

Before Social Capital: The Forgotten History of Cold-War Era Community Development

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PLEASE NOTE: I will deliver this paper from notes rather than reading it. What follows, therefore, is not a verbatim transcript of my intended remarks but a sketch of them. Hence, it is somewhat less formal and polished than these conference papers often are.

Thank you for the invitation to speak. We historians often write with the vague hope that our work will be of interest to those who engage with policymaking in the present, but we rarely initiate that conversation ourselves. I am particularly interested in the nexus between policymaking and historical scholarship because the topic I research, the United States' development aid policies during the Cold War, seems—to me, at least—to have such obvious resonance with the work of the World Bank today.

Before I tell you what I have found, let me briefly sketch out my sense of the field of historical research on development. For most of the postwar period, historians working on foreign relations between great powers took as their principal topic the Cold War. Postwar history, as we told it, mainly flowed along an East-West axis. But since the 1990s, we have seen a number of prominent historians revisiting the Cold War period with different interests in mind. Rather than seeing the central drama of the years after 1945 as the confrontation between Soviet and U.S. ideologies, they see it as the drama of development: as the confrontation between poor and decolonizing nations and the industrialized titans of Europe and Asia. The new axis is not East-West, but North-South.

Those historians have been united not just by a geography but by a key argument. The global North's engagement with the global South, both in its contribution of aid and

in its military interventions, has been shaped by an ideological commitment to the idea of modernization. In other words, it was not simple a zeal for democracy, a passion for justice, a desire to capture markets, or a quest for military allies that shaped the way in which rich nations intervened in the global South. Behind all of that lay the sometimes tacit assumption that the way to achieve those things was to replace traditional institutions with modern ones. Powerful countries in the global North, particularly the United States and the Soviet Union, sought to make the global South “modern,” with modernity understood as a condition, particular to no culture, marked by industrial society, a robust state ruled by scientifically minded experts, the triumph of technique over politics, and the achievement of abundance. Not surprisingly, the historians who have understood the North’s confrontation with the South as a grand modernization scheme have written from a critical stance. Modernization projects are often characterized as imperialism by other means: hubristic attempts to mold the global South in the image of the global North, marked by violence, cultural disruption, and ecological catastrophe.

Development agencies themselves have undertaken a similar transformation since the 1990s. In 1995, Christiaan Grootaert, in his much-cited paper, suggested that social capital might be the elusive “missing link” in development. Development, in other words, was not just a matter of physical capital—machines and materials—but required social capital as well: networks of trust, voluntary organizations, and a vibrant associational life. This interest in social capital encouraged developers to disavow the development practices of years passed, which had been top-down affairs geared toward quantitative measures of production and welfare, and focus instead on community-based or community-driven development. In this way, both historians and development practition-

ers seemed to be working in tandem: the historians offered a diagnosis of the bad old days and the developers sketched out a bright new future that would replace modernization-driven development with community-driven development.

My own research, however, challenges that story. In a study of the United States' development policies in Asia during the 1950s and 1960s, I discovered that, at the same time as the United States and other developers were pursuing top-down modernization strategies, they were also simultaneously pursuing a counter strategy, which they called "community development." As its practitioners saw it, the point of community development was not to increase GNP or to replace traditional institutions with modern ones but rather to encourage social cohesion at the level of the village. Community developers thus worked in remote areas, eschewed industrial technology, learned and celebrated local cultural mores, and pursued a decentralist path to development that was distinctly different from the one advocated by modernization theorists. In other words, this was community-driven development *avant la lettre*.

To give some sense of how community development worked, I want to say a little bit about the program as it ran in India, which was the flagship of the international community development movement. The program there began with a pilot project in northern India, in a district called Etawah, established in 1948. Its beginning as a pilot project is telling: community developers rejected the notion of plans imposed from the top and instead sought ground-level experiments, which, if successful, could spread horizontally outward. The man in charge of the Etawah experiment, a regionalist architect named Albert Mayer from the United States, was a close colleague of Lewis Mumford, the urban theorist and frequent critic of technology's distorting effect on human society. Before he

arrived in Etawah, Mayer consulted with Mumford and with the Indian leader Mohandas Gandhi. On their advice he set up Etawah as an exercise in bottom-up development. Villagers would meet to discuss their “felt needs” and would, with some government support, design and implement their own development projects, relying not on expert knowledge and cutting-edge technology but rather on what Mayer called “folk solutions.” Etawah quickly achieved international prominence, featured in articles, for example, in *Time*, *Life*, and *Ladies Home Journal*.

The Etawah project was judged a success, enough so that the Indian government, with aid from the United States and from the Ford Foundation, launched a national community development program. Signifying the affinity between community development and Gandhian politics, the program was officially launched on October 2, 1952, Gandhi’s birthday. Village by village and district by district, the Indian community development program expanded rapidly, until by 1965 it covered every village in the country. That is an achievement worth underscoring, since in 1965 India’s villages collectively contained *over ten percent of the global population*. To support the community development program, the Indian government also reconfigured its planning mechanism, so that, at least on paper, plans for rural development would originate not with the central Planning Commission but with newly formed, elected village councils—*panchayats*—which would generate plans and pass them up to the district, block, state, and federal levels. To this day, panchayats are a key part of the rural political landscape in India.

At the same time as community development expanded within India, it grew worldwide. In 1960, the United Nations, which provided technical assistance for countries seeking to establish community development programs, estimated that there were

over sixty countries with substantial community development schemes, about half of which were national in scope. The United States added a Community Development Division to its foreign aid agency and by 1956 that Division was providing aid and staff to community development programs in 47 countries. Community development was also, along with education, at the heart of the Peace Corps' mission. "Along with a flag, an anthem, a seat at the United Nations, a university, and an international hotel," wrote two observers in the 1960s, "a community-development program is an essential part of the trappings of modern nationhood."

Hundreds of millions of people in the global South had some experience with community development in the 1950s. In India, community development officers were the only direct point of administrative contact between many rural residents and the central government. And yet, most people have never *heard* of the massive international community development campaign of the 1950s. The defenders of community-driven and community-based development generally proceed as if their approach were entirely new, and are sometimes shocked to learn of its precedent. Why is that?

The reason we have generally missed community development, despite its scale, is that it failed, not in the dramatic way that modernization projects did—with flooded villages and napalm-scorched jungles—but conclusively. The "quiet revolution" in the countryside, to be accompanied by a promised agricultural bounty, simply never arrived. Numerous reasons were offered for what nearly all agreed was the failure of the approach. Some pointed to the too-rapid adoption and expansion of the programs, others to the growing food crises in the Third World by the early 1960s, still others to the failures of political leaders. But there was one feature of community development that was pre-

sent in every national context that I have studied and seems to me—as it did to many at the time—to be at the heart of the problem. That was the great faith that its advocates placed in communal processes. While technocratic modernizers sought to develop the organs of mass society, community developers had sought to temper the excesses of modernization, urbanization, and centralization by strengthening village life. But villages of Asia were precarious vessels for the hopes of developers. In India, the “village community” was to a large degree the playground of local elites, often Brahmins and other upper-caste Hindus, and was the site of powerful social stratification. Nor was India at all unusual in this. Peasants in the developing world frequently suffered more from their local subordination than from their location in a poor nation. At any rate, attempts to elicit communal participation in the global South nearly invariably resulted served as invitations for the rural social elite to force its agenda on “the community” and thus capture any state resources made available for community development. As one anthropologist who studied community development programs in a number of countries pointed out, to think that by turning over power to local communities you could unleash development in the Third World was like thinking that you could solve the problem of educational segregation in the Jim Crow South by turning things over to the local school boards.

In the face of growing food crises, community development lost its considerable luster and was replaced, to the chagrin of its advocates, by technocratic strategies designed to maximize food production. That began happening in the late 1950s, and by the mid 1960s most Southern nations had defunded their community development agencies or folded them into their ministries of agriculture. This was the Green Revolution, and it was intended as an explicit response to the failure of community strategies. When villag-

ers acting together proved unable to transform the economy of the global South, the emphasis switched from people to seeds. What remained of the community development program in India had become, in the words of one embittered development officer, into “a mere programme of distributing chemical fertilisers.”

The end of community development as a counterinsurgency strategy was not the end of the program. My research also took me to the Philippines, another country with a prominent community development program. There, however, things were different than they were in India. In the early 1950s, when community development was introduced, the postcolonial government faced the prospect of a peasant revolution, so much so that the president kept a motorboat tied outside of the presidential palace so that he could escape were revolutionaries to storm Manila. Deeply worried about the fate of the government, the Central Intelligence Agency deployed community development as a form of counterinsurgency. Here, the very aspect that had led to community development’s failure as a development strategy—its skewing toward elites—made it an ideal political strategy. There, community development, as it grew, became a way for the government to pacify the peasantry and to achieve the appearance of action without losing the critical support of landlords. Ecstatic with their victory in the Philippines, CIA operatives exported community development to Latin America, particularly Colombia, and to South Vietnam, where it became a precedent for the strategic hamlet program. Tellingly, the mastermind behind the Philippine deployment of community development had been none other than legendary CIA operative Edward Lansdale, the man most responsible for cultivating Ngo Dinh Diem.

When we historians reflect on how our work might inform policy, we are often reluctant to draw direct lessons. That is because we are sensitive to the radical particularity of time and place: a course of action that worked in one context might fare differently in another. We shy away from drawing “lessons” from history and prefer instead to use history as an entrée into the deeper understanding of an issue. But there are times, I think, when the similarities between past and present are so compelling that it becomes appropriate to suggest that the historical record really does offer a fairly direct contribution to our present thought. Community development of the 1950s and the community-based development of today are similar in just that way. And the lesson I would suggest is the following. The ideal of “community” has endeared itself to us because it stands in opposition to many of the disruptive aspects of modernity. But to assume that communities, rural or urban, are naturally protective, nurturing, and democratic social units is to let our dreams dictate our conclusions. Sometimes communities are that, as surely they have been in our lives at various times. But at the same time small communities can be places of stark inequality and oppression, an oppression made no less tolerable because it is carried out on an intimate scale. In general, “community” is as dangerous a receptacle for our uncritical faith as scientific expertise was. An intellectually honest approach to development must acknowledge that, and most grapple with not only the promises of community, but with the perils as well.

Abstract:

The World Bank and other aid agencies have placed a great deal of emphasis on social capital in their aid programs. By focusing on communities as the motors of growth, developers hope to avoid the mistakes of past decades, when an unchecked faith in technology and scientific expertise led to the support of schemes that proved to be not only unhelpful but at times destructive to both the environment and local cultures and societies. But development centered around the idea of social capital is nothing new. In the early Cold War, the predominant approach to rural aid was something called community development, a strategy that was adopted in around sixty nations and supported heavily by both the United Nations and the United States. In their heyday, community development programs covered hundreds of millions of inhabitants of the global South. But today community development is all but forgotten, despite the close resemblance it bears to the current aid strategies. This paper outlines the extent and character of Cold-War era community development and suggests reasons why it failed—reasons that are highly relevant to current aid approaches.