

MAKING DECISIONS, NOT BRICKS: COLLABORATIVE DECISION MAKING IN COMMUNITY-LED DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

Chad McCordic, BA; Renee Pardello, MEd; Jennifer Artibello, BSc; and Jill LaLonde, MSc

Abstract

Community Led Development (CLD) and Community Driven Development (CDD) have become mainstream development practices, thanks to policy recommendations from the World Bank and bold projects from many innovative non-governmental organizations (NGOs) operating in the global south. These programs seek to improve and leverage social capital to improve wellbeing. However, without collaborative and inclusive decision making with community members during designing, planning, and implementing, these projects become less effective and sustainable, and risk perpetuating past injustices that traditional aid models became known for. OneVillage Partners' approach to CLD focuses on capacity building by inviting community members to actively lead all aspects of a project's lifecycle. The project is owned by community members, resulting in engaged collaboration across the community, building on local strengths.

Key Words: Community led development, partnerships, community driven development, capacity building, collaboration, social capital

Copyright: ©2020 McCordic et al. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Noncommercial Attribution license (CC BY-NC 4.0), which allows for unrestricted noncommercial use, distribution, and adaptation, provided that the original author and source are credited.

INTRODUCTION

In the far east of Sierra Leone, the village of Grima completed a major public consultation with OneVillage Partners, a community-led non-government organization (NGO). The community members chose the priority issue that they and OneVillage Partners would address jointly with a development project. The majority voted for improved sanitation systems. The community members began to dance in celebration. A community member exclaimed to the OneVillage Partner staff, “We have had six NGOs come into our community before yours,” he said. “This is the first time we have been asked which project we thought was necessary!”

This approach of creating opportunities for communities to lead their own development projects is called Community Driven Development (CDD). This methodology directly involves those who will benefit from the project in its development and implementation. “Poor people are often viewed as the target of poverty reduction efforts. Community Driven Development, in contrast, treats poor people and their institutions as assets and partners in the development process” (Klugman, 2002, p. 303). This approach is efficient. “Where poor communities have direct input into the design, implementation, management, and evaluation, returns on investment and the sustainability of the project are enhanced” (Woodcock & Narayan, 2000, p. 243).

Projects that are community-driven also improve accountability structures in their implementation, through shared decision making and building social capital (Klugman, 2002). Social capital “refers to the collective power of relationships, connections, and networks among and between people” (Rasmussen, Armstrong, & Chazdon, 2011, p.38). By tapping into social capital, CDD programs leverage this collective power to improve socio-economic wellbeing.

Community-Led Development (CLD) is an evolution of CDD that emphasizes social capital by focusing on building on local strengths (Torjman & Makhoul, 2012). Several NGOs, including OneVillage Partners, apply unique models of CLD. Nuru International trains community leaders in East Africa on project management and manages a social enterprise program to fund projects led by those trained community leaders (The Nuru Model, n.d.). Spark Microgrants helps community members in East and West Africa to develop project proposals that the organization then funds (Spark Microgrants, n.d.). The Hunger Project builds community members' capacity to achieve self-identified, regional development project goals (Empowering People to End Their Own Hunger, n.d.). These NGOs, like OneVillage Partners, are part of the Movement for Community Led Development, a consortium of organizations committed to "enhancing the power and capacity of communities to take charge of their own development." Taking part in one's own governance is a human right; therefore, "People in power must view people as 'active citizens', not 'beneficiaries', and 'solutions', rather than 'problems'" (The Movement for Community-Led Development, n.d.).

CLD projects are a response to the growing awareness of inequities of the traditional 'top-down aid' model. William Easterly, author of *The Tyranny of Experts* (2015), and others have written about the ineffectiveness of development assistance from foreign governments and how the practice perpetuates colonial systems of dependency on those donors. International aid has often been used as a system of control of the poor recipients by the donor countries, and this has provoked criticism of aid models (Sueres, 2016). This neo-colonialist exchange has created systems of 'donor dependency' on international funders as governments rely on foreign entities to implement services for its poorest citizens. Conversations with citizens of poor countries reliant on aid demonstrates that "some connect their dependency on outsiders to a growing sense of powerlessness...they feel that aid agencies interaction with them diminishes their power to manage their own lives" (Anderson, Brown, & Jean, 2012, p. 21). Even NGOs are starting to warn against the dangers of donor dependency. A paper published by the NGO ActionAid cited the civic degradation that comes with this dependency, "because

governments focus their attention on relations with aid donors rather than with their own people, and citizens focus attention on provision of services by donors or NGOs” (Thomas et al., 2011, p. 18). CLD projects aim to break this donor dependency by encouraging local ownership of projects. OneVillage Partners goes a step further by encouraging local decision making and control of development projects.

Community-Led Development projects have been used as models for community development that were equitable, effective, and sustainable. However, have these new forms of inclusive development projects been as efficient and effective in building long-term social capital as they were in their short-term implementation? The International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie) is a global leader in funding and supporting research and evaluation of the impact of development programs in middle- and low-income countries. A recent study by 3ie (White, et al., 2018) found that many CLD projects did not improve social cohesion or build social capital, largely because they overstated the actual direct involvement of community members. The study found that, “In Malawi and Zambia, community members who attended the meeting [on the project] were informed about the need for material contributions, such as bricks and sand, rather than consulted on the choice of community project. People participated in making bricks, not decisions” (White et al., 2018, p. 17).

OneVillage Partners implements a CLD approach that trains local volunteers to actively lead decision making in project design, and implement that project in partnership with the organization. This collaboration has organized successful civic actions, improved social capital, and measurably improved well-being in rural communities in Sierra Leone. OneVillage Partners’ mode of partnership is an example of Riane Eisler’s Cultural Transformation Theory, focusing on Partnership systems. Dr. Eisler’s work demonstrates how societies orient toward either a hierarchical *Domination System* or a more egalitarian *Partnership System*. These systems are characterized by four key interactive components: family and social structure; gender roles and relations; rear, abuse, and

violence; and narratives (Center for Partnership Studies, n. d.). OneVillage Partners impacts each of these components through programming that fosters the development of new systems of local partnership that improve a community's health and wellbeing immediately and sustains those gains over the long term.

To achieve CLD's goals of reducing poverty and overcoming the inequities of the traditional aid model, we must co-create development solutions on a village and regional level in full partnership. We must ask communities to make decisions on the project, not just provide bricks.

COLLABORATIVE APPROACHES TO PROJECT DESIGN

When communities begin working with OneVillage Partners, a gender-balanced cohort of volunteers from the community are identified to participate in several training workshops conducted in Mende, the local language, led by OneVillage Partners' Sierra Leonean staff. Trainings use a Human-Centered Design approach to problem solving, which includes creating many ideas to explore, choosing some to prototype and learn from, and deciding on the best solution (What is Human-Centered Design?, n.d.). Training topics include facilitation skills, project planning, budget development and management and communication skills. The workshops feature experiential learning; the volunteer group implements their learning immediately and produces outputs for community feedback. The group delivers a problem statement and a project prototype; once the project has been finalized, they generate objectives, a budget, and an implementation plan. Meanwhile, the community gains deeper insight into the problem they are trying to address, and what actions they can immediately take to address it. These inclusive public consultations also emphasize that the voices of women and youth matter, and can exist alongside the formal decision-makers in the village. Traditionally, in these communities, decisions of public concern are made behind closed doors and only among the elite leadership, mostly land-owning men. In meetings involving

OneVillage Partners, more voices are invited into the discussions and the decisions are made openly. This is not a replacement or redefinition of the community's decision-making structure, but a way to make it more transparent on the community's terms.

During this inclusive process of project design, volunteers emphasize the voice of those most affected by the challenge being addressed. For example, while designing a water well project, community volunteers in a recent community meeting emphasized the voices of girls who travel far distances to fetch water. In front of the entire community, women spoke of common occurrences of sexual assault along the road as they had to walk further from town to fetch water during the dry season. The community voted to excavate a well in a central location in the village, and the owner of this land agreed to donate it to the project. If the wells were placed in key central locations in the community, girls would be at less risk of sexual assault from travelling far distances out of the village (Belmoh, 2018).

As with any project implementation, unexpected challenges arise. Key decisions are made in partnership with volunteers, community members and OneVillage Partners staff. This approach contributes to reinforcing and building local leadership and project sustainability. For example, the community of Makka decided they would install 99 latrine dropholes to end open defecation in their village and reduce diarrhoeal disease. Community members decided where to place the latrines, sometimes intentionally, directly in the path of commonly used open defecation sites, to discourage that practice. Households in Makka also pooled funds to make improvements to some latrine structures, including installing more permanent handwashing stations (Lansana, 2017). These particular decisions were made by the villagers themselves, without OneVillage Partners staff direction.

This collective action is an example of “bonding social capital”, which refers to “strong connections among individuals and groups with similar backgrounds” (Chazdon et al.,

2013, p. 2). In focus groups, participants cite the improved cohesion among community members as a major outcome of their work with OneVillage Partners, beginning with the inclusive decision making on the project (Bowles, 2019). The redefinition of the community members' role within their project, as well as their role among community decision makers, spurred the community at large toward further involvement and collaboration in the project. In the case of Makka, the strong social capital made the project activities more effective and determined new social norms around the practice of a previously taboo subject, open defecation.

COLLABORATIVELY MEASURING IMPACT

Once a project is complete, OneVillage Partners uses a monitoring and evaluation framework to measure the impact of this strengthened social capital among community members, as well as specific project outputs. Once the data is assessed and analyzed, the results are presented to the community. One participatory method used to gather data is the picture-based Bristol Stool Chart, which measures diarrhoea prevalence pre- and post-implementation (Bullen, 2013). When the Bristol Stool Chart was used in Makka, we found a 70% reduction in cases of diarrhoeal diseases in the village (Bowles, 2018). When the results of the Bristol Stool Chart were shared publicly in Makka, those in attendance loudly cheered the news of the reduction in diarrhoeal cases. The community owned the results. It was not the project's success, it was theirs.

During a meeting in which similar results were shared in another village, Kigbai, one neighborhood reported fewer instances of handwashing at critical moments. Community members decided to intervene in that section of the village by personally monitoring young children's habits after toilet use, to address the lack of handwashing (Conteh, 2019). This was a new intervention, collaboratively developed by community members without input from OneVillage Partners or an external agent. It was the community's own initiative focused on improving health outcomes for their neighbors.

This is another example of improved cohesion and bonding social capital, in this case being used to achieve improvements in public health.

IMPROVING NETWORKS OF COLLABORATIONS

After project implementation is complete, OneVillage Partners provides a platform for volunteers to share project outcomes with local government representatives and the regional development committee. This meeting outlines measures the community has taken to improve public health, but also identifies key influencers and leaders in the community whom the government can engage with for future interventions. This is an example of “linking social capital” (Chazdon et al., 2013, p. 2). While bonding social capital can refer to increased social cohesion within a community, linking social capital refers to cooperation with various power structures beyond the village, as described by Chazdon (2013) and others. “These vertical connections to organizations and systems help residents access resources and bring about change” (Chazdon et al., 2013, p. 2). OneVillage Partners’ program activities build on and improve linking social capital by directly linking the community’s projects to the larger government framework, while remaining grassroots. For example, volunteers have been able to source expertise in training on a wide variety of topics, including agricultural practices, public health, water well repair, and even food processing. These experts are identified from other villages by community members or by government agencies helping to solicit their expertise.

Another tool OneVillage Partners uses to measure improvements in social capital is the Most Significant Change (MSC) evaluation, which solicits individual stories of personal impact from the project (Dart & Davies, 2003). Through this evaluation methodology, OneVillage Partners has seen how the model of collaboration, not just the project outcomes, has strengthened bridging and linking social capital and improved wellbeing. Many volunteers now identify as leaders in their own communities, while the scope of

people who have a voice in community decision making has grown. In the communities that OneVillage Partners began working with in 2015, official leadership roles have been created to include more youth and women in decision making on the welfare and future of the community (Bowles, 2020). Some communities have reported rejecting projects that were being delivered to them by other NGOs until they could see the details of the project plan (Gassimu, 2018).

This model of local democracy, in which community members are encouraged to vote and give feedback on matters of importance to the whole village, has been used without OneVillage Partners providing the platform. An example is the village of Grima, the same village that danced when OneVillage Partners introduced their CLD program. One year later, decision makers in the community, including those trained by OneVillage Partners, renegotiated the terms of lease of land with the region's most powerful palm oil company. This meant more substantial influence in their village's future and, crucially, a more active voice in decision making concerning the use of their land. They accomplished this by providing a platform for farmers to voice concerns, to reach a democratic consensus, and to negotiate directly with the palm oil company representative (Conteh, 2019).

CONCLUSION

The OneVillage Partners model of inclusive decision making in development projects has created unique partnerships within communities as well as with other development agencies, private institutions, and governmental entities. The impact of OneVillage Partners CLD program demonstrates the interrelated components of Riane Eisler's Cultural Transformation Theory, focusing on Partnership. For example, Narratives of mutual respect can be seen in shared decision making across the program, as evinced by the communities' own narratives. Meanwhile, the Fear, Abuse and Violence component is mitigated, as seen in the community choosing the location of the well to decrease potential sexual assault of girls. Equality in the Gender Roles component is

seen in the gender balance of volunteers and the increase in women's opportunities for public decision making. When a community works in partnership addressing Family and Social Structures to ensure that their children grow up healthy by holding each other accountable to improve their children's hygiene, this is not just an empowered community - this is a caring community. Eisler's work on Partnership has historical implications too. The lingering colonial imprint on international development is a manifestation of a Domination System, one that mostly remains in place even though the evidence for the efficacy of a Partnership System in development has repeatedly been shown. The inequities of past international development paradigms cannot be undone without these new partnerships, forged by those who have first-hand lived experience with those inequities. In order to realize the promise and potential of Community Led Development, development actors must begin building inclusive and intentional partnership with communities that they serve. The recent push for implementing community-led interventions is laudable, but without true inclusive decision making, these projects risk perpetuating past injustices. Development agencies should not simply ask communities to make bricks, nor be content to ask communities to 'make decisions'; development agencies should support communities' development of their own radical new types of partnerships to thrive with resilience in the face of new challenges.

References

- Anderson, M. B., Brown, D., & Isabella, J. (2012). *Time to listen: hearing people on the receiving end of international aid*. Cambridge, MA: CDA Collaborative Learning Projects.
- Belmoh, M., (2018). *Debrief Report on Project Design in Kigbai*. OneVillage Partners Report: Unpublished.
- Bowles, C. (2019). *2018 Most Significant Change Report*. OneVillage Partners Report: Unpublished.
- Bowles, C. (2020). *Determining Community Impact: Mixed Methods Evaluation of First Phase Programming*. OneVillage Partners Report: Not yet published
- Bowles, C. (2019). *Kigbai Bristol Stool Chart Endline*. OneVillage Partners Report: Unpublished.
- Bowles, C. (2018). *Makka and Madina Bristol Stool Chart Endline*. OneVillage Partners report: Unpublished

- Bullen, P. B. (2013, March 28). Using the Bristol stool scale to measure diarrhea. Retrieved from <http://www.tools4dev.org/resources/bristol-stool-scale-for-diarrhea-tool-review/>
- Center for Partnership Studies. (n. d.). What is the Partnership System? Retrieved March 18, 2020, from <https://centerforpartnership.org/the-partnership-system/>
- Chazdon, S., Scheffert, D., Allen, R., & Horntvedt, J. (2013). *Developing and Validating University of Minnesota Extension's Social Capital Model and Survey*. University of Minnesota. Extension. Retrieved from the University of Minnesota Digital Conservancy, <http://hdl.handle.net/11299/171657>
- Conteh, L. (2019). *Debrief Report on Results Sharing in Kigbai*. OneVillage Partners Report: Unpublished.
- Conteh, L. (2019). *Most Significant Change Data from Gbeka, Grima, and Mamboma*. OneVillage Partners Report. Unpublished
- Dart, J., & Davies, R. (2003). A Dialogical, Story-Based Evaluation Tool: The Most Significant Change Technique. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 24(2), 137-155. doi: 10.1177/109821400302400202
- Easterly, W. (2015). *The Tyranny of Experts: economists, dictators, and the forgotten rights of the poor*. New York: Basic Books, a member of the Perseus Book Group.
- Empowering People to End Their Own Hunger. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.thp.org/>
- Gassimu, S. (2018.) *Debrief Report on Second Cycle Project in Yandohun*. OneVillage Partners Report: Unpublished
- Klugman, J. (Ed.). (2002). *A sourcebook for Poverty Reduction Strategies : Core techniques and cross-cutting issues* (Vol. 1, pp. 1-624). Washington, DC: The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/The World Bank Group.
<http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/156931468138883186/Core-techniques-and-cross-cutting-issues>
- Lansana, B (2018). *End of Project Reporting Form: Makka*. OneVillage Partners Report: Unpublished.
- Rasmussen, C. M., Armstrong, J., & Chazdon, S. A. (2011). Bridging Brown County: Captivating social capital as a means to community change. *Journal of Leadership Education*, 10(1), 63-82.
- Rasmussen, C., Pardello R., Vreyens J., Chazdon S., Teng S., & Liepold M. (2017). Building Social Capital and Leadership Skills for Sustainable Farmer Associations in Morocco. *Journal of International Agricultural and Extension Education*, Volume 24. Issue 2.
- Spark Microgrants. (n.d.). Retrieved March 22, 2020, from <https://www.sparkmicrogrants.org/>
- Sueres, J. (2016, May 4). Is aid a contemporary manifestation of colonialism? Retrieved March 22, 2020, from <https://medium.com/@juliensueres/is-aid-a-contemporary-manifestation-of-colonialism-ec362f4d7fc4>
- The Movement for Community-Led Development (n.d.). *Defining Community-led Development*. Retrieved March 7, 2020 from <https://communityleddev.org/definition/>

The Nuru Model. (n.d.). Retrieved March 22, 2020, from <http://www.nuruinternational.org/what-we-do/nuru-model/>

Thomas, A., Viciani, I., Tench, J., Sharpe, R., Hall, M., Martin, M., & Watts, R. (2011). *Real Aid 3 [PDF file]*. London, UK: ActionAid UK. Retrieved from https://www.actionaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/doc_lib/real_aid_3.pdf

Torjman, S., & Makhoul, A. (2012). *Community-led development*. Caledon Institute of Social Policy.

What is Human-Centered Design? (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.designkit.org/human-centered-design>.

White, H., Menon, R., & Waddington, H. (2018). Community-driven development: does it build social cohesion or infrastructure? A mixed-method evidence synthesis. doi: 10.23846/wp0030

Woolcock, M., & Narayan, D. (2000). Social Capital: Implications for Development Theory, Research, and Policy. *The World Bank Research Observer*, 15(2), 225-249. doi: 10.1093/wbro/15.2.225

Chad McCordic, BA, is the current Program Director of OneVillage Partners. He has been designing and implementing grassroots, community-based solutions in rural areas of Kenya, Ghana, and Sierra Leone, as well as in urban areas of Canada, for more than 12 years.

Renee Pardello, MEd, former assistant dean of University of Minnesota Extension, is a member of the Board of Directors of OneVillage Partners. She is currently a consultant with Strategies Across the Spectrum, using a community-led process to address equity, diversity, and inclusion.

Jennifer Artibello, BSc, was the Country Director of OneVillage Partners in Sierra Leone from 2014 to 2020. She has more than 10 years of experience in managing programs in Sub-Saharan Africa, while conceiving, designing, and implementing education and empowerment programs for youth and women.

Jill LaLonde, MSc, is the Executive Director of OneVillage Partners. She is an adjunct faculty member in the Master of Arts in International Development program at Saint Mary's University of Minnesota in Winona, MN. She has more than 10 years of experience in the international development and nonprofit sectors, and holds an MSc in Development Studies from the London School of Economics.

Correspondence about this article should be addressed to Chad McCordic at chad@onevillagepartners.org