

## COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT: THE DILEMMA OF THEORY AND PRACTICE

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**Abstract:** *As scholars and researchers in the field of community development grapple with research dynamics to identify underlying theories that contribute to the identification of characteristics or phenomena that keep emerging, practitioners debate on how conventional approaches that are research outcome driven compromise the delivery of the much needed services. This has elicited continuous debate on what does and does not constitute community development. A key factor that is agreeable between both researchers and practitioners is that all community development endeavors have an element of transformation in them. Ideally the process of “ideal” community transformation has to be people centered, problem solving and action oriented. The challenges that faces both practitioners as well researchers is the role research plays in helping practitioners study and understanding the underlying theories behind certain patterns that emerge and tend to dictate the outcomes of community development endeavors. This papers looks at relevant literature and two case studies to analyze self-help, technical assistance, and conflict approaches to demystify the dilemma of theory and practice in community development.*

**Key Words:** Community development, Self-help, Technical Assistance, Conflict Approach, Transformation.

### Introduction

Community development both as a tool and process that is used to address challenges facing communities has encountered several dilemmas over time. The first dilemma is expressed through the manner at which global and local players think that their interventions can develop other people, they forget that the people they normally refer to as the “target” for development are independent individuals who think and believe that they also have the capacity to help the so called “developer” develop. This is further complicated by jargons like community “basedness” which I refer to as community “living” or “community being” for the benefit of community development experts whom by virtue of setting up projects within communities, and inducing the setting up community development committees to spearhead development projects believe that the interventions are fully owned by the communities.

The current and past development approaches in the community development arena where “developed” world spends time and other resources to help the underdeveloped or developing world is a displaced process where “others” want those that do not prescribe to their way of life are convinced that their way of life is inferior and needs to change. In common practice change is the process of transforming a situation, act, projected behavior, perception and norms. The dilemma then is who drives the change? Change from what to what, why and how? In practice, the question of change does not come from those that are perceived to need the change but from those that “think “that there is need to change.

### Theory and Methodology

Community Development Theory is presented in this paper as a framework capable of bridging the micro-macro divide in community development; the tenets of this theory have implications for the ways theorists, researchers and practitioners view and engage with each other and the communities as well as the ways to achieve desired goals that address and bring desired change within a community (Tan, 2009). The study involved case studies of a Community Based Organization and a National Civil Society organization to analyze self-help, technical

assistance, and conflict approaches to demystify the dilemma of theory and practice in community development. The case studies examine Sekenani Maasai Development Project (SEMADEP) Maasai Mara, and Maa Civil Society Forum (MCSF). A purposeful sub-sample of a population of 30 from both case studies were selected for interviews using the criterion based strategy (Creswell, 2013). Creswell recommended that participants be information rich, that is, they have the information, knowledge, and experience with Maa land acquisition that the researcher requires for the study. The researcher located the participants by using existing social networks which include Facebook, LinkedIn, and the membership of Sekenani Maasai Development Project and Maa Civil Society Forum which brings together several NGOs, FBOs and individuals from Maa speaking communities in Kenya. Data was collected through interviews, document analysis of videos, films and photography. After data collection, the researcher used Hatch’s 8 steps procedure for critical theory analysis. I read the data set to capture the “big picture” wrote a self –reflexive statement to identify my ideological assumptions and those of Tan (Hatch, 2002). Data related to the assumptions coded (deductive) and coded inductively as new themes emerge. There after the researcher wrote analytical memos and notes about possible generalizations (including those to Tan); to verify understanding and interpretation through checking, and writing up an analysis.

### Discussion and Analysis

#### *Self-Help Approach*

The concept of Self-help which is often been referred to as mutual support is a participatory process where communities share common knowledge, experiences, problems and solutions to their problems. It involves reciprocity in giving and receiving help in either services or goods that members of a given community require in meeting their daily needs. Traditionally in the African context, self-help is an in-built process that is embedded in cultural values and in many communities one may not distinguish it from other social activities that each community undertakes; it is as informal as many other social responsibilities of a community. Such activities that are

considered self-help range from building of houses, fetching water, collective child care to merry go rounds to raise funds for needy families or even making hand dug wells for communal use. It is driven by the philosophy of “Ubuntu” “*I am because we are and because we are therefore I am*” where every member of the community is responsible for each other. The primary purpose of self- help is to provide emotional support, practical support and information exchange. This is done through informal groups which are mostly voluntary and their leadership is drawn from within the community and resources which are mostly in-kind are voluntary contributed.

According to Robinson and Green, Self- help approach assumes that communities possess the potential to improve the quality of life in their communities (Robinson & Green 2011). This potential or capacity to analyze their situation and coming up with solutions to the challenges facing them increases opportunities for community capacity building. Chaskin (2001) defines community capacity building as the interaction of human capital, organizational resources, and social capital existing within a given community that can be leveraged to solve collective problems, and improve or maintain the well- being of that community. According to Chappell and Funk (2010), social capital is generated through positive relationships and connections within a community. This is an empowering approach where people individually and collectively use their collective numbers to respond to needs through devising local mechanisms.

According to Alsop (2004), empowerment approach has direct relevance to rights-based approaches to development, which are based on a sense of justice and equity in relations between people, as well as the idea that individuals have a set of entitlements for which the state is responsible to advance, promote, and protect. The empowerment is derived from the safe and non-judgmental group atmosphere which helps group members to arrive at new insights into themselves and the problem. According to Bourdieu (1986), groups invest in networks of relationships (for example, through gifting and dialogue) producing mutual knowledge and recognition, and in the process create durable obligations that are usable by the group in the short or long term (Bourdieu, 1986).

Sekenani Maasai Development Project (SEMADEP) which is an initiative started by a rural Maasai community in Kenya. Located on the periphery of the world’s famous Maasai Mara Game Reserve, the Siana group ranch members have endured a life without the basic requirements to address lack of education facilities, lack of medical care, poverty and high incidences of livestock diseases as a result of heavy presence of wildlife. With no one to turn to, a group of men and women come together to discuss how best they can access quality education for their children, bring health care closer to the community, reduce incidences of waterborne diseases, and increase household incomes by exploiting the tourism industry. This gave rise to an informal group which over time has transformed the lives of not only the Maasai living in Sekenani but the whole communities of Siana group ranch through self-help efforts.

## Technical Assistance

Technical assistance is dynamic process aimed at improving the quality, effectiveness, and efficiency of specific programs. It is intended to facilitate the building of sustainable capacities, strengthen, systems, and support community ownership. Technical assistance is appreciated as supporting and developing local capacity as well the provision of expert knowledge that is often lacking in many communities (Frucher et.al. 1998).

In its simplest terms, technical assistance is the transfer of new knowledge along with new technology to others who do not know about it so that they are able to not only own the process of community development, but are able to make decisions that make their lives new better and more within their context.

According to Robinson and Green (2011), technical assistance finds its way into the recipient community either as a negotiated or imposed process depending on the nature of relationship that exists between the community and the supporting agency. Technical assistance comes in a package that includes direct project cost as well supporting funds for the “experts” in the field of concern<sup>1</sup>. According to Mitchell et al. (2002) technical assistance is provided through a broad range of systems, using a variety of methods.

The realization by the community of Sekenani that by coming together, they can collectively find solutions to their pressing needs necessitated the formation of the community group. They realized that they needed training in management skills, planning, and designing of the infrastructure that was needed to address their needs and challenges. It also became apparent that for their projects to succeed and meet the community aspirations, they needed partnerships that identified with their dreams and have the resources that are lacking in the community.

In the education initiative, SEMADEP sought the assistance from the Ministry of Education, World Vision provided leadership and resource mobilization skills, the Ministry of Health designed the health center and while the Department of Social Services provided the legal framework required to run Community Based Organizations (CBOs).

Several community development opportunities emerged within the Maasai Mara region arising from the outreach and community development activities undertaken by SEMADEP. The health facility provides medical services to all community members at a subsidized cost while the school boarding facility and school kitchen are helping keep children in school. The SEMADEP project has come to be a best practice for both local community development initiatives as well as a learning center for other community development projects in Kenya.

Inappropriate approaches to technical assistance in community development projects are many but the most danger is the inability of the local communities to sustain the projects once the experts leave. While acknowledging that community needs are as diverse as the communities are, community development

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<sup>1</sup> The term expert from the practitioner’s perspective is any individual who has a skill or knowledge that will enhance the accomplishment of the community development initiative contrary to common practice by theorists who believe that experts must be well schooled in the required field.

practitioners should work hand in hand with researchers to identify the nature and type of intervention needed to address the needs with adequate consultation with the communities.

### **Conflict Approach**

The Maasai people of Kenya have over the last century been subjected to untold dispossession of land and other natural resources. High levels of illiteracy, marginalization and political patronage on the other hand have contributed to the inability for them to articulate their demands and engage the government in seeking redress of the same. Post- colonial land dispossessions through skewed insensitive land legislation have compounded the myriad of challenges facing the Maasai people (Vambe, 1972; Saibull & Carr, 1981, and Okoth-Ogendo, 1991). The situation has created the need by the Maasai speakers to look for an opportunity to seek redress of the perpetual land losses as well as redeem land that they could within their ancestral as well as current habitats.

Maa Civil Society Forum (MCSF)<sup>2</sup> was formed in 2004 to spearhead the cause of the Maasai by mobilizing the Maa speakers in Kenya to speak with one voice regarding land appropriation. What started as an informal coalition of civil society organizations and likeminded individuals not only mobilized the Maasai but ended up being one of the national voices for communities with grievances on land and other natural resources in Kenya. The case study is an example of how a conflict can give rise to community initiatives that will lead to community organizing, mobilization and action meant to address both short and long term community needs.

According to Robinson and Green (2011), community development is a social process that involves people with different interests, values and communication styles working to effect social change in a place. Coming together under Maa Civil Society Forum brought the community together because of one common goal, addressing historical injustices on land and natural resources but there were other underlying area specific issues that brought in conflict within the movement. Arising from antagonism and opposition between the clan leaders, conflict of opinion, discord of action and outright ethical and operational differences between key people in the organizations resulted in conflicts within the sub-clans and the Maa people in general.

The external conflict motivated the Maasai to come together to defend, repose and reclaim what they collectively owned. The first scenario led to the emergence of a vibrant civil society movement among the Maasai community in Kenya which has contributed to the advancement of the Maasai agenda in Kenya policy and political arena and therefore enhancing visibility. The second perspective has contributed to healthy and open discussions of issues affecting the Maasai community from within the community leading to more accountability demands from the community on political leaders as well as the government. The results are visible with the ever increasing online discussion forums as well as the abilities within the youth to mobilize the community when issues of injustice or poor

governance arise in any Maasai County. The social networks have also helped the community in resource mobilization.

### **Conclusion**

In implementing community development, the self-help, technical assistance and conflict approaches come to play and depending on the nature, size, location, complexity and number of stakeholders involved in the project; all approaches are adopted albeit the dilemma of which approach should supersede the other two or whether all the three approaches can be applied simultaneously. Community development is both a method and a process where individuals collectively identify generative themes within their geographical, social, cultural, political and spiritual environments that need to be acted upon to give positive outcomes in the short or long term and within their specific context.

In the process of seeking solutions to problems, the use of self-help, technical assistance and conflict approaches have been applied individually or combined to give the desired results. Where the issue being address is simple and within the community's own resource capability, the self-help approach has worked. Technical assistance usually comes with its own terms and conditions which if not well introduced to the community may lead to conflicts and stalling of projects or end up not addressing the real needs of the community but the perceived needs of the source of external assistance.

The concept of self-help is not a new phenomenon. Every community has had their way of addressing their challenges and coping with emerging demands of their daily lives through informal systems that are intertwined within cultural values. While most the studies have focused on self -help approaches from a western perspective (Branden, 1985; 1986; 1990; 1993a & 1993b), thousands of other communities across the globe have undocumented self- help initiatives over history. Experienced group members, skilled in coping with or resolving the problem, become role models and a source of hope to other community members because they have something to show and share about their success with others. Giving and receiving support is generally regarded as the most important function of self-help groups and has been described as caring and helpful relationships, mutual self-disclosure and empathic understanding. It is important to note that as community development practitioners continue to grapple to find space in the world of researchers, researchers too have to come to the reality that there is no one size or type fits all in the self-help approaches to community development.

Each community has its unique approach which works within the people's cultural context, and this should be used as an anchor to approaching community development. This approach has been used by groups to start community based savings and credit, housing improvement groups, community food production and processing groups. It is therefore recommended that community development theorists and researchers develop strategies that will enable the immersion into the people daily lives in order to understand the intricate web of relationships that exists within each community of interest

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<sup>2</sup> MCSF is a conglomeration of NGOs, Faith Based Organizations and individuals from six Counties in Kenya which the Maa speakers live in Kenya.

Technical assistance approach to community development provides more than a set of skills. It helps the community develop a framework upon which the community can analyze their needs, assess their strengths and weaknesses, plan, grow and help their communities to prosper and it should always be shaped by the community's own development agenda. Effective technical assistance requires that all parties involved share the responsibility to assess their own as well as the other partners' performance, and a commitment to follow through on assigned responsibilities with open lines of communication ( in simple language that the local community understand and comprehend), and respect to boundaries.

Conflict as a concept and factor in community development is inevitable. Whereas conflict is more viewed in a negative perspective; conflict brings about opportunities for problem solving and alternatives for attaining the desired development goals. Opposing views, conflicting cultures, aspirations, desires and people's hopes can be positively harnessed to develop alternative solutions and to further discover intricacies that make up a community. Conflict Theory is essentially the basis or

foundation for the social work practice, particularly for macro work with communities. Leaders, organizers, and planners recognize that there is a need to organize because their interests may be overlooked because they do not align with dominant thinking. Moreover, communities may also organize to protect their interest, even if they do represent a dominant portion of society. This can be attributed to the fact that conflict is prevalent in our society and community, and conflict will occur because people are seeking to protect their varying interests that may place another social group at a disadvantage.

In the case of the Maa Civil Society Forum, the conflict between the general Maasai community over dispossession of land and political domination by migrant communities necessitated the Maa speakers in Kenya to organize in order to address the issue. Thus, the Forum become the center of community organizing. It became apparent that there existed a need for fundamental bridging of the divisions found within the Maasai communities due to the occurrence of conflict among the various sections of the Maasai community.

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