

RETHINKING POVERTY: THE ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS IN GRASSROOTS DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

Resource inequity and disparity between nations and communities is a significant social problem. The consequences of such inequities are immense and are compounded by governments' failure to find lasting solutions. International organizations have stepped in to fill the gap; however, their efficacy is fairly undocumented. Using social choice and chaos frameworks, we explore through a literature review and field experiences the work of three NGOs operating in six different countries highlighting the efficacy of Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR). Practice recommendations are provided that underscore the relevancy of a skilled workforce, great management, as well as an objective environment independent of bureaucratic coercion.

KEY TERMS: Chaos Theory, inequalities, poverty reduction, international organizations, Social Choice Theory, grassroots development

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INTRODUCTION

Despite efforts by governments to narrow social inequity, major economic, social and political struggles still persist. Today, half of the global population live on less than \$2.50 a day (Henderson & Cooper, 2004; World Bank, 2012). A majority of these 3 billion people reside in developing countries. Given that the vast concentrations of wealth are in the hands of a few individuals, i.e. less than 1% of individuals own over a third of the world's wealth, this gap is unsustainable (Credit Suisse Research Institute, 2010). The paper highlights the important work some governments and Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) have done to mitigate these social ills.

BACKGROUND

The social consequences resulting from economic disequilibrium are immense. Yet still, very little public appetite from governments and corporations exist to undertake the macro progress necessary to address the needs of vulnerable and underserved populations. Frequently, governments and private corporations do choose narrow economic paths in rewarding their stake holders and ignore the safe and secure economic path of property rights, honest public service and novelty. These forces hold economies back. Although reducing social disparity is complex and may require the engagement of public and private partnerships; finding sound approaches to solving these perennial problems is important. Urbanization has been a long

term drain on the economic vitality for most of the developing world, affecting rural communities as well as the urban. Decades of poverty, inhumane living conditions, congestion, and social unrest have contributed to a distrusting society that finds their governments unresponsive to their needs. While some governments have made great progress, fewer have recognized the potent institutional social liabilities--illiteracy, poverty, misgovernment and cronyism that often extricate wealth and pull societies backwards. Drawing from our extensive literature review on the work of NGOs as well as our own field experience, we contend that collaborative partnerships between governments and NGOs can make a difference in creating sustainable wealth.

RELEVANCE OF NGOS

NGOs have played an important role in addressing the social needs of communities and have pushed for long lasting and sustainable development (International Institute for Sustainable Development ([IISD] 2013). Unlike governments and corporations that might be bounded by competing interests, NGOs attempt to analyze social problems with neutrality, and cooperatively, together with the community, articulate necessary steps in addressing these needs. NGOs nurture and capture the social resiliencies available in the community by galvanizing the naturally available capacity to finding needed solutions. Through health literacy promotions, disease

eradication initiatives, innovation and economic empowerment, NGOs significantly contribute to the social welfare (IISD, 2013).

Further, NGOs understand the scope and social consequences of poverty and its potential to ignite social unrest. The invisible liabilities (e.g. lack of skills, mismanagement, illiteracy underutilization of resources etc.) can strangle development and cultivate a culture of dependency (Kling & Schulz, 2009). These liabilities pave the way for corruption, political gamesmanship and a sustained token economy (material reinforcers) that could cause social unrest. Social unrest, defined as the general condition of a society where movement in a confused manner is both regular and widespread, emerge as a collective reaction to the perceived discontent over unjust social arrangement (Social Unrest, 2013).

CAUSES OF SOCIAL UNREST

Political scientists have struggled to explain the causes of social unrest to encompass social, political, economic, and environmental causes (McAdam, 1983); food scarcity and food price increases, (Dowe, Haupt, Langewiesche, Sperber, 2001; Stevenson & Quinault, 1975); variations in international commodity, climate change (Zhang et al., 2011; Burke, Miguel, Satyanath, Dykema, Lobell, 2009) and demographic changes, (Goldstone, 1993). It is theorized that social, economic, and political tensions accumulate gradually over time and spike into sudden outbursts of unrest, causing contagious turmoil (Dowe et al., 2001; Burke et al., 2009). When a citizen of an

underdeveloped nation, for example, faces a development gap in an already “flattened world” as Thomas Friedman would metaphorically define globalization and its impact, (2005), destabilization forces are potentially inevitable. For example, the average income in Africa is less than \$2,000 a year per person, compared to the United States which is more than \$30,000 (Kling & Schulz, 2009). This gap holds societies back and encourages corruption by rewarding those who expropriate wealth than those who create wealth. This is a constant source of conflict.

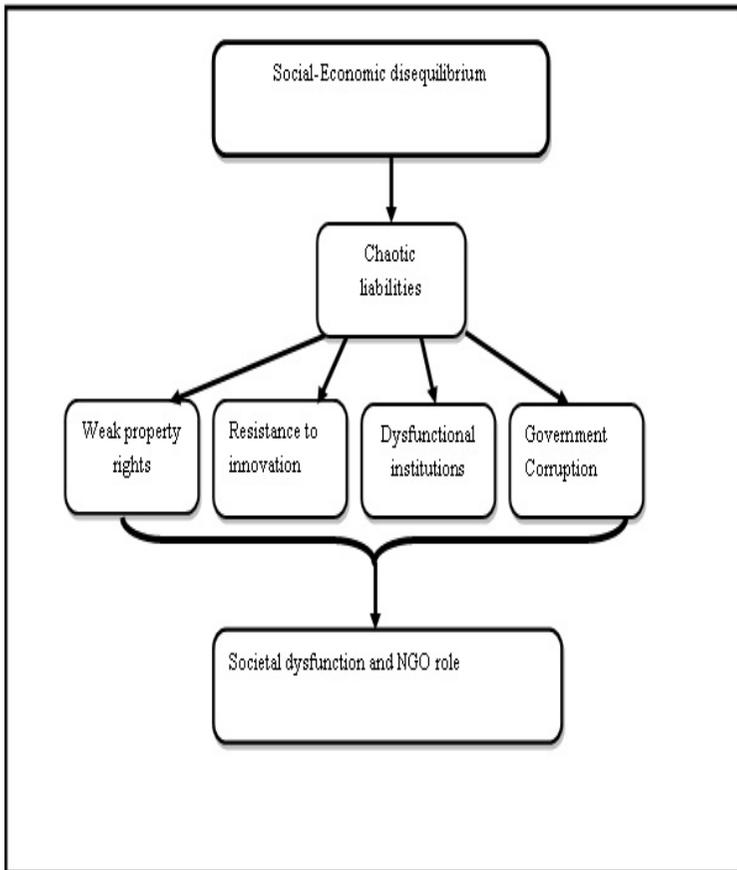
Understanding the push factors to conflicts is helpful. Because NGOs in essence, operate in a non-political climate and are impartial; they help narrow the social knowledge gap by sharing and stimulating bottom-up innovative and community-based projects. Empirical as well as experiential knowledge has shown that governments who have robust economic systems operate within a framework of working legal systems, rule of law, and a functioning social and economic protocol (Tebaldi & Mohan, 2010). Poor social arrangements and political institutions are invisible liabilities that can stifle innovation (Kling & Schulz, 2009). For example, where there are weak property rights and unchecked government power such as in Zimbabwe and North Korea, prosperity can be elusive (Kling & Schulz, 2009). Hong Kong, Singapore, and Israel on the other hand, are exemplars of relative robust operating system of rules, customs and standards that even in the absence of natural resources, for example, can galvanize economic prosperity. The

social norms of a country, often related to culture, institutions, religion, national ethics and values, play a significant role in explaining social inequality (Haferkamp & Smelser, 1992). South Korea, for example, is one of the richest countries in the world today; North Korea, however, still grapples with enormous backwardness and abject poverty. Although the culture between the South and North Korea today is very different, the Korean peninsula has a long period of common history dating back to before the Korean War where the two countries had unprecedented homogeneity in language, ethnicity, and culture (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). What sets these two countries apart, for most part, are the political and economic pathways they have adopted. Building on the strengths of international organizations, we document how grassroots mobilization and community engagement can play a role in social and economic development.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In his writing on the social chaos theory, Priesmeyer (1992) stressed the concept of future locale and how it is determined by its current position of competing burgeoning forces. Chaos is described as a situation of sensitive interplay of events, dependent on the initial conditions where a small shift in one place can affect social and cultural stability (Priesmeyer, 1992). Historical epochs in pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial period may have contributed to disequilibrium in the existing social, economic and political locale, creating the potential for instability (see figure 1).

Figure 1: *Conceptual pathways of social-economic disequilibrium* (Source: Priesmeyer, 1992)



A functioning government needs solid institutions that are sustained by the rule of law. Economic growth has been realized in most of the developed world, while in poor countries, we see stagnation, poverty and desolations (Kling & Schulz, 2009). International NGOs work

in isolated communities to identify intangible community capital such as, valuable skills that supplement unskilled labor. In fact, in poor countries where NGOs operate, namely, the democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, etc., the United Nations report consistent registration of negative wealth per person, defined as the average negative worker's output (Lewis, 2004). The lack of skilled workforce as is in these countries pulls economies backward, thus the negative wealth output.

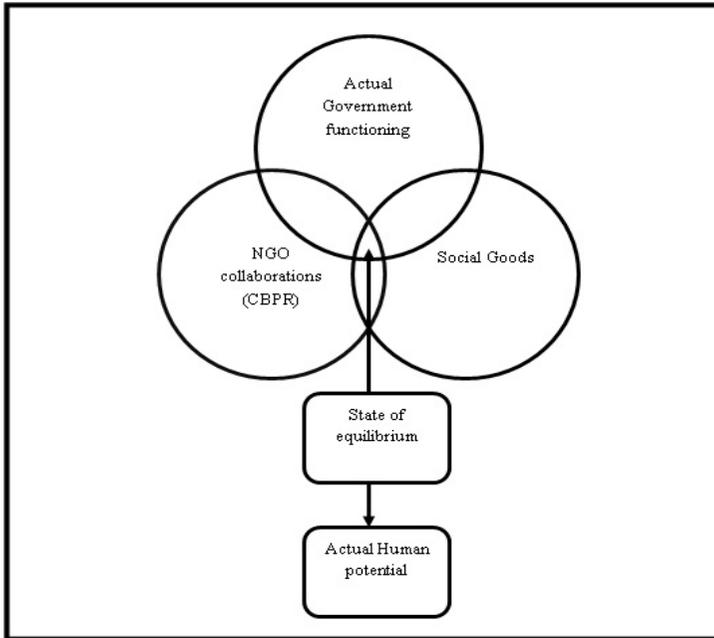
Utilizing the perspective of the Social Choice theory, NGOs understand that people afflicted by poverty would better their life by participating in activities of their choice to bring about the change they want. This can be done through building mutual community partnerships. NGOs act as catalysts of change for community developmental goals. Social Choice theory proposes that societal well-being is measured in the ability to evaluate and assess the potential capacity available in the community and to harness the existing human potential for a genuine collective social action (Atkinson, 1999). Primarily, Social Choice may explain economic growth and how societies balance the tradeoffs between community needs and resource availability (See figure 2). Choices are made to improve the social conditions in the country; conditions that could make or break the country. Mokyr discusses this phenomenon of choice selection as a "brake analogy" where cultures may serve as parking brakes against innovation, growth, and progress (1992). Conservative religious practices for example, and/or unequal

treatment of people under the law can stifle the human spirit for innovation (Elster, 1990).

NGOS AND COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

The work of NGOs is to leverage efforts that can accelerate, not break, the expansion of the human capacity present in the community and jump-start communities' economic participation. Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) for example, is one way that has been utilized by some NGOs to bring about sustainable development. It is a collaborative approach that engages "local stakeholders" in research as they are the most impacted and are "owners of the issue(s)" (O'Toole, Felix-Aaron, Chin, Horowitz & Tyson, 2003). Initiatives have to be transformative, truly inclusive, participatory, and more than short term development projects (Lederach & Jenner, 2002). GROOTS International is a good model that uses analytical and strategic approaches to community development (Moser and Sparr, 2007). Save the Children, UK, harnesses capacity building at the country level to link micro interventions with national policy work in countries where they operate (Moser & Sparr, 2007).

Figure 2: *State of equilibrium in the lens of social choice theory*
(Source: Priesmeyer, 1992)



SPECIFIC NGO ROLES

We define an NGO as any independent, not-for-profit organization established voluntarily to address community specific concerns. NGOs address social needs and act collectively with the community to meet those needs. Because they are independent, they are self-managed through a board of trustees, entrusted in making decisions on behalf of the organization. Being not-for-profit does not mean NGOs cannot engage in profit-generating activities, but rather they use the profits or revenue generated to advance the organization’s causes. As voluntary organizations, NGOs are not confined by the

politics of the countries' they operate into but are guided by established statues governing all NGOs in the country.

NGOs engage in diverse activities that are geared toward a cause to help the communities' needs. While we highlight these activities of the NGOs, we recognize that the success of their operations can overwhelmingly be met when there is a relatively functioning, stable political system, consisting of rules, customs, standards, and protocols. Governments' collaborative efforts are important because they provide a platform as willing partners in welcoming international NGOs into the country and ensuring their safety as they operate in usually remote communities. Successful NGOs understand that a framework where knowledge is rooted in the belief that, the most impacted by the problem, should take the lead in framing the research questions, in designing study methods and in determining the outcomes they want.

IMPORTANCE OF LOCAL COLLABORATION FOR NGOS

In their analysis of the different strategies utilized by NGOs in poverty reduction, Moser and Sparr, (2007) have pointed out that project implementation and evaluation has often been devoid of maximum community participation due to structural challenges. A lack of community participation hinders economic development in a number of ways as outlined by Goodman et al. (1998) and Freudenberg, (2004). An encouraging practice is the partnership of NGOs and other civil society organizations (CSOs) as well as

working with multiple United Nations agencies in addressing common programmatic needs. In Rwanda for example, CSOs and UNDP (The United Nations Development Program) joined forces with UNCDF (United Nations Capital Development Fund) to implement a decentralization program in the Rulindo District. Evidence-based participatory planning helped the local government build infrastructure that meets the needs of communities, such as bridges that connect farmers to their markets and children to schools. The Netherland Development Organization (SNV), a Netherlands NGO and UNDP facilitated local communities in Niger to work with mayors to design a new system for local revenue collection and to rehabilitate schools and health centers.

In Liberia, UNDP helped reactivate the National Vacation Job Program. As a result, youth who had dropped out of school are now able to return to school quickly and can acquire useful job skills. In Tanzania, UNDP and Unilever, worked to develop a local value chain of *Allanblackia* oil, a substitute to palm oil used in production of soap, margarine and spreads. By 2010, farmers participating in the project, of which 47 percent are women, collected 500 tons of *Allanblackia* oil from the forest and planted trees, securing an additional source of income to pay for school fees for their children, food, health care, and agricultural inputs (UNDP, 2012).

On a much smaller scale, The Collective for Orphan Care and Education, a small NGO was established to respond to continued social, economic and educational needs of youth in western Kenya.

Its mission is to work together with the local community to improve the health, education and well-being of vulnerable youth. Because one major problem identified by the community was a lack of educational opportunities for the youth, The Collective for Orphan Care and Education has been able to mobilize partners in enabling young boys and girls to receive educational scholarships for their educational needs. For example, the agency has been working with a local primary school, Bukhulungu Primary, whose majority of children have been orphaned by HIV to build classrooms for children to learn. The community has identified resources available within and has embarked on a volunteer program where recent graduates and retirees can come to the school and teach young boys and girls how to read to improve academic success. This also gives community members an opportunity to give back and invest in others. It has also embarked on a collaborative endeavor, working with the community and their international partner to build a community center that will house programs for children attending the school - a food program, a teenage pregnancy prevention program, information and counselling about HIV/AIDS, and a library. These efforts are accomplished through partnering with the locals for the good of the community.

That said, there is still more work to be done. Common problems associated with NGOs include, centralization of expertise which makes people not to feel a part of the help or change process. This can cause unresponsiveness from the people disallowing them to buy

into the fundamentals of the organization. Competing interests between groups for resources can also prevent healthy collaborations. Since change or development efforts usually require empowerment of people, absence of local support could cause development efforts to lack sustainability in the long run. A change or developmental process might also be considerably slower if immediate action cannot be mobilized through committed local participants.

Another problem is the lack of engagement of the local population. Not employing locals in collaborative efforts could lead to a more expensive change process or service delivery. This could mean that cheaper local resources might not be employed despite their abundance. Culture can play a big difference in the way needs are perceived by people. If local participation is not sought for programs/projects, cultural incompetence could lead to failure since the program might not be meeting the needs of its mission. New insights and ideas might also be overlooked if local participation is neglected. As a result, an effective partnership of International organizations partnering through community based participatory research should specifically show how research may be utilized in efforts to eradicate poverty and inequality. This kind of partnership will help to answer questions like: Are there any policy makers that are ready to be committed to the issues that are being raised? Are there democratic decision making processes among partners that

ensure that individual and collective choices have been factored in before any decision is reached?

RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

There are many factors that influence the strategies utilized by NGOs in poverty eradication. In particular, CBPR is a strategy that has been widely utilized as a form of participatory or empowerment research by different entities and with different populations. However, one major problem still looms in regard to the level of involvement of key participants in all the phases. Embedded rules, rituals, routines, and beliefs within the structure of NGOs could lead to a bureaucratic red tape. Nevertheless, CBPR remains the most utilized form of research that engages communities in identifying issues that affect their personal wellbeing. Moreover, finding a testable model to combine concepts of social choice theory, social chaos theory and CBPR in addressing the sustainability of NGOs will be significant. The emerging model can be utilized in strengthening the partnerships of NGOs and people afflicted by poverty.

CONCLUSION

NGOs in partnership with grassroots organizations must create a platform and support for individuals and groups to empower them for self-sustenance and skill development. Such organizations have to be formed and managed by the people themselves, not for them.

For this to succeed, a community has to be foresighted, highly motivated and selflessly committed, and have an altruistic leadership. Finally, the objective of the present paper was to analyze the contributions of NGOs in engaging local community stakeholders to meeting the needs of the community. We argue that participatory research can be key in stimulating development. We have built this argument by considering “five faces” by which to assess the significance of NGOs: (1) relevance of an NGO; (2) uncovering the causes of social unrest/problems; (3) utilizing appropriate theoretical framework; (4) community involvement; and (5) governance. We conclude that NGOs, governments and communities can work together in Knowledge exchange, skill development, communication, and education dispensation.

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