OVERVIEW OF THE AMPLIFYING COMMUNITY VOICES PROGRAMME AT THE UNIVERSITY OF VENDA, SOUTH AFRICA

1 Background

In 2006, the Amplifying Community Voices (ACV) programme, coordinated by Prof. J Francis and assisted by Dr. B Kilonzo among others was conceived and implementation rolled out. The programme rests on the need for creating grassroots community ‘ventilation’ platforms and incorporating the decisions of children, youth, women, men and community leaders into rural development programming. Also, it promotes self-driven rural development within grassroots communities. In the process, opportunities are created for both undergraduate and postgraduate students from various departments and centers of the university to acquire and sharpen skills for championing participatory rural development. The Institute for Rural Development at the University of Venda spearheads implementation of the award-winning ACV. In 2010, it was adopted as the flagship university programme for show casing community-engaged scholarship.

A grant from the WK Kellogg Foundation Africa programme made it possible to implement the ACV from May 2006-April 2011. Between January 2010 and December 2012, it mainly relied on financial support from the South African government's Department of Science and Technology made available through the pilot Community-University Partnership Programme, which the National Research Foundation managed.

Since inception of the ACV, Wards 1, 17, 29 and 37 of Makhado Municipality have been the core implementation sites. In 2009 to 2011, the Masia and Sinthumule Traditional Council areas, also in Makhado Municipality, were adopted as implementation sites in response to formal requests from the respective communities. Vhembe District Municipality adopted the ACV approach to community development in 2011. This saw the programme being partially expanded to Musina, Mutale and Thulamela Municipalities.

2 Origin of the ACV Clarified

In South Africa, successive post-apartheid governments have been endeavoring to achieve people-centred development in rural areas. In order to ensure that the drive towards achieving this goal was accelerated, the Municipal Structures Act of 1998 was enacted. It paved the way for the establishment of Ward Committees as vehicles of deepening democracy. The Municipal Systems Act of 2000 provided a framework for enhancing grassroots community participation in decision making particularly with respect to municipal budgeting processes and formulation of integrated development plans. However, despite the existence of these sound legal instruments and frameworks, involvement of grassroots community members in municipal decision making has remained largely a pipe dream. Evidence of this challenge is the increasing disillusionment with government programmes. Moreover, most projects implemented in rural communities often fail because researchers and development practitioners tend to use blue prints which the intended beneficiaries often disown. This highlights the urgent need for developing appropriate engagement approaches that might better amplify the voices of residents of grassroots communities. Such approaches must ensure that grassroots communities implement their development programmes.

Central to this is the need for recognizing that a community is a heterogeneous entity. Integrated development planning in most Municipalities appears to rely mainly on community leaders’ views. Yet children, youth, women, the elderly, men and various types of community leaders might have unique views on how to combat the challenges that militate against local development.
3 The Implementation Approach

The ACV endeavors to "take the university to its rightful owners – grassroots communities" by creating all-inclusive decision making platforms. Through participatory reflection circles that students and staff facilitate in partnership with “Foot Soldiers” or “Village Development Champions” (community representatives at village level), issues militating against local development are deliberated on in a democratic manner leading to community-owned decisions made. Various participatory tools and techniques are used to engage the following interest groups constituting the community in a democratic manner: a) Children (7-10 year old boys and girls; and 11-14 year old boys and girls); b) Youth (Both males and females in secondary school; and also both males and females out of school); c) Women; d) Men; e) Elderly people (more than 60 years old); and f) A wide range of community leaders and their institutions.

4 Milestones

The following milestones have been achieved to date:

a) Institutionalization of the ACV:
   i. developing draft short course on Leadership for Rural Development earmarked to be rolled out once official approval is granted;
   ii. In August 2006, Makhado Municipality passed a resolution adopting the ACV programme;
   iii. Giving birth to the Amplifying Community Voices Students Association (ACVoSA). In 2012, the university recognized and registered ACVoSA as a bona fide student body.

b) Awards
   i. Silver award in Impumelelo Innovation Award Trust national competition in 2008; and

c) Securing funding for programme implementation:
   i. In 2006: $399 000 from the WK Kellogg Foundation to create democratic platforms and facilitate engagements of grassroots communities through application of participatory tools, culminating in the adoption and launch of local development plans;
   ii. In 2010: R3 million ($1 = R8.8) from the University’s Executive management to purchase vehicles and other relevant equipment;
   iii. In 2010: R4.2 million from the national Department of Science and Technology to upscale the programme;

d) Human capital development:
   i. Training more than 200 village-level ‘Foot Soldiers’ of social change in participatory research methods and techniques;
   ii. More than 500 students pursuing various degrees have participated in this programme since its inception in 2006; and
   iii. Two PhD and three Masters in Rural Development theses plus 13 Honors degree research projects successfully completed.

e) Scholarship: 1 book chapter; 5 papers published in peer-reviewed journals; and more than 10 papers presented in conferences.