Linking Academia and Community: Evidence from Student-Community Engagement in Ghana

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Abstract

Academic institutions have come under criticism for not living up to their research expectations. In response, the University for Development Studies (UDS) in Ghana runs a student-community engagement programme termed the Third Trimester Field Practical Programme (TTFPP), where students stay in and research with rural communities on development issues as part of their academic work. This paper analyses communities and students' assessment of the TTFPP in relation to its core objectives. Data were obtained from 35 communities and 315 students during the 2009/2010 and 2010/2011 TTFPP sessions in the Upper West Region, using key informant interviews, focus group discussions and participant observation. The study established that the TTFPP is beneficial to communities and students and has the potential of being an effective vehicle for academia-community linkage. However, the preliminary field preparation prior to the student-community engagement was unsatisfactory and a weakness on the engagement. Nonetheless, communities are willing to host and work with students. Therefore, this paper argues that while this student-community engagement is justified, more needs to be done to ensure effective and efficient academia-community linkage. There is more to academia-community engagement than sending students out to field. This paper calls for a re-examination of the structure and content of the TTFPP.

Keywords: Community-based Research, Student-Community Engagement, Third Trimester Field Practical Program, University for Development Studies, Ghana

Introduction

There are arguments that the manner in which university education is conducted falls short of expectation (Alinsky, 1969; Stoecker, 1999; Strand et al., 2003, p. xvii), in that, university education is skewed towards more theoretical than practical issues. The view of a student: "I get so bored sitting in the classroom taking notes all the time. Why can't professors figure out a way to get us more interested in what they are trying to teach…?" seems to support such arguments. Even where there is practical/field research, the output of the research still remains with the researcher and knowledge is not shared with the community (Gaventa, 1993; Stoecker, 1999). Hence, universities have come under criticism for failing to use their resources to engage communities in their catchment areas to facilitate development in these communities (Fontaine, 2007) and equally failing to offer undergraduate students the opportunity to have practical experience in their field of learning (Osborn & Karukstis, 2009). It is however emphasised that community-based academic research programmes should meet community needs and yield positive socio-economic change; otherwise the impacts are not felt by the community members who then feel exploited as researchers carry away the research output (Fontaine, 2007; Gaventa, 1993; University of Utah, 2007).

According to Nyden, "Community-Based Participatory Research is research to be consumed, not to be stored on library shelves or hidden away in academic journals. It is research that can answer questions that classroom textbooks and existing research fail to address. It is research with an impact" (Nyden, 2003:580). Community-based research offers a more collaborative approach to community issues which enriches both the target communities and the universities (Osborn & Karukstis, 2009). However, the absence of effective collaboration among parties in community-based research made some communities reluctant to participating in subsequent research programmes (Stoecker, 1994).

In recent times, tailoring university education to meet both the clients at the local levels, and the students, has remained a critical concern of many academic institutions. Hence, research institutions have been challenged to ensure that research-based learning becomes a measure of students' education (Hunter et al., 2007). It is further argued that the core responsibility of universities is to ensure the civic well-being of the community in which it is embedded through teaching and research (Harkavy, 2000).

In order to address the criticism of academic research, there is a shift from university-based scientific research towards broader consultation with the research participants in different ways of creating and sharing knowledge (Gibbons et al., 1994; Sunderland et al., 2004). Hence, the concept of student engagement emerges from the belief that universities, the world over, should be playing a role in civic engagement and

in strengthening and supporting social responsibilities (Ostrander, 2004). Many universities, including the University for Development Studies (UDS) and other academic institutions, are now embracing community engagement as part of their civic responsibility.

The University for Development Studies was established in 1992 by the Provisional National Defence Council (Law 279), with the aim of providing higher education, undertaking research and promoting the advancement and dissemination of knowledge, and blending the academic world with that of the community. The University has four campuses, located in Tamale, Nyankpala, Navrongo and Wa, all in the three political regions of Northern Ghana. A unique feature of this University is its trimester system, with the third trimester dedicated to University-Community Engagement, which employs key principles of Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR). This engagement, termed Third Trimester Field Practical Programme (TTFPP), involves an active interaction between the University community (students, researchers/ lecturers) and the outside world (rural communities, industry, and other institutions) on practical and development issues, and forms part of the grade for the University degree. The third trimester of the first two years is based on an integrated programme in rural communities, where students employ participatory techniques to studying all aspects of the communities' life, including community profiles, development potentials and challenges, and community development interventions and projects. The third year third trimester is dedicated to various practical activities based on individual Faculty requirements. The core objective of the TTFPP is to help students develop favourable attitudes towards working in and with rural and deprived communities, and also learn to work in an interdisciplinary environment. This is done by exposing students practically to the nature and dimensions of development problems in rural communities, through living in and working with such communities. In the field, the students are expected to apply the theoretical skills which they are imbued with in the classroom. With this, it is expected that the TTFPP would provide useful services to Ghanaian communities through the exchange of knowledge and its application to address the felt needs and aspiration of these communities, and generate data for further research into problem solving development issues, and other purposes (UDS, 2009).

The TTFPP has been running since the establishment of the University. However, not much empirical evidence is available on the views of key players such as communities and students, about the programme. This information is relevant for the University to plan and manage future University-Community engagements. It will also be helpful for other academic institutions, the State, and development organisations for policy direction towards linking the academia and community for sustainable development.

The objective of this study is to assess the views of students and communities in the Upper West Region about the TTFPP, and draw implications on the wider community-based participatory research.

Conceptual Issues on Community-Based Participatory Research

The Concept of Community

Although community-based research is widely gaining ground in the current literature, there is no uniformity as to what constitutes community. However, understanding community is central to societal characterisation and societal improvement, and it also remains important to academicians and policy makers (Davies et al., 2013). Some construe community as a customer of services provided by agencies at which students are placed, while others perceive it as a neighbourhood or geographic location (See Cruz & Giles, 2000; Varlotta, 1996). The physical component in the concept of community has been emphasised (See Conyers, 1981; Strand et al., 2003). According to Conyers, the concept of community entails a group of people in face-to-face contact, who share common values and are guided by a basic harmony of interest and aspirations (cited in Fielmua, 2011). It includes a group of people who may not share a geographical association but do share an interest around culture, social, political, or health issues (Macaulay et al., 1999; Strand et al., 2003). These attributes enable members of a community to be identified as one people, although sometimes with diverse cultural backgrounds.

Community is also regarded as a society with a *common vision* and *sense of belonging* by all; a society in which the diversity of people's backgrounds and circumstances is appreciated and valued; where similar life opportunities are available to all; and where strong and positive relationships exist and continue to be developed in the workplace, in schools and in the wider community (Department for Children Schools Families, 2007:3). Therefore, in CBPR, community is recognised as a unit of identity, and should be interpreted as all who will be affected by the research (Horowitz et al., 2009; O'Fallon & Dearry, 2002).

While the University recognises and appreciates the various views on community, for the purpose of the TTFPP, the University identifies communities by geographical boundaries, in collaboration with the District Assemblies and Traditional authorities. However, these communities should have basic facilities such as potable water, be accessible roads, be near to health facilities, and generally safe, to ensure the well-being of the students. Besides these, communities should be willing to participate in the programme,

by pledging their commitment to accept, accommodate, and ensure the security of students. Community commitment is a key ingredient in CBPR because partners need to be dedicated to a long term research relationship (Horowitz et al., 2009) and this is important to UDS because the students are required to work with the communities for four months in two academic years. Hence the concept of community as used by TTFPP goes beyond the single geographical location as described by Westfall et al. (2009).

Community-based Participatory Research

Traditionally, research has often viewed individuals and communities as "passive subjects" (Macaulay et al., 1999:777). Interestingly, Ahmed et al. (2004) established that communities in most cases also regard traditional research as paternalistic and irrelevant to their needs. To offset these limitations, CBPR emerged as an alternative to the traditional research (O'Fallon & Dearry, 2002). CBPR is a core component of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) which was developed in the 1980s. PRA gives local people the opportunity "to share, enhance and analyse their knowledge of life and conditions, to plan and to act" (Chambers, 1994:953).

CBPR is participatory because it seeks to produce new knowledge in a systematic manner with those involved or affected by the issues being researched for educational purpose aimed at effecting social change (Macaulay et al., 1999; Westfall et al., 2009). The CBPR is an engagement "with a group, rather than on a group, and with a community rather than simply in a community or for a community" (Westfall et al., 2009:424). The CBPR approach to conducting research seeks to equitably involve all partners, such as researchers and those directly affected by the issues being researched (community in this case) and equally knowledgeable of the local circumstances.

The key characteristics of CBPR (see Ahmed et al., 2004; Horowitz et al., 2009; Israel et al., 2001) are summarised as follows:

- Effective communication between the community and the academic world;
- A collaborative enterprise between academic researchers and community;
- Validation of multiple sources of knowledge and promotion of the use of multiple methods of discovery and dissemination of the knowledge produced;
- Contribution by community and researchers in all phases of research;
- Shared trust, collaboration, shared decision making, and shared ownership of the research findings and knowledge;
- Negotiation by researchers and community members on issues such as the degree of confidentiality, research objectives and duration of the collaboration;

- Continuous exchange of knowledge, skills, strengths, and resources of partners for sustained impact, thus co-learning;
- Commitment of partners to long-term research relationships, and
- Local capacity building, systems development, empowerment, and sustainability.

CBPR encourages researchers to listen to communities and share information with them, thus enforcing mutually respectful relationship and emphasising capacity development (Horowitz et al., 2009). This gives community members the opportunity to acquire new skills or develop others as they work with academics and students (Strand et al., 2003). The CBPR process has helped community members in decision-making process, which has produced significant results in the communities (See Ahmed et al., 2004; Higgins & Metzler, 2001; Israel et al., 1998; Macaulay et al., 1999; Stratford et al., 2003).

Student-community Engagement

The concept of student-community engagement emerges from the belief that universities the world over should be playing a role in civic engagement and in strengthening and supporting social responsibilities (Ostrander, 2004). The Committee on Institutional Cooperation (2005) identifies three distinguishing features of engagement: that engagement is scholarly, involving both the act of engaging (bringing universities and communities together) and the product of engagement (the spread of discipline-generated, evidence-based practices in communities); that engagement cuts across the mission of teaching, research, and service. It is not a separate activity, but a particular approach to campus-community collaboration, and thirdly, that engagement is reciprocal and mutually beneficial (O'Connor et al., 2011). The concept of engagement very well applies in student-community relationship. As noted by Holland and Ramaley (2008), the hallmark of engagement is the development of partnerships that ensure a mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge between the university and the community (O'Connor et al., 2011).

The concept of school engagement has attracted increasing attention as being a possible remedy to declining academic motivation and achievement (Fredricks et al., 2004). Engagement is multifaceted in nature and may be described as behavioural, emotional, and cognitive (Fredricks et al., 2004). Behavioural engagement draws on the idea of participation; it includes involvement in academic and social or extracurricular activities and is considered crucial for achieving positive academic outcomes and preventing drop outs. Emotional engagement encompasses positive and negative reactions to teachers, classmates, academics, and school, and is presumed to create ties to an institution and influence willingness to do the work. Then, cognitive engagement draws on the idea of

investment; it incorporates thoughtfulness and willingness to exert the effort necessary to comprehend complex ideas and master difficult skills (Fredricks et al., 2004).

Student-Community Engagement (SCE) involves a range of experiential, community-based projects in which undergraduates undertake part of their learning within a community setting (Millican, 2008). Millican further explained that SCE differs from work placements (where students are often passive observers of a role they hope to move into in the future) and volunteering programmes (where students give their time voluntarily for what are often routine tasks) (Millican, 2008). According to Strand et al. (2003), SCE establishes a relationship between students and communities, it is a perfect community-based research model which is a collaborative enterprise between academics (professors and students) and community members. SCE entails students working closely with community partners to develop practical projects which they undertake in university time and for which they are given academic credit towards their degree. These projects should provide scope to develop their skills, to apply theory to practice, to reflect on their learning and their abilities and to make a real contribution to their community partner (Millican, 2008).

The Wingspread Statement Declaration on the Civic Responsibilities of Research Universities says: "Engaged teaching and research make sense in a world where systemic problems, conflicting demands and radical advances in communication technologies require new ways of discovering, integrating and applying knowledge" (Boyte & Hollander, 2004:3). And, most important, university engagement is grounded in a growing body of scholarly research that demonstrates its effective impact on teaching, learning and community-based problem solving (O'Connor et al., 2011). SCE offers students the opportunity to use their experience in real settings, to understand first-hand the difficulties experienced by different community groups, to have the chance to become involved in shaping and building a new organisation, builds confidence and challenges academic learning in a real world context (Millican, 2008).

Study Area and Research Approach

The empirical study was conducted between the 2009/2010 and 2010/2011 TTFPP sessions. During this period, students from various Faculties in the University were sent to all nine[10] political districts in the Upper West Region on their two year TTFPP. Three districts namely: Lambussie-Karni, Sissala East and Sissala West, were chosen for the study (See Figure1). The study districts share border with Burkina Faso along the northern stretch of the Region. Each of the districts is administered by both traditional

10 The Upper West Region had nine Districts at the time of the study between 2009 and 2011. In 2012, two new Districts were created. The Region currently has eleven Districts.

and modern political authorities. These authorities are very important in the TTFPP activities: from the selection of the communities to the entry, work and exit of the students. The people in these districts are mainly of the Dagaaba and Sissala tribes and are involved mainly in agriculture as their major source of livelihood.

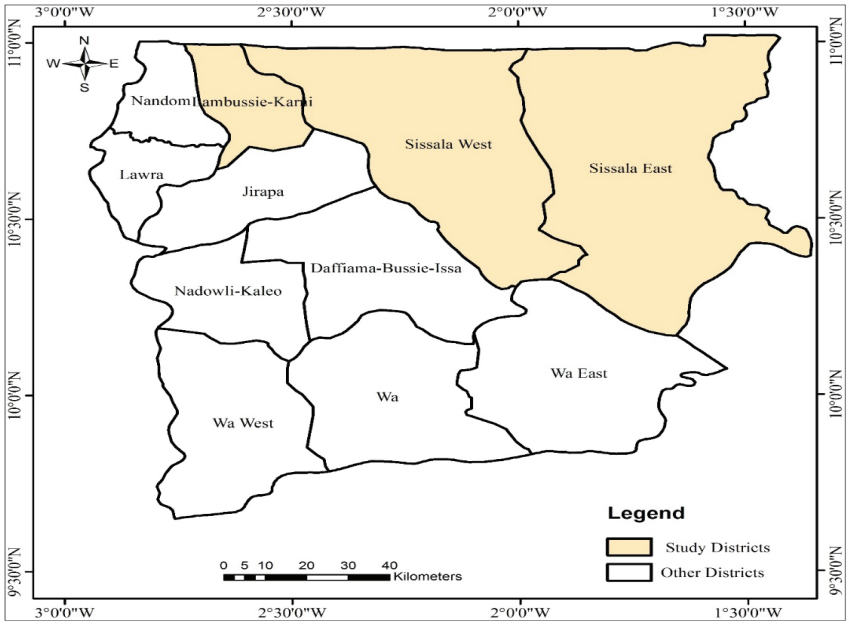

Figure 1: Map of the Upper West Region showing Study Districts

Source: DERS, UDS, Wa

The research adopted a case study approach. The case study approach because it allows the researcher to study contemporary events holistically (Yin, 2003). In terms of its epistemology, the study ascribed to an interpretivists' stance. This gives the researchers an opportunity to be part of the study and explain how CBPR operates in the communities. Given the dynamism of the actors and the study phenomenon (CBPR), the interpretivists' stance is appropriate because it gives room for flexibility (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The essence of the interpretivists' paradigm is not on geographical but theoretical generalisation: how TTFPP contributes to the wider theory of CBPR. The three districts were purposively selected for the study (see Figure 1) based on the fact that these communities were coordinated by the researchers. In this way, it was possible for the researchers to observe and participate in the student-community activities for the period of the engagement. From the three sampled districts, 35 out of the 50 TTFPP communities were randomly selected using the random selection tool in Microsoft Excel. The distribution of sample size among the three districts is as follows:

15 out of 19 communities in Sissala West; 6 out of 7 communities in Sissala East; and 14 out of 24 communities in Lambussie-Karni Districts. Generally, the average number of students per community is 10, but in the case of the study communities, the average was 9, giving a total of 315 students involved in the study. The disciplinary backgrounds of these students were: Agriculture, Medical and Allied Health Sciences, Applied Sciences, Integrated Development Studies, Integrated Community Development, and Business Studies.

Student-community engagement falls within the broader framework of PRA, and according to Chambers (1994) semi-structured interviews, case stories, key informants interviews, focus groups discussion, and participant observation are the core methods in PRA studies. These methods enhance participation of the target respondents. Hence, the study used focus group discussion, key informant interviews, and participant observation as the main methods. The focus group discussion was conducted with community members and the students. The key informants of the study were chiefs, local government assembly persons, Unit Committee chairpersons, and Academics. Whilst the data collection spanned the entire period of the student-community engagement, a greater part was collected in the 2010/2011 academic year, by which time participants had gained sufficient experience on the engagement. Secondary data was collected from the TTFPP Directorate up till 2016. The interviews were recorded using digital recorders, transcribed and analysed.

Results

Overview of the UDS TTFPP

The TTFPP started in 1994 with the Faculty of Agriculture of the University. Between 1994 and 2002, the programme was run on Faculty basis. Students and Lecturers concentrated more on their academic programme areas, thus the Faculty of Agriculture went to agricultural related institutions to learn and work, the Medical School focused on health issues and the Faculty of Integrated Development Studies (FIDS) worked on general development issues in rural communities based on a three-stage model of community profiling, identification of community problems and potentials, and project proposal writing.

In the 2002/2003 academic year, based on recommendations of a committee to review the TTFPP, the integrated third trimester system was adopted, based on the FIDS model. With the integration, undergraduate students pursuing various programmes from all the disciplinary areas are mixed in groups of ten (average) and sent to rural communities to live and learn. Currently, the main disciplinary areas of the University are: Agriculture, Agribusiness and Communication Sciences, Renewable Natural

Resources, Integrated Development Studies, Integrated Community Development, Planning and Land Management, Business, and Education Studies, Applied, and Mathematical Sciences, Engineering, Medical, and Allied Health Sciences. With their varied backgrounds, students provide expertise in their fields of study, to the group and the community. The Integrated TTFPP started with a period of three years, but currently runs as a two-year programme based on reviews.

TTFPP Country Coverage

The University-Community Engagement has so far led the UDS into six out of the ten regions in the Country, as shown in Figure 2 below.

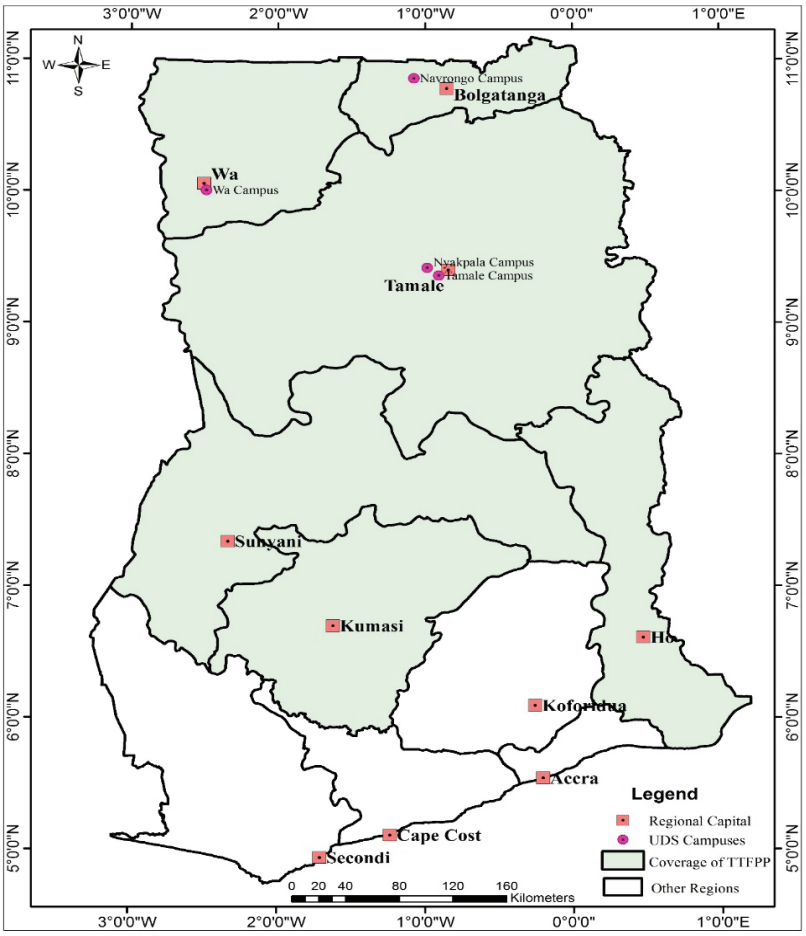

Figure 2: TTFPP Regional Coverage

Source: Authors' Construct based on data from TTFPP Directorate (2016)

From 2007 to 2016 (except 2013/2014 academic year), the TTFPP has made 3,255 rural community entries (see Figure 3). It is important to note that some of the communities have been visited a second time within this period. As shown in Figure 3, there has been a steady increase in the number of communities covered from 2006/2007 to 2009/2010 academic years. However, there was a drop in 2010/2011, and a sharp decline in 2011/2012 academic years due to a reduction in the intake of students within that period, to match existing infrastructure in the University. The number of students per community generally varies – averagely ten. With the 3,255 community entries by different groups of students, it is estimated that over 32,000 students participated in the student-community engagement over the nine-year period.

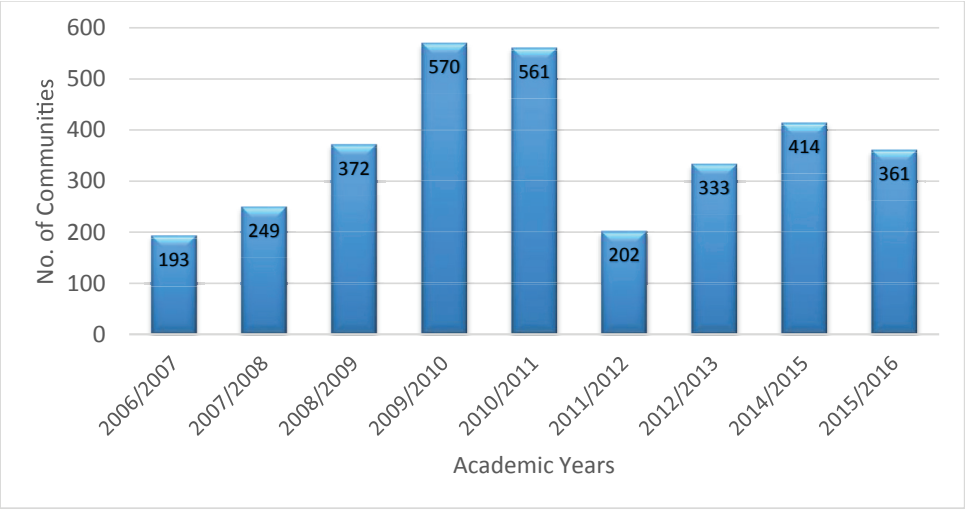

Figure 3: Communities covered by TTFPP between 2007 and 2016

Source: Author's Construct based on data from TTFPP Directorate (2016)

Quality Assurance during the TTFPP

Quality assurance is a core component of the Student-community engagement. The objective of the quality assurance is to ensure that the students enter the various communities safely and in accordance with traditional protocol, armed with the requisite tools and methods to collect accurate data, and to ensure that they focus on their task. The TTFPP orientation is the preparatory stage of the student-community engagement. Students are taken through orientation during the teaching trimesters in the first and second years of their programmes. The orientation include the University mandate and the TTFPP concept, the objectives, key tasks, and previous experiences of the TTFPP, tools and methods of participatory research, community development and social relations, and report writing (UDS, 2007). Students are expected to combine

the knowledge obtained in these specially organised TTFPP orientation sessions, with that from the disciplinary courses studied in the teaching trimesters, to enable them function well in their engagement with the communities. During the two-month field work each year, the District Coordinators visit the communities three times to guide and monitor the engagement, and also assess the students. At the end of the trimester, a fourth visit is made by a team of lecturers/researchers, including the District TTFPP Coordinator on a final assessment.

The Existing Framework of CBPR in UDS

The Integrated TTFPP is within the SCE framework, and thus employs key principles of the CBPR approach. To initiate this engagement, the University, through the Third Trimester Directorate (TTD) establishes relations with key stakeholders, educates them on the programme, and requests views and collaboration. This starts with a workshop for the Regional Coordinating Councils (RCC) of the Regions where students are to be sent. The various District representatives at the RCC then transmit the information from the workshop to the District Assembly members and District Departments, who in turn inform their constituents. This prepares the ground for the entry of the University to the Districts. Subsequently, the TTD sends out District Coordinators (Lecturers/Researchers) to map out the communities in the districts based on the community selection criteria outlined above (concept of community), with the support of the District Assemblies. The District Coordinators then enter every community to hold discussions with Traditional Authorities and opinion leaders including Assembly and Unit Committee members on the rationale, objectives, and the nature of the TTFPP. Once communities understand and agree to partner the University, giving assurance of receiving, accommodating and collaborating with the students on the programme, these communities are listed for the student-community engagement to take off. District Departments, other Government and non-Government Institutions offer various support to students and researchers, especially in respect of data gathering and health needs. Figure 4 below shows the key actor framework of the UDS TTFPP.

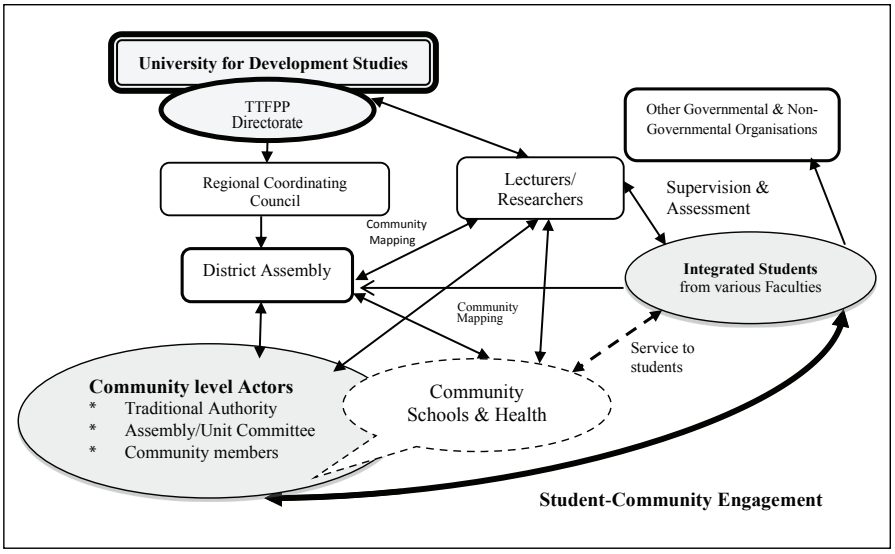

Figure 4: Framework of Actors in UDS CBPR

Source: Authors Construct, 2013

CBPR here is more of a partnership of students, faculty, District Assemblies and community members who collaboratively engage in research with the purpose of solving a pressing community problem or effecting social change. In that case, community includes educational institutions (schools) and agencies that provide services such as health facilities (Strand et al., 2003).

Views of Students on the TTFPP Orientation

The TTFPP orientation is one preparative stage of the engagement, and it was important to find out the views of students on this exercise. Generally, the students agreed that the orientation was very important for the success of their work on the field. The majority indicated that they were equipped with participatory research tools and methods which impacted greatly on their engagement with the communities. They, however, observed poor schedules of some orientation sessions, which affected their ability to cover the syllabus in detail. From the teaching trimester programme, students also noted that, there were some topics and courses which were very helpful for the engagement, but these were rather taught in second and third year, after initial need for them in the field practical work was over. The integrated nature of the work however made things easier for students as they shared ideas and learnt from each other.

Students and Communities' Expectations of the Engagement

As regards students' expectations prior to the community entry, students, especially, those who had never lived in rural communities, expressed mixed feelings. For instance, whilst some students expected difficult and hash conditions, generally perceived of very typical rural communities in Ghana, others expected conducive and adequate accommodation. Many students expected that the cost of living in rural communities would be relatively lower than that in urban areas. Additionally, students expected challenges regarding access to potable water, transportation and health. They expected challenges in student group dynamics, as well as cooperation from community members.

After a few weeks stay in the communities, students realised that whilst some conditions and situations were as expected, others were not. Conditions were not as bad as they thought. For some students, it was quite a favourable disappointment as they were accommodated in modern type housing. On the contrary, students in some communities reported their experience of sleeping in rooms with mud floor and leaking roofs. In some communities, food prices were very high contrary to the expectation of students.

During community mapping and routine visits, the Coordinators asked traditional authorities, opinion leaders, and community members about their expectations on the student-community engagement. The communities' expectations were that the programme would build good relations between communities and the University, and between community members and individual students. They expected knowledge sharing among community members and students, support to their school children in their studies, and a source of inspiration, especially on girl-child education. Most importantly, the communities expected that the engagement would serve as a means of identifying and marketing community development problems and potentials for subsequent intervention.

After the engagement, community expectations were generally fulfilled. This is because the interaction and exchange of knowledge impacted favourably on the communities. For instance, a pupil at Bakwala Community expressed his feeling about the programme and said: *"the presence of the students has been very helpful. We see them as role models, and we are encouraged to take our studies serious so that one day, we can also enter tertiary institutions"* (Excerpts from FGD 17/06/2011). Communities hoped that having identified community problems and potentials, some development interventions would be realised soon in their communities. In line with the core objectives of the TTFPP the following sections present the outcomes of the student-community engagement.

Benefits of Student-community Engagement

According to the students, the TTFPP has afforded them the opportunity to experience different cultures and livelihoods, and to also empathise with deprived community members. The students indicated that they have been exposed to the various development issues and challenges in rural communities: poor roads, hunger, and abject poverty. Rural communities, they said, lack many basic needs such as secured food, good shelter, quality health care, adequate potable water and improved sanitation, and transport. Other problems identified as plaguing rural areas were: high illiteracy, limited quality education, and low farm yield. To cope with the issue of inadequate qualified teachers for instance, some community schools engaged the services of Senior High School graduates, some of whom could not further their education due to poor academic performance.

In addition, students have observed that, children in some communities were not regular at school, especially during the rainy season, as they had to assist their parents on the farm. Students further observed that due to the poverty situation in rural areas, some children are unable to continue with their education after the basic level and stay idle in the community or migrate in search of greener pastures.

Exchange of knowledge between the students and the community emerged as the students interacted with community members at student-community fora, at home, on the farm, in the market, at funeral grounds and other social activities, where students learned about community problems and potentials and some moral and cultural values. These participations and interactions were observed by the researchers during monitoring.

A discussion with the communities revealed that they have gained knowledge on general health and sanitation, some agricultural practices and the importance of education, through the engagement. More importantly, the engagement with the students has unearthed the potentials of the communities which can be harnessed to solve community problems. Community members were impressed with the peaceful and united manner in which the students, though with varied socio-cultural backgrounds, lived and worked together. This was a source of motivation for their intra-community and inter-community harmony.

The student-community engagement has generated reliable and relevant data that can serve several purposes, including the provision of baseline information for further research and diagnoses of community development challenges. Additionally, the discussion with the community members revealed that through the engagement, they have appreciated the importance of research because the engagement demonstrated

that diagnosing community level development problems was fundamental in finding solutions to the problems.

Beyond the core objectives of the TTFPP, the student-community engagements fostered social relations between and among the actors. Generally, the student-community relationship was cordial. According to the students, some communities were very sociable and actively participated in data collection and analysis. Some chiefs, assembly persons, and community members visited the students on daily basis to ask of their welfare. The chiefs and elders encouraged students to work peacefully with the community members and urged them to report any challenge that they (students) faced in the communities. Some communities supported students with food stuff, and means of transport, mostly motor bikes, bicycles and donkey carts to enable them access healthcare, market centres, and to collect data outside the community. In communities where members were required to pay for water services, students were exempted from these payments. Students also assisted with community members. For instance, in community schools that did not have adequate teachers, students spent their leisure time to assist in teaching pupils, as well as out of classroom on academic assignments. In one community, a female University student decided to use part of her money for upkeep to support a girl (who dropped out of school) to be trained as a seamstress. According to the student, the plight of the girl and family was sympathetic and she (the student) could not have done anything better than helping her to have a trade from which she could earn income to support herself and her family.

The community members testified to these various support services. The researchers had also on numerous occasions observed the support services exchanged between communities and students, as some, such as foodstuff, were usually channelled through the Coordinators (Researchers) to the students. There were, however, some isolated instances of student complaints about non-cooperation of communities and community dissatisfaction with student behaviour such as being noisy and quarrelsome. This shows that the student-community engagement was not completely rosy.

Challenges of Student-Community Engagement

Despite the benefits of the student-community engagement, there were challenges relating to: transportation, the timing of the programme, communication, accommodation and security. Though accessibility in terms of motorable roads is a core criteria in selecting engaged communities, the availability of means of transport at all times is not guaranteed. Transportation was a major challenge, especially in communities that were not connected to major routes or major market centers with frequent movement of vehicles. Students, confirmed by communities, expressed the difficulties in travelling to and from their study communities, moving to district

capitals to collect data, accessing health services outside the communities, and moving to major market centres to buy foodstuff. In such instances, students had to rely on the benevolence of community members for their motorbikes, bicycles and donkey carts. Whereas transportation constraints were major concerns in some communities, easy access to transport services in other communities facilitated the frequent exit of students from the communities, which affected participation in the work.

The timing of the programme also posed a challenge to the engagement. The TTFPP takes place during the rainy season (May to July), which period coincides with the farming season. As all the TTFPP communities are rural farming communities, many households spend much of the time on the farms, making it difficult for students to smoothly conduct interviews. As a result, students were compelled to either trace people to their farms, convene meetings or visit households in the evening to collect data. According to both students and communities, these adaptation strategies were strenuous and inconveniencing. Students also had to make maximum use of Fridays and Sundays respectively in predominantly Muslim and Christian communities when community members do not do farm work.

There was little cooperation from some communities because community members were not adequately sensitised on the programme and their role. In three communities, members confirmed that their own participation at student-community meetings was poor. In other communities, people felt that the students were going to engage them without any benefits in return for their time. According to the students, some community members were demanding financial and material support from them in exchange for information.

In terms of accommodation, communities had challenges in providing adequate housing for students, especially in the second year of the programme. This is because the communities were not reminded on the return of the students due to the absence of pre-visits in the second year – which had taken place in previous years. In the second year of the engagement, there was ethnic conflict in some communities in the Sissala West District, making it difficult for students to hold meetings with community members, and go about normal academic and social work, thus affecting smooth engagement.

Discussion and Conclusion

Community-based participatory research has several dimensions. In most cases, undergraduate students research are assigned predetermined aspects of faculty research projects where students, under supervision, are given enough time to complete the project and come out with useful results (Hunter et al., 2007). However, the UDS approach is not exactly based on university predetermined research projects. The

students instead are expected to enter the community using the appropriate research protocol and understudy the community, drawing out community development issues. There is no prejudice in coming out with community real development issues as students have no prior information about the community situation before entry.

Generally, engaging students in community relationships gives them the opportunity to apply their classroom experience in real settings (Strand et al., 2003). As established, the students were able to apply their research methods skills, and classroom activity effectively on the field. This enhanced the training of professionals who not only understood the needs of the vast majority of Ghanaians, but who were also willing to work in, and with rural communities. The outreach programme enabled students to identify their learning needs.

It has been stressed that, community-based research can enhance policy if quality data about the community concerns are collected (O'Fallon & Dearry, 2002). Further, the benefits of engagement are enhanced, including building trust among the communities and the researchers, if the results of the research are disseminated among the relevant stakeholders (O'Fallon & Dearry, 2002), as this has the potential of addressing community development concerns. So much quality data has been generated from the TTFPP for planning development projects and further research. Apart from the exchange of knowledge between communities and students in the course of the engagement, the entire knowledge output generated by the stakeholders was mostly not shared with the engaged communities. Some communities in this study, especially communities who had participated in the programme more than once raised concerns about the need to have a copy of the final research report. Similar concerns had been raised by a participant in a research by Stoecker that; "we have students and reporters coming through all the time, asking neighbourhood people to give their time and answer their questions. And we don't get so much a copy of a paper from them. If I agree to talk to you, then I want you to agree that you'll give us a copy of the paper you write" (Stoecker, 1994) cited in (Stoecker, 1999:840). Indeed, little has also been achieved in terms of using the community engagement to influence national level policy. The argument advanced by Gaventa (1993) and Fontaine (2007) that academic and policy community do not communicate well, remains relevant here.

In fact, conducting research should not be seen as a goal but rather a means to a goal (Stoecker, 1999). Similar to the findings of Lantz et al. (2001), community members are eager to see the fruition of research in their communities. Community members indicated that the amount of time they invest in community-based research is worth more than the dollar they receive (Lantz et al., 2001). This still persists as communities continue to expect returns for the time they invest in community engagements. A caution is, however, needed in drawing a conclusion on the output of CBPR. For

instance, while universities match time in order to market their research findings, communities are action-oriented (Bringle et al., 1999) and often seeking results based on their engagement with the external world, be they academics or politicians. Unlike the traditional research approach which ends with publication of results, the CBPR is expected to mobilize the community to use findings to advocate for policy change, enhance local resources, and improve local practices (Horowitz et al., 2009; Israel et al., 2010). The study, however, observed that translation of research findings into action in the study area has received very little attention in the TTFPP in recent times.

Successful community engagement is based on guiding principles. CBPR needs to be conducted according to norms of partnership; mutual respect for all parties involved (Lantz et al., 2001). It was found that the UDS students immersed themselves in the communities during the research and participated in social and economic activities in harmony with their hosts. Communities equally received the students and supported them in both the research and on general welfare. There were however few instances of dissatisfaction among students and communities mainly arising from non-co-operation and violation of community norms by communities and students respectively.

SCE establishes a relationship between actors, and whilst within the wider CBPR, this is expected to be a long term relationship (Gebbie et al., 2003) with timely feedback to non-academic (Cargo & Mercer, 2008), the University relationship with the community essentially ends after the students exit the community. Although the University communicated with stakeholders prior to community entry, there is virtually no feedback to the communities after the community engagement, truncating a long term relationship. Although participatory research has the potential of unconsciously partnering with the minority that may not represent the collective interest of the community (Macaulay et al., 1999), the UDS approach is able to offset this challenge, because the students stay and work with the entire community for four months in two years and as such they become immersed in the community. The TTFPP is inter and trans-disciplinary in nature as it combines various academic disciplines and specialised and indigenous knowledge of communities in the engagement. This makes it different from those of other public universities as well as other CBPR approaches.

Despite the challenges of TTFPP, it has great prospects and can contribute to the wider theory of CBPR because the students appreciate its relevance, the communities are willing to actively participate, and there is demand for TTFPP reports by communities. The communities were grateful that the University has recognised and selected them to be part of the programme and wish the programme duration could even be extended. They see the programme as a projector of the image of their communities which could result in some development in the future. Overall, the TTFPP serves as an effective

vehicle in contributing to blending the academic world with that of the community for sustainable development.

There is, however, the need for improvement in the TTFPP. While there are other areas equally important to the success of community engagements, effective communication is important in realising the benefits (O'Fallon & Dearry, 2002). In that regard, active participation of all stakeholders requires effective and steady dissemination of information to them, specifying their various roles in the engagement. Restructuring the UDS-Community engagement is necessary for effective participation, especially of the students. In order to equip students with adequate knowledge and skills to effectively engage with communities, the TTFPP should start in the second academic year. In that regard, the first year third trimester could be devoted to intensive course work to adequately prepare students for the engagement. A holistic review is recommended for the TTFPP, involving other major actors such as the district assemblies, and the TTFPP District Coordinators and Assessors, so as to infuse innovative ways of enriching the programme

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