



COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT IN CHANGING WORLD ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

Worldwide almost three billion people live below poverty line, and women accounted for 70% of those living below the absolute poverty line. Three fifths of the total population in developing nations lack access to basic sanitation and clean water. Investments in improving market economies and per capita gross domestic product have not guaranteed improvements in health, partly due to structural adjustment and debt repayment requirements that have moved money away from health and social spending. Improvements in the per capita gross domestic product may improve health indicators such as life expectancy, but do not accurately reflect growing health inequities. Both relative and absolute poverty create vulnerability to disease as the poor are particularly susceptible to poor sanitation and nutrition, inadequate public health infrastructure, human rights violations, hunger and psychosocial stressors from powerlessness. Organization is an important tool of community empowerment. The individual, the group, the organization, the community and power relations in the surrounding society, are presented as contextual relations that influence and are influenced by changing and dynamic circles. Processes of Community Empowerment in the Context of Community Planning as an Empowering Professional Practice develops the empowerment encouraging intervention in each stage of the process of change. This paper highlights how the community empowerment is important in the lives of some group of people and presents different qualities of the process.

Key Words - Poverty line, Health and Social Spending, Sanitation and Nutrition, Human Rights violations, Community Empowerment



INTRODUCTION

In the 1990s the term empowerment began to replace community participation. Empowerment has conceptually evolved from the idea of participation in technical activities to a broader concern of improving life situations of the poor. These correspond to the political and economic environment of the time. The historical development of the concept of empowerment helps explain why there is no universally accepted definition of empowerment. Although it means different things to different people, countries, and cultures, the concept does share certain common characteristics. It applies to the individual and the collective/community, it addresses the issue of power and control over resources and the direction of one's own life, it addresses issues of capacity and confidence building of both individuals and communities, and it sees active participation is necessary but not sufficient contribution.

In the last decades, health professionals, nongovernmental agencies, multilateral and bilateral aid agencies, foundations, and governmental agencies have increasingly turned to community empowerment as major strategies for alleviating poverty and social exclusion and reducing health disparities. The process of empowerment means a transition from a state of powerlessness to a state of more control over one's life, fate, and environment. The process is aimed at changing three dimensions of a social condition, i.e., to bring about a change in: people's feelings and capacities; the life of the collective that they belong to; and the professional practice that gets involved in the situation.

The concept of empowerment is also an attempt to break the circle of various social problems which are difficult to resolve. People suffer and are harmed not only because of neglect but also because of the attention of bad social services. On the threshold of the 21st century it is becoming clear that groups suffer from powerlessness not only because of indifference, cruelty and a shortage of resources in the impoverished parts of the world, but also because of humanly degrading social solutions in the democratic society. Empowerment is first and foremost an ideology and a world view, and only someone who accepts its values can attain a deeper understanding of the details of its processes and the methods of its practical implementation. To overcome by all these problemsTherefore there are three interrelated process like individual



empowerment, which is the personal, intimate change process; community empowerment, which is the social change; and empowering professional practice, which is the organizational and functional change that encourages the realization of both the above.

COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT

Community empowerment outcomes include community bonding measures such as social capital, neighbourhood cohesion, neighbourhood influence, sense of community, community capacities or assetscommunity measures of participation, such as extent of civic organizations, and also objective changes in healthy public policies, transformed norms, greater equity, and improved material conditions.Community and national level empowerment variables within the political, economic, legal, and human rights sectors include good governance, institutional accountability, and women's empowerment. Good governance includes accountability of politicians and managers through an information flow to the public, enhanced civil liberties, lower corruption, and increased responsiveness of an institution to public health needs and problems, and reciprocal relationships with a public empowered with greater access to transparent information and control over resources.

There are people who present empowerment as an exclusively psychological, or political process, although its distinction lies precisely in the integration it creates between the psychological and the political. There are those people according to them empowerment makes it possible to express sensitivity to the individual, and at the same time to aspire to transform society. The concept then serves diverse ideas outside the mainstream, as well as giving a new flavour to conservative liberal ideas about civil rights and social responsibility. The ideology of community empowerment then interfaces with social views which have always been considered to be opposed to one another, creates bridges between them and moderates their central concepts. People's commitment to and responsibility for the world comes into being as a consequence of their development of their abilities, and not vice versa. These abilities are more than technical skills; they are a quest for meaning which comes from an awareness of our own needs and sensitivity to the needs of others.



Basically community development came from Anglo-French traditions of supporting people in their former colonies and in the industrial world out of problems of the urban poor. It has an agenda of social development like health, education, and welfare in the post World War II period. It was seen as a way of addressing problems of poverty among the majority of the world's populations. Its early focus was on improving living and health situations for the poor in both urban areas of the industrial world and so called developing countries struggling with poverty and lack of resources.

In the original sense of the word, community empowerment is power of attorney authorization to act on behalf of society, a kind of delegation of authority on the social and personal planes. Empowerment symbolizes energy which exists in abundance and is not taken by force it expresses an ongoing social process, not a onetime occurrence. Empowerment seeks for a position as a natural process that is anchored in human nature and in social relations: more control over one's life and one's environment is an important component in the life of every human being, and citizens who are in control of their lives and participate in decision making with regard to their future and their environment make an important contribution to democratic society as a whole. Hence, an empowerment policy which makes more control over one's life possible also increases resources of the society, the individual profits, the societal profits, the physical environment profits; the social institutions profit a win-win outcome in every possible sense. Community empowerment is also a broader social movement that supports the self-determination of poor people. It requires governmental, nongovernmental, public, private, political and religious institutions and organizations to address and remove the social exclusion, stigma, discrimination and violence that violate the human rights of poor people.

The meaningful participation of poor people is essential to building trust and establishing relationships and partnerships that have integrity and are sustainable .This may be challenging for service providers who are more accustomed to establishing the parameters within which services are provided, and prescribing how relationships or partnerships are to be conducted. As poor people and organizations become more empowered, there will be greater expectations of powersharing and powershifting .In the initial stages of community empowerment, poor



people may have less experience in organizing as a group. People's participation is also responsible for the weaknesses of community development. It is clear that the answers to poverty and health improvements could not be found in merely mobilizing communities. Problems of poverty, it was pointed out, were problems of inequities caused by the skewed social structures.

CRISIS GLOBAL ECONOMIC

During the 1980s, the global economic crisis and the increasing global information system began to moderate aspirations of the 'people's participation' approach. The changing environment focused the interests in participation on providing environments whereby local people would be able to manage their own lives rather than attacking the structures that kept them impoverished. Addressing the issues of poverty alleviation, the emphasis was placed on transforming individual abilities and aspirations, shifting the concerns from revolution to empowerment. The empowerment constructs emphasized individual and community actions focused on capacity building and shifts in power and control of decisions and resources.

Emphasizing the social benefits is an important strategic component in the ideology of community empowerment, especially in order that well-off potential partners may feel comfortable and not oppose the process. It is important to make clear to all the citizens the extent to which empowerment is relevant to their lives as well, and at the same time to remember that the constant support of the middle class is essential for the success of any comprehensive social plan. Empowerment then is a pragmatic world-view, which aims to serve as a guiding principle for diverse democratic views. As such, it is conscious of itself and of its aspirations, and does not recoil from a deconstruction and exposure of its assumptions, both as an educational action towards other approaches, and for the purposes of self-examination and self-criticism. In its view, we shape the world according to our perceptions: just as a competitive ethos creates competitive environments, and forecasts of a recession create a recession, so too people's faith in themselves and in their community who they are, what they want to do, and how they want to live has a much greater tendency to become realized than is customarily believed.



Societies are saturated with disempowerment with discrimination, with prejudices, with the casting of stigmas, with blaming the victim. It is permeated with ideals which isolate and exclude individuals inside their private space, and place them in confrontation with one another the individual's success is measured by her/his capacity to compete in a weak market, to be a winner among losers. Social practices which encourage solidarity, social integration, support of the vulnerable, compassion and empathy, are rare, and the outcome is a society of lonely individuals in the crowd. The creation of a community is both a personal and a social solution what it means is working as a group to grapple with problems that the individual cannot cope with alone. True, there is no guarantee that the collective effort will succeed where the individuals have failed, but the very process of collaboration of involvement of people's commitment to attain a shared goal, to influence the making of decisions that affect their lives, to improve the quality of their lives and their environment, creates a new feeling and new capabilities among the participants, and this is an important outcome in itself.

The community provides its members with important needs, in ways which people who live without a sense of community are not aware of. Alienation can become an existential condition, unless a person feels that she/he belongs to a body in which there exist mutual trust and commitment to shared goals. In conversations about empowerment, reservations are expressed as well. Some people refuse to accept powerlessness as a starting point for empowerment. For example, leaders of neighbourhoods and community organizations, who are people with power, are not prepared to identify with a stigmatic description of poverty, marginality, social alienation and indifference. They explain that since they are not poor or weak themselves, the transition from powerlessness to more control over life is not relevant to their lives. It is important to emphasize here that empowerment is important to every human being, because the danger of deterioration to a constant and systemic powerlessness lurks in wait for any citizen in the society.



HEALTH AND EMPOWERMENT

In the field of health, empowerment is often seen as an intervention rather than a political process. This view tends to stress empowerment as a linear process that can be reached through a prescribed set of changes and avoiding the issues of conflict and control. A recent article titled “Community empowerment paradigm drift and the primary prevention of HIV/AIDS” is typical. It focuses on level of community participation and on capacity-building and does not discuss the very real prospect that these issues can and often do lead to confrontation between lay community people and professionals/planners. World-wide health disparities are increasing due to vulnerability to disease from severe malnutrition, rapid re-emergence of water and blood-borne infectious diseases, environmental degradation, disinvestment in the health infrastructure and violence. Within this same period, empowerment strategies, participation, and other bottom-up approaches have become prominent paradigms within public health and the development aid for reducing these disparities.

EFFECTIVENESS OF EMPOWERMENT STRATEGIES

Findings Research on the effectiveness of empowerment strategies has identified two major pathways: the processes by which it is generated and its effects in improving health and reducing health disparities. Empowerment is recognized both as an outcome by itself and as an intermediate step to long-term health status and disparity outcomes. Within the first pathway, a range of outcomes have been identified on multiple levels and domains: psychological, organizational, and community-levels; and within household/family, economic, political, programs and services such as health, water systems, education. Only a few researchers have used designs resulting in evidence ranked as strong in the traditional evidence grading systems. Yet there is evidence based on multi-level research designs that empowering initiatives can lead to health outcomes and that empowerment is a viable public health strategy.

YOUTH EMPOWERMENT STRATEGIES

Youth empowerment strategies, promoting young people as participants in all aspects of program design and as advocates for community norm and policy change, are growing.



Empowerment strategies emphasize awareness of feelings of powerlessness and power, the manner of participation, and whether young people believe they are able to influence public health issues and policies. It is not just the quantity of attendance at a structured activity, but the quality and intensity of active involvement that are significant, as well as involvement of participants as decision-makers and social change advocates. Evidence shows that engaging young people in structured organized activities that link them to each other and to institutions enhances their self-awareness and social achievement, improves mental health and academic performance and reduces rates of dropping out of school, delinquency and substance abuse. Empowerment components, such as viewing youth as a resource, engaging them in group bonding through dialogue, and involving them as decision-makers in their social actions, have been demonstrated in many programs. In sum, youth empowerment interventions have been related to various empowerment outcomes: strengthened self and collective efficacy, stronger group bonding, formation of sustainable groups, increased participation in social action and actual policy changes. These empowerment outcomes in turn have been linked to improved health and educational outcomes.

There is a lot of research on the importance of the social contextual influences that contribute to discrimination and the social exclusion of women. There is a need, therefore, to incorporate women- specific issues into empowerment interventions. Improved education for women, including adult literacy and empowerment have been associated with improved child health and reduced fertility. Some studies have examined the impact of women's political leadership on women's lives. A national constitutional amendment in India, which gave women the right to be elected to village councils rather than appointed, resulted in nine villages voting for all women's slates. Outcomes in three of the villages four years later showed collective action by both men and women to increase fuel, water and fodder in households. Results also included an increase in women's mobility and decision making, closure of liquor dens resulting in less wife-beating and more girls attending schools. A study of women dairy farmer empowerment showed increased participation in management, collective self.



CONCLUSION

Pursuing empowerment thus raises a critical question for planners and policy-makers: Can people and/or communities be empowered by those who are outside or can only people and communities empower themselves. It has been pointed out that if those who have power initiate actions to give power to those who do not have it, is this not an attempt powerful to keep control of the process and thereby remain in power. It is argued that power cannot be given to those without power. The process of empowerment is that of having the powerless take control and exercise power from them. So to overcome by all these problems, Specific population programmes to be done to overcome the larger political, social, racial, and economic forces that produce and maintain inequities need to be developed and further evaluated. Structural barriers and facilitators to empowerment interventions need to be identified locally. Empowerment strategies, including community-wide participation, seem worthwhile to be integrated into local, regional and national policies and economic, legal, and human rights initiatives. Health promotion should address effective empowerment strategies, such as: increasing citizens' skills, control over resources and access to information relevant to public health development using small group efforts, which enhance critical consciousness on public health issues, to build supportive environments and a deeper sense of community; ② promoting community action through collective involvement in decision-making and participation in all phases of public health planning, implementation and evaluation, use of lay helpers and leaders, advocacy and leadership training and organizational capacity development; ③ strengthening healthy public policy by organizational and inter-organizational actions, transfer of power and decision-making authority to participants of interventions, and promotion of governmental and institutional accountability and transparency; and being sensitive to the health care needs defined by community members themselves. And lastly government investment in multiple-method research and evaluation designs to collect evidence on the impact of empowerment strategies over time is needed.



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