

Exploring the concept of community: implications for NGO management

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Summary

The concept of 'community-based action' is ubiquitous in the current development policy discourse amongst NGOs. This paper presents a critical look at the management issues involved in implementing community-based action. It is shown that community-based action can be implemented by NGOs in two ways; NGOs can either link with pre-existing community-based organisations (CBOs) or can create new community-based organisations. Each involves distinct management challenges. A consideration of these challenges with use of examples, mainly from Uganda, suggests that the way that the concept of community is used in development discourse often ignores the realities of community dynamics. The paper suggests ways in which NGOs can begin to develop a more relevant concept of community with which to work.

Introduction

Much of the literature which focuses on the role of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in development has been characterised by interest in policy issues for NGO relations with states, donors and communities (Lewis 1998: 3).² In comparison literature that takes as its theme NGO management is small, if growing. The tendency to privilege issues of policy over issues of management in the NGO development discourse is striking in the light of the practical and organisational nature of the work of NGOs.

There are two reasons why there should be greater attention given to issues of NGO management. First, NGOs concerned with development face the management of a complex and diverse range of issues. NGOs face internal management issues, for example questions of strategic planning, budgeting, staffing, the governing structure of the organisation, growth and change within the organisation. NGOs also face the management of external relationships; relations with government, the private sector, other NGOs and with their target communities. All of these come to bear on the possibility of NGOs managing development. The effectiveness of NGOs as actors in development and change depends on successful engagement with both internal and external management questions and also on the successful articulation between issues of internal and external management (De Graaf 1987: 297).

Second, the consideration of NGO management issues is important because turning policy into effective action requires effective management. A critical realisation that the implementation of policy directives is a practical rather than ideological process is often missing in NGO literature. The underlying theme of this paper is that NGOs who work in development can reap benefits by considering the practical and managerial implications for the implementation of policy ideas.

'Community-based action' is a policy idea that pervades the contemporary NGO development discourse. It is part of a strategic shift that NGOs have made in their relationship with the people that they work with and for, their beneficiaries. Fowler (1997: 221) has described this strategic shift as one in which NGOs move from roles of welfare and delivery to roles of strengthening people's organisations and movements.³ The shift has occurred in tandem with an overall recognition of the

importance of alternative, grassroots approaches to development processes (Craig & Mayo 1995: 1).

A whole set of now commonly used ideas and terms have accompanied this strategic shift. One of the most ubiquitous concepts advocated in the NGO development discourse is for the 'participation' of beneficiaries in development processes. Buijs (quoted in Carroll 1992: 78) defines people's participation as

... a process of change in which members of the project group by common effort gain an increasing influence in the decision making of their organisation

The reasoning is that participation encourages the formulation of development strategies that are increasingly sustainable, people centered and just. Hand in hand with the concept of participation has been the idea of 'empowerment'. Empowerment of beneficiaries has become a standard cited aim of NGOs involved in development work. The idea here is that the relationship between NGOs and their beneficiaries acts as a catalyst to a process in which target communities develop greater awareness and control over the power structures that determine their lives. Likewise the strategic shift made by NGOs in the relationship with their beneficiaries has entailed promotion of the concept of 'social capital' for NGOs to foster and use in development and change amongst the people with whom they work. Social capital has been defined as:

... features of social organisation, such as trust, norms and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinating actions. (Putnam 1993: 167)

Recognition of the importance of social capital is thus recognition of indigenous resources that might be consolidated for development.

Like the concepts of participation and empowerment, the notion of social capital has gained ground in the climate of decentralisation in development thinking and for NGOs involved in development (Harriss 1997: 928). There are both practical and ideological incentives for such decentralisation. On a practical level development action driven by concepts such as participation, empowerment and the consolidating

of social capital promises to reach the poorest in efficient and cost effective ways (Mayo & Craig 1995: 2). On an ideological level it promises a change in the balance of power within development processes, one in which beneficiaries move from receivers to contributors. However, despite the advantages cited and the prevalence of ideas that stress the importance of grassroots development in all range of NGOs and development agencies, there is much rhetoric and little exactitude about the concepts involved.

The bundle of ideas about the 'right' relationship between NGOs and their beneficiaries comes to bear on the advocacy of community-based action. Here community is taken as the proper and most effective site in which NGOs can work as an agent of change whilst incorporating ideals of participation, social capital and empowerment. This paper will consider the translation of 'community-based action' from a concept implied in NGO rhetoric to its practical manifestation in NGO development work. It will be shown that whilst the translation of community-based action into practice has many advantages in the creation of participatory, empowering development, it is not as smooth and unproblematic as might be suggested by the prevalence of the use of the concept in the NGO development discourse. There will be consideration of the strengths and weaknesses of community-based action drawn from case studies and suggestions as to how these might have implications for NGO management.

Community-based action

The 'community-based action' approach can be found in NGO policy in multiple and diverse areas of development. Thus a manual on NGO intervention in the area of psychological trauma amongst children after war experiences stresses:

There is an absolute necessity of turning to communities, families and children themselves as proactive participants in the analysis of their own situation and opportunities, in assessing their needs and resources and designing and carrying out solutions, trusting local and traditional methods. (Reichenberg & Friedman 1995: 321 for UNICEF)

Such sentiments credit people with the ability, even in the most extreme circumstances, to engage with the issues that face them. It is an important corrective to seeing people as passive victims of circumstances, an image which is in danger of being promoted through popular images of NGOs working with the poor, disenfranchised and needy especially in the light of the high profile of the aid industry (de Waal 1997: 82). Such sentiments also express an increasingly common realisation that the most important resource which NGOs can use to tackle issues of development are the initiatives, ideas and solutions proffered by people themselves. It is these that have the potential to inform relevant and applicable solutions.

As an anthropologist working in a post conflict area in east Uganda, I have been privy to the ability of people to respond to turbulent events in active and indigenously relevant ways. I conducted fieldwork in the Teso region of Uganda, which has been marred by political conflict for a period of twelve years between 1979 and 1991. Initially this consisted of armed cattle raiding against the people of Teso by their neighbours the Karamojong people. As a result of this raiding huge numbers of cattle, long the source of wealth and productivity in Teso, were lost. In 1986, however, the people of Teso went into insurgency against the then new government in Uganda, the government of the National Resistance Movement under the presidency of Yoweri Museveni. An anti government military rebellion was organised. The ensuing fighting was violent and devastating. In 1989, as a move to end the insurgency, Museveni ordered the forced removal of the rural population in Teso into settlement camps. Conditions in the camps led Amnesty International to accuse the NRM government of serious human rights abuses in the Teso area (Amnesty International 1992).

By 1991 the insurgency had dwindled to a close and people were free to return home. The impact of the conflict on the area had been resounding. Infrastructure had been destroyed, agriculture had collapsed and people who left the camps and went home faced conditions of extreme impoverishment. Nevertheless there has been in the years since 1992 a noticeable improvement in Teso. In fieldwork between 1996 and 1998 I was witness to the active coping strategies and initiatives for recovery and reconstruction put into place at a grass roots level. With conditions of peace, people in Teso have been able to pick up the pieces and put their lives together.

The place of 'community-based action' as a concept in NGO policy is advocacy of moves to tap into and promote such resilience. The tool of Participatory Rural

Appraisal (PRA) fieldwork has opened a practical space in which NGOs can acknowledge the opinions and initiatives of those peoples with whom they work and combine these opinions into the implementation of projects. Implementation itself takes place in two major ways; NGOs can either link with existing Community-based Organisations (CBOs) or they can create new community-based initiatives (Fowler 1997: 94).

Linking with existing community-based organisations

When NGOs seek to link with existing CBOs or Grass Roots Organisations (GROs) the sense of 'community' with whom they wish to work is of a unified group of people who already have an initiative, an expression of social capital that can be promoted and managed for development.

There is ample witness to the fact that people faced with difficult and oppressive conditions may mobilise themselves into self-help organisations. Lind (1997) has described the communal kitchens set up by women in Lima, Peru in the 1990s. The introduction of structural adjustment in Peru combined with a period of civil war brought ever-spiralling costs of living and deepening rates of poverty. Rural-urban migration continued apace. In response, women in Lima, activated a wide network of communal kitchens. As Lind describes it:

Every morning, some 40,000 low-income women belonging to the *Federacion de Comedores Populares Autogestionarios* (FCPA, or Federation of Self-Managed Popular Kitchens) gather at 2,000 sites throughout Lima's poor neighbourhoods, pooling their human and material resources to feed their families, some 200,000 persons. Twenty to 30 female friends, relatives, church mates and neighbours participate in each comedor. Women are joined by shared concerns and are welcomed in theory regardless of political positions or religious affiliation. The women rotate in positions of leadership and all take turns collecting dues, buying foodstuffs, and preparing the meals, usually in one of the members' kitchens. (1997: 1209)

Women in Lima responded and confronted the difficult conditions in which they bring up their families through community-based organisation. Likewise, other groups of women in South America have mobilised in response to escalating urban violence. For example the *Maes de Acari* organisation from the Acari slum area of Rio de Janeiro is a group of women dedicated to highlighting and resisting the political violence employed by the government. It was formed by a group of five mothers whose children were abducted and 'disappeared' in 1990. The group continued with active campaigns and has been a major force for solidarity amongst the Acari community (Lind 1997: 1212).

Community-based organisations proliferate in situations of poverty and entrenched inequality. They are also formed in response to crisis events and circumstances. Following severe drought in Senegal in 1984 the village of Zom mobilised as a community to regenerate the local agriculture. Villagers added new topsoil to the land and planted rice communally (Fischer 1994: 131). In Uganda there has often been collective reaction by communities to the devastation of the Aids pandemic. Many villages now have community burial associations who organise the food, water collection, cooking and financial outlay for the ever-increasing number of burials that families have to fund.

CBOs are formed as coping strategies and voices for change that are put forward by people themselves. They are organisations that represent the activity and ability of people to respond at a grass roots level even when disenfranchised and marginalised from formal structures of power. CBOs have many strengths. They are organisations formed from within a community to address the locally perceived needs of that community. They address those needs indigenously defined by the community in sustainable, locally relevant and participatory ways.

The effectiveness of CBOs can be wide ranging beyond the primary goals. Different CBO groups often network between themselves, forging social and economic exchanges that further strengthen the organisations and the members within them. For example in Togo the 'Association of Village Enterprises' co-ordinates various CBO groups and insists on the redistribution of surplus resources amongst the network (Fischer 1994: 132). In Uganda members of a burial association may, after collectively discussing and taking part in each other's problems, embark on a collective business enterprise, pooling financial resources.

In line with the strategic shift that has seen NGOs advocating policies to support and encourage community-based development action, many NGOs now seek to link with and support pre-existing CBOs. The links made between NGOs and CBOs offer many advantages in development work. CBOs can give NGOs a partner organisation that is internal to a community; a partner that is established and relevant, already sustained, already trusted and familiar and already legitimate (Fowler 1997: 94). When NGOs link with CBOs their partnership is one through which NGOs can access a communities needs, effective action and leadership in apposite ways. In turn CBOs can gain wider funding and recognition through their link with NGOs.

However, there are three areas in which links formed between NGOs and CBOs require cautionary attention. First the weaknesses of CBOs as actors in development need to be understood. Lind (1997: 1215) argues that, much as the communal kitchens in Lima have addressed the material needs and straits of the women and their families, they can also be seen as having institutionalised the women in their poverty. Members of groups such as the FCPA now live in a state of permanent dependence on the kitchens. In this way the CBO preserves the status quo. There still remains a gap between the kitchens as a community response to economic circumstances and state level policy which causes the broader economic structures which underpin conditions in the slum areas. The mechanisms by which community-based action could inform large-scale development effected on a national and international level are still weak.

CBOs are not an automatic route to empowerment for their members. Often they are a response to events and situations rather than addressing the underlying causes. In linking with CBOs, NGOs need to be aware that these are partners who might be engaged in actions based more on principles of welfare and delivery rather than principles of effecting lasting change.

Second there should be attention paid to the question of whether CBOs represent the interests of all the members of a community. Often CBOs are initiated and coordinated by members of an elite, by members of a certain sector of the population and are not socially all encompassing. They may exclude the involvement and opinions of other social groups in the community. Thus the ideas put forward for development through a CBO may be contested, considered invalid or not even recognised by other people in the same community. For example in 1996 a

conference was held in the Teso region of Uganda to bring together NGOs and local CBOs in order to discuss initiatives that might be put in place for facilitating reconstruction in the post conflict environment. A number of CBOs, dominated by educated men, argued their opinion that the best ways NGOs could facilitate reconstruction in Teso was through the funding of cattle restocking programs. A counter argument was put forward by a local women-run CBO to the effect that cattle restocking would only bring environmental degradation to Teso and that the money would be better spent in rebuilding schools for children.

CBOs do not necessarily speak for the community. They are formed as groups that may encode social hierarchies, divisions and differences of opinion within a population of people. This has implications for NGOs who link with CBOs. Whilst such a link often serves to strengthen a grass roots based initiative for development, it may also weight one such initiative or idea over another, a weighting that is potentially divisive and contentious to the population involved.

Third, there are complex management issues involved in making links between NGOs and CBOs. Though the link might be termed a 'partnership' CBOs may often lose their autonomy through a link with an NGO and be subject to different standards of practice, accountability and leadership. As a stronger partner an NGO is likely to impose, however unintended, new standards of management. For example in Teso, following the conflict, a group of former rebel soldiers mobilised themselves into an organisation from which to initiate development projects. For three years they existed as an autonomous group who pooled resources of land and oxen and invested in agricultural enterprises. The members of the group gained enough money from such projects to support themselves and their families and to establish the organisation on a permanent setting with a rented base. They also employed many hundreds of people from local villages on the agricultural projects. After three years the group wrote a project and funding proposal to a large international NGO based in England. The NGO accepted and sent representative to visit the CBO in order to cement a more lasting partnership that would extend beyond the funding of a single project.

This particular CBO gained many advantages from such a link; gaining larger amounts of capital which they could invest in the projects as well as advice from agricultural experts. However they had also to make many changes in their styles of management. As an autonomous organisation they had employed a fluid style of

accountability. Each of the members knew at any one time where more or less all the state of the current financial assets. If one of the members faced a personal or familial crisis and the other members agreed, the resources could be diverted to address it, for example providing expenses at a funeral or to repay a debt. In links with the international NGO such a system was changed into one of written accounts and banking. The leadership of the CBO was ultimately accountable to the NGO for its financial management, no longer to its members.⁴

When NGOs forge links with CBOs they have the potential to reach deep into a community, to address relevant and locally defined needs, in locally appropriate ways with local personnel. These relationships also have, however, the potential to change the balance of influence within a community and for the CBO involved. It can only be beneficial to clarify rather than obscure the power balances that stem from NGO relationships with CBOs. Such a clarification entails a recognition that in linking with CBOs, NGOs may find that it is not a community with whom they work but a group of people with defined set of interests and not so much a community 'partner' but a base within the grassroots locality. Once the actual power dynamics of a particular NGO-CBO relationship are known strategies can be put in place for realistic, rather than idealistic management.

Creating community-based organisations

In many situations people at a local level faced with difficult and overwhelming situations do not necessarily form CBOs, even though they may respond to their circumstances with active resilience and coping strategies. In such situations, where there is an absence of potential CBO partners, NGOs have the alternative of a second route for community-based action; they can precipitate the creation of community-based organisations which harnesses the resilience and potential of community inspired action.

Such work has important strengths. It introduces an organisation that is specifically geared towards social change and social needs. In the UK, since the 1960s, community-based work by charities and voluntary organisations has proliferated in response to government policy. Such work has sort to and has succeeded in empowering people in various ways; through the mobilisation of community identity and esteem, through political education, through opening channels by which the poor

and marginalised can relate to the state (Taylor 1995: 109). Community-based organisations that are created specifically for development purposes have the advantage of being potentially democratic and unifying agents for change (Fowler 1997: 94).

Within such locally based development work the idea that NGOs use of a 'community' is of an ideal unit from which to promote and to manage grass roots, participatory development. Creating community-based organisations and mobilising community-based action is seen as a way of working with and augmenting local, small scale, social units in relevant ways.

However, it has been increasingly recognised that, in practice, community-based action is often extremely difficult to achieve. The implementation, realisation and management of development which has the concept 'community' at its heart has proved problematic for many NGOs. For example, in the Teso region of Uganda an English based NGO sought to introduce community-based projects for the reconstruction of relations between Karamojong and Iteso peoples after the years of conflict between the two sides. The idea was to set up new communities in previously unoccupied land, communities that consisted of both Karamojong and Iteso peoples who would work together on development projects such as the rehabilitation of roads and bore holes. Four communities were founded with volunteers from each of the two sides, each base had an expatriate member of staff and basic transport provision. In many ways the idea was a success. It saw development work located in remote, up country areas. Many other NGOs concentrated their efforts in Teso near to the town that offered good transport and living facilities for expatriate workers. The communities have also proved to be a source of economic regeneration for other villages in their vicinity, providing access to resources and skilled personnel. However, deep and bitter division still remains between the Karamojong and Iteso inhabitants. One of the bases was forced to close after an armed, violent conflict between members of the community, each side accusing the other of trying to gain stronger political influence in the community. The expatriate worker was rapidly evacuated.

A major problem for the management of community-based action is that the idea of 'community' as advocated in NGO policy is often a simple and romantic notion which

is difficult to find, work with and translate into practice. As Guijt and Shah (1998: 7) have noted:

the use of 'community' as the unit of analysis for much work that passes as participatory is problematic...it evokes images of meeting people's real need and widespread participation at the grass roots level, thus creating a normative sense of 'a good thing'....inequalities, social hierarchies and discrimination are often over looked and enthusiasm generated for the co-operative and harmonious ideal promised by the imagery of 'community'.

Among NGOs the concept of 'community-based action' is often used to imply an automatic and uncontested translation into development that works at the grass roots level. The concept of 'community' is used to imply the social unit through which NGOs can best engage with the needs of their beneficiaries. Such usage ignores the actual complexity and reality of social relations between people in the same locality, a complexity that might have direct bearing on the success of the development envisioned.

The concept of 'community' used in much of NGO development discourse is weak in five major areas. First, it leaves no room for acknowledging the social dynamics between people who live in the same locality. Communities are infused with systems of power, hierarchy, authority and value, which define the lives of their members. These structures can mitigate against a joint and communal undertaking. For example between the Karamojong and Iteso members of the new NGO facilitated villages, there existed strong political and ideological differences as well as a history of hostility. This ensured that it was not possible to create automatically a harmonious community, despite people coming to live together in the same locality. The social relations between members of the same locality can be overtly hostile and involve conflict. In the Teso region of Uganda, people have returned to their home villages after the years of displacement into camps. There they often find themselves living back next to neighbours or even relations who had inflicted violence upon them during the very personal and local violence of the recent past. Such histories, though not overtly mentioned, are remembered and mitigate against collective reconstruction and development projects. Families tend to work separately to improve their own homes rather than join in communal initiatives. Even in populations with less fraught

social relations many NGOs find that when they seek to work in a community they will be drawn to one segment of the population; in rural Uganda those who work most readily with NGOs tend to be the educated, English speaking minority. Others in the population often feel disenfranchised from systems of authority and influence.

In addition the usage of 'community' as an ideal concept ignores the fact that there is change over time within the group in question. Anthropologists have long been criticised for taking the communities of people with whom they work as a synchronic, bounded and functioning entities. The shift now is to undertake research that accommodates the historical and changing nature and values within a community of people, especially in response to broader contextual events.

It is these dynamics which affect the possibility of managing community-based development. Payne (1998) has discussed the work of OXFAM in the Ikafe refugee settlement of north Uganda. Sudanese refugees in north Uganda had been encouraged to move to Ikafe out of the transit refugee camps. In Ikafe OXFAM aimed to implement a vision of:

a self-reliant population, co-existing with local people in small and well-spaced communities: a refugee population who might eventually live independently of any external assistance. (Payne, 1998: vii)

It was hoped that such a vision would work as an alternative strategy to principles of relief that usually characterises work with refugees. In Ikafe OXFAM aimed to strengthen fragmented communities from the grass roots up, promoting participation, capacity building and thus sustainable development.

In the event, however, such aims proved almost impossibly difficult to implement. Whilst in the initial year, 1995, OXFAM made advances in encouraging self sustaining settlement, subsequently the Ikafe population was subject to armed attacks from both Sudanese and Ugandan armed groups. Many of the population fled from the settlement and became subject to the vicissitudes of the political conflict engulfing them. In this context few community-based initiatives could be successful and OXFAM returned to emergency programming. By the end of 1996 most of the OXFAM staff had been evacuated from the area and the population of Ikafe were

once again living in transit refugee camps with OXFAM staff acting as service providers for their short term needs. By 1997 the Ikafe settlement was formally closed by UNHCR and the Ugandan government, the majority of the former population had returned to Sudan under duress.

The social relations between those who live in the same locality are complex and contingent. Development projects that are predicated upon a concept of community conceived without recognition of such dynamics might find that the social reality on the ground renders such projects unfeasible.

Second, the concept of community as used in NGO policy is weakened by the assumption that community inspired action will be beneficial to all. Allen's (1998) work in Uganda provides a strong counter to such idealisation of community initiatives. Allen conducted ethnographic fieldwork amongst the Madi of northern Uganda. These people were re-settling after years of displacement, again in the context of political conflict in the Uganda/Sudan border area. Allen suggests that after years of traumatic upheaval Madi people sought communal therapeutic mechanism through witch hunts. In these young women were targeted, killed and tortured in brutal and fatal ways. Allen suggests that such victims were positioned as scape goats for the tensions inherent in the community. Likewise Heald (1998: 9) has suggested that witch hunts amongst the Gisu of west Uganda in the 1960s functioned in terms of the moral self definition of communities at a time when the concept of community was becoming important as a unit of local political organisation. Once again those suspected of being witches were tortured and killed as community leaders sought to eliminate the perceived immoral influences from their society.

What is clear from such examples is that community initiatives work through deeply held systems of belief and perception; they are not ideologically neutral. Though many indigenous community initiatives will not be so fraught as these examples, all will be informed by their social and cultural context. These influence the action undertaken so that all participants are unlikely to be equal partners, and some may be actively discriminated against. Whilst NGO policy advocates 'turning to communities themselves' in the quest for people centered development there needs to be care not to posit indigenous community action with an automatic moral credibility. A naiveté in the dynamics of community life ignores the 'darker side of

traditional communities' (Guijt and Shah 1998: 8) and may lead to the institutionalisation of oppression.

Third the use by NGOs of 'community' as an ideal location for development ignores the fact that people themselves might not see the community as very important. Robertson (1967) conducted research in central Uganda in a locality where many families were migrants to the area. There he found that the most important and valued social bonds in the area were not those of 'community' but those of family relationship and of patronage; richer families hired labourers to work for them and this proved an important source of income. Similarly Werbner (1991) has documented the strong ideological associations of 'home' and 'family' above and beyond that of 'community' amongst the Bango people of Botswana.

During my own fieldwork in Teso it was noticeable that people placed strategies for the well being and reconstruction of their households over and beyond those for the community. This was apposite in an area where conflict had been interpersonal and bitter, in some cases involving neighbours, even cousins and siblings, on opposing sides. In the post conflict period relations between people in the area were shot through with feuds and division relating to the conflict. These mitigated against communal undertakings. When NGOs in the area tried to mobilise participatory community organisations for well digging and the construction of schools such tensions often prevailed and undermined community mobilisation.⁵

In addition the priority given to the 'community' by people in Teso varied at different times of the year. During the wet/planting season people would concentrate upon their household agriculture and spent most of their time with other family members on their homelands. During the dry season people had more time and money to enter communal beer feasts and occasions. NGOs working in the area found it more profitable to instigate community directed projects during the dry season and even then to timetable meetings in the early morning to avoid competition with beer parties (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ): personal communication). The question to be raised here is one of motivation. If people's locus of motivation is one other than that of 'community' this is likely to cross cut with NGO ideals for community-based action.

Fourth, the concept of community as used in much NGO policy seemingly isolates the community from the broader historical, regional and national context in which it is situated. As evident in the example of the Ikafe refugee settlement, it is this context which will determine the possibility of community initiatives. In Teso the bottom line for the ability of NGOs to instigate people centered development was the context of peace. With peace had come the incorporation of the area into the national political structure with its system of local councils. This system allows NGOs direct access to the grass roots locality and unmediated communication with local leaders (Brett 1996: 210). Those community initiatives which were successfully implemented by NGOs in Teso often depended upon this governmental structure. Rather than an isolated entity a 'community' exists in a web of wider relationships; it is these that are often the greatest resource in development processes.

Finally, an unproblematic use of the concept 'community' ignores the difficulty of definition. For what people see as a community is not always the same as a grass roots locality. The 'deaf community' for example is a self-defined group of people aware of a distinct culture and life style. As a community they have a number of initiatives and organisations to advocate deaf awareness and to seek consolidation between members of the community yet the members are widespread in location. In Teso the most convincing sense of Iteso community I was witness to was amongst migrants from Teso living in slums in the capital Kampala. Iteso immigrants tended to live in the same area and to actively meet and discuss ways in which they could support and further the conditions of their homes and families back in Teso. A large informal network bound the participants together, providing assistance in the gaining of employment and in transferring earnings and communication back to Teso. Whereas in Teso such members would have been divided by loyalties to kin and location, in the capital city they formed a community of interests.

Anderson (1991: 15) has suggested that communities are, most often, 'imagined' entities where members are bound in common reference to ideas and identity. Cohen (1985: 12) has likewise argued that 'community' be defined according to its use and role in people's experience, according to what the members have in common with each other and how they symbolically distinguish themselves from others. Both writers suggest that community be understood as a phenomenological concept, which expresses the members' joint interests rather than their geographical location.

Such definition has implications for NGO management. For it stresses that the concept of 'community' prevalent in NGO policy should be checked against the empirical reality on the ground. As Pratt and Loizos (1992: 37) warn that a physical community is not necessarily 'a natural unit of social co-operation', nor does it imply a convergence of interests and point out the dangers of

... assuming that simply living near to each other automatically leads to something called 'community spirit'. Such an assumption may well lead to problems if certain common interests and characteristics are projected on to a community before there is any real evidence that they exist.

On the other hand the strength of feeling that may lie within an 'imagined community' suggests that, once identified, herein lies a source of social capital and common interest that might provide a base for development processes, for community initiatives and organisations.

Implications for NGO management

A discussion of the dynamics and definition of the concept of community is vitally important for NGOs, for it is these dynamics which constitute the actual environment for NGOs who seek a better working relationship with their beneficiaries. Whilst in NGO policy community organisations and community-based action have often been reified as unproblematic working units, ignoring their dynamics in practice will work to the detriment of proposed development projects.

Such discussion leads to some practical suggestions for NGO management. An important initial step is for recognition of the possible complexities of community-based action. There needs to be recognition that communities are not homogeneous nor simple and uncontested entities and that even CBOs are organisations that encode lines of power and representation. When NGOs recognise such complexity they will be better focused on the social reality of their beneficiaries. There is potential in the recognition of communities as social groups held together by systems of belief and value, systems which constitute indigenous social capital rather than as groups necessarily bound together by their locality.

Second there is a place for ethnographic research by NGOs amongst the beneficiaries with whom they work. Such research is a commitment to the 'emic perspective (Fetterman 1993: 2) on social life as lived and understood by people themselves.⁶ Such research would enable NGOs to ground their community projects less in rhetoric and more in terms meaningful to their beneficiaries. Whilst such research is necessarily long term, NGOs have the possibility to link with those who have already done such research in the areas where 'community-based action' is to be implemented or to employ local staff, members of the community, to take part in designing the vision and planning of development initiatives.

Finally NGOs, particularly NNGOs, would benefit from flexible management strategies to accommodate the link between their organisation and existing CBOs and new community-based organisations. With recognition that partnership with an NGO has the potential to change systems of management and power amongst beneficiaries' groups, NGOs would benefit from looking at how the standards of management they expect differ and may conflict with those of their beneficiaries, and how the difference in standards and management culture may be negotiated.

Fowler (1997) suggests that the move of NGOs to supporting people's organisations and away from service and delivery will increase into the next millennium. With such a shift the prominence given to 'community' based development will surely continue. The examples and discussion of this paper seeks to stress that such prominence must be founded with practical and managerial scrutiny rather than with generalised development discourse. With commitment to the lived realities and dynamics of community NGOs can move towards community relevant as well as community-based action.

Notes

1. This paper is a revised version of a seminar given for the MSc course in Management of Non-Governmental Organizations at the Centre for Voluntary Organisations in the Department of Social Policy at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Many of the ideas in the paper benefited from the student discussion in the seminar. The author is a postgraduate student in the department of Anthropology at the London School of Economics, currently completing a PhD thesis on Post Conflict Reconstruction in the Teso region of East Uganda. I am grateful to David Lewis for his comments on this paper.

2. I am concerned with NGOs specifically involved in development which have been referred to in the literature as Non-Governmental Development Organisations (NGDOs). The use of the term NGO in the text refers to such organisations and includes Northern Non-Governmental Organisations (NNGOs), Southern Non-Governmental Organisations (SNGOs) and International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) involved in development but is differentiated from community-based organisations (CBOs, also sometimes known as grassroots organisations or 'GROs') involved in development. It should be noted that whilst the issues discussed in the paper are relevant for all NGOs working on community-based action, there is special attention given to case studies from NNGOs working on development in southern countries. There are more likely to be difficulties in such relationships given differences in culture and power between the two sides.

3. In some areas of the world the idea of community-based action has a longer history than advocacy by NGOs. For example community-based action was at the heart of Gandhian ideology for development. In the Philippines development work has long been carried out through CBOs and with a large degree of community participation (Constantino-David 1995: 154).

4. Such adjustments may not necessarily cause conflicts. However NGOs often feel that through such relationships they have a franchise on a relationship with a particular CBO. CBO's however often view it differently and see all NGOs as resources to be tapped into not to be hindered by loyalty to one.

5. When one Northern NGO organised a football match between two church youth groups in Teso as an attempt at reconciliation, the match ended in violent fighting as representatives from two families involved in an antagonistic incident during the conflict were on opposing teams: CHIPS personnel communication. One NGO representative stated that it was “impossible to get these people to be community minded” Soroti Catholic Diocese Development Office (SOCADIDO), personnel communication.

6. Ethnographic research entails a commitment to qualitative data which respects the ‘emic’, subjective and internal perspective of indigenous informants as much as the ‘etic’ of outsider analysts (Hammersley & Atkinson 1995). Ethnographic research entails a commitment to qualitative data which respects the ‘emic’, subjective and internal perspective of indigenous informants as much as the ‘etic’ of outsider analysts (Hammersley & Atkinson 1995).

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