

Book Review

Democratizing Development: The Role of Voluntary Organizations

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A review of John Clark, *Democratizing Development: The Role of Voluntary Organizations* (London: Earthscan Publications Ltd., 1991), 259 pages.

This book views development from a macroscopic perspective. It redirects the focus of NGOs in the pursuit of such development perspective. The first part defines the concepts of democracy and development and explains the nature of nongovernmental organizations. The other half redefines all the concepts mentioned above in response to the present needs of society.

Democracy is not limited to the electoral processes of a society, whereby citizens have the right to choose their leaders. It is "about a whole set of rights which citizens must be afforded if a government is to be open, accountable, and participatory" (p. 16). Advancement of democracy is usually pursued by popular movements/voluntary groups advocating common goals whose bargaining power is the force of its members. The present concern of such groups is towards consumption politics — "demanding a popular right to determine what is produced and how, and the quality of the society we live in" (p. 17).

On the other hand, the definition of development deviates from the traditional concept whose target is to increase the gross national product of a country. Its principal objective is no longer centered on the GNP but on the eradication of poverty and its underlying causes. It is important to note that poverty is measured not only "in terms of income and assets, bur also of health, life expectancy, diet, shelter, education, security, etc." (p. 20).

Robert Chambers identifies five interlocking web of factors which cause poverty, to wit:

- 1) poverty itself - due to low economic status;
- 2) physical weakness - physical disabilities leading to inability to avail of resources;

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- 3) isolation - lack of contact physically and socially;
- 4) vulnerability — due to natural disasters, exploitation, physical incapacity, or to social conventions (i.e., dowry system); and
- 5) powerlessness — to prevent the elite from trapping most, if not all benefits,
 - to prevent robbery, deception, blackmail or violence, and
 - to negotiate, meaning, no bargaining power.

Added to Chamber's list are two more factors identified by Clark, which are environmental damage and gender discrimination.

The thrust of development programs is geared not so much on the transfer of technology, but on enabling people to achieve their aspirations. This necessitates three things: (a) building a development model based on democratic processes; (b) making political choices according to which groups' aspirations will be prioritized since not all aspirations can be attended to at all times; and (c) enabling people to achieve their needs, not simply provided to them.

This book utilizes the framework of a "just development" — development being guided by the values of equity, social justice, and democracy, alongside the need for economic growth — which is aptly summarized in the acronym **DEPENDS**.

- D - Development of infrastructure
- E - Economic growth
- P - Poverty alleviation (recognition of people as vital resources)
- E - Equity
- N - Natural Resource-Base Protection (call for a sustainable environment)
- D - Democracy (establishing partnership between the people and those in power)
- S - Social Justice (eradication of any form of discrimination, exploitation of human rights, factionalism, etc.)

The birth of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) can be traced back as early as World War I. NGOs gained strength immediately after WWII, and proliferated during the 50's and 60's, their focus moving progressively into development activities. These activities involved imbibing modern developmental thoughts which are oftentimes hinged on the northern concept of development.

Through time, the image of NGOs has attracted the public. People tend to mistrust large bureaucracies; smaller voluntary groups are very much preferred.

It was mentioned earlier that NGOs/voluntary groups play a vital role in advancing the goals of development. Enumerated below are the strengths and weaknesses of such groups.

Counting among the strengths of NGOs that may also hamper performance include the following attributes:

- 1) These groups being initially triggered to liberate the poor, are in the best position to serve the lower stratum of the society. However, there is the problem of catering to the poorest of the poor for a practical reason — it is always more promising to develop a community which already has assets, i.e. literacy, physical capabilities, etc. to start with.
- 2) Popular participation is one secret to a sustainable development. This is one characteristic NGOs share in common — encouraging citizen participation in decisionmaking so that problems elicited by the community itself will be addressed and therefore project objectives will be patterned accordingly. However, in the course of the process, problems of the minority do not always jibe with those expressed by traditional leaders. A conflict then arises.
- 3) Since these groups do not suffer from bureaucratic processes and orthodox development concepts, they have ample room for innovation. However, amateurism which sometimes results to discontinuity is an oft-encountered problem.
- 4) These groups being voluntary enjoy the commitment of the staff, thus leading to a more effective and efficient performance. On the other hand, highly-committed members tend to express strong views, leading to heated debates which do not always end up in compromises. Disagreements may likely complicate decisionmaking and eventually affect project planning and implementation.
- 5) NGOs have an advantage of being able to perform efficiently and effectively because they are small-scale in nature. The disadvantage however, is that only a few people benefit from their performance.

Weaknesses may stem from:

- 1) Competition and rivalry — NGOs differ in target areas of concern. Sometimes, a group's existence is threatened by another whose objectives may be similar. Instead of collaborating to create greater impact, tendency leans more on isolationism.

- 2) **Leadership** — Although NGOs are staffed by brilliant, highly knowledgeable people, their knowhow is sometimes displaced, defeating the purpose of the organization.
- 3) **Project design** — Due to innovativeness brought about by ample room in decisionmaking, highly complex designs may become unimplementable.
- 4) **Problems of accountability** — NGOs are accountable to their respective donors. The challenge posed to them is whether the diversion of funds were intended and actually used for the right purpose.

The mushrooming of NGOs is a positive indication that they continually garner the support of various agencies in advancing the goals of development. At present, development projects are focused more on the "doing," and very little of the "influencing" part. Implementors largely concern themselves with how to's of the project. Focus is so localized that environmental forces are not looked into. For this reason, they should start functioning on a global basis.

The challenge posed to NGOs is to regard development from a macroscopic perspective. They must be guided by a new vision of development as conceptualized in the acronym DEPENDS. Programs should not only be directed to problems of disconnected communities, but to global problems as well. Utilizing their grassroots experience, they should relate the current problems with the existing global factors that cause poverty, i.e., foreign debt, dollar-centered economy, depletion of natural resources, discrimination, etc. In the Philippines, for example, foreign debt is a grave cause of poverty. It should be realized that the state of a nation is not caused by internal factors alone, but by external factors as well. Apparently, these things are taken for granted. People may benefit from NGO-initiated programs but the root of the problem is never solved.

In summary, groups aiming to democratize and sustain development should not limit themselves to the local setting. Experiences should not be merely translated into rhetorics and be treated as plain accomplished tasks. Lessons generated from these experiences should be used to effectively influence both national and international policymaking. It is high time that development be viewed as a macro phenomenon.

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