The Implications of Social Capital for Empowerment and Community-Driven Development

Amy R. Poteete

Introduction
Community-driven development (CDD) involves working with poor people as partners in development to reduce poverty and improve the fit between development efforts and the needs of the poor. Community-driven development is ultimately about empowerment. Empowerment of the poor is both a goal in its own right, and an intermediate goal expected to facilitate poverty reduction and development at the grass roots. Community-driven development attempts to achieve empowerment by building social capital, the social networks that facilitate collective action and can enhance the ability to hold representatives accountable to their constituencies. At the same time, community-driven development also depends upon existing social capital. Where favorable patterns of social organization already exist, community-driven development can proceed by identifying factors - such as access to information or to government representatives, or skills in developing policy proposals or record-keeping – that limit the ability of the already organized poor to effectively pursue their goals. Elsewhere, and perhaps more frequently, proponents of community-driven development find that they must first attempt to build social capital by facilitating organization of the poor. Existing social capital erects obstacles to the advancement of the poor, so that community-driven development must either challenge established patterns of social organization or run the risk of reinforcing inequalities by building on them.

This essay addresses two practical tensions inherent in community-driven development: (1) the reliance of community-driven development upon the willingness of the powerful to allow meaningful empowerment; and (2) the organizational opportunities and limitations of existing power relations represented by the concept of social capital. The first section places community-driven development in the context of a larger school of thought that sees empowerment as necessary for development. Community-driven development, like all development strategies that emphasize empowerment, depends on the willingness of the powerful to allow empowerment. Those who have power are sometimes willing to share power with the poor, but only under a constrained set of circumstances. Proponents of community-driven development need to recognize that empowerment asks a lot of political leaders. Development professionals should attempt to create incentives to encourage meaningful empowerment and must be realistic about the prospects for meaningful change. The second section focuses on the implications of social capital for empowerment. It begins by briefly reviewing the concepts of social capital and community. When we speak of community-driven development, the notion of “community” is all too frequently left undefined. Social capital refers to patterns of social organization that influence the social groupings with which individuals identify, and thus their sense of community. Social capital also affects power relations. Since community-driven development, like all forms of empowerment, attempts to alter power relations, an effective strategy for community-driven development depends upon a solid
The Implications of Social Capital for Empowerment

understanding of how social capital affects power relations at the local level, and how those power relations affect prospects for empowerment.

Strategies of empowerment such as community-driven development do not occur in a political vacuum. The third section identifies four practical challenges associated with the need to work within the existing political situation nationally and, at the local level, within the context of existing social capital:

1) Political leaders at the regional/national level are likely to oppose devolution;
2) Political leaders at the local level often oppose inclusiveness;
3) Even the poor may be wary about new inequalities arising from the imposition of formal equality;
4) And existing patterns of social organization often do not just passively leave the poor unorganized, but actively work to discourage organization as a distinctive group.

Political leaders and the nature of the political system greatly affect the opportunities for and costs of community-driven development, as emphasized by the first two challenges. Even with a favorable political environment, existing social capital can complicate and even actively obstruct community-driven development. The third and fourth challenges are examples of obstacles to empowerment posed by existing social capital that those unfamiliar with a community often fail to recognize. The essay concludes by emphasizing the inherently political nature of community-driven development. Proponents of community-driven development need to be aware of likely sources of opposition. Creation of the political space in which community-driven development can occur requires that development professionals convince powerful political actors that empowerment does not pose a threat.

**Empowerment and Development**

The concept of community-driven development grows out of a tradition that sees active community participation as a necessary condition for development (Cernea 1985; Chambers 1994; Hulme and Murphree 2001; Leonard and Marshall 1982; Montgomery 1988; Ostrom, Schroeder, and Wynne 1993). The people affected by development projects should set development priorities and participate in policy design and implementation. The stakes are high. In the absence of active participation, policies often hamper rather than enhance local livelihoods, and resources are frequently misallocated to projects of little local interest rather than to areas that would help people overcome obstacles to local development. In the worse case scenario, people who are not actively involved in decision-making refuse to cooperate with - or actively sabotage - policy implementation. Lack of active participation often reflects lack of power. People with no expectation that their preferences will be heeded have no reason to talk to or cooperate with policy-makers. Empowerment is a precondition for active participation, and thus for development. Indeed, since active participation entails participation in decision-making, promoting active participation means empowerment.

In practice, “participatory” policy-making varies in form and depth. The governments of most countries, regardless of income-level, rely on relatively centralized bureaucracies, in which field officers implement policies set at the center. Even in less bureaucratic or
democratic systems of government, rulers generally centralize decision-making to retain control over resources and prevent potential rivals from developing independent bases of support. Empowerment enhances the decision-making authority and control over resources exercised by local people. Such thorough participation runs against the centralizing tendencies of governments. The introduction of increased local influence over development represents a radical form of decentralization, one that many governments resist—even if political leaders recognize the potential benefits of increasing local involvement. Superficial forms of participation, such as rapid rural appraisals and consultation sessions where officials “raise awareness” about government priorities and policies, are adopted relatively frequently. Sometimes, local people are granted decision-making authority, but that authority is usually limited. Typical limitations include the need for ministerial approval of local decisions, requirements that local decisions be consistent with official plans or policies, requirements to follow predetermined decision-making procedures, and constraints on the substantive range of local authority. The more constrained the authority of local people, the less likely developmental goals will be achieved.

Community-driven development calls for relatively unconstrained decision-making about development by poor people. The poor should be treated as partners, with development professionals acting to enhance the ability of the poor to set and pursue their own development goals. These goals are shared with various forms of participatory development advanced over the past few decades. Yet, just as terms like participatory rural assessment and action research have been used to describe superficial forms of participatory policy-making, officials wishing to associate themselves with donor-favored policy-making techniques may adopt the label of community-driven development without actually changing their practices. The problem is that the ideal of CDD demands empowerment whereas most officials have no interest in promoting empowerment. In fact, existing patterns of social organization—forms of social capital—generally discourage officials working with the poor from pursuing empowerment, precisely because doing so threatens those currently advantaged. Existing patterns of social organization influence access to resources, and thus the ability to mobilize resources for development efforts. Power relations also influence collective action involving poor people, and the prospects for cooperation between the poor and development workers. How can development professionals intervene to empower people without antagonizing the powers that be to such an extent that their efforts are halted altogether?

Social Capital and Power
Social capital serves as the foundation for power. The concept is attractive. The parallel with physical capital provides rhetorical justification for social expenditures as investments with important positive externalities. Conversely, if the parallel holds, it warns that neglect of social capital will result in its deterioration. But what is social capital? Unfortunately, the attractiveness of the phrase encourages its adoption as a descriptor for a variety of different concepts. Putnam (1993) uses social capital to refer to dimensions of social organization that generate multiple horizontal linkages and foster
the development of social trust, collective reciprocity, and tolerance. Ostrom (1999) equates social capital with the positive outcomes of social organization rather than social organization itself. High levels of social capital, whether identified with favorable patterns of social organization or the resulting social trust and tolerance, are expected to facilitate provision of public goods; societies rich in social capital are better able to work collectively to hold their governments accountable.

Social capital is an attribute of a given community. But what does “community” mean in practice? Most scholars and development professionals equate the community with some geographically defined political entity such as a village or city. “Community” also implies some degree of social cohesion and self-identification. Community in this sense might, but need not, correspond with any political jurisdiction. Within a city or village, several communities often coexist. Other communities transcend geographically defined political jurisdictions. Social capital at the village or city level may be of interest for some purposes, but it may be more helpful for advocates of social change to think about social capital as an attribute of a wider variety of social groupings. Social capital among the poor, for example, should be of greatest importance for poverty alleviation. In fact, investigation of social capital among members of a category of interest for development purposes, such as “the poor,” may find that the poor identify with several different communities, or that the poor represent part of a more encompassing community. Recognition of the possibility of multiple self-defined communities within any politically defined settlement should help avoid misdirection of development efforts.

Social capital understood as patterns of social organization arguably has the greatest bearing upon power relations in a society, and thus on prospects for community-driven development and empowerment more generally. Empowerment means enhancing the power of some group of people. Empowering interventions may take a variety of forms, including skill development (e.g., literacy, public-speaking, record-keeping), provision of assets (e.g., credit, transportation, meeting space) and information, assistance with networking (e.g., identifying others with shared interests, access to markets and politicians), and the facilitation of organization (e.g., institution building). Skill development and the provision of assets affect social organization indirectly, by improving opportunities for disadvantaged people. Other forms of empowerment directly interact with existing patterns of social organization, attempting to alter them in ways that improve the position of the relatively disadvantaged. Even programs that promote skill development often affect organization of the poor. By bringing groups of beneficiaries together to achieve economies of scale in training, these efforts facilitate the identification of shared interests and exchange of information, and thus create conditions amenable to organization.

---

1 Manifestations of social capital as Putnam defines it are context specific. In his study of Italy, Putnam looks at membership in voluntary organizations and newspapers as indications of social capital.
2 Social capital may be “good” or “bad” in its social implications. The usual example of “bad” social capital is the criminality encouraged by the mafia.
3 Coleman (1988) sees social capital as the social networks developed by individuals rather than as networks or patterns of organization characteristic of a community. The strand of thinking and research that builds on Coleman’s definition of social capital seems less relevant for community-driven development, since the social unit of concern for CDD is the community rather than the individual.
Existing patterns of social organization influence the difficulty of enhancing the power of disadvantaged populations. Patterns of social organization are the product of years - even generations or centuries - of political competition and efforts at political consolidation. Large-scale upheavals such as the displacement of populations associated with civil wars, famine, or state-led resettlement policies can destroy social capital. Ordinarily, however, changes occur in the context of current organizational forms, so that those with power now influence who gets power in the future. Changing local alliances, interventions by development professionals or others, and changes in the underlying context (e.g., market conditions, demographics, the broader political system) all influence the prospects for changing patterns of social organization but cannot completely eliminate the influence of present and past organizational forms. When interventions or changing conditions threaten the status quo, those advantaged by existing arrangements can be expected to defend those arrangements. The natural tendency to defend existing advantages makes empowerment through external intervention difficult to achieve. It may be easier to destroy social capital altogether than to create or refashion it.

**Recognizing and Grappling with Challenges**
Community-driven development, and the idea of empowerment more generally, assumes that development professionals can intervene to improve the political position of the currently disadvantaged. Interventions can alter power relations. Doing so to achieve the desired effects requires that challenges associated with current patterns of social organization are recognized and confronted directly. Existing patterns of social organization present at least four challenges to those pursuing community-driven development:

5) Political leaders at the regional/national level are likely to oppose devolution;
6) Political leaders at the local level often oppose inclusiveness;
7) Even the poor may be wary about new inequalities arising from the imposition of formal equality;
8) And existing patterns of social organization often do not just passively leave the poor unorganized, but actively work to discourage organization as a distinctive group.

Political leaders at the regional/national level are likely to oppose devolution. National and regional political leaders exercise considerable influence over the prospects for community-driven development. In highly centralized polities, the poor have access to few resources and few opportunities to influence development. Authorities often fail to recognize local forms of political organization. Instead, they tend to act in ways that undermine local initiative. These conditions shape the expectations about the benefits of participating in development efforts. Centralization, especially in authoritarian systems, makes decentralized development initiatives riskier and more costly. Under these conditions, the poor will only work together on development projects that promise large, certain returns. Policies of devolution allow decisions about development to be taken at the local level, increasing prospects for meaningful participation in those decisions by the poor. Devolution lowers the costs of collective action by supporting collective decision-
making. It lowers the risk by decreasing the likelihood that national or regional
governments will ignore or reverse local decisions.

Devolution involves a redistribution of power that political leaders concerned with
political survival can be expected to view warily. Political leaders at the regional and
national level should be expected to sabotage efforts at community-driven development
unless they expect to benefit from devolution, or at least not be endangered by it.
Circumstances do exist when political leaders expect devolution to bolster their position.
For example, a ruler may see devolution of authority as a way to circumvent rivals and
build a constituency at the grass roots. But then the potential rivals will oppose
devolution and act to undermine it. Alternatively, if the political leadership inherits a
bankrupt or inefficient governance structure, devolution may be seen as a way to shift the
costs of development. In these situations, the leadership is likely to seek to limit and
control community-driven development, so that it contributes to state-building as well as
poverty alleviation. Political leaders may also allow devolution when relations with
ordinary people are so poor that even passive cooperation with government has collapsed.
Devolution under these circumstances is likely to focus on the cultivation of local allies
for the political leader more than on inclusiveness or poverty alleviation. Development
workers should be aware of dynamics like these, recognize that their actions affect power
relations among the political elite and between the government and local people, and take
care to avoid inadvertently exacerbating inequality.

Political leaders at the local level often oppose inclusiveness. Community-driven
development seeks more than devolution. The goal is to empower an inclusive set of
local actors, especially the poor. (Note that this goal is itself a limitation on local
authority, even if a well-intentioned one). Local power structures often work
systematically to prevent the organization of categories of people who might challenge
the leadership. When development professionals insist on inclusion of the poor or other
marginalized segments of the population (e.g., women, lower castes, low status ethnic or
religious groups), local politicians may refuse to cooperate with them, or may act to
undermine their efforts. Local politicians control access to many resources (e.g., jobs,
land, water) that the poor depend upon for survival; by threatening to withhold access to
these vital resources, local political leaders raise the costs of participating in community-
driven development, often to prohibitive levels. Depending on the nature of relationships
between local and national politicians, leaders at the regional or national level may throw
their weight behind empowerment efforts (to undermine local rivals) or allow localized
sabotage.

Even the poor may be wary about new inequalities arising from the imposition of formal
equality. The poor sometimes resist inclusive strategies, fearing that incorporation into
bodies representing larger political entities will dilute the force of their particularistic
claims. Moreover, formal equality can have the effect of entrenching inequality based on
wealth or social status. In Botswana, for example, government officials vetoed the
formation of a committee for wildlife management based on ethnic identity (Cassidy
2000, 13). The government’s insistence on ethnic neutrality ignores the ethnic-basis of
this community’s historical marginalization. Definition of members by ethnicity
The Implications of Social Capital for Empowerment

represented an attempt by local people to protect themselves against the advantages of wealth and social position held by members of other, historically privileged ethnic groups. Whether inclusiveness promotes or undermines equality depends on its meaning given local patterns of social organization.

Existing patterns of social organization often do not just passively leave the poor unorganized, but actively work to discourage organization as a distinctive group. Marginalization is usually systematic, with societies organized in ways that deny the poor access to resources needed for mobilization, discouraging frequent interactions among the poor, creating relationships of dependency that discourage mobilization, or incorporating the poor into networks that discourage identification with other poor people. Yet the poor need a minimal level of organization before they can be expected to act as partners in development. Building social capital among the poor becomes the first step in empowering the poor, and in creating the conditions for community-driven development. Lack of organization among the poor, however, does not imply lack of organization among local people. Building social capital among the poor often requires dramatically altering social capital among communities defined along other lines. It is difficult to predict the consequences of these sorts of interventions. The less developed the organizational ties among a group of people, the less predictable their interactions, and the more difficult development of social capital will be.

Political Activism and Development
Development professionals often claim political neutrality. Yet this discussion shows that efforts to promote development are inherently political. Enabling the poor to define and pursue their own development goals – the strategy of community-driven development – promises to improve livelihoods at the grassroots. The strategy rests on a commitment to empowerment, to improving the decision-making capacity and authority of disadvantaged people. Empowerment requires that development professionals confront and attempt to alter existing patterns of social organization (social capital). The goal is a worthy one, and probably a necessary condition for development. It is also unabashedly political. Development professionals will be best able to promote the goals of inclusive and equitable development when they acknowledge the political nature of their work. They should expect political opposition to their efforts to alter entrenched patterns of social organization and be prepared to engage in the coalition building and compromising required by political action. Even if compromises are made, successful changes at the margin may be preferable to completely blocked efforts at more radical change.

Works Cited


