ETHICAL CHALLENGES AND RESPONSIBLE POLICIES IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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Summary

Case studies from community driven development projects are used in order to present ethical challenges and possible solutions. Simple interventions in poor, disadvantaged communities aimed at improving livelihoods and household incomes are confronted with the new era general regulations, as well as with asymmetrical power relationships that threaten the achievement of the initial development objectives. A rural road built by the community is inadvertently used by big, log carrying trucks belonging to powerful companies. Both the road and the nearby forest are destroyed. A small wood processing activity aimed at generating income for a marginalized group is polluting the environment with shavings. The group succeeds to develop another activity, the production of shavings briquettes and consequently gets additional income and avoids pollution. A simple waste disposal solution is blocked by regional legislation that indicates general regulations for waste disposal. All these examples raise ethical issues. Is it right or wrong to engage in community driven development projects that can have unintended and/or unanticipated effects? Were the mentioned interventions good or bad? The answers to these questions change depending where one sits. The main idea of the paper is that sustainable futures are context dependent. Global, regional, national and local and community levels have requirements that need to be carefully balanced. Gradual, locally designed policies may be needed, as well as continuous impact evaluations, revisions and generation of new solutions. Corrupted power needs to be contained. Neither inclusive development nor sustainable development is sufficient. What is needed is inclusive and sustainable development, or, in other words, environmental and socially sustainable development. Two examples of responsible policies involving education and communication are also presented.

Introduction

Globalization and the various modern crises lead to changes in what is perceived as bad and wrong. In principle, everybody agrees that depletion of natural resources, pollution, and climate change and energy and food crises are the bad consequences of the Antropocene era. The problems arise when identification of sources is attempted (due to complex interdependencies), as well as when definition of general solutions is tried.

New standards and regulations are developed for preventing and dealing the crises. However, restrictions and limitations end up being imposed primarily, if not

exclusively, on those who should be temporarily exempted, or at least being asked to gradually comply.

Hopes are put into scientific innovations, sought to remedy or reverse the catastrophic paths. However, answers to small interventions never catch the attention of big scientific endeavors.

Socio-economic systems are questioned, as well as developmental models. Regional and even global scale models are discussed, while local and community levels are usually disregarded.

Meanwhile, community development projects continue to do their modest job, aiming at improving the livelihood of poor and disadvantaged people. However, their impact is evaluated in the same way as the impact of bigger societal programs. Restrictions and limitations are quickly applied, since it is always easier to control simple, small interventions, than large scale programs.

In order to analyze ethical challenges, several case studies are presented, that have as a starting point small community driven development projects: a rural road, a waste disposal solution and an income generating activity. Ethical dilemmas are identified and a number of recommendations are formulated, to respond to challenges. They aim at: (i) focusing on contexts, rather than applying stereotypes; and (ii) gradual implementation, instead of blind adherence to un-realistic requirements.

Case Studies

Three case studies of small community driven development projects are presented. The case studies are from the particular context of a transition country, Romania. They deal with interventions in deprived, poor communities, with marginalized population. Since the country has recently joint the European Union, the situation presented is no longer characteristic to Romania. Access to significant financial sources has moved the focus from developmental issues to proper design and implementation of projects. However, the case studies are useful for exposing issues and formulating recommendations.

All case studies are derived from the implementation of a competitive grant program, the Social Development Fund Program. Through the Program, poor communities could articulate their priorities for assistance and participate in the design and implementation of demand-driven sub-projects. Through this learning-by-doing mechanism, communities were able to satisfy specific needs, and build their capacity to identify and prioritize their demands, and mobilize and manage resources to design, implement, operate and maintain their own projects. The small projects improved the infrastructure in poor rural communities, developed income-generating activities in poor communities, and improved the quality of services offered to disadvantaged and vulnerable groups scattered throughout the country through social service activities. Participatory approaches have been used to identify problems, to decide upon priorities and to implement solutions. Environmental safeguards were checked prior the acceptance of the intervention and strictly followed during project implementation. Despite the small scale of interventions, a couple of ethical issues

have been encountered that can have a broader relevance, beyond the originating context.

First Case Study: Rural Road

A poor, isolated rural community decides that its priority need is to build a rural road. The small grant offered by a governmental program, together with the in-kind contribution of the people (consisting mostly of un-qualified labor) is sufficient to get a good gravel road. This will open the community to the outside world, enabling children to go to school, doctors and ambulances to get to their patients, peasants to go to markets to sell their products etc. The road is constructed, villagers are proud of "their" road, to which they have contributed in various ways.

The problems appear when heavy trucks transporting timber start using the small road to get quicker to their destination. Existing regulations forbid big capacity trucks to go on gravel roads. However, the big companies do not fear fines, which any way can be avoided, when right connections and bribes are used. The road gets destroyed day by day, the nearby forest is depleted more quickly and, in the end, villagers are at the starting point, with the environment being additionally damaged.

Could the situation be avoided through a better design of the project? Not really! The social capital increased during the implementation of the small project. Villagers' solidarity was expressed when they tried to oppose the destruction of "their" road and the accelerated exploitation of the forest. However, villagers' power could not oppose the company's power, its corruption, as well as the corruption of local authorities.

The ethical challenge was quickly expressed: would it have been better not to finance such a project, knowing from the beginning that asymmetrical power relationships may generate unexpected, un-desired effects? Was it good to try to solve the community problem, when the generated side effect has actually worsened the general situation?

Second Case Study: Income Generation Activity

Through the same granting program (a Social Development Fund), income generation activities were financed to assist disadvantaged groups from poor communities. One community decided to ask for financial assistance for developing a wood processing activity to increase their income. The main item purchase through the grant was a frame. Villagers could now sell their processed logs and get better prices.

The problem appeared when significant quantities of shavings started being generated that could no longer be managed by villagers. Piles of shavings were threatening the environment. The group involved in the small business identified another income generating activity, i.e., production of shaving briquettes that solved the environmental problem and also generated additional money to the community.

Could the problem be identified before hand? Possibly, it could, if villagers would have been better informed. Could granting authorities have prevented the problem?

Yes, if they would have adopted a more systemic approach, instead of the fragmented one. Even so, through a gradual approach, the community has solved the new problem.

The ethical problem is the same as before: was it right or wrong to finance projects with potential risks?

Third Case Study: Waste Disposal

A poor rural community had already implemented a project that answered to its priority need (water supply). As in the other situation, through project implementation social capital was increased. Higher solidarity was expressed through the desire to find a solution to the waste disposal problem. In the past, villages used traditional methods to process household waste, i.e., burning it in the backyard. This was no longer possible, once peasants started buying products packed in plastic bags and bottles. Piles of solid waste started to grow at the end of the village, including demolition and construction debris. Plastic waste was spread by winds through nearby agricultural fields. The view was appalling: fields sown with pets! Not only was the view terrifying, environmental degradation and potential loss of arable lands were too.

With little funds available, an "appropriate" solution was designed: at the end of the village (where anyway solid waste was thrown), an ecological (sanitary) landfill would be constructed. The landfill would be covered with a layer of geo-synthetic or plastic liner. The solid waste would be gradually deposited in cells of the landfill and compacted with local tools. Layer of waste would be covered with soil. Environmental pollution would be contained and, in time, totally eliminated, when funds would be available for retrieving the solid waste and properly processing it (Devinder Sood, 2002).

The problem appeared when authorization for the project was sought. The "appropriate" solution was not in line with the new European regulations to which the country has just adhered! According to these regulations, waste was to be collected, temporarily transferred to zonal and then carried to the main processing plants. Each family would pay a tax for the service. The problem was that platforms and plants didn't yet exist and peasants were anyway too poor to afford paying a new tax. However, the general regulation had to be observed and the temporary solution was denied.

The ethical question is: should such appropriate, temporary answers to urgent problems be denied, in view of general solutions that could be implemented only in the long term? What is good and what is bad?

Ethical Concerns and Possible Answers

All the case studies are raising ethical concerns. The small road was good for the community, but bad for the environment due to the corrupt power situation. The income generation activity was good for the community, but had a negative environmental side-effect, which was contained only after a new activity was

developed. The waste disposal solution was good for the community, but judged as bad by indiscriminate regulations.

Is it right or wrong to engage in community development projects that can have negative, usually unexpected and unintended effects? Were the mentioned interventions good or bad? There are different answers to these questions depending on who is responding. For poor communities, it was right to solve their urgent needs. All interventions were good, since they answered to community priorities for improving their livelihood. On a higher level (national, regional or global), these community projects could be qualified as bad and the approach as wrong, given the unintended environmental impact. In an extreme, bureaucratic approach, it seems it would have been better either to ignore poor communities, or to ask them to automatically comply with general regulations. The justification could be that complex interdependencies, usually difficult to forecast lead, or could lead to negative effects.

On one hand, small, fragmented interventions may have unintended effects that may be detrimental to everybody. On the other hand, one is tempted to judge the value of interventions in their own environment.

What to do? Give up community driven development interventions given the possible risks due to the existing inequitable power relationships? Condemning the poor because in the end corrupt power will have the saying? Block the initiative of a marginalized group in order to prevent negative effects that may appear in the context of limited resources and planning capacity? Condemn poor communities because they cannot fit the blueprint of richer localities?

While recognizing the dilemma, a guiding principle can be formulated: poor communities should not be asked to do what various centers decide they should do. Rather, various policy and decision makers should see what they can do for poor communities.

From the case studies, several recommendations seem to emerge:

> Since there are great chances for power to be corrupt, constantly pursue the fight against corruption.

> Since predictions are not possible, constantly evaluate impacts and be ready to solve new problems as they arise.

> Since poor people have a limited capacity in all respects, ensure that regulations take into account realities on the ground and provide for exemptions and gradual implementation.

> Since educated people can both get out of the poverty cycle and understand challenges, promote education for all.

Fight Corruption, Build Solidarity

The approach in all community driven development is empowerment of excluded groups. This is an efficient way to give voice and include disadvantaged groups. However, it is not sufficient to counterbalance asymmetrical power relationships that in most cases are accompanied by corruption.

Identification of corruption risks has to be followed by governance and accountability plans. Their implementation has to be constantly monitored.

More generally, democracy has to be pursued, since "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely" (Lord Acton Dalberg in a letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton, 1887).

Building trust and solidarity is key to reversing the effects of asymmetrical power relationships. Building solidarity, from the community level upwards has to be encouraged by focusing policies on equity and inclusion. One of the favorite jokes during the Soviet times was the following:

- Misha, be careful, your wife is with Ivan in the corn land!

- So what, this is not *my* corn land!

<u>Promote Local and Gradual Solutions</u>

Pockets of poverty require local solutions. There is little hope for large scale, global solutions to be developed, adopted and implemented in the near, foreseeable future that will eradicate poverty and ensure sustainable development. This conference, like other initiatives, will contribute to bring this vision closer. In the mean time, local gradual solutions, based on tales of success are both feasible and valuable.

Focusing on real people, instead of automatically applying stereotypes proves to be the right approach.

Case studies indicate that reversing destructive practices was possible through a gradual approach based on community solidarity.

<u>Promote Learning</u>

Learning, both in conventional terms, as in education and schools, and in a broader sense, as defined by the already old, Club of Rome report "No Limits to Learning" is needed. Adults will continue to learn from mistakes, but a less painful learning, the innovative learning, entails for anticipation and participation. Even when living in deprivation, people have the capacity to learn.

Education efforts are needed. A good example in this sense is the Rural Education project in Romania has a grant making scheme to increase school-community linkages. Schools and the community asked for funds to assist environmental education for both students and villagers.

Another good example is the Knowledge Economy project, also in Romania, which assists the development of Local Communities e- Networks (LCeNs) in knowledge deprived areas. The LCeNs are used to create and disseminate knowledge and information required by the community. They provide access to broadband communication and help young and adult rural persons connect with the outside world.

Conclusions

Real world examples have been used to support the idea that sustainable development in poor communities may seem to have a different meaning from sustainable development in other locations. Comparison of different perspectives can indicate what approaches are most efficient and effective.

During times of significant changes, people, especially the poor, may be caught in "dilemmatic" situations. As they adopt new lifestyles, traditional norms and codes become irrelevant and disappear. Meanwhile, new norms and standards are costly and unaffordable. Consideration of the local context could prevent the imposition of a code of behavior on poor people without their knowledge or consent. Policies with grace periods and exemptions may be needed, instead of radical policies.

The answer to the ethical dilemmas is neither inclusive development, nor sustainable development, but inclusive *and* sustainable development, or, in other words, environmental and socially sustainable development.

References

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