

An identification and interpretation of the organizational aspects of community empowerment

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ABSTRACT *Community empowerment* is central to *community development* and yet making this concept operational in a programme context remains elusive. Based on doctoral work, this paper identifies and interprets nine organizational ‘*domains*’ for *community empowerment*. These organizational *domains* are not absolutes rather they serve as a point of departure for further discussion about straightforward ways to define and *measure community empowerment* as a process. This paper is seen as a step toward clarifying and making this concept operational to guide practitioners who wish to apply and *measure community empowerment* in a programme context. The implications for *community development* and research are discussed.

An identification of the organizational aspects of community empowerment

The many definitions of community empowerment are broadly based on their interpretation as either inter-personal or contextual elements and as an outcome or as a process. However, it is as a process, progressing along a dynamic continuum: individual empowerment; small groups; community organization; partnerships; and political action, that community empowerment is most consistently viewed in the literature (Labonte, 1990; Rissel, 1994) and was developed in conjunction with the community development continuum by Jackson, Mitchell and Wright (1989).

Labonte (1990) claims that the continuum was first developed in Australia in workshops with health and social service workers in 1988. Labonte subsequently published his version of the continuum for community empowerment followed by Jackson, Mitchell and Wright (1989) who published their version for community development in 1989 using a similar five-point continuum. Rissel (1994) later adapted these two interpretations of the continuum to explain how psychological empowerment relates to the

process of community empowerment. These three authors use slightly different terminology which essentially hold the same meaning and represent the same conceptual design: the potential of people to progress from individual to collective action along a dynamic continuum.

In Table 1, I summarize the work of other authors to identify areas of influence on overlapping concepts with community empowerment. This work has assisted in the identification of both social and organizational aspects and in particular the study by Goodman *et al.* (1998) closely corroborates the organizational areas of influence identified in this paper. I build on this work to show how the process of community empowerment can be influenced within a programme context.

The organizational aspects of community empowerment provide a link between the interpersonal elements such as individual control (Everson *et al.*, 1997), social capital (Modra, 1998) and community cohesiveness (Geyer, 1997) and the contextual elements such as the political (Asthana, 1994), socio-cultural (Gordon, 1995) and economic (Taylor, 1995) circumstances of a programme. They represent those aspects of the process of community empowerment that allow individuals and groups to organize and mobilise themselves toward social and political change. The organizational aspects in themselves may act as a proxy measure for the social aspects of community empowerment, for example, the existence of functional leadership, supported by established organizational structures with the participation of its members who have demonstrated the ability to mobilize resources, would indicate a community which already has strong social support elements.

Research was carried out by the author using:

- a review of the relevant literature;
- a concept-mapping involving a textual analysis of case studies;
- inter-observer agreement on selection of empowerment domains.

A review of relevant literature, with particular reference to the fields of health, social sciences and education, provided an in-depth understanding of programmes which sought to achieve the same empowerment goals: to bring about social and political change.

I provide a summary of the reviewed literature in Table 2. The organizational aspects were categorized from a textual analysis of the literature and the validity of this data was cross-checked by two other researchers using a confusion matrix approach as discussed by Robson (1993, p. 222). The literature review identified the following organizational aspects within a programme context; participation, leadership, resource mobilization, problem assessment, links with others, organizational structures, asking why, the role of outside agents, and programme management. These were called the 'operational domains' (a 'domain' is a field or an area of influence) and I now provide an interpretation of each in relation to its influence on the process of community empowerment.

Table 1: The identification of the areas of influence on community participation, competence, empowerment and capacity

Community participation Rifkin (1988) Factors	Community competence Eng and Parker (1994) Dimensions	Community participation Shrimpton (1995) Indicators	Community empowerment domains (1999) Laverack	Community capacity Goodman <i>et al.</i> (1998) Dimensions
	Participation and machinery for facilitating participant interaction and decision making		Participation	Participation
Leadership		Leadership	Leadership	Leadership
Organization	Social support	Organization	Organizational structures	Sense of community, an understanding of community history and community values
Resource mobilization		Resource mobilization	Resource mobilization	Resources
Needs assessment		Needs assessment/ action choice	Problem assessment	
	Self aware and clarity of situational definitions		Asking why	Critical reflection
	Management of relations with wider society		Links with others	Social and inter-organizational networks
			Outside agents	
Management (programme)		Management (programme)	Programme management	
	Conflict containment	Training		Skills
	Articulateness	Orientation of actions		Community power
	Commitment	Monitoring and evaluation		

Table 2: Summary of the case study data reviewed

Geographical locale		Size	Organization			Sector				
Developing	Industrialized	Large (regional or national level)	Small (community or village level)	NGO	Gvt	NGO/Uni	Edu	CD	HP	CE
23	21	7	37	31	9	4	1	12	21	8
	Total = 44	Total = 44	Total = 44	Total = 44						Total = 44

NGO, non-government organization; Gvt, government organization; Uni, University; Edu, education project; CD, community development project; HP, health promotion project; CE, Community empowerment project.

An interpretation of the 'operational domains' of community empowerment participation

Participation. The involvement of individual community members in small groups and in larger organizations must occur if this concept is to develop along a continuum. There is considerable overlap between the concepts of community participation and community empowerment and the two have been included as a part of a number of frameworks explaining grassroots participation. One of the most widely used continues to be Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation. However, whilst individuals are able to influence the direction and implementation of a programme through their inputs and active participation, this alone does not constitute community empowerment. The difference between participatory and empowerment approaches reside in the agenda and purpose of the process. Empowerment and participatory approaches differ because the former has an explicit purpose to bring about social and political changes embodied in its sense of liberation and struggle.

Leadership. Goodman *et al.* (1998) point out that both participation and leadership are closely connected. Leadership requires a strong participant base just as participation requires the direction and structure of strong leadership. Leaders play an important role in the development of small groups and community organizations which are part of the continuum of community empowerment. Gruber and Trickett (1987) argue that participation without a formal leader who takes responsibility for getting things done, dealing with conflict and providing a direction for the group, often results in disorganization. In a programme context leaders are often introduced as external organisers because they are seen to have the necessary management skills and expertise. However, Rifkin (1990) points out that in most communities, leaders are historically and culturally determined and programmes which ignore this have little chance of success of being accepted or utilized by the primary stakeholders.

Constantino-David (1995) discusses the experiences of community development in the Philippines and the success of utilizing local leaders. Competent leaders were developed by NGOs amongst poor people who offered a more insightful understanding of the community problems and culture. However, it was found that a lack of skills training and previous management experience of these people created limitations in their role as leaders. Leadership style and skills can therefore influence the way in which groups and communities develop and in turn this can influence empowerment.

As a solution to the problem of selecting appropriate leadership, Goodman *et al.* (1998) argue that a pluralistic approach in the community, one where there is an interplay between the positional leaders, those who have been elected or appointed and the reputational leaders, those who

informally serve the community, has a better chance of leading to community capacity, and likewise to community empowerment.

Organizational structures. Organizational structures in a community include small groups such as committees, church and youth groups. The existence of and the level at which these organizations function is crucial for the way in which people come together in order to socialize and to address their concerns and problems.

However, organizational structures are themselves insufficient to guarantee the organization and mobilization of a community. There must also be a sense of cohesion amongst its members, a concern for community issues, a sense of connection to the people and feelings of belonging manifested through customs, place, rituals and traditions (Goodman *et al.*, 1998).

Wegelin-Schuringa (1992) found that community members in Pakistan, India and Cambodia who had a sense of community and who were able to inter-relate to their own situation and to that of others had a better chance of establishing organizational structures. The interpretation of organizational structures for community empowerment therefore has two distinct but inter-related dimensions: the organizational dimension of committees and community groups; and the social dimension of a sense of belonging, connectedness and personal relationships.

Problem assessment. Problem assessment is most empowering when the identification of problems, solutions to the problems and actions to resolve the problems are carried out by the community. In order to achieve this the community may have to acquire new skills and competencies. The importance of problem assessment toward community empowerment has been identified in a number of health programmes (Tonon, 1980; Pelletier and Jonsson, 1994; Plough and Olafson, 1994; Purdey *et al.*, 1994; Roberts, 1997). However, Rifkin (1990) points out that whilst many programmes advocate for wider participation, community involvement is limited. These programmes lose the opportunity to involve the community in the decision making process of defining wider problems which concern the stakeholders and have been shown not to achieve their purpose. I provide an example of this situation in Box 1.

Box 1: *Community health care in Hong Kong*

Rifkin (1990) describes a hospital project in Hong Kong which wanted to improve health and health care among the urban refugee community. The aim was to have the community maintain its own health care and the hospital decided that this could be best achieved by improving service delivery. The hospital set up three community clinics and a health insurance scheme in the refugee area but without consulting or involving the community in the decision making process. The result was that the community saw it as a hospital project without a role for themselves and participated by accepting the services but not by contributing toward its upkeep or maintenance.

Resource mobilization. The ability of the community to mobilization resources both from within and the ability to negotiate resources from beyond itself is an indication of a high degree of skill and organization (Goodman *et al.*, 1998). The experience of many programmes has identified the ability of community groups to mobilize or gain access to resources as an important factor toward empowerment (McCall, 1988; Barrig, 1990; Eisen, 1994; MacCallan and Narayan, 1994; Fawcett *et al.*, 1995; Hildebrandt, 1996; Roberts, 1997). However, Rifkin (1990) points out that there is little evidence to suggest that resource mobilization alone will make the community groups more empowered. The community must also have a purpose and the skills and capacities necessary to achieve this purpose, as well as the required resources.

Asking 'why'. Another important domain for empowerment is the ability of the community to be able to critically assess the social, political, economic and other contextual causes that contribute to their level of disempowerment. This process has been termed 'critical awareness', 'critical thinking' and 'critical consciousness'. It is a process of emancipation through learning or education and has been adopted as an approach in many programmes including non-formal education (Kindervatter, 1979; Kilian, 1988), health education (Minkler and Cox, 1980; Werner, 1988) and community development (Hope and Timmel, 1988).

Empowerment education, as developed by the educationalist Paulo Freire, is one of the most widely used approaches for emancipation through learning. People become the subjects of their own learning through a process of critical reflection and analysis of the circumstances in their lives. Freire offers a three step methodology: listening to understand felt issues or themes; participatory dialogue using a problem posing approach; and actions identified by the community to resolve the issues identified during their dialogue in groups. This process has been successfully used in a number of programmes toward empowerment (Wallerstein, 1992; Wallerstein and Sanchez-Merki, 1994).

Links with other people and organizations. Links with other people and organisations include partnerships (Panet-Raymond, 1992), coalitions (Butterfoss *et al.*, 1996) and voluntary alliances (Korsching and Borich, 1997) to address community problems. Fawcett *et al.* (1995) argue that partnerships serve as catalysts for community empowerment in which community members can take action to effect change in the policies and practices that influence their lives. Partnerships can be especially effective toward community empowerment because the individual partners share the same responsibilities, tasks and resources. In Box 2, I provide an example of community empowerment through partnerships in Brazil.

The role of the outside agents. In a programme context outside agents have

Box 2: *Community empowerment and partnerships in Brazil*

O’Gorman (1995) provides a case study of community empowerment through partnerships and social movements in Brazil. Self-help groups addressing issues such as police violence, poverty and political corruption recognized that their strengths lay in unity and used the slogan ‘united, the people will never be overcome’. Isolated projects and groups began to link up and form partnerships which developed into a network of popular movements. Using their collective strength the movements were able to exert greater public pressure on the government to coerce it into addressing the issues of social justice and equity. The movements increased their links with other non-government organizations in neighbouring Latin American countries who had the shared interests of human rights and social justice. Through these links the organizations were able to share resources and strengthen an emancipatory ideology.

been identified as playing an important role in facilitating action through infrastructural support (Constantino-David, 1995), skills development (Minkler and Cox, 1980), raising the level of critical awareness (O’Gorman, 1995), technical expertise (Hildebrandt, 1996), fostering the support of leaders (Vindhya and Kalpana, 1988) and the provision of finances (Wheat, 1997). The role of the agent is essentially to use their control over decisions and resources to allow others to discover their ability and competencies to manage their own lives. In Box 3, I provide an example of the role of the outside agent to initiate empowerment.

Programme management. Rifkin (1990) argues that whilst most agents pay lip service to the ideas of sustainability and the management potential of the community, they find this very difficult to do in practice. Programme management that empowers the community includes the control by the primary stakeholders over decisions on planning, implementation, evaluation, finances, administration, reporting and conflict resolution. The community must have a sense of ownership of the programme which in turn must address their concerns. Rifkin (1990) points out that the first step toward programme management by the community is to have clearly

Box 3: *The empowerment of women in Bangladesh through micro-financing*

Wheat (1997) describes how women in Bangladeshi communities are assisted to become empowered through micro-financing with the help of the Grameen Bank (the outside agent). The success of project outcome and loan repayment is attributed to the solidarity of small community organizations, social support and the financial advantage offered by the loan. Although the loans are small the Grameen Bank covers more than one third of villages in Bangladesh with over 22,000 borrowers amounting to more than \$1,800,000. However, whilst the loans are intended to give women more control over decisions regarding income generation Wheat (1997, p. 19) points out that the issue is more complicated as 63 percent of women claimed to have only ‘... partial, very limited or no control over their loan...’.

defined roles, responsibilities and line management of all the stakeholders. For empowerment to be influenced by programme management the outside agent must increasingly share their control over decisions and the access to resources with the community.

Implications for community development. This paper provides clarity about the influences on the process of community empowerment, specifically the organizational aspects or 'operational domains'. It is these domains that can serve as a means by which the process of community empowerment can be made operational through assessment and planning in community development programmes by:

- presenting a straightforward way to define and measure this construct as a process; and
- acting as a proxy for the often more ambiguous and complex social elements of community empowerment.

The rationale for the design of a methodology to assess community empowerment which incorporates the organizational aspects is the subject of another paper (Laverack and Labonte, 2000).

This paper raises several unanswered questions which must be considered as a part of the broader implications of empowerment research and practice:

- are some domains more important than others for empowerment?;
- is it necessary for all the domains to be strengthened for the empowerment of communities?;
- can all the domains be equally supported by outside agents in a programme context?; and
- how are the operational domains inter-linked?

Each domain is inter-dependent and can individually influence the effectiveness and utilization of the process of community empowerment but it is not known if there is a hierarchy of importance or if a combination has more of an influence. The methodology utilized in the research was able to provide considerable breadth through a review of case study data and was not intended to provide an in-depth analysis of each domain and this would be an area for further research. This data would be specific to the cultural context of the community involved in this study but would provide more detail about the dynamics of the processes and influences involved in community empowerment.

It is hoped that this paper will broaden the understanding of the different influences on the process of community empowerment and in particular the practical accommodation of this concept within community development programmes.

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