How
to develop Meso-level, representative Institutions.

The answer to community empowerment is not in delivering preconceived packages but in real institution building at different levels.

A guide for Donors, Rural Development Programmes and Development Professionals.

By

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Abid Ullah Jan

Introduction

Undoubtedly, the government of Pakistan has not shown the desired impact as the vehicle of delivery of development. However, it does not call for abandoning the government in favour of a parallel set up of support NGOs without any end of their operations in sight. The situation on the government side is not incomprehensible and on analysis provides very clear reasons for the failure. Similarly there are options and alternatives to end the monopoly of external NGOs. Institutions for rural development and community empowerment in Pakistan are driven by the concept of social mobilisation and grand ideology of transformation. But simultaneously, the very process of institution-building revolves around a status-quoist approach and a monopoly of the few. The disjuncture between the two is what causes the development crisis we are witnessing.

Is there something contradictory about the institutionalisation of community empowerment? Yes, there is. And it's basically this: at the level of rhetoric and discourse, initiatives for social mobilisation are driven by the perspectives and ideologies of social guidance and transformation. However, at the level of practical institutional formation, operational strategies of social mobilisation are to a large extent driven by institutional interests and the built-in need for self-preservation through donor driven target oriented approaches. This disjuncture between transformative socio-political discourse and status-quoist community development approach is at the root of the development crisis faced by the entire spectrum of projects and programme in the arena of community development in Pakistan.

This disjuncture and multiplicity of perceived roles is what often causes a pathological schizophrenia in these organisations and their leadership. The problem becomes acute when the same organisation tries to become everything to everybody, simultaneously flowing with the responses of micro-finance institutions as well as the other responses like right-based NGOs and government departments. As a result, it becomes difficult to locate the exact perspective and response of these development/poverty alleviation organisations at a given point of time.

This development crisis is in a sense because of the crisis of the State and governance and because of the growing scepticism about the ability of the market to address the political economy of poverty and marginalisation. Also, political parties across are becoming less and less the social legitimising agents of the State, and more and more institutional mechanisms or electoral networks for the capture of State power. Such a muddled situation provides fertile soil for multiple roles for institutionalised community development.

In the last 20 years the impact of community development has been more visible in three sets of roles -- Supplementary, Advocacy and Legitimising. These roles can be further described as: 1) an extension of the State: either to supplement or to supplant the State's development functions; 2) societal agents which amplify socio-political demands and dissent and advocate public policy initiatives; and 3) social legitimising agents of hegemonic structures including their own vast bureaucratic structure, the State, market and international institutions.

Undoubtedly, apart from serving the vested interest, these three roles expanded the arenas of community development substantially. There have been efforts, at least at the surface, to build enabling conditions for broader alliances that facilitate new social movements. The bridging of micro-level activism and macro-level policy initiatives, however could not get materialised for amplifying the voice of the marginalised sections. Despite consuming millions of dollars, in the national arena the poverty alleviation efforts could not bring about major changes like the global arena where broader alliances of human rights, ecology, women's rights and consumer rights organisations acquired an influencing political role that created space for global dissent to the negative impact of globalisation on marginalised countries and people. The long and short efforts at poverty alleviation for the past more than two decades could not even highlight the root causes of the poverty problem as identified in chapter 2, let alone directly addressing them. On the other hand, the institutional contours of the poverty alleviation related non-government programmes have changed substantially in the last 20 years. More efficient and effective fundraising initiatives have created a pool of financial resources available for sustaining these programmes. However, the balance sheet of community development in the last 25 years proved very unsatisfactory.

Due to the institutional and methodological ambivalence, most organisations for rural/community development have not been able to effectively undermine the hegemony of social structures and unequal distribution of

resources. Social, political and economic inequalities have further grown to justify continuity of such programmes. Theoretically, it is the catalytic role of these organisations in the promotion of enabling socio-political conditions (awareness, conscientisation, rights discourse, networking etc) that can help challenge the hegemonic structures. But this possibility could not get materialized for some inherent weaknesses in the approach of these organisations. Instead of serving as a breeding ground for alternative socio-political leadership, in the context of a disintegrating political party system and structures, practices of these organisations led to more conflicts in the community due to their involvement in some malpractices in collaboration with corrupt elements of the community.

Despite exposure of the corrupt practices of some of the leading NGOs, the donors kept funding these enterprises. This is probably due to one of the significant paradigm shifts in the 1990s, which is the ideological hegemony of a neo-liberal, techno-economic perspective in politics as well as governance. Technological advances in computing and communication substantially changed the way we communicate, think and act. Both these developments influenced community development approaches in different ways. The neo-liberal paradigm has been consistently subverting the role of institutionalised community development by strategically sucking it into the periphery of a free-market or the shades of the State. This paradigm actively promoted by the Brettonwood system and WTO encourages new entities that would fit into the `private action for public good' framework. This attempt to promote the `NGOs' as `public contractors' or `social enterprises' flows from the neo-liberal priority of privatising social services and security as a part of the omnipresent and omnipotent market. However, it would be a fallacy to conclude that the market appropriates the entire community development spectrum.

The most effective and sustainable challenge to capitalist oriented, free-market neo-liberal projects could come from a section of institutionalised community development. This tension would pave the way for a polarisation wherein a substantial number of external NGOs would eventually become private profit-making business enterprises and a large number of local institutions would become part of the broader political movement that would simultaneously resist, engage and persuade hegemonic structures to devolve power.

The challenges for community development come from within and outside its contours. The most important challenge is the ongoing attempt to suck the entire spectrum of rural development into a neo-liberal and capitalist perspective and turn community development NGOs into micro-finance institutions. Fortunately, most of the identified reasons both on part of the government and non-government sector are amenable to actions. Therefore, the need for incomprehensible solutions does not arise. There have been quiet a few options tried and tested for rural development over the past five decades. The book is an endeavour to evaluate different community development approaches and explain the alternative approach of developing representative NGOs as a sustainable replacement of the ineffective and expensive external support programmes.

Undoubtedly, all communities have a great potential and amazing resilience, which can be harnessed through polishing them after organising on specific lines. The question, however, is that how long would a development programme be able to keep them organised? All communities, no matter how poor, have resources (many that still need to be identified) that can be tapped for real development. Here the question arises that for how long would the outsiders come to plan for the community. To release and best use this huge national resource and to keep the process sustainable, we need an alternative approach to community development. Forming thousands of community organisations at the micro-level alone and presenting mind boggling statistics to show their success is not the real way to empowerment. This book not only explains the alternative but also provide detail material that can be used as hand outs, as well as a resource for preparing different modules for training in Social mobilisation.

Community organisation is a complex process. All communities go through intricate patterns of interactions. To bring these patterns of interactions to relatively stable forms at different institutional level and ensure long-term community participation the social organisers need to stimulate and encourage the community members. This Guide addresses the needs and requirements of all those who wish to effectively initiate this stimulation. This is a "how-to" Guide, intended for funding agencies, development programmes and experienced as well as tyro social organisers who want to stimulate social change in a community in the direction of more development, poverty eradication, better governance, self reliance, increased integrity and transparency in the management of community affairs; in short, empowerment of community through development of multi-level grassroots institutions.

The first portion of the book gives an overview of the development scene abroad and at home along with an analysis of different approaches. This portion sets the context for explaining the alternative approach to rural development in the second chapter. An emphasis on the needed skills and understanding of concepts useful to community workers has been added in the following sections for greater understanding and practical use.

Apart from explaining the need for an alternative rural development model, this book also helps the community development professionals in understanding advanced community mobilisation techniques along with its basic concepts and principles in its second part. In most cases, many field workers are found to be very enthusiastic and hardworking but for many comprehending the idea of social mobilisation and forming sustainable community organisations remain an uphill task. An effort has been made to help such workers make their thinking crystal clear by giving them an overview about the objective of rural development programmes. It would help them acquire new tools. It would also assist the trainers in designing new courses based on the content of this book.

This book also gives an overview of various concepts associated with social organisation, community participation, participatory development, sustainable development, etc. Moreover, a brief assessment of the rural development programmes in the beginning would help the readers grasp the crux of a new concept introduced as meso-level organisations. These kind of representative organisations are need of the hour and the only alternative to the long-term, ineffective and expensive external support programmes for rural development. It would help government policy makers and funding agencies rethink their rural development strategies and funding policies. Moreover, a brief overview of the rural development programmes in Pakistan has been included to introduce readers to a new concept and need of developing meso-level representative organisations. Chapter 2 explains this idea in detail. It would help government policy makers and donors to reconsider their funding and planning strategies and rural development policies.

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