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Critical Outlooks Of The Community Approach To Global Development

Wednesday, 5 August 2020, 7:27 am

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Systems devised to organize local community participation in development emerged more than 70 years ago as a means to address poverty by involving people in designing their own initiatives and activities. Today, the people-driven approach to development is widely considered a way to create sustainable projects to advance economic growth, education, and health. However, it is not without its challenges and limitations, and has therefore been met with several pervading criticisms. For those of us who support and encourage participatory development (PD), we must ask ourselves what we need to do in order to ensure maximally productive and life-enhancing experiences for the communities with which we work, in the time we are in.

Challenge 1: There is insufficient documented evidence that PD results in measurable change. We do not have as much evidence as we should of PD's long-term effectiveness resulting in increased income, improved schools, enhanced food security, gender justice, social unity, and the like. We need to study the extent to which these outcomes are real and sustained. The common assertion is that if people are engaged in decision-making and the process is in fact interactive among the participants, this in itself is adequate proof. However, this is not the case. Yes, there are benefits from participating in a dialogue with fellow community members, but there is not enough evaluation and monitoring to demonstrate the fundamental, lasting change people need.

Community members and their partners should affirm together the idea that the process is not the goal, even as there are empowering benefits to local people planning together, such as heightened awareness that enables participants to make finer decisions. One cannot call it successful unless it results in uplifting people's lives – in terms of job creation, clean water, equipped classrooms, trained teachers, public health, and so on – in a way we can and do measure. Unfortunately, outside organizations that measure changes often gather local data without returning them to the people from whence it came in order to inform their designs for the future they seek. Such practices are extractive, unethical, and unhelpful, and they need to change. Local communities and their supporters, for their part, should ensure - through writing, speaking, and strategic advocacy - that their experiences inform their representatives and policy-makers in guiding programs to be more conducive in addressing communities' realities.

Challenge 2: Relying too much on known techniques can impede success. People's participation in making decisions that impact their lives is intrinsically good. Practitioners often assume that the development which results will be successful with the right methods as community mapping, options-assessment charting, institutional diagramming, or seasonal calendar creating, among many. Some might adhere to techniques and the "rightness" of the endeavor, similar to religious certainty, and rarely question it. However, these methods are not blueprints, and being too rigid in their application does not automatically lead to the outcomes we desire.

We would do well to remind ourselves not to be bound by overemphasis on methodology in our efforts to achieve our goals. In fact, if participant dialogue is proceeding effectively in a community meeting, we can set aside the intended methods and let the process move forward organically. While we may have a deep, ideological commitment to PD, we are only justified if it is productive and effectual. We believe in it as it makes

sustainability possible, new income, and the good that can be done. We cannot let that commitment cloud or detract from participation's essential function as in the promotion of human development. Methods are tools to be applied as communities might find them helpful, and not necessarily to be utilized if alternative, traditional, or even improvised measures might be preferred and bring progress.

Challenge 3: Local-level successes might not translate into widespread, systemic change. Community engagement in identifying and implementing projects - growing trees, waste management, and women's cooperatives - are all instances of positive development. Yet, we do not always see these actions result in structural change, in the reform of laws, property rights, societal institutions, or the political power structure. These micro-level movements need to create national and global structural transformation to truly unleash the potential of humanity. Intrinsic public-private partnerships at the different tiers of society are intended to support the priorities of local people. These lead to community development and growth, which is a difficult, evolutionary, potentially-radical process, and not a sudden one. Rather, it occurs over time and with concerted will.

We can point to individual programs and national policies that have emerged or been informed by community-level experiences. In Morocco, an example of how successful local pilot initiatives have gained national traction for reform is the free lending of public lands that are under the jurisdictions of different ministries, as well as those belonging to the [Moroccan Jewish community](#), in order for farming communities to grow fruit tree nurseries that they desperately need. Globally, national governments' economic stimulus in the face of the pervasive dislocation wrought by the pandemic would do exceedingly well if it were directed at small and medium-sized, community-level projects that can rebuild people's lives. The aggregate impact of fulfilling the self-determined development will of the people (through diverse partnership) will encourage intersectorial solidarity, decentralize decision-making power, and alter the social structure in favor of promoting local inclusion for growth mobilization. Profound change takes time and serious depth of energy to broaden applications across larger spaces, and the sum of its parts forges its own resonance with leaders and macro, social forces to accept its arrival. Our challenge is to achieve a sustained pervasive scale, with self-generating revenue to propel and deepen expansion across localities.

Challenge 4: Communities are seen as having unlimited capacities, while often ignoring their constraints. The notion of communities as harmonious, united, and consensual is an ideal. It overlooks their conflicts, stratifications, and power struggles. The idea that they possess adequate resources and that all members are equally empowered or equally motivated downplays the existing, inherent social inequities. All of the forms of division we see in the world - gender, age, class, ethnicity, where you live, what you wear, what you grow, your family members, your clan, and more - are manifested within a community. Practitioners of PD have come through everyday trials to see communities realistically as places where planning can be difficult, getting everyone together can be hard, and communication can be strained, sometimes impacted by generational grudges and recalcitrance that can hold down the many by the few. Attempting to engage community members can be a strenuous, emotional, and often loud and angry affair.

Still, PD justifiably assumes that people are capable of driving change and managing growth if given sufficient support, which most often involves third-party facilitation or mediation to assist in coordination and inclusive interaction. Broad participation in a physical or virtual setting to identify the most important change that is needed is not a spontaneous event, but requires the perseverance of its arbiters. However, let's also be clear: it is not the everlasting search for resolution and consensus among members of communities that primarily accounts for anemic growth in a locality. Instead, it is typically the overwhelming lack of funding and knowledge and capacities as to how it can be acquired that prevent the people's ideas from being realized. Well-intentioned public and private entities at national and international levels, for the sake of urgent needs of the people in our time, must find and make use of all worthy channels that deliver funding directly to the local groups with shovel-ready community enterprises.

Challenge 5: Participatory facilitators' authority can unduly influence community decisions. The facilitator has an inherently influential or even authoritative position. If not properly trained to ask, listen, and mirror back the people's own information, then they are abusing their entrusted positions. The more this occurs, the less accurately reflective of local desires and lasting impact the projects will have. For PD facilitators, inclusion in a

community meeting is not automatic, nor is there any guarantee that every voice will be heard - that those who are landless or marginalized will be part of the dialogue. Initially, this takes a lot of work even though later meetings become more self-sustaining and external facilitation is less needed. When facilitators use their socio-political capital to shape projects and skew dialogue, it undermines a community's own process. Yet, most effective facilitators do not allow that capital garnered to be left unspent, but rather they advocate for greater benefits for the widowers, the orphans, and those who endure the harshest of life's trials. They are also sure that any goodwill generated will be reflected back upon partners and donors, to inspire their further contribution.

Critical evaluation can help shed light upon how we may best improve our work of service to others. Promoters of beneficiary-driven social change should take heart that our challenges do not at all suggest that our approach is doomed to make sustainability undeliverable. Rather, they hearken that we must be more true in our measurements, more flexible in our procedures, more ambitious in extending over increasing areas, more urgent and innovative in securing finance, and more selfless in favor of those who are hurting most.

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Members of a cooperative in Morocco meeting and planning their future (July 2020).

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