Chapter Six

CONCEPTS OF SUSTAINABILITY, PARTICIPATION AND EMPOWERMENT

Abstract

This chapter defines three of the important concepts which underpin the process of communitizing education. The concepts are sustainability, participation and empowerment.

Sustainability has been brought into vogue by the World Commission of Environment and Development (WCED). It defined sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs”. Several critics have brought out the limitations of this definition, some of which are mentioned in this chapter. Sustainability has three dimensions: the economic, ecological and social.

Participation in the development context involves "the creation of opportunities that enable all members of a community and the larger society to actively contribute to influence the development process, and share equitably in the fruits of development" (UN). The chapter highlights the operational implication of this concept in the process of communitizing education.

Empowerment is what happens when people meaningfully participate in the process of development. Its essential aspect is the involvement of people in the decision-making processes. In the absence of participation which empowers people, development becomes unsustainable. A pre-supposition behind all discussions about empowerment is that there is suppression, domination and exclusion in society. Empowerment therefore is a matter of restoring rights, a matter of social justice. The value-implications of the process of empowerment cannot be overlooked.
Communitizing education can become a tool for social change only if and when participation and empowerment become its operational goals, and ecological-economic-social sustainability its dominant concern.

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1.6.1 Introduction: Development Re-visited

The world is today faced with the challenge of defining and re-defining development too frequently. 'Development debate', 'development impasse', and 'paradigm-shift' are frequently used phrases. The last three to four decades have come to be known as the development era, but what has been achieved during this part of human history is now being subjected to rigorous re-evaluation. Two hundred years ago the income ratio between the world's rich and poor countries was 1.5: 1; in 1960 it was 20: 1; in 1980 it was 46: 1; and in 1989 it reached a high of 60: 1. World Bank figures reveal that the number of people living below the minimum poverty line
(US $1 a day) is clearly on the increase. In Africa, for example, it increased from 18 million in 1982 to an alarming 216 million in 1990. The richest 20 percent of the world’s population receive 83 percent of its income. The poorest 20 percent receive 1.4 percent. There is a 25-year-gap in life expectancy at birth between the poorest countries and Europe.

1.6.1.1 Search for New Paradigms

Development thinkers today realize that to move beyond the impasse created by the so-called development era, we need to explore the conditions in our practice of development. One aspect that is highlighted by these writers is the fact that there is a tendency to treat the concepts of growth and development, as if they are the same. The world took too much time to realize that these are not the same at all. Allan Kaplan who has developed his concepts based on hints from Dale B. Harris and Bernard C.J. Lievegoed tends to see development as a biological process. He has clarified that growth is quantitative increase whereas development implies qualitative increase and qualitative transformation. A further clarification he has made is that growth describes a change not of the thing itself but only of one of the variables (quantity). Thus, growth depicts a quantitative increase within the same structure, while development depicts a change in the whole structure of the system itself.

Biologically there is death and birth in the process described above. Structural change implies the pain of letting go the old, as well as the pain of taking on the new. Often the pain of development is the pain of changing unconscious habits and patterns.

Qualitative change of society or social transformation is today recognized as the mainspring of development. This perspective is now popularly discussed as sustainable development which has its basis in the
way people relate among themselves, with others and with the environment. Participation, empowerment and sustainability are all aspects of what is today known as sustainable development.

1.6.2 Sustainability

The World Commission of Environment and Development (popularly known as Brundtland Commission) in its report *Our Common Future* observed:

Until recently, the planet was a large world in which human activities and their effects were neatly compartmentalized within nations, within sectors (energy, agriculture, trade) and within broad areas of concern (environmental, economic, social). These compartments have begun to dissolve. This applies in particular to the various global ‘crises’ that have seized public concern, particularly over the past decade. These are not separate crises: an environmental crisis, a development crisis, an energy crisis. They are all one.

Environmental stress has been seen as the result of the growing demand on scarce resources and the pollution generated by the rising living standards of the relatively affluent. But poverty itself pollutes the environment, creating environmental stress in a different way. Those who are poor and hungry will often destroy their immediate environment in order to survive. They will cut down forests, their livestock will overgraze grasslands; they will overuse marginal land; and in growing numbers they will crowd into congested cities. The cumulative effect of these changes is so far-reaching as to make poverty itself a major global scourge.

Against the backdrop of this grim picture Brundtland Commission has put forward the concept of sustainable development as development that
meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs.

As spelt out in the report, the critical objectives ("strategic imperatives") for environment and development policies that follow from the concept of sustainable development include reviving growth and changing the quality of growth, meeting essential needs for jobs, food, energy, water and sanitation, ensuring a sustainable level of population, and conserving and enhancing the resource base, re-orienting technology and managing risk; and merging environment and economics in decision making.

The Brundtland Commission’s definition implies a view of sustainable development as a case of inter-generational sensitivity in respect of the use of natural resources. It contains two basic ideas: one, that of the right of the future generation to inherit all the ecological and natural resources which the present generation inherited from the preceding one; two, that of the responsibility of the present generation, to so use the available ecological and natural resources that they are passed on intact to the succeeding generation.

This definition has been criticized on several grounds by leading developmentalists. One obvious limitation of it is that, while it is eloquent about inter-generational equity, it keeps quiet about intra-generational equity. The concept of need also is ‘sufficiently vague’ to accommodate the extravagances of the affluent countries. However, the concept of sustainability as a vital component of development has been highlighted by the Brundtland Commission, and that is its lasting contribution to the development debate.
1.6.2.1 The Ecological and Economic Dimension

The concept of ecological sustainability aims to reconcile the utilization of eco systems and natural resources with their ability to regenerate. All over the world the correlation between ecological sustainability and economic development is a matter of concern. It is now widely recognized that economic development is not to be bought at the expense of environment and that environmental damages do not stop at natural borders.

Providing for the future is a crucial aspect of the ecological-economic sustainability. All put together, it can be said that sustainable development ought to be seen as a multi-dimensional balancing act between the environment and the economy, between the present and the future, between the affluent and the poor in a socially sustainable manner.

1.6.2.2 The Social Dimension

The social sustainability is a dimension of development which is related to human resource development including, the development of leadership capabilities. Unless a community /society / nation is capable of developing and managing its human resources, it cannot be expected to manage the multi-dimensional balancing mentioned above. It is also important to protect and promote the socio-cultural systems of the community / society concerned.

A sociological critique of the present-day development is that it has led to social erosion in several ways. It has undermined the systems of family, neighbourhood and community. It has also led to widening socio-economic disparities as pointed out earlier. It has produced dislocation of tribes and village folk from their natural habitat. It has loosened social bonds to such a great extent as to produce an alienated individual. It has
adversely affected community health and can be seen from the increasing incidence of hypertension, mental illness and drug addiction. Finally it has blurred the moral vision of society as is evident from the wide-spread trend of value-decadence, crime, delinquency and violence.6

The first social imperative of sustainable development is its capability to promote the basic human impulse for socializing and thereby to strengthen social bonds. Improvement in the social equality of life requires containing the virus of depersonalization on the one hand and intensification of social warmth on the other. The importance of this dimension is well taken care of in the process of communitizing education.

To sum up this discussion of sustainability, we may note that the institutions of higher education have a special role in promoting it. The conservation of natural resources, including bio-diversity, promotion of alternate technology, search for alternate health-promotion measures, promotion of socio-cultural identities and bonds – all these are matters of academic interest. They ought to find a place in the curriculum, and be matter for action-research in colleges and universities.

1.6.3 Participation

Participation, in the simplest terms, connotes self-activity. A participatory process is substantially endogenous, meaning thereby that it grows or originates from within. It is also a product of group motivation or collective action. “Participation is a social experience shared by individuals and groups who live in definite social and economic relations to each other in a society or community.”7 Most of the stipulative definitions revolve around this concept.

The United Nations (1981) observed that participation in the development context involves the creation of opportunities that enable all
members of a community and the larger society to actively contribute to influence the development process and share equitably in the fruits of development.

1.6.3.1 Participation at Micro and Macro Levels

While participation can be understood as referring to the entire political and economic process of a nation, it can also be defined as "the involvement of local population in the decision-making concerning development projects or in their implementation." At the micro level also the political dimension (meaning, related to implementation), and the administrative dimensions (meaning, related to implementation) are present. The interface between political and administrative perspectives at the macro level is well brought out by the following passage from the United Nations (1971) publication:

Active and meaningful involvement of the masses of people are necessary at different levels: (i) in the decision making process for the determination of societal goals and the allocation of resources to achieve them; and (ii) in the voluntary execution of resulting programmes and projects.

But it is this localized (micro) application of the concept of participation which has immediate relevance in the process of communitizing education. At both levels the intervening educational agency can play a facilitating role. This role has to be performed in such a way that it is promotive of empowerment and holistic development.

1.6.3.2 Definitions of Participation - a Review

Participation is a concept which has been closely studied in recent decades. For the purposes of this study it is important to arrive at a
definition of participation which is acceptable and feasible in the context of
Campus Community Interaction. Hence a brief review of the definitions of
participation is attempted here.

Cohen and Uphoff state that:

There are four kinds of participation in rural development activities. They are: (a) participation in decision making; (b) participation in implementation; (c) participation in benefits; and (d) participation in evaluation.

Several development practitioners and social scientists in India and abroad have supported the stand taken by Cohen and Uphoff that participation in development may take place at different levels, in decision making, in implementation, and in receiving the development benefits, and in evaluating the process. It is also pointed out that the level and intensity at which citizen participation in development takes place depends on various criteria like organization of institutional structure, prevailing value system, the nature of leadership and the nature of citizenry itself.

Dionisia (1979) succinctly captures the gist in the following words: Participation is often defined in the rural development literature as active and meaningful involvement of the masses at different levels; (a) in the decision-making process for the determination of societal goals and allocation of resources to achieve them; and (b) in the voluntary execution of resulting programme and projects. In the decision making-process, the people should be allowed to participate in four stages; (a) defining the situation requiring a decision; (b) choosing the preferred alternatives; (c) determining how best to implement the decision once it is made; and (d) evaluating the consequences of the action taken.
Mayfield (1985) too provides an interesting inventory to the participatory dimension, which is both useful and instructive. While the notion of involvement and voluntary decision-making with a focus on situation, alternative choice, and evaluation are often the key dimensions of any definition of local participation, what is often missing is some discussion concerning the process by which such activities come about. Who initiates such activities? What is the relationship among the outsiders and the local elite and the local peasant community? How is commitment and motivation engendered? How are obstacles identified and dealt with?¹³

The questions listed by Mayfield are of great significance in the present study. When an institution of higher education in our country gets down to the community in the hope of evolving a partnership for mutual benefit, these questions need to be answered in very specific and operational terms.

1.6.3.3 Participation in the Indian Context

In India, the importance of people's participation was recognized from the beginning of planned developmental efforts in 1951. If one browses through various plan documents, it will be apparent that the theme of participation has had a pervasive, if occasionally diffused, influence. The successive Five Year Plans have suggested various measures to be employed for bringing about public participation and commitment to the cause of development ideals. But none of these plans did anything to effectively facilitate inter-sectoral linkage between education and development.
Of late, the policy pronouncements at the highest level have been emphasizing the fact that unless the authority to allocate resources for projects within an area was actually devolved to the District Panchayat and Block Panchayat and Grama Panchayat, it would be wrong to claim that real devolution of power leading to the empowerment of the people had been achieved.

The recent experiments of decentralization have provided a major fillip due to the constitutionalisation of Panchayatraj Institutions, for these bodies have a far greater say today in formulating local plans through people's active participation in micro-processes emanating from below. One of the best examples of this trend is seen in Kerala where the involvement of the people in the planning process has attracted worldwide attention.

1.6.3.4 People's Participation in Development: Stages of Evolution

The concept of people's participation in the development process has been evolved and refined over the past four development decades. A. A. Mac Donald has presented it as follows.

Pre-1960s: participation meant the extent to which disadvantaged people accepted programme benefits directly from an external donor or from government.

1960s: it referred to labour input to implementing programmes planned for them by external donors.

1980s: it began to mean ownership and control of the development through people's organizations.

A pictorial representation of the concept has also been provided by Mac Donald. (Figure 3)
Figure - 3: Evolution of the Concept of People's Participation
The figure shows how the "beneficiaries" of development ("objects" in Paulo Freire's vocabulary) become owners and controllers of development ("subject" in Freire's vocabulary). Participation becomes meaningful only when it empowers people so as to make them own the responsibility for development.

As the concept of people's participation has emerged, so has the terminology employed to denote the different applications of the concept in practice. Terms such as "people's participatory planning", "participatory research", "participatory evaluation" and "formation of people's organizations" have become frequently used terms in the literature denoting the process of enabling disadvantaged people to participate as subjects in the development activities affecting their destiny.

To conclude this part of the discussion we may re-assert the fact that participation is a matter of relationship, and relationship is the essence of communitizing education as well as National Service Scheme. Mac Donald's picture indicates the qualitative change in this relationship. In the process of communitizing education, participation is not a matter of convenience for programme delivery, instead it is a value in itself. It is an essential pre-condition for sustainable development.

1.6.4 Empowerment

Empowerment is a concept that came into favour in development literature in the 1980s. It is now a frequently used concept in social work, community health, equity and civil rights.

1.6.4.1 People are Capable

A basic position of those who support empowerment is that ordinary people can take control of their own lives and make good decisions about
the way forward, if they are given the power to do this. The advocates of empowerment feel concerned about the fact that communities and ordinary people are disempowered, deprived and dominated. Ordinary people must therefore have power restored to them. The argument of those supporting empowerment is that the dominant society (which is capitalist, growth-oriented and lacking in any ethical concern for people) weakens and suppresses popular initiatives and society’s potential for development. And it is the task of educational institutions, voluntary organizations and social movements and legislation to restore this power to oppressed people. Educational institutions are usually not listed along with these agencies which are expected to work towards the empowerment of the poor and the oppressed. This is because, as discussed in Chapter One, education is seen as a dispassionate, “disinterested” (Aristotle) activity in spite of the documented claims to the contrary in the literature and reports related to educational planning.

1.6.4.2. The Powers to be Restored to People

The debates on empowerment refer to various kinds of power that should be restored to people. This includes economic power, skills, organizational participation, political power, self-esteem, and moral/ethical vision. The kind of empowerment relevant in the case of communitizing education is related to all these. The very event of an educational institution getting down to a humble hamlet is generative of self-esteem for the people there. The institution automatically becomes a catalyst which helps the community become aware of their inherent worth. The process of gathering them into a people’s organization further sensitizes them about the synergistic potentials of the community.

Empowerment on the economic front (through accessing government schemes, through entrepreneurial development, through competencies
which promote better utilization of available scarce resources) can become a primary item in their action agenda. Promotion of the social capital of the people (which serves as a substitute for economic capital) is another priority. When the poor people help one another in times of need and thereby save money on costly services and facilities, it is the social capital that gets generated. Neighbourhood groups and self-help groups are thus not merely forums for social harmony, but also powerhouses for generating social capital.

Those who support empowerment believe that forces from the privileged sector, NGOs, and sympathetic intellectuals and activists, must form an alliance with popular forces. The assumption here is that grassroots initiatives, particularly of the poor, cannot thrive without such support organizations. Social work theorists like David Korten believe that voluntary organizations are specialists in the use of integrative power in pursuit of a value-driven social mission. Integrative power is the opposite of hierarchical power, and it is the primary cohesive force of the just, sustainable and inclusive society. From this perspective what an educational institution can legitimately be expected to do goes beyond the catalytic role of organizing the people for their own empowerment. It goes one step further to envisage a coalescing of the sympathetic intellectuals and academics (including students) with the poor people. Such an empathic integration is in itself an instance of empowerment.

To conclude, it may be noted that participation is in itself an empowering experience and that without empowerment development becomes unsustainable. These key concepts have an essential role in the formulation of any strategy for sustainable social progress.
Notes and References

1 Frans Shuurman, ed. Beyond the Impasse: New Directions in Development Theory (London: Zed, 1993). This book is an excellent critique of development as it is practiced today, and points to possible new directions.

2 Other than Frans Shuurman, three authors who have done significant explorations are Wolfgang Sachs, Dale B. Harris, Allan Kaplan.


Dale B. Harris, The Concept of Development (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1968)


3 Not even the United Nations was free from the fallacy of equating development with economic growth. It had defined the development goal for the first development decade (1961-70) as 5 percent growth in gross domestic product, and for the second decade (1971-80) as 6 percent. It was conceived that development should take the same path in all countries, ie, the 'underdeveloped' countries would merely have to catch up on the processes that developed countries had already completed.

4 Today, in the west, damage to ecology and undermining of the stock of natural resources is a matter of life-style. Their unwillingness to change these habits and patterns was clearly visible in the Rio Summit. It is a widely held estimate that the per capita energy use in industrialized
countries is two hundred times greater than in developing countries. There are so many instances where individual countries and multi-national corporations have plundered the rich genetic diversity of developing countries for research and development.


6 This succinct sociological critique of today’s development pattern is adopted from S. L. Sharma, Development: Socio-cultural Dimensions (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 1989)


13 Jane B. Mayfield, *Go to the people: releasing the rural poor through the people’s school system* (West Hartford, Conn: Kumarian Press, 1985) 87.
