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BEYOND ATTENDANCE: FORMS AND LEVELS OF YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN MAGU DISTRICT, TANZANIA

By

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Abstract

This article examines the forms and levels of youth participation in community development in Lutale Ward, Magu District, Mwanza Region, Tanzania. It draws on the first objective of a broader study on youth participation, focusing on how young people engage in formal and informal community development activities. The study adopted a qualitative phenomenological design. Thirty participants were purposively selected: 24 youth, two village chairpersons, two elders, one Ward Executive Officer and one representative of a youth focused nongovernmental organisation. Data were collected through focus group discussions with youth and semi structured interviews with key informants, then analysed thematically. Findings show that youth participation was commonly expressed through attendance at village meetings and the provision of labour for community projects. However, attendance often did not translate into voice, and youth were rarely involved in planning, budgeting, resource allocation or priority setting. Formal youth representation was sometimes tokenistic, while informal youth groups and peer networks provided more meaningful opportunities for discussion and shared decision making. Young women faced additional barriers to being heard. The article argues that youth participation should be assessed not only by their presence or physical contribution, but also by the extent to which they influence decisions. It recommends strengthening youth voice in village planning and building links between effective informal youth groups and formal governance structures.

Keywords: youth participation; community development; rural governance; youth voice; Magu District; Tanzania

Introduction

Youth are important contributors to community development, but their participation cannot be measured simply by whether they attend meetings or take part in community work. Meaningful participation also involves opportunities to express views, influence priorities and contribute to decisions that affect local development. Pretty (1995) presents participation as a process that can take different forms, while Arnstein's (1969) ladder draws attention to the difference between limited involvement and genuine influence. Youth participation research similarly distinguishes symbolic involvement from shared decision making and empowerment (Checkoway, 2011; Shier, 2001; Wong et al., 2010). Participation also depends on the spaces and rules through which institutions invite people to contribute (Cornwall, 2002).

In Tanzania, local government and community development processes provide spaces through which residents can contribute to local priorities, but the existence of these spaces does not guarantee equal influence. Research in Dar es Salaam found that young people often had limited awareness of local development programmes and decision-making procedures (Mlay & Mbirigenda, 2023). Studies from Iringa, Morogoro and Mwanza also identify constraints related to resources, knowledge and access to formal local-government processes (Mpwehwe, 2021; Mwageni et al., 2025; Sama et al., 2023). More broadly, studies across Africa caution against interpreting low participation in formal structures

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as simple apathy; participation is shaped by institutional opportunities, trust and relationships between young people and adults (Agodio, 2023; Umutoniwase et al., 2026).

The broader dissertation, "Youth Participation in Community Development in Magu District, Mwanza Region, Tanzania," explored the forms of youth participation, the factors enabling or constraining it, and the strategies youth use to participate. This article selects the first objective: to explore forms of youth participation in community development in Magu District. The focus is on Lutale Ward, specifically Kagere and Kikundi villages. It considers whether youth participation is primarily attendance and labour, or whether young people also have meaningful opportunities to shape community decisions.

Materials and Methods

The study used a qualitative research approach and a phenomenological design to understand participants' lived experiences of youth participation in community development. Phenomenology is suited to examining how people describe and make meaning of their experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Fieldwork was conducted in Kagere and Kikundi villages in Lutale Ward, Magu District, Mwanza Region, Tanzania.

Purposive sampling was used to recruit 30 participants: 24 youth aged 15–35 years, two village chairpersons, two elders, one Ward Executive Officer and one representative from a nongovernmental organisation working on youth development. Purposive sampling is appropriate when participants are selected because they can provide information relevant to the research question. Youth were the primary participants, while village leaders, elders, the ward official and NGO representative provided institutional and community perspectives.

Data were collected through focus group discussions with youth and semi structured interviews with key informants. The data were analysed thematically through familiarisation, coding, theme development and interpretation, following established guidance for thematic analysis. The analysis process and participant selection are also consistent with established qualitative research guidance (Dahal, 2024). Ethical safeguards included informed consent, confidentiality and the protection of participants' identities. The findings presented here are drawn from the dissertation's first research objective and are specific to the selected villages, they should not be treated as statistically representative of all youth in Magu District.

Findings

Participation through attendance without influence

Village meeting attendance was one of the most visible forms of youth participation. However, attending meetings did not necessarily allow young people to influence decisions. A male youth participant, aged 23, explained:

"I go to almost every meeting the village chairperson calls. I sit at the back with other young people. We listen to what is decided, and then we go home. Nobody asks us what we think unless it is something small, like collecting contributions for a funeral. On the big matters, the road, the market, the school, we are just there to hear the outcome." (Male youth participant, Kagere Village)

A female youth participant similarly observed that "attending and being heard are two completely different things" (Female youth participant, Kikundi Village). These accounts suggest that meeting attendance was often treated as evidence of community involvement even when young people had little opportunity to express their views. A community leader also acknowledged that village leadership had historically focused more on attendance than on whether youth were able to speak.

Contribution of labour to community projects

The findings also showed that youth participated by providing physical labour for community development projects. Their work included digging trenches, carrying stones and helping with local infrastructure. However, they were often brought in after major decisions had already been made. A female youth participant who took part in a water-point repair project stated:

"When the village wanted to repair the water point near the school, it was we, the youth, who dug the trenches and carried the stones. We worked for almost two weeks. But the decisions about where the water point should be, how much each household should contribute and who would manage it afterwards, the elders and the village government made those before we even started digging." (Female youth participant, Kikundi Village)

This account illustrates a division between implementation and decision making. Youth labour was valued, but their involvement in selecting project locations, setting budgets and planning management arrangements was limited.

Limited participation in planning and formal representation

Young people described difficulties entering planning committees and influencing development priorities. A village chairperson explained that committees tended to include people already known to leadership, such as elders and established community figures. A youth participant reported being told that there was no space on a committee, even though several members already served on multiple committees.

Where youth were formally appointed as representatives, their role could remain symbolic. One youth participant who served on a village development subcommittee explained that he attended meetings but was not asked to contribute and did not receive the meeting minutes. These experiences indicate that formal representation alone does not guarantee meaningful participation when meeting procedures do not actively invite youth contributions.

Informal youth groups as spaces for meaningful participation

In contrast to formal village meetings, informal youth groups, savings groups and peer networks offered more opportunities for shared decision making. A female participant involved in a village savings and credit group described the difference:

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"In our group, when we meet every week, everyone speaks. We discuss how much to contribute, what to do if someone cannot pay, and who is responsible for receiving the loan. Nobody is silenced because they are young. It feels completely different from a village meeting, where we are just listeners." (Female youth participant, Kagere Village)

A participant in an agricultural labour exchange group also described members discussing and agreeing on decisions together. Yet some village leaders said they had limited direct knowledge of how these youth groups operated. The findings therefore point to a gap between the participation young people practise in informal settings and the opportunities available within formal governance structures.

Gender differences in whose voice is heard

The findings indicated that young women experienced an additional barrier. A female participant explained that young women's contributions could be overlooked or laughed at, discouraging them from speaking in larger meetings. The NGO representative also noted that facilitators sometimes called on young men first because they raised their hands more quickly. This suggests that unequal participation may be reproduced through everyday practices and inattention, even when exclusion is not openly intended.

Discussion of the Findings

The findings show that youth participation in Lutale Ward is uneven across settings. Young people are present in village meetings and contribute to community projects, but these activities do not consistently translate into influence over planning or resource allocation. Participation may therefore be visible through attendance or labour while remaining limited in decision making power. This distinction reflects the argument that participation should be assessed by the extent of influence people have, rather than by presence alone (Arnstein, 1969; Pretty, 1995; Shier, 2001).

The pattern is consistent with Arnstein's (1969) argument that participation exists at different levels, and that presence or consultation should not be confused with control over decisions. It also echoes Pretty's (1995) emphasis on distinguishing forms of participation according to the role people play in a development process. In this study, youth were often involved in implementation after decisions had already been taken, suggesting that the opportunity to contribute labour was stronger than the opportunity to determine priorities.

The contrast between formal meetings and informal youth groups is important. Youth demonstrated the ability to discuss problems, negotiate responsibilities and make collective decisions in their own groups. This challenges explanations that attribute limited formal participation mainly to youth apathy or lack of capacity. Research on youth-adult partnerships stresses that meaningful participation depends on structures that enable young people to share decisions with adults (Campbell & Erbstein, 2012; Wong et al., 2010). Tanzanian studies also report barriers in formal decision making, including limited information, resources and access to local government processes (Mlay & Mbirigenda, 2023; Mpwehwe, 2021; Mwageni et al., 2025; Sama et al., 2023). Youth engagement through clubs and community based initiatives may provide additional spaces for collective learning and citizenship (Park, 2024).

Gender further shapes the experience of participation. If young women's contributions receive less attention, simply inviting youth to attend meetings will not ensure inclusion. Meeting facilitators and local leaders need to create deliberate opportunities for young women and less vocal participants to speak and have their contributions considered. Research on participation in Tanzanian local councils also documents institutional obstacles to women's representation and influence (Swai & Nicolle, 2023).

The article's central implication is that meaningful youth participation requires a shift from counting attendance and labour contributions to examining whether young people influence decisions. Formal structures can build on existing youth groups and networks by creating clear channels for their priorities to enter village planning, committee discussions and resource allocation processes. Research on local governance in Tanzania also highlights the importance of accessible information and inclusive decision making arrangements. Youth led approaches that give young people real responsibility, rather than symbolic roles, offer one possible direction for practice (Amewuda & Hoyeck, 2025).

Conclusion

The study found that youth in Kagere and Kikundi villages participated in community development through village meeting attendance, labour contributions, formal representation and informal youth groups. However, formal participation was often limited: youth could be present without being heard, contribute labour without shaping project decisions, and hold representative positions without substantive influence. Informal youth groups provided more participatory spaces where young people could express views and make collective decisions. Young women faced additional barriers to having their voices recognised.

The findings demonstrate that youth participation should be understood in terms of both involvement and influence. Youth are already contributing to community development, but their potential is not fully reflected in formal planning and decision-making structures.

Recommendations

First, village and ward authorities should provide structured opportunities for youth to contribute to project planning, budgeting, priority setting and evaluation not only implementation. Second, committee selection and meeting procedures should be reviewed so that youth representatives are able to speak, receive meeting information and influence deliberations. Third, local leaders and development organisations should connect existing youth groups and savings networks with formal village planning processes. Finally, facilitators should actively ensure that young women and quieter participants are invited to contribute and that their views are considered.

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