

## **Can local knowledge make the difference? Rethinking university's community engagement and prospect for sustainable community development**

### **Abstract**

Against the backdrop of Africa's quest for development, there have been emerging demands for its universities to do more in contributing to development drives beyond their immediate sphere of operation. Drawing on an instrumental case study within an African community, this paper heartens a reconsideration of African universities' community engagement as a catalyst for sustainable development. It ascertains that it would be beneficial to the university and its mission to foster sustainable development when local voices are assimilated within its knowledge creation, diffusion and societal engagement objectives. Whilst this has the potential to instigate the university's engagement to address local and regional concerns and promote relevant development, this would be predicated on targeted collaborative engagement frameworks, underpinned by mutual trust.

**Key word:     The University, Community Engagement, Local Knowledge, Sustainable Development, Cameroon.**

### *Introduction*

The potential of a university contributing to sustainable development is not a new subject (Sherren, 2008; Preece, Ntseane, Modise & Osborne, 2012; Franklin, 2009; Blum, Nazir, Breiting, Goh & Pedretti, 2013; Mbah, 2015; Schuetze, 2010; Ostrander, 2004). Existing literature on education for sustainable development has touched on several themes such as partnerships, pedagogy, competences, challenges and outcomes (Lotz-Sisitka et al., 2015; Winter and Cotton, 2012; Mochizuki and Fadeeva, 2010; Blum et al. 2013). However, the extent to which, and how, local communities can be involved in fostering the positioning and engagement of universities in sustainable development agendas regionally is an under-researched, although a very important issue. This is particularly the case for universities in developing countries, where studies of universities' contribution to local development are scarce, and the issue of community involvement is even less investigated. Drawing on Barnet's idea of the ecological university whereby an engaged university can seek to capture and address local needs within its mission of care (Barnet, 2011; 2013), it can be posited that African universities can participate in projects that will address suffering and deprivation in the continent and foster community development. This is not to suggest that African universities have not been addressing the developmental needs of the continents in spite of the challenging socio-economic context of their operations (Mbah, 2014a). The case of the University of Botswana's engagement in Gaborone City (Ntseane, 2012) and Makerere University's extra-mural programmes (Openjuru and Ikoja-Odongo, 2012) illustrate the commitment

on the part of many African higher education institutions to respond to societal needs. However, the level and quality of African universities' participation in fostering sustainable development within the framework of their outreaches require a readdress (Preece et. al. 2012). A commonly used definition of sustainable development stems from the Brundtland report which posits that it is 'development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (WCED, 1987, 42). Whilst this definition is somewhat vague and subject to contextual interpretations, it does however usher two pivotal points. Firstly, the enormous significance of meeting the needs of the citizenry, including those living on the margins of communities and socially excluded. Secondly, developmental initiatives should not lead to resource depletion, which might inhibit the prospect of meeting the needs of the future generations. Although these facets of sustainable development are essential in contextualising this paper, the nexus however lies with the former and extends the scope of meeting the needs of the world's poor to include widening participation in developmental processes and outcomes.

Universities could be seen to closely engage in and work with local communities in network and partnerships, leading to knowledge co-creation and mutually beneficial outcomes that are productive and sustainable. Such initiatives can provide an opportunity for locals to get together and participate in building their communities (UNDP in Action annual report, 2010/2011) by taking active part in identifying community needs, contributing resources and sharing ideas to achieve sustainable outcomes. It should therefore be considered worthwhile for African universities with an engagement mission intended to drive sustainable development agendas to devise ways to capture local knowledge systems in an attempt to define the context and remit of such a mission.

### *Theoretical background*

University community engagement has been deprived of an adequate conceptual framework given its multifaceted nature. Over the years, significant emphasis has been placed on the importance of usable or applicable knowledge (Dewey, 1938). Rather than learning just for the sake of learning, Boyer (1996) in his concept of the engaged scholarship highlights the need to enable learning experiences to address the pressing needs of the society. The focus of education in the past was primarily centred on one's ability to remember and reproduce information as illustrated in Freire's (1970) banking concept of education. In today's world, there is growing need to go beyond education for recitation or regurgitation to education for societal transformation and sustainability (Bransford, Brown and Cocking, 1999). Boyer (1996) brought to the forefront some of the early conceptual framework of university - community engagement in his theoretical construct of "engaged scholarship". This explicates the relationship between higher education and their larger communities for mutual and beneficial exchange of resources and knowledge in a context of sustained partnership and reciprocity. In this concept, Boyer

argues that in order for education to have a fundamental role in contributing to public good, it would necessitate a platform for knowledge discovery, knowledge integration and knowledge sharing.

Similarly, Barnett (2011, 2013) brought to the fore the idea of an 'ecological university' which has both the position and the responsibility to care about and for the world. Whilst Barnett further asserts that the ecological university's care for the world is engendered by global concerns such as poverty, illiteracy and gender imbalance, without dialogue with the community to capture local insights, ascertain and address relevant needs, these concerns may not be met to the satisfaction of ordinary citizens of the community. It can be maintained that a local university's developmental mission may be satisfactorily realised for the greater good of the local community and sustained when it is backed by policies and processes aimed at articulating a place of influence for community voices. To corroborate the need for collective voices, Mohrman (2010) asserts that there are some missions universities simply cannot accomplish alone. From this perspective, it can be underscored that universities need to listen to and work with different partners in their attempt to play a transformational role in local communities. Every form of knowledge needs to be validated, including those of the oppressed as captured by Mpanbo African Multiversity (Wangoola, 2012; Tandon, 2008). This challenges the neoliberal notion of universities having a key role in the production and marketing of knowledge (Barnett, 2011; Nixon, 2011; Jarvis, 2001; Hart, Maddison and Wolff, 2007). In the United Kingdom for instance, the notion of universities seeking profitability and being run as corporations rather than committing to the public good was ignited at the beginning of the 1980s by the right-wing monetarist government. This led to a decline in government subsidies and a rise in student fees, forcing universities to become market oriented and competitive (Jarvis, 2001; Collini, 2012), resulting in academic leaders being transformed into managerial experts (Nixon, 2011). In spite of this trend, universities have been considered to possess the capacity that can contribute towards the realisation of sustainable development initiatives at regional levels (Mbah, 2016; Karatzoulou, 2013; Filho, 2011; Sedlacek, 2013). This aligns with the UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education declaration in 2009 which asserts that higher education and research have the potential to contribute to the eradication of poverty and progress towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (UNESCO, 2009).

Given that many universities in Africa are State owned (Mbah, 2014b; Teferra & Altbach, 2004), with assigned mission to promote national development, they are accountable not just to the State but also to the tax payers. In this light, this paper posits that one way a university can demonstrate accountability to ordinary people is by listening to their opinions within a framework of knowledge co-creation. In capturing the views of ordinary people, particular attention can be paid on a local knowledge system such as an indigenous knowledge. For many people and locals in Africa, Asia, Latin America and other parts of the world, indigenous knowledge represents and reflects the ways natives in a given locality have come to understand themselves and their environment and how they relate with a wide range of resources and organise themselves to enrich their life and environment (Agrawal, 1995; Warren, 1991).

Nonetheless, attributing indigenous knowledge to a group of people living in a given geographical locality can be problematic, and this is particularly so when one considers the effect of globalisation, migration, resettlements and free movement of people, goods, information, services and talents across different regions of the world. Semali and Kincheloe (1999) maintain that “the dilemma we face in defining indigenous knowledge and what it means in the context of millions of indigenous peoples of the world is central to the postmodern and postcolonial debates on the origins of knowledge and the manner in which it is produced, archived, retrieved and distributed throughout the academy” (1999, 4). Whilst the contestation and shifts in debate on the definition of indigenous knowledge persist (Van Damme & Neluvhalani 2004; Semali & Kincheloe 1999), many discourses have emphasised its significance in fostering agricultural practices, poverty alleviation, rural community development and inclusion (Agrawal, 1995; Sillitoe, 1998; Briggs, 2013). Although the idea of indigenous knowledge is relevant to the subject of sustainable development (Waren et al., 1989; Warren, 1991), this paper hinges rather on the notion of local knowledge. Shifting the discourse from indigenous knowledge to local knowledge helps to broaden the scope of knowledge to include both indigenous knowledge and other forms of localised knowledge.

In addition to highlighting the role of localised forms of knowledge, this paper underscores the importance of dialogue and partnership within a framework of co-production (Berkes, 2009) of a relevant knowledge base for sustainable development. Local people who are also made up of indigenes can exhibit distinctive knowledge, ways of expression, taste, preference and conduct (Bourdieu, 1985). Such distinctions can form the basis of local knowledge systems whose potential within the context of knowledge co-production with university partners can instigate prospects for local development.

### *Methodology*

The empirical phase of the research adopted a case study approach which ran for a 10 week consecutive period in the middle of 2013. As in other instrumental case studies, the case in this research was investigated to provide insight into an understanding of the general context (Stake, 1994) of the university’s community engagement and its potential to contribute to the fostering of sustainable development. The case study aimed to build a systematic understanding of how local people construct the existing and potential role of the university, and what might be required to meet their aspirations and needs in more developed and dialogical ways. The focus was a developing world context and specifically a municipality in Cameroon, situated in the South West Region which is one of two English Speaking regions of the country. The region consist of a highly complex community comprising a blend of urban, semi-urban, rural and traditional settings, the municipality is made up of eighty-five villages spread across a surface area of 870 Sq.km with a total estimated population of above 200,000 inhabitants. The majority of the inhabitants rely on agriculture (small scale farming) as a source of livelihood which makes the context compelling. In addition, the State owned university within the

municipality, with a student enrolment of over 16,000 was also examined. In total, 31 participants took part in the study and given that a case study will typically utilise many methods for data collection (Yin, 2013), the researcher had to make a decision as to which methods will best serve the context and design of the research. In order to give voice to research participants, 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted, and 11 members participated in two focus group discussions (Bryman, 2012; Yin, 2013). All interviews were conducted in either English language or Pidgin. Pidgin, which is a lingua franca and a local variation of English was occasionally used to avoid questions being misunderstood by participants if asked in standard English, especially when dealing with participants from very remote locations, and who have had very limited formal education. In addition, the researcher approached the research context as an insider. This meant that he could relate with some narratives from participants. However, as an insider, he had to take steps to make the familiar strange (Delamont, 2003). That is, he had to be careful not to articulate participants' voices on their behalf or conclude their utterances or ascribe meanings too soon to their responses due his familiarisation with some of their perspectives. In this case, he made a deliberate attempt to let participants have control of their ideas, draw their own conclusions and allow meanings to emerge naturally from the data. Also, the researcher's familiarity with the local context of Pidgin and knowledge of the English language gave him the aptitude to understand the narratives being articulated by participants and translate accordingly to have an accurate representation of their voices.

Participants were drawn from different age range, marital status and village of residence through different sampling methods, namely: purposive sampling (Creswell 2013), opportunistic sampling (Merril & West, 2009; Holliday, 2007), and snowball sampling (Langdrige & Hagger-Johnson, 2009). Community members were able to opt in and out of the enquiry process as their participation was voluntary and authenticated through individual consent forms. For those who opted to take part, questions and discussions revolved around the themes of the university's role in the wider society, community engagement, community development and local voices. In addition to the traditional methods of data collection already mentioned, there was direct observation (Langdrige & Hagger-Johnson, 2009). Within the research context, a farming session organised by the Faculty of Agriculture of the investigated university was observed. Yin (2013) argued that because case study takes place in a natural setting, it creates an opportunity for direct observation. Given that the main occupation of the inhabitants of the municipality of Buea is farming, it was relevant for the research to incorporate the observation of some farm activities of the Faculty of Agriculture of the University. The intention was to capture data which could be used alongside other datasets from different sources to construct meanings that would address the subject of the university and its potential to enhance community development. It is also worth noting that the data used in this paper is part of a main study which has been reported in some previous outputs (Mbah, 2015; 2016) and could be consulted for a broader appraisal.

### *Data Analysis*

The analysis of data was informed by the thematic analytical approach (Boyatzis, 1998; Attride-Stirling, 2001). Whilst there are different ways themes in a dataset can be identified (Ryan & Bernard, 2003), the identification of themes within the research was data driven (Wolcott, 1994). That is, the transcribed interviews and discussion were not subjected to a predetermined theory or any form of bias. This approach entails the identification of themes or patterns within data, coding the themes or patterns, combining similar or the same themes or pattern and cataloguing the themes or patterns in order to arrive at meaningful findings (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Aronson, 1994). Given that this research was also underpinned by the interpretivist research paradigm, the analysis of data also drew on the principle of hermeneutic circle to understand the macro complexity of the case study. From the micro understanding and meaning derived from the associate parts of the analysis, their interconnections, relationships, appropriate findings and conclusions were arrived at. According to Klein and Myers (1999), the hermeneutic circle highlights the fact that the “the whole” and the “parts” are intertwined and should be given a liberal and broad interpretation. By interpreting each segment or part of a data to obtain a holistic understanding of a case, the holistic understanding can also offer an understanding of its integral parts. It is within this framework the three ensuing themes, also known as findings were identified. The findings will be integrated with a discussion of them and it should be noted that when a participant is quoted, the name is often followed by the sex, the age range, the village where the participant resides and the date of the interview or focus group discussion such as “Margaret, female, 41-50, Bolifamba, 15-04-2013”.

### *Discussion and Findings*

Given the data analysis, three themes emerged, namely: Acknowledging local community voices and their potential to convey relevant knowledge; engaging the local community in co-creating a relevant knowledge base, and collaborative engagement as an operational disposition to maximise local knowledge.

#### *Acknowledging local community voices and their potential to convey relevant knowledge*

The analysis of participants’ perceptions on the university’s community engagement revealed a recurrent theme of their awareness of the significance of not only participating in community initiatives driven by the university but also most importantly, having their voices heard and helping to frame the context and direction of such initiatives. The following quotations drawn from participants’ narratives illustrate this:

Let the university go out and get the opinion of the people. They can start up programmes through their radio station to capture community opinions. Let them inform and educate the public on what they can do, call for a meeting with civil society organisations and we can come and talk and they will know how to fashion their programmes from the feedback (Joan, female, 51-60, Bulu, 22-04-2013).

Nobody is a monopolist of knowledge. The university should brainstorm with people in the society and get ideas and see exactly how they can better manage the university and orientate themselves (Clement, male, 51-60, Clerk's Quarter, 18-04-2013).

We need open forums for people to come together and share ideas. The university could organise one for people to come and see what the university has on offer, and how the community can be part of (Joe, Male, 51-60, Molyko, 27-04-2013).

The idea of community members having a voice within the remit of a university's outreach mission resonates with Barnett's (2011) concept of the ecological university. Given its responsibilities toward the wider environment, Barnett asserts that the ecological university acts in collective interests. The potential of a university to act within the framework of collective interests underlines the need to connect with, listen to and assimilate other relevant voices, knowledge systems and the ideas embedded in them. Whereas the idea of an ecological university is intended to serve common interests, it can be rightly argued that this would be predicated on the prevalence of democratic values operating within the university and the local community which can narrow existing power gaps between the "gown" and the "town", that is, between the university and the local community. By recognising and incorporating voices from disparate backgrounds in the community, the university can factor into its engagement and processes, community concerns and ideas in an interweaving context of securing benefits for both the community and the university in sustainable ways (Mbah, 2015). Although the ecological university can take different forms and shapes within the context of its civic responsibility, as well as engages in the community and in research that tackles both global and local concerns (Barnett, 2011), it is needful to address how a university with an engagement mission for instance can ascertain what local concerns are in the first place before attempting to address them. Okolie (2003) asserts that most development experts who visited Africa within the past decades did not enquire what Africans themselves really thought, what they want, what the issues are and how they engaged similar issues in the past. A university should not assume to know what it does not know about the community it intends to serve. Although the intended beneficiaries of sustainable development are ordinary people, they should also be drivers (UNDP in Action Annual report, 2010/2011). By empowering and listening to ordinary people articulate what the issues are and how they could be address in ways that are relevant and friendly to their conduct of life, sustainable development can be attained.

Whilst it is advantageous for universities to recognise and maximise local knowledge systems within their engagement framework, it is also worth noting that universities do not exist exclusively to satisfy local concerns (Barnett, 2011; Nixon, 2011; Jarvis, 2013; Hart, Maddison & Wolff, 2007; Collini, 2012). However, a university will make enormous contribution in serving the public good and fostering

local development when it listens to local communities to take actions on initiatives that would enrich the wellbeing of the community. One research participant buttressed this point: ‘It is important for the university to listen to our voices because we can talk. Irrespective of our educational level, we can say something based on our experience which can help the university’ (Elizabeth, female, 41-50, Bokuva, 03-05-2013). Apart from enabling the university to accomplish a strategic mission in a local community, local knowledge systems can enhance knowledge systems at the university by channelling them to serve purposes relevant to ordinary people within the framework of co-production and co-diffusion. Furthermore, the process of blending scientific and local knowledge systems to address local developmental needs can lead to a better understanding of the nature of challenges facing the community (Warren *et al.* 1989). As community members tend to be aware of what they need, as well as what can be user friendly to them in terms of solutions, expert researchers can work with local knowledge to produce tools and mechanisms that can serve local contexts in efficient ways. Preece *et al.* (2012) noted that in some instances, local knowledge practices in African communities on the making of organic fertilizers can be enhanced and made more robust by accessing scientific knowledge and the university can also access local knowledge and render its knowledge base more robust for local consumption. The potential of local voices to convey a relevant knowledge base to inform, inspire or complement a university’s engagement for sustainable development, within a framework of knowledge co-creation, diffusion and implementation can be considered empowering and emancipatory (Freire, 1970) by all involved. The benefits of such a participatory framework is further underscored by Habermas’ theory of communicative action (Habermas, 1987) which amplified the need for communication to involve all interested persons fostered by an atmosphere free from a centrally dominating influence.

#### *Engaging the local community in co-creating a relevant knowledge base*

As part of the direct observation approach to data collection, the research that underpins this paper engaged a local tomato farmer during a practical farming session organised by the Faculty of Agriculture of the investigated university. The practical session was dedicated to train students on the techniques of farming tomato. The following excerpt from the exercise illustrates the significance of engaging local people in an attempt to capture and maximise local knowledge systems for a common good:

Q: Can you tell me what you have observed?

A: I saw too many sticks and when I asked the students, they said, it is for staking. They said they are using sticks to stake the tomatoes. What I saw with those sticks is that some of them may not last. Some of the sticks are fresh and have buds and when used to stake tomatoes, they can germinate and create bushy areas, thereby obstructing the growth of the tomato plants.

Q: Do you have any other observation?

A: Another observation is that when they were planting, they carried the seedlings with the soil from the nursery beds, so when I asked why, they said that the soil from the nursery bed contain the nutrients the seedlings need in order to grow before getting use to the nutrients in its new environment. So that is actually something new that I have learnt.

Q: After observing this practical session, what are the things you can take home which you think may help you improve your farming skills and increase your yields?

A: As I said before, the way the students transplanted the seedlings, that is, they did so with the soil - that is the only thing I have learnt. With all the other things, I'm familiar with.

Q: Do you think it will give you a better yield if you practiced what you have seen here?

A: I will go and put it to test. It is something new I have seen. I will now go and test it.

Q: Based on your observation, are there suggestions you make to improve the practical knowledge being given the students?

A: It is just the staking which I saw as a problem. The students need to use better sticks such as Indian Bamboos, which is the best. It is what I am using. If you use the kind of sticks I have seen them used, you need to clean up the buds. Also, they should use strong sticks because if the stick is tinny, the weight of the tomato will push it down.

The account of this transcript strongly suggests that by engaging local people in development agendas and processes, a win-win situation can be occasioned. This can be evident when university and community ideas are jointly appreciated and provided with the opportunity to inform an experiential learning opportunity such as an action oriented project on tomato farming. This phase of the research was relevant because improvement in tomato farming can instigate local sustainable development by guaranteeing food securing and income generation for local people (Mbah, 2015). Furthermore, the engagement of students and the tomato farmer align with the notion of engaged scholarship propounded by Boyer (1996) where he asserts that scholarship should not be restricted to theory and classroom activism but should also find expression in the field. After the engagement process which involves the tomato farmer observing the practical session and having conversations with student trainees, the farmer suggests that he has learnt a lesson from the exercise, as well as can contribute some knowledge. Whereas the university has got scientific knowledge that can benefit the local community, the tomato farmer demonstrated that the local community also has knowledge that can benefit the university's knowledge-base.

On this basis, it could be advanced that an illuminating way of accessing local knowledge is to engage local people. This can activate an opportunity for them to articulate productive ideas, based on their lived experiences. To support this assertion, the tomato farmer said: "the students need to use better sticks such as Indian Bamboos, which is the best. It is what I am using. If you use the kind of sticks I have seen them used, you need to clean up the buds" (Martin, male, 31-40, Molyko, 26-04-2013). After several years of farming tomato, the farmer's experience highlighted "Indian Bamboos" as one of the best sticks that could be used in staking tomato plants. Given that students and academics are

accustomed to theories, they can benefit from the rich experiences of community stakeholders to compliment theoretical knowledge and community stakeholders can also draw on existing knowledge at the university to complement their practices. The tomato farmer further clarifies: ‘They [the university] can work with local farmers and exchange knowledge on farming skills and techniques and in so doing that will help local farming’ (Martin, male, 31-40, Molyko, 26-04-2013). This suggests there is great significance in engaging local actors within the framework of a university’s pursuit for the sort of development that will benefit the wider community. This may go a long way to address the Association of African Universities (AAU)’s mission of strengthening the capacity of African universities and enhancing their contribution to African development. Long before this mission was articulated, several African universities already had a mandate to contribute to national development (Mbah, 2014a). For instance, there were expectations for universities in Cameroon to make contribution towards the achievement of national developmental targets (Njeuma, 1999). Given the drive to involve African universities in the development of the continent, this paper maintains that they stand a better chance of fulfilling this mission when they engage the community to ascertain local needs and processes aimed at achieving these needs. Whilst Boyer (1996) argues the need for education to have a fundamental role in contributing to public good through knowledge discovery, knowledge integration and knowledge sharing, it is expedient to also acknowledge potential sources of knowledge and this can include engaged locals. Freire (1970) also emphasised the need for collective participation in change processes by paying attention to what each member of the community knows. This has to do with the need to respect the different forms of knowledge that exist amongst the popular class or ordinary people of the community. Therefore, it should be conceivable for universities with a mandate to foster sustainable development to engage targeted communities (UNDP in Action annual report, 2010/2011). Moreover, engaging local people and their knowledge systems is fundamental in realising any piece of work or producing any research or engagement output that would be meaningful to their culture and social contexts (Agrawal, 1995). However, there is need to address the type of operational disposition a university can adopt to enable it to co-create, co-share and co-integrate a relevant knowledge system for sustainable development.

#### *Collaborative engagement as an operational disposition to maximise local knowledge*

Even though the university at the centre of this research tends to create some, often ‘tokenistic’ opportunities for discussion with the community, participants were generally of the opinion that the university lacks the will and determination to listen to community voices within a framework of co-creation of knowledge. One community participant and former student of the university maintained that “there is no such opportunity for us to make suggestion to the university. I don't know, maybe it is there. I have been looking for it” (Margaret, female, 41-50, Bolifamba, 15-04-2013). This view was also shared by many participants; they said they have suggestions to make and seek for opportunities to speak but felt there were none. One community member felt that the university was operating in a

cocoon and the community does not have a say in its affairs. However, despite the difficulties expressed by participants for community members to have their voices listened to within the framework of knowledge co-creation and university's community operations, it was also noted that a few community members had been able to have their voices listened to by certain members of the university based on personal relationships. To corroborate the idea of "personal relationship", a female community member who was managing an NGO that had hosted interns from the university stated that "I have no collaboration with the university. I however have contacts with some of the educationist there like Dr. X." (Joan, female, 51-60, Bulu, 22-04-2013).

The notion of being in contact with an institution on the basis of personal relationship with few members of the institution may also be referred to as "man-know-man" which is an expression in pidgin but would be expressed in Western societies today as "individual-know-individual". A community member who was relying on food crop production and had twenty-six dependents illustrated the notion of "man-know-man" when asked if she has ever had the opportunity to dialogue with the university:

It is a matter of who you know there. I think that they can deal more with the people they know, those that they are familiar with. I had a concern but had to go through a sister of mine to channel it, which was resolved. I could not go there myself and had to use an intermediary (Helen, female, 51-60, Bokwai New Layout, 05-05-2013).

Whilst the idea of "man-know-man" presents an opportunity for some community members to have their voices listened to and their concerns addressed, it also suggests that those who do not know someone at the university will have their voices side-lined. In such situations, the strong and connected could take advantage over the weak and disconnected and this has the tendency to foster massive segregation, bias, tribalism, favouritism and nepotism within the university and wider environment. For this to be abated and a level playing field established for diverse community members to have a place to co-create and co-diffuse knowledge with relevant university partners, this paper suggests targeted collaborative engagement platforms based on mutual trust. This should demonstrate a profound presence of community involvement and shared ownership of initiatives intended to benefit the locals. Equity should also be considered an essential component of such a collaborative framework (Barnes et al., 2009; Nocon, 2004; Thompson, Story & Butler, 2002) between the university and the local community which can guarantee a mutual but sustainable outcome for partners (Gronski & Pigg 2000). Furthermore, the collaborative platform should be driven primarily by a participatory endeavour which draws on ideas emerging from all parties in ways and methods designed to address an array of issues. Through knowledge co-creation, sharing and assimilation, the framework of collaborative engagement can be beneficial in advancing, fostering and realising the interests of local partners and the community (Peters et al., 2005) as well as enhancing and meeting the interests and aspirations of the university. This assertion demands an element of trust at the level of the community and most importantly, at the level of the university. Although trust can be multi-dimensional (Griffiths, 2006; Tschannen-Moran,

2001), the one central to capturing and maximising local knowledge systems to improve prospects for local development is experience-based. That is, universities should be able to trust local people to contribute useful knowledge which can be evident by their lived experience. Whilst it can be argued that contemporary universities cannot literally dialogue with each inhabitant of the wider community, strategic channels and targeted partnerships for knowledge production or exchange can be identified. Also, it is reasonable to consider that it is not always an easy venture for separate entities such as a local community and a university to collaborate on a subject. The community's culture can clash with the university's standardised view on a range of issues which may include but not limited to social justice, power relation and style of work (Dewar & Isaac, 1998). In this regard, embracing and fostering a collaborative engagement framework demands a significant level of commitment and trust from both partners.

### *Conclusion*

Whereas much has been written on the subject of university community engagement and sustainable development, this article heightens the need to rethink community engagement by articulating the role of local voices and an operational disposition a development minded university can adopt. By co-creating, co-sharing and co-integrating relevant knowledge with local stakeholders within its community engagement, a university can reinforce its place as an ecologically minded university responding to the need for community wellbeing and sustainable development. Whilst the context of community engagement may vary across different settings and regions, this paper posits some phases a university can consider in an attempt to maximise local knowledge systems for sustainable development.

Firstly, the university with a development oriented mission such as a state owned university in a developing world context must realise that local people are not empty barrels to receive and integrate scientific knowledge or other forms of knowledge but should be trusted to articulate their own forms of knowledge within a context of co-creation, co-diffusion and co-integration if development targets are going to be sustainable. As community members tend to be aware of what they need, as well as what can be user friendly to them in terms of solutions, expert researchers can work with them to produce relevant tools and mechanisms that can best serve local contexts in efficient ways.

Secondly, an appropriate way to access relevant local knowledge systems is not from a distant location. Local people should be engaged in ventures intended to foster the development of their communities and wellbeing. In the process, they will inject into the system a portfolio of relevant experiences and ideas to enrich the ventures. Through community engagement, which is not the preserve of universities but also local communities, local people can articulate the knowledge of *what* local community issues are, the knowledge of *where* local community issues are, the knowledge of *when* local community issues

are apparent and possibly the knowledge of *how* local community issues could be addressed, drawing on their lived experiences. These facets of knowledge are relevant to a university's community engagement target of fostering sustainable development by addressing issues relevant to the community.

Thirdly, it is not enough to engage local people if the goal is to co-create a knowledge base for sustainable development as they can be engaged and basically operate within the sphere of their kind, meaning their ideas may not filter to another party. Consequently, this paper advances that an appropriate operational disposition to adopt when engaging local people to co-create and co-integrate a relevant knowledge base for sustainable development is targeted *collaborative engagement* underpinned by mutual trust. This has the potential to mitigate existing power gaps between the university and local actors, boosts unrestricted communication, exchange of ideas and the realisation of common developmental outcomes.

Whilst the research suffered from the limitation of time constraint and sample size, there are however prospects for future studies resulting from it. In this regard, the adoption of a different methodological path such as Action Participatory Research can be considered to further probe some of the findings. For instance, an Action Participatory Research can create a practical scenario for community members to participate in designing a service learning curriculum which can be operationalised in the community and the outcomes examined in the light of fostering community development. Furthermore, it would be appropriate to complement this research on a single case study with another research on another university or multiple universities to come up with a comparative study which can potentially articulate best practices in different locations of the world and universities/communities can have the opportunity to draw on a variety of outcomes.

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