Community Participation and Participatory Governance in Constituency Development Fund Projects: A Case Study of Nyimba Central Ward, Zambia

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ABSTRACT

Community participation constitutes a fundamental principle of democratic decentralisation and participatory governance, particularly within community-driven development programmes. In Zambia, the Constituency Development Fund (CDF) has undergone substantial reforms aimed at enhancing citizen participation in local development planning through Ward Development Committees (WDCs). Despite these reforms, limited empirical evidence exists regarding the effectiveness of WDCs in facilitating meaningful community participation at the ward level. Thus, study examined the mechanisms through which the Nyimba Central Ward Development Committee promotes community participation in CDF projects focusing on the factors influencing participatory governance. Guided by Participatory Governance Theory, the study adopted a qualitative case study design. Data were collected through key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis involving Ward Development Committee members, local authority officials, community leaders, project beneficiaries, and other relevant stakeholders. Thematic analysis was employed to analyse primary data, while documentary analysis was used to analyse secondary data. The findings indicate that the Ward Development Committee play a significant role in mobilising community participation through public meetings, stakeholder consultations, participatory project identification, and community monitoring of development projects. However, the effectiveness of these participatory mechanisms is constrained by inadequate technical capacity, limited financial and logistical resources, low public awareness, inconsistent community attendance, and perceived political influence during project prioritisation. The study further found that although participatory governance has strengthened local ownership of development initiatives, institutional weaknesses continue to undermine transparency, accountability, and inclusive decision-making. The study concludes that meaningful participatory governance requires not only decentralised institutional structures but also sustained investment in institutional capacity, civic education, transparency mechanisms, and regulatory safeguards that protect community decision-making from undue political influence. Strengthening these governance dimensions would enhance the effectiveness of Ward Development Committees and improve the responsiveness and sustainability of Constituency Development Fund projects within Zambia's decentralised governance framework.

Keywords: Community Participation; Participatory Governance; Constituency Development Fund; Ward Development Committees; Decentralisation

INTRODUCTION

Despite more than three decades of decentralisation reforms across the world, achieving meaningful community participation in local governance remains a persistent challenge. Governments have increasingly devolved administrative authority, fiscal resources, and development responsibilities to subnational institutions with the expectation that decision-making closer to citizens would enhance democratic accountability, improve service delivery, and produce development interventions that better reflect local priorities (Oates, 1972; Ribot, 2002; Mansuri & Rao, 2013; Faguet, 2011; Smoke, 2022). However, evidence from both developed and developing countries demonstrates that decentralisation has not consistently translated into genuine citizen participation or improved governance outcomes. In many contexts, participatory institutions exist largely as formal administrative structures, while decision-making remains dominated by political elites, bureaucratic interests, or technocratic processes that marginalise the voices of ordinary citizens (Ribot, 2002; Gaventa, 2006; Smoke, 2022). This disconnect between the institutional design of decentralisation and its practical implementation has emerged as one of the most significant governance challenges confronting contemporary public administration.

The growing recognition of this governance challenge has elevated participatory governance from a normative democratic ideal to a central principle of contemporary public administration and community-driven development. Participatory governance is founded on the premise that citizens should not merely receive public services but should actively influence the processes through which public decisions are made, resources are allocated, development priorities are determined, and public institutions are held accountable (Fung, 2006; OECD, 2020). Unlike traditional bureaucratic governance models, which concentrate decision-making authority within government institutions, participatory governance promotes collaborative relationships between governments and citizens, recognising communities as partners rather than passive beneficiaries of development programmes. Through such collaboration, participatory governance seeks to improve the legitimacy, responsiveness, transparency, and effectiveness of public institutions while strengthening democratic accountability and fostering sustainable development (Fung & Wright, 2003; World Bank, 2021).

The increasing prominence of participatory governance reflects a fundamental shift in development thinking over the past four decades. Earlier development paradigms were largely characterised by centralised planning, where governments and external development agencies identified development priorities, allocated resources, and implemented projects with limited consultation of local communities. Although these approaches contributed significantly to infrastructure expansion and economic development, they frequently failed to respond to local needs, resulting in inefficient resource allocation, weak community ownership, limited accountability, and poor sustainability of development interventions (Chambers, 1997; Mansuri & Rao, 2013). These shortcomings prompted a growing body of scholarship advocating participatory approaches that recognise local knowledge, empower communities to influence public decision-making, and promote shared responsibility throughout the development process (Arnstein, 1969; Cornwall, 2008).

However, contemporary scholarship increasingly cautions against assuming that participation automatically produces better governance outcomes. Arnstein's (1969) influential "Ladder of Citizen Participation" demonstrates that participation exists along a continuum ranging from manipulation and tokenism to genuine citizen power. More recent studies similarly argue that governments frequently institutionalise participatory structures without transferring meaningful decision-making authority, thereby creating the appearance rather than the substance of citizen engagement (Cornwall, 2008; Gaventa, 2006). Consequently, the effectiveness of participatory governance depends not merely on the existence of participatory institutions but on whether citizens possess genuine opportunities to influence public decisions, access relevant information, hold public officials accountable, and participate throughout the entire development cycle.

These debates are closely linked to decentralisation, which remains one of the most influential public sector reforms implemented globally since the late twentieth century. Decentralisation involves transferring political, administrative, and fiscal authority from central governments to lower levels of government with the objective of improving governance efficiency, democratic participation, and public accountability (Oates, 1972; Faguet, 2011). The theoretical rationale underlying decentralisation is that local governments and community institutions possess superior knowledge of local conditions and are therefore better positioned to identify development priorities, allocate resources efficiently, and respond to citizens' needs. By reducing the distance between decision-makers and communities, decentralisation is expected to strengthen accountability while improving the responsiveness and effectiveness of public service delivery (Oates, 1972; Faguet, 2011).

Nevertheless, the relationship between decentralisation and participatory governance is neither automatic nor linear. While decentralisation creates institutional opportunities for citizen participation, empirical evidence demonstrates that devolving authority alone rarely guarantees inclusive governance or improved development outcomes. Instead, decentralisation frequently reproduces existing political and institutional inequalities where local governance structures lack adequate technical capacity, financial resources, administrative autonomy, or accountability mechanisms (Smoke, 2022). In many developing countries, decentralised institutions continue to experience political interference, elite capture, inadequate civic awareness, weak transparency, and limited public oversight, thereby constraining meaningful citizen participation despite formal decentralisation reforms (Ribot, 2002; Crook, 2020; Smoke, 2022). These findings suggest that the effectiveness of decentralisation depends less on the formal transfer of authority than on the institutional conditions that enable citizens to participate meaningfully in governance processes.

The limitations of decentralisation are particularly evident within community-driven development programmes, where citizen participation is expected to determine development priorities, strengthen accountability, and enhance project sustainability. International evidence indicates that development initiatives are more likely to achieve sustainable outcomes when communities participate actively throughout project identification, planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation (World Bank, 2021). Such participation promotes community ownership, improves transparency in resource utilisation, and enhances institutional accountability. Conversely, where participation is weak, projects frequently reflect externally determined priorities, attract limited community support, and experience implementation delays, poor maintenance, or eventual failure (Mansuri & Rao, 2013). These contrasting outcomes highlight that community participation is not merely a democratic principle but a critical determinant of effective local development.

The continuing gap between decentralisation policy and participatory practice therefore raises important theoretical and policy questions. Although governments increasingly establish participatory institutions and expand opportunities for citizen engagement, evidence suggests that meaningful participation remains constrained by institutional, political, and socio-economic factors that vary across contexts. Understanding how these factors influence participatory governance has consequently become an important area of inquiry within public administration, development studies, and decentralisation research.

Rather than assuming that participatory structures automatically produce democratic outcomes, contemporary scholarship increasingly emphasises the need for context-specific empirical evidence that explains why participatory governance succeeds in some settings while remaining largely symbolic in others. It is within this broader debate that the present study is situated, providing an empirical examination of community participation and participatory governance within Zambia's Constituency Development Fund framework.

Legal and Policy Framework Governing Community Participation in Zambia’s Constituency Development Fund Projects

Zambia's constitutional, legislative, and policy framework establishes a robust legal foundation for participatory governance by recognising community participation as a statutory requirement rather than a discretionary administrative practice. Nevertheless, the existence of an enabling legal framework should not be equated with effective implementation. Comparative decentralisation research consistently demonstrates that formal legal provisions frequently coexist with implementation deficits arising from weak institutional capacity, inadequate civic awareness, political influence, limited financial resources, and ineffective accountability mechanisms (Ribot, 2002; Gaventa, 2006; Smoke, 2022). Consequently, the critical policy question is no longer whether Zambia possesses an adequate legal framework for participatory governance, but whether the institutions established under that framework effectively facilitate meaningful citizen participation in practice.

It is within this implementation gap that the present study is situated. Specifically, the study evaluates how the legal and policy provisions governing community participation are operationalised within Constituency Development Fund projects in Nyimba Central Ward. By examining the extent to which Ward Development Committees facilitate inclusive participation, transparency, accountability, and community oversight throughout the CDF project cycle, the study moves beyond analysing the existence of legal provisions to assessing their practical effectiveness.

In doing so, it contributes empirical evidence that may inform future reforms aimed at strengthening participatory governance, enhancing the performance of Ward Development Committees, and improving the effectiveness of Zambia's decentralisation agenda.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Participatory Governance Theory

Participatory Governance Theory provides the principal theoretical lens for this study. The theory is primarily associated with Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright, whose work on empowered participatory governance has significantly shaped contemporary thinking on citizen participation in public decision-making (Fung & Wright, 2003). The theory emerged as a response to the limitations of traditional top-down models of governance, arguing that effective governance is achieved when citizens are directly involved in policy formulation, planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. Rather than treating citizens as passive recipients of public services, Participatory Governance Theory conceptualises them as active partners whose knowledge, experiences, and preferences contribute to improved public decision-making and democratic legitimacy (Fung & Wright, 2003; Fung, 2015).

The theory is founded on the premise that governance is strengthened when public institutions create institutionalised spaces for meaningful citizen engagement. It advocates collaborative decision-making among government institutions, civil society organisations, community groups, and other stakeholders, thereby promoting transparency, accountability, responsiveness, and inclusiveness. Participatory governance further contends that decentralised governance structures are more effective when they provide genuine opportunities for citizens to influence decisions affecting their communities rather than merely informing or consulting them (Fung & Wright, 2003; Cornwall, 2008).

Participatory Governance Theory rests on several key assumptions. First, it assumes that citizens possess valuable local knowledge and practical experience that can improve the quality of public decisions and development outcomes (Chambers, 1997). Second, it assumes that effective participation enhances democratic accountability by increasing the responsiveness of public officials to community needs and priorities (Bovens, 2007; Fung, 2015). Third, the theory assumes that inclusive participation promotes transparency, trust, and collective ownership of development initiatives, thereby improving implementation and sustainability (Gaventa, 2006; Gaventa & Barrett, 2012). Finally, the theory assumes that participation should be meaningful and empowering rather than symbolic, requiring institutional mechanisms that enable citizens to influence decisions rather than merely endorse predetermined outcomes (Arnstein, 1969; Cornwall, 2008).

Participatory Governance Theory is particularly suitable for the present study because it directly explains the relationship between decentralised governance structures and citizen participation in local development planning. The study seeks to examine community participation in the utilisation of the Constituency Development Fund within local authorities in Zambia, where decentralisation reforms are intended to enhance citizen involvement in identifying, prioritising, implementing, and monitoring development projects. The theory therefore provides an appropriate analytical framework for assessing whether existing participatory mechanisms facilitate meaningful citizen engagement, democratic accountability, and responsive local governance, consistent with the objectives of Zambia's decentralisation policy and the implementation of the Constituency Development Fund (GRZ, 2013; Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development, 2022).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Community participation has become a central principle of democratic governance and decentralisation reforms across both developed and developing countries. Contemporary governance literature argues that sustainable development is more likely to be achieved when citizens actively participate in identifying development priorities, allocating public resources, implementing projects, and monitoring public institutions (Fung & Wright, 2003; Gaventa & Barrett, 2012). Participatory governance has therefore emerged as a governance paradigm that seeks to strengthen democratic accountability, transparency, responsiveness, and legitimacy by creating institutional spaces through which citizens can directly influence public decision-making (Fung, 2015). Nevertheless, despite widespread adoption of participatory governance reforms, empirical evidence suggests that meaningful community participation remains inconsistent, particularly within decentralised governance systems characterised by institutional weaknesses and political constraints (Smoke, 2022).

Fung and Wright (2003) conceptualise participatory governance as a system in which citizens engage directly with public institutions in planning, implementation, and monitoring development programmes. They argue that such arrangements strengthen democratic legitimacy because public decisions are informed by local knowledge and collective deliberation. Similarly, Gaventa and Barrett (2012) demonstrate that meaningful citizen engagement improves public accountability by increasing institutional responsiveness and enhancing the capacity of citizens to influence governance processes. However, both studies largely examine participatory governance from a broad theoretical and international perspective without considering how participatory mechanisms operate within rural decentralised governance structures in developing countries. This represents a contextual gap, which the present study addresses by examining participatory governance within Ward Development Committees responsible for implementing Constituency Development Fund (CDF) projects in Nyimba Central Ward, Zambia.

The effectiveness of participatory governance depends not merely on the existence of participatory structures but on the quality of citizen engagement. Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Citizen Participation remains one of the most influential frameworks for evaluating participation by distinguishing between symbolic participation and genuine citizen empowerment. Arnstein argues that participation ranges from manipulation and tokenism to delegated authority and citizen control, implying that meaningful participation exists only where citizens possess real decision-making power. Cornwall (2008) similarly contends that governments frequently institutionalise participation without transferring substantive authority to communities, resulting in procedural rather than transformative participation. Although these studies provide important conceptual insights into the quality of participation, they do not examine the institutional factors that influence meaningful participation within contemporary decentralised governance systems. This constitutes a conceptual gap, which this study addresses by examining how institutional capacity, transparency, accountability, and political dynamics shape the quality of community participation in CDF implementation.

The relationship between participation and accountability has also attracted increasing scholarly attention. Earlier studies generally assumed that increased citizen participation naturally strengthens accountability and improves governance outcomes (Fung & Wright, 2003). However, Fox (2015) argues that participation alone cannot improve governance unless it is supported by transparent institutions, informed citizens, and enforceable accountability mechanisms. Similarly, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2022) maintains that participatory governance is effective only when governments demonstrate genuine commitment to incorporating citizens' views into public decision-making. While these studies broaden understanding of participatory governance by emphasising institutional accountability, they provide limited empirical evidence from local governance institutions within developing countries. This represents an empirical gap, which the current study fills by investigating how accountability mechanisms influence participatory governance within Ward Development Committees in rural Zambia.

Decentralisation provides the institutional framework through which participatory governance is operationalised. According to Oates (1972), decentralisation enhances efficiency because local governments possess superior knowledge of citizens' preferences and are therefore better positioned to provide public services that reflect local priorities. Ribot (2002) extends this argument by suggesting that democratic decentralisation strengthens accountability by transferring political authority closer to citizens. These theoretical perspectives have influenced decentralisation reforms globally, with governments increasingly devolving administrative authority, financial resources, and development responsibilities to local governments (Faguet, 2011; Smoke, 2022). Nevertheless, recent scholarship demonstrates that decentralisation does not automatically produce improved governance outcomes. Rather, its effectiveness depends upon institutional capacity, political commitment, financial autonomy, and the quality of citizen participation (Smoke, 2022).

Faguet (2011) found that decentralisation improves service delivery and public accountability where local governments possess adequate institutional autonomy and administrative capacity. In contrast, Smoke (2022) argues that many decentralisation reforms have transferred functions without corresponding investments in institutional capacity, resulting in weak implementation and limited citizen participation. While these studies provide comprehensive analyses of decentralisation reforms, they focus primarily on national and comparative experiences rather than examining grassroots governance institutions responsible for facilitating community participation. This represents an empirical and contextual gap, which the present study addresses by focusing specifically on Ward Development Committees and their role in facilitating participatory governance within Zambia's expanded CDF framework.

Community-driven development (CDD) has become one of the principal mechanisms for operationalising participatory governance within decentralised governance systems. Mansuri and Rao (2013) argue that communities are better positioned than central governments to identify local development priorities and manage development interventions. Their extensive review concludes that community participation enhances project ownership, accountability, and sustainability where institutions possess adequate capacity and communities exercise genuine decision-making authority. Similarly, the World Bank (2021) argues that participatory development programmes improve development outcomes when accompanied by strong institutional capacity, civic education, and transparent accountability systems. However, Mansuri and Rao (2013) also demonstrate that many participatory programmes fail because of elite capture, inadequate institutional capacity, and unequal power relations.

Although these studies provide substantial evidence regarding the effectiveness of participatory development programmes, they rely predominantly on international comparative evidence and provide limited qualitative understanding of how participatory governance functions within specific local governance contexts. This represents a methodological and contextual gap, which the present study addresses through an in-depth qualitative case study of participatory governance in Nyimba Central Ward.

Within the African context, decentralisation reforms have produced mixed governance outcomes. Ayee (2021) observes that decentralisation has expanded opportunities for community participation in several African countries, including Ghana, Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. Nevertheless, these reforms continue to face challenges arising from elite capture, political interference, weak administrative capacity, inadequate fiscal decentralisation, and limited civic awareness. Likewise, Smoke (2022) concludes that institutional weaknesses continue to constrain participatory governance despite comprehensive decentralisation reforms across developing countries. Although these studies identify common governance challenges across Africa, they largely adopt comparative perspectives and therefore overlook country-specific institutional dynamics. This constitutes a contextual gap, which the present study addresses by providing evidence from Zambia's decentralised governance framework following the expansion of the Constituency Development Fund.

The Zambian literature similarly demonstrates both the opportunities and limitations of participatory governance. The Revised National Decentralisation Policy (GRZ, 2013) and the Constituency Development Fund Operational Guidelines (Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development, 2022) identify Ward Development Committees as the principal institutions responsible for facilitating community participation in local development planning and implementation. Empirical studies by Chikonde and Chituta (2020) and Mukwena and Banda (2022) indicate that Ward Development Committees have strengthened stakeholder coordination and created institutional opportunities for community participation in identifying development priorities. However, these studies focus primarily on institutional functions and provide limited analysis of how governance processes influence the effectiveness of participatory governance. This represents a conceptual gap, which the present study addresses by examining the interaction between institutional capacity, transparency, accountability, political dynamics, and community engagement in shaping participatory governance.

Other Zambian studies present a more critical perspective. Ndhlovu (2022) reports that many Ward Development Committees continue to experience inadequate technical capacity, weak administrative coordination, insufficient logistical support, and limited stakeholder engagement. Similarly, recent Afrobarometer surveys (2024; 2025) reveal that many citizens remain unaware of CDF procedures, Ward Development Committee responsibilities, and opportunities for community participation. These findings suggest that the existence of participatory institutions alone does not guarantee meaningful citizen engagement. However, these studies generally examine governance challenges independently without exploring how institutional, political, and social factors interact to influence participatory governance following the expansion of the CDF. This represents both a methodological and empirical gap, which this study addresses through a qualitative investigation involving multiple stakeholder groups, including Ward Development Committee members, councillors, council officials, traditional leaders, and community members.

Overall, the literature demonstrates broad consensus that participatory governance contributes to democratic accountability, transparency, and improved development outcomes when supported by effective decentralised institutions. Nevertheless, existing studies continue to report inconsistent governance outcomes because

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participatory governance is influenced by institutional capacity, accountability mechanisms, political dynamics, civic awareness, and local leadership. More importantly, much of the available literature remains either theoretical, comparative, or focused on national and district-level governance, with relatively limited qualitative evidence explaining how participatory governance operates within individual wards following Zambia's 2021 CDF reforms. Consequently, this study addresses conceptual, empirical, methodological, contextual, and policy gaps by undertaking an in-depth qualitative examination of participatory governance in Nyimba Central Ward. In doing so, it extends existing scholarship by explaining how institutional and governance factors interact to shape meaningful community participation in Constituency Development Fund projects, while generating context-specific evidence capable of informing policy and strengthening grassroots governance in Zambia.

Identifying Gaps in literature

The preceding review identifies a significant gap in the existing literature. While numerous studies have examined CDF implementation at the district and national levels (Chikonde & Chituta, 2020; Mukwena & Banda, 2022), limited empirical evidence exists regarding the practical functioning of Ward Development Committees at the grassroots level. Furthermore, most existing research has focused on institutional processes rather than the dynamics of participatory governance, including power relations, transparency, accountability, and the influence of political interests. This study addresses these gaps by providing an in-depth qualitative examination of participatory governance in Nyimba Central Ward.

METHODOLOGY

The study took a qualitative approach underpinned by a single-case study design, its appropriateness was premised in the designs ability to facilitate an intensive investigation of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context (Yin, 2018). Participants were purposively selected based on their direct involvement in CDF governance processes and their ability to provide rich, context-specific information relevant to the research objectives. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved, which occurred after the 28th interview; however, five additional interviews were conducted to ensure data sufficiency (Guest et al., 2020). The study participants and sample composition of 32 included; eight (8) Ward Development Committee members, five (5) Nyimba Town Council officials, four (4) traditional leaders, three (3) Community-Based Organisation representatives, five (5) community members, and seven (7) project beneficiaries. Data was collection through semi-structured interviewed and focus group discussions.

Data analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) reflexive thematic analysis framework. Audio-recorded interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim and analysed through six iterative stages: familiarization with the data, coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition, and report writing. Codes were developed inductively and organised into themes aligned with the study objectives, including community participation, institutional capacity, transparency, accountability, and participatory governance. Documentary evidence was analysed concurrently to validate and enrich emerging themes.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Community Participation in Constituency Development Fund Projects

The findings indicate that participatory planning has become embedded within the ward's governance processes. Respondents consistently reported that WDCs convene community meetings to identify local development priorities before project proposals are submitted for consideration under the CDF. Participants viewed these forums as an important departure from previous top-down planning approaches, allowing communities to influence decisions concerning education, health, water supply, roads, agriculture, and youth empowerment.

As one WDC member noted, "People now have an opportunity to discuss and prioritise projects before they are submitted for funding."

Documentary evidence, including WDC meeting minutes and CDF planning records, corroborated these accounts, confirming that project proposals generally originated from community consultations. Despite these positive developments, respondents questioned the extent to which community priorities influenced final funding

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decisions. This reflects the normative expectations of participatory governance theory, which argues that citizen involvement enhances legitimacy, responsiveness, and accountability in public decision-making (Fung & Wright, 2003; Gaventa, 2006). In the Zambian context, these findings align with the intent of the Revised National Decentralisation Policy (2013) and the CDF Guidelines (2022), which seek to embed citizen participation within local development planning structures.

Although projects were initially identified through participatory processes, several participants reported that some highly ranked community priorities were not ultimately approved. Respondents attributed these discrepancies to technical feasibility, financial constraints, and perceived political influence.

A focus group participant observed, "Sometimes the community agrees on one project, but another is eventually approved."

These findings suggest that while participation has increased, citizens' influence over final decision-making remains constrained, reflecting a gap between procedural participation and substantive decision-making authority. However, the findings also reveal a persistent gap between procedural participation and substantive influence. While community members are regularly consulted and involved in identifying priorities, their influence over final project approval remains constrained. This confirms emerging scholarship in African decentralisation studies that warns against equating consultation with empowerment (Smoke, 2022; OECD, 2023). In practice, participation in Nyimba Central Ward largely operates at the level of information-sharing and agenda-setting, rather than genuine decision-making authority.

Community participation also extended to project monitoring. Participants reported that WDC members and local residents jointly monitored project implementation by visiting construction sites, assessing progress, and reporting implementation challenges. This participatory oversight was widely perceived as improving accountability, transparency, and local ownership of development projects. However, respondents noted that effective monitoring was constrained by inadequate transport, insufficient operational funding, and limited technical expertise among some WDC members, thereby reducing the committees' oversight capacity.

The study further found that WDCs have promoted more inclusive participation by encouraging the involvement of women, youth, traditional leaders, persons with disabilities, and community-based organisations. Nevertheless, participation remained uneven across social groups. Women frequently cited domestic responsibilities as limiting attendance at public meetings, while youth participation was generally low unless discussions directly related to employment or empowerment programmes. These findings indicate that formal opportunities for participation do not necessarily translate into equitable engagement, highlighting persistent socio-economic barriers to inclusive governance. These variations in participation are critical. Arnstein’s (1969) ladder of participation remains relevant in explaining the Zambian case, where participation often remains in the “consultation” or “placation” rungs rather than reaching citizen control. Thus, while decentralisation has expanded participatory spaces, it has not fully redistributed decision-making power.

Institutional capacity and participatory governance

Institutional capacity emerged as the most significant challenge affecting participatory governance. Across participant categories, respondents identified inadequate training in project planning, procurement, financial management, monitoring, and evaluation as limiting the effectiveness of WDCs. Resource constraints, including the absence of transport, office facilities, and communication equipment, further reduced the frequency of community consultations and project monitoring. Respondents also perceived those political interests occasionally influenced project prioritisation after community consultations, weakening public confidence in participatory processes.

This finding aligns with Smoke (2022), who argues that decentralised governance systems frequently fail not because of weak participation, but because of weak implementation capacity. Similarly, World Bank (2021) evidence suggests that community-driven development programmes only achieve accountability gains when supported by structured monitoring systems and institutional capacity-building.

In Nyimba Central Ward, accountability mechanisms remain fragmented. While community members can report concerns, there is limited structured feedback from local authorities regarding project approval decisions or implementation outcomes. This weakens downward accountability and reduces trust in the participatory system.

Political Influence, Transparency, and Democratic Legitimacy

Overall, the findings demonstrate that decentralisation has strengthened community participation through institutionalised consultation, participatory planning, and community monitoring. However, meaningful participatory governance remains constrained by institutional capacity deficits, resource limitations, inconsistent inclusion, and perceived political interference. These findings suggest that the effectiveness of participatory governance depends not only on the existence of participatory structures but also on the institutional and political conditions that enable communities to exercise genuine influence over local development decisions.

The implication is significant: perceived political influence undermines procedural legitimacy, even where actual participation exists. Democratic legitimacy in participatory governance systems depends not only on inclusion but also on transparency in how decisions are made and justified (Fox, 2015). Where communities cannot clearly understand why certain projects are selected over others, trust in decentralised institutions declines. Thus, the challenge in Nyimba Central Ward is not the absence of participation, but the opacity of decision translation processes between community prioritisation and final approval.

This perception is consistent with broader decentralisation literature that identifies elite capture and political interference as persistent risks in local governance systems (Bardhan & Mookherjee, 2006; Ribot, 2002). In the Zambian context, recent studies have similarly noted that CDF implementation is vulnerable to political steering, particularly in contexts where oversight mechanisms are weak (Chikonde & Chituta, 2020; Mulenga, 2023).

Inclusive Participation and Social Equity

The study found that participatory structures formally include women, youth, traditional leaders, and civil society groups. However, substantive participation remains uneven due to socio-economic constraints, cultural expectations, and opportunity costs of participation. Women's participation is constrained by unpaid care responsibilities, while youth engagement is sporadic and largely instrumental, emerging mainly when employment-related issues are discussed. These findings reflect Cornwall's (2008) argument that inclusion does not automatically translate into empowerment, particularly were structural inequalities shape access to participation.

From a governance equity perspective, this suggests that decentralisation in Nyimba Central Ward has achieved descriptive inclusion but not transformative inclusion. Without targeted strategies such as flexible meeting schedules, youth-focused governance platforms, and gender-responsive facilitation, participatory governance risks reinforcing existing inequalities rather than reducing them.

Policy Implications for Zambia's Decentralisation and CDF Reforms

1. **Mandatory WDC Training Programme** – Develop and roll out a structured, ongoing certification programme for all WDC members covering project management, budgeting, procurement, and monitoring and evaluation, with refresher courses delivered annually to ensure sustained competency.
2. **Formalised Feedback and Appeals System** – Institutionalise a transparent, documented feedback mechanism that requires district authorities to issue written justifications for all project approvals and rejections, with a clear appeal process for communities whose priorities are deprioritised.
3. **Dedicated Logistics Budget for Monitoring** – Allocate specific funds within the CDF for community monitoring activities, including transport allowances for WDC members, procurement of standardised monitoring checklists and templates, and simplified reporting formats that are accessible to non-specialists.
4. **Targeted Inclusion Quotas and Platforms** – Introduce mandatory participation quotas for youth and women in all CDF consultation processes, complemented by alternative engagement channels such as mobile-based polling, community WhatsApp groups, and evening or weekend meeting schedules to accommodate diverse availability.

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5. **Civic Education Roll-Out** – Fund and implement a national civic education campaign using local radio, community theatre, and visual aids focused specifically on explaining CDF processes, citizens' rights, and how to effectively influence project prioritisation.
6. **Independent Grievance Mechanism** – Create an independent, non-political ombuds function at the provincial level to receive and investigate complaints related to CDF project selection, political interference, or WDC misconduct, with findings published quarterly.

CONCLUSION

This study finds that while the Ward Development Committee has successfully advanced participatory governance in Zambia's CDF projects through community mobilisation, consultations, and monitoring, persistent challenges including limited WDC capacity, inadequate resources, uneven civic participation, low public awareness, and political bias continue to constrain meaningful engagement and public trust. The research concludes that effective participatory governance depends not just on decentralised structures, but on institutional capacity, resources, transparency, accountability, and political neutrality; sustained improvement thus requires ongoing investment in grassroots institutions. Theoretically, the study extends Participatory Governance Theory by showing that genuine participation emerges from the interplay of inclusive arrangements, organisational strength, transparency, and procedural integrity, meaning decentralisation must be understood as strengthening entire governance systems, not merely transferring funds and authority.

Ethical Approval Statement

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the appropriate institutional ethics review committee before the commencement of fieldwork. Permission to conduct the research was also obtained from the relevant local authorities in Nyimba District. Participation was voluntary, and all participants provided informed consent before data collection. The study adhered to internationally accepted ethical principles relating to informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, beneficence, and respect for participants throughout the research process.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there are no financial, professional, or personal conflicts of interest that could have influenced the conduct, interpretation, or reporting of this research.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. The data are not publicly available because they contain information that could compromise the privacy and confidentiality of research participants.

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