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Title: Fostering Civic Engagement: Stakeholder Participation in Rural Projects in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

For more than two decades, development practitioners have expressed a growing concern over the lack of understanding of participation in rural community projects. While the concept of participation is clouded with practitioners' anecdotes suggesting that for effectiveness, participation needs to be socially constructed, research substantiating that assertion has been minimal and most often discussed without the voices of those whom development seeks to benefit. The intent of this study, therefore, is to take the discussion to the rural communities and present an argument that substantiates the position that stakeholder participation in rural project interventions is socially constructed, based on historical antecedents, and communities' contextual characteristics. These factors underlie the extent to which public participation in rural communities is more or less effective to promote development.

I focus the study on seven selected poverty hotspot villages located within the Bonsaaso Millennium Village Project cluster in Ghana. Using an in-depth qualitative inquiry, I interviewed 118 people who were chiefs, local community individuals, village committee

leaders, and officials at the local district assembly and project staff. The study includes four main tasks. The first task was to gather the existing perceptions on communities' historical experiences in participatory development. The second task was to find out how participation was occurring in the selected villages, and thirdly, to ascertain how the selected communities perceived and interpreted participation. Lastly, I examined community perceptions on motivation for participation.

The main findings of this study are that the challenges and opportunities to local participation in community projects are connected to history, social development priorities and contextual characteristics of project beneficiaries. In conclusion, I recommend the rethinking of participatory approaches to rural development based on a holistic institution-based project model. In this approach, communities' intricate social environments have to be widely studied in-situ to inform project participatory processes before project commencement.