

Decolonizing Development

May 22: Power, Voice and Inclusion (afternoon)

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For Day one afternoon

Nearly all the projects I've consulted on have been with organizations that have approached their work through a rights-based, social justice or at least a community-driven or collective impact lens. Inclusion, voice and consideration of power have consistently been priorities, at least on paper.

While I have definitely seen some promising approaches and practices (mentioned below), these are some of the challenges I've observed trying to support development/social change work which authentically embraces the values of inclusion, engagement with power dynamics, and prioritizing people's own voices.

Often we have found that the challenges are not just around donors and funders' timelines, priorities, and bureaucratic constraints, but also are related to the education, orientation and priorities of the NGO partner organizations representing the marginalized/target communities being served. While working on a women's empowerment/women's rights project in South India, we facilitated a number of situational analysis and visioning workshops with a large partner NGO that works throughout country. Workshop participants consisted of staff, many of which came directly from the communities being served. One of the exercises involved a dynamic where staff were asked to establish the big issues for women in their communities, and the communities where they were working. The previous week we had spent a lot of time sitting down with women and discussing what made them sad, scared, worried, hopeful, joyful, etc. One of the themes that came out strongly during the week was women's lack of decision-making power, and domestic violence. However, during our first day of the staff workshop the issue was never raised. Instead, staff continued discussing the NGOs "party line" with economic empowerment achieved through education and access to capital the keys. This was the strategy that the NGO was replicating throughout the country, and there was limited discussion and reflection by staff about its effectiveness and what people were observing in the field. It took much work, of our trying to impress upon staff that we wanted their OWN observations and perceptions, and not those of the NGO.

IN SUM, SOME OF THE MAIN ISSUES I'VE FOUND WE NEED TO CONTEND WITH ARE:

- **External establishment of needs, program goals, strategies.** While there may be consultation with "target communities" programs generally draw from neoliberal models that determine priorities and ultimate visions for change. Thus, the role of the development practitioner has traditionally been one of supporting people to reach goals which have been largely imposed

from the outside driven by a deficit rather than asset-based lens, and which don't necessarily reflect a community's value system. In short, the knowledge/expertise/priorities in the community are often considered less legitimate than external technical knowledge and values. (*Just consider the paternalistic terms "development" which implies that there are people/places that have yet to be developed, and can benefit from those that are and the word "beneficiary" immediately communicates a hierarchy, with one side having the knowledge and resources, and the other being the recipient.*)

An example -

- **Decision-maker profiles don't necessarily reflect the values, culture, and experience of population being served.** It is the exception rather than the rule when leadership roles in development programs are held by those the program is aiming to serve. And, while representation is a step forward, it isn't enough. People working in development organizations and NGOs have largely been educated in, and work for institutions which perpetuate a neoliberal/traditional model of development, and have limited exposure to critiques and alternatives. A reality as well is that local development agency and NGO leadership and staff are often working in a context where jobs and funding are hard to come by, thus it's not surprising that they are unwilling to push back, and risk rocking the boat.
- **Lack of understanding and capacity about how to accompany rather than serve or save.** Even in programs that are committed to being inclusive, "community-driven" and "people-led" there is quite a bit of technical expertise, but less capacity in how to engage people in creatively shaping their own future. There seems to be a scarcity of knowledge, skills and know-how, at all levels, around exactly how to execute this partnership and accompaniment role.

SOME KEY QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- As consultants, practitioners, what is our contribution? How do we push back? Are there times when we can subvert the agenda? How do we determine where there might be fertile ground? How do we decide when we are contributing to the status quo?
- What knowledge/skill sets do development practitioners need to strengthen in order to contribute to an agenda of decolonizing development?
- What knowledge/skills to communities/aid recipients need in order to push back?
- What knowledge/skills due communities need to increase their power/leverage and voice in development/aid projects?

For Day Two (or as part of discussion)

The addressing of most issues (from lack of proper housing and infrastructure, to Gender Based Violence, corruption, deforestation, contamination, etc.) at any scale requires shifts in power and participation, cultural norms, relationships, alliances, paradigms, law, policies and practices. This requires inclusion from many different actors and sectors, and clarity on the root causes and change strategies. Yet development models rarely take this into consideration. The planning and assessing of most programs are still based on linear log frames that are overall insufficient for complex change processes that will need to ultimately contribute to shifting power and addressing injustice.

Many of our engagements take the shape of “developmental evaluation” where we are hired to provide a learning framework and strategy from the beginning of an initiative. People have increasingly see “Theory of Change” as the next big thing, which they feel is participatory without losing its rigor. However, in practice it is always a huge challenge to bring more actors to the conversation, particularly from the communities being served. “There is no time/money to bring in community representatives”, is a common response, along with, “Well, they won’t really be able to engage with the discussion, they will be uncomfortable, or at least bored”. And my favorite, “We already know what they want, look at all the research out there!”

This same resistance to creating collective spaces for analysis and learning generally continues throughout the program, where opportunities for real critical reflection are pushed aside by the sense of urgency, and need to get through the to-do list. While individual people are often quite enthusiastic about creating an inclusive process, the shifts this would require in terms of timelines, organizational processes, work flows, and resources are often seen as obstacles.

There were two very distinct programs, one on Child Marriage in South Asia and a Collective Impact program in Southern Florida where the evaluation process was highly participatory and learning focused. Consultants, staff and participants alike were enthusiastic both about how local field staff and mobilizers were learning to value, facilitate and lead the critical reflection process, and how connections were being formed and strengthened amongst participants. It was clear that the conclusions, questions and ideas emerging from the processes were highly insightful, emerging from a process where people’s voices, particularly the most marginalized were given space and weight. Interestingly, in both of these cases the process was hijacked, or at the least knocked off track by the calls for “evidence” and “rigor”. In the case of the Child Marriage work, I recall a conference call I participated in from Dhaka, where we were enthusiastically explaining the outcomes of two weeks of training, piloting and experimenting in the field with creative approaches and techniques, when a staff person from the global office said, “but where is the data?” Apparently a paper to contribute to research for an advocacy

coalition had moved forward in the queue, and along with that another set of expectations. Similarly, in Southern Florida a subset of trustees began calling for “hard numbers” and health incidence data after less than two years of a program which in the first years was aiming to strengthen the ability of community members and groups to act together on their own behalf, in a context of significant resource inequality and racial tension.

Points for you to add into the discussions on days one and two

SO HOW DO WE ADDRESS ISSUES OF POWER, VOICE AND INCLUSION AS PART OF DECOLONIZING DEVELOPMENT PROCESSES? SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT WHAT I’VE SEEN TO BE EFFECTIVE.

- **Donor and partner education:** Encourage discussions with development agencies/donors, NGO partner organizations about how change does or does not happen. Perhaps it is easier to be clear about what we know doesn’t work! Donor and partner education can be effective through:
 - Promoting learning opportunities where donors can be exposed to other donors, decision-makers effectively experimenting with more community-driven funding models, raise questions, hear other experiences.
 - Support opportunities for connection with groups that are effectively implementing more bottom-up change models (such as social movement building approaches) to speak to donors and share what they’ve accomplished and learned (This can be a Skype conference, etc.)
 - Position yourself as a resource and “thought partner”. Create a learning loop with donors, decision-makers, sharing relevant articles, resources which address their questions, and providing concrete and inspirational alternatives.
- **Create spaces for critical reflection** at and between different levels. For example, communities where program is being implemented, local/field staff, national, global staff. Prioritize and resourcing these spaces.
- **Strengthen skills and capacity of staff in development organizations and NGOs to facilitate collective learning** and support NGO partners in a different way of working.
- Ensure that **organizational learning for grantee partners is prioritized and resourced**, both in terms of process (how can we work differently?) and content (how do we think change happens? What are the concrete examples?) We’ve seen this often happen most effectively through funding peer exchanges and knowledge sharing (particularly in person).

- Move away from rigid logic models, focus on means, not the end. **Plans are structured to allow for flexibility and revision.**
- Work towards **multi-directional accountability**, which requires donor and development staff to turn a mirror on themselves. This is an important aspect of developmental evaluation.
- Inclusion and participation calls for **timelines to be adapted to the pace of work on the ground**, and the rhythms and capacity of a variety of those who need to be included.
- Prioritize grantmaking criteria that **identifies pre-existing resources, capacity, leadership, momentum** that development processes can build on, strengthen and accompany..
- **Establish upfront expectations around evidence.** Push people to really consider what types of evidence they need, and how it will really be used. Consider **fore fronting participatory approaches** which encourage people's own voice and systematizing for accountability and case-making.
- **Build ownership of programs:** Inclusion and voice are difficult to engender if there is not ownership and buy-in to programs. We've seen that building on/supporting work with momentum and legitimacy, and authentic community leadership strengthens buy-in, as well as a carefully constructed process of listening to and hearing what the community has to say.