EngageSDG

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Work Package 2

Participatory Approaches in Universities: Opportunities, Challenges, and Alignment with the SDGs in the SADC Region

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Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Higher education in the SADC region faces the challenge of delivering quality education while addressing pressing societal needs, including health, education, environmental management, and social inequality. Participatory approaches, which engage students, academics, and community stakeholders in co-creating knowledge, teaching, and research, offer a pathway to meet these challenges while advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This study reviewed 92 documents to examine the use of participatory approaches across community engagement, teaching, and research.

The findings suggest that participatory approaches enhance community empowerment, student agency, critical thinking, professional skills, and the relevance of research. Projects co-designed with local stakeholders address real-world priorities and foster sustained partnerships, while service learning and work-integrated learning bridge the gap between theory and practice. Participatory research promotes locally relevant, actionable outcomes, innovation, and social justice. Challenges include resource limitations, institutional rigidity, ethical considerations, power imbalances, and sustainability.

Embedding participatory approaches strategically, providing adequate resources, ensuring equitable participation, and fostering reflective practice can strengthen university-community partnerships, cultivate socially responsible graduates, and deliver lasting social and developmental impact.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Rationale

An increasing number of higher education (HE) institutions are adopting sustainability as a core principle in alignment with the 2030 Agenda. Guided by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), universities are re-envisioning teaching, research, and their broader "third mission" of community engagement to advance sustainable development (Fia, Ghasemzadeh and Paletta, 2022). Participatory approaches are central to this shift, as they foster collaboration, co-creation, and local ownership. Methods such as Participatory Action Research (PAR), Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR), and Living Labs enable universities and communities to jointly identify priorities and co-design context-sensitive solutions that are culturally relevant and sustainable (Nhamo, 2012). These approaches directly support SDG 17 on partnerships, since they are grounded in reciprocity, mutual respect, and shared accountability (Chankseliani and McCowan, 2021).

By positioning students and community members as equal partners, participatory practices also contribute to capacity building and empowerment, enhancing skills, agency, and innovation while aligning with SDG 4 (quality education) and SDG 8 (decent work) (European Commission, 2022). In addition, participatory monitoring and evaluation strengthen accountability by linking projects to measurable outcomes across health, water, climate action, and inequality (Evans, Jones, and Karvonen, 2022). In the Southern African context, initiatives such as the Southern African Regional Universities Association's (SARUA) EngageSDG project demonstrate how participatory approaches enable universities to contextualise and operationalise the SDGs in local realities, thereby reinforcing their central role in community engagement (SARUA, 2023).

This study examines participatory approaches in higher education within the SADC region, to define and operationalise such methods across the three core domains of higher education: community engagement, teaching and learning, and research. By systematically mapping and analysing participatory practices, it seeks to generate evidence-based insights into how universities can serve as active agents in advancing sustainable development.

1.2 Objectives

- To clarify and define participatory methods in higher education, situating them within historical and theoretical perspectives and identifying their relevance in the SADC region.
- To explore how participatory methods are applied across three key domains of higher education (community engagement, teaching and learning, and research), highlighting their advantages and challenges.
- To illustrate participatory practices through selected case study examples from the SADC region, thereby grounding the discussion in regional realities.
- To analyse the alignment of participatory approaches with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- To synthesise insights across domains to identify cross-cutting opportunities, shared challenges, and implications for higher education policy and practice in the SADC context.

- To provide recommendations for strengthening participatory approaches as strategic tools for advancing inclusive and sustainable higher education in the region.

1.3 Methodology

This study employed a desktop research method to examine participatory approaches in higher education in the SADC region. A total of 92 documents were systematically reviewed, including peer-reviewed articles, institutional reports, policy briefs, and documented case studies. The documents were selected based on the following inclusion criteria:

- Relevance to participatory approaches in higher education, including research, teaching and learning, or community engagement.
- Geographic focus on the SADC region or applicability of insights to SADC higher education contexts.
- Published between 1994 and 2025 to capture both foundational and recent developments.
- Available in English and accessible through academic databases, institutional websites, or public repositories.
- Evidence of practical application, case studies, or evaluation of participatory approaches.

Data extraction involved a systematic review of each document using a structured template. Key information was captured under the following categories: definitions and conceptual frameworks of participatory approaches, reported advantages and outcomes, challenges encountered, and documented case studies or examples of application. The extracted data was inductively thematically analysed according to the following pre-defined categories:

- Definitions
- Advantages
- Challenges
- Case Studies.

1.4 Scope and Limitations

The review focused on participatory approaches within higher education institutions across the SADC region, examining how these approaches are applied across the three core university mandates: teaching and learning, research, and community engagement. The study drew on both theoretical and empirical literature, providing insights into the design, implementation, advantages, challenges, and case studies of participatory approaches, with a particular focus on practices that foster collaboration, co-creation, and social impact.

The study is limited to published literature and accessible reports, which may omit unpublished or institution-specific participatory initiatives within the SADC region. The desktop review relies on the accuracy and completeness of secondary sources, which can vary in quality, depth, and methodological transparency. Additionally, while the review focuses on higher education's three core mandates, teaching and learning, research, and community engagement, contextual differences between countries and institutions may limit the generalisability of findings across the entire region.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Participatory approaches in higher education are processes that actively engage students, staff, and external stakeholders in the design, delivery, and evaluation of initiatives. It therefore facilitates the integration of sustainability into higher education processes by incorporating diverse perspectives, promoting shared responsibility, and enhancing institutional culture (Disterheft, Caerio, Azeiteiro, and Filho, 2015). Participation in development has been shown to improve efficiency, sustainability, empowerment, and the attainment of broader development objectives.

Evidence, including World Bank reviews, suggests that participatory approaches enhance project effectiveness and long-term sustainability by fostering a sense of ownership among community members (Martinez-Vargas, 2022). Participation is widely understood both as a means to an end and as an end in itself, insofar as it advances democratisation and enables marginalised groups to build confidence, exercise decision-making power, and engage in more equitable forms of governance (Martinez-Vargas, 2022). Empirically, participatory practices have been linked to the achievement of key development outcomes, including poverty reduction, improved public service delivery, and strengthened systems of accountability. Moreover, participation has the potential to transform the role of development practitioners, shifting their position from that of directors to facilitators who acknowledge and value local knowledge and expertise (Chankseliani and McCowan, 2021; Martinez-Vargas, 2022). For this study, participatory approaches will be discussed according to the three core missions of higher education institutions.

Higher education institutions are recognised for fulfilling three interrelated core missions: community engagement, teaching and learning, and research. While traditional academic functions of instruction and knowledge generation remain fundamental, recent scholarship increasingly emphasises the transformative role of universities in societal and economic spheres.

3. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Participatory community engagement is a collaborative, often project-based, approach in which higher education institutions, researchers, students, and community members actively work together to identify needs, design initiatives, implement solutions, and evaluate outcomes (Nhamo, 2012). This approach emphasises mutual respect, shared decision-making, and co-creation of knowledge to achieve social, cultural, or environmental benefits for all stakeholders. Community engagement is often referred to as the "third mission" following teaching and learning, and research (Chankseliani and McCowan, 2021).

This third mission encompasses a broad spectrum of activities ranging from technology and knowledge transfer to civic and community service that extend beyond the academy's walls (Carl and Menter, 2021; Compagnucci and Spigarelli, 2020; Jones, Leask, Brandenburg, and de Wit, 2021). Empirical studies, such as those conducted in Germany and Italy, demonstrate how universities can amplify their social impact, support regional development, and enhance educational outcomes by integrating teaching, research, and third-mission initiatives (Carl and Menter, 2021; Compagnucci and Spigarelli, 2020). Moreover, evolving conceptualisations advocate for community engagement to transcend being an ancillary function and become central to institutional identity and strategy (Johnson & Hlatshwayo, 2025).

Participatory methods in community engagement within higher education foreground collaboration, reciprocity, and the co-creation of knowledge between universities and communities. Rather than positioning communities as passive beneficiaries, these approaches embed principles of inclusivity, mutual respect, and shared responsibility in project design and implementation (Padayachee and Harris, 20230. Community-based programmes, such as university–civil society partnerships, demonstrate how co-designed initiatives can simultaneously build community capacity and provide students with opportunities to apply academic knowledge in real-world contexts. These collaborations ensure that local priorities, promoting reciprocity, shape activities and shared benefit for both communities and higher education institutions (Padayachee and Harris, 2023; O'Farrell, Mtawa and Luescher, 2022). Such methods also serve a broader democratising function, challenging traditional hierarchies of knowledge and enabling communities to act as equal contributors in addressing social, cultural, and developmental challenges (Hall and Tandon, 2017). However, participatory engagement is not without difficulties: case studies from rural South Africa reveal that issues of power imbalances, resource constraints, and institutional barriers can limit the transformative potential of such approaches (Bhengu and Mbokazi, 2015). Nonetheless, when carefully facilitated, participatory methods provide universities with a platform to engage communities in ways that are contextually relevant, socially responsive, and sustainable.

3.1 Advantages

Participatory approaches to community engagement in higher education offer numerous benefits that enhance both academic institutions and the communities they serve. These advantages encompass various dimensions, including enriched learning experiences, strengthened community-university partnerships, and the promotion of social equity as outlined in Figure 1.

3.1.1 Enhanced Learning and Development

Participatory approaches actively involve students and practitioners in real-world problem-solving alongside community stakeholders, fostering experiential learning and critical thinking. The result is a gain of practical skills, increased social awareness, and a sense of civic responsibility through direct engagement with societal issues (Vance-Chalcraft, Smith, Allen, Bowser, Cooper, Osborne Jelks, Karl, Kodner, and Laslo, 2024). This hands-on involvement encourages reflective learning, helping to connect theoretical knowledge to practical applications.

3.1.2 Empowerment and Community Ownership

By involving community members in decision-making, planning, and implementation, participatory approaches promote empowerment and a sense of ownership over initiatives. Communities are not merely recipients of interventions but co-creators of solutions, which strengthens local agency and fosters long-term sustainability of outcomes (Collins, Erickson, Miller, and Rivera, 2018). This empowerment also helps address social inequities and ensures that interventions reflect community priorities.

3.1.3 Improved Relevance and Impact

Integrating community perspectives ensures that projects and interventions are closely aligned with real-world needs and priorities, enhancing their relevance and practical effectiveness. Participatory approaches increase the likelihood that initiatives will be embraced, sustained, and successfully implemented by the community, thereby maximising their social and developmental impact (Collins et al., 2018; Sugawara, Patel, Lander, and Thompson, 2023).

3.1.4 Strengthened University-Community Partnerships

Participatory approaches foster trust, mutual respect, and long-term relationships between universities and communities. Such partnerships increase community involvement in academic initiatives, expand access to resources, and provide opportunities for collaborative projects that benefit both parties (Sugawara, Patel, Lander, and Thompson, 2023; Williamson, 2016; Isokuortti, 2024; Hubbard, 2025). These relationships also support institutional goals of social responsibility and enhance the university's reputation as a socially engaged institution. By embedding trust and mutual accountability at the core of engagement initiatives, universities can strengthen both the sustainability and impact of their interventions (Williamson, 2016; Hubbard, 2025).

3.1.5 Transformation of Academic Practices and Culture

Engaging in participatory approaches encourages academics and students to shift from traditional, top-down models to collaborative and inclusive modes of knowledge creation. This cultural shift fosters humility, respect for local knowledge, and a broader understanding of social contexts, which can transform teaching, research, and institutional strategies toward more socially responsible practices (Vance-Chalcraft et al., 2024; Omland, 2025; Waycott, 2010).

3.1.6 Alignment with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Participatory community engagement projects in higher education help students and academics understand the interconnectedness of societal challenges and the SDGs (Bringle and Hatcher, 2009). By collaborating with local communities on projects addressing health, education,

environmental management, or social inequality, students gain practical experience in tackling real-world problems while contributing to SDG-related outcomes (Furco, 2010; Scott, 2020). For example, initiatives that involve communities in water management, renewable energy, or urban planning simultaneously promote SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy), and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) (Brand, Jovic and Kim, 2025; Hermann, Bossle and Costa, 2024). Such engagement enhances student learning and civic responsibility while ensuring that community-based projects are aligned with global sustainability priorities (Adarlo, 2024). It also fosters long-term social and environmental impact in the communities involved (Scott, 2020; Hermann, Bossle and Costa, 2024).

3.2 Challenges

Participatory approaches in community engagement within higher education aim to democratise knowledge production and foster reciprocal relationships between universities and communities. However, implementing these approaches presents several challenges that can hinder their effectiveness and sustainability.

3.2.1 Power Imbalances and Tokenistic Participation

A significant challenge in participatory community engagement is the persistence of power imbalances between academic institutions and community members. While participatory approaches strive for shared decision-making, universities often retain control over funding, research agendas, and dissemination processes (Cargo and Mercer, 2008). This can lead to tokenistic participation, where community input is sought but not genuinely integrated into decisions, undermining the authenticity and impact of engagement efforts (Cargo and Mercer, 2008; Wallerstein, 2006). Addressing these challenges requires strategies to redistribute power, such as co-designing research agendas and implementing governance structures that give communities meaningful influence (Cargo and Mercer, 2008).

3.2.2 Institutional Constraints and Resource Limitations

Higher education institutions often operate within structures that prioritise traditional academic outputs, such as peer-reviewed publications and grant acquisition, over community engagement activities (Gelmon, 2022). Additionally, rigid curricula, assessment methods, and administrative procedures may not accommodate the flexible and collaborative nature of participatory engagement (Micallef, 2025). This structural emphasis can create a misalignment between institutional priorities and participatory engagement, resulting in limited support for faculty and students to undertake community-based projects. Without formal recognition, promotion incentives, or dedicated resources, participation in these initiatives may be discouraged, restricting both the scope and depth of engagement (Weerts, 2008). Additionally, effective participatory engagement requires substantial time, financial resources, and human capital. Institutions may face challenges in allocating sufficient resources to support these initiatives, especially when competing with other institutional priorities. Additionally, community partners may lack the necessary resources to participate fully, leading to unequal partnerships and potential exploitation (Israel, Eng, Schulz, and Parker, 2010). Overcoming these barriers necessitates institutional change and a commitment to integrating community engagement into the core mission of higher education institutions (Kline, Griner, Neelamegam, Webb, Veeramachanen, Morris-Harris, Carlo, Guadian, and Dunlap, 2025).

3.2.3 Differing Expectations and Objectives

Academic institutions and community members often have divergent expectations and objectives regarding engagement projects. Universities may focus on research outputs and academic recognition, while communities may prioritise practical solutions and immediate benefits (Hallmark, 2023). These differing priorities can lead to conflicts and misunderstandings, affecting the success and sustainability of participatory initiatives (Jagosh, Macaulay, Pluye, Salsberg, Bush, Henderson, Sirett, Wong, Cargo, Herbert, Seifer, Green, and Greenhalgh, 2012).

3.2.4 Ethical Considerations and Community Fatigue

Communities, particularly marginalised groups, often experience fatigue from repeated engagement that does not result in tangible benefits, which can foster scepticism and reluctance to participate in future projects (Ashley, 2021; Switzer, 2024). Ethical concerns also arise when community knowledge is used without appropriate acknowledgement, compensation, or consideration of community priorities (Eriksen, 2021; O'Sullivan, Desmond and Buckley, 2023). Addressing these issues requires a commitment to ethical engagement practices and the cultivation of long-term, mutually beneficial relationships with communities (Minkler, 2004; Ashley, 2021).

3.2.5 Sustainability and Long-Term Impact

Ensuring the sustainability of participatory initiatives remains a persistent challenge. Many projects are short-term, with limited funding and defined timeframes, which can result in engagement that does not generate lasting benefits (Duke 2023). Developing mechanisms for ongoing support and embedding projects within institutional structures are essential to maintain long-term impact and continuity of community engagement efforts (Duke, 2023).

3.3 Case Study: The Siyakhana Initiative (University of the Witwatersrand): co-creation for urban food security

The Siyakhana Initiative, established in 2005 through the University of the Witwatersrand's Health Promotion Unit, represents one of South Africa's most significant examples of community–university co-creation for urban food security. Situated within a broader national movement of urban agriculture projects that link higher education with community development, such as those documented in the South African Journal of Agricultural Extension, Siyakhana illustrates how participatory approaches can address issues of food insecurity while fostering capacity building and institutional transformation (Rudolph and Muchesa, 2024).

Originating as the Siyakhana Permaculture Food Garden in Johannesburg's Bezuidenhout Park, the initiative was created to address the nutritional needs of vulnerable populations, including children in early childhood development centres and people affected by HIV/AIDS (Wills, Chinemana and Rudolph, 2010). Rather than imposing a university-led solution, the project was grounded in community-identified concerns about access to healthy food, thereby ensuring local ownership from the outset (Siyakhana, n.d.; Siyakhana Initiative, 2011).

From its inception, Siyakhana functioned as a partnership hub, bringing together university faculties, NGOs such as Food and Trees for Africa, local municipal departments, and community-based organisations. The university played a central role as a broker of

relationships, enabling partners to define priorities and share responsibilities collaboratively. In practice, the university provided technical expertise and organisational support, NGOs identified beneficiary groups, and community members contributed labour and local knowledge, producing a governance model that reinforced shared accountability (Siyakhana Initiative, 2011; Farm & Garden National Trust, 2014). Implementation focused not only on the direct provision of food but also on capacity-building through training in permaculture and sustainable agriculture. Community members, Wits students, and civil society actors participated in workshops, on-site demonstrations, and skills transfer processes that facilitated the diffusion of knowledge and practices beyond the original garden site (Bauta, Kostkova, Parsia, and Restrepo-Guzman, 2011).

The co-creation process was iterative, with feedback from community partners and beneficiaries feeding directly into programme adaptations. Adjustments in crop choices, distribution mechanisms, and training content reflected a reflexive governance model based on mutual learning rather than one-way knowledge transfer (Wills, Chinemana and Rudolph, 2010; Siyakhana Initiative, 2011). The outcomes of this approach included improved relevance and uptake of food distribution systems, enhanced community skills and resilience through replication of food gardens, and the development of durable networks that extended Siyakhana's reach beyond its founding site (Bauta, Kostkova, Parsia and Restrepo-Guzman, 2011; Farm & Garden National Trust, 2014).

Although the project has been widely recognised as a model of socially engaged scholarship and community partnership, it has also faced challenges. These include reliance on donor funding, difficulties in sustaining staff capacity, and limited ability to capture long-term health and livelihood outcomes. Such limitations highlight the importance of integrating sustainability planning and robust evaluation mechanisms into community–university partnerships (Wills, Chinemana and Rudolph, 2010; van Niekerk, 2015). Nevertheless, Siyakhana demonstrates the value of co-created approaches in addressing food insecurity, not only through the delivery of tangible outputs but also by fostering long-term relationships, skills development, and institutional transformation towards socially responsible engagement (Siyakhana "About Us", n.d.; Siyakhana Initiative, 2011; Rudolph and Muchesa, 2024).

The principles that underpin participatory approaches in community engagement—collaboration, co-creation, and mutual learning—are equally applicable within the teaching and learning context in higher education. Just as engaging community stakeholders enhances the relevance, ownership, and impact of projects, actively involving students in curriculum design, pedagogical decisions, and classroom activities fosters deeper learning, critical thinking, and a sense of agency. By translating participatory methods from community initiatives into educational practice, universities can create learning environments that are more inclusive, reflective, and aligned with real-world challenges, bridging theory and practice while empowering students as co-creators of knowledge (Cook-Sather, Bovill and Felten, 2014; Mercer-Mapstone and Kuchel, 2015).

4. TEACHING AND LEARNING

Participatory teaching and learning requires the integration of pedagogical approaches that actively involve students in the co-creation of knowledge, decision-making, and reflection to foster a collaborative learning environment. These methods contrast with traditional, teacher-centred approaches by emphasising student agency and shared responsibility in the learning process (Bovill, Cook-Sather and Felten, 2014). Unlike conventional methods, where students are passive recipients of knowledge, participatory approaches involve collaboration, dialogue, and shared decision-making. Importantly, pedagogical approaches such as Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) and Service-Learning (SL) can be implemented in non-participatory ways, focusing primarily on student skill development or providing services to communities; however, their educational and societal impact is maximised when a participatory paradigm is embedded (Bovill, 2020; Healey, 2018). While various approaches are employed to integrate participatory pedagogical methods into teaching and learning, this section will focus on service learning and work-integrated learning as key approaches to this integration.

Service-learning is a pedagogical approach that integrates meaningful community service with curriculum-based learning and critical reflection. It emphasises the development of both academic and civic values through reciprocal relationships between universities and local communities. (Rhodes University, n.d.). Ochoa-Cervantes and Pérez-Galván (2019) identify four key dimensions for understanding participation in service-learning: pedagogical, linked to how students engage in their learning; political, concerning their ability to influence matters that affect them; social, focused on raising awareness of community needs and fostering transformation; and psychological, tied to emotional and personal growth. They also outline levels of participation, simple, consultative, projective, and “meta-participation”. which highlight varying degrees of commitment and shared responsibility. These levels invite reflection on the depth and quality of interactions in service-learning, stressing the need for genuinely collaborative and transformative engagement.

Work-integrated learning refers to educational practices that integrate academic learning with workplace concerns, aiming to enhance student development, employability, and civic responsibility (Council on Higher Education, 2011; Jackson, 2016). According to the Council on Higher Education’s Best Practice Guide (2011) work-integrated learning encompasses four primary modalities. Work-integrated learning connects academic content with professional practice through activities like case studies, site visits, and group work. Problem-based learning challenges students to tackle complex, authentic problems collaboratively and reflectively, encouraging integration of interdisciplinary knowledge. Project-based learning develops autonomy, planning, and communication through real or community-focused projects, including service learning. Finally, workplace learning immerses students in professional environments, where they gain firsthand experience, supported by preparatory activities and reflective practice. Together, these modalities integrate theory with practice to build professional competence and civic responsibility.

Work-integrated learning (WIL) is increasingly understood as a process that is strengthened through participatory approaches, where students, educators, and workplace partners actively shape both the experience and its outcomes (Jackson, 2023). The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO, 2016) highlights the importance of involving multiple stakeholders in WIL programmes, including students and industry representatives, to ensure that learning experiences are meaningful and aligned with both academic and workplace expectations. This participatory approach supports reflective practice and continuous

improvement, helping institutions enhance the quality and inclusivity of WIL activities (HEQCO, 2016). Jackson (2023) further notes that when students have input into the design and structure of WIL experiences, they develop a stronger sense of ownership over their learning and are better able to connect theoretical knowledge with practical skills.

4.1 Advantages

4.4.1 Enhances Student Engagement and Motivation

Participatory teaching methods, such as active learning, foster increased student engagement and motivation. By involving students in the learning process through collaborative activities and decision-making, these methods create a more dynamic and interactive classroom environment. Students who actively participate in their learning are more likely to be motivated and invested in their educational experiences (Rakha, 2025).

4.4.2 Improved Learning Outcomes

Participatory approaches can lead to measurable improvements in academic performance. For example, a field experiment involving teachers and students in Tanzania demonstrated that participatory teaching methods were more effective than traditional rote learning in enhancing learning outcomes (Jakob, Büchel, Steffen and Brunetti, 2023).

4.4.3 Development of Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving Skills

Participatory methods encourage students to engage critically with content and collaborate with peers, thereby enhancing their problem-solving abilities. These approaches promote higher order thinking skills, requiring students to analyse, evaluate, and synthesise information collaboratively (Tynjälä, 2008).

4.4.4 Increased Student Satisfaction and Retention

The implementation of participatory teaching methods has been associated with higher levels of student satisfaction and retention. By creating a more inclusive and supportive learning environment, these methods help students feel valued and connected to their learning community, which can lead to improved retention rates (Rakha, 2025).

4.4.5 Effective Preparation

Participatory approaches mirror professional environments where collaboration, communication, and active participation are essential. By engaging students in participatory learning, higher education institutions prepare them for real-world problem-solving, teamwork, and professional decision-making (Tynjälä, 2008).

4.4.6 Contextual and Experiential Learning

Participatory teaching methods enable students to be immersed in real-world contexts, thereby bridging the gap between theory and practice. By engaging directly with authentic problems, projects, or community-based activities, students gain practical experience that deepens understanding, reinforces learning, and enhances the relevance of theoretical concepts to real-life situations (Healey, 2018). This contextual immersion also fosters adaptability, equipping students to respond effectively to complex and dynamic challenges.

4.4.7 Alignment with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Participatory teaching methods can cultivate students' understanding of societal challenges and the importance of sustainable development (Wals and Jickling, 2002). By engaging students in community-based projects, service learning, or problem-solving initiatives that address local and regional issues, these approaches foster awareness of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), and SDG 13 (Climate Action) (Scott, 2020; Brand, Jovic and Kim, 2025).

Such engagement encourages students to develop a sense of social responsibility and equips them with the skills and knowledge to contribute meaningfully to sustainable and equitable development in their communities (Hermann, Bossle and Costa, 2024). Evidence from higher education contexts globally indicates that participatory teaching fosters global citizenship, problem-solving skills, and community impact (Martín-Sánchez, González-Gómez, and Jeong, 2022; Adarlo, 2024).

4.1 Challenges

4.2.1 Increased Workload and Preparation for Academic Staff

Implementing participatory teaching approaches necessitates careful planning, design, and facilitation. Academic staff must develop collaborative activities, guide student discussions, and provide continuous feedback, which can significantly increase workload compared to traditional lecture-based methods. This additional effort can be a barrier for instructors with heavy teaching or research commitments (Bovill, Cook-Sather and Felten, 2014).

4.2.2 Managing Diverse Student Expectations and Abilities

Participatory methods rely on active student engagement; however, students vary in their motivation, prior knowledge, and communication skills. Managing these differences to ensure meaningful participation can be challenging, as some students may feel uncomfortable in collaborative settings or struggle to contribute effectively (Mercer-Mapstone and Kuchel, 2015).

4.4.3 Assessment and Grading Complexities

Evaluating learning outcomes in participatory teaching contexts is more complex than traditional assessments. Group projects, peer assessments, and reflective activities require clear rubrics and transparent criteria to ensure fairness and consistency, which can be challenging to design and implement (Bovill, Cook-Sather and Felten, 2014).

4.4.4 Resource and Institutional Constraints

Participatory teaching often requires additional resources, such as smaller class sizes, technology for collaboration, or materials for project-based learning. Institutions with limited resources or large student cohorts may struggle to support these approaches effectively (Trowler and Trowler, 2010).

4.4.5 Resistance to Change

Transitioning from traditional didactic teaching to participatory methods may meet resistance. Some faculty may be hesitant to relinquish control of the classroom, while some students may prefer passive learning and feel unsure about their role in co-creating knowledge. Cultural and disciplinary norms can also influence the willingness to adopt participatory approaches (Bovill, Cook-Sather and Felten, 2014).

4.4.6 Time-Intensive Nature of Learning and Reflection

Participatory methods often involve iterative activities, discussions, and reflections, which require significant time both in and out of class. This can limit coverage of content and pose challenges in balancing curriculum requirements with experiential learning objectives (Bovill, 2020).

4.2 Case Study: LabHackathon Zimbabwe – Empowering Students to Innovate Low-Cost Laboratory Equipment

In June 2018, the Harare Institute of Technology (HIT) hosted the inaugural LabHackathon in Zimbabwe, a collaborative initiative designed to engage students actively in addressing the persistent shortage of laboratory equipment in African educational institutions. The event brought together over 100 students from various disciplines, including science, engineering, computer science, and social sciences, as well as faculty and industry partners, to co-create solutions through hands-on teamwork (HIT, 2018). Rather than following pre-set instructions, students were encouraged to participate in problem definition, design, and evaluation processes, making decisions collectively and iteratively, which exemplifies a deeply participatory approach to work-integrated learning (Webb, Gupta and Stewart, 2019).

The LabHackathon fostered collaboration across disciplines, with students sharing knowledge, skills, and ideas to develop prototypes that responded to real-world challenges. Faculty, industry experts, and local partners served as facilitators and mentors, rather than traditional instructors, supporting reflection, guiding problem-solving, and helping students navigate both practical and conceptual issues. This co-creation model empowered students to take ownership of their learning, enhancing engagement, creativity, and critical thinking while ensuring that the solutions developed were relevant to local contexts (Webb, Gupta and Stewart, 2019; arXiv, 2019).

The initiative also highlighted the importance of inclusive participation. Teams were encouraged to leverage diverse perspectives, and the open documentation and peer evaluation processes enabled knowledge sharing not only among participants but also with the broader community. By actively involving students in shaping the problems, methods, and outcomes of the LabHackathon, the initiative demonstrated that participatory approaches in WIL can create a more democratic, responsive, and meaningful learning environment (HIT, 2018; Webb, Gupta and Stewart, 2019).

Overall, the LabHackathon in Zimbabwe demonstrates how participatory work-integrated learning can transcend traditional, instructor-led models. By embedding collaboration, co-creation, and reflection at every stage, it enabled students to engage deeply with authentic problems, develop professional skills, and contribute to solutions with tangible social impact.

5. RESEARCH

Participatory research encompasses a broad spectrum of research designs, methodologies, and theoretical frameworks that foreground collaborative inquiry with individuals and communities directly impacted by the issues under investigation. Its central aim is not only to generate knowledge but to catalyse meaningful social or practical change (Vaughn and Jacquez, 2020). Participatory research approaches actively involve communities, transforming participants into co-creators of knowledge, ensuring that marginalised groups have a meaningful voice in decision-making processes. This participatory orientation fosters empowerment, inclusivity, and shared ownership of outcomes (Stewart, 2025; Vaughn and Jacquez, 2020; Kanyamuna and Zulu, 2022).

By integrating community perspectives, research gains critical contextual relevance, allowing priorities, methodologies, and interventions to be shaped around local realities and needs. Such alignment is particularly vital in addressing persistent health disparities, where community-driven insights inform solutions that are both culturally appropriate and practically effective (Duea, Zimmerman, Vaughn, Dias, and Harris, 2022; Vangeepuram, Fei, Goytia, Madden, Corbie-Smith, and Horowitz, 2023). While participatory research can take various forms, ten (10) key approaches are outlined within this section. These approaches are summarised in Table 1 below.

Table 1: An Overview of Participatory Research Approaches used in Higher Education in the SADC Region

Approach	Definition	SADC Example	Academic Note
Participatory Action Research (PAR)	A collaborative, iterative approach where communities and researchers engage in cycles of action, reflection, and learning to drive social change (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013).	Used with farmers in Zimbabwe to co-develop integrated soil fertility management strategies and strengthen adaptive capacity (Mapfumo, Adjei-Nsiah, Mtambanengwe, Chikowo, and Vanlauwe, 2013).	Well-established in literature.
Living Labs	Real-world, user-centred research environments where stakeholders co-create and test innovations collaboratively (Callaghan and Herselman, 2015).	The Education Living Lab in South Africa co-developed mobile learning solutions with schools, industry and academia (Callaghan and Herselman, 2015).	Well-established in literature.
Citizen Science	A process where non-scientists participate in scientific research by collecting and analysing data, enhancing knowledge democratisation (UNESCO, 2022).	UNESCO's Biosphere Reserve project in SADC supports local communities in environmental monitoring and governance through citizen science (UNESCO, 2022).	Well-established in literature.
Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR)	A collaborative research approach in which researchers and community members share decision-making power throughout the process (Hall and Tandon, 2017b).	The SCRATCHMAPS project in the Western Cape, South Africa, applied CBPR to co-design community development interventions in low-income areas (Lazarus, Taliep, Bulbulia, Phillips, and Seedat, 2012).	Well-established in literature.
Participatory Climate Risk Assessments (PCRA)	A co-design process where communities and researchers collaboratively assess climate risks and develop adaptive strategies (Mapfumo, Adjei-Nsiah, Mtambanengwe, Chikowo, Giller, and Vanlauwe, 2013).	In Zimbabwe, participatory methods helped smallholder farmers and researchers co-create climate adaptation practices in agriculture (Mapfumo et al., 2013).	Conceptually aligned with participatory climate adaptation research.

Participatory Urban Planning (PUP)	A planning method involving communities and authorities in designing inclusive urban infrastructure and upgrading informal settlements (UN-Habitat, 2016).	In Durban, South Africa, participatory planning was applied in informal settlement upgrading through partnerships with communities and municipalities (Sutherland, Buthelezi, Roberts, Hordijk, and Scott, 2016).	"PUP" as a term is less common; often appears as "participatory spatial planning" or "community-based planning."
Regional Multi-Stakeholder Platforms (RMSP)	Forums where governments, academia, civil society, and private sector actors co-create policies and strategies for regional integration (SADC, 2025).	The SADC Dialogue Facility enables collaborative policy dialogue, peer learning, and regional academic-policy partnerships (SADC, 2025).	Practice and terminology widely used.
Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) / Participatory Evaluation	A family of participatory approaches that enable stakeholders to analyse, reflect and plan collective action while embedding learning into curricula (Chambers, 1994).	Service-learning programmes in South African universities integrate PLA to promote equity-focused pedagogy and reflective community engagement (Wood and Zuber-Skerrit, 2013).	In higher education, practices often described as "participatory pedagogy" rather than explicitly as "PLA."
Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR)	An approach that integrates action research with participatory learning, focusing on empowerment, democratic knowledge creation, and sustainable change (Zuber-Skerritt, 2015; Wood, 2020).	At North-West University, PALAR projects enabled lecturers and community partners to co-learn socially just approaches to embedding participatory approaches into higher education curricula (Wood & Zuber-Skerritt, 2013).	Well established in literature

5.1 Advantages

5.1.1 Enhanced Relevance and Contextualisation

Participatory approaches ensure research is closely aligned with the needs and priorities of communities, making findings more locally relevant and actionable (Chevalier and Buckles, 2013). By engaging stakeholders in problem identification, higher education research can address real-world challenges, particularly in education, health, and community development (Israel et al., 1998).

5.1.2 Empowerment and Capacity Building

Participation in research processes empowers community members, students, and staff by enhancing skills, knowledge, and agency. It facilitates mutual learning and co-creation of knowledge, building capacity for both academic and community partners (Wood and Zuber-Skerritt, 2013; Zuber-Skerritt, 2015).

5.1.3 Promotion of Social Justice and Inclusion

Participatory research prioritises marginalised voices and fosters equitable involvement in knowledge creation. In higher education, this can help address epistemic injustice and inclusivity in curricula, research design, and community engagement activities (Mitchell and de Lange, 2019; Wood and Zuber-Skerrit, 2013).

5.1.4 Improved research Quality and Innovation

Incorporating diverse perspectives from multiple stakeholders enhances the depth, credibility, and richness of research data. This can stimulate innovative solutions, especially in complex interdisciplinary problems such as urban planning, climate adaptation, or health interventions (Callaghan and Herselman, 2015; UNESCO, 2022).

5.1.5 Strengthening University-Community Partnerships

Participatory approaches reinforce sustained relationships between higher education institutions and external stakeholders, fostering long-term collaboration, trust, and knowledge exchange (Chevalier and Buckles, 2013; SADC, 2025). This aligns with universities' third mission of community engagement and contributes to regional development objectives.

5.1.6 Facilitation of Reflective Practice and Learning

Approaches such as PALAR embed cycles of action, reflection, and learning, which support continual improvement in teaching, research, and service activities (Wood and Zuber-Skerritt, 2013; Zuber-Skerritt, 2015). Reflective practice enhances both the scholarly rigour of research and its societal impact.

5.1.7 Alignment with Global Agendas and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Participatory research naturally integrates local action with global priorities, such as SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), SDG 13 (Climate Action), and SDG 17 (Partnerships), by actively involving stakeholders in co-creating solutions (Wood, 2020; UNESCO, 2022).

5.2 Challenges

5.2.1 Time-Intensive Process

Participatory research requires sustained engagement with multiple stakeholders, iterative cycles of action and reflection, and consensus-building, which can be far more time-consuming than traditional research approaches (Chevalier and Buckles, 2013; Zuber-Skerritt, 2015).

5.2.2 Resource Constraints

These approaches often demand additional financial, human, and logistical resources, including facilitation, workshops, travel, and ongoing support for community participants (Israel et al., 1998; Callaghan and Herselman, 2015).

5.2.3 Power Dynamics and Equity Issues

Ensuring equitable participation between academics and community members can be a challenging task. Differences in education, social status, and access to resources may lead to unequal influence in decision-making (Mitchell and de Lange, 2019; Wood and Zuber-Skerrit, 2013).

5.2.4 Managing Conflicting Interests

Stakeholders often have diverse priorities and perspectives, which can complicate decision-making and project direction. Negotiating these differences requires careful facilitation and can slow down progress (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013; Wood and Zuber-Skerritt, 2013).

5.2.5 Institutional Barriers

Universities may have rigid structures, traditional academic reward systems, or limited recognition for participatory approaches, which can hinder faculty adoption of these methodologies (Wood, 2020; Zuber-Skerritt, 2015).

5.2.6 Ethical and Accountability Challenges

Participatory research can raise complex ethical questions regarding consent, confidentiality, data ownership, and shared authorship. Ensuring ethical rigor while maintaining meaningful participation requires careful planning (Israel et al., 1998; Wood and Zuber-Skerrit, 2013).

5.2.7 Sustainability and Follow-up

Maintaining engagement and impact beyond the life of a research project is often difficult, particularly if community partners have limited capacity or funding. Without sustained support, the benefits of participatory research can be short-lived (SADC, 2025; UNESCO, 2022).

5.2.8 Complexity in Evaluation and Measurement

Outcomes of participatory approaches are often qualitative, context-specific, and multidimensional, making standard evaluation and impact assessment challenging compared to conventional metrics (Callaghan and Herselman, 2015; Mitchell and de Lange, 2019).

5.3 Case Study: Ward 14, Gwanda District participatory action research (PAR) (Zimbabwe)

In Ward 14 of Gwanda District, Matebeleland South Province, Zimbabwe, a participatory action research (PAR) project was conducted to address the community's low awareness and management of hypertension. The study aimed to assess knowledge, attitudes, and practices related to hypertension and identify opportunities for intervention. Researchers collaborated directly with community members to collect data, ensuring that findings reflected local realities and priorities (Chimberengwa, Naidoo and the Cooperative Inquiry Group, 2019).

The research revealed significant gaps in community knowledge regarding hypertension, including misconceptions about causes and treatment adherence. Data were gathered through structured surveys and focus group discussions with residents, representing a population of 5,867 people across 1,384 households (Chimberengwa, Naidoo and the Cooperative Inquiry Group, 2019, p. 3). Women accounted for 55% of the surveyed population, and agriculture was identified as the primary source of livelihood. However, recurrent droughts and economic constraints posed challenges to health outcomes (Chimberengwa, Naidoo and the Cooperative Inquiry Group, 2019).

Findings from this PAR project informed community-based health interventions, including education campaigns aimed at increasing awareness of hypertension prevention and management. The study demonstrated the potential of participatory research to enhance the relevance and impact of health interventions in rural Zimbabwean communities. By actively involving local stakeholders, the project fostered stronger university-community partnerships and contributed to sustainable health outcomes (Chimberengwa and Naidoo, 2020a; Chimberengwa and Naidoo, 2020b).

Despite limitations related to resources and logistical challenges, the project exemplifies how higher education institutions can engage effectively with local communities to address pressing health concerns while building local capacity for health promotion and disease prevention (Chimberengwa and Naidoo, 2020a).

6. SYNTHESIS OF FINDINGS

6.1 Alignment to Sustainable Development Goals

Participatory approaches in higher education bring community engagement, teaching and learning, and research into dynamic alignment, each reinforcing the other in pursuit of sustainability and social transformation. Community engagement provides the platform where students and academics collaborate with local partners to address pressing issues such as health, education, environmental management, and inequality. These collaborations expose learners to the interconnected nature of societal challenges while contributing directly to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Bringle and Hatcher, 2009; Furco, 2010; Scott, 2020). For instance, projects focused on water management, renewable energy, and urban planning simultaneously support SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy), and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) (Brand, Jovic and Kim, 2025; Hermann, Bossle and Costa, 2024). These initiatives not only deliver tangible benefits to communities but also cultivate students' civic responsibility and deepen their experiential learning (Adarlo, 2024; Hermann, Bossle and Costa, 2024).

Teaching and learning is enriched through this engagement. Participatory pedagogies such as service learning and problem-based projects connect classroom knowledge to real-world issues, embedding sustainability challenges into the educational experience. By engaging students in collaborative projects with societal relevance, higher education advances SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), and SDG 13 (Climate Action) (Wals and Jickling, 2002; Scott, 2020; Brand, Jovic and Kim, 2025). This approach not only builds academic and professional skills but also develops the dispositions of global citizenship, social responsibility, and problem-solving capabilities essential for equitable and sustainable development (Martín-Sánchez, González-Gómez, and Jeong, 2022; Adarlo, 2024). Research acts as the integrating thread that connects and amplifies these efforts. By involving communities and stakeholders in co-creating knowledge, participatory research ensures that inquiry is rooted in local realities while aligned with global sustainability priorities, including SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), SDG 13 (Climate Action), and SDG 17 (Partnerships) (Wood, 2020; UNESCO, 2022). This approach transforms research from being solely an academic exercise into a collaborative problem-solving process that feeds back into teaching and strengthens community partnerships.

Together, these three domains form a mutually reinforcing cycle: community engagement generates authentic contexts for learning and inquiry; teaching prepares students to participate meaningfully in such contexts; and research provides the knowledge base and innovation needed to sustain impact. By integrating these participatory approaches, higher education institutions position themselves as active contributors to the SDGs while nurturing graduates who are capable, responsible, and committed to social transformation.

6.2 Key Advantages of Participatory Approaches in Higher Education in the SADC region

Participatory approaches in higher education strengthen the relevance, inclusivity, and transformative potential of universities by integrating community engagement, teaching and learning, and research into mutually reinforcing practices. Drawing on evidence from the SADC region, five overarching themes emerge as outlined in Figure 1.

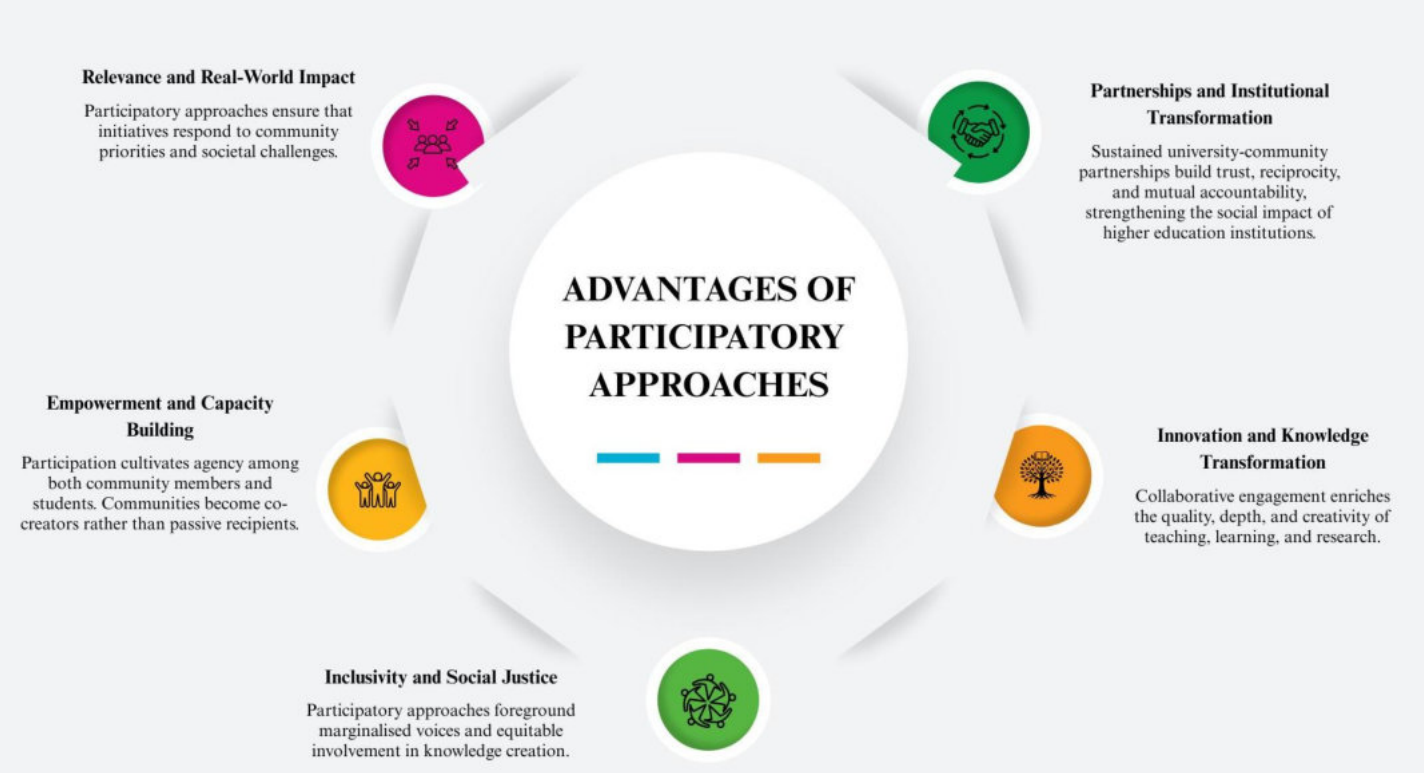

Figure 1: An Overview of the Advantages of Participatory Approaches in Higher Education in the SADC Region.

Participatory approaches in higher education in the SADC region enhance the relevance, inclusivity, and transformative potential of universities by integrating community engagement, teaching and learning, and research in mutually reinforcing ways. By embedding real-world problem-solving into academic practice, these approaches ensure that initiatives respond directly to community priorities and societal challenges. In community engagement, projects co-designed with local stakeholders address issues such as health, education, environmental management, and social inequality, increasing the practical effectiveness and sustainability of interventions (Collins, Erickson, Miller, and Rivera, 2018; Sugawara, Patel, Lander, and Thompson, 2023). In teaching, participatory methods immerse students in authentic problems, bridging theory and practice, fostering experiential learning, and improving academic outcomes (Jakob, Büchel, Steffen and Brunetti, 2023; Healey, 2018). In research, active stakeholder involvement ensures findings are locally relevant, actionable, and responsive to community needs (Chevalier and Buckles, 2013; Israel et al., 1998).

These approaches also cultivate empowerment and capacity building among both communities and students. By involving communities as co-creators rather than passive recipients, participatory approaches strengthen local agency, foster ownership of interventions, and contribute to long-term sustainability (Collins et al., 2018). Students develop critical thinking, problem-solving, and professional skills through experiential engagement (Vance-Chalcraft et al., 2024; Tynjälä, 2008), while participatory research fosters mutual learning and capacity development among academics, students, and community partners (Wood and Zuber-Skerritt, 2013; Zuber-Skerritt, 2015).

Inclusivity and social justice are further advanced through participatory approaches. By foregrounding marginalised voices and promoting equitable involvement in knowledge creation, these approaches address epistemic inequities and foster more socially responsible academic practices (Mitchell and de Lange, 2019; Wood and Zuber-Skerritt, 2013). Collaboration between academics, students, and community members also drives innovation and knowledge transformation. The integration of local and academic knowledge enhances research quality, stimulates creative problem-solving, and supports interdisciplinary solutions to complex challenges such as urban planning, climate adaptation, and health interventions (Callaghan and Herselman, 2015; UNESCO, 2022; Vance-Chalcraft et al., 2024).

Sustained partnerships between universities and communities underpin the long-term impact of these approaches. By embedding trust, reciprocity, and mutual accountability, participatory methods strengthen institutional engagement with societal challenges and position universities as active contributors to regional development (Sugawara et al., 2023; Williamson, 2016; Hubbard, 2025). At the same time, engagement in participatory practices fosters a cultural shift within higher education institutions, promoting collaborative, inclusive, and socially responsible teaching, research, and engagement strategies (Vance-Chalcraft et al., 2024; Omland, 2025; Waycott, 2010).

Through these integrated advantages, participatory approaches in the SADC context not only enhance learning outcomes and research relevance but also empower communities, advance social justice, stimulate innovation, and drive institutional transformation — creating a higher education ecosystem that is deeply responsive to both local realities and global sustainability priorities.

6.3 Key Challenges of Participatory Approaches in Higher Education in the SADC Region

Participatory approaches in higher education, which engage students, academics, and communities collaboratively, have gained prominence for their potential to enhance learning, research, and societal impact. Yet, they also present distinct challenges that must be carefully navigated. Drawing from the findings of the study, five challenges were identified in the embedding of participatory approaches within SADC higher education. These are outlined in Figure 2.

Figure 2: An Overview of the Challenges of Embedding Participtory Approaches in SADC Higher Education.

Participatory approaches in higher education offer substantial benefits, yet they face challenges that can limit their effectiveness, sustainability, and transformative potential. A key issue across community engagement, teaching, and research is the persistence of power imbalances. Universities often control funding, research agendas, and decision-making, which can lead to tokenistic participation and undermine authentic engagement (Cargo and Mercer, 2008; Wallerstein, 2006). In research, differences in education, social status, and access to resources can create unequal influence among stakeholders, complicating collaboration (Mitchell and de Lange, 2019; Wood and Zuber-Skerrit, 2013). Addressing these dynamics requires deliberate strategies such as co-designing agendas and governance structures that empower communities. Institutional and resource constraints also pose barriers. Higher education often prioritises traditional outputs, and rigid curricula or assessment structures may not accommodate collaborative, iterative methods (Gelmon, 2022; Micallef, 2025; Trowler and Trowler, 2010). Participatory teaching demands substantial preparation and facilitation, adding workload for staff (Bovill, Cook-Sather and Felten, 2014), while limited financial, technological, and human resources can restrict both university and community participation (Israel, Eng, Schulz, and Parker, 2010; Callaghan and Herselman, 2015).

Diverging expectations present another challenge. Communities often seek practical solutions, whereas universities focus on academic outputs or student learning goals (Hallmark, 2023; Jagosh et al., 2012). Students' varying motivation and abilities can complicate participatory teaching (Mercer-Mapstone and Kuchel, 2015), and research requires careful negotiation of diverse stakeholder interests to avoid delays or conflicts (Chevalier and Buckles, 2013; Wood and Zuber-Skerritt, 2013).

Ethical and accountability concerns are central across all domains. Community fatigue can arise from repeated engagement without tangible outcomes, and misuse or inadequate recognition of local knowledge raises ethical issues (Ashley, 2021; Eriksen, 2021; O'Sullivan, Desmond and Buckley, 2023; Switzer, 2024). Participatory research must navigate consent, confidentiality, and shared authorship (Israel et al., 1998; Wood and Zuber-Skerrit, 2013), while teaching requires fairness in assessment and evaluation of collaborative work (Bovill, Cook-Sather and Felten, 2014).

Finally, sustainability and long-term impact remain critical challenges. Short-term projects, limited funding, and a lack of institutional support can hinder the achievement of lasting benefits (Duke, 2023; SADC, 2025; UNESCO, 2022). Participatory teaching and research are time-intensive, requiring reflection and continuous engagement, which can conflict with curriculum demands and faculty workload (Bovill, 2020; Chevalier and Buckles, 2013; Zuber-Skerritt, 2015). Embedding participatory practices within institutional structures and providing clear mechanisms for evaluation and ongoing support are essential for sustained effectiveness (Callaghan and Herselman, 2015; Mitchell and de Lange, 2019; Kline et al., 2025).
In sum, while participatory approaches promote empowerment, inclusivity, and social relevance, their success depends on careful attention to power dynamics, resources, ethics, institutional alignment, and sustainability.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

Participatory approaches in higher education prioritise collaboration, co-creation, and mutual learning, positioning students, academics, and community stakeholders as active partners in shaping knowledge, teaching, research, and societal impact. In consideration of the findings, five recommendations are proposed to embed participatory approaches within SADC higher education. These are outlined in Figure 3.

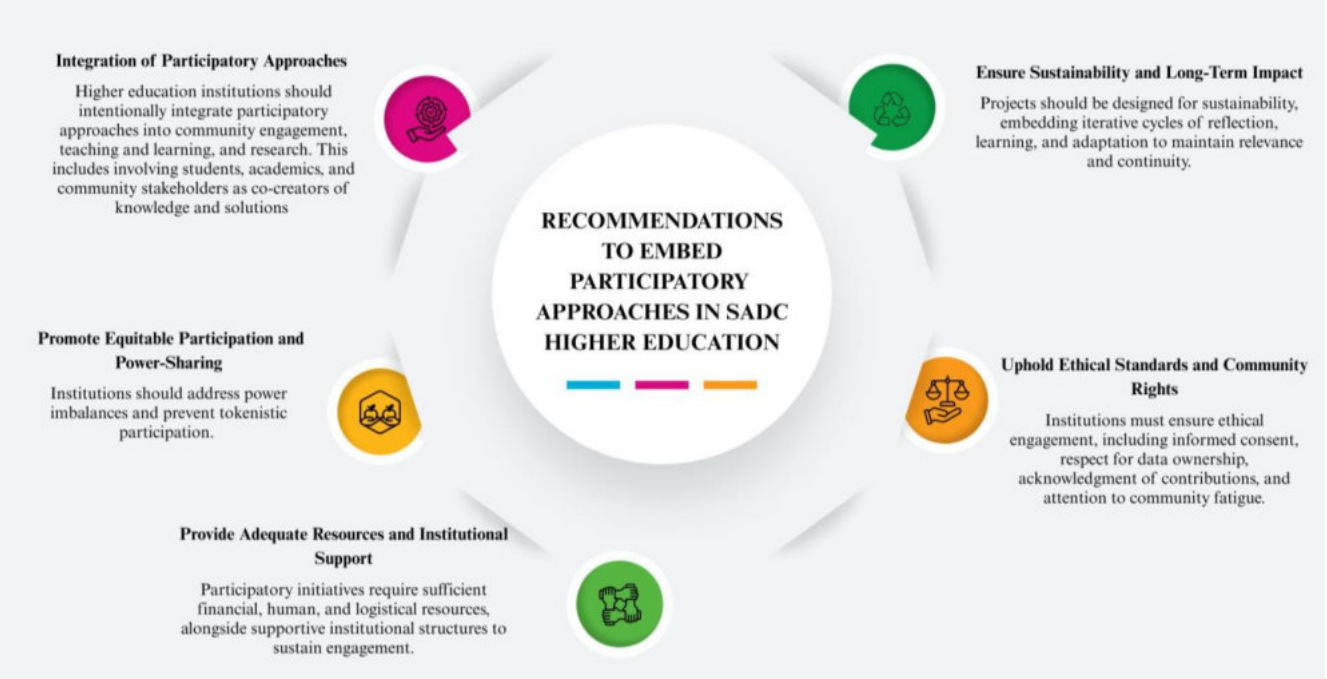

Figure 3: An Outline of the Recommendation to Embed Participatory Approaches in SADC Higher Education.

Participatory approaches in higher education, spanning teaching, research, and community engagement, prioritise collaboration, co-creation, and mutual learning, actively involving students, academics, and community stakeholders as co-creators of knowledge and solutions (Bovill, Cook-Sather and Felten, 2014; Wood and Zuber-Skerritt, 2013; Padayachee and Harris, 2023; Hall and Tandon, 2017; Stewart, 2025). By intentionally integrating these approaches, curricula, projects, and research become contextually relevant, reflecting the needs, priorities, and lived realities of communities and students (Chevalier and Buckles, 2013; Collins et al., 2018; Duea et al., 2022; Vangeepuram et al., 2023; Mapfumo et al., 2013; Sutherland et al., 2016; Jackson, 2023; Healey, 2018; Rhodes University, n.d.).

Ensuring equitable participation requires deliberate redistribution of power to avoid tokenism and prioritise marginalised voices in curriculum design, research, and community projects (Cargo and Mercer, 2008; Mitchell and de Lange, 2019; Wood and Zuber-Skerritt, 2013; Rudolph and Muchesa, 2024; Padayachee and Harris, 2023). Institutions must also provide adequate resources and institutional support, including funding, staff, and infrastructure, to sustain participatory initiatives (Gelmon, 2022; Kline et al., 2025; Callaghan and Herselman, 2015; Bovill, Cook-Sather and Felten, 2014; Israel et al., 2010; Trowler and Trowler, 2010; Johnson and Hlatshwayo, 2025; Carl and Menter, 2021).

Ethical considerations are central, requiring informed consent, respect for data ownership, acknowledgment of contributions, and attention to community fatigue (Israel et al., 1998;

Eriksen, 2021; Ashley, 2021; O'Sullivan, Desmond and Buckley, 2023; Switzer, 2024; Minkler, 2004). Sustainability depends on iterative cycles of reflection and learning, enhancing the impact of projects, teaching, and research while aligning with societal goals and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (Wood and Zuber-Skerritt, 2013; Zuber-Skerritt, 2015; Duke, 2023; SADC, 2025; UNESCO, 2022; Bringle and Hatcher, 2009; Scott, 2020; Brand, Jovic and Kim, 2025).

Participatory teaching and learning approaches, such as service learning and work-integrated learning (WIL), foster student agency, critical thinking, and problem-solving through collaborative, reflective, and contextually immersive activities (Bovill, Cook-Sather and Felten, 2014; Jackson, 2023; Healey, 2018; Rhodes University, n.d.). These methods enhance engagement, motivation, learning outcomes, and professional readiness, while ensuring alignment with societal priorities (Rakha, 2025; Jakob et al., 2023; Tynjälä, 2008; Wals and Jickling, 2002; Hermann, Bossle and Costa, 2024).

Participatory research approaches, including Participatory Action Research (PAR), Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR), PALAR, PLA, and citizen science, enable communities to co-create knowledge, fostering empowerment, inclusion, and capacity building (Chevalier and Buckles, 2013; Hall and Tandon, 2017b; Vaughn and Jacquez, 2020; Kanyamuna and Zulu, 2022; Stewart, 2025; Mapfumo et al., 2013; Callaghan and Herselman, 2015; Mitchell and de Lange, 2019; SADC, 2025; UNESCO, 2022; Zuber-Skerritt, 2015; Wood, 2020). These approaches improve research relevance, stimulate innovation, promote social justice, and strengthen sustained university-community partnerships (Chevalier and Buckles, 2013; Wood and Zuber-Skerritt, 2013; SADC, 2025).

Despite these advantages, challenges persist, including time-intensive processes, resource constraints, power imbalances, conflicting priorities, ethical considerations, institutional barriers, sustainability, and evaluation complexity (Chevalier and Buckles, 2013; Zuber-Skerritt, 2015; Israel et al., 1998; Callaghan and Herselman, 2015; Mitchell and de Lange, 2019; Wood and Zuber-Skerritt, 2013; Duke, 2023; SADC, 2025; UNESCO, 2022; Eriksen, 2021; Ashley, 2021). Overcoming these requires embedding participatory approaches into institutional strategy, ensuring resourcing, cultivating long-term reciprocal relationships with communities, and prioritising ethical engagement, sustainability, and alignment with global development agendas (Gelmon, 2022; Kline et al., 2025; Johnson and Hlatshwayo, 2025; Bringle and Hatcher, 2009; Scott, 2020; Brand, Jovic and Kim, 2025).

8. CONCLUSION

This desktop study highlights the diverse applications of participatory approaches within higher education across the SADC region, demonstrating their value in teaching and learning, research, and community engagement. By synthesising 92 documents, the review identified key advantages, including enhanced relevance, empowerment, inclusivity, and strengthened university-community partnerships, alongside practical challenges such as resource demands, ethical considerations, and institutional barriers. The findings underscore the importance of embedding participatory approaches strategically within higher education institutions, ensuring adequate resourcing, ethical engagement, and alignment with local contexts and global development priorities. Overall, this study provides a foundation for universities, policymakers, and practitioners to implement participatory methodologies that are contextually responsive, socially just, and capable of fostering sustainable impact across the region.

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