

Local community capacity building: exploring non-governmental organizations approaches in Tamil Nadu

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Abstract Locally based non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play an important role in community capacity building (CCB). Because these NGOs are generally located close to the affected communities, they have the local knowledge to identify problems and assist the affected communities to address them. However, the methods these local NGOs use to build capacity in the local communities and the reasons they choose certain CCB approaches are not well known. To enhance the knowledge in these areas, this study conducted semistructured interviews with local NGOs and local NGO experts in Tamil Nadu, India. It was found that local NGOs build capacity in communities using emotional empowerment; a process that involves providing communities with (i) a sense of care and hopefulness, (ii) spaces to voice their feelings and challenges, and (iii) support to transform their voices into community action. Local NGOs adopted this approach because they found that long-term disadvantaged communities had high affective barriers, such as discouraging personal outlooks and an acceptance of existing social structures, which prevented them from taking ownership of the situation. Theoretically, these insights contribute to CCB literature by drawing attention to the community's psychological processes and emotional empowerment characteristics. They also add to wider poverty debates by highlighting the affective community barriers that perpetuate existing inequalities.

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Introduction

Local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play a unique and important role in community development and poverty reduction (Banks and Hulme, 2012; Islam, 2017a; Langmann *et al.* 2021) because of their embeddedness within local communities (Gibb and Adhikary, 2000). Their locations ‘close to the problem or issue’ at hand (Cawsey, 2016, p. 1) make them sensitive to the needs, resources, and challenges of disadvantaged communities (Gibb and Adhikary, 2000; Ulleberg, 2009; Aldashev and Navarra, 2018). Local NGOs, therefore, are uniquely placed for community capacity building (CCB; Banks and Hulme, 2012), which involves ‘working with local deprived communities to promote fuller engagement with social, economic, and political life’ (Craig, 2007, p. 10).

Although the importance of local NGO involvement in CCB is well established (e.g. Banks and Hulme, 2012; Langmann *et al.* 2021; Lentfer, 2015), little is known about the CCB methods used by these local NGOs. Understanding local NGO CCB approaches is important for two reasons. *First*, the CCB programmes of larger national and international NGOs have often been criticized by scholars and practitioners as being detached from local conditions, realities, and the real needs of the communities, and, therefore, are seen to have limited abilities to foster community input and participation (Nikkhah and Redzuan, 2010; Parnwell, 2011; Rwebugisa and Usinger, 2021). Continued emphasis on these CCB approaches risks making ‘local and regional actors of secondary importance’ (Rihani, 2005, p. 56) and might push people into further hardship (Carr, 2008). Therefore, a local understanding of CCB could reveal how the different pathways in and out of poverty are construed (Sharma *et al.* 2021). *Second*, local NGOs are often small, informally structured, and focused on specific issues within a relatively small geographical area (Willis, 2011; Cawsey, 2016). Often, they are also resource-constrained (Suharko, 2007), which requires them to partner with local communities and codevelop identities using local resources (Willis, 2011; Banks and Hulme, 2012; Islam, 2017a). A better understanding of how these organizations approach these CCB challenges could assist in making their efforts more viable and scalable.

Based on these considerations, this study explored the following research questions.

RQ1. How do local NGOs build capacity in local communities?

RQ2. Why do local NGOs adopt certain CCB approaches?

To answer these questions, semistructured interviews were conducted with members from 18 local NGOs, three local sustainable development experts, and the Dean of a social work college in Tamil Nadu. The interview data analyses suggested that local NGOs recognized that CCB efforts were

often being hindered by discouraging personal outlooks and an acceptance of existing social community structures, with these affective barriers trapping the community members in poverty. To tackle these barriers, local NGOs often adopted an emotional empowerment approach to instil a sense of care and hope and provide space for the communities to transform their voices and challenges into individual and collective action.

Therefore, this study makes two main contributions. *First*, it adds to CCB literature by expanding knowledge on local NGO conceptualizations of the community challenges. Specifically, this study draws attention to the local affective barriers that are keeping communities trapped in poverty. These findings suggested that there is a need for future research to better understand and more fully incorporate the affective dimension of poverty as this could elucidate a more effective pathway for future CCB efforts in these types of communities. *Second*, this study contributes to the wider NGO literature by providing new insights into the functioning of local NGOs and the methods they use to address these affective community barriers. The study findings indicated that it was important to provide emotional empowerment to local communities. The local NGOs viewed emotional uplift and development as a vital starting point for sustainable CCB. Importantly, this represents a shift away from viewing communities as 'sets of problems' towards approaching them as 'collections of peoples who possess their own problem-solving capabilities,' and could offer an alternative sustainable CCB approach that more effectively addresses the needs of affected communities.

To build the argument, current CCB concepts and the role of local NGOs are first examined, after which the research methodology, data collection method, and analytical approach are outlined. The subsequent section presents the empirical findings, and the final section concludes by discussing the implications of the results, acknowledging the study limitations, and providing suggestions for future local CCB research.

Literature overview

Community capacity building

CCB, which is under the community development umbrella, focuses on the development of collective community activities to solve local problems and improve local lives and well-being (Merino and de los Ríos Carmenado, 2012; Moreno *et al.* 2017). Capacity building includes the development of 'capacity' as the 'power of receiving, containing, experiencing, or producing' and 'building' as 'gradually establishing or constructing by putting all the parts together' (Ahmad and Abu Talib, 2015, p. 643; Craig, 2007). In local community settings, capacity building is the process associated with

developing the community's ability to define, assess, analyse, and act upon the concerns of its members and develop innovative and productive solutions (Ahmad and Abu Talib, 2016).

NGOs have different approaches to CCB efforts, ranging from institutionally driven interventions (top-down) to process-focused change (bottom-up) (Merino and de los Ríos Carmenado, 2012). The CCB top-down approach seeks to improve conditions in the affected communities by offering training and technical support, lobbying, and/or engaging in advocacy activities (Panda, 2007; Franco and Tracey, 2019). However, top-down strategies have been increasingly criticized for (i) being detached from local reality and overlooking context-based solutions, (ii) creating a culture of dependence in local communities and stifling growth in their initiatives, innovations, and self-reliance (e.g. Parnwell, 2011; Wahid *et al.* 2017; Devkar *et al.* 2019), and (iii) contributing to a lack of community trust in the intentions of outsiders (Rwebugisa and Usinger, 2021). Top-down strategies, therefore, risk making communities no more than passive development recipients (Parnwell, 2011).

Because of this criticism, the research focus has shifted to bottom-up CCB approaches (Panda, 2007; Franco and Tracey, 2019), which claim that sustainable development can only have long-lasting impacts when community aspirations, dreams, and values are embraced and marginalized communities are effectively represented and able to defend their interests (Craig, 2007; Eade and Datta, 2007; Franco and Tracey, 2019). Bottom-up CCB, therefore, aims to combine the strengths, commitments, resources, and skills of a community, use these to improve the community's collective quality of life (Spindel, 2021), equip the disadvantaged with the resources to overcome the obstacles that restrict them from making a living, confront and dismantle existing power structures, and challenge inherent injustice (e.g. Simpson *et al.* 2003; Nikkhah and Redzuan, 2010; Spindel, 2021).

Empowerment and bottom-up CCB

A central construct in bottom-up CCB is empowerment (Ulleberg, 2009; Nikkhah and Redzuan, 2010; Willis, 2011; Wahid *et al.* 2017), which in development terms refers to the process that enables the disadvantaged to identify and overcome their life obstacles and increase their agency (Kamruzzaman, 2020). Empowerment gives communities the ability to perceive themselves as being capable of gaining control over their lives (Abbott, 1996; Kam, 2002) and being able to action long-lasting change. Empowerment renews a community's aims and increases community cohesion and cooperation (Wahid *et al.* 2017), which motivates community residents to take ownership of their development (Simpson *et al.* 2003) through community inclusivity (Devkar *et al.*, 2019; Wahid *et al.* 2017).

Local community empowerment requires psychological empowerment (PE) (Christens, 2012), which is defined as the ‘psychological aspects of processes through which people gain greater control over their lives, take a proactive approach in their communities, and develop critical understandings of their sociopolitical environments’ (Christens, 2012, p. 543). Zimmerman’s (1995) seminal work explained that this was a complex process that involved people having (i) a belief that they could influence the desired outcomes and the ability to learn how to accomplish them, (ii) an awareness of the behavioural options and choices to achieve their set goals, and (iii) an ability to self-initiate the actions. Studies have found that emotions also play an important role in this rational process (Peterson *et al.* 2006; Christens *et al.* 2013). Christens *et al.* (2013) defined emotional empowerment as a process that included feelings of hopefulness and resilience, and along with other scholars claimed that empowerment required critical community-level attention (Christens, 2012; Kamruzzaman, 2020) because of the feedback loops between the individual and community levels.

CCB and local NGOs

Local NGOs are in a unique position to empower communities using bottom-up CCB approaches. Because these local NGOs are at the coalface, they can focus on poverty reduction within relatively small geographic areas (*e.g.* Cawsey, 2016; Lentfer, 2015; Willis, 2011) and are not hampered by formal organizational structures (Gibb and Adhikary, 2000; Aldashev and Navarra, 2018), they are generally more sensitive to the particular needs, resources, and challenges of disadvantaged communities and more able to respond to their changing needs and realities (Lentfer, 2015; Parnwell, 2011; Ulleberg, 2009). However, local NGOs do not generally have extensive resources, which means they need to partner with the local communities to codevelop the new realities (Willis, 2011; Banks and Hulme, 2012). Therefore, empowerment and bottom-up CCB are more natural approaches for these relatively small NGOs.

Despite the unique position of local NGOs, little research to date has examined the methods they use to build community capacity (Biermann, 2009). While local NGOs are in key positions to create links between communities and external institutions (Huq and Reid, 2007), their main CCB challenges lie in translating the broad capacity-building concepts into local actions (Merino and de los Ríos Carmenado, 2012) to ensure that (i) the goals they wish to achieve within specific communities can come to fruition, (ii) they have the means to attain these goals, and (iii) they understand the impact of their capacity building on the local community dynamics (Merino and de los Ríos Carmenado, 2012). Maintaining a consistent level of community involvement and community ownership in CCB

(Hailey *et al.* 2005) is challenging (Holcombe *et al.* 2004). Therefore, this study was established to better understand the CCB methods and actions taken by local NGOs to ensure local community engagement.

Methods

Research context and participant interviews

Tamil Nadu in India was selected as this study's research site for several reasons. *First*, India has the highest number of NGOs per capita (Shukla, 2010) at roughly one NGO for every 400 people (Anand, 2015), with many of these being local NGOs, which fitted the research focus. *Second*, Tamil Nadu is one of the most densely populated states in India (Census of India, 2011) and poverty is a significant issue. *Third*, because Tamil Nadu has a higher poverty reduction rate than the Indian average and a strong focus on inclusive development (Menon, 2016; Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, 2020), there has been significant involvement by local NGOs; therefore, understanding their approaches could enlighten and inform best practice.

The study participants were recruited through a combination of personal referrals and snowball sampling. This approach enabled the research team to identify the key actors 'on the ground who are needed to fill in the gaps in our knowledge in a variety of social contexts' (Atkinson and Flint, 2003, p. 278). It was an important research aim to ensure that the participating local NGOs had varied sustainable development foci (e.g. education, health, and housing) so that data could be collected on a range of different approaches to address the local concerns (Gibb and Adhikary, 2000). Before the interviewee selections, the NGOs were screened by conducting checks with third parties to avoid non-genuine NGOs ending up in the sample. A highly useful support tool in the data collection process was the register provided by a local NGO, in which the *bonafide* local NGOs in Tamil Nadu's capital city Chennai were identified, which included state-registered and unregistered NGOs, that is, organizations working on a very informal level, like family NGOs, sole individuals, and student groups.

These data collection procedures meant that meaningful referrals were given. The final participants were eighteen local NGOs, three local NGO experts, and the principal of a social work college in Chennai. The 18 local NGOs varied significantly; 12 were formally registered organizations and 6 were informal. In most cases, the directors or managers provided information (61 percent), and in other cases, staff members and/or volunteers provided the information. Therefore, this research drew upon a diverse group of local NGOs, all of which were operating within the relatively narrow geographical setting of a single city, although with a population of over 11 million and over 496 local NGOs.

Data collection and analysis

Open-ended, face-to-face interviews were conducted with all participants. To avoid leading the participants and compromising the integrity of the data, no participants were asked directly about their CCB approaches (Agee, 2009). Rather, the questioning focused on the functions and operations of the local NGOs, which allowed each participant to give their personal views on their organization's focus, led to more accurate accounts of the local NGOs' work, and allowed for unexpected discoveries, metaphors, and analogies (Swedberg, 2020).

The interview data analysis was conducted using the 'Gioia method' (Gioia *et al.* 2013); a three-stage analytical process that structures and analyses the data to derive meaning from them. In the first stage, a combination of open coding and InVivo coding was used to (i) identify the patterns and variances in the participant narratives (Corbin and Strauss, 1990) and (ii) preserve the strong statements in which human experience was the key driver, which fore fronted the subjectivity (Garcia and Quek, 1997). At this stage, the first-order codes directly relevant to the research questions were developed.

In the second stage, the initial codes were expanded using axial and selective coding procedures (Corbin and Strauss, 1990) to develop the second-order concepts. Many of the patterns that emerged identified the influence that discouraged personal outlooks and an acceptance of existing social community structures had on local NGO activities. Broad patterns started to emerge, which revealed the mechanisms used by the local NGOs to counter the feelings of disempowerment and emotionally empower the communities. The identified themes were repeatedly discussed and the interpretations tested, from which three aggregate themes emerged as shown in the data structure in Figure 1.

The third stage used the aggregate themes to construct a process model that showed the approaches being used by local NGOs to counter the affective community barriers (Figure 2). The subsequent section unpacks this process model and outlines its major components and relationships.

Empirical results

Finding 1: local NGOs conceptualize poverty in their own way

A broad insight emerging from the analysis confirmed the marked differences between the ways that local NGOs and larger national and international NGOs viewed and approached CCB. As previously observed (Craig, 2007; Nikkiah and Redzuan, 2010; Rwebugisa and Usinger, 2021), the participants acknowledged the top-down-driven development efforts of the larger NGOs but were also critical of the effectiveness on local beneficiaries.

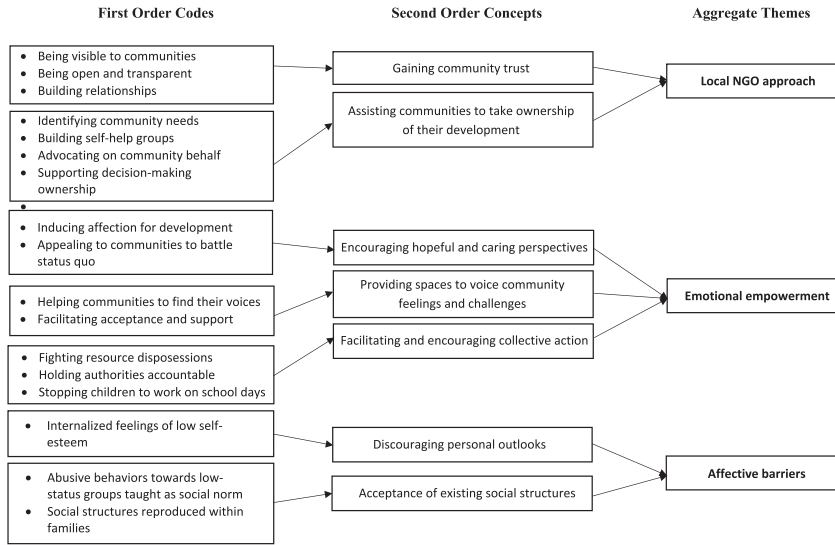


Figure 1 Data structure and aggregate dimensions.

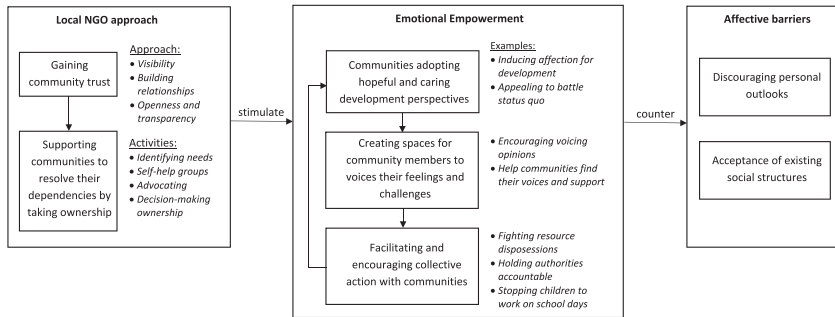


Figure 2 Local NGO approach to counter affective community barriers.

One participant stated that ‘this kind of development is there, but it does not advantage everybody. The trickle-down never happens’ (PM1).

However, the local participants emphasized that the starting point for their efforts was to identify what was important to the communities, advocate for the identified community needs, and support the communities to resolve their dependencies, as exemplified by two participants who said: ‘you have to help people according to their needs, not yours’ (PP3) and ‘the protests should come from the bottom’ (PP1). The participants stated that their efforts were less focused on providing material support and more focused on creating relationships with community members, listening to their voices on the ground, and assisting the communities to take ownership of their own

development to initiate positive change. Building, and sometimes regaining, trust through transparency was considered critical to the success of these CCB efforts: *'Your entire relationship [with the community] is based on trust. Be very transparent with people. It's the best way to win over their confidence. That is something very important to them . . .'* (PM1).

An unexpected insight was that local NGOs adopted these different approaches because of their small-scale and limited resources (e.g. [Cawsey, 2016](#); [Suharko, 2007](#)) and because they had varied conceptualizations regarding poverty and its potential solutions. The narratives pointed strongly to the affective barriers that were preventing the communities to advance out of poverty. The local NGO participants saw these affective barriers as being an emotional feeling in the communities of being trapped in their circumstances with little or no alternatives to rise out of poverty: *[community members] just don't feel like they can break out of the whole thing. They assume this is the only choice they have'* (PP11). This discouraged emotional state was found both at the individual level and in the broader community social acceptance of existing social structures.

Discouraging personal outlooks The local NGOs recognized that individuals in the affected communities often had discouraged personal outlooks that could stifle their CCB, which generally stemmed from low self-esteem and previous humiliations. *First*, these internalized feelings of low self-esteem made the affected people feel powerless and unimportant, which, in turn, made them unable to overcome their disadvantages and better their situation: *'empowerment [is] stifled by the people's low self-esteem. People think they are too small to make a difference. [. . .] It is much harder to convince people . . . once [they] feel they are not the social authority to pressure [changes] . . . two is that they do not want to take the trouble either'* (PP3). Another participant explained that these discouraging personal outlooks and the related inactions highlighted the lack of knowledge on how to help themselves and the uncertainty they felt about the effects of their efforts: *'there is no chance that [disadvantaged people] want to help themselves, [if] a) they don't know how, and b) they are not sure if it is going to help them'* (PP6).

Second, the feelings of low self-esteem were often related to previous humiliations by community members, which discouraged them from accessing the services or resources needed to improve their situations. These humiliations were often related to bureaucracy: *'[people] cannot get a certificate, cannot get a job, cannot get anything, cannot get the job done in a timely manner, let alone the frustration and humiliation and the money involved in it'* (PM11). The same participant pointed out that humiliation was felt by the people in their *'struggle to follow regulations and procedures'* to obtain goods and services they may often be entitled to in the *'invisible layers'* that deny

critical access, and that perpetrators (often public servants) are *'getting away scot-free'* (PM11).

Acceptance of existing social structures The acceptance of existing societal structures by community members was also an important factor perpetuating the community vulnerabilities. This acceptance resulted from a combination of externally reinforced social norms and family expectations. *First*, abusive behaviours towards low-status groups are often accepted social norms in the wider society. One participant gave an educational example of the higher caste students' abuse of lower caste students: *'Since he is a boy from an underprivileged caste, they [other pupils] most likely are going to treat him really badly, because they think that's the way it should be done'* (PP3). Because of the repetition and lack of consequences for these types of abusers, vulnerable communities develop a mindset that these 'social norms' are 'normal': *[the] 'problem again is when you are physically abused and going through something that would be very common, you sort of succumb to it'* (PP11).

Second, it was also highlighted that the larger social structures in which the poorer communities find themselves could contribute to the emergence of the same problems within families, especially concerning education; for example, many girls from poorer communities often leave school early: *'they all enroll female students, but by primary school completion, they will have dropped out for many different reasons, including family'* (PD1). Another interviewee added that girls from poorer communities shy away from attaining education as they may think that: *'my mother was not educated, my grandmother was not educated, my father, why do I need to study?'* (PP6). The parents also often discourage their daughters from education: *'It is ok if I educate my son. There is no need to educate my daughter. Why do I have to spend time educating her? Let her become a maid somewhere else'* (PP6).

Finding 2: Emotional empowerment to address affective barriers

The analysis indicated that local NGOs see empowerment as a critical mechanism in tackling CCB challenges: *'empowerment, [...] is the ultimate'* (PM3): particularly as it provides a more future-looking perspective in that: *'we don't want to make [the community] dependent on us'* (PM2). The participant narratives revealed that these empowerment efforts happened at an emotional level and that it was through (i) appealing to community members at an emotional level, (ii) giving the people the space to voice their feelings and challenges, and (iii) igniting feelings that collective action could make a difference that local NGOs sought to initiate community-led CCB. **Figure 2** summarizes the three-step emotional empowerment process that emerged from the data and the activities that local NGOs deployed.

The first important emotional empowerment step was to encourage the community members to adopt hopeful and caring perspectives about their current situation because if the community did not develop a new sense of care toward its own situation and did not reverse their affective feelings of helplessness, any local efforts would be ineffective: *'[development] is all about affection. How you react to the community and how you build the affection for [development] . . . If you care enough [about your development] then you will do it yourself' (PP3)*. This step was also important in helping the communities understand that they were not alone in their struggles and to motivate feelings of collective resistance to change the current situation. One NGO participant said: *'we literally make [the community] feel why they are resisting. That's the kind of speeches sometimes you have to give to the community . . . we also draw parallels to other social movements . . . to educate the communities to assert their rights' (PM1)*. The study participants felt that appealing to the communities to battle their acceptance of the status quo at an emotional level was more effective than traditional legal approaches because it encouraged them to reject any further humiliations that could add to their low self-esteem: *'we touch on an emotional base [with the parents] . . . if you work on a legal parameter, you are putting the family into shame, and it is not going to change and sometimes it backfires' (PM8)*. Therefore, the local NGOs mainly focused on being visible within the local communities, building relationships with community members, and initiating conversations to change the prevailing poverty narrative.

Second, when the relationships were established and the communities were starting to challenge the status quo, the next emotional empowerment step was to create spaces for the community members to voice their feelings and challenge each other and the external authorities: *'A lot of the work we do is about increasing community responsibility . . . to give them the courage to state their opinions. To give them the courage to state their opinions irrespective of whether it coincides with mine or not is the biggest step of all' (PP3)*. An important way to create the space for community members to find their voices, gain acceptance, and provide support was by establishing self-help groups. One participant exemplified a self-help group for mentally ill women that had had positive results: *'We have formed self-help groups and they are all mentally ill women. The self-help groups are not only high caste or low caste women. It is a nice mix, and we find that they really help each other. Even if it is just to get out of bed, they help each other. We do promote that' (PM10)*. Another participant explained how the voices and self-help group choices in the communities generated positive emotional ripple effects and gave an example of parents sending children to school: *'We have a self-help group saying that all children should be in school, so [the community] sends all their children to school. In the next community also, so it has that ripple effect' (PM2)*.

Third, the analysis indicated that the last step in emotional empowerment was the translation of these voices into behaviours by motivating the communities to take collective action to improve their lives and the lives of future generations. This was done by encouraging the community to take ownership of the situation and make decisions based on their own needs. For example, a study participant highlighted the importance of communities taking ownership when it concerns resource dispossession: *'We challenge or combat dispossession . . . indigenous communities are being dispossessed of their resources . . . we show the means or ways how to do it. We enhance their capacity . . . we make communities understand what their right is, and we make them monitor it . . . if you want to fight, we tell you how to fight . . . sometimes, [initiatives] backfire. Sometimes, somewhere, we save people from eviction, sometimes we have let go of evictions. But the matter of fact is we have empowered communities to stand up and decide what they want'* (PM1). The same interviewee added that this was the key because community action makes it harder for the responsible authorities to ignore issues: *'If tomorrow I go and negotiate with [the authorities] of Chennai, saying "homeless people are so marginalized," the [authorities] will say "what is your problem?" But when homeless communities themselves go and negotiate, [they] can't say "what is your problem." It's their problem. We only show them the means or ways how to do it'* (PM1).

Visible throughout these three community empowerment stages was the local NGOs' focus on the emotional level and the effectiveness of these approaches. For example, one participant explained how parents were emotionally approached by questioning them: *'how was your development during that time, what were the opportunities, and facilities you had? What opportunities and facilities do you have now to support your child? Do you want your child to be like you? What is stopping you from sending your child to school?'* (PM8). Positive results were observed from these emotional approaches: *'we roughly identified 389 children, child laborers in the target area. Out of the 389, we have about 172 children that have been stopped from going to work by their parents. The other half, the children stopped going to work on school days . . . only on Saturdays and Sundays along with the mother, to help the mother. Within three years we were able to reach this point that is the reason, as you said, to beat poverty at the ground level'* (PM8). Another NGO also noted how changes within communities fostered even more change: *'We were able to bring out some children because rather than us going and telling the parents to not send their child to work, when a child from the same situation shares his or her experience, that had a very good effect. So, through the children, some [other] children were really interested. [. . .] So, through this, we just took about 20 students altogether and these children we found escaped the cycle, and then they went and shared, which had a really good impact'* (PM2).

Discussion of key findings

This paper explored the CCB approaches being used by local NGOs in Tamil Nadu, India, to build capacity in local communities and their reasons for adopting these approaches. It was found that local NGOs mainly focused on empowering local communities at an emotional level by offering them a more hopeful perspective on overcoming their challenges, which, combined with providing spaces to voice their challenges and feelings, allowed the communities to initiate individual and collective development action (Figure 2). Local NGOs used these emotional approaches to overcome the individual and community-wide affective barriers that not only discouraged positive change but also perpetuated existing inequalities.

These findings offer two main contributions. *First*, this research expanded the current understanding of the perceptions local NGOs have of community struggles and the effects that affective barriers have on keeping communities trapped in poverty. Therefore, this inherent affective dimension of indentured poverty in disadvantaged communities needs further discussion in CCB research and practice because this community dissatisfaction about being disadvantaged, and the feelings of emotional barrenness and helplessness (also see Marques, 2008) directly contribute to community poverty. This insight was consistent with prior research that the setbacks experienced by people struggling to improve their circumstances can result in general feelings of discouragement (Shah *et al.* 2012; Christens *et al.* 2013; Haushofer, 2019). As two of the key affective mechanisms promoting negative community attitudes and behaviours and affecting well-being, this study specifically examined the feelings of low self-esteem and the acceptance of the existing social structures. However, as alleviating this inherent emotional poverty dimension could be significantly more challenging than addressing material poverty (Marques, 2008), broader CCB research needs to pay greater attention to these psychological processes and outcomes when assessing the effectiveness of CCB development efforts (Goldsworthy, 2002; Christens, 2012), that is, a stronger research and practice focus is needed on the affective dimension of poverty to ensure current CCB approaches are more sustainable.

Second, this study provides new insights into the functioning of local NGOs and the approaches they use to address these affective barriers. It was found that the local NGOs tended to engage the communities on an emotional level and that the 'realities on the ground' (Langmann *et al.* 2021) guided the local NGOs to build community capacity first by instilling the people with the confidence to adapt in the face of setbacks (also see Cavaye and Ross, 2019; Nelson *et al.* 2007). The specific process employed by the local NGOs expands current PE at the local level and shows *how* people can become aware of their behavioural choices and

can develop a belief in their abilities to initiate action (Zimmerman, 1995). These emotional empowerment approaches differed significantly from the empowerment approaches suggested in CCB literature and general empowerment theory, which predominantly focus on economic outcomes, material well-being, and people's ability to make choices (Alvarez *et al.*, 2018).

Importantly, the local NGOs' emotional empowerment process does not view the disadvantaged communities as just a set of problems; rather, it sees the community as comprising people that can solve their own problems. These 'human' capacity-building insights about who needed to be empowered revealed a promising avenue through which community outlooks could be changed (Islam, 2014b). The inclusion of these considerations in CCB programmes could yield better results than initiatives such as aid, education, media, and information campaigns, which have been found to be ineffective in changing behaviours, addressing local needs (Islam, 2014a; Franco and Tracey, 2019), or overcoming the patron-client operating modes most often adopted by larger NGOs (Holcombe *et al.* 2004). This study indicates that the key foundation to building these relationships is emotional connection, without which 'proper trust does not occur' (Möllering, 2001, p. 410).

Limitations, future research, and conclusion

This study was conducted within a set of boundaries and in acknowledging these limitations, the following directions and avenues are suggested for further research.

First, this study's emphasis on local voices needs to be included in development practice (Carr, 2008) as the local voices in Tamil Nadu may not be representative of local CCB efforts in other contexts. Therefore, replicating this study in other local contexts could examine the scalability of the local NGO operations in vulnerable communities that could use support.

Second, while this research highlighted that local NGOs sought to realize positive change through emotional empowerment, the effectiveness of this process was not fully investigated. Although some anecdotal evidence of the local NGOs' success was found, as this was not the focus of the study, the long-term community CCB outcomes were unclear. Studies by Islam (2017b) suggested that the local NGO impact was less than claimed, with many NGOs merely being providers of goods to 'consumers' rather than 'facilitators' of empowerment (Islam and Morgan, 2012). Future research, therefore, could benefit from examining the outcomes of these types of CCB local approaches.

Third, this study was directed at participants within the local NGOs who were knowledgeable of the community hardships. Future studies could,

therefore, focus more explicitly on these underlying emotional approaches and the influence of the local NGO's activities, which could reveal additional mechanisms, relationships, and insights beyond those discovered in this study. This study also did not consult community members on their experiences with poverty. Future studies could include these voices to better understand the community's feelings of lived poverty. Utilizing broader data ranges could also uncover hidden complexities and emotions that cannot be put into words.

In conclusion, this research started to answer some of the questions related to local NGO CCB approaches to assist the disadvantaged and contribute to their continuing struggles with poverty and deprivation in many places around the world. Future research is needed to further unpack the role local NGOs play in CCB and the impact they have on the affected communities.

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Declarations of interest

None.

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Data availability

Research data are not shared, as our ethics application of Curtin University does not allow that.

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