

Empowerment and disempowerment in community development practice: eight roles practitioners play

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Abstract In community development practice, practitioners and organizations play many different roles in the planning, implementation and diffusion of the ideas and projects that they seek to promote. Some of these roles can serve to empower communities, while others can result in their disempowerment. In this article, eight roles commonly played out in development practice are briefly examined through the lenses of empowerment and disempowerment. Four of these roles are recognized as being 'traditional' and four are identified as 'alternative'. It is hoped that the exercise of examining several of the generalized roles that practitioners play will allow us to take a closer look at how theory impacts practice and, more importantly, at the potential of such practices to truly achieve their theoretical aspirations.

In community development practice, practitioners and organizations play many different roles in the planning, implementation and diffusion of the ideas and projects that they seek to promote. These roles are direct products of multiple and often conflicting forces – the goals of the intervening institution, the needs of the community, the vested interests of state and local governments and business groups, and even the personal aspirations of the individual practitioner. While some of these roles are developed in conjunction with the members of the community to be 'developed', all too often

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the act of defining such roles is undertaken by an institution or organization that resides outside of the boundaries (whether spatial or symbolic) of the specified community. In turn, these roles are greatly influenced by the constantly evolving moods and shifts of development theory and practice of the day, lined with buzzwords that often have little to do with the overall goal of community development.

On the one hand, this maturation of the field of community development has been positive in that the practice of development has proved to be self-critical and open to change. However, the unfortunate reality of this continuous transformation is that most of the growing pains are experienced not only by the practitioners themselves, but also by the subjects of such development experiments. While agents and institutions may suffer through crises of being, in general, it is the people who are to be 'developed' who must deal with the larger consequences of such interventions, whether they become poorer, richer, happier, sadder, less dependent, more dependent, empowered or disempowered. When a project goes wrong, the development practitioner has the option of quitting his job and going home, but the development subject cannot 'go' anywhere; she is already at home and must deal with the situation as it was left behind. For this reason, it is vital that development practitioners fully understand the implications of the roles that they are asked to play when interacting with communities, especially in terms of what will happen to the subjects of such development projects after the practitioner has moved on.

Part of the problem is that there is little general agreement on what actions fall within the definition of community development (Denise and Harris, 1990). International institutions, federal governments and grassroots groups all claim to be promoters of 'community development', but to each this practice holds very different meanings. The result of this is that what is done in the name of community development is subject to the vision of the self-defined practitioner or practicing institution, which he, she or it uses as the rationale for engaging in a wide spectrum of roles, many of which clearly do not result in community development at all. As Bhattacharyya rightly states, herein lies the problem: 'Many who call themselves community developers can perhaps do so because the field is unfenced; if it became fenced, they would be obliged to go their separate ways, or retrain' (2004, p. 6).

Therefore, it is vital not only to adopt a correct understanding not just of what community development is, but also, what it should be. Where on the one hand, we can take one step forward by embracing Bhattacharyya's definition, of the 'pursuit of solidarity and agency' (Bhattacharyya, 2004, p. 28), we can take a second step by looking closely at the link between community development and another abused term – that of empowerment.

Despite the notoriety of 'empowerment' as a tired buzzword, it continues to be of great importance, not so much despite its overuse, but rather because of it. As buzzwords often serve to give the appearance to the rest of the world that development organizations are on the right track, it is vital that development scholars and critics make a continual effort to take these words apart in order to put them back together again. In today's development field, the terms empowerment and community development are irrevocably connected and therefore it is necessary to understand the terms not only by themselves, but also in the different ways that they are linked – whether through mere rhetoric or in concrete practice. Craig (2002) defines empowerment in the community development context as 'the creation of sustainable structures, processes, and mechanism, over which local communities have an increased degree of control, and from which they have a measurable impact on public and social policies affecting these communities' (p. 3). If we can accept that the ultimate aim of community development is to empower, then all roles undertaken in this guise must be subject to the lens of empowerment, as well as its opposite – that of disempowerment.

In what follows, eight roles commonly played out in development practice are briefly examined through the lenses of empowerment and disempowerment. Four of these roles are recognized as being 'traditional' and four are identified as 'alternative'. The roles defined below are purposely simplified in order to give a sense of the models within which practitioners are expected to obtain results, and while a distinction must be drawn between a 'model' of development and a practitioner of development, it must also be noted that those who work within said models are destined, or doomed, as it may be, to be guided by them. Even the practitioner who is well versed in discussions of community development and empowerment will be unable to completely resist the enacting of development roles that may have disempowering results, if those are what he is sent and paid to perform. Of course, in the real world, the work of the development agent is much more complex and cannot be confined to the performance of one role over another. Ambiguities and contradictions float in the space between where one development paradigm leaves off and another begins. In addition, practitioners are people, not models, and therefore their own personal actions are full of the tension between doing what they have been sent to do and what they feel is right, which are often not the same. However, the exercise of examining several of the generalized roles that practitioners play allows us to take a closer look at how theory impacts practice and, more importantly, at the potential of such practices to truly achieve their theoretical aspirations.

Historical roles of the community development agent

As rescuer

In post-WWII usage of the term, 'development' in practice was understood as a form of international aid; American president Harry Truman enacted the Marshall plan in 1947 in order to provide massive post-war reconstruction to European countries whose national economies were destroyed by the war. Though the allied countries were the major recipients of the economic aid, Axis powers such as Germany and Italy also received substantial amounts of assistance, as one of the central motives of the plan was to repel the onslaught of communism in the Western World.

Although the myriad of motives behind the Marshall plan was more complex than a simple rescue mission, the basis of the plan was to provide emergency relief to countries in great need. This basic premise underlies much of the development work in the last half-century and continues even today under the heading of humanitarian assistance. Indeed, most multinational non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that conduct 'community development' projects at present grew out of emergency relief activities. CARE International, World Vision and the Red Cross are all examples of NGOs that originally operated through basic 'rescue' techniques, providing emergency supplies and basic assistance such as food, water and medical supplies to needy populations in times of crisis (war, drought, famine).

The role of development as a Rescuer is necessary when people are unable to help themselves due to severe physical limitations, and can provide people with adequate nourishment and appropriate medicine, without which they might be powerless to survive. However, this role can have disempowering qualities when it directs its efforts at people who do not need to be 'rescued'. The Rescuer can become a force of disempowerment in several ways. By 'rescuing' a hungry nation with imported food aid where the threat of famine is not extreme, the Rescuer can decrease demand for food produced in the region with detrimental impacts to local and national farmers. Where demand decreases, local supply will follow, as returns on production become too low to justify farmers' investment in terms of time or resources. Thus, when the next famine occurs, there will be even fewer local supplies to abate the crisis, and starving people will be in even greater need of a Rescuer. Unfortunately, development trends do not always follow-up on the same region, and people who were 'rescued' from one famine with food aid cannot necessarily count on their Rescuer to come through again.

Research done on a government welfare program in Botswana referred to as *atlhama-o-je* ('Open your mouth and eat') showed how such strategies

actually worked against empowerment: 'Approaches and policies which encourage *atlhama-o-je* thus contribute to the passivity of the poor, where the latter become dependent receivers without taking part in the development process. This may lead to negative attitudes, unwillingness to participate, a lack of trust, and resistance to change' (Lekoko and Merwe, 2006, p. 326).

As provider

The role of the Provider is very similar to the role of the Rescuer, but unlike the latter, the former role is not limited to times of crisis. Rather than providing emergency aid, the Provider focuses on giving the 'gift' of charity to less fortunate communities and individuals. Development organizations that operate through this role tend to measure their impact, at least in part, by tangible outcomes provided by donations of material resources or time and energy by volunteers. Examples of projects enacted by the Provider are schools or churches built (with outside resources and/or manpower), child sponsorship programs in which the benefactor sends gifts of money or other materials to needy children, as well as infrastructure projects done on a larger scale, such as the implementation of regional irrigation schemes through the digging of wells and the building of canals. Though the Provider operates through many different methods and projects, with or without the participation of the local people, the unifying characteristic of such projects is that they are in large part generated and paid for by people whose lives will not be directly impacted by the project.

The majority of international development organizations that operate in the area of community development play the role of the Provider in many of their activities. Even where projects are designed with significant input from the local population, the role of 'providing' becomes apparent when the majority of those impacted by the project perceive themselves as being materially benefited by the development organization. While it can be empowering to provide services and resources to those who lack them, the role of the Provider often has a disempowering effect on local populations by doing things for people instead of helping them to do things for themselves. Such interventions often focus on the end product of the development activity (i.e. the number of children going to school) rather than the process through which the activity takes place (i.e. the historical, economic, political and social contexts which influence the number of children going to school and the quality of education). As a result, the strategy used to fix the problem is usually simplified and surface-level.

A Peruvian case study that analyzed local resistance to participating in development projects illustrated that Provider-type development projects had the effect of making local people believe that their own efforts were

inadequate and that it was more effective to wait for donor handouts and prepackaged projects than to exercise their own initiative (Vincent, 2004).

NGO action and alliances with 'organized efforts of the excluded' can easily lead to manipulation and may create new bonds of clientelistic dependency... While on the one hand NGOs state their aim as fostering self-reliant development among the poor, on the other they build themselves up as institutions that looks set on staying. With one voice they go to the poor with something to offer, with another they say that the poor should stand on their own feet (Stiefel and Wolfe, 1994, pp. 207–208).

As modernizer

In response to the continued problem of poverty in some of the 'developing' nations, as well as the determination of the 'developed' nations to continue to pursue their own development, the idea of 'modernization' arose. Modernization theory began to infiltrate into development practice in the 1950s through the concept of 'trickle down' economics, in which economic development in richer core areas would eventually increase the wellbeing of the poorer periphery. The term 'community development' came into being around the same time, and modernization was seen by many to be hopeful solution to the noted problem of 'backward agriculture' (Ellis and Biggs, 2001).

Since the 1950s, modernization has been spread to communities in 'underdeveloped' countries through techniques such as technology transfer, mechanization, agricultural extension, state-led credit and the implementation of free trade agreements and policies. The Green Revolution, a highly debated experiment in modernization, was one 'hopeful solution' that helped double yields in much of South Asia through the intensification and mechanization of traditional farming techniques. However, the inputs needed for such drastic increases were dependent on large amounts of water, chemical fertilizers and pesticides, which greatly polluted waterways and worsened problems of water scarcity in drought-prone regions (Cavanagh, 2002). The greatly increased yields also led to price declines of basic foodstuffs, which greatly benefited consumers while leading to losses of income for many small-scale farmers, whose lack of appropriate land excluded them from participation in the project (Evenson and Gollin, 2003). Research has shown that while food production increased, the number of hungry people also increased by equal or greater percentages, independent of increased population; while there was more food available per person, the poorest were unable to access it (Lappé *et al.*, 1998). Other 'modernization' projects have had similar results.

In Brazil during the 1970s, when soybean exports increased phenomenally – to be shipped to Japanese and European markets for animal feed – hunger also increased from one-third to two-thirds of the population. During the 1990s, Brazil actually became the world's third largest agricultural exporter, with the area devoted to industrial farming of soybeans growing by 37 percent from 1980 to 1995, displacing millions of small farmers in the process (Cavanagh, 2002, p. 174).

Although the use of 'modernization' as a term has gone out of style, the spirit of the Modernizer is alive and well in the international and economic political climate of the twenty-first century, one that does not hesitate to sing its praise of the virtues of free trade. International Financial Institutions (IFIs), such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, despite rhetoric wonderfully laden with the most inspiring buzzwords, continue to play the role of the Modernizer through the making of conditionalized grants and loans to poor nations and the enacting of 'pro-poor' development projects that have little reference to community or empowerment outside of the approved strategy paper (Cornwall and Brock, 2005; Kane, 2006). In many cases, the methods used to 'build capacity' and 'transfer technology' have resulted in little more than the impoverishment of the small-scale farmers who they profess to 'empower', and the subsequent disempowerment of the communities to which these farmers belong.

As liberator

Although the decade of the 1970s was marked by so-called 'integrated services' by the dominant development institutions, around the same time there was an alternative development role that was being promoted by scholars who were critical of the mainstream, top-down roles described above. The Brazilian social scientist, Paulo Freire, was one of the most prominent advocates of the role of the development agent to be one of a Liberator, and wrote extensively about the concept of the 'liberation of the oppressed' from the bounds of their oppression, namely poverty, social injustice and inequality. Father Gustavo Gutierrez, a priest from Peru, was another important figure in the development of 'liberation' as a theory, and published one of the most important books on liberation theology, which integrates the religious practice of Christianity with that of political activism.

In general, the role of the community development agent as a Liberator was one of education of the masses, political activism and solidarity with the poor. Freire, in particular, developed his 'liberating' method in pedagogical terms, mainly through the teaching of literacy to raise participants' awareness of the 'world' in their process of discovering the 'word' (Blackburn, 2000). Other practitioners who took on the role of the Liberator

focused on the political oppression of the poorer classes, and acted out their parts by living alongside the poor, fighting alongside them in armed revolution and even dying as martyrs for the cause. The practice of Liberation is to be conducted from the bottom up, rather than the traditional, top-down development scheme; 'In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform' (Freire, 1973, p. 49).

Though the role of the Liberator has had strongly empowering effects for a great number of people, particularly those in Latin American societies where oppressive political and economic structures were engrained in decades of dictatorship, it also has had disempowering effects through its tendency to polarize issues, divide populations and act in itself as a tyrannical force. Liberators tend to see the world in black and white, or as Freire depicted, as made up of the oppressed and their oppressors – the only way out is to instill a 'revolutionary' consciousness among the people, create a 'new man'. In this light, the Liberator will seek to overturn worldviews that are perceived to be oppressive, regardless of the cultural or spiritual importance of that worldview for the individual. By denying people the right to make up their own minds and disputing the validity of their perceptions, the Liberator can unintentionally disempower the same people that he desires to liberate (Robinson, 2005).

Liberation can also become its own tyrannical force in turning the 'oppressed' into 'clients, beneficiaries, and customers' of the privileged educators or activists who are actively engaged in the process of liberating them (Esteva *et al.*, 2005, p. 19). Revolutionary governments often err in this way by nationalizing previously privatized (and usually oppressive) systems and businesses for the collective good. While the goal is to spread equity among the people, the result is often less positive, as services become centralized, markets become regulated, and the poor are rendered dependent on the same people who hoped to 'free' them.

Alternative roles of the community development agent

As catalyst

There are many different capacities in which community development agents can operate as catalysts, or agents for change, at various levels of practice. Catalysts can come in the form of individuals, organizations or even entire communities, working together for a common purpose. The main objective of the catalyst is to spark a new idea or action, with the hope or expectation that it will lead to a change in a given direction.

Catalysts are different from 'change agents' or 'extension personnel' in that they are not promoting a particular change or new technology. Instead, they aim to help communities build their own capacities for identifying and solving problems, emphasizing autonomous action and self-reliance (Datta, 2007).

Catalysts tend to work in indirect ways, as their role is to get the ball rolling, but not to undertake the responsibility of keeping it moving. Indeed, the role of the catalyst is often unintentional, with the origin of the new idea or action often forgotten as others take responsibility to cultivate the new knowledge and follow through on determined action (Lancaster, 1992). Researchers who work directly with local people can often inadvertently play the role of the catalyst by seeking answers to questions that had not previously been contemplated by the respondents. Individuals who cross cultural or social boundaries can also become unwitting catalysts, as they bring new information, beliefs and perceptions in sharing their own ideas and experiences with others. In this way, catalysts are constantly reshaping the knowledge that they encounter.

The practice of horizontal learning can also be a catalyst for change in communities, as local people share experiences and ideas with peers, whether from within the same region or even through 'south-to-south' encounters between people who deal with similar struggles but come from different parts of the world. 'Exchanges can provide a catalyst for a development process within a new community as they see the development approaches that they are using' (Patel and Mitlin, 2002, p. 130).

While such experiences are not always directed to the creation of a specific project, the simple opportunity for hearing new ideas and presenting one's own has a catalyzing effect by planting seeds of possible change in peoples' minds, along with the shared hope and inspiration to cultivate their growth. A research project in Canada, called the Caragana Project, showed that in helping rural people to identify problematic issues affecting their communities, they enabled them to become empowered so that they could continue the process of resolving such issues on their own. Thus, the Caragana project acted as a catalyst, enabling the 'community to mobilize and continue the process to resolve the issues identified' (Gaboriau, 1993).

As facilitator

Another alternative role that development practitioners can play is that of the facilitator. Though facilitation is not a new concept in the development field, its use as an indirect approach, unaccompanied by some of the more traditional roles mentioned earlier, can have empowering effects for communities. Facilitators can serve communities in several ways: by

bringing people together – especially in cases in which political, social, or cultural differences have led to historic divisions within populations – by aiding the organizational process through which a community can begin to mobilize for action, and by acting as a objective observer, whose impartial eye can bring to light power imbalances that might have been ignored otherwise. The role of the facilitator is especially important for marginalized populations within communities, such as women or children in patriarchal societies, who are not always invited to participate in the decision-making or implementation of community projects. In such cases, the facilitator can ask community leaders if meetings are representative of entire populations, and if they are not, then what the leaders can do to make them so. They can also challenge the existing community leadership or organizational structures that have disempowering effects, such as a lack of transparency or democracy in decision-making.

Datta's research on organizational sustainability in Bangladesh sheds light on how the role of the development agent as the facilitator can contribute to the external and internal capacities of community-based organizations (CBOs). While it was recognized that CBOs are most successful when initiated from within, the organizational structure and effectiveness of such groups could be strengthened by outside assistance in the area of facilitation, such as 'decision-making roles and processes, resource mobilization and management, communication and coordination, and conflict resolution' (Datta, 2007, p. 53). The role of the facilitator is also vital in order to get the community on the same page by providing spaces in which people can meet and by guiding people through brainstorming activities in which new ideas or solutions to community problems can arise. In this way, there becomes less of a tendency to set the 'goodies' against the 'baddies', borrowing the phrase from Stirrat (1996), and a stronger inclination to seek understanding of how inequalities arise in local settings.

The Sarvodaya movement in Sri Lanka is a good example of how outsiders can inspire change by adopting the role of the facilitator: 'When Sarvodayans are invited to a village, they bring no blueprints for change, but rather good listening skills with which to empower the villagers' (Wilson, 1996, p. 623). It is not about 'working on' people, but rather, about 'working with' them.

As ally

Perhaps one of the most important roles that a development practitioner can play is that of an Ally – a friend and supporter to individuals and communities in need of economic, social or political empowerment. Allies can act in many different ways to support and empower communities, such as legal representatives, intermediaries, interpreters, educators and spokesmen.

They can play out their roles individually, as a priest or anthropologist, or in collective, as an institution, organization or movement (Stiefel and Wolfe, 1994).

One of the most important words for an Ally is 'solidarity', 'a willingness to engage in collective effort to create and sustain a caring society' (Bhattacharyya, 2004, p. 15). Solidarity is vital for the development agent because it encompasses the spirit of compassion, respect, unity and collective action, without which the 'helper' will never be able to connect with the 'doer'. Montoya describes a new process of 'community making' that 'seeks to attain collective well being in an organized manner through a practice of new values of solidarity, community, cooperation, and mutual aid. It is this novel undertaking – whereby people through their own efforts seek to obtain a material and spiritual well-being that cannot be reduced to simple economics – that we call community economic development' (A. Montoya, 2001, p. 179).

Allies can also be found in horizontal relationships between individuals or communities, in which the emphasis is on friendship and equal exchange, rather than the relationship being based on an unequal flow of resources or knowledge from one to the other. The Nicaraguan Network is one example of a large group of allies – a network connecting sister-city and peace and justice committees in the United States with community groups, environmental organizations and labor unions in Nicaragua. The Nicaraguan Network carries out its work by arranging opportunities for Nicaraguans and North Americans to learn from one another and share experiences through conferences, speaking tours, publications and participation in political and social campaigns. Although the Network also works in more direct ways by supporting social movements and carrying out advocacy work, its main purpose is to express solidarity and strengthen friendships between people from the United States and Nicaragua. As in any friendship, the goal is not charity or dependence, but rather trust, support and love.

Charity talks. Solidarity listens. Charity assumes it has all the answers. Solidarity learns. Charity can be *patronizing*. Solidarity is humble. Charity decides what its recipients need. Solidarity asks for input and participation from both sides (from speech, Jeffries, 2007).

As advocate

Related to the role of the ally is the role of the advocate. Though the ally and the advocate are similar in their expressions of solidarity and support with individuals and communities, the advocate plays more of a politically active role in his work. Advocates tend to be passionate supporters of

contentious politics and seek to support oppressed peoples in their struggles through involvement in social movements (as marchers), through political advocacy (as lawyers or politicians) or through the spreading of propaganda (as reporters, spokesmen or artists).

While allies are usually connected through ties of friendship, and thus have had physical or verbal contact with the individuals and communities that they support, a person can play the role of the advocate without necessarily knowing firsthand the specific people or communities behind the issue. Indeed, the advocate is often more concerned with the issue itself, whether it deals with environmental, social, cultural, political or economic rights, and seeks to champion causes based on moral or philosophical grounds. The German novelist who writes a book on the cultural and economic impacts of widespread logging on indigenous tribes in the Amazon, the Canadian high school student who becomes a vegetarian after reading about the environmental destruction of meat production in the Americas, or the Californian housewife who writes letter after letter to local newspapers and politicians to call for the closing of the Guantanamo Bay prison facility, are all examples of ordinary citizens playing the role of the Advocate. Community development practitioners and organizations can also act as advocates by taking political and moral stands in support of the people they seek to help. They can provide legal aid to victims of human rights abuses; they can publish reports on cases of political corruption; they can march alongside oppressed people in mobilizations.

The role of the advocate in development is especially important in order to bring local issues into the global arena for broader change. Even where an issue might appear to be local (the building of a dam on Mapuche land in Chile), causes and impacts often extend into further geographical arenas (national electricity needs, urban water supply, indigenous land rights, etc.). Alger argues that because global problems are in essence local problems, the global policy paradigm must be broadened 'to extend from small communities affected by global policies, sometimes referred to as the grassroots, to global institutions' (Alger, 1990, p. 155).

Conclusion

In taking lessons from the roles and experiences described above, we as development practitioners must ask ourselves how we can hope to engage in the roles that offer the promise of empowerment to communities and individuals, and to avoid working within those that do not. One lesson deals with the kind of relationship that exists between the

development agent and subject. While the enacting of traditional roles tends to result in the establishment of vertical relationships between the agents of development and their subjects, those who play alternative roles are aware that development relationships constitute a two-way street, in which both the development agent and subject must work together in order to make positive and sustainable change. On the one hand, the rescuer, provider, modernizer or liberator is inclined to dictate and to set the terms of participation; on the other hand, the catalyst, facilitator, ally or advocate is more likely to ask how to help, rather than making assumptions about what to do.

Another lesson deals with the issue of motivation. Traditional role-players in development practice often seek to supply forms of external motivation to communities or governments in order to obtain their compliance and participation. The 'stick-and-carrot' method is unfortunately alive and well today in community development practice through the prevalence of bribes, cajoling and political pressure. However, development agents who undertake alternative roles seek to work with the already existing intrinsic motivation for development among a given population. Rather than insisting or obliging, these development agents ask questions, encourage good ideas and support poor peoples' struggles as cheerleaders – not as ringleaders.

Taken from Keough, the most important lesson to keep in mind is that institutions exist at the service of community, not the other way around.

We do not live in NGOs, we do not live in universities. These are institutions created to improve and sustain the life of our communities. We have forgotten the order of things. How can we keep our attention fixed on the maintenance of our communities? How can we root our decisions in community? How can we ensure that the institutions created for the advancement of our communities do not lose sight of their reason for being, which is in a democratic society to serve community? (Keough, 1998, p. 194).

However, this is not to say that all 'responsible' practitioners must desert the more traditional organizations and institutions that also tend to have the greatest amount of resources. Rather, it should be stated that change is often most effective when it comes from within, and as such it is vital that practitioners keep not only their eyes open to the real impacts that their actions are having, but also their tongues ready to argue for different approaches when they are so needed.

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