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Factors Encouraging the Growth of Sustainable Communities: A Jamaican Case Study

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The concept of sustainable communities assumes a process of social and/or economic development that has as a high priority, the needs of the future generation. However, models of social and economic development employed in developing countries, must rely heavily on political, social and psychological empowerment techniques being employed at the community level, in order to warrant any type of sustainability becoming apparent. A case study taken from Kingston, Jamaica recounts and examines the experience of a Social Work Unit/private company in partnership, becoming involved in a low-income community's drive for sustainable development. The paper will reflect on the intervention, the analysis of which suggests inclusion and acceptance of a 'third party' support mechanism by the community and the presence of visible political and economic support from the government as the two factors which impact directly on creation of sustainable development initiatives in communities such as this.

EMPOWERMENT WITHIN GARRISON COMMUNITIES

As other authors have pointed out, real empowerment of the community tends to lead to confrontation with the state and its machinery (Delgado, 1997; Kolawole, 1982; Shragge, 1997). Handing over authority to local bodies, the forming of partnerships between state and community economic ventures, the creation of new civil structures with their own autonomous and independent decision making machinery, are all changes which lead not only to en-culturation and re-vitalisation of dying communities, but are also changes which have the potential to lead to confrontational politics from all the stake-holders. In fact, often one finds that

in the low-income community, there is a peculiar tension which exists in its relationship with the government. Although striving to create some sort of community integrity with civil structures which are run and managed by the local residents, there is still the hesitance to become too independent and confrontational and therefore lose the patronage derived from partisan support. For these people, confrontation with party representatives is therefore rarely more than easy rhetoric, as they remain unsure of the faithfulness of any new source/offers of assistance. The most successful types of alliances therefore tend to be those which bring clearly defined rewards, rewards which should be visible in material terms and should be accessible to the majority of the residents.

Wealth and status have become synonymous with visible party membership and position. In examining this Jamaican case study Stone's concept of the 'garrison community' helps us to understand the extreme dependence ('clientelism') which develops between the ghetto resident and the political party in power. In exploring this clientelism, Stone (1986) coined the concept of garrison communities, where the guarding of the 'garrison', the urban ghetto community, became uppermost in the life of the residents. Stone sees this dependence leading to a partisan practice of "preponderant support" (Stone, 1986:63) where in the community, the need for, and access to, scarce resources, oftentimes leads to extreme measures being taken to ensure community coherence and safety, albeit all in the name of partisan fidelity. As has been seen in the past, garrison communities with their typical die-hard political-party allegiance, constantly turn to and rely on the political party to furnish socio-economic needs. This type of faithfulness has also tended to re-direct confrontational politics inward as a consequence of the local competition engendered. This in turn leaves little space for forging of alliances and collaborative activities with outside non-party groups which have been historically hesitant to identify with the area for fear of reprisals, personal or political.

In developing countries, community usually refers to a particular locality engaged in communal activity. As Ife (1996) points out, geographical rather than interest-based definitions allow development practitioners more freedom to understand principles

of equity and justice as communal attempts at CED implementation are better monitored within boundaries. Thus development in this context reflects not simply social and economic growth as reflected in socio-economic indicators, but rather a community-defined process of improved social networks and access to resources which will enhance personal, economic and communal quality of life over an extended period of time. As Munslow expresses it, reflecting on the South African experience, sustainable development is being "concerned with improving the overall quality of life as well as satisfying human needs (Munslow et al. 1997:4)". This type of development therefore is long-term, multi-faceted and concerned not only with immediate economic return, but also concerns itself with setting structures in place which will ensure (as much as is possible in these temperamental Third World economic) a life-style which is internationally comparable and environmentally supportive.

In analysing the strategy employed in the case study, the writer was guided by a particular model which Nozick (1993) presents. She offers five principles which provide a framework for building a sustainable community. Summarily these are:

1. Community commitment to maintaining the natural balance between humanity and nature.
2. A collective unity of purpose. Thus for the community, the 'power within' (the individual) and the 'power-with-others' (the community) should emerge rather than being ascribed due to partisan fidelity and adherence to fixed national agendas.
3. Placing the onus of development on the community and the individual within that community, pointing out that material and non-material needs will only be satisfied when human indicators of development are foremost. As she puts it, "people matter most-not things, not money", (1993:38).

These three principles lend support to use of the locality-based definition of community where systematic emphasis of the human resource element bridges the divide between rich and poor. Empowerment of the individual brings together resources and potential. Although undereducated and inexperienced, poor residents need not be underachievers. Access to innovative resources,

coupled with a wish to achieve can bring untold of success. This is one of the premises on which the empowerment principle rests as the individual attempts to integrate political, emotional and economic empowerment. (Abbott, 1995; Freire, 1972; Friedman, 1992; Jones, 1992; Mendell & Evoy, 1993).

THE JONES TOWN EXPERIENCE

In 1992, the government of Jamaica began the process of developing a strategy for re-vitalisation, deemed the 'only way forward' for urban low-income communities 'blighted' by continuous outbreaks of gun warfare, extreme poverty and a piteous lack of infrastructure. A specially selected Committee was constituted under the Office of the Prime Minister. It brought together a range of community-based organisations, representatives of the church, representatives of the political parties, The Kingston Restoration Company (KRC, a private urban re-development company), the Government of Jamaica and the Social Work Unit, University of the West Indies, Mona Campus. After a series of meetings, a sub-committee was given the charge to scientifically select an area with which to begin the process of designing and implementing a strategy for re-vitalisation. The area, Jones Town, was selected and accepted by the Committee after a process of rating based on proximity to the designated KRC re-development area, evidence of a high level of political 'warfare', socio-economic characteristics, and potential for development. KRC and the Social Work Unit were then named as joint implementers (with the backing of the government of Jamaica) of this process towards re-vitalisation.

Having selected Jones Town, the Committee was faced with the problem of clarifying geographical boundaries that were acceptable to all the stakeholders. The problem was eventually resolved by using a geographical area delineated as such by the Electoral Enumeration office and ratified by the historico-geographic recollections of the residents. As the area has remained a party stronghold, local political interpretations of 'tribal' boundaries, (a term used to reflect political party allegiances) was also employed.

Description of Jones Town

Jones Town evolves from what was called Jones Pen, then a post-emancipation residential area. It housed primarily up-and-

coming professionals who were working in Kingston and proud of their newly evolving status. Houses were well built of block and steel and had spacious bed-rooms, kitchens and bathrooms all under one roof with well-kept surroundings. During the nineteen fifties, the area was serviced with buses, electricity, and an efficient water and sanitation system. This pace of development, however, failed to keep abreast with the remainder of Kingston, due to the area becoming stigmatised as a political party stronghold, and suffering frequent attacks by the opposing faction. As the years passed into the sixties, these large houses became tenement yards, housing a number of families in one building or one yard. During the seventies and eighties, this political stigmatisation resulted in a restriction in movement for the residents, with a consequent dislocation of earning opportunities. Consequently towards the end of the period, many of the community activists who had been working towards lessening the dependency on political allegiance, left the area to find work and to live elsewhere in Kingston. For those left, the problem of political violence together with the oppressive reality of extreme poverty over the years, created a tightly knit, closed community ravaged by frequent outbreaks of gun warfare and attendant emergency curfews.

Today internally, Jones Town is well serviced with churches (of all denominations) bars, small shops and groceries, basic schools, a post office, a primary school and a police station. Within close proximity, Jones Town has potentially easy access to a range of health facilities, schools, cemeteries, public transportation, limited telephone facilities and fire stations. Economic opportunities are however limited as the stigmatisation of the residents and the area by the larger community still exists.

Jones Town is a community of history, a community of memory, of residence, of partisan politics and as such, a community that needs to be seen in both a physical and spiritual sense. It is an inner-city neighbourhood which has been ravaged from within, by the devastating impact of poverty, hopelessness, alienation, and from without, having endured severe political polarisation and consequent stigmatisation by the larger society. It is an example of an ideal-type garrison community, having been used as a 'war-zone' between opposing 'tribalists' and one that has seen its share of savage, personal domestic disputes. In 1986, explaining the garrison concept of such communities, including Jones Town,

Stone spoke of "machine guns controlling clearly defined political boundaries", with a consequent "political protection insulating the residents from the reach of the security forces" (1986:57).

The young (51% under 20 years of age) socially depressed community of approximately 8000 residents, has over the last 30 years experienced a continued deterioration in the level of community services available internally. For them, inclusion in a strategy for re-vitalisation was seen as a possible way of lessening the effects of this deterioration and continued dependence on party representatives, as the continued high level of social unrest and violence has undermined any local attempts at change.

The Strategy

The first step in the re-vitalisation strategy was a process of gaining community acceptance through introduction of the team and building knowledge of the community and its dynamics. In initiating the process, the faculty representative of the Social Work Unit and the team leader from the KRC spent some three months in the area being formally introduced and becoming familiar faces to political and social activists. During the seventies and the eighties (a period of severe stigmatisation by the larger society due to the high level of gun warfare), the residents of Jones Town had made systematic attempts to structure community organisations which were tasked with designing a representative body which would serve to bring together all the sections of the community. It was important, therefore, for the team to re-assure community residents that this was not just another political manoeuvre designed from outside simply for political gain, but rather a move which reflected a real interest on behalf of the larger society to build on work already started and which hopefully would lead to a renewal of the area. During that time also, political representatives and residents were aware from discussions and the public media that the select Committee had been chosen and the implementers were to be expected in the area.

When it was decided that both community leaders and the community itself accepted the presence of the team and were willing to begin participation in the process of re-vitalisation, students of the Social Work Unit were formally and informally introduced to the community together with their faculty Super-

visor. The use of students from the Social Work Unit brought home to the community of Jones Town, the seriousness of the project. Suddenly to them, it appeared that perhaps someone was really interested in helping them in their almost forgotten dream of rehabilitation. To the residents of Jones Town, the constant threat of gun violence had now become a way of life which it was clear had driven away any sort of systematic interest in the area. To see young, female University students standing on the corner late in the evening talking about community dreams and desires seemed almost unreal. Soon however it became obvious that team was indeed intent on pursuing a process which must begin with a high level of community involvement.

The first community meetings were held at the two Church Halls in separate sections of the community. They were able to present the intent of the particular process to the residents, as well as to identify the kinds of concerns that were most frequently articulated. They also served to identify to the researchers, possible community resource persons who might be willing to identify with the project. Maintaining this contact, however, was not as simple as it might seem as it meant that those persons would have to be seen as assisting with a project which at first blush appeared to have strong political support from the party in power.

The process began with employment of the Social Compass technique (Connor, 1969), as a participatory method of identifying community strengths, weaknesses, and resources. After motivation by the churches and social activists of the community, members of the community volunteered to be trained by the Unit to assist with the exercise. As students were also to be gathering data along with the community residents, careful attention was paid to the issues of acceptance, credibility, and safety as part of the process of gaining entry to and acceptance by the community. There were ground rules agreed on by the community representatives and the students, such as how late one could stay in the community at night, students should always be accompanied by the chosen community representative, and if fighting broke out in the community, students should be quickly escorted out.

Then followed an intense three months of data generation. Participatory analysis of the data led to the implementers becoming very active, discussing the findings from the study with the

different sections of the community, with the special Committee and with the Prime Minister's office.

The process of gaining acceptance by the community was premised on the principles of partnership and the necessary fusion of researcher and researched. In this manner, unexamined assumptions of leadership, expertise, and authority, often held by the outsider, were open to confrontation and scrutinisation by the community experts. This methodology has been acknowledged as a way of sharing the responsibility for collective decisions made (Bawden, 1989; Finn, 1994; Freire, 1972;) while re-enforcing community self-confidence and endurance.

In 1993, the working group entered a second phase where the task was now one of representation and advocacy. The team had no other agenda than to call for help on behalf of the community within the areas that were identified during the participatory data gathering. It therefore initiated consultation between the community, private investment companies and government representatives to attempt clarification and support for possible implementation of goals which could be derived as a result of the process. The community at this phase was represented by mass meetings, area political representatives, informal community leaders and church representatives while the Committee appointed by the Prime Minister provided an external source of assistance.

Although a potentially rewarding time, it was also a very challenging period as it saw leadership roles becoming clarified as part of the process. The team leader, for example, soon realised that Jones Town could become a very taxing responsibility and from time to time began to be involved in other less demanding activities. Students became immersed in other degree requirements and the faculty representative realised that developmental growth of a community calls for a great deal of personal and communal empowerment, a process which is time consuming and requiring repetitive re-enforcement. For Jones Town, it was a period of continuous dialogue and negotiation, forcing opposing groups within the community to re-identity themselves as joint members in the process. All levels of leadership were engaged. Despite setbacks, the determination of the Select Committee to see the process through and 'to keep the people to their word', active continuation of the process was ensured. In this manner, residents

were therefore assisted with negotiating how 'tribal' warfare was to be handled and were also encouraged to initiate the inclusion of new expertise.

By 1996, we saw the evolution of a Jones Town Re-development Committee (JTRDC), which called for a formal alliance between Jones Town community representatives and the Committee. At this point, new partners were drawn into the process viz. the CAST/IPED team. This was a team of consultants and students from the Physical Infrastructure Class of the University of Technology, Jamaica. It brought into the process 'new blood', some of whom were former residents/leaders of Jones Town who were now living outside of the area but had retained links with remaining family and the community at large. The JTRDC as its' first task designed and assisted with the implementation of a number of community activities which included the Best Block Competition, the provision of rewards for Labour Day activities, general cleaning of communal and open areas, summer vacation programmes for some 100 youngsters, a Basic Schools upgrading programme, and a cultural Ghetto-music Splash. These activities served to bear out the truth of the position, that in Jones Town, there is indeed a community and activities organised through the representational bodies are viable and well supported. Activities served also to bring to the fore the wide range of skills and leadership abilities which abound in the area. Planning and mobilisation for the activities also served not simply to critique and balance proposals being made by various representatives within the JTRDC, but also created a sense of camaraderie and entrepreneurship amongst leaders at all levels.

It is clear however, that community mobilisation is a necessary but not sufficient condition for development to be sustained. The process in Jones Town has therefore attempted to include the political process and the constituent political representatives, without including the actual Members of Parliament themselves. It forced the political directorate to examine the accustomed preferential treatment within the community boundaries and the divisionary nature of such activity. Meetings which were held both inside the community and outside in highly public forums attempted to be truly participatory with a democratic organisational culture which emphasised the use

of non-hierarchical organisational strategies. This participatory developmental model employed was therefore able to encourage and stimulate the resurgence of a well-defined representative body within the community in which residents felt empowered enough to identify themselves as change agents. Consequently, local residents were motivated to "make things happen" and we witnessed a subtle transfer of power with the government's agreement (after more than four years of asking) to open the east-west corridor which had been closed due to political warfare, ministerial backing for huge inputs of international financial aid, structuring of a Revolving Loan strategy which should be funded by existing national sources, and visible evidence of state intention to back private sector financial and resource support for basic schools, parenting and teen projects, and economic ventures in the area.

The Social Work Unit is no longer in Jones Town. It is not needed. Looking back at 1998, it would appear that the community is now fully mobilised towards social, psychological, and economic empowerment (Report 1998), having moved through the stages of participation in consciousness-raising and critical analysis of historical political alliances, learning how to exert control through developing competence and technical ability, and re-establishing a positive self esteem (Ninacs, 1997). If we look at the areas of success, the need for security, clean neighborhood and improved access to the outside world, ranked high on the list. During the process it became clear that it was important to the community that those persons who wished to be identified as part of the process should be clearly identified and publicly praised. For them community approval was now more influential than wealth or status conferred from outside. The community is well on its way to prioritisation of its needs and the possible sources for assistance, having finalised arrangements with government-linked international aid agencies for establishment of income generating projects located inside Jones Town. It has also called for a redefinition of autonomy and decision-making power as it strives to entertain possible alliances. This is what re-vitalisation really means. A new power from within which is defined in cognitive, economic and social terms. Economically, the historical reliance on the local representatives of the state and/or party continue to

give way to self-help and innovative use of the credit institutions that now exist specifically for a clientele such as this.

TOWARDS THE DEVELOPMENT OF SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES

A key premise underlying the use of a participatory developmental model was the acceptance by all the stakeholders that the strategy employed would build on empowerment of the local leadership. It was an assumption which derived from an academic and experiential understanding of poverty and its alleviation and an understanding of what its role is in the process of sustainable development and anti-poverty programming. In Jones Town, poverty alleviation was interpreted as improved housing conditions and removal of certain stigmas associated with location, thus allowing for easier access to the outside community. As the majority of residents were self-employed, ease of access and proximity to the market place was critical. Economic empowerment then became both determinant and corollary as acceptance of their legitimate struggle for autonomy should lead to improved financial inflows into the community and improved economic strength. Simultaneously, as residents realised the possibility of their savings going towards the erection and renovation of their own dwelling units, the incentive for earning a steady income should improve proportionally. Empowerment also spoke to increased use of community decision-making and acceptance of it by the politician.

In addressing poverty, social processes go hand in hand with new economic initiatives as economic independence brings with it new roles, responsibilities and personal relationships.¹ In Jones Town, the services of community-based agencies in the development of skills and starting up of small businesses remained high on the agenda as residents identified the need for improved incomes. As Ninacs' SWOT analysis of the Bois-France mouvement communautaire in Quebec (1993:154), lead him to conclude, any economic activity within the community will become sustainable chiefly because of the solidarity and recognition of the broader socio-political framework which exists. Here, the external agents found it expedient to 'market' the community to the private interests and internally, to ensure that programs aimed at restoring self

esteem and weakened family relationships become high priority. The community was quick to realise that sustainable poverty alleviation speaks about creative and democratic alliance building between public and private sector agencies as well as within already existing agencies, as development of the community grows.

The intervention approach used in this case assumed that people preoccupied with daily questions of safety and political violence are hard pressed to dream of a long life or a fruitful future. These residents of inner-city low-income neighbourhoods see political stability and the freedom to encourage economic investment at the local level as a desirable goal. For them, sustainable development and empowerment means having the capacity to negotiate alliances with both government and private sector from a position strengthened by representation and participation as they strive to live that 'better' life. Institutionalised acceptance of communities' attempts at capacity building and self-actualisation is therefore called for. In a society where economic power continues to be highly concentrated within a small minority of rich and privileged families, who along with foreign capital dominate the economy, communities are now demanding an integrated approach to development which builds on tradition and history but confronts a sense of marginality and powerlessness by improving the conditions of life and livelihood nationally.

As Barr (1995) points out, in the process of sustainable development there is a need to form mutually empowering alliances, as confrontation with the state/government is not the only route. In fact, it is now recognised that capacity building or asset building i.e. the developing of community skills and resources cannot be achieved relying totally on internal capabilities. In discussing the complexities of empowerment, Barr makes the point that often the State while attempting to hand over the reigns of local government and other such structures of local empowerment, finds its efforts misunderstood. "There are sometimes contradictions, therefore, between the apparent desire to empower but an actual unwillingness to recognise and "own" the logical consequences in terms of power redistribution and dis-empowerment. Professionals and politicians need honestly to appraise their attitudes and consider whether in their strategies for empowerment they only accede to notions of partnership because this approach secures

their own power" (1995:128). What is interesting to note, is that as the Jones Town residents began to realise their own ability to negotiate for project funding on their own behalf, new demands were being made of politicians to go beyond the traditional clientelism and give integrated social development an opportunity to take root.

CONCLUSION

Analysis of this case study has demonstrated that there are certain lessons to be learnt:

- a. Jones Town as a ghetto garrison community still shows the capacity to move to a democratic cross-sectional developmental representation despite the history of dependency and guardianship. This representation has the potential to harnesses the community strengths by giving status to committed community involvement.
- b. As organisational strength grows with the confidence gained from accomplishments, it must be borne in mind that the pace of sustainable development in such low-income ghetto settlements cannot move more rapidly than the community's ability to interpret and challenge political control. This is substantially bolstered by achieving a position of organisational and cognitive strength.
- c. The involvement of the community may be sporadic or temperamental. It is hardly well sustained without considerable support. As they consciously strive to remove the shackles of clientelism, the use of a process of participatory learning action at the hub of the intervention will lead to the community embracing new opportunities for re-visioning and structuring of initiatives for social and economic development. Retention of an unattached external body that sees its role as facilitator and enabler, would serve to under-gird the process of learning and commitment as the community strives to bring together internal and external resources to tackle stigmatisation, alienation and poverty. This body, however, needs to ensure that it is non-partisan, reputable and willing to understand the process of representation and advocacy while having the competencies for action development.

NOTE

1. See Mendell and Evoy (1993) for discussion on the tensions inherent in community economic development

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