilities include the coordination of district planning and allocating implementation budgets and ensuring that districts implement policies with the objective of supporting the culture of peace, transparency, and participation by citizens in decision making. The province also ensures that district-level governance is in line with national policies, laws and regulations; and that development within

districts is based on scientific research. At the summit of the administrative hierarchy is the central government which, through line ministries formulates and evaluate policies, programmes and principles which govern the country; as well as resource mobilization to facilitate programme implementation and building the capacity of the population and entities which implement programmes.

Decentralization

The primary intention of the decentralization policy of the Rwandan government is to activate collective action at the community level by developing bottom-up budgeting and planning systems to address communities' needs (Dunbar 2004, 6). Ubudehe program is then part of this larger decentralization effort.

It is believed that decentralization is a critical component of the country's plan to reconstruct itself after the devastation of years of poverty, civil war, and finally the 1994 genocide. Empowering local communities to address their own problems is a necessary part of building trust in a damaged society, and creating local institutions to support the economy.

The crucial role is played by districts governments under the decentralization plan and they are given 10% of state revenue through the Community Development Fund (CDF) for development needs such as Ubudehe.

II. Ubudehe program

It is a traditional Rwandan practice and cultural value of working together to solve problems. The literal origins of the word describe the practice of digging fields before the rains come and the planting season arrives. Ubudehe is targeted to the village (*umudugudu*) level composed of about one hundred households, and small enough to foster collective action. Targeting this level is part of a broader attempt to increase community-level participation in governance and development. A group of households join together to work in their fields; acting collectively to share the burden of the work and make sure that everyone is ready in time for the planting season (MINALOC: Ubudehe to Fight Poverty, 2007). The government of Rwanda has resurrected this traditional cooperative mechanism as the model for a program designed to foster collective action at the community level, rebuild trust and alleviate poverty (Dunbar 2004, 4). It draws on the understanding that the poor often best understand the problems they face and know their priorities, but do not have sufficient information or resources to design effective solutions.

Under Ubudehe, villagers have been trained to make their own demands to attract CDF funds, based on their priorities and needs. Information collected at the village level through this methodology in turn informs district-level development planning.

III. Findings from Nyamagabe and Musanze districts.

The research was carried out under the Local Governance and Leadership research stream (LL) of the Africa Power and Politics programme (APPP). The overall aim of the research was to throw light on the institutional arrangements which permit ‘better’ provision of local public goods essential for poverty reduction and development. Specifically the research was concerned with identifying local instances of where things are working well and then exploring how the local actors, institutions and resources combine to overcome the key bottlenecks which might otherwise undermine their provision. In particular the stream was interested in establishing whether these institutional or governance arrangements work ‘better’ because they are somehow rooted in local realities (Chambers and Golooba-Mutebi, 2012).

The innovative use of neo-traditional cultural institutions as operational tools to support the implementation of the country’s poverty reduction and development strategies was born out of the national dialogue¹ which took place at the end of the nineties. It was at this time that institutions such as *ubudehe* (collective action to combat poverty), *gacaca* (informal conflict settlement arrangements), *imihigo* (competitive performance contracts and accountability mechanisms), *itorero* (cultural mentoring and leadership training) and *umuganda* (communal work) were first presented as practical ways of overcoming the immense challenges faced by Rwanda at the turn of the century.

Ubudehe was explored by researchers in the villages as one of the neo-traditional values revived by Rwandan government to let local communities engaging in solving their own problems by using collective action. The research took eleven months of ethnographic fieldwork and was carried out in twelve villages situated in five different administrative sectors in two districts from May 2010 to March 2011. In Nyamagabe district six villages were studied in three sectors: Nyanza1 & Kavumu (Cyanika sector), Kabuga & Nyaruryango (Kaduha sector) and Karama &

¹ The National Dialogue (*umushyikirano*) is one of the major platforms at which the President of the Republic meets representatives of the people to discuss issues of national importance and work out appropriate solutions.

Mubuga (Musange sector). In Musanze district six villages were studied in two sectors: Rubara & Nyakigina (Kinigi sector) and Karushenyi, Nyamugari, Nkomero & Cyiri (Gacaca sector).

The team learned that the program was first piloted in the former Butare province in 2001 and scaled up at the national level with support from the European Commission in 2004. The Ubudehe pilot program had two primary goals: to engage in a participatory poverty assessment and priority-setting exercise; and based on the assessment, to implement a community project with Euro 1000 provided directly to the village. At the time of scaling up to the national level, the goals remained the same but the grant amount was reduced to Euro 900 because of the limited budget for the program.

How did it operate?

At the time of this fieldwork, most of planning and implementation activities had already taken place and researchers had to rely on interviews of retrospective actions. Likewise reported in other communities (Mupenzi 2010), the communities at village level go through a process of collectively mapping their community and come up with a community map. That exercise is facilitated by two trained community volunteers at village level. These are the focal persons who facilitate the process at decentralized structures from the village to the district. Villagers further go through a process of collectively defining and analyzing the nature of poverty in their community; look at local categories of poverty, characteristics of each category, and mobility between categories, the causes and impact of poverty etc. Then people rank the problems identified in order of priority and the ones that the community wants to spend most of its effort and resources on and request funding for. The villagers also clarify their role and participation and put in place a permanent mechanism to manage the projects through both implementation and evaluation committees. They follow the National Coordination criteria to guide the selection of these committees. Each village then opens a bank account in the nearest Banque Populaire (popular bank) to accommodate the CDF deposits, the money allocated to each benefiting village

At each village level, two distinct processes using the same methodology are observed: one at the village level and the other one at the household level. During Ubudehe process at the village level, the community determines the poverty profile as perceived by members themselves and the causes and consequences of poverty. Community members also draw up of the social map of

the village including the names of household heads, their social category of wealth, development infrastructure, and the roofing material of each house. They also identify problems faced by the community and determine the priority problems to be addressed. A plan of activities and means required to address the prioritized problem is then elaborated, and a system to manage collective action is put in place before the submission of the action plan to a pertinence test for all stakeholders to see if the chosen strategies are appropriate.

At household level the same process is applied and the community selects a poor household with the idea of having a model household in the community which would prove that poverty can be overcome through determination. At this level, the emphasis is placed on analyzing and identifying their survival or coping strategies. Members of the household work together with facilitators to identify their coping strategies that are in line with seasons of the year. They plan for the household's activities and budget for the execution of the chosen strategy. Wise men (*inyangamugayo*) in the village carry out a pertinence test to make sure that the chosen strategy is appropriate and will benefit the household. The household members finally sign for the funds to facilitate the implementation.

The characteristics of households

In the villages of Musanze district, the research team was there at the time the communities were categorizing the households based on the government's criteria (*RPRS Paper, 2002*). They followed a designated six category scale characterizing the households after assessing poverty in their villages and came of the following categories:

Those in abject poverty (*Umutindi nyakujya*): They are the people who need to beg to survive. They have no land or livestock and lack shelter, adequate clothing and food. They fall sick often and have no access to medical care. Their children are malnourished and they cannot afford to send them to school.

The very poor (*Umutindi*): The main difference between this category and the previous one is that this group is physically capable of working on land owned by others, although they themselves have either no land or very small landholdings, and no livestock.

The poor (*Umukene*): These households have some land and housing. They live on their own labour and produce, and though they have no savings, they can eat, even if the food is not very nutritious. However they do not have a surplus to sell in the market, their children do not always go to school and they often have no access to health care.

The resourceful poor (*Umukene wifashije*): This group shares many of the characteristics of the poor but, in addition, they have small ruminants and their children go to primary school.

The food rich (*Umukungu*): This group has larger landholdings with fertile soil and enough to eat. They have livestock, often have paid jobs, and can access health care.

The money rich (*Umukire*): This group has land and livestock, and often has salaried jobs. They have good housing, often own a vehicle, and have enough money to lend and to get credit from the bank. Many migrate to urban centers.

Our research found that *Ubudehe* is a mechanism which enables the poorest and most vulnerable households to be identified by their fellow villagers and ensures that they are the priority recipients of any development partner or national level support available, including payment of *mutuelle* subscriptions or receipt of free cows under the national *girinka* (one-cow per household) programme. It has therefore specifically contributed to the extension of community health insurance (*mutuelle*) coverage to poor households. *Ubudehe* has also played a more direct role. The funding received by villages in the framework of the program in 2006-2007 contributed to improving rural livelihoods by providing income-generating activities, in the form of paid labor and in the creation of cooperatives. Not only does this have positive effects on general levels of health and nutrition it also provides largely subsistence farmers with the long-term capacity to pay for their own family's health insurance, thus contributing both directly and indirectly to the provision of maternal health. There was evidence that *ubudehe* programs had left a greater impact in Nyamagabe District compared to Musanze, and in particular in the sector of Musange where the sector executive secretary told us that “the *ubudehe* scheme has left an unforgettable mark here”². In this sector many of the institutions created through *ubudehe* have become sustainable.

All of Musange's 33 villages received *ubudehe* funding in 2006-2007 and four of them were awarded National prizes when the *ubudehe* programmes were evaluated in 2008. Three villages received additional funding of 1.000.000 Francs and Mubuga village which received the prize of 4th best performing *ubudehe* program nationwide, received 2.500.000 Francs. In Kaduha sector, the Kavumu cell executive secretary explained to us how she collaborated with the village committees to ensure that the selection of vulnerable people was carried out fairly and that the proposed recipients of cows were indeed the most vulnerable community members.

² “*l'ubudehe a laissé une trace inoubliable ici*” in French. Interview Musange sector, 13 August 2010.

In Musange sector initial ubudehe funding enabled villages to employ villagers to undertake a variety of manual labor: farm in the marshland, put in place anti-erosion measures such as ditch-digging and bridge building, and undertake essential road repairs. This not only generated immediate income for village households but it also provided foundations on which sustainable income-generating activities could be built. In Mubuga the marshland cleared by the ubudehe funds has since been exploited by a rice-producing cooperative of which 135 of the village's households are members and which has become a profitable income-generating activity. Elsewhere in the sector pineapple production has become popular. At the household level the ubudehe funds have also been used to provide financial support to poor households. In Mubuga two poor households were singled out to receive 50.000 Francs each and subsequent funding was also used to buy five milk-producing cows which were given to poor families and to provide two other poor households with 25.000 Francs each. Subsequent ubudehe poverty classification lists

Box 1: Ubudehe success stories

a. COPARIMU cooperative:

The cooperative COPARIMU started in 2007 and now counts 135 members who farm 13 hectares of land and produce 45 tons of rice a year. Started on the advice of the sector executive secretary, it was given a boost by ubudehe funds which financed the draining of marshland on which the rice fields were created. Further sector authority support then enabled the cooperative to secure financing from GTZ for the purchase of a de-husking machine in 2008 which arrived just in time for their first harvest. The activities of COPARIMU have transformed the village and its economic status and have brought numerous benefits to its households and the sector. Amongst other things the cooperative pays for the mutuelle health insurance of its members and their families (up to seven per family) and provides each household member with 70kg of rice per year.

b. ABAGINAMA Cooperative: Pineapples plantation/ Musange sector/ Nyakirambi Village

ABAGINAMA cooperative has been created at the end of 2008 and counts 34 members, all are villagers of Nyakirambi. The pineapple plantation covers around 8-9 hectares of land with about 12670 plants. This cooperative is also a result of ubudehe program in Musange sector and was among the first villages in the country to be rewarded by MINALOC for the well use of Ubudehe fund and initiate a sustainable project.

drawn up by village local authorities in Musange show that there are less people living in poverty than before. The sector local authority credits ubudehe programmes with playing an important role in improving local livelihoods and welfare.

The monitoring process

In each of the district, there was a person trained in the ubudehe program who is responsible for the day to-day follow up in all the villages. Every month all these district people gather at the provincial level to discuss and evaluate implementation. The monitoring is done at all levels from the national level to the village. Activities at village and household level are evaluated every year and the best performers awarded.

Ubudehe in fostering democratic governance and poverty eradication

Indeed, ubudehe was found to work within and reinforcing decentralized structures and processes. Decentralization on the other hand, has brought financial resources into the rural economy. By targeting communities at the village level, ubudehe penetrates down to the lowest decentralized structure and has become a tool for bottom-up planning and policy making. It has now been institutionalized as a mechanism for helping community groups and poor households participate in problem-solving process. The process created opportunities for the villagers to interact with one another, share views and create their own institutions that assign duties, benefits, responsibility and authority. The role of the government in the process is not that of a patron, but an enabler providing an environment for socio-cultural rights and obligations of citizens towards one another. The process puts into operation the principles of good governance which is citizens 'participation through collective action and seeks to strengthen democratic processes and governance starting from the people's aspirations, abilities and traditions.

IV. Discussion

In both districts our research pointed to the importance of Ubudehe program not only as poverty reduction strategy but also as a tool of engaging local communities in taking decisions concerning their own problems. Our research in Nyamagabe and Musanze districts proved that Ubudehe is collective action and a learning process. People construct opportunities from the diversity of local perspectives. Citizens also form the basis of the discussions; create foundations of democratic functioning by helping diverse forms of associational experience to express local liberties at the family, neighborhood, and village levels. Ubudehe is a process that has tried to rebuild trust for peaceful co-existence in the Rwandan society. Conflict destroys relationships of trust and reciprocity. People need to be helped to come together around neutral issues that affect them. Some external resources provide the motivation for coming together in meetings. The

allocation of resources, their use, and monitoring: all of these activities require people to interact and to have some hope that others will behave in a reciprocal way.

Challenges faced by Ubudehe in Nyamagabe and Musanze.

As with any emergent process Ubudehe has encountered, and continues to encounter, new challenges. The challenges can be summarized in three categories: mindsets and belief; administrative bureaucracies and bottlenecks; and lastly, the time it has taken to generate wider stakeholder support towards the core participation principles that drive Ubudehe.

Mindsets and beliefs of citizens and policy makers alike have at times been obstacles. The ability to believe that citizens have power and they can exercise that power to act and be proactive citizens instead of helpless apathetic recipients of State patronage and power is a powerful belief system that takes time to accept. For citizens to find, experience and discover that they could engage in collective action with others to solve common public problems was powerful and the success has depended on the abilities of citizens to engage and trust one another. At times this process of building trust has taken long for citizens to realize their innate potential. Similarly, the discovery by government officials that actually citizens have more information and understanding than them has equally been a powerful obstacle to break. By engaging over time with citizens more and more, government administrators are realizing how they can work in partnership with citizens instead of treating them as helpless subjects. Greater popular education and increased experiences by citizens in Ubudehe processes has helped contribute to changing citizen worldviews and worldviews of government officials in power.

Administrative bureaucracies and bottlenecks have also been reported as obstacles. For example, trying to design a system where resources could be transferred directly from the central bank to villages took time and at times the procedures of various donors have led to greater administrative workloads. Deadlines and conditions have sometimes prevented different processes from building on the experiences of ubudehe. These administrative bottlenecks were being reduced through experience.

Other critical views

Ubudehe demonstrates that making changes on your own is very difficult. This is evident from the fact that many of the most important problems have to be tackled by people working

together. The people have designed systems and institutions in communities to solve problems and regulate their behavior and access. The traditional practice of *ubudehe* in Rwanda illustrates the strong historical understanding of this by Rwandan communities.

Ubudehe as a government approach has changed the trends of governance. For instance, it encourages moving from a top-down, autocratic approach associated with the past to developing local self-government structures which can facilitate collective action. Therefore Poverty Reduction Strategy and Decentralization processes have been focused not only on individuals or the macro structure and processes, but on villages. Villages, as the lowest administrative units of around one hundred households, are small enough to foster collective action but are also linked directly into the system of government. A key element in this process is developing the ability of communities to hold structures of government accountable to them. Building up strong governance structures in the absence of building communities 'capacity to understand and interact with them will not result in better governance.

Capacity building for effective collective action at the village level is important in several ways. First, it allows the village to identify and act on its own problems independently. Second, once problems are identified, collective action could lead to lobbying for resources, including funding and services. Finally, collective action can lead to increased faith in local governance institutions to address community needs, and begin to rebuild social capital at the grassroots level, both critical to the long-term sustainability of decentralization efforts. This is in line with Mupenzi's findings in 2010 that if Ubudehe effectively fosters collective action, it has the potential to create much more than a small, annual community project that reduces poverty.

Conclusion

Studying about Ubudehe, gives a clear indicator that poor people and communities know exactly the problems they face; have the best time and space information about their situation and what changes would have real impact on their lives. However, they often do not have the appropriate technical and scientific information to design the best solutions and are not aware of the options available and costs they entail. This is where external assistance is needed. What communities require is the information to help them design better solutions and the skills and confidence to develop arrangements regulating how they will work together to implement them. While financial and physical resources play a vital role, the amounts needed when working at this level are surprisingly little.

At the end, we conclude that the successes of Ubudehe initiative are the social mapping of all households with their social categories. This initiative helped people to come together to develop a common understanding of a problem and experience problem solving through direct engagement. People have slowly developed a sense of implementing and managing their affairs. In the process citizens debate, negotiate and reach an agreement which contains details about a commonly agreed purpose, budget and rules of association that will bind citizens. All of this increases local pools of knowledge. By default, this initiative has increased the accountability and transparency in the management of their collective action leading to wider calls for accountability and transparency. And this approach now provides for the next phase of Ubudehe: a basis for planning longer-term and larger-scale support to citizens at district level.

It is clear that Ubudehe as a participatory human development perspective empowers people with varied abilities. People are able to build alliances, manage financial resources, assess and analyze their own situations, develop ability to mobilize and organize, are able to negotiate, have access to technical resources and able to advocate proactively for shared interests.

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