

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL WORK IN PROMOTING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN DECENTRALIZED GOVERNANCE SYSTEMS IN LIBERIA

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ABSTRACT

The research draws on empowerment theory demonstrating the role of social work in transforming structural challenges through leadership development, critical consciousness-building and accountable institutions. . The study uses qualitative method and used interview as the data collection technique. The study used Semi-structured key informant interviews with 7 participants inclusive of 4 social workers, 1 county planning officer and 2 community leaders in Montserrado County, Liberia. Analysis of the findings of the study was done by utilizing thematic analysis. The findings reveal that social workers can assist marginalized groups demand accountability from decentralized units and facilitate the gathering of evidence by acting as intermediaries thereby enhancing oversight, responsiveness and social accountability towards good governance.

Keywords: Decentralization, Community Engagement, Social Work, Local governance, Citizen Participation

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Decentralization reforms have played a major role in Liberia since the early 2000s as part of its post-conflict governance agenda. Liberia embarked on a road to redeveloping the structures of governance through the decentralization of resources and power to local levels of the country. The establishment of the county service centers coupled with the county development agenda were important reforms focused on administrative and fiscal authorities in order for decision-making to be closer to citizens (Nilsson & Kovacs, 2016). In so doing, the intention was to promote transparency, accountability and citizen participation at subnational levels of government. Despite the introduction of these reforms some 15 years ago, it has been noted by observers that Liberia's record on decentralization has been unequal and local government consistently lack adequate resource and capacity to effectively operate (Isaac, 2019). There is inadequate awareness amongst citizens of local governance process and persistent coordination challenges across different aspects of decentralized units. As a result, the engagements of the public in budgeting and local planning have been very limited which undermines meaningful decentralization. The objectives of placing the people at the center of governance can only be realized when the local accountability initiatives and community participation are substantially enhanced.

The profession of social work concentrates on empowerment, social justice among vulnerable populations through a human right-based approach and improving wellbeing (Brittanie, 2022).

Considering that decentralization focuses on expanding decision-making and services to underserved communities in Liberia, social work aligns with supporting inclusive community participation in local governance. Social workers can facilitate the understanding and engagement of citizens, particularly women, youth and rural poor regarding newly decentralized structures in their districts and counties (Lee, 2017). By utilizing popular education, participatory rural appraisal approaches and motivational interviewing, frontline social workers can not only create awareness and mobilize collectives but they can also capacitate local communities to express their needs, track budgets and hold public officials accountable for their stewardship (Nina, (2021). As middlemen between the state and local communities, they can boost feedback loops and civic engagement necessary for decentralization reforms to be successful. Social work in conjunction with its person-in-environment belief and professional values of social justice, human rights, service, collective responsibility and respect for diversities (IFSW, 2018), plays a crucial and multilayered role in promoting active engagement of citizens and inclusive community participation of citizens with decentralized structures of post-conflict Liberia. Particularly, through direct practice tools inclusive of community organizing, capacity building, popular education and group work (Lee, 2017), social workers can create awareness within hard-to-reach rural areas as well as urban communities about the spaces and opportunities for public participation in local planning, budgeting, accountability and the delivery of service that is facilitated by decentralization.

Frontline social workers entrenched in communities across the 15 counties of Liberia can aid in the mobilization and assistance of marginalized groups such as persons with disabilities, low-income families, women and youth get actively involved in process of decentralized governance in their respective communities considering they are equipped with the necessary skills like motivational interviewing, participatory appraisal (Chambers, 1994), and empowerment techniques (Nina, (2021).

By creating feedback channels between citizens and local government actors, building knowledge and capacities for civic engagement, helping communities track budget implementation and service quality, and facilitating collective action through associations and social networks, social workers can become an essential medium that enhances the culture of transparency, accountability and responsiveness crucial for decentralized governance reforms to deliver on the promise of taking decision-making closer to ordinary citizens across the country. Despite the introduction of decentralization reforms some 15 years ago, citizen participation and engagement remain nominal across the country 2020; Nilsson & Kovacs, 2016). Several studies have documented the persistent gap in citizen awareness, involvement and oversight in the governance process at county, district and community levels (Fredrick et al., 2022; Several reasons account for the limited participation of the public with decentralized structures. Nanda and Matthew (2022) argues that citizens lack adequate knowledge on the specific roles and responsibilities transferred to units of local government under the decentralization reform thus leaving many citizens uninterested and inactive in the decentralization process. Additionally, elite capture and misinformation of the processes of decentralization has further undermined sincere community participation (Wahed et al., 2018).

Similarly, vulnerable groups like people with disabilities, women, and youth have seen very limited civic engagement in the governance process of Liberia (Porio, 2014). This is contingent on several factors inclusive of limited organization for collective action, lack of mass civic

education programs, resource constraints and exclusionary social norms all of which are challenges that decentralization promised to resolve through local governance (Nilsson & Kovacs, 2016). These continuous inadequacies associated with the implementation of governance decentralization in spite of it being the flagship post-conflict development program, advances questions about the progress of the decentralization model (Sultan, 2022). Almost 20 years later, bridging the gap between state authorities and citizens in Liberia which was promised through the implementation of decentralization reforms have not been fulfilled (Richard, 2019). The need for fresh ideas and new approaches especially regarding strengthening local community institutions to improve greater participation of the communities. The objective of this study is to examine the role of social workers in mobilizing and engaging communities to participate in decentralized governance systems in Liberia

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

The reforms instituted through decentralization in the context of post-conflict countries like Liberia focuses on not just strengthening democratic participation but at the same time providing an opportunity for marginalized groups have access to decentralized institutions (Elliot & Seye, 2023). Social work techniques can mitigate power irregularities without vulnerable citizens. Approaches such as participatory workshop enhance civic capacities to engage local authorities while on the other hand, principles of inclusion and empowerment as an approach ensures the planning process of decentralization is representative of vulnerable population (Cornwall, 2002; Menocal, 2014). There has been recorded cases of success in places like India and Brazil regarding participatory budgeting demonstrating potential of accountability techniques for equitable development policies when social workers aid communities needs with local authorities (Avritzer, 2002; Heller et al., 2007). The limited transparency of decentralized units, accountability is hindered despite the expanding participation opportunities (Tambulasi, 2009). The communities' capacity to access information and monitor services utilizing social auditing tools, hence addressing the risk of corruption is enhanced by the intermediary roles play by social workers through coaching (Fiala, N., & Premand, P, 2018.; Ackerman, 2004). Nevertheless, technical oversight approaches may be insufficient without mitigating deeper political challenges excluding marginalized groups (Joshi & Houtzager, 2012). Fox (2015) and Odugbemi & Lee (2011) argue that adequate resources are needed for building the capacity of social workers as part of efforts to enable participatory governance reforms

3.0 CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

3.1 Decentralization

Falleti (2005) and Smoke (2015) define decentralization as the transfer of power, resources and responsibilities from central government actors to local government unit or subnational level government actors with the sole objective of bringing decision-making closer to the citizens is referred to as decentralization. The concept of decentralization is complex and has multifaceted typologies inclusive of administrative, fiscal and political decentralizations. Administration decentralization on one hand requires deconcentration of bureaucratic autonomy from central ministries and agencies to civil servants or appointees locally situated (Dickovick & Riedl, 2010), while fiscal decentralization concentrates on the empowerment of local governments through tax provisions, shared revenues and intergovernmental transfers (Martinez-Vazquez &

Vaillancourt, 2011), and political decentralization which is the last of the typologies focuses on devolving more authority to locally elected officials to not just make policies but also allocate budgets fitted to the needs and preferences of their communities (Grindle, 2007). The spread of decentralization reforms across the globe since the 1980s is underpin by several key assumptions. Work (2002) argues that by bringing governance closer to local citizens, responsiveness, accountability and efficiency in service delivery tailored to local realities can be improved. To be able to successful achieve effective and efficient decentralization, Loftus (2019) intimate that not only will it require institutional changes but also building the administrative capacity of local officials while at the same time facilitating civic mobilizations at the local tiers.

3.2 Social Work

Social work is a practice-based profession focused on improving human empowerment, wellbeing as well as the advancement of economic, environmental and social justice for oppressed and vulnerable people (IFSW, 2018). Social work employs theories of social systems, social justice and human behavior to examine complex situations and facilitate change at the small and large levels (Healy, 2014). It covers involvements from one-on-one counsling and therapy to policy advocacy, community organization, humanitarian service delivery and public education across fields such as healthcare, mental health, child welfare, addition, employee assistance, disabilities, and disaster relief (Zastrow, 2019). Code of ethics inclusive of importance of human relationship, competence, integrity, advancing just social structures through non-violent means, service and dignity and worth of person are principles that guide the professional of social work (Banks, 2020). Even though the profession developed as a result of charitable efforts in the 19th century, social work has greatly evolved over time into a more diverse and specialized professional dedicated to vulnerable community-center development through rights-based and participatory techniques (Beddoe, 2010; Midgley & Conley, 2010). The diverse roles it has continue redefining the professional borders as cultural, political and geographical contexts shift.

3.3 Citizen Participation

Irvin & Stansbury (2004) and Michels & De Graaf (2010) term citizen participation as the means through which non-elite members of the community in a political system actively engage with and influence policy formulation, development planning, governance and public decision-making that impact their lives. It encompasses both conventional acts like voting and protest behavior as well as non-conventional participation through community organizing, activism, and civic oversight mechanisms to shape priorities or hold authorities accountable (Laurence et al., 2023; Ilaria, 2018). At the core of citizen participation, it focuses on increasing participation by infusing public governance thus widening stakeholder consultation for improved transparency, providing a platform for underrepresented people to not only have a voice in policy process that impacts their lives but also fostering civic capacities to exact accountability of the state (Gaventa & Barrett, 2012; Newig & Kvarda, 2012). To consider citizen participation meaningful, (Quick and Bryson 2016) argue that it must include information sharing, access and opportunities for underprivileged groups to clearly articulate their priorities, share local knowledge as well mobilized collectively and have enhanced decision making clout rather than token roles

The outcomes of citizen participations range from building public trust in governance to greater service efficiency and social justice. Nevertheless, a full realization of citizen participation relies on not only political will but also civic infrastructure inclusive of education, responsive institutions and channels for evidence-based engagements instead of contamination or manipulation of the voices of citizens

4.0 THEORETICAL REVIEW

This study draws on three theories which include democratic participatory, social capital and empowerment theories. Democratic participatory theory opines that equitable and widespread public engagement improves governance outcomes integral to a well-functioning democracy such as legitimacy, accountability, transparency representativeness, inclusiveness and deliberate policymaking attuned to the needs of the people (Fung, 2006; Michels, 2011). This theory is relevant considering that it aids in the explanation of the failures of decentralization reforms in Liberia to translate rhetoric about “bringing government closer to people” into genuine citizen participation and oversight over local planning and services. Similarly, the social capital theory on the other hand sheds light on the value of social links, ties and norms that facilitate collective action and cooperative relations important for communities to function and follow shared goals (Tatiana et al., 2023; Woolcock, 2010). Moreover, this theory applies to governance gap in Liberia’s reform relative to the lack of adequate “social capital” displaying as scarce civic reforms and limited community cohesion in order to participate in and oversee decentralized processes.

Additionally, by enhancing self-efficacy, community mobilization and critical consciousness towards accountability and social justice aims from institutions, Perkins & Zimmerman (1995) and Speer & Peterson (2000) highlight that power barriers confronting marginalized groups can be transformed. This theory seamlessly aligns with the focus of the study regarding activating oversight, inclusive community-driven participation and responsiveness in decentralized governance units in Liberia.

4.1 Materials and Method

This research utilized a qualitative explorative design that involves semi-structured key informant interviews with community leaders, social workers and other stakeholders in Montserrado County, Liberia. This method provides for an exhaustive, context-rich analysis of lived experiences, concepts and perspectives crucial to examine social work roles in community governance engagement, which is currently absent in the literatures.

Additionally, the study employed the use of a purposive sampling method that recruited 7 informants inclusive of four social workers at government or NGOs offices, 1 county planning officer coordinating local decentralization and 2 community leaders from urban and rural areas. The combination of information-rich cases highlight perspective from both practitioner service delivery lens and community recipient lens. The in-depth interviews with relevant stakeholders or informants of the study was conducted between 30-45 minutes by the researcher at a convenient location of the participant’s choosing. All interviews were transcribed using thematic analysis approach. I also used triangulation of data from secondary to add to the dependability, credibility of the findings.

4.2 Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study highlight multiple interlinked themes demonstrating the strategic values of social work in fostering participatory governance as well as addressing the challenges marginalized groups are confronted with relative to engaging decentralized structures, specifically post-conflict context like Liberia experiencing democratic decentralization. The findings shows that the practice of social work is guided by social justice, empowerment and critical conscious frameworks supports agreement with the democratic participation and empowerment theories. The finding shows that popular participations of citizens in social development programs can facilitate good governance, more responsive and inclusive approach to decision-making in policy- formulation.

The findings demonstrate that community organizing approaches such as simulations, cultural mediums and awareness workshops can build the civic mobilization capacities and participatory readiness of disadvantaged groups to be able to substantively engage decentralized planning forums. Accordingly, the study revealed that entrenched power barriers deeply rooted in historical trauma, marginalization, bureaucratic intimidation and discrimination hinders public participation in social work. The study shows that it is important to implement targeted awareness of authorities on reforms and assistance in order to motivate vulnerable. The study found that even though decentralization increases civic opportunities, accountability is hampered by limited transparency around planning and budget processes. The finding shows social worker play important intermediate roles utilizing motivational coaching, scorecards and oversight committees for marginalized groups to gather evidence, articulate needs around service. The findings confirm that social work's is relevant for social capital and empowerment frames for participatory decentralization. The study revealed that social work facilitates inclusive development and ensures democratic governance practices.

5.0 CONCLUSION

This study sheds light on the multifaceted and strategic roles social workers can play in advocating for inclusive participation and engagement of the local citizens with decentralized governance systems in post-conflict settings like Liberia. Notwithstanding the 15 years of ambitious decentralization reforms aimed at bringing decision-making closer to ordinary citizens, the analysis highlights that public participation in local planning, budgeting and accountability processes is very minimal, particularly among urban poor and marginalized rural communities. Challenges continue as a result of intimidating bureaucratic systems, elite capture worries, inadequate participatory capabilities and limited civic awareness stemming from historical oppression.

However, the practice of social work guided by values for social justice, empowerment and human dignity is adequately positioned to address these governance challenges. Frontline social workers can assist associations to articulate their needs in public forums, conscientize citizens on local governance process and build the civic mobilization skills of citizens through simulations and peer learning. By deliberately remedying systematic challenges and power asymmetries confronting marginalized groups, social work hinged on empowerment practice approach has huge potential to fulfill the policy promises provided by the architects of decentralization reforms in Liberia such as inclusive, participatory and accountable governance. The findings of the study fill a gap on literature on social work's emerging

importance to participatory localized development amidst calls to strengthen social accountability and civic oversight towards a more responsive public service and actualization of governance sustainable development goals.

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