The Role of NGOs in Promoting Empowerment for Sustainable Community Development

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ABSTRACT This paper attempts to illustrate the contribution of NGOs towards sustainable community development. NGOs have many programs, functions and roles which assist community to become empowered, and eventually attain sustainable development. This paper reviews some of these roles, functions and programs of NGOs, such as microfinance, capacity building and self-reliance. Microfinance programs improve the economic well-being of communities by job creation and income generation. In the long run, this economic empowerment will contribute to sustainable community development. NGOs, through capacity building, develop community capacities such as ability, skill and knowledge of mobilizing resources, planning and evaluating community initiation and solving problems to gain the mastery over their lives. It also motivates the community to participate in the projects and help them to improve quality of their lives. Participants are expected to coordinate meetings, plan community activities, and be practical in community initiatives. In this way, NGOs contribute towards sustainable community development. Furthermore, NGOs mobilize the communities to be self-reliant. It assists the communities to discover their own potentials and rely on their own resources. In short, this paper demonstrates that all these programs and functions of NGOs could contribute towards the realization of sustainable community development.

INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have gained increased attention among scholars and practitioners of development. They have become increasingly important agents of the development process in the countries of the South, in all of their main areas of work such as humanitarian relief, long-term development, policy formation and political advocacy (Attack 1999). On the other hand, there is a current view that NGOs constitute a viable alternative to government as channels of development assistance, particularly in developing countries. Some of the NGOs' functions and advantages, according to Streeten (1997) are (1) they are good at reaching and mobilizing the poor and remote communities; (2) they help empower poor people to gain control of their lives, and they work with and strengthen local institutions; (3) they carry out projects at lower costs and more efficiently than the government agencies and (4) they promote sustainable development.

In this article two aspects will be discussed, first, the relationship between NGO and empowerment as a particular virtue of NGOs, and second, the strategy and program undertaken by NGOs that contribute to sustainable community development. In other words, the purpose of this paper is to shed some light on the NGOs' program regarding issues of empowerment and sustainable community development. In particular, the paper seeks to highlight participation of NGOs in promoting sustainable community develop-ment. Thus, this article will review some literature regarding the NGOs' programs, and highlight how these programs would affect community empowerment, and finally contribute to sustainable community development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

NGOs are professionally-staffed organizations aiming at contributing to the reduction of human suffering and to the development of poor countries (Streeten 1997). They do this in various ways, e.g. by funding projects, engaging in service provision and capacity building, contri-buting to awareness, and promoting the self-organization of various groups (Baccaro 2001). Meanwhile, Desai (2005) has mentioned that NGOs have an important role to play in supporting women, men and households, and expected that they can meet the welfare. She accounted some role and functions for NGOs, such as counseling and support service, awareness raising and advocacy, legal aid and microfinance. These ser-vices help the people to achieve their ability, skill and know-

ledge, and take control over their own lives and finally become empowered. On the other hand, Stromquist (2002) has noted three major functions for NGOs such as (1) service delivery (e.g. relief, welfare, basic skills); (2) educational provision (e.g. basic skills and often critical analysis of social environments); and (3) public policy advocacy. Baccaro (2001) shows how particular NGOs can promote the organization and "empowerment" of the poor, particularly poor women, through a combination of micro-credit, awareness-raising, training for group members, and other social services. Empowerment is the ability of individuals to gain control socially, politically, economically and psychologically through (1) access to information, knowledge and skills; (2) decision making; and (3) individual self-efficacy, community participation, and perceived control (Rappaport 1987; Zimmerman and Rappaport 1988).

In the long term, the aim of NGOs is to promote sustainable community development through activities that promote capacity building and self-reliance. Langran (2002), has mentioned that NGOs through capacity building help to sustain community development. NGOs are often created in order to expand the capacities of people (Korten 1990). Furthermore, NGOs are praised for promoting community self-reliance and empowerment through supporting community-based groups and relying on participatory processes (Korten 1990; Clark 1991; Friedmann 1992; Fowler 1993; Edwards and Hulme 1994; Salamon 1994) .

On the other hand, sustainable development has emerged over the past few decades as an important paradigm for community development. However, as Bradshaw and Winn (2000) have noted, sustainability is rooted largely in an environmental approach, particularly in the industrialized countries. But, the goal of sustainable development is to find a balance between three pillars - social, economic and environmental - of communities (Sneddon 2000). The Rio Conference interpreted sustainable development as a single process with three dimensions. In addition, the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation defined it as three distinct processes, of "economic development, social development and environmental protection— as interdependent and mutually reinforcing pillars" (United Nations 2002). These dimensions were originally introduced with the aim of identifying areas in which social, economic and environmental goals are interrelated (Holmberg and Sandbrook 1992). However, these dimensions of sustainable development have done little to reduce the complexity of the concept and has itself introduced a contradiction.

Hibbard and Tang (2004) in their study in Vietnam, have noted the importance of NGOs' roles in sustainable community development. One of the roles was that NGOs balance the social, economic and environmental factors in promoting sustainable development. Another important role of NGO that they discovered was decentralization of the central government which helps the local communities to acquire more power in order to make their own decisions. But, sometimes the local communities lack specialists to do professional work and resources that are important for the particular projects. In this situation, NGO assists local staff with drafting sustainable development plans that are functional under the umbrella of a central government policy. Finally, they concluded that sustainable community development is process-oriented, and it requires extensive community participation and relies on network to share resources, knowledge and expertise.

From the literatures, it could be summarized that NGOs play an important function in promoting sustainable community development. Sustainable community development emphasizes on a balance between environmental concerns and development objectives, while simultaneously enhancing local social relationships. Sustainable communities meet the economic needs of their residents, enhance and protect the environment, and promote more humane local societies (Bridger and Luloff 1997). As Bridger (1997) has mentioned, sustainable community development includes five dimensions. The first dimension emphasises on increasing local economic diversity. The second is self-reliance which entails the development of local markets, local production, local processing of previously imported goods, and greater cooperation among local economic entities. The third dimension involves a reduction in the use of energy, coupled with the careful management and recycling of waste products. The fourth dimension focuses on the protection and enhancement of biological diversity and careful stewardship of natural resources. Finally, the fifth dimension is related to the commitment of the sustainable communities to social justice.

Through the functions of providing microfinance, initiating capacity building and self - reliance, NGOs could promote empowerment among community members, and eventually community sustainable development.
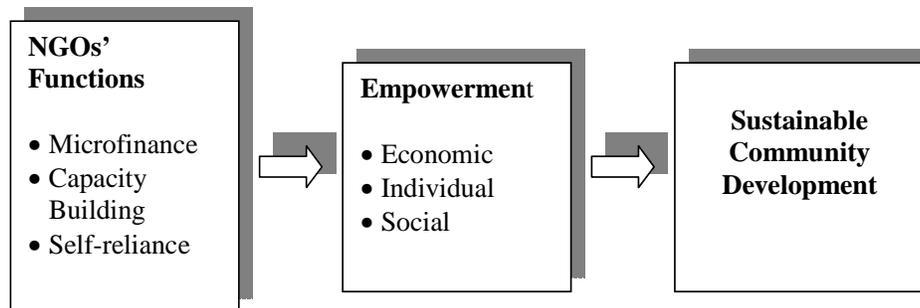
Fig. 1. Theoretical framework of the functions of NGOs in promoting sustainable community development

Figure 1 shows the outline of the relationship between NGOs' functions, empowerment and sustainable community development. From this perspective, NGOs' functions in community development are, among others, develop the local production and local markets; help the community to develop the social, capital and human resources; increase the knowledge and skills; encourage people to participate in activities, and act as a network between community and systems. The involvement in these activities would lead to them become empowered, which is the output of community development. In the long run, the outcome would be sustainable community development.

NGOs FUNCTIONS AND SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

This section highlights NGOs, functions and the promotion of sustainable community development. Specifically, the discussions are on the functions related to provision of microfinance, initiation of community capacity building and self-reliance. Eventually, sustainable community development will be achieved, particularly when community is empowered. The "bottom-up approach" in community development would likely bring about empowerment to the community and finally sustainable community development. According to Finger (1994), the bottom-up approach emphasizes community participation, grassroots movements and local decision making. It argues that community participation and grassroots initiatives promote participatory decision making and local self-reliance (Panda 2007).In bottom-up approach, people are able to define their own problems and having ability and capacity to solve it through organizing and participating themselves.

(a) Microfinance and Sustainable Community Development

During the 1990s, scholars have increasingly referred to microfinance as an effective means of poverty reduction (Rekha 1995; Cerven and Ghazanfar 1999; Pankhurst and Johnston 1999). Oxaal and Baden (1997). Mayoux (2000) and Cheston and Khan (2002) have pointed out the importance of microfinance in empowerment, particularly women empowerment. Microfinance is defined as efforts to improve the access to loans and to saving services for poor people (Shreiner 2001). It is currently being promoted as a key development strategy for promoting poverty eradication and economic empowerment. It has the potential to effectively address material poverty, the physical deprivation of goods and services and the income to attain them by granting financial services to households who are not supported by the formal banking sector (Sheraton 2004). Microcredit programs provide small loans and savings opportunities to those who have traditionally been excluded from commercial financial services. As a development inclusion strategy, microfinance programs emphasize women's economic contribution as a way to increase overall financial efficiency within national economies.

According to Cheston and Khan (2002), one of the most popular forms of economic empowerment for women is microfinance, which provides credit for poor women who are usually excluded from formal credit institutions. Since the 1990s, microfinance institutions have addressed the issues of sustainability, participation and empowerment. These issues have been research-ed and debated by donor agencies, NGOs, feminists,

and activists (Johnson and Rogaly 1997; Razavi 1997; Kabeer 1999; Mayoux 2001; Mahmud 2003). However, underneath these shared concerns lie three fundamentally different approaches to microfinance: financial sustainability, feminist empowerment, and poverty alleviation. All three microfinance approaches have different goals coupled with varied perspectives on how to incorporate gender into microfinance policy and programs (Mayoux 2000).

The microfinance empowers women by putting capital in their hands and allowing them to earn an independent income and contribute financially to their households and communities. This economic empowerment is expected to generate increased self-esteem, respect, and other forms of empowerment for women beneficiaries. Some evidence show that microfinance would empower women in some domains such as increased participation in decision making, more equitable status of women in the family and community, increased political power and rights, and increased self-esteem (Cheston and Kuhn 2002). Well-being as an out put of microfinance not only covers the economic indicators, but also other indicators such as community education, environment, recreation and accessibility to social services. It is related to the quality of life (Asnarulkhadi 2002).

In order to gain economic sustainability, NGOs through microfinance help the communities to reduce poverty, create jobs, and promote income generation. In the developing countries, sustainability is linked more closely to issues of poverty and the gross inequalities of power and resources (Hamnett and Hassan 2003). This is due to the fact that in the Third World countries, the ecological system sometimes conflicts with the socio-economic needs of local people who depend on a local ecosystem for their survival (Nygren 2000). In contrast, in the developed countries, as Bradshaw and Winn (2000) have noted, more priority is given on environmental aspect of sustainable development. In these countries, since the wealth of the nation and of most individuals has reached a certain level, therefore sustainability has been fueled primarily by concern for such issues as climate change, biodiversity, the deprivation of the natural environment, and the over-consumption of natural resources -especially non-renewable (Hibbard and Chuntang 2004).

(b) Capacity Building and Sustainable Community Development

As mentioned earlier, capacity building is another NGO's strategy that helps to bring about sustainable community development. Capacity building is an approach to development that builds independence. It can be:

i.   A 'means to an end', where the purpose is for others to take on programs.

ii. An 'end' in itself, where the intent is to enable others, from individuals through to government departments, to have greater capacity to work together to solve problems

iii. A process, where capacity building strategies are routinely incorporated as an important element of effective practice (NSW Health 2001).

Before beginning to build capacity within programs, practitioners need to identify pre-existing capacities such as skills, structures, partnerships and resources. Frankish (2003) has counted a number of dimensions for community capacity including financial capacity (resources, opportunities and knowledge), human resources (skills, motivations, confidence, and relational abilities and trust) and social resources (networks, participation structures, shared trust and bonding). UNDP (1997) has introduced capacity building as the process by which individuals, groups, and organizations increase their abilities to (1) perform core functions, solve problems, define and achieve objectives; and (2) understand and deal with their development needs in a broad context and in a sustainable manner. Furthermore, in terms of NGOs' functions, Langran (2002) has defined capacity building as the ability of one group (NGOs) to strengthen the development abilities of another group (local communities) through education, skill training and organi-zational support.

Capacity building is an approach to development not a set of pre-determined activities. There is no single way to build capacity. Although experience tells us that there is a need to work across the key action areas, practitioners approach each situation separately to identify pre-existing capacities and develop strategies particular to a program or organization, in its time and place. NGOs, through the provision of education, skill and knowledge, develop the capacity of community towards achieving sustainable development. In fact, NGOs act as a capacity builder to help the

community to develop the resources, building awareness, motivating to participation in project and finally improving the quality of community's lives.

A link to empowerment is frequently cited as one of the reasons for and outcomes of community capacity building. Empowerment is discussed at the level of individual empowerment (changes in skills, knowledge, consciousness and awareness, hope, action and beliefs in abilities to affect change) and changes in wider social structures and processes that result in increased resources and opportunities (Verity 2007). Furthermore, with regards to sustainability, capacity building has been identified in much sustainable development policy as one of the key strategies for increasing the potential towards sustainable development. For example, in a program to train women to establish a small enterprise, a positive result will be that women have co-operated to start the enterprise, but a sustainable outcome will depend on whether women have the capacity to make it work and derive an income from it without external financial or technical assistance (Viswanath 1991).

Many researchers argue that building community capacities and fostering empowerment are more effective ways of achieving sustainable community development than programs and success indicators imposed by outside experts (Harrison 1998; Mobbs 1998). They point out that outside experts usually have limited knowledge and understanding of the particular context, needs and issues of a community. Local solutions to achieving sustainable community and economic development are therefore seen as important outcomes of a capacity-building approach (Lennie 2005). For example, to increase the people's participation in order to achieve sustainable development, many issues should be considered, such as skills, leadership, knowledge, physical resources and stakeholder representativeness.

(c) Self-reliance and Sustainable Community Development

Self-reliance is another strategy that affects sustainable community development. Effective community development sits on the foundation of self-reliance. The concept of self-reliance is strategically situated within the essence of community development and is related to other concepts like mutual-help, self-help, participation of the indigenous people and rural progress. Self-reliance encourages the necessity for people to

use local initiatives, their abilities and their own possessions to improve their condition. Fonchingong and Fonjong (2002) have pointed out that self-reliance is increasingly being adopted as modus operandi for community development.

According to Kelly (1992), self-reliance means that the people rely on their own resources and are independent of funds sourced outside the community. Self-reliant strategy relies on the willingness and ability of the local people to depend on their own available resources and technology which they can control and manage. A self-reliant strategy requires the optional use of all available human, natural and technological resources (Agere 1982). Although dependence on the state maybe desirable in the short term, it should not be a long term objective, because the aim of the community development must ultimately be self-reliance. Reliance on external resources will lead to the loss of autonomy and independence of the community. On the other hand, autonomous communities can flourish only in the absence of such external dependency. Therefore, to attain self-reliance, community workers (e.g. NGOs) and community groups must discover their own potential and look for ways to innovatively develop such discovered potential to use as sources of wealth for the development of the community (Ife and Tesoriero 2006).

Motivating and mobilizing people to be self-reliant and to participate in development activities become an important objective of the NGOs. According to Korten (1990), the second strategy of the NGOs focuses on developing the capacities of the people to better meet their own needs through self-reliant local action. In the second generation strategy, Korten (1990), mentioned that the local inertia is the heart of problem in a village or community. There is a potential energy in a community but remains inactive because of the inertia of tradition, isolation and lack of education. But this inertia can be broken through the intervention of an outside change agent (NGOs and other agents) who helps the community realize its potentials through education, organization, consciousness raising, small loans and the introduction of simple new technologies. It is the stress on local self-reliance, with the intent that benefits will be sustained by community self-help action beyond the period of NGO assistance (Korten 1990). Therefore, NGOs, through the strategy of self-reliance, can facilitate sustainable development of the community.

CONCLUSION

This paper demonstrated the importance of NGOs in achieving sustainable community development through micro-finance, capacity building and self-reliance. NGOs through the micro-finance help members of community to access jobs, income-generation and improve economic situation. And then they would become empowered economically. On the other hand, NGOs develop the capacities of community such as skills, abilities, knowledge, assets and motivates the community to participate in the project to improve the quality of their lives. NGOs act as a capacity builders that help the community to achieve the empowerment particularly indi-vidual empowerment.

Since the philosophy of community development is independent from any outside agents, thus the community must rely on their own resources. NGOs assist the community to discover their potentials and also mobilize community to be self-reliant. According to the definition, empowerment is where people have greater control over livelihood resources. Therefore, the final outcome of community development is the independence of the community from external agents in formulating its agenda and managing its affairs. This process involves capacity building, where people get involved in human capital training, transferring of authority from donor to recipient and receive supports from stakeholders (World Bank group 1999). When people become fully empowered, they are able to contribute toward sustainable development (Lyons et al. 2001). Capacity building and empowerment are the best means to achieve sustainable community development. Therefore, NGOs through some programs and functions, such as microfinance, capacity building and self-reliance help community to be empowered, and finally contribute towards sustainable community development.

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