

Authority and Accountability : Cornerstones of Development

In considering a variety of development projects and policies (from capacity building amongst artisan cooperatives in North India to guidelines for HIV/AIDS education and prevention), it is immediately clear that the successes and failures of development programs are predicated on whether or not development practitioners considered the unique cultural dynamics in which these projects were situated. While it is evident (and admirable) that some form of participatory dialogue permeated most of the case studies offered below (or, as in the case of the failure of famine aid in Sudan, comprised its prescribed remedy), another unifying consideration appears to be the subject of authority and accountability. By the verb “authorize,” I am referring to the ability to provide and manage directives while ensuring effective execution (and ultimately, sustainability). By the noun “authority,” I am referring to constituents, institutions and development practitioners that design and implement assistance programs (and are fundamentally accountable for its success or failure).

In the spirit of participatory development, I suggest that during the phase of implementation, authority and accountability must be shared by both practitioners and the community. However, in recognizing the nuances inherent in any development project, it would be difficult to expect that this sharing of authority and accountability will be immediate. Depending on the factors behind the impetus for the project, initial authority can reside with any number of actors (aid agencies, cabinet ministers, trade union leaders, village chiefs, etc); however, if truly sustainable progress is desired, both the *agency* provided by authority and the *burden* of accountability must ultimately rest on the shoulders of the constituents receiving aid. I argue that while resources can be made

continually available, for a community to “own” the mechanisms that seek to lift them from degradation, they must be given authority over their liberation.

In keeping with the argument previously offered in my first literature review, I will also continue to argue that development must be approached from all sides of what is always a multi-faceted party of stakeholders. In developing assistance projects, it is important to incorporate Paulo Freire’s dogma of dialogic praxis with regards to helping the oppressed find their cultural voice- and therefore their means out of subjugation.¹ However, I maintain that it is also important to help the oppressors become aware of their complicity in the system of oppression. While one may not immediately consider aid agencies such as Oxfam or the UN World Food Program as “oppressive” (indeed, it might even be considered sacrilegious to do so), one must also consider that despite the best intentions, ill-designed programs can serve to perpetuate oppressive regimes. The most effective way to prevent this (as illustrated in many of the projects described below) is through active participation of all actors in both the design and execution of a development program, with authority and accountability gradually transferred (after adequate training) to the constituents receiving aid.

I will focus my discussion on three areas where authority and accountability can reside: Institutions, Communities and Individuals. By “Institutions,” I refer primarily to ideological, social and political frameworks that govern legal policies and systems of leadership (i.e., the state and the market economy), By “Communities,” I refer to intimate social groups such as families, communes and collectives. By “Individual,” I refer, quite literally, to the core actor and the perceptions of self-efficacy that will ultimately drive

¹ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed-30th Anniversary edition*. (New York, NY: The Continuum, Inc, 1970)

the success and sustainability of any initiative. Using case studies and historical analyses of development policy, I offer examples of where the transfer of authority and accountability contributed to the ability of a project to meet (and not meet) goals and needs.

INSTITUTIONAL AUTHORITY

The consideration for the role of institutions in development is a critical element in project design. As modes of authority, political institutions dictate both legislation and policies that directly affect buy-in or dismissal from government while cultural institutions govern communal and personal ideologies that affect sustainable adoption. A comprehensive analysis of women's empowerment movements in China, Korea and India offered by Monica Das Gupta (et al) illustrates this point perfectly. In her essay, Das Gupta reveals how totalitarian state directives (China), democratic means of egalitarian participation (India) and the rapid subscription to the forces of a market economy (Korea) intersect with traditional concepts of gender roles to either accelerate or hinder equality.²

In each example, institutional authority functions differently with subsequent effects on *patrilineality* and *patrilocality* (traditional, male-centered social structures that limit female agency).³ In China, totalitarian statehood demanded the breakdown of lineage-based familial organizations, thereby ensuring the exclusive loyalty and obedience to the state. Committed to an ideology of egalitarianism, state mandates allowed for a rapid, systemic improvement in the status of women, providing them

² Monica Das Gupta (et al.), *State Policies and Women's Agency in China, the Republic of Korea, and India, 1950-2000* in *Culture and Public Action*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004) p.234-260

³ Das Gupta, p.236

education, employment and opportunities to participate in local governance. However, even state directives were met with resistance in the guise of community ambivalence and interpersonal non-compliance; for example, various compromises were made in the issue of Marriage Law, and while greater protections against domestic violence and ease of divorce for women were achieved, male-dominated lineages persist.⁴

In India, authority lies in a democratically elected government- one that actively encourages the participation of women (as seen in its high percentage of female membership). India, however, is also a large, highly heterogeneous state with communities of equally diverse ideologies, needs and circumstances. Ironically, while providing the framework for participatory governance, it is India's commitment to the challenges poised by democracy (i.e., its preponderance for bureaucracy) that produces slow responses to issues of poverty, health, sanitation and the overall improvement of the quality of life.⁵

Given Korea's strong commitment to development (and its subsequent rise from post-war poverty to world economic giant), one can easily argue that here, authority lies in the market economy. With a requisite emphasis on human development and economic growth, women enjoy high levels of education, health and employment. Despite this, participation in society is still confined to traditional gender roles that favor a woman's role as homemaker and family caretaker.⁶

From these illustrations of Asian women's movements, it is clear that the state will always play a role in advancing or hampering social movements. However, another

⁴ Das Gupta, p.243

⁵ Das Gupta, p.250-254

⁶ Das Gupta, p.245-250

commonality is that in each society, states were meeting the demands of burgeoning collective networks that served (if nothing else) to transfer a level of authority over the direction of advocacy agendas to the women themselves (family planning centers and domestic violence support groups are some examples).⁷

In a similar fashion, Shelton Davis offers the role of the Guatemalan state in attending to the demands of a strengthening Mayan movement of cultural rediscovery. After generations of either cultural dismissal or destructive assimilation under colonial rule, Mayan communities began to assert their proud heritage and the heterogeneous ethnic, cultural and linguistic reality of the Guatemalan people.⁸ Authority over the destiny of the Mayan culture passed from colonial masters to a post-revolutionary government that, with the implementation of diversity policies and ministries purposed with cultural preservation and revitalization, ultimately transferred authority to the Mayans themselves.⁹

The pan-indigenous congresses and Peace Accords seen in the late 20th Century also point to the intersection between institutions and participatory development. Working as a collective on behalf of indigenous interests, Mayan leaders lobbied to have their voices included in the dialogue regarding Guatemala's poverty reduction programs. While many suggested reforms failed in their efforts towards congressional ratification, the very existence of the effort brought to the table the demands for increased participation. Leaving room for future legal debate, both the institutional authorities

⁷ Das Gupta, p.247

⁸ Shelton Davis, *The Mayan Movement and National Culture in Guatemala* in *Culture and Public Action*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004) p.336

⁹ Davis, p.337

governing the legal parameters of development and the cultural institutions that determined communal needs now have a precedent for engaging in a dialogic praxis.¹⁰

COMMUNAL AUTHORITY

Much like institutions, communities are imbued with complex ideologies that inform collective behaviors and social organization. Disregard for the requisite authority (and accountability) that communities should have in any development project could lead to a project's reduced efficacy and failure to fulfill intentions. The dangers of this kind of neglect is most clearly demonstrated by Simon Harragin's essay on the Sudanese famine of 1998. In this example, the failure of relief agencies such as the World Food Program and the UN Children's Fund to channel adequate resources timely and effectively can be attributed to implementation methods that negated indigenous kinship groups and ideologies of distribution.¹¹

Amongst the many challenges facing relief agencies in Sudan was the distribution of much-needed resources to specific "targets" that were identified as being the most vulnerable (defined as those demonstrating actual signs of malnutrition). As resources were being apportioned, however, a Sudanese system of communal resource sharing within kinship groups challenged this idea of targeted assistance. Subsequently, "relief distributions that were planned by aid agencies to go to the vulnerable minority... were often reassembled by local *authorities* ... and redistributed subsequently to the general

¹⁰ Davis, p.345-348

¹¹ Simon Harrigan, *Relief and an Understanding of Local Knowledge: The Case of Southern Sudan in Culture and Public Action*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004) p.307-328

population through their kinship leaders and along kinship lines rather than on a territorial basis” (italics mine).¹²

It became immediately apparent that previous estimates of need fell far below the gravity of the famine. Rather than merely considering individuals that were the “most in need,” it was imperative to consider the communities holistically as falling under that category. The visibly indiscriminate affects of malnutrition and disease on the bodies of all members of society assured that this egalitarian system of resource allocation left no one guilty of over indulgence, thereby diffusing inflammatory assumptions of corruption or elitist siphoning.¹³ Dialogue amongst kin leaders would have also diffused community perceptions of aid as an “outsider” force; while it is likely that aid so direly needed would not have been turned away, building capacity amongst the Sudanese to allocate resources according to their cognitive framework would have strengthened empowering notions of accountability and agency.¹⁴

The Sudanese example illustrates the dangers of what happens when the authority over the mechanisms for communal (and personal) betterment are not passed over to the community receiving this aid. The antithesis to this would be policies that empower communities by entrusting them with intervention itself.

The Cottage Industry- Global Market (“K2Crafts”) project conceived and implemented by Georgetown University faculty and graduate students points to an effective development program that married cultural innovation with capacity building. Funded by World Bank lenders who expressed skepticism over the absence of purely

¹² Harrigan, p.313

¹³ Harrigan, p.315

¹⁴ Harrigan, p.320

quantifiable success indicators, the project sought to enable impoverished communities of female artisans in India to market their woven goods online. Upon completing the needs assessment, however, it became apparent that imposition of communications technology was secondary to the more fundamental need for basic skills training in both weaving and business practice. To facilitate this capacity building, a Resource Center was developed and staffed by local professionals; here, instruction in fundamental accounting, resource management and marketing principles coincided with helping the women locate and assert a unique cultural voice that could aid in branding their product. Subsequently producing a product that grew in popularity both in India and abroad because of its regionally-specific pattern and light-weight compatibility with warmer climates, these artisans enjoyed the fruits of an authority over their creative product that Georgetown project implementers were well-served to provide.¹⁵

Another brief example offered by Carol Jenkins is a program at the Sonagachi brothel in Calcutta, India where older sex workers rescue young women forced into the sex industry and help them find safer environments elsewhere.¹⁶ In recognizing groups of sex-workers and injecting drug users (IDUs) as *communities* worthy of the same participatory interventions aforementioned, practitioners in HIV/AIDS education and prevention have done well to counter often politically motivated policies with solutions that *engage* rather than *incarcerate*. Drawing similarities to Sudanese kinship group chiefs and Indian artisan collective, there is a palpable power to HIV and IDU peer-to-

¹⁵ JP Singh, Development As Cross-Cultural Communication: Anatomy of A Development Project in North India in *The Journal of International Communication*, 9:2, 50-76

¹⁶ Carol Jenkins, *HIV/AIDS and Culture: Implications for Policy in Culture and Public Action*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004) p. 272

peer intervention methods in that it offers peer leaders with an agency that can only come with responsibility. In all three cases, meeting need hinges on locating power in the *local*.

INDIVIDUAL AUTHORITY

In HIV/AIDS education and intervention, one must consider that while policy developers may prescribe methodologies based on collective sexual behavior patterns, the fundamental determinant of whether any of these interventions met their intended target lies at the moment a person begins to consider whether or not to slip-on a condom before intercourse; the true litmus test for a message campaign's efficacy occurs at the very moment a needle is offered and passed (or not passed). Similarly, the true test of development lies beyond a cooperative's adoption of new weaving techniques, a nation's assertion of cultural identity or a kin-based collective's ability to distribute a common good; rather, the guarantor for sustainability (and therefore, success) lies in an individual's desire to continue to weave, learn about one's heritage and trust resource providers enough to continue distributing through local means; in short, to persist in a behavior change because there is reason for him or her to do so.

What pervades these examples is the issue of individual authority over personal action – otherwise known as “agency.” In describing conditions that tend to ensure the type of agency that would prevent the rehabilitated drug user from regressing, Carole Jenkins provides the following needs: (1) a significant caring relationship with someone sober; (2) improved stability of housing; (3) a meaningful, enjoyable occupation or activity; and (4) a long-term regular relationship with a professional counselor.¹⁷

¹⁷ Jenkins, p.278

Taken together, these provisions speak to the building of a society's capacity to nurture interpersonal relationships based on stable social frameworks that in turn provide stimulating opportunities to reach one's full potential. Women who enter sex work, for example, often do so because it provides them with sustenance and means to survival. In short, it provides them with a degree of agency (however dire); as Jenkins argues, however, "to diminish the attraction of prostitution, then women need to stay in school longer, have greater job opportunities, more power over their own bodies, and improved legal equity in marriage."¹⁸ In other words, the individual needs conditions that nurture agency.

On the subject of interpersonal relationships: while the actors in a dialogue about development often involve transnational agencies, state-run ministries, cross regional chieftaincies and a host of local collectives, development itself can never divorce itself from one-to-one, face-to-face interactions between individuals trying to affect each other's capacity to aspire and agency for change. While participatory development practices focus on collective cultures and social networks, at the core still lies the very individual upon which the ultimate effects of all development projects will reside.

¹⁸ Jenkins, p.271

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Das Gupta, Monica, et al. (2004). State Policies and Women's Agency in China, the Republic of Korea, and India, 1950-2000: Lessons from Contrasting Experiences. In Vijayendra Rao and Michael Walton (Eds.), *Culture and Public Action*, (pp.234-260). Stanford, CA: Stanford Social Sciences, Stanford University Press
- Davis, Shelton H. (2004) The Mayan Movement and National Culture in Guatemala. In Vijayendra Rao and Michael Walton (Eds.), *Culture and Public Action*, (pp.307-328). Stanford, CA: Stanford Social Sciences, Stanford University Press
- Freire, Paulo (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed (30th Anniversary edition)*. New York, NY: The Continuum International Publishing Group, Inc
- Harragin, Simon (2004) Relief and an Understanding of Local Knowledge: The Case of Southern Sudan. In Vijayendra Rao and Michael Walton (Eds.), *Culture and Public Action*, (pp.281-307). Stanford, CA: Stanford Social Sciences, Stanford University Press
- Jenkins, Carol (2004) HIV/AIDS and Culture: Implications for Policy. In Vijayendra Rao and Michael Walton (Eds.), *Culture and Public Action*, (pp.260-281). Stanford, CA: Stanford Social Sciences, Stanford University Press
- Singh, JP, Hilpa, Shilpa A. (2003). Development As Cross-Cultural Communication: Anatomy of A Development Project in North India. *The Journal of International Communication*, 9:2, 50-76