Community-based planning
A BETTER APPROACH TO DEVELOPMENT?

A potential source of individual, community, and national development, the methods and application of community-based planning are well worth exploring.

by George Kent

Development is commonly taken to be the responsibility of national governments; it is the planning offices in the national governments, always located in the capital cities, which prepare and publish the formal national development plans. Even where there is extensive participation from "below"—from individuals, communities, and possibly regional planning offices—the function of development planning is understood to belong to the national government. The others are helpers.

But why? Why should local people be the beneficiaries, but not the producers of their own development?

Planning by ordinary people can be a major instrument not only for their community's development, but also for their personal development and for the development of their nation. The potentials and the methods of community-based development planning are worth exploring.

In this context, community-based refers to face-to-face groups within communities working essentially at their own initiative. Planning means deliberate analytic efforts designed to guide future decisions and action. The distinction between planning for action and the action itself is important. Some community-based development activity is based on plans formulated elsewhere. Some activity is unplanned. The focus is on planning itself, on the process of reflection that precedes and guides action.

The meaning of development here, as in the current development literature, is amorphous. It derives from traditional interpretations concerned with increasing levels of industrialization and from modern conceptions centered on fulfillment of basic needs, but the meaning looks more toward the transcendent interpretations based on ideas of human dignity and fulfillment. The formulation that "development is the process of people taking charge of their lives" captures the meaning to be used here.

To develop is to gain increasing power to define, to analyze, and to solve one's own problems. In these terms, community-based planning can be seen as a direct means of development, not for the product it yields, but in its process.

The idea of involving ordinary people in planning is well established in the literature, even if it is not so well established in the practice of planning. Typically, popular participation is advocated virtually without limit; the populist reaction against elitism is total.

Despite the enthusiasm of its supporters, however, it must be acknowledged that popular participation has its disadvantages and limits. For example, planners may wish to consult broadly on whether a bridge should be built, but gladly leave its technical design to experts. Moreover, many people simply do not want to participate. It seems that people should have some right to become disengaged from public issues to tend to their own concerns.

By any realistic appraisal, then, the objective cannot be to maxi-
imize public participation. More moderately, the hope is to some-
how optimize it. The crucial point to be accepted from the advocates of public participation is that, while it is not unlimited, public participation does have intrinsic value. As Arnold Kaufman put it, ... the main justifying function of participation is development of man's essential powers—inducing human dignity and respect, and making men responsible by developing their powers of deliberate action.

As a consequence, at least some costs, in terms of delays, risks, and inefficiencies, should be tolerated in exchange for the benefits of public engagement. Where its effectiveness is uncertain, efforts should be made to make it work.

There are also some very positive benefits from participation beyond the intrinsic benefits to the participants. Planning is always contextual; it cannot be done at a distance or in the abstract. Local people always know the local context better than any outsiders. Thus, in some respects local people are in fact better equipped to undertake planning than professionals who have come in from the outside.

Even more important, broad participation in planning has the virtue of facilitating the implementation of plans. There is a new and growing literature on the problem of implementation agonizing over the fact that, repeatedly, plans that seem to be technically sound are not carried out successfully. The core problem simply may be that people do not like to carry out a scheme devised by others—regardless of its merits. In contrast, when plans are generated by the people who are to act them out, so that the goals and the motivation are wholly internalized, implementation becomes much less problematic.

**POWER**

It may be objected that it is foolish to advocate planning by local communities where those communities do not have the power to act out their plans. The formulation of ends without control over the necessary means can only lead to frustration. Where control is tightly held by the central government, any local planning that is allowed is likely to be only a mirage, an exercise designed to appease, fostering an illusion of shared power.

Surely it is foolish for planners at any level to propose actions that are manifestly impossible. But it should be appreciated that power is not a tangible commodity, to be divided around or divided up or captured like so many melons. People become weak by acting weak. In much the same way, people can gain power by acting as if they had power. A village may not have direct control over its nation's budget allocations, for example, but if it begins to formulate clear analyses and demands in the light of its interests, it will in the process manifest power, and it will gain influence over those allocations. The power derived from the active challenging of authority is not received as a gift nor is it seized from that authority. Rather, it reflects an inner strength that has lain dormant, an independent, self-created source of power.

As Berenice Carroll has argued so cogently, it is far more constructive to think in terms of power as competence than as dominance. The term refers to ... the idea of power as independent strength, ability, autonomy, self-determination, control over one's own life rather than the lives of others, competence to deal with one's environment out of one's own energy and re-

It is the empowerment of people out of their own resources that constitutes the fundamental value of community-based development planning. This empowerment is the basis of development in its deepest sense.

The enhancement of a community's power over itself could be seen as threatening to the community's central government, and it could lead to repressive action by that central power. However, while increasing power in the periphery may lead to increasing resistance to that power from the center, that is not a necessary and inevitable result. Many local communities, like many individuals, do not fully use the opportunities they have. Local communities sometimes can do a great deal for themselves before they even begin to antagonize their central governments.

Moreover, there are some central governments which are benevolent and politically secure, and which therefore would be pleased to find local communities enhancing their capacities to act for themselves. Some central governments may view the enhancement of community power not as a challenge but as a contribution to their own strength. Thus, the possibility that locally based planning could lead to a clash with central power should not be exaggerated and escalated into an assumption that it necessarily would lead to such a clash.

Nevertheless, there is the possibility. In some cases the national elite may see its interests as contrary to those of local communities. In such instances the empow...
ering of local people through community-based development planning may be viewed as a subversive act, one contrary to the interests of the center. Thus, central powers (or rural elites) may resist community-based planning. Their resistance may take the form of outright prohibitions. More commonly, however, their resistance is likely to take the form of tokenism, of appeasement. They are likely to advocate it in form, but do whatever is possible to empty it of substance.

Members of the local community, anticipating resistance, may be fearful, and thus they may choose not to pursue community-based planning. The grounds for that fear should be examined within the community. The outside planner may feel that the effort only becomes worthwhile when it presses its limits, when it begins to be risky. In the final analysis, however, the outside planner, as a facilitator, should respect the local people's judgment and decision on whether to undertake community-based development planning. They will have to live with the consequences of this decision; the outside planner will not.

Characterizing comprehensive planning as "the most advanced form of development planning," Albert Waterston describes it in this way:

It begins with the projection of a specific rate of increase in income or production over the planning period as the prime target. . . . The formulation of a comprehensive plan then involves the construction of a growth model for the period of growth on such aggregates as public and private consumption, savings, investments, imports and exports, employment . . . calculations are made to relate inputs . . . and the resulting outputs . . .

Comprehensive planning includes both the formulation of an integrated public investment plan and a plan for the private sector which have been reconciled with each other and with the over-all targets. 5

This is surely unrealistic for poor countries, especially small poor countries. The technical difficulties of completing these tasks is immense—as acknowledged by Waterston. More importantly, comprehensive planning and many of the sophisticated technical instruments of planning are not very effective, in rich countries or in poor countries. They may be intellectually elegant, but they also tend to be of very limited use in concrete situations. 6

To insist on sophisticated, technical planning methods renders many local governments and local people incompetent to plan, and forces them to rely on outside "experts." Too often, the sophisticated methodologies become instruments of mystification, expanding the influence of the outside planner or expert while shrinking the influence of the purported beneficiaries. It is also plausible that governments and others might adopt exotic planning techniques not so much because they work particularly well, but to retain and enlarge their own control over the planning process. Technique can thus serve as an instrument of dominance.

A comparable analysis can be made of much of the applied social research intended, with all good will, to help in the formulation of policy. The common complaints about gaps in the data base required by planners and the calls for more systematic research generally reflect the conventional view of research as something done by experts from the center to facilitate planning and decision-making in the center. In this light, research can be a means of separating people from the making of decisions that affect them. In the alternative approach advocated here, that of helping local people to make their own analyses and their own decisions, there is far less need for systematic, formalized social research. By and large, people know their own situation, and if they are to make their own decisions, there is little need for formal research about that situation. If research is needed, local people may be able to do it themselves. 7

Community-based planning can take place autonomously. At times, however, there may be interventions by outside agents, whether government officials, professional planners, development experts, or others.

Intervention by outside agents is filled with difficulties, especially in the ethical dilemmas it raises. Some critics, reflecting on the checkered historical record, argue that the only workable solution is to cut off intervention altogether. Any such indiscriminate rejection is irresponsible, however, just as indiscriminate acceptance of intervention is irresponsible. That outside agents can do harm is very well known, but at the same time it must be acknowledged that they can do some good. The benefits that outsiders can bring should not be cavalierly denied, especially in the face of very real needs.

To take the question of intervention seriously, then, is to ask under what terms and conditions, and by what guidelines, should service be rendered?

At the minimum, it is clear that
intervention must not be dehumanizing for any of the parties to the transaction. There must be a deep mutual respect. Just as the expert would like to have others acknowledge his or her special capacities, so too should the expert acknowledge the capacities of those with whom he or she is working. Mutual respect arises out of working with, rather than for others.

Concretely, this means working to reduce the distinctions between the expert and the non-expert. This can be accomplished through the sharing of planning tools. Edward Gerlock, in describing methods by which ordinary people can undertake their own research ("folk research"), has suggested that the proper role of the social scientist is not to do research but to suggest research tools. Similarly, the role of the professional planner perhaps should be understood not as planning for people, but as of bringing tools to and facilitating the work of people planning for themselves—folk planning.

Ordinarily, methodologies for planning (or for research) take the form of specific rules and tools. It is impossible, and probably undesirable, to provide that sort of detailed guidance for the conduct of community-based development planning. In an essay like this, or in the field, it may not be very useful to provide abstract theories and models. Perhaps the best approach simply is to provide examples that tell how people elsewhere have dealt with similar problems. These accounts should be of concrete experiences, and not simply the insights and lessons the agent has drawn from these experiences. This task of interpretation should, as much as possible, be left to the people themselves. They can supply the lessons to be derived, the specific meaning of these stories for them. They then become enriched by that interpretive activity.

**ALIEN VALUES**

Comprehensive planning as described by Waterston is unrealistic because of the difficulty of doing it. There is another, far more serious sense in which such sophisticated planning techniques are unrealistic: they are designed to achieve goals that are totally removed from the genuine concerns of genuine people. Who, when asked about their most troubling problems and their deepest aspirations, would answer in terms of heartfelt hopes for achieving specific national economic growth rates? Rather than being the highest stage of development planning, comprehensive planning may be not only impractical but also undesirable in all countries, developed or undeveloped. Such sophisticated planning instruments tend to be instruments of alien values, partly because they are designed that way, and also partly because their use requires the importation of alien experts.

The objective of most development planning—economic growth—is commonly advocated as a response to poverty. This view should be met with two major objections. First, as is well known, it is highly questionable whether economic growth is in fact effective in reducing poverty in the distributional sense—that is, in reducing the number of poor people.

Second, and of greater interest here, is the objection that increasing wealth, as such, is not always the central goal of poor people. Of course poor people, like rich people, would like to have more money. But the poor may not be as avaricious as the projections of rich people suggest. Many people with low incomes are well adjusted to their material circumstances, and instead focus their hopes and aspirations on other values. The imputation that the central development objective of most people is to increase their wealth is, to say the least, an untested hypothesis, an assumption that is made but not explored by development planners.

If development is defined in terms of autonomy—an increasing capacity to identify, analyze, and solve one’s own problems—then achieving economic growth, as such, does not constitute development. Economic growth may possibly contribute to development, as an instrument, if the character of the underlying problems of concern is made clear and if the way in which economic growth would be responsive to those problems is also made clear. But it never is made clear.

Much too much of the value set that motivates development planning is framed in terms of economic growth rates, foreign exchange balances, employment rates, and other comparable abstractions and aggregations. Values based on abstractions and aggregations may be authentic if they are drawn from systematic inquiries among ordinary people—the supposed constituency and beneficiaries of these development plans. More commonly, however, these are the terms of discourse learned by central planners as the basis for appealing to their effective constituencies—other bureaucrats, especially bureaucrats in international development agencies. Many development planners are in fact more responsive to potential funding agencies than to those whose development they purport to promote. The advocacy of alien values by central planners is thus sustained and reinforced by the attitudes of development agencies.
In much the same way, when central planners visit a village and suggest funding for this or that project, the local people say they want it. And if the central planners ask the people what they want, of course they ask for this or that project. They, like the visiting planners, know the game and its circumscribed rules. Just as in the relationship between central planners and the international lending institutions, they negotiate proposals of a very limited variety. In these transactions, each party programs and rewards the other to remain within the confines of the usual game.

Defining development

Insistence on the primacy of economic wealth as the measure of development is not simply a matter of bad judgment. It has the profound effect of affirming that those who are poor are defective: they are underdeveloped. Poor people may be enormously successful in their own terms—in maintaining strong communities, for example—but these achievements simply may be overlooked by those who insist on defining worth in terms of wealth. It is no accident that those who get to define development choose to define it in terms by which they themselves are already successful. One of the most important privileges of the powerful is that they get to define success.

We do choose how we will define development. The character of development is not something that simply "is"—out there to be discovered. It may be helpful to think of people's development as being measured in terms of that which serves as a source of pride to them. Then it becomes clear that imposing any common standard creates deficiencies, denies diversity, and manifests disrespect for people. In contrast, respect for indigenous values honors local achievements and thus shows respect for local people.

These observations bear on the argument for increasing self-reliance as a means to development.

The function of self-reliance is not only to reduce material dependency on others and to reduce vulnerability in certain kinds of crises. A major function of increasing self-reliance also is to help assure responsiveness to indigenous rather than alien values.

**EXPERIENCE**

There has been a great deal of community-based development planning, most of it ignored by modern, technique-oriented, central planners. Gandhi advocated and implemented village-based development in India, now manifested in the "panchayati raj" system.9 Mao mobilized the peasantry in China. Self-management at the factory level has been the major feature of Yugoslavia's development. The "ujamaa" program in Tanzania was based on village-level development. The Sarvodaya Shramadana movement in Sri Lanka has grown in scope and effectiveness since its inception in the 1950s. The Institute for Cultural Affairs, based in Chicago, has operated community-based development programs in more than 30 countries. Planning at the local level has been a major element in some programs of decentralization within nations. Not all community-based development efforts have been successful, but every one of them has added to the record of valuable experience. A full exploration of the potential and methods—and limits—of community-based planning would call for a close examination of this wealth of experience. For now, however, it may be useful simply to offer a few suggestive examples.

In one case a procedure was formulated by Bruce Etherington, an outside intervention agent, to help residents in squatter settlements in the Philippines to formulate their preferences in relation to land-use planning, and thus to be able to participate more fully with government agencies in determining land use. Following a briefing, groups of squatters were given cardboard sheets divided into 25-millimeter squares, and a number of cardboard squares to represent single family dwelling units. The people were asked to arrange the dwelling units to represent the ways they would like to see their new community planned. They were asked to make arrangements in any combinations they thought desirable.

Significantly, many groups asked to take the sheets back to their own communities where, over a number of days, virtually all community members participated in arriving at their proposed solutions.

Etherington concluded

... it may be argued that planning at the community level ... does not fall readily into the commonly accepted concept of planning. It is, nonetheless, an essential element within the planning process. In fact, within the hierarchy of planning techniques, it could be the basic element or building block upon which urban, regional and national social and physical planning policies may be built.16

Another good example of community-based planning is provided by the way an organization called the Economic Development Bu

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reau (EDB) defined its role in helping the people of Tanzania to deal with their problem of enormous grain losses due to mildew, vermin, and insect infestations. The EDB approached the problem at the village level and in a manner that would ensure direct control by the villages throughout the project. Through dialogue and by working on modifying existing storage structures, the villagers came to realize that they had more knowledge about the problem than they had thought, and that they had the collective power to change their own situation. The storage system that was finally developed through this process was not the result of foreign technology, but a recombinant of the best elements of the storage methods traditionally used in the village.

The grain storage problem was approached as a social problem that could be solved by the villagers. A technical solution was only part of the project as conceived by the EDB. Integrated into, and more important than a technical solution, was the facilitation of a process of problem definition, exploration of local material resources and limitations, and the design of effective action that could be used by the villagers to attack future obstacles. . . .

. . . In order for development to liberate people from the causes and substance of their poverty, it must involve a process over which they have control.11

The Rural Work Program, originating with the YMCA in Fiji and now also operating in Western Samoa, is based on local initiative, and gives focused attention to the importance of local planning. Out of a concern for the “culture of dependency where many people believe they have the right to depend on others to plan their future,” the program has established as one of its guiding principles the premise that “the main actors that make the plans and work the action should be the people with the problem.”12

**Premises of planning**

The value of community-based development planning can be illustrated by reference to food-related issues. Nutrition planning can proceed from either of two very different premises. The more traditional view is that the hungry need to be fed, and thus there is a need for food assistance programs and the like. The other view, pressed in Lappe and Collins’ *Food First*, is that, given the opportunity, people will feed themselves. The task, then, is mainly to help remove the obstacles that prevent people from taking care of themselves.

The argument is readily generalized beyond nutrition:

One view of the role of dialogue in planning is that it is something that needs to take place among the concerned professionals—planners, experts, specialists, policymakers. Several observers with another view have discussed the importance of dialogue between professionals and ordinary people. Some, like Max Millikan, see “planning as permanent dialogue among political leaders, technical elite, and populace over goals, targets, costs, and programs.”14

A third, quite different view of dialogue is that it is fundamentally something that should take place among ordinary people themselves. This is the basis of Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Working through literacy training programs, originally with peasants in the northeast of Brazil, Freire formulated methods for helping people analyze their situations and recognize their capacity to act on those situations. He called this process one of conscientization, or consciousness-raising. Dialogue within the group provides the basis for the liberating praxis: reflection and action upon the world to transform it.15

The natural method of development planning among ordinary people is dialogue. Planning at the community level thus necessarily entails a group of people arriving at their own analysis of their situation, including a confrontation with the conflicts they have among themselves and with others. It is a process of joint reflection providing a basis for action that will continue on page 86.
transform their situation. Thus, development planning is itself a form of liberating pedagogy. Moreover, it is likely to serve the purposes of liberation in a wider range of contexts than the literacy-training framework. Where basic literacy has already been achieved, community-based planning may be used as the basis for the work of consciousness-raising.

Thus, distinctions have been drawn here among three types of dialogue: that among professionals, that between professionals and ordinary people, and that among ordinary people themselves. If development is understood in terms of the liberation of people, the highest priority must be given to facilitating the planning dialogue among the people themselves. Planning can be liberating, but only for the planners. So long as people remain marginalized, without communication (and communication, and community) among themselves, dialogue among professionals—or the dialogue of consultation between professionals and isolated individuals—cannot be very fruitful.

Footnotes