

Initiatives for Community Empowerment- Do They Create Both Spatial and Temporal Boundaries and How to Look Beyond Them

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Introduction

There are apparent obstacles and challenges to community-led development particularly regarding sustainable community development. This study aims to delve into different initiatives of community empowerment and to consider whether they generate further boundaries (spatially and temporally).

What do we mean by Community?

Before we can discuss community development and empowerment it is necessary to create a foundation of understanding by how we define a 'community'. There is what can be described as a definition problem surrounding the term, meaning it can be interpreted and defined in many different ways.

It is questionable for example as to whether the concept community is place-specific as many traditional definitions suggest. However, this fails to acknowledge the rise in technology and communication which has advanced not only our immediate community but also our own identities (internet communities). Hence it can be argued that due to globalisation communities are no longer be defined to such a great extent by spatial boundaries (dispersion across space).

Similarly, the term community can relate to multiple groups of people with a shared or similar identity who reside in different locations. And arguably, projects on the ground level may not effectively reach all of the community as a result (spatially limited).

Below can be seen the associated terms collected when researching definitions of a community (figure 1). The associated terms largely contradict the assumption of globalisation that homogeneity is preferable. In reality, communities are often

heterogeneous and find strength in diversity (Hawken, 2007). Both in a human and in a nature context diversity is heavily paralleled to resilience.

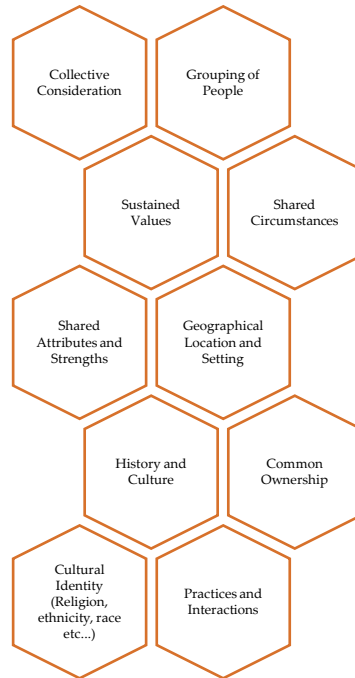


Figure 1: Associated Terms from Community Definitions

As well as collating associated terms a word cloud was generated from a collection of existing definitions of the term 'Community', this can be seen in figure 2. The most frequently used words were: common, people, group and interests. There are three key underlying themes of a community including place (geographically and online), commonality and belonging. It is important to note that when defining a community we are defining certain boundaries and hence it can be an exclusionary process.

When discussing power it is important to acknowledge the power of a community itself (collectively) for example a communities power to act. Within Price and Veen's study of community power structures the need for a local power balance is discussed (2016). Before working towards community development outsiders must begin with a power analysis to better understand local institutions. A power analysis for example may involve discussion with members of the community about 'security actors'. Local power can then be utilised for community benefit (Price and Veen, 2016).

It has often been regarded that there are four powers: power within, power with, power to and power over, however, this has been developed further by Robert Chambers (2012). The fifth power has been defined as the 'power to empower' and is essential to this study. Robert Chambers explored the interconnected nature of the powers for example the role of power within as an essential aspect of empowerment. Claiming that "self-confidence and a belief in their own rights" are necessary for empowerment (Green, 2016, pp.33).

Empowerment as defined by the World Health Organisation refers to "the process by which people gain control over the factors and decisions that shape their lives" (WHO, 2009). Hence empowerment requires the renegotiation of power which can often be associated with decentralisation. This process involves a shift in the power balances of a region. It must always be acknowledged that giving power to some takes power away from others (power is rarely equal or balanced). Ulrich's critical systems thinking approach recognises the need for unity in diverse approaches and systems and hence the need for effective management.

Community Empowerment as a Process

In the context of community empowerment, individuals in a collective can have a greater influence over their development in a process that goes beyond "involvement, participation or engagement" (WHO, 2009). Community development for example not only increases the participation of a community but must build capacity and hence encourage community-led solutions to community problems (Hawken, 2007).

Community empowerment has been divided into nine organisational domains by Laverack and Laverack (2001) as seen in the table below. These are predetermined and act as a systematic structure for community empowerment. Each domain is interdependent and in theory, all are of equal importance. It is questionable perhaps as to whether all domains are necessary or whether some domains depend on the prevalence of others. However, no domain alone can cause resultant empowerment.

Table adapted from Laverack and Laverack (2001)

9 Organisation Domains of Community Empowerment:
Improves Participation
Develops Local Leadership
Increases Problem Assessment Capacities
Enhances the Ability to 'Ask Why'
Builds Empowering Organisational Structures
Improves Resource Mobilisation
Strengthens Links to Other Organisations and People
Creates and Equitable Relationship With Outside Agents
Increases Control Over Program Management

Community Participation, one of the nine domains, is in essence the involvement of people within the development process. Participating in community decisions for example increases ownership and by doing so empowers members of the community (Hawkin, 2007). Although it is important it does not always result in empowerment as people can participate without engaging. Similarly, effective participation requires leadership else there is significant disorganisation (Laverack and Laverack, 2001).

For community empowerment to be successful there is clear debate as to the kind of leadership needed. Is it more effective to have local leaders, to train up leaders or to have an interplay between existing leaders and organisations? For any of these to be successful an understanding of existing leadership structures (culture and history) is necessary (Laverack and Laverack. 2001).

As well as recognising leadership structures organisational structures are also incredibly important. Communities are often made up of multiple subgroups all of which may organise themselves by different structures. For empowerment to be effective there is often a need to find common ground such as location or 'sense of belonging'. In many cases, people can be united by the fact they experience the same problems. Hence it can be argued it is necessary to derive a collective identity to bind people and generate collective leadership.

Similarly, defining different peoples core values can also be effective in uniting communities (Flint, 2013). However, when it is difficult to establish common values or identity, a problem assessment becomes very relevant. This encourages community members to identify issues and solutions themselves (decision making power). All of which can be viewed collectively through the process of Census building (Hawken, 2007, pp.223).

Access to resources and the ability to discuss and negotiate said resources is another essential domain (Laverack and Laverack, 2001). Community resources can generally refer to access, provision, control, availability, distribution and so on and play an essential role in the empowerment and development process (Hawken, 2007, pp.222). Resources are often heavily associated with leadership and power structures of which decision making could be co-located or distanced (Hawken, 2007).

The community must be made critically aware through methods such as education or capacity training, as to why they are disempowered. By raising awareness as to hindrances of development it can enable the division of community derived solutions and action. Lastly, forming links with others via partnerships for example can be known to play a significant role in the empowerment process. As described by Laverack and Laverack (2001) partnerships act as catalysts for the community empowerment process.

Challenges of Community-Led Development/ Empowerment:

Since the 1990's there has been a significant rise in 'non-state networks' including Non-governmental organisations (NGO's), with grassroots and bottom-up development growing in popularity. This shift largely occurred as a result of the failures of trickle-down economics from state-based top-down strategies. And as a result, NGO's in the present day are recognised for their significant role concerning community development and empowerment. However, a common misconception remains: NGO's cannot empower people, people must empower themselves. It is really important to recognise the 'power within' and 'power to empower' within this context. NGO's play a vital role as a catalyst, or enabling factor which if acted upon can lead to empowerment (Willis, 2011). Hence it can be argued that this misconception in itself poses a challenge to community development as it fails to recognise that individuals may choose not to participate in the empowerment process.

Another way in which community empowerment and grassroots projects are often limited is by finances. Due to the non-profit nature of most organisations, this often means they are tied to multiple different outlooks such as donors and governments. This can inhibit the ability of a project to meet the community's needs. Similarly, it can also largely impact the timescale of a project (maybe a much slower process, or stop-start). This financial dependence of NGO's can also make them more volatile to dependency on governments making it difficult for them to 'maintain autonomy' (Willis, 2011).

A common failure of community empowerment and development strategies is the 'implementation gap' when policy isn't put into practice. Communities First is an example of a Welsh Community Regeneration Policy that was an early attempt by the government to raise participation and engagement on a local level. Adamson and Bromiley's study of the project identified the need for 'incentives and levers' for greater policy rhetoric and community persuasion (2008). Recognising the time and energy constraints community development can have on community members, which is another significant challenge for the empowerment process. Arguably the implementation gap occurs when community members struggle to commit to programs (time constraints, low incentive, lack of training and so on) or the linkage between local power structures and outsider structures is weak.

Moreover, it is important to note how difficult it is to achieve meaningful and widespread participation. Entrenched attitudes are very difficult to change and hence there is a significant time commitment to such attempts. Similarly, deep-rooted inequalities often relate to tradition, culture or history which require great study and understanding to intervene. Hence it is essential to find ways of overcoming the notion of the 'outsider' to create better understanding and more effective power dynamics. As described by Green, it is important that 'outsiders' create an enabling environment and build peoples capacities so they can find their solutions (2016). As a result, the process in itself will empower community members.

Another significant challenge of community empowerment is how focused and specific it often can be. Although bottom-up development needs to be localised and directed to the needs and wants of a given community it is still incredibly important to recognise the influence of that group or region within its wider context. This is where systems thinking becomes incredibly relevant to Community Empowerment.

The Value of Systems Thinking

Systems thinking is largely built upon synthesis, the process of understanding something via its wider context. And it recognises the interconnected nature of the world we live in without shying away from complexity. Systems thinking actively encourages longer-term and more open-minded thinking that goes beyond isolated issues and challenges and provides appropriate interventions. It is recognised that by having a holistic or global view it can result in interventions consequently needing more simultaneous interventions or changes.

Within systems thinking there is a real focus around the concept of change. This can be anything from accidental change to wider system change for example. Change is

recognised as being unpredictable and there is often great resistance to change that must be overcome (Green, 2016). Within systems thinking 'leverage points' are recognised as "places within a complex system, where a small shift in one thing can produce big changes in everything else" (Meadows, 1999). These are areas of which intervention should take place. As well as understanding leverage points systems thinking also considers boundary judgements.

When considering a system as a whole certain boundary judgements must be made to establish what is relevant and irrelevant. Different groups are likely to have different borders of concern and hence to establish a system we must understand a community's boundary judgements. A more ethical research approach for example is likely to encompass wider boundaries to incorporate more views of concern (Midgley, 2016). However, it can be argued that it is often difficult to extend boundaries due to time and resource constraints. Sometimes boundaries are better off narrower. It is completely context-dependent as to how boundaries are defined (Ulrich, 1994).

Managerial decisions about boundaries driven solely by interpretation and hence remain volatile to different stakeholders and individuals. Rationality and justification for such judgement, as a result, can be questioned therefore based on how appropriate they are given the situation and development context. When different groups of people are seen to be making different judgments about boundaries conflict can arise and as a result, there is an apparent marginal area between the two given boundaries (Midgley, 2016). This explains how views often become more prevalent or dominant over others.

Spatial and Temporal Boundaries

Within the context of community empowerment boundaries can be considered concerning space and time. This is where the definition problem becomes particularly relevant. If the definition itself is spatially limited then arguably the process will also induce spatially limited change. Changemakers must recognise the wide scope of communities for example- encompassing multiple localities or the online platform. There must also be recognition beyond the focal area, of the wider system. By developing one community are we having spinoff impacts on other localities (spatial limitation)?

Similarly, the nature of empowerment is often a timely process. Community mobilisation for example requires the building of trust. Structural change to incorporate locals or outsiders in leadership structures is not a quick and simple transition. Deep-rooted empowerment requires a mindset and behavioural change

that must happen in real-time and cannot be rushed. Temporal limitations of community empowerment mustn't generate an unrealistic pace as this can be incredibly limiting. NGO's by nature are dependent on finances which often are unpredictable or limited and has consequent effects on the duration of projects. When progress is not visual within a short duration of time, projects are often dropped for those progressing at a faster pace. Hence it can be argued that NGO's themselves become disempowered to an extent by factors such as financial reliance, partnerships and so on.

Systems Thinking and Community Empowerment

Applying a systems thinking approach to community empowerment can be very effective for numerous reasons. Local peoples knowledge of a particular environment may for example be more important in cases than scientific knowledge. As further elaborated by Ulrich "present-day notions of professionalism wrongly put non-professional people in a situation of incompetence" (1998, pp.15). Similarly, Midgley puts great value on 'ordinary people', claiming they are just as able to think "systematically as professionals" (2016, pp. 163). Hence it can be argued that systems thinking in itself empowers people by recognising 'ordinary peoples' value.

As well as failing to recognise the value of experiential knowledge large scale community development often fails to incorporate everyone's needs across large areas. Hence, it can be argued it is incredibly important to recognise different areas of concern and the interconnected nature of variant issues rather than tackling one issue at a time (Flint, 2013). This is where a systems thinking approach is particularly relevant as it sees the wider context when solving problems. Similarly, communities must always be considered within their wider region such as their bioregion. This is because the actions of one community could have offset benefits externally or on the flip side could negatively impact the environment or another communities development (Flint, 2013). Hawken similarly recognises the link between sustainable communities and systemic thinking- "Sustainable communities seek community development that enhances the local environment and quality of life as well as developing a local economy that supports both thriving human and ecological systems" (2007, pp. 223). This is becoming increasingly relevant with the rise in global crises and is something essential to consider going forward. Parochial perspectives in particular are becoming more unsustainable by nature and largely hinder the community empowerment process.

Systemic Intervention (Methodology):

Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) is a form of research method that combines post-structuralism¹ and critical futures research. CLA requires participants to be willing to share and collate ideas and looks to effectively incorporate different ways of thinking. Similarly, systems thinking approaches are often most effective when mixing methods due to the heterogeneous nature of systems and the holistic wider view.

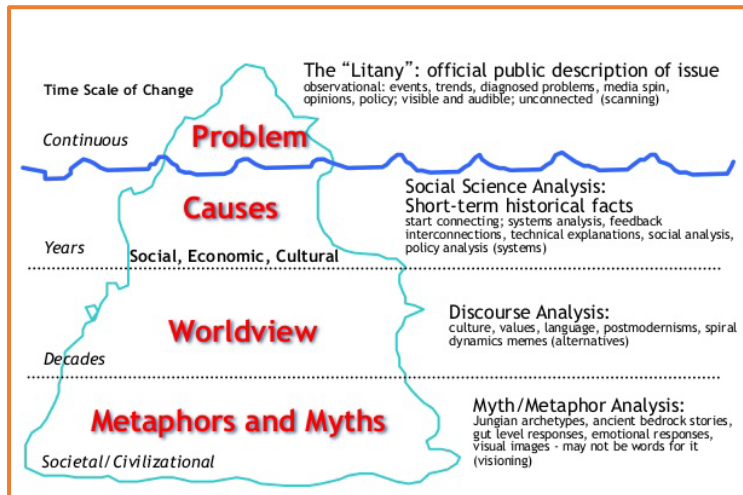


Figure 3: Causal Layered Analysis - Slaughter, List and Hines (2003)

A systemic intervention can be defined as a “purposeful action by an agent to create change to certain boundaries” (Midgley, 2016, pp.157). Systemic interventions occur at leverage points as previously discussed and can create the need for a further spin-off intervention. Systems Thinking methodology has been evaluated through Communities Prepared to produce concluding statements for future community empowerment prospects.

Communities Prepared is a UK community resilience programme with a focus on emergency aid and volunteer training. Communities Prepared is unique in the sense it uses a hybrid method that combines both top-down and bottom-up approaches. This is not always equally balanced as some communities require one approach to a greater extent (appropriate development). Communities Prepared exemplifies multiple barriers to community empowerment as follows.

Communities Prepared has multiple partnerships including one with the Environment Agency. Whilst also having multiple sources of funding such as the

¹ A cultural movement that advanced on structuralism during the 1960's that can be closely linked to that of post modernism. Looks at meaning through differences and the power of discourse.

National Lottery and Community Fund making it stable and consistent. Although Communities Prepared is both supported and financially stable the sheer nature of said partnerships create functional boundaries. Arguably, decision making will take a narrower scope due to different interest points of the programme's ties. Similarly, there will be greater pressure to show progress and response and hence programs may have short durations or take a faster pace.

By nature, emergency aid is a very responsive process. Arguably, multiple temporal and spatial boundaries arise from this. The emergency response often requires a fast pace and is configured under significant pressure. Hence it is questionable as to how well planned out emergency development is. Similarly, depending on the scale of an emergency it is unlikely an organisation alone can provide the resources, people power and so on to cover everyone (spatially limited). This however is often overcome by multi-organisational response which occurs by overcoming functional boundaries of an organisation and often takes place through emergency management-related decisions.

On the other hand, communities prepared's volunteer programme and less short term initiatives have impactful empowerment prospects. Communities Prepared for example looks to reduce skill gaps by providing knowledge and tools (capacity building). By providing a range of different options for participation Communities Prepared is effective in encompassing different peoples needs, capacities and time constraints (Adamson and Bromiley, 2008). Similarly, by providing 'participation careers' there is a greater incentive to progress and participate. Flexible governance structures have also created an enabling environment for more harmonious relationships between the local community and 'outsider' structures.

Conclusions

This study set out to acknowledge spatial and temporal boundaries through the exploration and evaluation of the community empowerment process. Early on in the research, a clear definition problem was identified concerning the term 'community'. Through research around empowerment and community, both individually and combined there soon became apparent challenges. By viewing community empowerment through a systems thinking approach it became possible to identify spatial and temporal boundaries from the challenges. Communities Prepared was then used to exemplify boundaries in systemic intervention in real-time. The results of the study have indicated the value of a systems thinking perspective when approaching community empowerment to reduce boundaries both temporally and

spatially. However, have proved no perspective and approach is without its flaws and community empowerment remains a challenging and complex endeavour.

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