Community-Driven Development, Social Capital, and Empowerment: Conceptual and Operational Links

by

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Introduction

This think piece examines the conceptual, and to a more limited extent, the operational linkages between three clusters of concepts – community, social capital, and empowerment. The following ideas are presented as a series of loosely connected points that I sometimes illustrate with empirical examples. Two conclusions of the argument can be highlighted – a) a focus on community as the driver of development needs to be supplemented with attention to socio-political processes both below and beyond the community; and b) policy relevant conceptions of social capital are more appropriately those that focus on the individual and that view it as an endogenous rather than exogenous factor.

1. Social theoretical writings identify three critical conceptual loci for the pursuit of development: States, markets, and societies/communities. The mechanisms that generate collective outcomes in these three domains of human activities and lives are supposedly particular to each. States accomplish development-related goals by deploying political authority that purports to redistribute power and/or material wealth so as to facilitate the pursuit of development. Markets work the magic of development by improving choices and promoting exchanges that generate profits and lead to development. Societies/communities, finding close attention since the early 1990s, are the home of solidarities and close interpersonal connections that facilitate collective action and empower community members to bring about development. Table 1 summarizes the above points.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domains of collective action</th>
<th>Change mechanism</th>
<th>Key outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>Political authority</td>
<td>Redistribution = equality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Market</td>
<td>Economic exchange</td>
<td>Profit = economic capacity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Society/community</td>
<td>Solidarity/social capital</td>
<td>Collective action = empowerment</td>
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2. Much writing on these themes seeks either to defend the conceptual links outlined in the table, or to suggest that connections among domains of collective life, mechanisms, and key outcomes bleed across categories rather than being exclusive. One set of illustrative arguments may include the observations that states and their associated organizational forms are often also active in creating the conditions for the operation of markets; market relationships are based on trust and reciprocal expectations that are
the basis of any non-simultaneous exchanges; and hierarchical and authoritative relationships characterize social arrangements within communities and among their members. This note attempts to strengthen the argument that domains of collective activities, change mechanisms, and outcomes variables cannot be arrayed in a one-on-one relationship or sequence.

3. Development of individuals/households is itself a function of greater social equality and status, higher economic capacity, and an ability to exercise choices as well as power in collective decision-making processes. Since these three outcome measures and the mechanisms with which they might be associated are not strictly orthogonal, successful policy measures to pursue development are likely an amalgam of strategies that appeal and apply to multiple social actors. Establishing the relationships among these strategies and mechanisms is therefore crucial for effective interventions.

4. Whatever the above relationships, a focus on only one domain of collective life – whether state, market, or society/community – may not allow significant movement toward development for other reasons as well. State policies have to translate into local changes. Such changes depend on actions of local power-holders and the configuration of structural and institutional relations. Thus many well-intentioned development policies have foundered on the rock of local resistance as James Scott has made clear in his book, *Weapons of the Weak*. Communities (understood as small, territorially circumscribed social formations) are embedded within larger political and economic trends. Their freedom of action is severely limited in many instances. Just as recalcitrant communities can constrain the achievement of state policies, new social, technological, and economic forces can transform communities. Finally, market exchanges often occur in ways mediated by cultural and/or political understandings of fairness, propriety, and equality. For example, in many societies certain kinds of jobs, however lucrative, are reserved for certain groups of people. It is not a stretch of the imagination, therefore, to suggest that even if development policies focus on a particular set of economic, or political, or cultural relationships, they must also attend to seemingly extraneous forces.

5. Those interested in communities and the potential of communities to realize the interests of their members often pay careful attention to dynamics within the community and relationships of community actors with those in the local and the national state. Decentralization reforms are a case in point – advocates of communities and social capital recognize the importance of greater autonomy and decision-making authority for communities and localities vis a vis the central state, and argue for retrenchment of central state powers. Community and other local level decision makers can then act to fill the available political space. But it may be equally important to attend to powerful market actors and their interactions with communities, especially where valuable common or public goods are at stake.

6. When claims over many kinds of natural resources arise – some examples of such resources being forest products, tourism revenues, wildlife resources, and development funds – community actors and members can easily get sidelined when market actors get involved in an effort to take advantage of new institutional arrangements that seek to empower communities. The example of forest exploitation in Indonesia, Cameroon, and Mexico is illustrative. In each of these countries, the government attempted to decentralize control over forests to local communities. However, because community actors lacked
sufficient expertise and knowledge both about forests and the new rules, it proved relatively easy for market actors to gain forest concessions from communities. The involvement of large market actors impeded competition among community actors because of scale inequalities. Such marginalization of community actors may be especially common when the value of resources is high. Concessionary politics, in which market actors gain concessions from states to exploit valuable resources and effectively exclude communities, are often the result (Hardin).

7. A more general conclusion can be advanced – in situations where market actors, community members, and state officials negotiate over benefits from resources or allocation of redistributive outcomes, it is likely that the weakest of these three groups of actors would turn out to be those belonging to community associations. One way to alter the balance of politics in such negotiations would be to attempt to create alliances of community-level decision makers. Typically, state and market actors can activate or call upon substantial resources in negotiations and bargaining with each other or with community actors. Community level actors are less likely to have access to significant resources at the bargaining table. Two examples that illustrate these points come from India and Nepal. In the joint forest management committees that the forest department has encouraged in many states in India, the balance of power rests with government, specifically forest department officials. In community forestry user groups in Nepal, a federation of community forestry user groups repeatedly challenged specific policy decisions of the government that attempted to curtail existing rights of community groups.

8. Community-driven development strategies can address such political inequalities. But they can do so, seemingly paradoxically, only by focusing both beyond communities and below the surface of communities.

9. Focusing below the surface of communities is necessary because extreme heterogeneities and inequalities likely undermine the idea of community as also many if not all actually existing communities. Many small social groups, often referred to in a shorthand way as communities, no doubt are already highly heterogeneous and contain many kinds of inequalities (Varughese and Ostrom). Community-driven development must address such inequalities – since they are antithetical to the very idea of community-driven development to the extent that CDD is about high levels of participation and inclusion, capacity building, support to the poor and disadvantaged, and so forth. External interventions play a useful role in addressing problems internal to communities by identifying and rewarding those on the margins. The example of machine politics in the US in the late nineteenth century is instructive – it took central intervention for such political dynamics to be cleansed.

10. In the context of community-driven development, then, empowerment should refer both to the empowerment of individuals and households within communities, and to the strengthening of communities in their interactions with external actors (Agrawal and Gibson). Indeed, since empowerment is more likely relevant in particular interactions rather than for groups or individuals across the board, it might be more reasonable to think about how to affect the structures of interactions in various domains rather than empowering groups or individuals in general. This point follows the idea that no individual or group is completely powerless, and that the exercise of power in specific situations
is a function of access to many different kinds of resources rather than being a generalized and permanent feature of their existence.

11. The presence of high levels of social capital in a community can be viewed as one important mechanism through which specific communities can gain greater capacity for favorable outcomes -- presumably because higher levels of social capital are positively related to trust, reciprocity, and ability to act collectively. Indeed, many recent studies characterize social capital as the property of a collective, and typically community or social formations sharing features commonly attributed to communities -- small size, regular and multiplex interactions, and shared norms -- likely have higher levels of social capital.

12. Those who treat social capital as the property of collectives also tend to depict it as an exogenous variable that drives political and economic performance. The best known example is Robert Putnam’s *Making Democracy Work*. In addition, those analysts who think of social capital as an exogenous factor typically also see it as being highly durable over time (Putnam, Inglehart). Indeed, if social capital is not durable, it is likely to be endogenous, changing in response to shifts in economic conditions, political dynamics, institutional rules, and of physical disasters or windfalls. If social capital is not durable, then social explanations that appeal to social capital as a cause of better economic performance or social harmony are likely flawed, or at least superficial. If social capital itself is changing in response to shifts in deeper variables, more satisfying accounts of changes in collective outcomes would appeal to those deeper variables rather than to social capital.

13. It may be more fruitful, and logically consistent, to view social capital as the property of individuals much like human or economic capital (Portes), and subject to variations over time in response to changes in institutions, incentives, and actions. In their interactions with others, some individuals with more, and more extensive/intensive social links, likely gain more by virtue of their ability to convert their social links into other forms of capital. Conceptualized thus, there is a high potential to transform one form of capital into another: economic wealth can be used to cultivate social relationships and enhance social capital, and social relations can be activated to gain economic or political advantage (Coleman, Granovetter). If social capital is seen as the property of individuals rather than collectives, different forms of capital can be made commensurable -- indeed, a large literature in sociology (and now even economics) has analyzed how different kinds of links (weak vs. strong) are more or less likely to yield advantages to those who are linked.

14. Thinking about social capital as a property of individuals/households in a community helps demystify the process through which social capital is created (rather than being an immutable property of collectives, or for that matter, an enduring feature of an individual’s psychological makeup), and also allows interventions that might contribute to its production (Jackson and Miller). The presence of social capital (in its positive and negative versions) or its lack among members of a given community is a consequence of institutional arrangements and incentive structures in that community and how the different members of the community are situated in relation to those institutions and incentives. Social
capital then is not the generator of the community’s social, political, economic, or institutional performance.

15. It is worth noting that social capital as a concept and as a social phenomenon should be interesting to policy makers and activists only if its levels are subject to change in relatively short order (for whatever reasons). Cycles of policy making last relatively short periods, and sustained interest in different development phrases is rare. If social capital is formed and makes its effects felt only over two or three decades (or centuries), it is likely not a very useful concept for those interested in social transformations.

16. Just as the relationship between community-driven development and different levels of social capital is likely ambiguous (what kind of social capital, in whose possession, used for what purpose?), it is also likely that the relationship between social capital and empowerment of a collective is ambiguous. If some communities are highly stratified and their more marginal members gain greater capacities to exercise choices, social capital of other more powerful community members might decline. Alternatively, the more powerful community members might effectively offset any losses to their social capital by striving to gain higher levels of human or economic capital. If instead, social capital, development, and empowerment are seen as being relevant to individuals rather than to communities, much of the analytical ambiguity associated with the relationships among these three different concepts will disappear.

17. Interventions that seek to change social and political relations within communities, and thereby bring about development, need to address institutional relations and incentives, as well as the nature of material and symbolic rewards linked to socio-political participation. Among the most important aspects of institutional change are accountability relations across group hierarchies. Institutionalized relationships of accountability tend to be more effective when those who are in positions of decision-making are downwardly accountable to their constituents rather than upwardly accountable to their superiors alone (Agrawal and Ribot). Transforming accountability relations to enhance downward accountability can simultaneously empower those on whose behalf decisions are made, and promote their social capital through empowered interactions with decision-makers.

18. Changes in structural relations so that more marginal groups and individuals are differentially advantaged within a community are more likely to happen when efforts to build social capital favor marginal groups and individuals differentially. Development programs that have attractive benefits associated with them are typically subject to elite capture. One tactic to prevent capture would be to make access to such programs time and labor intensive – resources in which poorer and more marginal households are more likely to be better endowed than their richer counterparts whose opportunity cost of time and labor is likely higher. Richer households, whose members likely value their time more highly are less likely then to seek participation in such programs. Higher levels of participation are likely as well to lead participants to a more developed sense of their own interests and strength.
References:


