

Empowerment as an Approach for Community Development in Malaysia

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Abstract: This study defines and discusses the concept of empowerment in the context of community development in general, and community development in Malaysia specifically. The principles and techniques underlying the empowering process are also elaborated. This study also describes the application of the concepts defined in the community development activities in Malaysia. The general aim of this study is to describe and explain how the process of empowerment takes place in community development within local communities. [World Rural Observations 2009;1 (1):63-68]. ISSN: 1944-6543 (print); ISSN: 1944-6551 (online).

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1. Introduction

The term 'power' is a contested concept and varies in definition, concealing different meanings based on different perspectives of looking at it. The meanings are complex and are debated among sociologist and political scientists. It follows that the transliteration of 'power' 'empower' complicates the construction of the meaning of empowerment. However, since the word 'empowerment' is underpinned by the notion of power, and in literature it is quite frequently used together with other words - 'individual', 'group/community', 'interpersonal' and 'community'-to become 'individual empowerment', 'group/community empowerment', and 'interpersonal empowerment', it is worth exploring some meanings which underlying the concept of 'power' in relation to 'empowerment'. Further to this point is that the term 'empowerment' has been used widely together with 'participation', and there is a claim of relationship between the two (Abbott, 1995; Wallerstein, 1993; Zimmerman, 1990; Zimmerman and Rappaport, 1988; Kahn and Bender, 1985; Oakley and Marsden, 1984; Kieffer, 1984). Some suggest that participation and empowerment is a twin strategy to promote sustainable, people-centered development, equal opportunities and social justice (Mayo and Craig, 1995). Before it can be said that participation can lead to empowerment, it is important to discuss its underlying notion of power. Hence this study describes the concepts of power and empowerment in the community development activities

2. Literature Review

In relation to empowerment there are two ways in which the term 'power' can be conceptualized. First, in general and metaphorically terms, the notion of power can be referred to as the ability to take the initiative to make something happen that otherwise would not happen. This is parallel to the meaning of power given by Arendt, power 'corresponds to

human ability' (Arendt, 1970: 44). It is a creative energy, force and potential (Browne, 1995: 360). In Giddens's words, it is the 'transformational capacity' possessed by human beings (Giddens, 1985). In this sense 'power to' do or act on something is the individual capacity, potential and competence which can be developed, accumulated and strengthened in their life process through the experience of doing something. By analogy it is like human development, and this power is attributed to individual. This human ability is their capacity to mobilize resources - either individual resources such as skills, knowledge, money or other inputs, or local resources in a collective way for the attainment of a specific goal. With regard to this, having and gaining this power by individual would not have a negative effect on others. This interpretation of power is relevant to Parsons' idea of power, in that power is a generalized facility or resource possessed by the society as a whole (Parsons, 1963), which is not owned by a certain individuals or groups. In this perspective, power in term of capabilities can be explained in non zero-sum terms. Exercising these capabilities, through participating in activities for example, can increase the power in the society, in that it enables the people to achieve collective goals. At this point, the process of exercising by individuals does not 'harm' others, because power is not a fixed 'entity', which indicates that giving or releasing some power to individuals or to one group means decreasing the power of others. Since power is a resource of the society as a whole, furthermore all individuals, at least, have gifted potentials or talents which can be developed or sharpened through experiencing it, therefore power is not a reducible 'thing'.

In contrast to the first position, where power is conceptualized 'not the property of individuals', the second position perceives power as a 'thing' possessed by individuals or groups. This can be observed in Weber's idea, where power is defined as

'the chance of a man or a number of men to realize their own will even against the resistance of others who are participating in the action' (Weber, 1978:926). In this sense, the exercising of power can be examined in terms of the relationship between two parties. To put it crudely, the amount of power that one has is dependent upon the degree one can and has control over the behavior of others.

There is difference between 'power to' and 'power over'. In the former, power lies within the co-operative activity, where individuals and groups significantly affect one another without there being a conflict of interest between them. This, according to Lukes (1974), is 'influence' but not a power relationship. Thus, the meaning of power is more towards capacity and ability. On the other hand, power in Weber's term is more concerned with the ability to exercise power 'over' other parties. However, this power relationship does not necessarily occur with actual conflict. Having discussed the term 'power', it is clear that there is no standard definition, rather an over-arching concept or substance to the meaning of empowerment. To summarize, power can be defined as the individual or group members' capacity or ability to act to make something happen that otherwise would not happen, or to prevent something from happening that another party may wish to make it happen. The act of individuals to exercise this power in their daily lives is also translated or revealed in the discourse interaction between them, within which experiences and a subjective meaning are integrated together as a basis to mobilize and is objectified in certain actions where those capabilities are exercised, or even during dialogue with them.

The word 'empower' in relation to definition of power as above can be interpreted as 'to enable', 'to give, gain, or to take over power'. Literally, therefore, empowerment is the *process* whereby power is developed, promoted, gained, shared, facilitated, or adjusted by the individual or group members in their social interaction through which they are able to exercise their capabilities to make, affect and bring about changes in the community, as the *product* of being empowered. The empowerment concept includes both process and product dimensions and the relationship between them is complex (Staples, 1990). Thus, the central theme of empowerment can be defined as a process whereby individuals or groups are able to exercise their ability and capacity to understand, interpret the problems faced, and later define the needs, and to translate these into an action process by participating in organizing themselves to decide, influence, demand, negotiate and engage in carrying out activities. It is within this process that power interaction and relation is exercised between individuals themselves in their respective groups and also between them and the structures in which they live, where both parties affect each other to bring about change, as the *product of the process*. The

main component of empowerment in this respect is the ability of the individuals to gain more control in determining their lives as they wish, an idea which is shared with the practitioner in community work, and group work (Rappaport, 1987; Adams, 1990; Simon, 1990; Staples, 1990; Parsons, 1991; Wallerstein, 1993). While community psychologists like Chavis and Wandersman (1990), Florin and Wandersman (1990) and Zimmerman and Rappaport (1988) examine empowerment at the psychological level by assessing the perceived control, willingness to take action by individuals and the belief in one's ability to act for community change through participation in a group or organization. In a similar vein, empowerment is defined by Pinderhughes as the individual's feeling of increased power; 'the capacity to influence the forces which affect one's life space for one's own benefit' (Pinderhughes, 1983:332) without changing the social structure.

To what extent the people or community members are being empowered and can be empowered - capable to effect and to bring social change - is debatable given the issue of how structure determines the individuals action, or vice versa. There are three perspectives or viewpoints in addressing this issue. First, is the doctrine which believes that individuals have the capacity to construct and reconstruct their world (Blumer, 1969) phenomenologist (Schutz, 1967) and ethno methodologist (Garfinkel, 1967). To them, social reality is not fixed or immutable, but is continuously being created or produced and reproduced by the meaningful interaction and action of the actors. Human agencies have the free will to choose and decide for themselves, there is no real social order. Orderly social life is created by individuals who are actively engaged in making sense of social life, and those individuals actions are not mechanical responses and constraints by the social system and their structure. Giving and acknowledging individuals' capabilities and creativity means empowerment can easily take place. There is no problem for people to exercise their 'power to' act and take 'power over' or control over the structure in which they live. In contrast, the second doctrine believes that social life and reality is determined by the social structure, and thus human action and interaction is molded and surrounded by the structure. These ideas are associated with Durkheim (1938), an early exponent in functionalism, which were later expanded by structural-functionalism. According to this school of thought, relationships between individuals in a society are organized and patterned, and this is maintained by the values, norms and roles shared and practiced by the members in all institutions such as the family, economy, educational, political system and so forth. All these normative behaviors uphold the structure of society, whereby each individual member in every institution plays their role. As a result, human activities and other products are shaped

by this structure, and therefore, it can be suggested that people's empowerment is limited within those 'in-built capsules'. The third view suggests that there is a close relationship between individuals and their social arrangements or social structures. According to this view, structure is socially created and, as such, the social relationship is always structured, but it has never been determined. This means that although individuals are institutionalized by the social structure, moral codes, cultural norms and other legitimized bodies created by society are exercised through their social and power relationships, however at the same time individuals also have the capacity to create the structure (Berger and Luckmann, 1967). In this sense, individuals are relatively determined, and as such, in everyday life individuals can be both agents of reproducing and simultaneously restructuring the structure; social and power structure. In these terms, individuals actions are influenced to some extent by the structure, but at the same time individuals collectively are capable of changing the social structure. With regard to this view, therefore individual's empowerment can take place in the society, and as a group they could possibly exert collective empowerment towards achieving 'power over', by influencing and adjusting the power relationship within the unobservable power structure. However, it is important to note that to what extent collective empowerment is able to affect the existing structure depends upon the degree of the relationship that people have with the structure in general, and the extent to which they are 'devoted' to the social or power structure in particular.

3. Methodology

The research was performed as a qualitative library in which the researcher had to refer to relevant and related sources. Secondary data is research based on secondary resources that already exist (Jennings, 2001). Secondary data also refers to previously published information that can include information, historical records and government reports (Yin, 2003). Secondary sources such as official reports, community development guideline, programme books, internet, and working papers were used as a source of data in this study.

4. Empowerments for Community Development in Malaysia

Theoretically and pragmatically, in exploring the empowerment process with the Malaysian context, there are limitations at the macro level because the control that the state has over the citizen through, firstly, the politico-bureaucratic mechanism in-built within the community development process and the method, and secondly, at the same time mutually supported by the culture of patronage. Structurally, examined it at the micro level, the process of bringing change through community development activities is closely related to government policy,

facilitated by and under the auspices of the respective state's agencies. This politico-bureaucratic nature of promoting community change is further strengthened at the micro level through the District Office within the state rural development administration policy. In fact, a close relationship between the District Office, other extension agencies personnel and related departments, and the local people through their representatives, is encouraged by the state (Ness, 1967; Chee, 1974 & 1975; Esman, 1972; Siedentopf, 1987). In this politico-bureaucratic structure and patronizing culture, the appointment of voluntary community development personnel, such as the Mosque Committee members, for example, is based on certain procedures introduced by the state, which intensify and extend the state's controlling power over the people. Interference by the local 'political man', the Member of Parliament or the State Assemblymen in community life, help to extend the patronizing culture macro-micro relationship. At the local level, this patron-client phenomenon can sometimes become more complex when there are some forms of individual-based patronage between the politician and his supporters, and thus this makes the state's control through its Member of Parliament's and State Assemblymen over the masses more effective. The impact of this phenomenon is much more significant when the patronized individuals are the community activist or community developer. By upholding and promoting the community's traditional working practices; the self-help and mutual-help spirit to develop people's self-reliance and self-determination propagated by the state through the local community activists to meet the local needs, reinforces the patronizing framework and network. Given this scenario, what is the meaning of empowerment in terms of the power that the people have, individually or collectively, in participating within the structure imposed on and mutually maintained by them? Generally in the Malaysian context, and specifically in exploring the participation process in community development, it can be said that to a certain degree, empowerment is limited by the social structure. However, this does not mean that empowerment does not take place within the given structure in which people live. This is because, within this structure, there are some real spaces for empowerment to take place. As discussed earlier, although people are socially structured, they are also creating reality. The same experiences that they face in their environment are shared together as subjective meanings, which are then translated into an action process to initiate something to fulfill their collective needs. In the process of participation people are empowered and can be empowered, and the central themes of people's empowerment is the ability that they have to make changes based on their own needs after realizing the problems they face. Hence, within these prescribed circumstances, individuals interact and influence each other,

mobilize and organize themselves to decide, perform and take the action collectively to solve common problems and to achieve their goals.

Facilitated by local activists, individual members exercise their abilities - the 'power to' act - through collective action, mobilizing themselves in initiating and establishing various community groups, conducting group activities, organizing self-help and other communal projects, based on their interests in an effort to solve and alleviate common problems they experience. In other words, these problems and needs, which are shared by individuals, are objectified and manifested in the establishment of the groups and activities. These are also the tangible products of empowerment. Such activities or groups cannot materialize if they are not empowered to do so. It can be argued that it is through the relationship with others within the environment and the structure in which they live, that they are able to translate the problems, their subjective meanings, into concrete action by participating to acting upon it. It is through this process that individuals are able to exercise and experience their power with others. The process whereby individuals exercise their ability and capacity effectively to achieve certain goals, and to further develop those capabilities, is referred to as *individual empowerment*. By exercising those capabilities through participation in establishing, organizing, implementing and managing self-initiated groups or activities, individuals can gain more control over their lives, while at the same time strengthening their existing personal ability. Participating in such actions allows individuals to practice their potentialities and experience the actual empowering process.

The process of achieving goals or objectives, and to bring about changes however, cannot be attained successfully individually, moreover the problems needing to be addressed are shared between the individuals as community members. Support and commitment is needed from other community or groups members to form the group or collective empowerment. Individual empowerment actually can contribute to group empowerment (Staples, 1990; Kieffer, 1984). This takes place in the participation process itself when the empowered individuals, who realize their personal responsibility for bringing some changes to their social environment, help to enhance the functioning of the group and community members by informing, inviting, encouraging and organizing them to participate in identifying the problem, prioritizing the needs, deciding and taking part in conducting the group activity, project or even action. By mobilizing, integrating, utilizing and coordinating local resources into a self-help effort for community change (Kahn and Bender, 1985) as one collective action, *collective empowerment* is said to be generated. The ability of individual members to influence their friends and other community members to participate together in pursuing the

action process is their *interpersonal empowerment*. Once these interrelationships are established collective empowerment is thus tightened and stabilized, which eventually not only sustains but further encourages individual empowerment to take place (see also Parsons, 1991; Kieffer, 1984). In other words, when the groups are established and the members are able to define the boundaries of its actions and activities to meet the shared needs or to solve the common problems which correspond to the changing environment or situation, group members can become active participants in implementing the decisions and the process which affects them. At the point where they are responsible for implementing their own choices and decisions, and are accountable for actions taken, that collective empowerment is exercised. Indeed, empowerment as a process of developing and exercising power - the ability to make decisions and to take the initiative on matters related to their lives - is an ongoing process of developing the 'power to' act to achieve their objectives. An increase in individual empowerment has the ability to promote or build up and generate collective or group empowerment, which can effect change; to improve their living or community life conditions, providing care or help for the community, setting up community education centers and so forth. At the community level, the effort to bring these changes is related to the objectives of the groups or activities initiated by the empowered individual members. Empowerment in itself is a reflexive activity in which the process can be initiated and sustained by individuals, as the agents who seek to determine their own destiny or lives. In this reflexive process, which takes place within an action is empowerment; individuals gain and develop skills, competence and confidence. Furthermore, this individual empowerment is reinforced by continued involvement with, and support from, the group (Evans, 1992; Hirayama and Cetingok, 1988). Developing and gaining skills, competence and confidence in such a process are, in general, knowledge gathering. Here, the dictum 'knowledge is power' according to Foucault, could advance people's action collectively as a group, when they reflect on past actions and experiences, and know where their capabilities are in relation to the social arrangement in which they live. With regard to this, collective action can promote and bring collective empowerment nearer to the 'power over' situation. But it is important to note that empowerment through people's participation within the enclosed situation, shaped by the structure, is not equivalent to a change in the power structure, or a change in the distribution of power because power is held somewhere else by the state, submerged within the politico-bureaucratic framework they themselves promote, which is then strengthened by the culture of patronizing. Nevertheless, within this structure reinforced by the culture, the participation process takes place. People

involved in setting up community groups and organizing their activities learns and gain knowledge. This is a real discourse experienced by them. Through this, empowered people know where the structure is and to what extent they can infiltrate the 'membrane' that surrounds the structure, while participating in exercising the ability to develop and initiate some changes in community life. Consequently, they could also act collectively to take action to secure and improve their position, as the subject in the process of developing themselves through influencing, negotiating, demanding, and even, in some instances, using threatening and confronting strategies in the process of interacting with others to achieve their group goals. Although, one can argue that people are gaining some power when they successfully influence other party, this does not mean that power is being taken or seized by them. Even if they succeed in exercising their power over the state's representative body in implementing development programmes by controlling them, this does not mean that power has been taken or transferred directly from the power holder to the people - the status quo remains. The reason for this is that the action taken, and the interaction process between both parties, takes place within the structures and frameworks which are regulated and approved by the state. But it is justified to say that people have exercised their power over the state representative by making some adjustments to the power relationship, which disadvantages them in the prior place. Similarly, the state agency's power is not reduced if it complies with the demands made by the people through their collective action in campaigning activities. Their power still exists. In short, the action taken by the people is that of 'negotiation', and the effort put forward by them within the permissible surrounding structure. Since empowerment is not directly power which has been given or taken by the people from the power holder, empowered people have the ability to see the boundary of flexibility within the social structure, and to take this opportunity to try their best to maneuver within those real spaces available to meet their own needs at the group or local level. In other words, empowered people are in the process of checking the limits of the membrane surrounding the structure - its elasticity - and to what extent it can be tolerated, while participating in taking their collective action. Therefore, empowered people are both reproducing, and at some point exerting a kind of 'challenge' to the structure. Surrounded by, and living in, a paternalistic society or environment where the patronizing relation still dominates human interrelationships, the notion of empowerment is not synonymous with a process whereby people gain, seize or take power, and later develops an absolute control over the structure.

Another point in relation to this is that, if such phenomena are also present in any situation or place,

therefore, it could also be argued that many definitions of empowerment with the key words in emphasizing the process 'where people take control of their circumstances. This is true, because the concept of empowerment lies in the notion that increasing the power of individual or group does not mean decreasing the power of another person or group: it is not a zero-sum commodity, which literally means power being taken from one and going to another. With regard to this, Swift and Levin (1987) have also reminded us that the use of the word empowerment; '... is rooted in the world views of those who used the term and often implied by the semantic context in which 'empowerment' is used.

5. Conclusion

To summarize, empowerment through participation is a continuous process by which people develop and use their ability to act in response to shared problems and to achieve expected needs in an effort to bring some changes to community life. Together in this process they strengthen and gain knowledge, skills and competence in a cumulative manner so as to gain control over their affairs collectively within the existing socio-political milieu. Pragmatically, in the Malaysian context, it is within the given structure that people participate and empower themselves by exercising their inherent ability to develop and initiate change at the micro level, to fulfill their immediate and future needs without changing the power structure, and thus the superstructure. Also, at the macro level, it is within this structure that the process of empowering the people, propagated by the state through promoting and encouraging the joint effort between them with the aim of improving the economic, social and cultural condition of the community, which eventually could enable them to contribute to the national progress is inculcated. The findings of this study can be a framework for future planning in terms of community development in third world countries.

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