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A Quest for Self-Glory or Self-Reliance: Upgrading the Benefits of Community Development Programmes *

EBEBE A UKPONG +

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that self-reliance and community development as a theory and strategy of sustainable development are congruent concepts. When political opportunism sets in, discontinuity occurs in this relationship, which frustrates the anticipated benefits of development for the rural people while promoting the personal gains of project leaders and the cheap popularity of the government. Development experts have a duty to halt this trend.

Introduction

The two UN Development Decades have failed to bring about meaningful improvement in the quality of life of the peoples of the Third World. This painful failure has not only exposed the bankruptcy of the Western theories which informed the development policies of the period, but has also given a vigorous fillip to the search for alternative development strategies. The theorists of the *dependency* school have recently taken front stage to demonstrate the poverty of '*bourgeois*' theories of development, and to present an alternative intellectual foundation for the development process (Korany,1986). Self-reliance, a concept now fashionable, presents both a theory and practice of development.

The search for an alternative intellectual strategy has been matched by a corresponding search for an appropriate approach to development. For over three decades rural people, and the development of their world, have become the central focus of the development process. Students of development are apt to be intrigued by the shifting conceptions of the rural problem. In one conception, the rural people are stereotyped as passive, ignorant and incapable people whose improvement must be externally engineered and delivered on a humanitarian basis. Yet, in

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+ Department of Sociology, University of Calabar, Calabar, Nigeria

another engineering moment, they are presented as a reservoir of economic and social capabilities who must be actively involved in the betterment of their lives. Four approaches can be identified and have been advocated in the period of the 1950s to date: the trickle down effect, integrated development, community development (the 'small is beautiful' approach) and, most recently, the 'enabling environment' approach (Hyden,1986). The community development approach is widely recommended, given its strong emphasis on self-reliance.

Unlike the view of some writers, the concepts and practice of self-reliance and community development are not discontinuous nor new. In Africa for instance, the concept of *Ujamaa* and movements like *Harambee* or the improvement unions (voluntary associations) are obvious pointers. What is more, they indicate the harmonious coexistence of the the concepts of self-reliance and community development. What is new, possibly, is the projection of political opportunism into the practice of both. It is this new development which has altered the perception and, consequently, the attainment of the ideals of self-reliance and community development.

The concepts of self-reliance and community development have shared a philosophy which has undergone historical modification. This must be recognised. Advocacy is quite different from practical experience. While in recent times the latter has tended to acknowledge the existence of some disruptive events in the practice of community development, the former has largely ignored such possibilities and has, instead, continued with stale exhortations based on assumed notions.

Advocacies that have failed to acknowledge, or have underestimated, the import of the growing two worlds of community development are severing the continuity between self-reliance and community development programmes. This pathology, though understandable since advocacy presents only the image of a pleasant world, is totally unacceptable. Community development has two main audiences: the community of the advocates (policy-makers and the academics) and the community of the practitioners (the rural people led by the 'sons abroad' or 'elite'). The programmes pursued by the latter are often at variance with the conceptions and exhortations of the former. The result is often the thwarting of the ideals of self-reliance. These two worlds must be joined for the sake of enhancing sustainable development for rural people.

The purpose of this paper is to point out, using available field data, the discrepancy in the conception and practice of community development and its sustaining factors, and suggest some means of improvement which will enhance the ultimate attainment of self-reliance. The paper argues that unless the factor of political opportunism which has altered the main thrust of community development practice, is firmly controlled the promises of self-reliance may be jettisoned for a 'phantom cocoon'.

The charm of self-reliance

The deep frustrations that followed the great expectations of the development theories of the 1960s could be regarded as a blessing in disguise. Development experts must demonstrate their willingness and ability to point out an alternative route to the goal of development (Bloom,1988). Only such action enhances the capacity of the beneficiaries of development to take direct control of their destiny. Crises often provide the immediate impetus for such demonstrations, which too often find form in things unknown and proximate.

Self-reliance is conceived as an alternative development path with great potential. It is a response to the ills of maldevelopment associated with '*bourgeois*' development models or theories (Mathews,1988). Largely championed by the theorists of the dependency school, self-reliance, with applications at international, national and even local levels, is a must for the creation of a 'just structure' in the face of inequity (Korany,1986). By its conception, self-reliance implies some degree of dissociation (of the dependent periphery from the system's core), a necessary condition for the building of a 'just structure'. It is this position of dissociation which permits unrestrained rethinking and autonomy in decision-making within a particular local context. Indeed, King and Slesser (1987:5) describe self-reliance as "local initiative applied locally". This involves the harnessing of intellectual powers, management and human resources to help raise the material standard of living.

In the broadest sense, self-reliance means "the right and ability to set one's *own* goals, and then realising them as much as possible through one's *own* efforts using one's *own* factors' (Ikoku,1980:37). It is seen as a development strategy based on indigenous socioeconomic engineering. Its philosophy is improvement from *within*. This does not imply a return to the past, nor does self-reliance equate to autarky or dismiss some advantages of international relations (Mansour,1979; Ikoku,1980; Bloom,1988). It means, rather, the search for and the application of scientific and rational knowledge to the resolution of local problems, within the context of maximum autonomy in decision-making.

The promises of self-reliance are concretely stated by Mansour (1979:229-233). They include:

(i) Gearing economic activities to the satisfaction of the basic needs of the masses, using available local resources.

(ii) The domestic control of the means of production.

(iii) Autonomy in the determination of basic needs and in the setting of priorities in both decision-making and in the sharing of subsequent benefits. It also implies the acquisition of enabling skills for these enterprises.

(iv) Enhancement of the mobilisation of productive resources, resulting in the effective social control of the means of production.

(v) Opportunities to achieve reward from the application of the skills acquired.

(vi) The development of countervailing power structures.

Such lofty gains are considered sustained if they are founded in the grassroots. Therefore, the advocates of self-reliance have always considered it rational to root the concept in the 'small is beautiful' (community development organisations) approach, from where it can grow and proximate 'collective self-reliance'. The preconditions of self-reliance have therefore, been unmistakably tied to this notion (Lewis,1988; Ikoku,1980). Identified elements of the success of the self-reliance strategy include:

(i) An unambiguous delineation of the sector(s) where self-reliance is sought, eg food, energy, manpower, social services, etc.

(ii) The diversification of the level of priorities built upon the successes of sectoral self-reliance, from village to national level for instance.

(iii) Local autonomy in the determination of a community's destiny and protection against the vagaries of centralised policy-makers and planners.

(iv) The provision of incentives by central decision-makers to implement self-reliance, eg reduced dependence on foreign aid, technologies, equitable distribution of resources, etc.

(v) The creation of flexible, participatory institutions and social processes beginning from the grass-roots level.

(vi) The setting of a timespan for the achievement of set goals.

The preconditions indicate that the promises of self-reliance can best be attained when anchored in community development (Abasiekong,1982), variously described as popular participation, citizen participation, mass participation, decentralisation, codetermination, self-help, self-government, etc (Cunningham,1972; Mulder,1971).

The practice of community development

A depressing environment has always prompted human responses aimed at alleviating the harsh conditions. Historically, however, the nature of the response is usually determined by the available social technology. Universally, community development, in which ever garb it is presented, offers the common collective response pattern to a group's problems. Although the form of expression may differ, community development everywhere draws inspiration from the desire to have a change, an improvement (Owuamalam,1981). Sanders (1968) has given a lucid account of the intellectual and social origins of community development. It

has been widely acknowledged that community development is not a recent invention. An historical account of the transformation of community development practice in Eastern Nigeria from 1928 to the early 1980s has, for example, been presented by Owuamalam (1981). What, however, is new is the tendency to progressively 'modernise' its practice.

Community development describes a "process where attempts are made to mobilise the total resources of the community for the protection, support and enrichment of individuals and groups being part of the whole" (Milson,1974:26). The definition given by UNESCO (quoted in CRS,1979:7) accepts the improvement of the life of the community as the cardinal concern of community development, but emphasises that the mobilisation for such attainment rests on the partnership of the community with government authorities. The philosophy of community development recognises that:

(i) economic resources are limited, hence only integrated and organised mobilisation can lead to maximal benefits being derived.
(ii) self-help must be encouraged in the face of scarcity.
(iii) community-based decisions, or self-determination, is the core action-value of community development.

The goals of community development differ between places. In developed nations the basic goal is to spread the idea of democratic process, while in developing countries community development focuses on the provision of the basic necessities of life to the citizens (Milson,1974). Besides the provision of basic needs, community development in developing countries is assigned another important function, that of developing human capacities and social institutions to enable people to take control of their environment. The ultimate aim of community development, therefore, is to bring about change in the physical conditions of the community, as well as altering the negative, apathetic and skeptical attitude of the people to one that enhances their participation in community affairs (Perlman and Gurin,1972; Batten,1974).

The theory of community development (Littrel,1970; Njjar,1970) identifies rural development as being the goal. In this approach, the principal instrument of attaining rural development is self-help projects. Self-help projects are endorsed as the motive force of community development because of the economic, psychological and political benefits (like social service amenities, raised political status and group identity) they offer participants. What is often underestimated is the conflict, failure and waste involved in self-help projects. Self-help projects are also recommended because they permit much reliance on the initiative of the people in conjunction with government assistance. Again, the issue often glossed over is the effect of a government role in self-help projects on the initiative of people in rural communities.

The history of community development practice, especially in the former Eastern Region of Nigeria, indicates the pioneering role of the missionaries in fostering organised self-help projects. This was followed by the efforts of urban-based voluntary or improvement associations which aspired to extend some urban facilities to their rural communities (Little,1967). Government entered the scene, prominently, at the end of the civil war. Challenged by scarce resources in the face of the massive rehabilitation needed, government had to fall back on the traditional ingenuity of the people encapsulated in the practice of self-help and give it a rational-legal backing for its success. For instance, the Development Administration (Amendment) Edict of 1973 authorised the collection of levies from citizens for self-help projects. In the former South Eastern State (now split into Akwa Ibom and Cross River States), government's concern with community development was implemented through the Development Administration programme (which split communities into Development Areas). When the reformed Local Government system was introduced in 1976, Development Administration was abolished and its mandate transferred to the Local Government Councils (CRS,1979), a practice still maintained today. The Federal Government has recently appeared on the scene, with the creation of the Directorate for Food, Road and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI), authorised to distribute resources for self-help projects.

Government's interest in community development is unambiguously to utilise communal assistance and further rural development. The concern here is not paternalistic. Its benefits from this approach are hardly acknowledged. However, government advances its interest by:

(i) Seeking to coordinate the planning of community development to "ensure uniformity....so that in (the) final analysis, the local plan proposals will be such that (they) can be integrated into the State Development Plan" (CRS,1979:10-11).

(ii) Providing training and orientation courses for community workers, extension staff and community/project leaders.

(iii) Providing financial assistance to projects as loans, grants, technical assistance or subsidy.

The overbearing presence of government in community development sponsors many discontinuities which threaten the promises of self-reliance though self-help projects. A better understanding of the nature of discontinuities is necessary if the benefits of self-help projects are to be reaped.

The impact of discontinuities on self-reliance

Robert Merton (1968) called our attention to the fact that social arrangements often produce or perform functions that were unintended and are largely unrecognised.

On the whole, latent or unintended consequences tend to be dysfunctional in relation to the cause of their existence. From a functional perspective, this paper has presented the philosophy and the infrastructural arrangement of community development as presented by its advocates in the realm of self-reliance.

Some documentary evidence and field data on the practice of community development reveal some discontinuities with the model being advocated. Part of the data from an empirical study undertaken between 1980 and 1981, and followed up in 1978 (Ukpong,1988a), is presented to point out the discontinuities they permit. In 1972 Ikono/ Middle Area Development Committee, a creation of the Development Administration policy, comprising 33 villages, embarked on the building of a secondary school which was a genuinely felt need. The school opened in 1973 and was taken over by the government in 1975. The arrangement with the government was that, on the completion of this first phase of the project, another community project (a general hospital) would be undertaken. Instead, each of the villages making up the Development Committee went independently inward and executed several projects. What went wrong so soon?

"Political opportunism" (McAuslan,1986:271) had set in on the part of both the government and community leaders. The inability of the leaders to discuss the project at the community level, and their inaccessibility, were identified as the main cause of the collapse of the community-based projects. Even when the leaders turned inward, they unilaterally decided on projects they thought would give their villages easy identification, higher political status or would be completed earliest. In some cases, early gigantic projects were abandoned to make way for moderate projects considered easily completable. Where the desire was for a degree of independence and a sense of importance, ambitious projects were initiated. Many, like their predecessors, were abandoned. Obviously, the democratic ideal of popular participation in community development is subverted here. This situation is inherent in community development programmes (Cunningham,1972). When leaders dominate the initiation of projects, they usurp the people's right to collectively and locally set priorities, thus stifling a cardinal principle of self-reliance.

When leaders unilaterally set the goals of community development and proceed to define self-help projects for the community, they demonstrate their impatience with the pace of community development, the perceived threat of this situation to their entrenched positions, and their readiness to further turn the opportunity to personal advantage. Quite often, such projects, which are aimed more at the enhancement of their own status than the community's, turn out to be irrelevant, duplicated, too costly or wasteful, and are abandoned. Such failures carry a high price for the community. Nevertheless, the leaders may still have some gains. As empirical data shows, project leaders utilised the opportunity offered by

community development projects and transformed themselves into political leaders - councillors in the Local Government Council and legislators in the Second Republic.

The government's role in self-help projects has particularly sustained the discontinuities. The bid to receive as much of the government's financial allocation as possible actually stimulates the proliferation of projects, rather than a genuine desire to complete them for need satisfaction. Such allocations often end up in the pockets of a few privileged project leaders. The government tends to pay less attention to the end-use of its allocations. Its concern, instead, remains with the political urge to establish its presence conspicuously in every corner of the society (Ukpong,1988b). The thinking is that more government-aided projects littered about indicates government's response to the needs of its citizens. Government's financial assistance is given on the understanding that "any bit of concrete assistance from government, no matter how small, is enough to fuel the people's enthusiasm for self-development and generate self-help projects of no small magnitude" (CRS,1979). Government seldom worries about the completion of projects it has assisted. Again, as shown elsewhere (Ukpong,1988c), the unwillingness of the government to incorporate practical field data in public policy process occasions 'policy misplacement' with adverse consequences on rural development.

There is yet another dimension of the discontinuity created by the government. Government policy on community development empowers Local Government Councils to directly oversee self-help projects. Projects have been made to "depend on the Local Government Council for (their) operational continuity" (CRS,1979:10). The result of this is the subjugation of the efforts and autonomy of local communities to official evaluation by the government. The most disquieting consequence of this subjugation lies in the failure of government officials to successfully guide the implementation of projects. Although it can be argued that the government officials who act as the 'deciders' of self-help projects are local people (in the sense of being Nigerians), they are in fact outsiders to the communities that they decide for. They are urban-biased and intellectually linked to the outside (Atalas,1974).

The persistent rural development problem is considered more of an intellectual problem than a problem of numbers (Hyden,1986). Being disdainful of field data, government officials often work more from the political perspective of achieving self-glory through cheap publicity than a commitment to satisfying the felt needs of the people. For this reason, they find it more rewarding to work in concert with project leaders with whom they have shared interests than with 'the people'. The direct result of this is the abandonment of projects of doubtful purpose and the

underutilisation of completed ones. For instance, given the proliferation of community secondary schools in Ikono Middle (from one in 1973 to seven in 1987, for a community of 66 622 people) the facilities of the schools are grossly underutilised. These costs are never recoverable although they are paid from lean sources, the waste is painful and traumatic. Some of the implications of this are shown in Table 1.

Policy recommendations

Against the background of the discontinuities already noted, the following policy recommendations are suggested, in the hope that they will assist in the improvement and sustenance of the benefits of community development to rural people.

1. Setting sectoral priorities

Much as community development is a function of voluntary mobilisation, its success depends on a firm element of planning being built into the process, or else there is bound to be waste and duplication of resources. The way out is to set sectoral priorities, say at the Local Government level, in broad outlines, eg food, roads, employment, etc, to which communities should focus their attention in a given order of satisfaction of needs. The organic relationship between human needs, self-reliance and articulation is meaningfully discussed under the theme of Human Scale Development (**Development Dialogue**,1989:1). The agenda must add indices of utilisation and define absorptive capacity in terms of population density. Communities can still retain the right to explore their aspirations within the limits of the realism set. Government's co-ordination must be conceived only in this realm of setting sectoral priorities.

2. End-use considerations

The lure of benefiting from government's financial assistance is the root cause of the negative competition for self-help projects. Given the potential of government's participation to stimulate community development, it should be properly channelled for the benefit of the majority. So far, indicators are that unviable projects are often funded by government, while a good part of the subvention ends up in the pockets of a few individuals, resulting in the failure of the projects. Government rarely questions how its subventions are used or why they are part of the failure. Government must therefore distance itself from failed projects. It must insist on subventing only projects that satisfy the sectoral priorities and have proven chances of success.

3. Clarification of urban connections

Community development within the African context will for sometime to come retain its urban connection, given the unbalanced relationships existing between urban centres and rural areas in Nigeria. The tendency to adopt the top-down approach in the initiation and execution of self-help projects must be deemphasised. The role of the 'sons abroad' (the urban based elite) should be limited to an advisory capacity and in relation to organisational means. Neither they nor government officials should function as the *defacto* project leader. The task of initiation and implementation of projects should reside with local leaders acting in accord with the needs of the community. This calls for measures that enhance popular participation and equity, and will guard against the benefits of self-help projects being expropriated to urban centres.

4. Exclusion of political opportunism

The greatest threat to the essence of the self-help movement is the infiltration of political opportunism. It easily subverts the goal of the movement. Of course, it must be acknowledged that community development is a political action, for it involves attempts to alter the structure of the authoritative allocation of values. The danger, however, is present when the allocations are made in favour of a few privileged people or they frustrate collective goals. One way of eliminating the pursuit of personal ambitions on the wings of collective effort is to entrust the business of self-help projects to the hands of those the most affected by privation, who are open to accepting ideas of effective organisational and managerial ability. A need for an alliance with non-governmental organisations for this purpose is imperative.

5. Expansion of knowledge base

This is an era of planned change. Change even at the lowest level must obey the commands of planning. Since planned change depends on sound knowledge, enormous effort must be directed at the training and education of the villagers and politicians on the nature of community development. The content of the education must assist in the organisation, supervision and maintenance of projects and to overcome social objection.

Conclusion

Development, rightly viewed as a moral issue, is now evoking more global concern than at any other time in world history. The only lingering debate is about what constitutes *the* best strategy for the attainment of development with a human face.

The insistence of the Third World on self-reliant development squarely places the burden of engineering the required improvement on the local people themselves. But these local people do not often understand the forces of group dynamics involved. It is, therefore, the responsibility of development experts and social scientists to point out both the realities and the pitfalls in any enterprise. The purpose of this is to avoid the failures which deepen dependency relations and promote a loss of self-confidence in the capacity of local people.

FOOTNOTE:

1. Ikono Local Government Area is in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.

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Table 1
Summary of the Performance of Self-Help Projects in Ikono Middle 1972-1987

	Variable	1972 - 80	81 - 87
1.	Total no of projects	33a	26b (uncompleted)
	Primary School	10	8
	Secondary	3	4
	Civic Centres	9	10
	Health Centres	-	2
	Water Project	1	-
	Market	2	1
	Road	3	-
	Others	5	1
2.	Government subvention		
	State	N34 000	na
	Local	N 1 500	na
3.	Financial requirement		
	Cost of projects	na	N2 604 000
	Contributions so far	na	N 595 782

a Includes existing and proposed projects
b This excludes 3 road projects, 2 civic centres and 1 secondary school completed.

Source: Community Development Annual Reports (1980) Ministry of Rural Development and Cooperatives, and Ministry of Local Government (1987) Ibiaku Ntok Okpo, Ikono.