

# **Empowering communities: The key to sustainable forest and wildlife management in Ethiopia**

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## **Abstract**

In recent decades, the participatory approach has been widely recognized as a key strategy for achieving the sustainable use of natural resources, including forests and wildlife. In line with this, the Ethiopian government has shown political commitment to engaging local communities in rural development projects, particularly in forest and wildlife enterprises. However, the extent to which communities are involved in decision-making processes remains unclear. This case study evaluates the involvement of forest dwellers in an externally initiated participatory forest and wildlife resource management project in Ethiopia. Data were collected using household surveys, focus group discussions, and key informant interviews. Sherry Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation model was employed to measure the extent of community involvement across four major project phases: planning, implementation, benefit sharing, and monitoring and evaluation. The findings reveal that respondents predominantly perceived their participation as passive in most project phases: 74.43 % in planning, 67.67 % in benefit sharing, and 52 % in monitoring and evaluation. The implementation phase was the exception, where active participation (55.08 %) surpassed passive participation. Overall, participation was largely limited to consultation, reflecting a typical form of passive involvement. These results highlight the need for a significant shift towards empowering local communities to play a more active role in natural resource management, particularly in decision-making processes that impact their livelihoods and the sustainability of these resources.

**Keywords:** Citizen participation model, community involvement, forest and wildlife, participatory approach, sustainable use

## **Introduction and Background Justification**

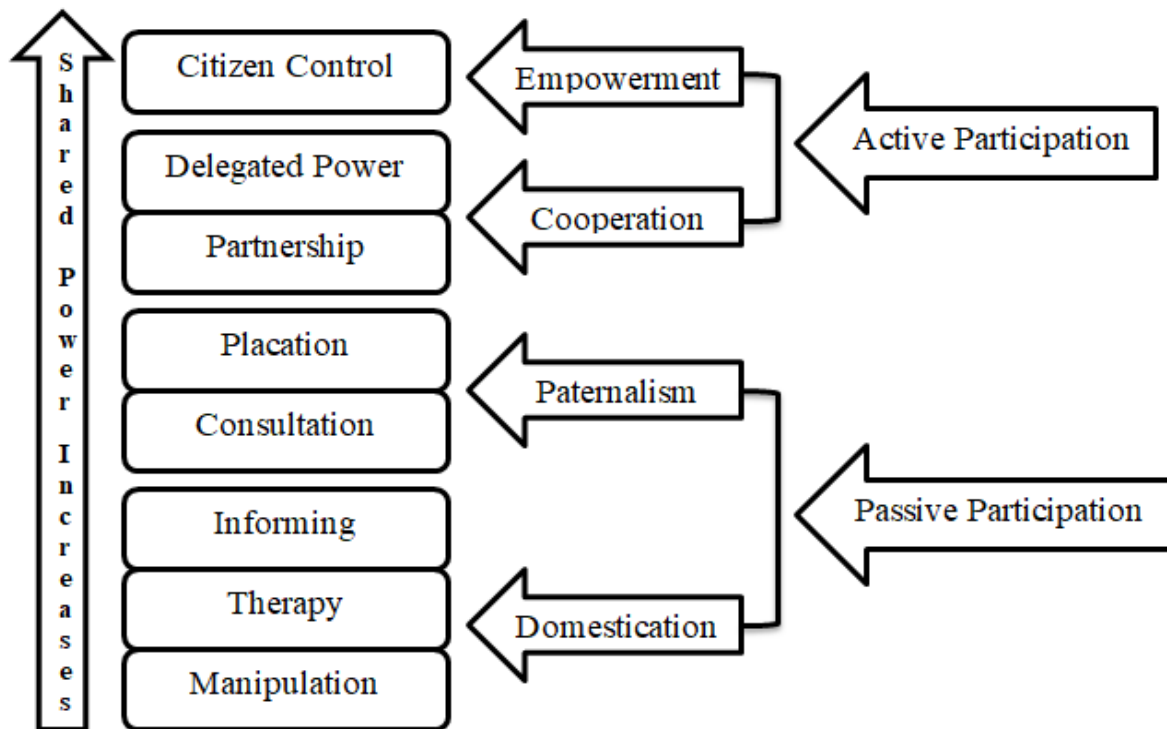
Citizen participation encompasses a range of processes and practices designed to bring citizens into the heart of decision-making and governance, moving beyond passive roles to actively shaping public policies and community outcomes (Li, 2015). It involves individuals or groups, whether voluntarily or obligatorily, contributing to the formulation of policies, governance, and public decisions beyond merely voting in elections (Mahingi, 2023; Aquino et al., 2017). At its core, citizen participation is about sharing power and influence with the public to make decisions more democratic, inclusive, and reflective of community needs (Arnstein, 1969; Aceron et al., 2024). Effective participation emphasizes openness, inclusiveness, transparency, and continuous feedback, ensuring that citizens have a tangible impact on outcomes rather than being superficially informed or consulted (Kurkela et al., 2023; Rwekaza, 2024). The overarching goal is to involve citizens as active partners in governance to enhance legitimacy, trust, and the quality of public decisions (Özden, 2023).

Since the 1990s, in natural resource management in general and wildlife management in particular in Africa, the participation of residents has been increasingly supported by governments, donors, and NGOs. Meaningful devolution or decentralization of natural resources to local communities has, in many cases, been strengthened (Barrow et al., 2000). In line with this trend, the Ethiopian government has demonstrated political commitment to engaging local communities in rural development projects, particularly in forest and wildlife enterprises. However, the extent to which communities are genuinely involved in decision-making processes remains unclear. This case study evaluates the involvement of forest dwellers in an externally initiated participatory forest and wildlife resource management project in Ethiopia.

## **Levels of Participation**

Approaches to stakeholder participation have evolved through a series of recognizable phases. Currently, Arnstein's "ladder of participation" is the most commonly used framework to describe levels of participation. According to Haruța and Radu (2010), Arnstein's ladder is adapted into eight rungs: 1) manipulation 2) therapy 3) informing 4) consulting 5) placation 6) partnership 7) delegated power and 8) citizen control. These categories are grouped into four classes based on the relationship between the extent of control or power and participation. These classes are 1) domestication 2)

paternalism 3) cooperation and 4) empowerment. Domestication and paternalism are defined as “passive participation”, while cooperation and empowerment are “active participation”.



**Figure 1** Levels of Participation (adapted from Haruta & Radu, 2010)

Domestication is a type of participation in which control over a given activity lies in the hands of planners, administrators, local elites, scientists, or other professionals. It is achieved through pseudo-participation techniques that manipulate people into doing what outsiders perceive as important, rather than empowering participants. Paternalism suggests that power and control remain in the hands of an external agent or an elite community member. Members of the participating group may receive information, be consulted, assisted, or placated, but they have no real influence over decision-making or control over benefits. They may be informed about activities but lack authority to shape decisions.

Cooperation involves people working with outsiders to implement activities intended to benefit them directly. Decision-making takes place through dialogue between insiders and outsiders, and participants are actively involved in implementation. Power and control are shared throughout the project, which ideally follows an inductive, bottom-up process rather than a top-down approach. Empowerment is an approach in which people hold power over, and is fully in control of, a program or institution including decision-making. Participation occurs at the political, social, cultural, and economic levels. Empowerment is achieved through growing consciousness, democratization, solidarity, and leadership. Participation for empowerment typically characterizes autonomous processes of mobilization for structural, social, and political change.

## Methods

Data were collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were obtained through a household survey using a structured questionnaire, focus group discussions, and key informant interviews. Secondary data were gathered through an extensive literature review.

Sherry Arnstein’s ladder of citizen participation model was employed to measure the extent of community involvement across four major project phases: planning, implementation, benefit sharing, and monitoring and evaluation. For each phase, four key activities were identified where participation could be assessed and classified as either active (cooperation, empowerment) or passive (domestication, paternalism). If three out of four responses for an activity reflected active participation, it was categorized as active; otherwise, it was deemed passive. An equal number of active and passive responses indicated a mixed type of participation.

## Results

The findings indicate that community involvement was largely passive in most project phases, with the exception of implementation. Specifically, participation in planning (74.43%), benefit sharing (67.67%), and monitoring and evaluation (51.80%) was predominantly passive, whereas implementation showed relatively higher levels of active engagement.

**Table 1** Summary of Forest dwellers participation across the four phases

| Phases of the Project           | Level of forest dwellers participation (percentages) |       |       |       |
|---------------------------------|--|-------|-------|-------|
|                                 | D  | P     | C     | E     |
| Planning Phase                  | 37.59  | 36.84 | 18.04 | 7.53  |
| Implementation Phase            | 13.53  | 31.39 | 29.32 | 25.76 |
| Monitoring and evaluation Phase | 21.80  | 30    | 36.84 | 11.36 |
| Benefit sharing Phase           | 44.36  | 23.31 | 19.55 | 12.78 |

**Key:** D = Domestication P = Paternalism C = Cooperation E = Empowerment

On the other hand, respondents reported an average of 40.3% active involvement across all project phases. This is noteworthy, as it suggests that participants may be more willing to engage in future forest and wildlife management activities if the government demonstrates greater loyalty and transparency.

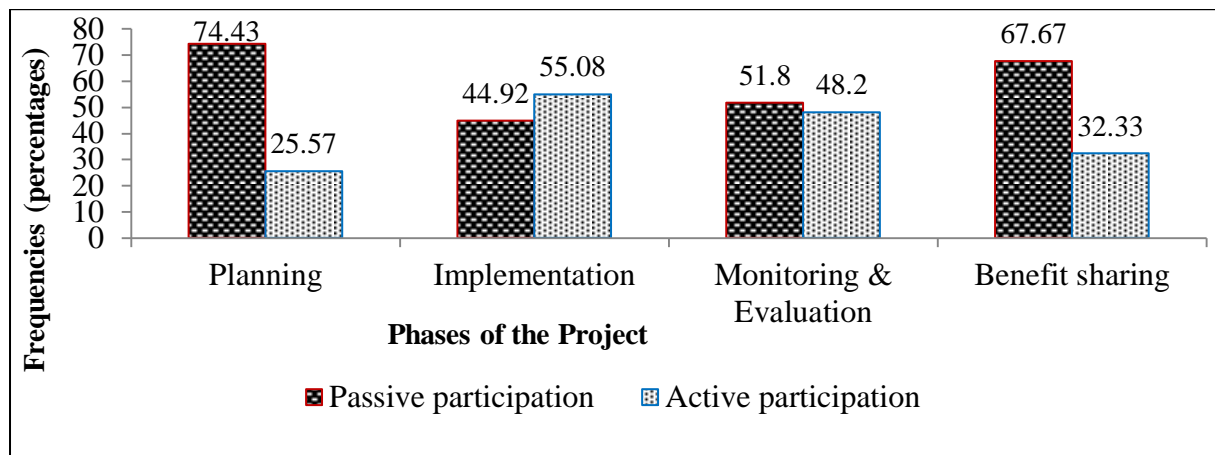


Figure 2 Trend of passive versus active participation across the four phases

## Discussion

Community participation in forest and wildlife management was uneven across project phases, with the planning stage showing a critical gap. Excluding local voices undermines the principles of community-based natural resource management, as interventions that overlook local needs and knowledge risk being ineffective (Halim et al., 2011). Genuine involvement enhances sustainability and welfare (Treves et al., 2009), yet participation was highest during implementation, where communities contributed physical input and resources. This form of engagement, however, often reflected instrumental involvement, treating communities as labor rather than decision-makers, consistent with findings that participation is typically confined to implementation (Chirenje et al., 2013). Monitoring and evaluation showed partial inclusion, but paternalistic structures limited community influence, concentrating decision-making in external actors (Black & Watson, 2006). Similarly, benefit sharing was characterized by passive participation, with inequitable distribution fostering distrust and reflecting a top-down governance approach. Ensuring equitable access to benefits, inclusive decision-making, and recognition of local communities as allies are essential for long-term conservation success (Dyer et al., 2014).

## Conclusion

Community engagement imbalances highlight persistent top-down approaches that limit local voices in decision-making and undermine the principles of community-based natural resource management. For conservation initiatives to succeed, communities must be engaged not only as implementers but

also as equal partners in planning, monitoring, and benefit distribution. Recognizing local communities as legitimate stakeholders rather than peripheral actors offers the most promising pathway to achieving both ecological sustainability and social well-being.

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