

Community Driven Development in Liberia

(anonymous author)

1. The application:

In this student term paper the forms of power – visible, hidden, invisible – are used to analyse the way in which development intervention framed around ‘empowerment’ might impact on power relations.

2. The case:

Community Driven Development is an approach developed by the World Bank which explicitly seeks to empower poor people. The question is how empowering such approaches really are in practice and what kind of power is involved. Liberia is one of many contexts in which CDD has been carried out.

The World Bank definition of empowerment is ‘the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives’ (World Bank 2001, Narayan 2002:vi). They do not define power itself, but the definition of empowerment suggests that it is about increasing ‘power to’.

The CDD approach prioritises the local as the site in which poor people’s lives can be changed, and frames its targets as ‘communities’ in a way that supposes a homogeneity – or at least a willingness to work together towards equality irrespective of current differences – that in reality communities rarely demonstrate. An analysis of the forms of power that pertain in a country like Liberia throws up some important challenges to this kind of approach.

3. The analysis:

Liberia’s contextual particularities are unique to its history, but the way in which these may challenge the assumptions of an approach such as CDD are illustrative of a broader point, that existing power relations in the places where development intervention takes place can undermine as well as support the intentions of such programmes.

In terms of visible power, inequalities are entrenched because of a historical distinction in Liberia between ‘civilized’ and ‘aboriginal’ communities which confers different rights on different groups. This creates a systematic mobilisation of bias against one category, as evidenced by a two-tier justice system (making the hidden power hardly hidden).

Hidden power is exercised by elites who dominate resources, decision-making and control at a community level. When CDD approaches opt to work with established CBOs and existing leaders they are playing into this hidden power structure rather than challenging it. Chieftancy arrangements, the role of the diaspora, and the existence of ‘sodalites’ – secret societies – are all sites of contextual power which are hidden when communities are approached as homogeneous entities.

Entrenched attitudes towards women and youth are expressions of invisible power at work, with social rules dictating that both of these groups have more limited roles to play than adult males. Interestingly one of the effects of the horrific violence in Liberia's conflict was to disrupt these invisible power structures: women and youth became more active and present in society (and in violence) than they had been in peace time. However, this may now be changing again. Aboriginal groups, who have also internalised their own secondary status in society, mobilised against their oppression in this conflict, generating their 'power with' and expressing it in violent ways. Despite the visibility of this uprising, though, it has not changed their ongoing status nor their internalisation of a role in society that means they do not count. In terms of CDD, non-participation by these groups can therefore be expected.

4. Implications & significance

In this context, it can be argued that CDD might have very perverse effects, posing a warning to development agencies that seek to 'empower' without understanding power. What the use of the power analysis tools achieves here is an unpicking of some of the complexity into which development processes play, signalling some obvious but difficult areas in which intervention practices need to change if they are really to alter power relations meaningfully and for the better.

The experience also recasts the nature of the space in which CDD happens as an 'invited space', where the donors are inviting community members to participate in what is essentially a process or a game in which the donors have set the terms - including making the assumption of equality which allows hidden power to remain hidden during this encounter. Although described as a 'community-based' process it has not really been claimed and certainly not created by the community. Reframing the space in this way goes beyond identifying 'ownership' as a problem - by labelling the space as 'invited' it specifically poses questions about who is doing the inviting, what the terms of the invitation are, and what that means for what it is possible to change through action within that space.