

Assessing the Level of Community Participation in Constituency Development Fund (CDF) in Zambia: Empirical Evidence from Constituency-Level Implementation.

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.10100579>

Received: 02 February 2026; Accepted: 07 February 2026; Published: 18 February 2026

ABSTRACT

Community participation is a central pillar of Zambia's decentralisation agenda and is formally embedded within the design and implementation of the Constituency Development Fund (CDF). This paper examines the nature, extent, and effectiveness of community participation in the implementation of CDF projects in selected constituencies. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study analysed quantitative data from 70 respondents alongside qualitative evidence from interviews with Ward Development Committee members, Councillors, Experts who manage CDF, and project beneficiaries. Descriptive statistics, Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), and Exploratory Factor Analysis were employed to examine participation patterns, while qualitative data were analysed thematically. Findings indicate that community participation is strongest during project identification, with declining involvement during implementation and monitoring. While descriptive results indicate moderate satisfaction with engagement (mean = 3.54; SD = 0.96), inferential analysis shows that community participation does not have a statistically significant effect on successful CDF implementation ($F = 0.594$; $p = 0.001$). Qualitative findings attribute this gap to limited civic awareness, procedural participation, political interference, and weak technical capacity at the community level. The paper concludes that while community participation is institutionally recognised, it remains largely consultative and insufficient to influence implementation outcomes. Based on these findings, the study recommends institutionalising community participation across all stages of the CDF project cycle through strengthened civic education, capacity building for local actors, and enforceable accountability mechanisms to enable communities to exercise meaningful influence over implementation and monitoring processes.

Keywords: Community participation; Constituency Development Fund; Decentralisation; Local Development; Zambia

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

Community participation is central to decentralised governance, improving the responsiveness, accountability, and sustainability of development interventions (Ribot, 2002; Smoke, 2015). In Sub-Saharan Africa, fiscal decentralisation has sought to bring services closer to citizens and strengthen participatory governance (Ahmed et al., 2025). In Zambia, the Constituency Development Fund (CDF) is a key mechanism for promoting local participation, with allocations rising from K1.6 million to K40 million per constituency between 2021 and 2026 to support grassroots development and citizen engagement (Republic of Zambia, 2025).

While CDF policies emphasise stakeholder engagement, participatory planning, and transparency (CDF Communication Strategy, 2024), evidence shows that meaningful participation remains limited. Civil society

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monitoring highlights progress in awareness but restricted influence during implementation and oversight (Mutale, 2025). Broader African studies confirm that decentralisation often yields consultative rather than substantive participation, with engagement stronger in planning than in implementation (Onyalo, 2024).

In Zambia, challenges such as political interference, limited technical capacity, and weak accountability continue to constrain the impact of community participation on development outcomes (Chinunga & Chibomba, 2025; Muyaloka & Kachamba, 2024). This study examines how participation occurs across CDF project stages and whether it correlates with successful project outcomes.

Theoretical Orientation and Literature Review

This study is anchored in participatory development theory, which conceptualises participation as a process through which local people exercise agency over decisions that affect their lives. From this perspective, participation should extend beyond consultation to include meaningful influence over planning, implementation, and accountability mechanisms. Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation provides a useful framework for distinguishing between tokenistic involvement and genuine citizen power, a distinction that is particularly relevant to the operation of CDF participatory structures. Participatory development theory emphasises that empowerment, ownership, and active engagement are central to sustainable development outcomes (Chambers, 1997).

The analysis is further informed by decentralisation and fiscal devolution theory, which argues that devolving authority and resources to lower levels of governance enhances efficiency and responsiveness when local actors are empowered to influence spending decisions (Oates, 1972; Ribot, 2002). However, decentralisation does not automatically translate into meaningful participation or accountability. Without strong local institutions, civic awareness, and technical capacity, decentralised funds may reinforce existing power inequalities and be susceptible to elite capture and political interference (Smoke, 2015).

Community participation is central to the planning and execution of Constituency Development Fund (CDF) projects, as active involvement of local residents ensures that initiatives address real community needs and enhances project sustainability. Globally, studies have highlighted the importance of community engagement in CDF and similar decentralised development projects in countries such as Kenya, Uganda, India, and Pakistan. Kamau (2015) found that effective local participation improves project relevance and fosters a sense of ownership, increasing commitment to successful outcomes. Similarly, Baskin (2016) notes that empowering communities through CDF initiatives can generate long-term social and economic benefits. Nevertheless, challenges such as limited resources, inadequate outreach, and insufficient training for both government staff and community members often hinder meaningful participation (Kilewo, 2015).

In the African context, community participation is particularly critical due to socio-political and economic diversity. Countries including Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda have implemented CDF mechanisms to decentralise development funds and empower communities. Matipa (2019) observes that participation enhances transparency, accountability, and the inclusion of marginalised groups, ensuring that projects reflect local priorities, especially in areas with limited access to government services. Projects that actively engage communities are better positioned to address essential needs in health, education, and infrastructure.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, however, limited resources and institutional capacity constrain participation. Shetunyenga (2023) notes that low awareness of civic rights and responsibilities restricts effective engagement, while Nikkhah (2016) highlights socio-political and economic barriers that marginalise certain groups. Hapompwe (2020) further underscores that insufficient outreach and communication strategies reduce broad based community involvement in CDF planning and execution. Political interference, corruption, and lack of trust between communities and officials also undermine participation (Howard-Grabman, 2017). Effective communication and problem-solving skills are therefore essential for inclusive and transparent decision-making.

In conclusion, while community participation is widely endorsed as vital for CDF project success, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, its effectiveness is limited by challenges including low awareness, resource constraints, and political interference. These findings indicate the need for tailored strategies to strengthen engagement,

build trust, and enhance project outcomes. In Zambia, further empirical studies are required to explore the specific dynamics and barriers of community participation within CDF projects.

The Problem and Questions Guiding the Research Paper

In several parts of Zambia, including Some parts of Zambia Constituency, the implementation of Constituency Development Fund (CDF) projects faces persistent challenges despite increased government allocations. Many projects remain incomplete, experience significant delays, or are executed with poor quality, limiting their intended development impact (Auditor General's Report, 2021).

A critical factor contributing to these challenges is the limited and uneven community participation in CDF planning, implementation, and oversight. While communities are often consulted during project identification, their influence over decision-making and monitoring is minimal, reducing accountability and the responsiveness of projects to local needs (Simutenda, 2019; Phiri & Chama, 2020; Caritas Zambia, 2017). Structural and institutional issues, such as political interference, weak local governance capacity, and poor dissemination of project information, further constrain meaningful engagement, particularly in rural and peri-urban constituencies.

Although decentralisation policies and CDF frameworks emphasise community participation as essential for project success, empirical evidence at the constituency level remains limited. Most studies provide broad national or provincial insights without systematically evaluating how community engagement affects project outcomes. This paper therefore addresses this gap by examining the extent and effectiveness of community participation in CDF implementation in Some parts of Zambia, with implications for similar constituencies across Zambia. The research paper attempts to unpack extent of community participation in the planning and implementation of CDF projects in some parts of Zambia.

METHODOLOGY

A mixed-methods research design, grounded in a constituency-level case study, was adopted. Quantitative data were collected via structured questionnaires from 70 respondents across urban, peri-urban, and rural wards. Surveys measured perceptions of community participation across project identification, implementation, and monitoring using Likert-scale items.

Qualitative data were collected through key informant interviews and focus groups with Ward Development Committee members, community leaders, and CDF beneficiaries. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, ANOVA, and Exploratory Factor Analysis to identify participation constraints. Qualitative data were analysed thematically to capture contextual explanations and lived experiences.

RESULTS

The results show that community participation in the implementation of Constituency Development Fund (CDF) projects in Some parts of Zambia constituency exists but is uneven and largely concentrated at the project identification stage. Quantitative findings indicate moderate overall satisfaction with community engagement, while inferential analysis demonstrates that such engagement does not significantly influence successful project implementation. Qualitative evidence explains this disconnect by revealing that participation is primarily consultative and diminishes during implementation and monitoring.

Quantitative Results on Community Engagement

Descriptive statistics indicate that perceptions of community engagement vary among respondents. As shown in Table 1, responses ranged from strong disagreement to strong agreement, with a mean score of 3.54, suggesting that respondents generally tend to agree that community engagement in CDF projects is satisfactory. However, the standard deviation of 0.96 reflects notable variation in perceptions, indicating that experiences of participation are not uniform across the community.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Community Engagement

Community Engagement Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation
Participation in project identification meetings	3.92	0.88

Ability to influence project prioritisation	3.71	0.91
Access to information on CDF projects	3.58	0.97
Participation during project implementation	3.21	1.02
Community involvement in project monitoring	3.05	1.08
Feedback mechanisms to council/WDCs	3.35	0.95
Overall community engagement	3.54	0.96

To determine whether community engagement predicts successful CDF implementation, an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted. The results, presented in Table 2, show that community engagement does not have a statistically significant effect on implementation outcomes ($F = 0.594$, $p = 0.444$). The small regression sum of squares relative to the residual sum of squares indicates that most of the variation in project success is explained by factors other than community engagement.

Table 2: ANOVA Results for Community Engagement and Successful CDF Implementation

Engagement Dimension	F-value	Sig. (p-value)
Project identification participation	1.214	0.274
Access to project information	0.987	0.396
Participation during implementation	0.642	0.531
Community monitoring and oversight	0.594	0.444

The quantitative results show that community engagement in the implementation of CDF projects was generally rated at a moderate level across all measured variables. Mean scores indicated that community involvement existed in project identification, consultation, and monitoring, but was not consistently strong. The one-way ANOVA results revealed no statistically significant differences in levels of community engagement across demographic or institutional groups, suggesting that engagement practices were applied uniformly. This implies that while engagement mechanisms are present, they may lack depth and effectiveness to create measurable variation in participation outcomes.

Qualitative Results on Community Participation

Qualitative findings provide important context for the quantitative results. As summarized in Table 3, respondents reported that community participation mainly occurs through consultations aimed at identifying and prioritizing projects. Community members are engaged at zone and ward levels to express development needs, and projects are ranked according to perceived community priorities

Table 3: Summary of Qualitative Findings on Community Participation

Emerging Theme	Key Words	Verbatim Extracts
Consultative participation	Consultation, meetings, identification	“We are called to meetings to suggest projects, but after that we do not hear much.”
Declining engagement after approval	Implementation, contractors, exclusion	“Once the project is approved, contractors take over and the community is sidelined.”
Limited monitoring capacity	Monitoring, skills, authority	“We do not have the technical skills or authority to monitor works properly.”
Information asymmetry	Communication, transparency	“Information about budgets and progress is not shared openly with everyone.”

Institutional mediation	WDCs, control	council	“Everything goes through the Ward Development Committee and the council; ordinary people have little say.”
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Qualitative findings revealed that community engagement was largely consultative rather than participatory. Emerging themes indicated limited decision-making power for community members, irregular feedback mechanisms, and weak follow-up after consultations. Respondents frequently emphasized that engagement often occurred after key decisions had already been made. These perceptions help explain the quantitative results by showing that uniform engagement processes exist, but they are largely procedural and do not translate into meaningful involvement.

When combined, the quantitative and qualitative findings demonstrate convergence between numerical trends and lived experiences. While community engagement structures are in place and applied consistently, their effectiveness is constrained by limited inclusiveness and influence. This alignment confirms that improving the quality and depth of engagement rather than its mere presence is essential for enhancing CDF project outcomes.

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that community engagement in the selection of Constituency Development Fund (CDF) projects in some parts of Zambia is generally perceived as adequate, with about 70 percent of respondents acknowledging community involvement at this stage. This suggests that formal participatory structures, such as community meetings and ward development committees, are functioning at the project identification level. Such engagement is consistent with stakeholder theory, which emphasises inclusive decision-making as essential for enhancing legitimacy, ownership, and acceptance of development interventions (Freeman, 1984; Mansuri & Rao, 2013). Similar observations have been reported in African decentralisation contexts, where consultation during planning stages is often the most visible form of participation (Onyalo, 2024; Afrobarometer, 2025).

However, the uncertainty expressed by a proportion of respondents highlights persistent gaps in awareness and information dissemination. This finding supports existing literature that identifies access to information and communication as critical prerequisites for meaningful participation (Ribot, 2002; Smoke, 2015). In Zambia, civil society assessments have similarly noted that while consultation forums exist, information asymmetries limit broad-based and informed community engagement in CDF processes (Caritas Zambia, 2017; Mutale, 2025).

Despite relatively positive perceptions at the descriptive level, inferential analysis reveals that community engagement does not significantly predict successful CDF implementation. The non-significant ANOVA results and weak correlation coefficients suggest that participation, as currently practised, has limited influence on implementation outcomes. This finding contrasts with normative participatory development literature, which links community involvement to improved project relevance and sustainability (Baskin, 2016; Mansuri & Rao, 2013). However, it aligns with more critical empirical studies showing that participation often fails to influence outcomes when it is not accompanied by decision-making authority or accountability mechanisms (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Nikkhah & Redzuan, 2016).

The observed disconnect between perceived participation and implementation outcomes suggests that community engagement in Some parts of Zambia is largely consultative rather than empowering. Participation appears concentrated at the project selection stage, with minimal community influence during implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. This pattern reflects broader critiques of decentralised development initiatives in Africa, where invited participation exists without substantive power transfer to communities (Howard-Grabman, 2017; Matipa, 2019). Similar findings have been documented in CDF-related studies in Zambia, which report limited community oversight and weak accountability once projects move into execution phases (Simutenda, 2019; Phiri & Chama, 2020).

Overall, the findings underscore the need to move beyond procedural participation toward deeper and more inclusive engagement across the entire CDF project cycle. Strengthening civic awareness, improving

information flows, addressing institutional and political constraints, and embedding community-based accountability mechanisms are critical if participation is to translate into tangible improvements in CDF implementation outcomes. This conclusion is consistent with recent decentralisation literature, which argues that participation only becomes developmentally effective when supported by capacity, transparency, and responsive local governance systems (Ahmed et al., 2025; Onyalo, 2024).

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

CONCLUSION

The objective of examining the influence of community engagement on CDF project implementation was achieved. The findings revealed no statistically significant relationship between community engagement and project implementation outcomes (ANOVA $F = 0.594$, $p = 0.444$). This indicates that despite widespread advocacy for participatory development, the role of the community in this context does not directly translate into project success. This could be due to the quality of participation being minimal, symbolic or poorly integrated into the decision making and monitoring processes. Hence, while community engagement remains a valuable principle, its current practice in Some parts of Zambia requires re-evaluation and reform to become more impactful.

Implications of the Study

- The findings imply that community engagement mechanisms in CDF projects are largely procedural and require strengthening to enable meaningful participation.
- Policymakers and local authorities should shift from consultation-based approaches to inclusive decision making models.
- Strengthening feedback, transparency, and monitoring frameworks can improve accountability and project outcomes.
- Aligning community engagement practices with local priorities can enhance sustainability and public trust.

Recommendations

Based on the study findings, which demonstrate a statistically significant relationship between community participation and effective CDF project implementation, it is recommended that:

- Local Authorities institutionalise structured community engagement mechanisms across all stages of the CDF project cycle.
- Community participation should extend beyond project identification to include implementation monitoring and post-completion evaluation.
- Formalising community representation through ward development committees and project monitoring teams would enhance accountability, reduce project abandonment, and improve alignment between projects and local needs.

Limitations of the Study

This study was limited to only some parts of Zambia, which restricts the generalisability of Zambia with different socio-economic and administrative contexts. The use of self-reported data introduced the possibility of response bias, as participants may have overstated their level of participation or project effectiveness. The cross-sectional nature of the study also limited the assessment of long-term project outcomes and sustainability. Additionally, the study focused on a limited set of variables, excluding other factors such as contractor performance and broader political influences that may affect CDF implementation. Finally, some constraints in accessing complete official records may have affected the depth of project-level verification.

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