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Barriers to empowerment: Assessment of community-led local development organizations in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Community-led local development and community-driven development mechanisms are recent development phenomenon's adopted by many developing and developed countries, aimed at improving proactive community participation and quality of life along with social wellbeing of local community. The paper is about the role and severity of different barriers that prevent empowerment and community participation in the development of community led development in Pakistan. This paper initially illustrates the concept of empowerment and its importance, and then describes the findings of the project's assessment of barriers to empowerment among Citizen Community Boards in Pakistan. Audio-taped, structured, open-ended interviews were conducted with six leaders of Citizen Community Boards, who initiated and implemented the community driven projects. Discussion with respondents was about mechanisms of community participation; political and elite control; problems encountered at community level due to elite control; and other issues of capacity building and access to information. Interview results revealed that political interference and elite control hinder community participation at local level. Moreover, it is an obstacle that impedes community participation in local community-led development activities. Building capacity at local level is an important ingredient for sustainable development, as it not only provides local stakeholders with an opportunity to participate in decision-making, but also enables "community ownership", a key component of empowerment. The findings of this study contribute towards greater understanding of developmental issues at local level and will help policymakers to focus on highlighted issues and problems faced by community-led development organizations.

1. Introduction

There has recently been a gradual shift in international development initiatives, from top-down centrally-managed planning procedures to participatory, bottom-up, community-driven strategies [64]. This change is thought to enable local residents to act collectively to promote substantial development results, including better preservation of resources, enhanced quality of life and diminished rates of inequality and social exclusion [27]. There is abundant literature to be found on the different government-led initiatives in place to promote community empowerment, including: corporate environmental innovation [65]; export promotion; and sustainability [66,67].

Social change incorporates two closely connected dimensions: empowerment and social inclusion. The former applies to individuals

while the latter is relevant to systems and institutions. Bennet [6] defines social inclusion as the elimination of institutional obstacles together with beneficial policies that lead to improved incentives, which, in turn, provide better access to development opportunities and resources for the poor and other marginalized individuals. Social inclusion, similar to the social mobilization component of empowerment, aims at giving marginalized individuals greater power and altering the system as a whole, so that the needs of those living in poverty are met [69]. The concept of empowerment is ambiguous and contentious – it incorporates not only control over others, but also the power of an individual or community to achieve something for themselves and others. Saegaert [53] suggests that, with respect to community development, empowerment can also refer to the capacity to pressurize institutions in the private or public sector to implement

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development strategies, such as enhancing quality of life; however, empowerment can also reinforce agendas where those with greater power have far more influence than the rest.

Equipping the poverty-stricken with the resources to overcome obstacles hindering them from making a living is both essential for alleviating poverty and a key aim of empowerment initiatives. Institutions can only be inclusive and address the needs of all sectors of society if citizens are empowered to make their voices heard and so direct the decisions of the institutions which control access to resources and services. Consequently, active participation is vital for effective governance and the accountability of the institutions providing public services. Community change depends on increasing citizens' access to information so that they can attain a deeper knowledge of the social issues that affect them personally [24].

It is apparent from the literature that competing definitions of empowerment have been proposed. Hjorth [29] and others claim that it is crucial for development processes to be directed by the citizens; this translates into increased self-assurance in their abilities, which enables them to achieve a perceptible increase in their political power and social influence [15]. Speer et al. [57] characterize empowerment as a deliberate and continuous process which is grounded in the community and includes empathy, collective action, critical reflection, and reciprocal respect – this process gives those with a lesser share of important resources better opportunities for accessing and managing such resources. Bennet [6] adds that empowerment involves strengthening communities and individuals in their capacity to participate, direct and hold accountable institutions that influence their lives. For individuals, empowerment includes processes which help them to manage their resources, develop decision-making abilities, and work cooperatively with others [54,63]. Approaches involving social mobilization are frequently classified as empowerment, implying that empowerment is an ongoing process rather than an isolated event. Bennet [6] calls this 'mobilization empowerment', a process which extends the connections, capabilities and information necessary for lifelong empowerment. This process can give communities a fresh understanding of themselves and also increase cohesion and the potential for cooperation. Assisting the poor and marginalized members of society to appreciate how collective action can empower them is a central aspect of most social mobilization strategies.

The goal of the participatory development approach is to achieve empowerment advantages such as advancing social justice [26], improvements in the community capabilities, and greater participation of stakeholders in decision making [38]. A large number of studies, including those by Itzhaky and York [33] and Morgan [70], support the theories stating that empowerment can be achieved through participation, and focus specifically on participation as a means of reducing marginalization and inequality. Such approaches constitute a channel for avoiding or lessening the power relationships normally involved in development research; they also give marginalized groups greater influence by engaging them in projects. Redistributing power in this manner produces opportunities for those participating to augment their potential for changing their lives, thereby promoting empowerment.

In contrast, highlighted actual problem of community led development is social dilemma. The pro-choice for community-led development is in fact a public good game. On the side of the main industry, there are gains to be made in profit by neglecting and obstructing the development of community led local organizations, while in terms of the public good, most notably the environment and wellbeing of the people. These public goods could lost due to selfish incentives of the industry not to care for the cleaner production. There are many other studies concerning which factors could alleviate the tragedy of commons. Next sections address the dynamic of process of empowerment and case of Citizen Community Boards in Pakistan (Fig. 1).

2. The dynamic process of empowerment

The process of empowerment incorporates multiple dimensions. According to Malhotra et al. [40], the definitive features of empowerment are: (i) the progression from one condition to another; and (ii) agency, meaning that individuals must make a substantial contribution to the change that is taking place. This implies that empowerment is a process in which the individuals affected do not simply experience the change, but are actively engaged in bringing it about.

Empowerment is not something that can be accomplished systematically, nor is it a fixed 'end state'. Rather, it is a matter of disrupting entrenched power structures so that new economic and political relationships can be formed. Schulz et al. [54] points out that any definition of empowerment largely relates to quality of life and associated concerns; such as, increasing people's power over resources and decision-making, while. Accountability; capacity of local organizations, participation and access of timely information, are among the central aspects of empowerment [37]. These concepts are inseparable in relation to social policies, because empowerment involves increasing opportunities for people to participate, but at the same time people need to be empowered in order to exercise their right to participate. Walton and Smulovitz [61] suggest that achieving empowerment can affect policy decisions or the execution of collective activities, as well as various other things such as: decision making in institutions, politics or economics; the degree of empowerment among less wealthy members of society; and positive or negative feedback loops. (An example of a positive feedback loop would be where as good economic outcome enables poor people to increase their contribution to decision-making and their effect on government or other agents; a negative feedback loop would be an increase in conflict or opposition as a result of changes made).

Although researchers frequently highlight the advantages of empowerment, they seldom consider the potentially negative aspects of this process; for example, conflict is sometimes necessary for the achievement of empowerment (this is elaborated upon in the section detailing the findings of the research). Thus, one must be critically aware that empowerment is frequently controversial, political, subjective, and inevitably non-linear. It is an erratic and volatile process – causing problems both in theory and in practice – because it can be reversed just as much as it can be advanced.

This approach is potentially controversial, even though empowerment is being used more and more for assessment and monitoring. As Malhotra et al. [40] point out, for the majority of countries; there is a paucity of sufficient and reliable data regarding levels of empowerment. Miller and Campbell [44] have provided a review and empirical evaluation, in which they describe the difficulties associated with measuring empowerment, including, vagueness in the definition of the concept, the absence of agreement in practice, and inadequate records of its success. In addition, they raise a concern regarding the 'theoretical underdevelopment' of empowerment, and suggest that: (i) there are other approaches which may be as effective as the evaluation of empowerment, and (ii) that the latter loses its conceptually distinct perspective on evaluation. One considerable obstacle to gauging empowerment is that characteristics which are indicators of empowerment in one particular setting may be interpreted differently in another. Narayan [47] points out that measurement procedure are often impeded, in terms of comparability and consistency, by differing levels in the importance of empowerment across diverse contexts. Improving capacities, providing timely information, holding local bodies accountable and participating in decision-making that enhances sustainability resulting an empowered community.

2.1. Empowerment initiatives alleviate poverty

The purpose of empowerment initiatives is to enable people to control and influence their lives and participate actively in sustainable

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