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African Rural University Students are Improving Farming Communities' Livelihoods during Internship Using Community Action Planning in the Albertine Region, Uganda

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Abstract Community Action Planning (CAP) develops capacity of grass-root communities to create the change they desire. African Rural University (ARU) students are deployed in villages for internship program to facilitate change and acquire hands-on experience in conducting CAP with rural farming communities. Using the Epicenter Strategy (ES), ARU internship students (interns) were deployed in 11 Sub Counties in Kagadi, Kibaale and Kakumiro districts for two academic semesters to help villages plan and implement projects using CAP. They used visionary planning approach to generate visions and required actions from the communities. The methods used in CAP included; brainstorming, group discussions, and plenary discussions. The students were mentored in the field by Epicenter Managers (EMs) and supervised on a bi weekly basis by a faculty supervisor and a Traditional Wisdom Specialist (TWS). They (the students) prepared an internship report of all projects initiated and presented the achieved results to the communities, local government and faculty staff before submitting the reports to ARU for assessment. The authors used one report of the internship conducted at Birembo Sub County and prepared this paper. The key results highlighted in this work include; communities initiated own projects in agriculture, health, education, transport and environmental conservation at individual, household, group, community or Sub County levels. The ARU intern student contributed to the effectiveness and efficiency of service delivery at Sub County during the internship. The intern learned and conducted CAP thus enhanced her capacity to cause a democratic bottom up planning process for effective rural transformation. The intern enabled people to learn and acquire skills in the visionary approach to improve their livelihoods. There is need for more CAP sessions to follow-up, monitor the initiated projects or even start new ones.

Keywords: epicenter strategy, community action planning, structural tension chart, participatory action research

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1. Introduction

Development interventions need to start from the grass-root levels to ensure sustainability [1]. Community Action Planning (CAP) develops capacity of grass-root communities to create the change they desire. CAP ensures that all members are involved and participate at all stages in the development process [2]. CAP specifies what will be done, who will do it and by when and for which purpose. The people are a primary resource in this process other than being objects of change. The Epicenter Strategy (ES) is one tool that employs CAP [1].

The ES was pioneered by Uganda Rural Development and Training program (URDT) and it operates at individual, household, community and Sub County levels

to cause systems change in rural communities. The villages and Sub Counties are the epicenters of change where people learn collectively and generate energy for a focused action. The epicenters are run by Epicenter managers (EM) who are rural transformation specialists trained by African Rural University (ARU) under the Bachelor of Rural Development program (BRD) and are employed by URDT at sub counties [3].

The BRD is a four-year program that involves three years of class work and one year of internship. The internship lasts for two academic semesters. During the internship, students are deployed alongside existing EMs at Sub Counties to facilitate change and acquire hands-on experience in conducting CAP with rural communities while documenting the achievements. The students understand the ES and this prepares them to become EMs after graduation. The Interns also contribute to the

effectiveness and efficiency of systems and structures for service delivery at the Sub Counties [4].

The achievements realized and documented by the students are often presented in an internship report after validation at Faculty and Sub County levels. However, it is not readily accessible to the wider community. This paper intends to build on the body of knowledge in CAP by meaningfully presenting achievements of a student deployed in Birembo Sub County, Uganda for internship in the 2019/2020 academic year.

The internship was guided by the following objectives; ARU interns have the capacity to contribute to the efficiency and effectiveness of systems and structures in service delivery at Sub County; ARU interns as potential EMs demonstrate an understanding of the Epicenter Strategy (ES) in the realization of Uganda Vision 2040; ARU interns have the capacity to conduct CAP as a democratic bottom up process to cause rural transformation.

2. Methodology

The study was conducted at ARU. ARU was started by URDT. The University (ARU) was founded to institutionalize and deepen the home-grown methodology for human and rural development, based on the visionary approach, the principles of systems thinking and sustainable development [5]. ARU puts its emphasis on practical learning of local interventions mainly through community engagements by students and their mentors [4]. Community engagements are realized through practicum and internship where students learn and stay in rural communities to catalyze rural transformation.

Eleven final year students of the 2019/2020 academic year were deployed for internship in eleven Sub Counties in Kagadi, Kibaale and Kakumiro districts where URDT has recruited EMs. The students stayed in the communities for two academic semesters and developed cohesion with the rural people. They improved their livelihoods through CAP in the areas of education, agriculture, environment, income generation, sanitation and health. During CAP, communities generated their aspirations and the interns and EMs helped them realize them through community-based interventions. The communities used the visionary planning approach [6] to ensure the realization of their aspirations (visions). The visionary approach employs the structural tension chart framework as a planning tool which ARU promotes [2].

The CAP sessions at village levels were facilitated by the ARU intern, EM, Traditional Wisdom Specialist (TWS) and the faculty supervisor. The sessions were facilitated using the URDT frame of technologies for creating [7], to give an insight about the principle of creating as a development approach.

During the CAP sessions, different methods such as brainstorming, group discussion and plenary presentation were used. The community members were asked to brainstorm some of their aspirations for the villages. The members were later divided into groups of twelve people. Each group was tasked to write down their aspirations for a period of one year and after a thorough discussion, group leaders from each group were asked to present their aspirations to the plenary. They mentioned aspects of

development such as health, education, electricity, local markets, sanitation and hygiene amongst others. After the presentations by different groups, the leaders from these groups were tasked to translate their aspirations from word into drawings which were presented to the entire village for amendments. They further assessed their Current Realities, and developed action plans based on priorities, who will do what, when and identified the needed resources for implementation of the plans. They then started implementing the action plans.

This paper focused on the work of a student in three villages of Birembo Sub County in Kakumiro district. This only student was selected because she was supervised by the lead author of this paper. Birembo Sub County has 16 villages but the student focused on three villages (Kijaguzo, Kiryateete and Kirasa) where the existing EM (the mentor) was already working. Birembo Sub County has 6,119 households. There is currently one health center III, one secondary school, and four primary schools for the 27,266 people in the Sub County. It is prone to environmental destruction since it is connected to R. Nkusi, Nyakatongo forest reserve and rocky areas [8].

Several development partners, Emesco Development Foundation, Foundation of Netherlands Volunteers, Infectious Diseases Institute, and Marie Stopes Uganda have been engaged in development work in this Sub County. These have not been using the visionary approach to development [2]. In 2019 URDT sent an EM to operationalize the visionary approach using CAP and subsequently an internship student, eight months later. The internship student implemented CAP in three villages (Figure 1) where people generated and implemented several community development projects.



Figure 1. The ARU intern conducting CAP session in Kijaguso village

The student documented all the activities carried out and the achievements realized with the support of faculty supervisor and EM. She prepared a report that was presented to the representatives of the Sub County key stakeholders for validation. The report was revised following the comments from the stakeholders and submitted to the ARU faculty for assessment. The author reviewed the final report and prepared this paper using document review method.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Sub County Level Results

The following are the results realized at Sub County level in relation to objective one. Objective one stated that "ARU intern has the capacity to contribute to the efficiency and effectiveness of systems and structures in service delivery at the Sub County"

The intern enhanced documentation of Sub County meeting proceedings. The ARU intern participated in several meetings at the Sub County. During one of the technical planning meeting, the intern emphasized the need for report writing and submission to the Senior Assistant Secretary by different departments (Figure 2). This is because reporting ensures proper documentation of the different planning and implementation phases of the different projects and activities of the SubCounty. According to the intern, these reports help not only the technical staff but also other development partners and stakeholders to have a baseline data. According to other authors the information presented in reports is not only for the Sub County but may also help other stakeholders in decision making [9]. Reports help to disclosure key issues that promote sustainability practices in institutions [3].

As a result of actively participating and giving relevant submission by the ARU intern, her ideas were bought by the technical staff and enhanced the effectiveness of the documentation and reporting system at the Sub County. Due to the participation in the meetings, her knowledge and experience on Local Government systems was also enhanced. This was achieved when the intern attended council meetings. The student learnt the conduct and different roles of council members and participants. She learnt that the local government system is open and participative as reported by Kiyaga-Nsubuga & Olum [10].



Figure 2. ARU intern presenting a report during technical planning committee meeting

The participation of the ARU intern in meetings also enhanced partnership and collaboration with other development partners in the district. This was achieved during three planning meetings with World Vision International (WVI) and Kakumiro District Natural resource department. The WVI meetings' objectives were to help in the planning and setting project priorities to be implemented in the next two years by community leaders. The intern presented the different aspirations from the various villages that helped to inform the discussion during the meetings (Figure 3). From these aspirations, community members prioritized health, education, livelihood, and child protection. These aspirations are community-owned and will thus create sustainability for the planned interventions as also envisaged by United Nations Development Program [4].



Figure 3. ARU intern presenting village priorities during stake holders planning meeting

ARU intern also participated in a workshop organized by Kakumiro district natural resource department. This had the objectives of forming a watershed management committee for Birembo Sub County, to build the capacity of water management committees, to create synergy between district local government and lower local government in water management and to raise awareness on the importance of fragile ecosystems. As a result of active participation by the intern in these different planning meetings, ARU's contribution towards transformation of Birembo Sub County and Kakumiro was highly appreciated. These continuous engagements by the intern with other stakeholders in meetings created and strengthened understanding of institutional relationships. This enhanced the partnering behavior where people share time and knowledge as well as offer services [11].

The ARU intern supported the development of Sub County development plans. From her report, it was indicated that the intern collected and presented data for village priorities which formed the basis for planning of financial year 2019/2020 and development of the five-year development plan for Birembo Sub County (Figure 4. below). The intern with the guidance from the EM collected data from five villages of Mujungu, Kijaguzo, Kirasa, Birembo and Kiryateete in Kyakarongo parish.



Figure 4. ARU intern collecting data for village priorities in Kiryateete village

The intern prioritized government projects in the community. This was achieved through sensitization activities. With the guidance from the EM and the SubCounty chief, the intern sensitized four groups within Kyakarongo parish. She shared information about the ongoing Agricultural Cluster Development Project (ACDP) by Ministry of Agriculture Animal Industry and Fisheries, Uganda with

the major aim of increasing production and income among households. ACDP ensures a shift by community members from producing for only home consumption to commercial farming [12]. The project contributes to increase in agriculture productivity thus contributing to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 2 "End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture" [13].

The intern enhanced peace and reconciliation in the community. Under the guidance of the EM and the parish chiefs she attended the hearing of domestic related cases brought to the Sub County. Most of these cases aroused during the COVID-19 lockdown. Out of the six cases, four were resolved at the Sub County while two were referred to Igayaza police station for further hearing. While attending to these cases, the intern emphasized the importance of harmonious and peaceful co-existence among the family members. This led to rebuilding of peace to the victims and perpetrators of domestic violence. It also contributed to the achievement of African Agenda 2063, aspiration #3 - "A peaceful and secure Africa" [14] and SDG 16 "Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels" [13].

3.2. Results at Group Level

Objective two of the internship was; ARU intern as potential EM demonstrate an understanding of the ES in the realization of Uganda Vision 2040.

The intern facilitated groups to meditate and document their aspirations through trainings in the principles of creating. As a result of the training, different groups were able to come up with their visions, clearly assess their current reality, and devise doable action steps, set due dates and assign the accountable. One group envisioned; "A confortable accommodation for all the elderly in the village".

There was a senior woman without a confortable accommodation in the village (Figure 5). Birembo Charity and Empowerment group worked towards achievement of her vision besides the prevailing limitation of the COVID-19 regulations. The group mobilized resources to construct a new house for a widow (Figure 5, Figure 6). The intern observed the strength of team work in a group and appreciated its necessity in the contemporary business [15]. This result greatly contributed to the realization of African Agenda 2063 aspiration 5 "An Africa whose development is people-driven, relying on the potential of African people, especially its women and youth, and caring for children" [14].



Figure 5. The state of the house before intervention



Figure 6. The completed house as earlier envisioned

3.3. Results at Household Level

The intern supported households to meditate and document their visions. Five households came up with visions such as "role model household with good hygiene and sanitation." They then clearly assessed their current realities as having poor sanitation facilities at their different households. They were able to come up with different action steps which included; mobilization of all family members to participate in constructing sanitation facilities, setting compounding and dumping sites, constructing drying racks, plastering latrines and installation of hand washing facilities - the tip taps. As a result of the visioning; clear assessment of the current realities and coming up with the doable action steps, three homes in Kirasa village became role model homes in health and sanitation. According to the internship report, these homes put up sanitation and hygiene facilities such as; pit latrines with covers, bath shelters, rubbish pits and hand washing tip-tap facilities. They also established kitchen with modern energy saving stoves (Figure 8), two step-drying racks (Figure 9) amongst others. These families are also reported to have started taking boiled water. This helped to contribute towards the availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all and access to affordable, reliable and sustainable energy for all as envisaged in Sustainable Development Goals 6 and 7 [13].



Figure 7. Cooking stones before the intervention



Figure 8. Energy saving stove after the intern's intervention



Figure 9. A drying rack in use after intervention. There were no drying racks before the intervention

3.4. Results at Community Level

The intern helped communities envision the future they aspired. This was achieved through the nine CAP sessions conducted among 131 community members, 66 male and 65 females from Kijaguzo, Kirasa and Kiryateete villages.

The aspirations for Kirasa village included; having good village hygiene and sanitation (pit latrine with tip-tap, kitchen, energy saving stove, two-step drying rack, bathing shelter, clean home roads, purified drinking water), piped water, connection to national electricity grid, one feeder road, kitchen gardens for nutrition, high household income through agriculture, a medical clinic, improved education facilities.

Meanwhile, during the CAP session in Kiryateete village, members were able to come up with the following as their vision "a wealthy, healthy and peaceful community characterized by; enough functional water sources (borehole and shallow well), electricity, sanitation facilities (pit latrines, tip taps, drying racks and kitchens), income generating activities, modern agricultural farming methods, three schools (primary and secondary), clean and safe roads and health outreaches.

In Kiryateete village, 25 girls with support from ARU intern and other two teachers from the local schools identified their aspirations in relation to girl child education. After clearly coming up with what they aspire to achieve, they also assessed their current reality as; poor attitude of parents towards girl child education leading to early marriages amongst girls.

The action steps they took in relation to their aspirations included sensitizing parents on the importance of girl child education which was achieved through regular meetings, girl-child education campaign through dialogues and Music Dance and Drama (MDD) and setting up village by-laws regulating girl-child education in the area. An MDD club was formed to spearhead all the sensitization activities.

They (the girls) were facilitated to express their aspiration in enjoying their rights to education as young women and economic empowerment through entrepreneurship training. This was done to contribute to the realization of gender equality and empowerment of women and girls as enshrined in the sustainable development goal # 5 [13].

Results achieved under objective three (ARU intern has the capacity to conduct Community Action Planning as a democratic bottom up process to cause rural transformation) are highlighted below.

The intern facilitated the different CAP sessions. These were done to enable the community members to own up

the different processes of development hence sustainability of the different projects initiated during those sessions. Effective stakeholder involvement in initiating and implementing projects has been reported to significantly contribute to their success [16]. As a result of the above CAP sessions, below are some of the results and projects left in Birembo by the intern in the areas of education, health, environment, transport, and food production.

The intern supported the community members to initiate three community driven development projects as shown in the Table 1 below.

Table 1. Showing Participants for three Community Driven developments

Projects	Total Participants	Male	Female
Pre-primary school	76	74	2
Clean and safe water	16	6	10
Improved road infrastructure	70	56	14

3.4.1. Promoting pre-primary Education

To improve the education for pre-primary children, three classroom blocks for Kirasa Nursery section was constructed at Kirasa Primary school by community members (Figure 10). The construction came as one of the action steps in the realization of "educated community" which was one of the community's aspirations (vision) during a CAP session. During the construction, locally available materials such as poles and reeds were used. The materials were mobilized and brought by the community members. They also provided non-technical labor. Other materials used included; ropes and nails which were bought using the money collected from the community members of Kirasa. This project will promote lifelong learning opportunities to the children in this community, a contribution to sustainable development goal #4 [13].



Figure 10. The nursery school structure under construction

During the construction, both the intern and the EM were able to share information with the community members about ARU and URDT and roles played by the duo in girl-child education and women empowerment, respectively. They also emphasized the importance of girl-child education and women empowerment. They encouraged the community members to involve both men and women in the Community Development work to promote the principle of creating. This came up as a result of women not participating in the Community Driven Development (CD) work (see Table 1 above). "CD is done by only men since women are weak" said Chairperson Parents Teachers' Association, Kirasa Primary school.

Members were impressed to see both ARU intern and the EM (both female) involved actively in CD work. It was reported in other studies that women withdraw from such activities due to lack of models and mentors and lack of respect from the male counterparts [17]. The community members, thus, promised to change their perspectives about the role of women in their community.

3.4.2. Clean and Safe Water for Good Health Improvised

Looking at importance of integrating water in sustainable development and underline the critical importance of water and sanitation within the three dimensions of sustainable development [18], UN General Assembly recognized access to safe and clean drinking water and sanitation as a human right and called for international efforts to help countries to provide safe, clean, accessible and affordable drinking water and sanitation.

To ensure clean and safe water, members of Kijaguso village participated in the water cleaning and naming of Kimanywenda water spring (Figure 11 & Figure 12 below). They also attained knowledge on how to ensure clean and safe water for drinking and domestic use through a training meeting that ensued after the cleaning. They also developed by-laws and formed a management committee to ensure every one contributes to the safety and cleanliness of the water.



Figure 11. Kimanywenda water spring before clearing



Figure 12. Kimanywenda water spring after the clearing

3.4.3. Improved Road Infrastructure

To improve the transportation and road network, the 5 km road from Nyansimbi-Kiryateete trading center was cleaned by the community members mobilized by the ARU intern.

This exercise was done in response to Kiryateete village vision number 7 (Clean and safe roads) that was set during CAP session in Kiryateete village.

It was noted that 20 percent of the participants were women (Figure 13 below) unlike the past activities where no woman could participate in CD. The community members were also surprised to see the ARU intern, a female, participating together with them in doing the work. This greatly changed their perception about the gender roles in the society hence appreciating the roles played by different sex in the community in bringing about development.



Figure 13. Women of Kiryateete participating in the digging and road clearing

3.4.4. Environmental Protection

To enhance environmental protection, a "keep Kiryateete clean" campaign was launched which involved monthly activities such as collecting and burning of all plastic bottles and polythene bags within the trading center (Figure 14). This activity was championed by Kiryateete young stars. During the activity, the community members were made aware that all plastic materials and polythene are non-biodegradable and causes pollution of both land and water, therefore, posing a great danger to environment, wildlife and to people in many ways.



Figure 14. Kiryateete young stars after collecting all the plastic bottles and polythene bags from the trading center for burning

To improve on health and sanitation, four villages of Kijaguzo, Kiryateete, Kirasa and Kibingo Villages were taken through practical training sessions on making sanitation facilities. Twenty-two practical training sessions were conducted by the intern to create a healthy community in Birembo Sub County. The training sessions were on different sanitation measures such as making energy saving stoves, 2-step drying racks, tip-tap making and shaggy/door mat making. The practical sessions were done to ensure the realization of their aspirations to improved sanitation in all the three villages. Sustainable

Development Goal target 6.2 calls for adequate and equitable sanitation for all [5]. The target is tracked with the indicator of "safely managed sanitation services" use of an improved type of sanitation facility that is not shared with other households and from which the excreta produced are either safely treated in situ or transported and treated off-site. This was also done in appreciation of Article 40 of the constitution of Uganda which "Ensures that every Ugandan has a right to clean and healthy environment" [6].

As a result of the training, 13 drying racks, three rubbish/compost pits, and two tip-taps were established for home sanitation. It was noted that; due to the outbreak of COVID-19, the president of republic of Uganda and the Ministry of health gave out standard operating procedures (SOPs) amongst were; social distancing and regular washing of hands to curb the spread of the deadly virus [7]. The intern used the opportunity when people were willing to listen during the lockdown to sensitize the community members on sanitation and this led to almost every household to have the hand washing facilities. Many of the community aspirations were aligned to healthy living and COVID-19 mitigation as outlined by the world health organization [8].

For environmental conservation and household income, the intern trained members in making energy saving stoves (Figure 15). Four youths took up the initiative of making for other community member's energy saving stoves at a fee of five thousand shilling per energy saving stove. As a result of the practical sessions, a total of 39 energy saving stoves were constructed in three villages using local materials (sand, anthill soil, bricks, sweet potato leaves, banana stems and couch grass). The use of energy stoves is one strategy to mitigate the rampant deforestation in Uganda [9].



Figure 15. Energy saving stove in use

During the different training sessions, the intern sensitized the community members on the need to shift from the traditional 3-stone stove to fuel/energy saving stove as highlighted here; saving 60% on the fuel hence impacting positively on the environmental and economic aspect of the family. It ensures clean and safe cooking due to less smoke, less smoke related diseases, food remaining warm as well as being safe for children. Energy saving stove has also got a great impact on the environmental aspect of the community since less fuel wood is used by individual households [10].

In addition, a total of seven youths acquired skills and started making shaggy mats as their income generating activities. This training greatly encouraged home economics since it was cheaper to make this kind of door mats compared to the commercial ones. The youth were also encouraged to take it up as a business since there was

high demand and growing interest for the mats by the community members hence ensuring job creation for them instead of being job seekers.

3.4.5. Food Production

To increase food production, the intern trained communities in making of organic manures from animal droppings to boost the growth of crops (Figure 15). This result aimed at ensuring continuous production of both quality and quantity food thus contributing to the achievement of SDG goal 12 "Ensure sustainable food consumption and production patterns" [5].



Figure 16. The intern and group member's during liquid manure making

4. What Worked and What didn't Work

The following worked out for ARU intern and other stakeholders. The internship maintained its course. This happened because there was adequate collaboration with local leaders.

The EM, TWS and supervisor were available throughout the internship period. This made her gain deeper understanding of the Epicenter Strategy. Community mobilization and participation during CAP, the utilization of indigenous knowledge helped in initiation and implementation of self-help projects.

However, the following didn't work out well for the intern. COVID-19 affected most of the Joint activities and meetings for example "keep Birembo clean" campaign and other training. Change of programs due to unavoidable circumstances like death and incidentals also affected working at the three levels of the Epicenter Strategy. There was low turn up by community members especially Kijaguso for CAP Sessions, low women participation in CD in Kirasa and kiryateete.

The intern student recommends that the Sub County needs to put more emphasis to change the mindset of people towards community owned projects. There is need for EM and Community Development Officer to conduct more CAP trainings sessions in order to ensure sustainability of the initiated projects and initiation of new projects hence ensuring sustainable development.

5. Key Lessons to Draw from the Internship

The intern learned that lower local governments, Birembo Sub-county in particular, sometimes use bottom- up approach to planning as this was seen in village priority setting. Community members know what they want but only need awakening to ensure their realization. It is important for communities to stay focused and acknowledge changes and be able to work and create desired goals.

6. Conclusions

ARU intern successfully participated alongside the Sub County leadership and other development partners in ensuring effective and efficient service delivery. The intern enabled people at all stages to learn and acquire skills in the visionary approach, and work towards their visions contributing to the realization of Uganda vision 2040, African Agenda 2063 and Sustainable Development Goals 2030. The intern learned and conducted CAP at group and community levels thus enhanced her capacity to cause a democratic bottom up planning process for effective rural transformation.

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