

Summary literature review

Paradoxical demands: CBOs within the official development aid system in Kenya

The research project *Towards inclusive partnerships: the political role of community based organizations and the official development aid system* investigates factors that enable and constrain the political roles and potential of community based organizations (CBOs). It explores the operational realities within the official development aid (ODA) system in which CBOs operate and analyses the 'chaos of urgencies' they face, including donor demands, economic emergencies and the social emergencies of members. This study examines the daily practices of two CBOs in Nairobi, Kenya, that have contrasting positions in the ODA system: one is fully integrated into the system, whereas the other receives small amounts of funding intermittently from local funders.

This literature review explores the presence of CBOs in the academic literature in relation to three domains: 1) community participation, 2) the position of CBOs in the ODA system and 3) the political role of CBOs.

Main findings

- Lines differentiating between CBOs, community and community participation are vague within the academic literature. Often, community participation remains undefined and conflated with the institution of the CBO. This oversight contributes to the invisibility of the CBO as a development actor in its own right and with its own (political) agenda. In essence, while CBOs originate within and represent (part of) communities, they should not be considered one and the same. CBOs represent the community in spaces where the general local population is often excluded (e.g. the space of development policy and programming). Conflating community (participation) with CBOs conceals the potential political power CBOs have. Moreover, it obscures the power relationships that evolve between the organization and its members, and conceals the organizational makeup and its daily practices.
- CBOs experience paradoxical demands. They display an 'on the ground' approach to development, yet they are also expected to possess the managerial skills needed to fulfil their position in planned development programs. These demands on CBOs simultaneously create processes of inclusion and exclusion, which affect their potential to obtain prominence within the ODA system and to become more effective on the ground.
- The literature review also highlights the power configurations and concomitant decision-making processes that exist within the ODA system. This system mostly includes CBOs as programmatic partners, particularly as a means to reach pre-defined development ends. CBOs are rarely involved in the design of development approaches and decision-making from the start.
- NGOs and donors frequently underutilize the skills, expertise and knowledge of CBOs in the ODA system. The *ad hoc* and flexible ways of working, inherent in CBOs' daily practices of dealing with unfolding emergencies and needs of community members, provide little space for development within the ODA system. Rather, these practices are being replaced by requirements that demand them to 'professionalize' and adapt to sophisticated ways of (financial) accountability, as well as work from a project-oriented perspective, which limits the potential for growth both politically and organizationally.

Policy messages

- Critical reflection on practices of community participation and engagement of CBOs in development approaches is needed. Such reflection prompts questions such as ‘who includes’, ‘who is included’ and ‘on whose terms’.
- To ensure CBOs can contribute more meaningfully to development projects, it is important to recognize the diversity of knowledge that exists within these organizations, e.g. practical knowledge on how to implement projects, as well as knowledge of the (inter) national political spaces CBOs operate in. CBOs must be included in the implementation phase of projects and in the different phases of planned development, including design and decision-making.
- To achieve greater political inclusion in planned development, policymakers need greater awareness of the power dynamics that exist between themselves and CBOs, CBOs and local NGOs, and CBOs and their communities. For such inclusion it is necessary to recognize the CBO’s specific identity in civil society that distinguishes them from other civil society actors, as well as acknowledge the distinction between CBOs and their respective communities.

Relevant literature

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