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A review of the strategies used by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) use to reduce vulnerability to poverty in Zimbabwe

DUBE, Kiriana

ABSTRACT

This review paper examines the strategies, strengths and weaknesses, contradictions and controversies in literature on non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and vulnerability. The identification of gaps in literature sets the context for an in-depth study that will investigate the role of NGOs in reducing rural vulnerability. The paper adopts a semi-systematic literature review methodology where recent literature is reviewed and synthesised to understand the strategies that NGOs use to reduce rural vulnerability to poverty. Based on six (6) University of Johannesburg online databases, as well as four (4) interdisciplinary journals, a total of 25 relevant journal articles published from 2009-2019 were reviewed. Evidence from literature suggests that the role of NGOs is prominent in poverty reduction using top-down strategies. Few scholars have examined how NGOs reduce vulnerability. The paper argues that in the context of climate change, vulnerability cannot continue to be overlooked. This points to the need to shift focus from poverty to include vulnerability. In practice, it means policy makers should enact vulnerability pro-poor policies that are designed to protect rural communities from shocks and stresses.

KEY TERMS: vulnerability, poverty, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), Zimbabwe

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Author/s details

PhD Candidate, Department of Sociology, University of Johannesburg, PO Box 524, Auckland Park 2006 Republic of South Africa. Email: kiridubs@gmail.com

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INTRODUCTION

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have played a central role in improving the lives of the marginalized communities particularly in developing countries where national governments have lacked capacity and political will to address the needs of their people. In the context of sustainable development, NGOs are well suited to provide innovative and participatory practices. NGO research seem to be fragmented as few scholars have synthesised literature on NGO programming. Kareithi and Lund, (2012) reviewed NGO performance published in academic journals between 1996 and 2008. Brass et al, (2018) carried a mixed methods systematic review of published literature on NGO scholarship of the three decades from 1980-2014. This review paper seeks to understand in literature how NGOs are reducing rural vulnerability to poverty. The question posed is: what strategies do NGOs use to reduce rural vulnerability to poverty? To answer this question, and locate NGO strategies, the paper looks at the contemporary debates on NGO programming, identify problems, strengths and weaknesses, contradictions and controversies in literature on NGOs and vulnerability. The identification of gaps in literature sets the context for an in-depth study that will investigate the role of (NGOs) in reducing rural vulnerability. The paper adopts a semi-systematic review methodology also called a narrative review that provides qualitative descriptions of the results of previous studies. Based on six (6) University of Johannesburg online databases, four (4) interdisciplinary journals relevant to the topic, a total of 25 journal articles published from 2009-2019 were reviewed. The analysis of literature show that scholars use both qualitative and quantitative methodologies and the debate that is on-going in academic literature is that of the tension between responding to immediate needs of people and promoting long term development for rural people, which, at a conceptual level, is a move from focusing on poverty to vulnerability. Questions of use of top-down strategies causing dependency, lack of participation, empowerment and sustainability have preoccupied development scholars for a long time. These four key debates have framed the literature on NGO programming. The paper begins by looking at conceptualisations of vulnerability to show how vulnerability and poverty are distinct and yet interlinked concepts. The paper moves on to methodology section which is followed by review of related literature, drawing from case studies that show that NGOs have largely focused on poverty reduction, meeting the material needs of rural people using top-down strategies. The role of NGOs in reducing vulnerability is seen in disaster situations where they provide relief, helping people rebuild their lives using top down strategies. The paper ends with a discussion of findings and the major conclusions drawn from literature and areas that need further research.

THE ‘WHO IS CURRENTLY POOR VERSUS WHO IS AT RISK DEBATE’

The debate on poverty and vulnerability rests on whether poverty and vulnerability are the same, or distinct concepts, and whether there is a relationship between the two. A discussion of how the two concepts are different or related is important in highlighting why this review focuses on vulnerability rather than poverty. One school of thought argues that poverty and vulnerability are synonymous (Alwang, 2001; Pasteur, 2011) and that in economics literature, vulnerability is often implied in many poverty studies. Another school of thought argues that poverty and vulnerability are distinct concepts (de Janvry and Sadoulet, 2016; Makoka and Kaplan, 2005; Naude et al, 2009). Chambers (1989:6) define vulnerability as exposure to contingencies, stress and difficulty in coping with them. Poverty is defined as a lack of access to the material, economic, social, political and cultural resources needed to satisfy basic needs. Poverty focuses on the current status of an individual or a household in terms of the state of income and material resources while vulnerability is about exposure to risk. The concepts are interlinked in such a way that poverty makes people vulnerable to shocks such as droughts because of fewer or lack of assets to cushion them. In turn, peoples’ vulnerability to shocks exacerbates poverty because of low coping capacities. Best (2013) argues for the need to redefine poverty as risk and vulnerability as that enables practitioners to look beyond the existing poverty to also focus on preventing future poverty. Scholars argue that while poverty provides a useful threshold in quantitative terms to define the poor and non-poor (for example, those living on less than a given threshold are considered poor), it does not capture the qualitative lived realities of the poor. In particular, issues arising from sustained deprivation, voicelessness and powerlessness (Chambers, 1989). These are feelings of vulnerability resulting from uncertainty and insecurity that are often neglected in poverty literature and specifically in NGO scholarship.

METHODOLOGY

The paper a semi-systematic literature review to understand how NGOs are reducing rural vulnerability. Semi-systematic review is different from the traditional literature review in that it identifies, selects, synthesises and evaluates best evidence to a particular research question. In a narrative review, I was able to combine results from different studies that used different methods and that addressed different questions but arriving at same conclusion. The approach involved a comprehensive search of all relevant published and unpublished works with a goal to synthesise a body of evidence to achieve robust and extensive conclusions. The other advantage of a narrative approach is that it reduces bias and the approach is replicable. A meta-analysis literature review methodology

would not be ideal in that it generally uses quantitative methods that would not yield or address the research question. Narrative review allowed us to identify patterns and connections as well as evaluating studies based on the methods used that allow conclusions about the literature. However, the weakness of a narrative review is that it cannot routinely incorporate all the relevant sources.

In order to identify, critically evaluate and integrate findings from different sources, we began with the most recent works working backwards, with the assumption that recent articles would contain references of previous works and may also contain a synthesis of literature related to the subject matter. We searched six (6) large online University of Johannesburg library databases for potential relevant studies. Selected databases included African Journals Online (AJOL), Africa Wide Information – EBSCO, Emerald, Taylor and Francis, Science Direct as well as African Education Research (ESSA). The choice of databases was determined by the need to select publications that are scholarly and peer reviewed. The databases also contain information related to the subject matter and therefore allowed the researcher to gain an international perspective on NGOs and vulnerability. Besides searching the literature on large online databases, the author also searched journals on NGOs as well as the interdisciplinary journals that dominate NGO research to find the most relevant articles. To identify relevant studies, we used key words together with Boolean search options of AND/OR/NOT to refine the search and bring out articles that include only the search terms. Thus, the following key words were used; ‘Non-Governmental Organizations’ [NGOs] AND ‘Vulnerability’; ‘NGOs and vulnerability’ NOT ‘poverty’; ‘NGOs programmes’ OR ‘NGO interventions’; ‘Strategies NGOs use to reduce vulnerability’. The key words are important when doing a narrative literature review as they improve rigour.

The inclusion and exclusion criteria included all empirical researches published in English in the last 10 years (2009-2019) from Zimbabwe, the African region and international. Potential relevant articles were screened by first skimming the abstracts to identify the relevant articles then reading the full articles. Data was therefore collected from the studies that met the eligibility criteria. Data was synthesised based on the themes or patterns observed from the studies reviewed related to the topic of study. A total of 25 articles were extracted and reviewed to answer the research question. Findings were then discussed in terms of themes that emerged from literature. An overarching general interpretation of the findings was presented with its implications on further research.

FINDINGS

Prevalence of vulnerability and the role of NGOs: An international perspective

A number of studies have shown that vulnerability is more widespread than poverty (de Janvry and Sadoulet, 2016; Human Development Report, 2014; Marariki and Nyamwanza, 2012). These studies show that vulnerability is increasingly recognised as a growing global issue affecting human development across societies. Reducing the impact of vulnerability on populations and strengthening resilience of households and communities have become urgent, in order to achieve sustainable development (Human Development Report, 2014; Musa and Omokore, 2011). Scholars argue that if vulnerability is not reduced, those who move in and out of poverty (often referred to as the transient poor) will be pulled back to poverty and those that are already in poverty (chronic poor) can experience deeper poverty, which is deprivation (Gupta, 2008). Increased vulnerability contributes to an increase in poverty levels as demonstrated by Narayan et al (2009) who found that 10.4% of people in Malawi were taken out of poverty, after experiencing shocks 10.6% fell back into poverty, completely reversing the gains that had been made to move people out of poverty. Gupta (2008) sees vulnerability as the cause of poverty arguing that today’s poverty is yesterday’s unaddressed vulnerability.

In the Sub Saharan Africa, unemployment, droughts, climate change, financial crises, conflict and epidemics such as HIV and AIDS, and the recent coronavirus are some of the shocks that the poor are confronted with (Cooke 2015; Heltberg et al, 2012; Mafa and Kang’ethe, 2019; Naude et al, 2009). Governments in Sub Saharan region seem not to have capacity to help their citizens as they often lack resources and institutional frameworks for formal social protection mechanisms, increasing the vulnerability of both the chronic and non-poor to poverty and deprivation over time. To understand the impact of natural and man-made disasters on livelihoods and wellbeing in eight developing countries. Heltberg et al (2012) found that households were engaged in income diversification, making painful sacrifices such as working long hours, eating less, taking children out of school, not seeking medical treatment, selling assets as well as high risk activities such as engaging in sex work, drugs and theft. The strength of this study is the use of qualitative methods, which revealed everyday realities that would otherwise not be revealed with quantitative methods. These studies strengthen the view that vulnerability is an important area of focus.

Strategies used by NGOs to reduce vulnerability

In assessing the strategies used by NGOs to reduce vulnerability studies show that NGOs employ structured strategies that provides little room for beneficiary participation suggesting that NGO strategies are prescriptive to meet the needs of people in the short term. As poor people in developing countries continue to experience multiple shocks emanating from natural and man-made disasters, NGOs are directing their efforts to reduce vulnerability of rural people by implementing Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) programmes. These are the programmes that are designed to helping communities prepare and prevent future disasters. However, findings revealed that beneficiaries lacked ownership of projects and that NGO led disaster preparedness programmes in some communities were not providing people with the skills and knowledge on planning and implementing disaster preparedness projects (Pertwi et al, 2019).

A review of NGOs implementing DRR programmes in Northern Namibia show that NGOs were employing short term adaptation strategies (Angula and Kaundjua, 2016). The NGO role was seen in providing drought relief, using top-down strategies. In contrast, two studies in Malawi show that NGOs are adopting community based approaches in disaster preparedness (Kita, 2017; Trogrlić et al, 2018). Kita's study show that NGOs are working with communities in disaster preparedness while findings from a study in Nsanje and Chikwawa districts by Trogrlic et al (2018) show that NGO programmes are at community level rather than 'with' community, which promotes local ownership and sustainability of NGO projects. This shows that although DRR programmes are increasing in the countries of the South most of them are based at community level rather than 'with' the community implying that some DRR community based programmes do not involve the communities in decision making and therefore do not use participatory methods.

For most part, studies on vulnerability within the Zimbabwean context have looked at how communities are adapting to climate change using indigenous systems such as Zunde raMambo (Chief's granary), growing drought resistant crops and traditional ceremonies such as *mikwerera* (rain making ceremonies). However, a study by Nhodo et al, (2014) show that community based smallholder irrigation schemes can be affected by top-down approaches, with outside agencies taking over the schemes. The study by Nhodo et al (2014) found that in the Rupike irrigation scheme in the Chivi district, outsiders took a technical and a managerial approach towards the irrigation scheme. This resulted in the exclusion of beneficiaries from decision making. Moreover, studies by Manyena et al (2013) and Mavhura, (2017) show that rural people are not adequately prepared for and that actions are taken after a disaster has occurred suggesting lack of disaster preparedness in Zimbabwe. These studies show a gap in literature with regard to the absence of NGOs in Zimbabwe to reduce vulnerability and strengthen resilience of rural people to cope with socio-economic and environmental shocks.

Evidence from literature show that NGO programming in Zimbabwe is focused on poverty reduction specifically meeting the immediate needs of rural communities and increasing household income, implementing microfinance programmes. Studies by Tsigas et al (2016) show that community participation in NGO projects was lacking even where bottom up approaches were said to be employed because of lack of understanding on what constitutes participation. Scholars found out that certain aspects of participation such as involvement in decision making were lacking. This suggests that beneficiaries were not involved in all stages of the project from problem identification, project design, implementation and evaluation, which are important elements that make the participants feel that they are part of the project.

In evaluating NGO poverty reduction strategies in the Binga district, Mago et al (2015) found that the strategies employed by NGOs in reducing poverty were not effective to promote long term development as NGOs were distributing food, creating dependency as beneficiaries could not think of means to survive on their own. Scholars suggested the need to shift from current strategies to participatory approaches. Findings show that instead of relief, beneficiaries preferred developmental programmes that bring development to their community and eventually reduce poverty. This confirms findings from extant literature that NGOs particularly those that do things for people create a dependency syndrome, which does not promote empowerment (Banks et al, 2015). Scholars have called on development NGOs to change their strategies in-order to remain relevant.

Contemporary criticisms against NGOs

NGOs perpetuating the dependency

Findings from literature show that NGO dependency on donors for funding has affected the way they implement programs as donors tend to dictate to NGOs creating dependency syndrome (Mafa and Kang'ethe; Smith, 2015). In that regard, NGOs are accountable to donors rather than to the people they purport to represent (Banks et al, 2015). Drawing from case studies in Africa and Asia, findings show that some NGOs in Sub Saharan Africa are not able to promote sustainable development because their donors have not engaged them to do so. Similarly, an analysis of NGO programming in Ghana, show that NGOs are using problem-focused approaches that tend to see rural challenges as problems that require external efforts from donors rather than from communities themselves (Osei, 2017). For example, NGOs in Ghana were building toilets, digging boreholes, and building schools and clinics, with little participation of beneficiaries in decision making. Osei, (2017) concluded that NGOs were

contributing to the underdevelopment of Ghana and making it difficult for Ghana to achieve sustainable development as NGOs imposed their own programmes on beneficiaries. Ironically from this study, locals were not able to criticise NGOs even when they did not agree with them for fear of losing support, suggesting that NGOs have created dependency. Sahoo, (2013) study questioned whether NGOs were doing development or creating dependency in a rural district south of Rajasthan in India suggesting that the NGO was not promoting participation and empowerment as beneficiaries remained dependent on the NGO. Although some NGOs are said to be operating within the participatory paradigm, evidence show that NGOs lack understanding of the social, economic and cultural contexts in which programmes are implemented (Sahoo, 2013). It suggests that NGOs are divorced from the local contexts due to their dependency on donors.

NGO programmes lack of participation and empowerment

Although participation can be an empowering process where beneficiaries are able to participate in decision-making processes of the development process, NGOs seem to embrace the discussion on participation and empowerment but fail in practice to walk the talk (Banks et al, 2015). Scholars argue that participation is rhetorical because there is no resonance between theory and practice. For other scholars, participation is ‘cosmetic’, for NGOs to appear to be doing good. These scholars agree that local participation reflects local power dynamics that shape who participates and whose interests are represented. Banks et al (2015) argue that for NGO programmes not to be palliative there has to be shifts in power suggesting that rather than being service providers, doing things for people, NGOs can be facilitators, which is more participatory and sustainable. They can achieve this by re-orienting themselves, prioritising communities, relinquishing power over programme design, planning and implementation to the grassroots. By doing so, NGOs will be contributing towards the longer term-structural change that tackles the root causes rather than the symptoms of poverty.

Empowerment entails the process of allowing the communities to own and have control over the development of projects. The goal of empowerment is for local people to be independent from NGOs implying that they can make their own decisions, when they have acquired skills, they can design and implement their own projects. Participation makes development more demand-driven, bottom-up, rather than top-down (Hunt and Samman, 2016). Scholars argue that the debate on empowerment is about power dynamics at play and hinges on addressing pertinent questions as to who is empowering who? Is it the individual, community and by whom? In the context of NGOs, it is essentially the redistribution of power from NGOs to locals. Can the NGOs give communities power over projects? If so, to what extent? These are the questions that the research community are seeking to answer in the empowerment debate. The tendency is that those who have power want to hang on to it. Scholars suggest that the term ‘empowerment’ is just being used without understanding of what it means and how to empower confirming arguments by scholars that empowerment has become a buzzword in development circles and many lack understanding of what it means and how people can be empowered (Hunt and Samman, 2016).

NGO projects lack sustainability

Another criticism from literature on NGOs is that their projects lack sustainability (Appe, 2019). Sustainability is taken to mean ownership of projects beyond the end of the project. It means that NGO project should be able to sustain itself and continue long after the programme has ended. It follows then that strong participation of people in decision-making processes in NGO projects is needed. The criticism against NGOs emanates from the premise that households and communities have not been capacitated to make decisions in NGO projects. Appe (2019) describes case studies of how NGOs are experiencing sustainability challenges in Ghana and Latin America due to aid dependency, shifting donor priorities resulting in donor withdrawal and projects ending prematurely. Due to the top down approaches NGOs use, they rarely build capacity of beneficiaries to sustain the projects. Studies emphasise that NGOs ought to formulate objectives that are meant to build ownership and empowerment of projects. One limitation of sustainability is that many organisations have not been capacitated to create sustainability mechanisms in their programming. This has the ripple effect on communities failing to sustain projects on their own.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

Most scholars seem to agree that poverty and vulnerability are distinct and interlinked concepts (Chambers, 1989; de Janvry and Sadoulet, 2016; Makoka and Kaplan, 2005). The concepts are distinct in that poverty is about lack of basic material needs such as food, money, clothing while vulnerability is about risk. They are interlinked in such a way that each concept influence the other. For example poverty makes people vulnerable and if it is not addressed, it will result in vulnerable populations experiencing deeper poverty (Goshu, 2011). Literature shows that in economics, vulnerability is often implied in poverty studies. This implies that in NGO programming, NGOs should consider asking critical questions such as who is poor as well as who is at risk? However, literature has

shown that NGOs have predominantly focused on asking who is poor and their programmes have been short term, designed to meet the immediate material needs of people. It seems NGOs have largely ignored the questions of who is at risk so as to direct their efforts towards reducing vulnerability. There is need to look at vulnerability as a distinct concept and how NGOs are reducing it.

Analyses of literature show that many studies on NGOs have largely focused on meeting the immediate needs of people. This points to the historical prescriptive way of modernising where western countries dictate to other countries how they should develop to achieve economic growth. Makuwira (2018) adds that development was perceived to be driven by experts, mainly Western white men who disregarded local knowledge and traditions. This shows that development is political, because it is characterised by power imbalances between two classes developed and developing, rich and poor.

Literature shows that disasters, natural or human-made have increased in the last few decades particularly in developing south and are instrumental to increasing vulnerability of populations to experience deeper poverty and deprivation (Human Development Report, 2014; Naude et al, 2009). The Human Development report emphasise the need to reduce vulnerability, prepare households and communities for a less vulnerable future to achieve sustainable development. The prevalence of vulnerability serves to show that vulnerability is a growing problem. Some studies show that NGO programming in reducing vulnerability is dominated in disaster relief and Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) to help communities recover and rebuild their lives (Angula and Kaundjua, 2016). NGOs seem to have paid less attention to the fact that rural people are exposed to multiple shocks that may affect their lives and livelihoods increasing their propensity to fall into poverty in future. It could be argued that insufficient attention is paid to the questions of vulnerability, and the ways in which NGOs are reducing vulnerability and building resilience of rural people to cope with shocks and stresses. The Zimbabwean scholarship on disasters show that disaster preparedness in Zimbabwe is weak (Manyena et al, 2013; Mavhura, 2017). What is evident from these studies are the glaring gaps in literature that few scholars have studied vulnerability as a distinct concept from poverty and how NGOs are reducing rural vulnerability in practice using participatory approaches. This paper argues that understanding the role of NGOs provide important insights into how NGOs are reducing vulnerability to poverty and building resilience of households and communities.

The criticisms against NGOs confirm the debate that is on-going in academic literature of the tension between responding to immediate needs of people and promoting long term development for rural people, which, at a conceptual level, is a move from focusing on poverty to vulnerability (Best, 2013; Osei, 2017). The argument of these scholars is that service provision, over time will lead to people ceasing to be proactive and innovative to find solutions to the challenges they face but instead wait on NGOs to provide for them.

CONCLUSION

The paper aimed to set the context for an in-depth study on the role of NGOs in reducing rural vulnerability. To achieve this objective, the paper collated existing literature on NGOs from 2009 to 2019. Studies revealed that the role of NGOs is prominent in poverty reduction and disaster situations where NGOs react to disasters implementing relief strategies that are top-down in nature. The studies further show that in both poverty reduction and in responding to disasters, NGOs tend to use top-down strategies that create dependency, do not promote participation, ownership of projects and affect the long term sustainability of projects. The studies revealed useful insights into NGO programming and that few scholars have studied vulnerability as a distinct concept from poverty. Other pertinent issues raised by the scholars include that of dependency syndrome, lack of participation in the poverty alleviation programmes contributing to lack of sustainability of NGO projects due to lack of ownership of projects. The paper suggests a policy shift at national level to ensure that NGO programming does not promote dependency. The studies demonstrate the need to understand how NGOs are working with communities to reduce vulnerability to poverty.

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