Coping with Energy Poverty in Rural Zimbabwe: Spaces Matter

Ellen Fungisai Chipango[1]

ABSTRACT

Space for participation has become de riguer in the development discourse. Nonetheless, this phenomenon has not been adequately embraced in the energy sector. The question at the centre of this article is: What spaces for participation are available to the rural people to voice their energy concerns-how participative are they? Through extensive qualitative research in Buhera, Ward 24, this study demonstrates the barriers and constraints which hinder rural people's participation in energy issues. Interviews with the participants revealed that while rural people participate in the invited and claimed spaces, power relations and conflict of interests are major obstacles to democratic decision-making. This suggests that decision-making in the energy sector lies with the powerful elite (government actors and electricity providers). Findings from the study revealed that hidden and invisible powers prevent the rural people from voicing their energy concerns. As a result of a lack of participation in the energy sector, energy poverty is misconceived as a phenomenon which can only be technically solved. However, participation allows that government can become more responsive to citizens' energy needs and more effective in service delivery. By assessing the space for participation in the energy sector, the article might inform the relevant stakeholders of the importance of engaging the locals in addressing energy issues. Failure to appreciate the importance of space for participation limits the understanding of rural people's energy needs, and the significance of their views remains underestimated. It is therefore recommended that space for participation be created to allow social inclusion of the rural people in the energy sector.

Rural poor are like frogs in the proverbial slowly heating pot and they adapt; but more often than the frogs, they increasingly feel the pain. They do less, and they do it less well. They would like to jump out but fear for their survival if they did
(Chambers, 2010: 14).

[1] Corresponding author, Department of Anthropology and Development Studies, University of Johannesburg, Auckland Park, South Africa. E-mail: ellen.chipango@gmail.com, Phone: 0027745752126.

1.   Introduction

As a developing country, the majority of the people in rural Zimbabwe are dependent on traditional energy services (Ministry of Energy and Power Development, 2012). Rural communities meet 94% of their cooking energy requirements from traditional fuels (2012:2). Against this background, it is worrisome that in modern times no country has managed to substantially reduce poverty without increasing the use of clean and efficient energy. Following Ramalingam et al, rural people are highly 'adaptive agencies' (2008: 42-47). Put differently, in the face of energy poverty they employ coping mechanisms of making do in the face of hardened reality.

The current body of literature in Zimbabwe is mainly on how rural people cope with energy poverty. Vermuelen et al (2000) in their study on shifting patterns of fuel and wood use by households in rural Zimbabwe show how other energy sources such as kerosene, candles and electricity were incorporated into the rural energy mix. Previous micro-surveys recorded a variety of conservation practices, such as lowering of the grates to improve efficiency, removal of grates when a long, slow simmer is required and building of wind-breaks for hearths (Hancock and Kaeser-Hancock, 1985; McGregor, 1991). Chirau (2015) investigates the coping mechanisms of the poor in the Hatcliffe informal settlement of Zimbabwe. It emerged that the major coping mechanism is 'fuel stacking' (Masera et al., 2000). Put simply, rural people include multiple sources of energy to meet their needs without abandoning the traditional ones (Eberhard and van Horen, 1995). This observation has important implications for the 'fuel transition' and 'energy ladder' perspectives, which assume a universal, deterministic and linear progression towards clean sources such as electricity. Conversely, other factors such as access to the grid, the power relations between household members and their consumption patterns play a critical role in shifting consumption patterns.

While these coping mechanisms are useful to a point, they are unclean and inefficient which means they have an adverse effect on the local people's well-being and their livelihoods. For the poor, the priority is the satisfaction of such basic needs as jobs, food, health services, education, housing, clean water and sanitation. Energy plays a key role in ensuring delivery of these services (World Energy Council and FAO, 1999). However, based on the current situation whereby rural people are depending on traditional fuels it means their productivity and welfare are compromised. For instance, energy poverty has serious public health concerns related to indoor air pollution (IAP). WHO (2002) states that the inefficient burning of solid fuels such as wood and dung contribute to respiratory ailments that are the fourth leading health risk in developing countries. In a similar vein, due to dwindling fuelwood resources, local people cut wet indigenous wood to use in the homes and this is against the laws of the country. Hence, they are labelled as contributors to environmental degradation (Chipango, 2018). The current study departs from the existing literature which assumes agency in the face of energy poverty as ontologically given and argues that it is politically-shaped by certain contingencies and constraints of existing socio-economic and political conditions.

Literature outside Zimbabwe also presents coping mechanisms as apolitical. Gibbons and Singler (2008) examine various practical actions which can be employed in response to energy and income constraints. These include rationing energy use, reducing expenditure on food and borrowing money. Similarly, Anderson et al (2010) explore the range and complexity of these strategies while also examining the psychological context which shapes and gives meaning to these actions. While these are useful observations, without the affected people's voice, it is unlikely that there will be meaningful change.

The concept of participation has been studied in other sectors: for example, Aref (2011) examined how farmers' participation is necessary for agricultural development projects. Similarly, Mubyza and Hutton (2012) state that community participation in the health sector is important in involving intended beneficiaries in the design, implementation and evaluation of activities, with the aim of increasing the responsiveness, sustainability and efficiency of health services. Narayan (1995) conducted a case study of 121 rural water supply projects throughout the developing world and discovered that people's participation in decision- making results in effective and sustainable rural water systems. In addition, participation might encourage a shift in institutional strategies from supply-driven to demand driven approaches, which respond to the felt needs and aspirations of the rural people users. That being so, participation is a seldom discussed concept in the Zimbabwean energy sector and that presents a gap in the existing literature. Our knowledge of how spaces can be created to allow such participation and how rural peasants participate to influence their energy choices remains scant. It is the lack of access to space for engagement with relevant authorities in the energy sector

which is partially limiting rural people to contribute in the decision-making process. This present study is a step toward filling this gap- adding space for participation in the existing debate.

The contributions of this study are manifold. First, it gives voice to the poor without which they will remain trapped like 'frogs in the proverbial heating pot.' Second, participation in these spaces allows communication to the service providers and government of their oversights in addressing energy poverty-failure which results in a tale of the 'blind and the dumb.' The blind here are the government, energy ministry, international development agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) failing to see and take relevant account of the rural people's energy needs and the dumb are the rural people without the capacity to voice their concerns. Third, agency in the energy sector is highly subjective and political, which makes this article, in part, an unmasking critique of rural people as autonomous agents; in other words, there are innumerable obstacles between a 'peasant' and a secure heating source. These considerations are important in showing all those involved in policy-making and design that social justice in the energy sector is achieved by involving the rural people's participation.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows: Section 2 analyses the theoretical framing of the study and briefly discusses literature in this context. Section 3 describes the methodology employed and the case study area. Section 4 and its sub-sections present findings and their discussion. Finally, section 5 presents some conclusions drawn, policy implications and suggestions for future research.

2.   Theoretical framework: Space for participation

Social science concepts are fraught with definitional contestation and space is no exception. Some writers refer to political spaces as institutional channels, political discourses, social and political practices through which the poor and those organisations working with them can pursue poverty reduction (Webster and Engberg-Petersen, 2002). Some focus on 'policy spaces' to examine the moments and opportunities where citizens and policy makers come together, as well as 'actual observable opportunities, behaviours, actions and interactions sometimes signifying transformative potential' (McGee, 2004: 16). Cornwall and Coehlo (2006) examine 'democratic spaces' in which citizens can engage to claim citizenship and affect the governance process. This article adopts Gaventa's definition which takes citizen action and participation as its starting point-considering 'spaces as opportunities, moments and channels where citizens can act to potentially affect policies, discourses, decisions and relationships that affect their lives and interests' (2006: 26).

Drawing on the Ministry of Energy and Power Development's (2012) observation that fuelwood provides the bulk of the total energy supply in Zimbabwe, this article questions whether the rural people have space as a form of agency to challenge the status-quo. However, by definition, coping means to be able to deal with something difficult and it is a response to a constraint or threat (Chambers Dictionary, 1989). Brock et al (2004) examine how citizens participate in policy spaces surrounding poverty reduction and conclude with a call for moving from 'policy to power.' Likewise, the current study draws on the same approach for energy poverty reduction. Lefebvre states that 'space is a social product …….it is not simply "there," a neutral container waiting to be filled, but is a dynamic, humanly constructed means of control, and hence of domination of power' (1991: 24). To tease out the complexities of space, this article applies Gaventa's 'power cube' (2006: 25). He presents how the three spaces for engagement are created, and the three levels of power from local to global, in which they occur.

The three types of spaces are closed, invited and claimed/created spaces (Cornwall, 2002). In the closed spaces decisions are made by a set of actors, without any inclusion or consultation of the local people. In the invited spaces, people (as users, citizens or beneficiaries) are invited to participate by various kinds of authorities. Created spaces are claimed by less powerful actors from or against power holders or created more autonomously by the local people themselves. Cornwall refers to this space as 'organic' space which emerges out of sets of common concerns or identifications and may come into being as a result of popular mobilisation around issue-based concerns (2002 as cited by Gaventa, 2006: 27).

Spaces are not power-free. Therefore, it is logical to investigate 'how spaces are created, in whose interests and with what terms of engagement' (Gaventa, 2004: 35). This is important because failure to clearly define participation risks the entrenchment and reproduction of the existing asymmetrical power relations (White, 1996). Meaningful participation in energy issues requires informed citizens who have the capacity for taking joint action (Hadenius, 2003). Sadly, the World Bank

(2001) observes that the public all-too-often knows very little about its spaces. As a result, spaces are available in theory and not in practice.

Although power is a ubiquitous concept in the social science studies, it is the hardest concept to comprehend (Haugaard and Clegg, 2009). Hence, it is instructive to discuss the forms of power which 'contaminate' spaces as posited by Gaventa's (2006) power cube. These include visible power, hidden power and invisible power. Visible power applies to an observable, decision-making process and the strategies targeting this are trying to change the 'who, how and what' of policy-making so that it becomes more democratic (2006: 29). Hidden power concerns itself with the mobilisation of bias where certain interests and actors in public spaces are privileged. This dimension focuses on the actual control over decision-making arenas, and the way powerful actors maintain influence over the process often by excluding or devaluing concerns and agendas of the less powerful groups and putting boundaries on their participation. Lukes describes it as an 'agenda control' where the one wielding power can 'decide what to decide' (2005: 111). Invisible/ideological power is experienced when conflicts are hidden through internalisation of dominating ideologies, values, and forms of behaviour (VeneKlasen and Miller, 2002). Lukes (2005) states that actors exercise power by influencing, shaping or determining others' wants, perceptions, cognitions, and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things. Peet and Watts (1996) also refer to invisible power as ideological power where political power operates in the construction of discourses as the means for shaping the material and social world.

Drawing on the connection between space and power, this study analyses blind spots which are apparent in energy poverty coping mechanisms. The power–cube is important in showing 'how citizens can have the capacity to act, how they mobilise to get their issues heard and responded to in the public agenda' (Gaventa, 2006: 24).

3.   Literature review

Energy coping mechanisms have been studied in Zimbabwe: for example, Hosier and Dowd (1988) focused on rural household energy use in Zimbabwe, MacGarry (1987) assessed biomass resource and measured family fuelwood consumption in rural Zimbabwe and Vermeulen et al (1996) examined the consumption of wood by rural households in Gokwe Communal Area, Zimbabwe. That being so, there is need to establish the notion of human agency which attributes to the individual actor – 'the capacity to process social experience and to devise ways of coping with life, even under extreme forms of coercion' (Long, 1992: 22). Drawing on Admassie (1995), individual and collective actors carry out intentional and purposeful action, but their action is rarely played out as planned, nor does it always lead to the intended outcomes. Demta et al (2011) examine how to cope with fuelwood scarcity and the household responses in rural Ethiopia. The study establishes that rural households residing in forest degraded areas respond to fuelwood shortages by increasing their labour input to fuelwood collection. Further, they submit that in Ethiopia nearly all of the rural population depends on biomass energy sources for cooking and other energy requirements. This observation concurs with the International Energy Agency (IEA) which states that in other parts of Africa (sub-Saharan Africa) over 80% of households rely on biomass as their primary energy source (IEA, 2010). The agency further predicts that by 2030 biomass energy will still account for at least 75% of total residential energy in Africa (IEA, 2002). What is not appreciated in all this is that local people's capacity to act-agency is not exempt from the contingencies and constraints of existing conditions. Following Harvey, 'the mix of performative activities available to the body in a given place and time are not independent of the technological, physical, social and economic environment in which that body has its being' (2000:98).

The insights from Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) number 7 are instructive here. It focusses on ensuring access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all and places emphasis on efficiency as a strategy to achieve its objectives. What is missing is engagement with the society. In that vein, the inadequacy of SDG number 7 lies in its political naivety as it fails to give space to the intended beneficiaries to participate in energy issues. In contrast, SDG number 6 that seeks to ensure sustainable access to clean water and sanitation for all appreciates the significance of participation to achieve its objectives. Particularly, target 6b supports and strengthens the *participation* of local communities in improving water and sanitation management, which is essential for ensuring that the needs of all people are being met (Griggs et al., 2013, my emphasis). Griggs et al (2013) contend that the involvement of relevant stakeholders is necessary to ensure that the technical solutions decided upon are suitable for specific socio-economic contexts.

That said, it appears there is a blind spot in the energy sector because SDG number 7 does not appreciate the important role of participation. Makonese and Bradrum (2017) investigate public participation in technological innovation of the Tshulu stove. Their findings point to the need for improved communication between citizens and technical experts, as well as for narrowing the gap between the designer and the user by encouraging meaningful engagement and inclusion. From a developed world perspective, participation is indispensable in energy transitions (Radtke et al., 2017). In the same line of reasoning, Radtke et al (2017) contend that participation in the energy sector is political. Nonetheless, a call for participation without addressing the underlying political constraints and barriers to participation is limiting and only abstract. Gaventa's 'power cube' argues for such analysis as this article will show the simultaneous function of space and power at various levels (2006:25).

4.　　Study area and methodology

Buhera, Ward 24 falls under Buhera District which is one of the seven districts in the Manicaland Province (see Figure 1). Buhera was chosen because of its high reliance on fuelwood in the absence of other sources. In the district 93% of people use wood in the home, 3.2% use electricity, 0.1% use paraffin and 3.2 use other sources (Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency, 2012: 144). At the national level fuelwood provides the bulk (61%) of the total energy supply to the local people in Zimbabwe, liquid fuels provide 18%, electricity provides 13% and coal provides 8% (Ministry of Energy and Power Development, 2012:1). The energy balance of Buhera District evinces the characteristics of energy poverty. Reddy et al (2000) define energy poverty as the absence of sufficient choice that allows access to adequate energy services, affordable, reliable, effective and environmentally benign to support economic and human development.

Figure 1: Map of Zimbabwe, showing research site. Source: FAO/WFP (2009)

The article draws on fieldwork conducted between September 2016 and January 2017. Space for participation is a sensitive subject, and a qualitative approach was appropriate for exploring the local people's emic views (Harding, 2013) and to understand how they structure and give meaning to their experiences (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). Convenience sampling was used to recruit 60 participants in Buhera, Ward 24 and this includes 20 women who were targeted in order to address the power dynamics of gender on space for participation. The study relied on participants who were readily available at that particular time and were willing to participate in the interviews (Babbie, 1998). Both individual and group semi-structured interviews were conducted until no new themes were emerging and that was the appropriate time to stop. The interviews provided the opportunity to listen to the views and experiences of the respondents for an extended period of time and to ask probing questions to explore ideas further.

In addition, desktop research was conducted to help triangulate data. To secure information from the experts, purposive sampling was used to recruit the 10 key informants from the Ministry of Energy and Power Development (MEPD), Environmental Management Agency (EMA) and the Ministry of Women's Affairs Gender and Community Development (MWAGCD).

Two approaches to data analysis were employed.　First, document analysis was carried out. In this instance, documents such as the energy policy and the national constitution were analysed by questioning their authenticity and representativeness. Thereafter, thematic analysis helped to code content from the documents and interviews into themes. Ethical considerations prevailed at every stage of the study and confidentiality was maintained by use of pseudonyms.

5.　　Findings and discussion

5.1   Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents

For data analysis, participants were categorised into age groups as follows: 18 (legal age of majority in Zimbabwe) -30; 31-49 and 50-above. The initial assumption was that characteristics such as age, gender and level of education determine the willingness of the respondents to participate in this study. However, the study discovered that socio-demographic factors do not influence participation especially on matters which are important to the rural people's livelihoods and well-being. This was evinced by the positive attitude of the men and women, young and old, educated and uneducated to participate in the study. This confirmed the ideals of social justice that planning for one's life irrespective of background is *sine qua non* for autonomous human beings (Mill, 1957 [1859]).

5.2   Coping mechanism strategies

Interviews with the local participants revealed that a dominant alternative energy source in the absence of electricity is fuelwood. BF2 said:

We are desperate, and we do not have anyone to tell our problems. We are now using wet fuelwood despite that it is no longer easily accessible due to the restrictive measures put in place by EMA [sic]. We are literally stealing.

BF20 elaborated:

We are coping, but it is a struggle. The truth is that there is no other way out except for stealing wet wood.

The evidence suggests that the local people are not free to act in the face of energy poverty. This is due to asymmetrical power relations between the peasants and EMA. This observation conforms to Foucault's (1979) assertion that subjects always exist in a social context that influences their agency. Put simply, rural people are not autonomous agents. Dove et al concur with Foucault (1979) that agency is not something that is simply 'out there' in the world, rather it is socially constructed (2008:43). In the same line of reasoning, it is significant to appreciate that the response to agency or adaptation is a perception of one's circumstances and not a choice. BM7 put it succinctly:

........, in the absence of electricity, we will continue stealing wet wood. After all it is more reliable and cheaper compared to the expensive electricity. Even if we get electricity, there will be load shedding.

The respondent's observation is parallel with the proverbial fox and grapes metaphor. It states that after having desired the grapes, the fox, seeing that he cannot get the grapes judges that they are sour. By imperfect analogy, having desired the electricity, the rural people, seeing that they cannot afford the electricity, judge that it is unreliable due to load shedding. While load shedding is experienced in Zimbabwe, electricity is an efficient, and environmentally benign energy carrier. Drawing on the evidence, the local people tend to have a positive attitude towards fuelwood. Upon analysis, it appears that their adaptation is in response to their own perceptions of their circumstances and not informed by choice. Proceeding from the aspect of a lack of choice by local people, it confirms that rural people are energy poor as opined by Reddy et al's (2000) definition adopted in this study. It states that a lack of choice in accessing alternatives is one of the characteristics of energy poverty. Having teased out the rural people's agency and its associated constraints, the subsequent section presents the invited spaces which they can use to voice their energy concerns.

5.3   Of the invited spaces and the rural people's participation

As a first preference, respondents indicated that they wait to be invited by relevant authorities to participate in programmes where they can voice their energy concerns. Asked whether they ever raised the issue of electricity access during the 2013 constitution making process, the common response was that they did not. As a result of probing why they did not raise the question when they are energy poor, BF22 said:

We participated, but we did not raise issues which were at our hearts [sic], electricity is one of them. They came with pre-planned issues to be discussed. The issues were to do with land redistribution and the use of indigenous languages in our country.

BM1 elaborated:

I was the secretary for development issues in our village then, but I could not raise the issue for fear of the unknown. Rather, I just focused on what they told us to discuss and I believed them as our superiors-they know better what is best for us.

While the constitution is supposed to be an 'invited space' which allows public participation for the local people to influence their own agency, 'hidden power' creeps in. Consequently, the local people are not given the chance to express their views on what they need. As a result, issues which matter to their lives and livelihoods are not even put on the table for discussion. Put differently, this implies that the local people lack the freedom not only for the fulfilment of their needs, but even for the formulation of their needs (Sen, 1994). The elite tend to make an active use of space whereas the lower income groups tend to be trapped by it (Pahl, 1965).

In addition, the evidence describes an instantiation of Gramscian hegemony in which knowledge is internalised to develop a culture of silence of the oppressed (Gramsci, 1980). Due to the 'hidden power,' the local people are willing to listen more and do less, trusting in the ability of the powerful (government actors). In the Zimbabwean case, the new constitution does not singly address the issue of energy poverty as compared to potable water and sufficient food mentioned in Chapter 4, Section 77 (a; b), hence it traps the poor in that they cannot claim for electricity access as a constitutional right (Government of Zimbabwe, 2013). In a similar vein, BM5 stated that:

We did not get a chance to vote in the referendum, so we do not know if our concerns were captured, maybe they decided for us what they think is important to us[sic]. We know as rural people that we are despised. They would rather listen to those from town, not us!

Empirical evidence strongly suggests that the so-called invited space can be a 'closed space' where the powerful elite decide for the weak with limited or no consultation with them. This shows the vagueness of what participation in the invited space means. For participation to be useful there is a need for 'clarity through specificity' (Cohen and Uphoff, 1980: 269). This involves spelling out what exactly people are invited to participate in and for what purpose. Also, clearly stating who is participating and for whose benefit. Further drawing on the evidence, it appears that the respondent is referring to rural people's social exclusion. Although there is no universally agreed definition or benchmark for social exclusion, a lack of participation in society is at the heart of nearly all definition put forth by scholars, government, government bodies (United Nations, 2016). It is apparent that social exclusion entails not only material deprivation, but also a lack of agency or control over decisions as well as feelings of alienation and inferiority.

Asked if there are platforms where rural people can participate in energy issues, a key informant from the MEPD responded:

Oh yes, we have provincial consultative workshops, and these consist of provincial administrators from different provinces. So, we have no doubt that they know what's going in their respective provinces.

In a bid to establish whether the local people use the provincial consultative workshops as suggested by the government official, the study assessed the local people's views on this particular space. It emerged that political party issues were dominating in the meetings. For the sake of argument, it seems that the state uses the space as a means to promote its own interest in the name of public participation of the local people. This observation supports John Williams's view as cited by Bond et al that, 'ordinary people have mostly become endorsees of pre-designed planning programmes and communities and villages are often the objects of administrative manipulation' (2011: 16). The contextual data illustrate the difficulty of democracy even in the so-called democratic states where societies are more of administered than democratic entities. Put it another way, democracy is compromised by the influence of the rarely discerned hidden and invisible powers. This observation is consonant with Aiyar's sentiment that 'power asymmetries and social exclusion have meant that the invited spaces have served to create newer avenues for capture of the state by local elites at the cost of the poor' (2010: 210). Asked if the issue of energy access was ever raised during the consultative workshops, BM11 said:

It has never been discussed. Maybe they just came here and observed the situation and went back to Harare to plan for us from that side. However, as far as I know we were never consulted about it.

Drawing on the empirical evidence, the provincial consultative workshops allude to what Chambers describes as 'rural development tourism' (1980:98). This means a brief rural visit by an outside professional who often decides for the local people as suggested by the respondent above.

Another flaw associated with the invited space is the use of technical language during the development meetings. BF3 said:

I once attended a workshop on renewable energy facilitated by Practical Action, but I did not understand their gigawatts and kilowatts [sic], all that stuff. As a result, I could not make any contribution for the fear of embarrassing myself.

Based on the evidence, it appears that it is one thing to have meetings with the targeted group and it is another to have them participate. While the space is superficially available, technical language is used as an instrument of hidden power to exclude those who cannot understand the technical jargon. In other words, it is 'participatory exclusion'-exclusion within seemingly participatory institutions (Agarwal, 2001:1623). What follows then is that energy planners end up 'planning without facts' from the intended beneficiaries. This is due to the technical language which is used as a 'boundary' that shapes the invited space for participation. For the sake of argument, it seems that hidden power discourages the efforts of social groups to advance their interests-all of which results in spatial segregation of the rural people.

It is interesting to note that during the fieldwork most of the householders would conclude by thanking the researcher for discussing energy poverty which affects their lives and livelihoods. Drawing on such a gesture, it seems that significant issues are not only kept from the decision-making table, but also from the minds and consciousness of different players involved, even those directly affected by energy poverty. BF 9 said:

Thank you very much for coming to us and opening our minds, this is new. We are only used to party politics meetings which do not help us as individuals or households.

In the same vein, the study assessed the role of NGOs in providing space for engagement with the rural peasants. Contrary to the view that NGOs are an invited space, it emerged that they are power laden. RF14 explained:

NGOs are frustrated in our area because once they come into an area, they are considered as supporters of the opposition political parties. This is done despite how good their programmes are. So, it becomes difficult for us to associate with them for the fear of victimisation.

This observation suggests that spaces for participation are not neutral but are themselves shaped by power relations that both surround and enter them (Cornwall and Coehlo, 2004).

However, BF4 had a different observation about the NGOs. She said:

These NGOs, I just don't like the way they operate. Although there is no NGO working on energy issues in this area, there is GOAL which gives food handouts. But they are just selective when distributing the handouts; they purport to know us better than we know ourselves. If they could learn to hear from us, we could have a better relationship with them.

It is revealing from the respondent's experience that NGOs are not always democratic spaces, which treat everyone equally. Moreover, they tend to be elitist by not engaging those whom they seek to help no matter how well intended are their projects. This finding supports Carroll (1992) who observes that even the NGOs, often assumed to be participatory, are not necessarily so. He submits that a study of 30 NGOs in Latin America found that a majority of them scored low or medium on participation (Carroll, 1992). What is not appreciated is that for NGO projects to succeed, there is a need to engage the targeted group and the experts only become facilitators. Only through that approach will local people realise a sense of ownership of the programmes and that guarantees the sustainability of the initiatives (Manzini and Rizzo, 2011).

Interviews with women revealed that they do not know of any platforms they can use for raising issues which concern their livelihoods such as electricity access. Asked the same question, a senior officer in the MWAGCD said:

It is just difficult for rural women especially the married ones to be involved in some of these issues. They are closed in a shell–without access to information.

While capitalism is an enemy to women's empowerment and participation (Annecke, 1999), patriarchy is also a contributing factor to women's exclusion in energy issues at the household sector (Chipango, 2018). Against this backdrop, the issue of space for participation should not start at the national level, but at the household level. In this context, a household refers to 'one or more persons who usually live and eat together whether or not they are related by blood, marriage or adoption, and the individuals recognise each other as members of the same household' (Barnes et al 2002 as cited by Nemarundwe, 2003:18). Women's participation in the household space is compromised by the gender ideology which creeps in the form of 'disciplinary power' based on norms and natural rules (Delsing, 1991: 135). Lack of access to information on whom to approach about their energy concerns reproduces social inequality. Contrary to urban women who are engaged in networks of association beyond their

immediate boundaries, such as the public consultation meetings on service delivery, the rural women are entirely confined within their boundaries. RF3 put it succinctly:

Here in rural areas we are typical of the proverbial blind man leading another blind man because we lack information on electricity. That explains why we fall prey to thieves who con us of our hard-earned money. We take our electricity issues to the wrong people because we have no connections to the relevant people. We do not know where to take our issues to.

This observation supports Aiyar (2001) who suggests that for citizens to partake of available spaces and participate in a meaningful way, invited spaces need to be nurtured. This can be achieved by ensuring access to information on the basis of which they can mobilise and participate. In addition, the citizens need to understand how the invited spaces work-the norms and processes that govern them.

Asked whether they know about renewable energy technologies (RETs), the majority of the respondents did not know about them. BM3 said:

We have no knowledge about that. How do you expect us to know when we are not educated about them? Let them teach us and allow us to be part of it.

The respondent suggests that lack of participation is one of the contributing factors to the barriers to renewable energy in the energy mix of Zimbabwe. Karekezi and Kithyoma (2002) state that renewables are often recommended as the most appropriate technology choice for rural Africa. Nonetheless, how can they be successfully implemented when the rural people do not know about them? There has been over-reliance on solar photovoltaics (PVs) and other forms such as solar thermal, wind pumps, micro/pico hydro power decentralised energy technologies are seldom considered.

5.4   Of the claimed/created spaces and the rural people's participation

Findings revealed that due to the limitations of the invited spaces, the local people create their own spaces. The study investigated whether the rural people attend meetings in their villages or as a ward where they can discuss energy poverty. It emerged that while they do, it is just difficult. BF22 said:

Yes, we once held such meetings in our village, but nothing really materialised because people ended up splitting along political party lines.

BM9 elaborated:

It is just difficult because in the rural areas if you just gather as a group, it's not surprising that you will be accused of organising party politics and for that reason people now shun such meetings and some just do not attend.

The evidence illustrates that hindrances to the claimed/created spaces are conceived at a higher-level scale. For instance, legislation such as the Public Order and Security Act (POSA) prohibits freedom of assembly. It seems that such law lacks an appreciation of the fact that people need to come together and create their space predicated on factors that affect them without interference. Therefore, it is important to understand that the local people's resentment towards gathering for village development meetings is not out of their choice, but due to the surrounding political circumstances. This observation confirms Bevir's (1996) earlier sentiment that individuals can never reach a space where they are not affected by particular social contexts. Literature on service delivery from the developed world shows that participation takes a variety of forms depending on the actors-local actors cooperate and collaborate, participate in forums and processes, exchange ideas and establish networks (Radtke et al., 2017). Nonetheless, evidence from Buhera, Ward 24 shows otherwise: the dissimilarity might be an indication of a lack of 'democratic tendencies in the service delivery system' of the developing world.

Empirical evidence revealed that even within the created spaces by the local people themselves, power asymmetries within the group can compromise the goal of the space. BF3 explained the situation in a metaphorical way:

If the group consists of lions, hares, bucks, zebras, tortoise among other small animals and the lions are always roaring and scaring other animals, such a space does not work.

By imperfect analogy, the respondent is implying that the ever 'roaring lions' within the claimed/created space are those group members with 'power over' other members, and as such they are always controlling. Consequently, the created space is not open for all. Drawing on Cohen and Uphoff (1980), in most cases the term participation is used vaguely. In their view, true participation means people should be able to express themselves without fear, be listened to and taken seriously. In addition, while the rural people are considered as belonging to a disadvantaged category; they are a heterogeneous group due to differential power.

Following Mohan and Stokke (2000), agency can be strengthened with the sense of belonging to a larger collective and engaging with other communities. In that spirit, the local people in Buhera, Ward 24 formed groups for them to lessen the connection fee to the national electricity grid. However, power asymmetries compromised their relationship within the groups. BF13 explained:

The powerful especially those with sustainable livelihoods always want things to be done their way, earlier we proposed to contribute small amounts of money for a longer period such that we could raise the required amount. However, the better-off [sic] were not patient with the weaker members insisting that they should contribute the required money in six months and that pushed away the majority of the members.

It is revealing that 'discriminatory attitudes' contribute to social exclusion within the claimed spaces. As a result, some local members *exclude* themselves because they cannot measure up to the expectations of the majority of the group.

Another claimed space which was identified is the visits to the Rural Electrification Agency (REA) entities to present community claims. Nonetheless, there are some challenges associated with this approach. First, the respondents highlighted that it is expensive for them to travel to Mutare where they can get the REA provincial office to register their concerns. Another challenge is that when the ward councillor goes to the provincial office, he does not always give feedback to the fellow villagers. BM5 said:

They end up running the whole thing as a one man's show. The reason being that sometimes they use their own bus fares to go there and they feel no obligation to share what they would have been told there.

It appears that in a heterogeneous society the claimed space is 'captured' by the better-off. Resultantly, inequality is reproduced at the village level.

Emerging literature warns us of the dangers of focussing only on the 'local' or the 'national' spaces in a globalising world. Harcourt and Escobar have coined the term 'glocal' to describe 'spaces that are neither local nor global' (2002: 13). In that context, the local people can 'jump levels' and use the global fora as arenas for action than they can appeal to local governance. For instance, international platforms such as the United Nations' initiatives on clean energy access (SDG number 7) and Sustainable Energy for All (SE4ALL) among other initiatives can be used as forms of claimed space which can put pressure on the state to provide clean energy to the rural people. However, findings revealed that even though the Zimbabwean Government has adopted the objectives of SE4ALL and domesticated SDG number 7, it is the prominent international NGOs such as Practical Action, Oxfam, SNV Netherlands, Hivos, which are facilitating access to renewable energy to the rural people (Personal communication with an NGO director, 12 November 2016). The paradox of the matter is that the NGOs are not working in a neutral space due to political interference. As such it becomes difficult or even impossible for such spaces to be used to exert pressure on the state to act on energy provision. While the international NGOs are part of the civil society coalition for SE4ALL in Zimbabwe facilitating access to clean energy in rural areas, they do not have the mandate to give feedback to the communities. Rather, it is the duty of the parliamentarians and councillors to keep their constituencies abreast of any developmental projects (Personal communication with an NGO practitioner, 30 November 2016). For that reason, it seems that the claimed space at the global level through NGOs still revolves around the state.

5.5   Of the closed spaces and the rural people's participation

Asked if they know how the electricity connection fees and tariffs are set, the respondents expressed ignorance about it. BM6 said:

You see the problem is that we are not engaged in some of these issues and they do it on their own. Some of us we are rural people yes, but we want electricity. If they had consulted us, personally I would have advised them to embrace the principle of fee-for-service concession. That would save us from the initial high investment cost and the maintenance of the system. We want electricity in the rural areas!

Drawing on the evidence, it appears that policy making in the energy sector is a 'closed space.' Put simply, decisions are made without the energy user participation. The shortfalls of this approach are apparent to see. For instance, the market-oriented energy sector reforms in Zimbabwe that were intended to improve the overall sector's performance failed to protect the interests of the poor. This is because a market driven approach does not consider the socio-economic background and needs of the poor, but only values profit (Khunou, 2002). While the national energy policy mentions stakeholder

participation in the development of the Integrated Energy Resource Master Plans (MEPD, 2012), it does not pay attention to the questions such as whose participation and at what level? Unfortunately, unspecified participation results in social exclusion of the rural people because of their unequal standing in the society. Therefore, any policy which purports to offer participation for all should clearly state at the outset the involvement of the rural poor people. Lack of the local people's participation partially contributes to path-dependency, which embraces the supply-driven strategies in the energy sector. Eberhard and van Horen (1995) state that any electrification programme which focuses on increasing the number of supply points in the household sector will inevitably result in a poor allocation of resources. This is because supply authorities would have little understanding of the end-uses for which electricity may be more appropriate and those for which it is unlikely to be the best choice for the households. It is apparent that rural people's voice is important when planning for them. In other successful instances: Brazil, Costa Rica, Thailand and Tunisia have used cost reducing electricity distribution technologies and have *engaged communities* in the planning and delivery of the electricity services (Barnes, 2007, my emphasis).

Furthermore, it was instructive to inquire whether the local people have space to discuss fuelwood access as a dominant source of energy. A respondent from the MEPD said:

It's not our mandate to deal with fuelwood issues because for us having fuelwood or not; the difference is the same because it is an unclean energy carrier. After all, it is not the duty of the MEPD to deal with fuelwood issues, but rather of the Forestry Commission.

The Forestry Commission did not accept the claim. A senior official from the commission said:

Fuelwood is not our concern because it is the duty of the MEPD to provide electricity or any form of energy to the people. So, they should know better how to engage with the local people about energy issues.

These findings are important in revealing that the energy relevant organisations are not willing to take ownership of responsibility for fuelwood access. For that reason, there is no space available for the rural people to discuss fuelwood access as a dominant fuel. The reasons for rejection of ownership by the MEPD might be necessitated by the desire to be associated with cleaner energy sources and as such it would be politically retrogressive to be associated with unclean sources such as fuelwood. Similarly, the Forestry Commission is more concerned with the conservation of the forests and woodlands than the daily energy needs of the rural people. In this light, there is no space for engagement with the rural people to discuss fuelwood access. As a result, decisions on fuelwood access are made by the government elite, without the inclusion of the rural people's voice and that explains the antagonistic relationship between the local people and EMA (Chipango, 2018). This is partially emanating from the fact that the space is 'closed' for rural people to share their views with the policy elites on their coping mechanism, which is solely fuelwood. Put it another way, rural people lack influence over resource allocation and representation in policies and strategies related to environmental protection and management (Ribot, 2010).

Findings revealed that the media plays a critical role as a closed space by advancing a one-sided view. Pro-conservationists have used the media to promote their interests and discredit the actions of rural communities who solely depend on fuelwood, hence accuse them of causing environmental degradation. Media observations indicate that Zimbabwe is currently losing more than 300 000 hectares of forests per annum (The Financial Gazette, 2013; The Herald, 2013). What is problematic with this statistic is its vagueness on how the mapping was done-it is not clear whether it was a spot mapping, or a generalised view intended to push a certain agenda. Invisible power is evident in the media where it influences the perceptions of how fuelwood harvesting is causing environmental degradation in the rural areas. Similarly, the effects of hidden power are evinced by the exclusion of the communities' views on their energy concerns.

6. Conclusions and policy implications

This study identified spaces for participation and demonstrated the constraints and barriers that are associated with the invited, the claimed/created and the closed spaces. Findings revealed that the rural people in Buhera, Ward 24 have no spaces for participation which they can use to voice their energy concerns. Community participation in planning and delivery of energy services is an important component of social inclusion and ultimately social justice. However, the local people are covertly pushed away from the spaces of participation by invisible and hidden powers. It is due to these forms of power that the spaces which are superficially available in theory are actually 'closed' in practice. As

a result, most decisions on energy issues are imposed on the rural people because they are designed within the closed space. In addition, it was discovered that some local people lack the knowledge about the existing spaces which they can use to raise their energy concerns. This shows that the effect of power does not only 'close' the space but can present itself in the form of discourse which keeps the matter away from the minds of people concerned. Furthermore, the study revealed that energy issues are considered as purely technical and hence the need for technical solutions without community participation. However, such a techno-centric approach promotes the implementation of wrong solutions to the wrong people. Based on these findings, a conclusion can be reached that coping with energy poverty and participating in the energy arena are political activities.

   Accordingly, the study proffers that for energy issues to be meaningful to the intended beneficiaries, it is time we buried the 'expert knows all syndrome.' The relevant authorities in the energy sector should create spaces which are participatory for the rural people to express their felt needs and aspirations. Instead of the service providers being supply-oriented, they must become demand-responsive and understand about where and how to engage the stakeholders. In that line of reasoning, the starting point should be the curbing of the hidden and invisible powers as we were instructed long ago by Foucault (1980) that no profound change will take place in society unless the power mechanisms change.

   The current study dealt with the creation of spaces as platforms where rural people can voice their energy concerns. However, does simply creating new spaces bring about meaningful participation-can participation improve accountability for clean energy service delivery? What is the impact of this lack of participation on the rural people's socio-economic and environmental development? This requires further research.

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