

## APPLYING EMPOWERMENT APPROACH IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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### Abstract

*This paper attempts to illustrate on how the empowerment theory can be applied as a critical approach to increase power and capacity of community development. Empowerment is not seen only in the theoretical and philosophical perspectives, but it is an alive approach and can be applied to increase the well-being of life to a better state at the individual, organisation and even community levels. Many community issues were discussed by academicians using the empowerment approach such as the issues of poverty, health, women, people with disabilities, single mothers, youths, leadership, organisations and so on. It is because this approach is an effective approach to resolve issues by empowering target individuals or groups to take effective actions through the capabilities and potentials developed. The discussion will begin with a review of the definitions of empowerment, which is closely related to the concept of power. In the context of community development, empowerment refers to the mechanisms that individuals, organizations and communities gain to control over life and issues related to them in the economic, social, psychological and political aspects. In order to understand the concept of empowerment clearly, an in-depth discussion will be done by looking at its definition from two dimensions; on whether empowerment is a process or an outcome. Using a qualitative approach to analyze content, books, journals and so on, several steps or processes have been developed to apply empowerment as an approach that can be practiced in the context of community development, especially in rural areas.*

**Keywords:** *Empowerment, Community Development, Power, Capacity Development.*

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### INTRODUCTION

The concept of community development requires collaboration, engagement and involvement from all parties including ministries, departments, government agencies, non-governmental organisations, private sectors, and more importantly, the active involvement and participation from the community members who are going to plan, execute, evaluate and set a milestone for their own development. This mean the basis for the success of community development process is the ability of the community itself. The capability of a community will emerge when all members participate actively in the development programmes. From that point onwards, their potential can be developed to ensure that they are able to plan, implement, make decisions dan further expand a development according to their own and community needs without maximum intervention from outside parties (Asnarulkhadi; 2011).

Due to the needs and beliefs in the potential of each community member, early development orientation using top-down approach have been minimised and instead, paid immediate attention to the bottom-up approach by highlighting the role of community members as the key actors in the community development process. This process of discovering, enhancing and expanding human ability is known as community empowerment. Individuals or community members with the ability can directly impact the empowerment of a community.

Therefore, to study the empowerment approach within the context of community development, it is important to first understand the concept of power, which is the keyword to empowerment. The next part will discuss the connection between the levels of empowerment which resulted in the overall community empowerment. The discussion will also address community empowerment as a social process as to look into this approach in a more practical way.

### **The Concept of Power as Ability – a Theoretical Review**

Empowerment is a word widely debated by numerous scholars from various disciplines. However, this concept is still not very well known from various levels and different practices. Empowerment can be understood by investigating the concept of power and absence of power. There are two ways to conceptualise power. **First**, power can be referred to as the ability to take actions. **Second**, power is a ‘thing’ or something that can be owned by individuals or groups (Asnarul; 1997).

Some scholars define power as the ability to take actions, such as Arendt (1970), Browne (1995), and Giddens (1985) as mentioned in Asnarulkhadi (2009). Arendt defines power as a force equivalent with human ability. Meanwhile, Browne refers power as the ability, energy and potential, and Giddens assumes power as a capacity for human transformation.

Referring to the definition given by the three scholars, few phrases emerged from the word ‘power’ need to be further examined, namely ‘power to’, ‘power to do’ and ‘power to act’. These three phrases refer to the capacity, potential and competency of the individuals that can be developed, collected and enhanced within life process with the experience when doing something. If one level of individual, organisation and community receives power, it does not necessarily mean that the rest will lose it. This power is referred to as the ‘power within’ and the ‘power with’. The ‘power within’ refers to the power in a person to develop independence by not relying on others and self-esteem. The ‘power with’ explains that actions or other things can be achieved if it is done collectively and not individually. Indirectly, this explains that power does not permanently belong to any individuals or groups since it belongs to the community as a whole (Asnarul; 2009).

It also reflects that power does not necessarily give negative impacts since it can also provide positive momentum in the individuals because it can produce good and useful actions to him and his surroundings. In such a case, power enables someone to use available sources such as skills, knowledge, money and collective action to achieve certain goals. The power in this context corresponds to the views provided by Mc. Clelland (1984) who stated that power is needed as an energy that induces motivation, confidence and inspiration; giving greater choices of sources or achieving a better life. Keiffer, as quoted in Lord and Hutchison (1984), explained that the absence of power at the individual level can be seen when one fails to act to affect his life outcome. In the context of community development, implementing the ability through active participation among community members can indirectly increase the power within the community to achieve better well-being and way of life.

Meanwhile, the definition of power as a ‘thing’ or something that can be owned by individuals or groups, is widely discussed by scholars such as Weber (1978), Tawney (1993), Mac Millan (1978). Weber views power as a person or collective opportunity to realise their needs even when they have to go against others. Power, for Tawney, is the ability for any individuals or groups to change the behaviours of other individuals or groups. On the other hand, Mac Millan views from the point of comparison between power and influence. Power is defined as one’s ability to re-arrange or alter any situations or conditions, while influence refers to one’s ability to change others perception about something.

Based on the discussion, in this context, it can be explained that power is examined in the form of bilateral relations. It means that the power possessed by individuals or groups will affect other individuals or groups. The amount of power possessed by individuals or groups is dependent on how far someone can control the behaviour of others. In this case, Zimmerman (1993) and Rowland (1998) conceptualise power as ‘power over’. Power is considered a commodity in which an increase in power at a single stage, whether individual, organisational or community levels, will lead to decrease to others. Individuals or groups will gain power in any possible ways.

Galbraith (1983), Frence and Raven (1959) mentioned that there are several sources of power namely influential personality, wealth, knowledge, position, popularity and organisation. At the end of this century, these sources are considered as critical power sources. For instance, the class that dominates the means is the minority group that has broad economic and political power compared to the majority who has nothing.

The comparison of both ways to perceive power can also be seen from Lerner (1986) as quoted in Lord and Hutchison (1993). Lerner divided the absence of power into two namely the absence of real powerlessness and the powerlessness surplus. The absence of real powerlessness is a result of economic imbalance and oppression control in the system or done by others. The powerlessness surplus occurs in a person when they believe that change will not happen because it causes them to be apathy and refuse to fight for control and influence. The absence of power then becomes a concept seen as an objective phenomenon in which a person who has no political and economic power, lacking the means to gain substantial control over their resources and lives (Lord & Hutchison; 1993).

In general, the concept of power can be observed from two different angles. First is by looking at the power that gives one's ability or energy to take initiatives on something or actions. This power comes from a positive, self-conscious individual (intra) who is confident in his ability and the attitude of independence to the help of others to take action on something. Second, power can be seen as a 'thing' or something that can be owned by individuals or groups. The power possessed by individuals or groups will result in lack or loss of power to others (inter).

### **Empowerment**

The concept of power and its relationship to the concept of empowerment has been widely discussed in the discourse. The concept of power as an ability is linked or used together with other words such as individual, organisation and community to become individual empowerment, organisational empowerment and community empowerment. Hence, the empowerment approach is discussed and linked directly with the participation of community members in the development process. This is because participation is the main aim and essence in the process of community empowerment (Asnarulkhadi; 2009).

There are several definitions given by few scholars. Cornell Empowerment Group (1989) and Mc. Clelland (1975) have a similar view about the concept of empowerment. Empowerment is understood to be a process of change (Cornell Empowerment Group; 1989). According to Mc. Clelland (1975) as quoted in Lord and Hutchison (1993), to gain power, they need to know themselves and the surroundings, want to identify and collaborate with others to make changes. Empowerment is a process of expanding the ability of individuals and groups to make choices and change towards a common goal. Wallerstein (1992) translated empowerment as a social action process that promotes participation of people, organisations and communities towards the goal of enhancing individual and community control, political efficiency, improved quality of life, and social justice.

There are also many scholars who shared their views and relate empowerment to personnel controls such as Rappaport (1987), Cochran (1986), *Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion* (1986) and Israel (1994). They viewed empowerment as a person's ability to control their personalities to acquire what they want. This is because only the person himself can understand his own needs instead of others. In terms of health, for example, the *Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion* believed that people cannot achieve good health potential unless if they are able to control some factors that determines their health. Similar views were also pointed out by Israel (1994) who mentioned that individuals will be able to remove themselves from poverty if they can control the life-changing aspects by taking some actions which can improve their living standard. To him, the empowerment concept is considered a positive and proactive approach. This concept can be seen from various levels of analysis and practices, i.e. individual, organisation and community levels.

In short, empowerment is a process whereby individuals and groups apply their ability and capacity to understand and interpret problems and needs which then translated into action through active participation.

## **Empowerment Approach in Community Development – From Theory to Practice**

Empowerment is not seen only from theoretical and philosophical context, but it is an approach that can be applied in everyday life either in community work, social work, youth work or general development. The importance of empowerment in a community has already been discussed as a key theme in the discourse, particularly on community competency, community capacity and social capital. This approach is increasingly accepted as a practical approach that can improve capacities and abilities, and thus achieve a better level of community life. Many community issues were discussed by academicians using the empowerment approach such as the issues of poverty, health, women, people with disabilities, single mothers, youths, leadership, organisations and so on. This is because this approach is the most effective in solving the issues by empowering the target individuals or groups to take effective actions through ability and potential development.

According to Reid (2002), empowerment is the most effective approach to alleviate poverty. Raising wages and income of the people is just not enough to eliminate poverty, as it must also be followed by the strive to change the paradigm and traditional beliefs of the community members as well as the local institutions. The most appropriate approach used to eliminate poverty is through the empowerment approach.

### **Empowerment Process in Community Development Programme**

Reid (2002) suggested few steps and processes for implementing empowerment approach in community development in which must be done in sequence. The steps are as follows:

#### **1. Building Hope**

The first step in the empowerment process is to increase self-esteem and eliminate hopelessness amongst incapable community members to improve the quality of life. Being easily despaired and having lack of self-esteem can threaten and hinder the dreams of getting a better life. Only a high, respected and visionary community leader is capable of mobilising the community members to take actions even though it is not an easy task to change the attitude of those who have no resolve and despaired attitude. Nevertheless, sometimes events which threaten their lives such as farm fire, environmental destruction and pollution, disease outbreaks, and high crime rates in a community can create awareness and mobilise them to change to a better quality of life. Keiffer (1984) believed that this stage is considered a provocation that creates awareness at the early stage of the empowerment process. Likewise, at the government level, opportunities and spaces should be provided to build high hopes and determination by providing incentives and initiatives such as establishing competition or development programme. From there, their potential can be developed to ensure that they are able to plan, implement and make decisions in the development programme according to their needs and requirements.

#### **2. Widespread Participation**

The process of empowerment in a community development programme will not be successful if it is participated only by leaders or small groups or other parties such as the ministries, departments, government agencies, non-governmental organisations and private sectors. Empowerment requires extensive participation from members, associations or communities. Empowerment is unlikely to happen if only elites are involved and implement the community programmes. On the other hand, their ideas, energy, skills and enthusiasm are the hidden assets or potentials which must be addressed through empowerment process. The wide and active participation from community members will result in a good decision made in the development programme.

The issue of participation has been widely discussed by scholars and is considered a key medium of empowerment and the most effective way to engage people in community development. The more community members are involved, the more people will get empowered. This participation approach begins when there is a failure of using the bottom-up approach to improve the well-being of life.

### **3. Building Relationship with Partners**

This stage is known as advancement stage in the empowerment process (Keiffer; 1984). At this stage, a community needs to have a good relationship with other organisations and become partners in implementing development. These partners are needed to help identify assets or resources within the community and to build institutional capacity to move forward.

### **4. Creating Visions**

Before implementing the development process, community members must have a clear vision to foresee the direction. The first step in creating visions is to begin by assessing the strengths and weaknesses of a community's capacity. Resources assessment is done by identifying existing assets and followed by assessing the community ability in the future. Based on the assessment, the community will build a vision that has the aims and strategies for implementing development programmes or activities that can improve the well-being of life. Strategies are built based on the barriers or problems which exist in the community surroundings such as high poverty rates, drop in students' performance, increase crime rates, unemployment and so on. From those strategies, the community will come up with appropriate approaches to overcome the problems which become the barriers to the process of change.

### **5. Establishing Work Plan**

The next step in the empowerment process is to establish a work plan. The work plan acts as a 'roadmap' that forms part of the basic requirements towards achieving the targeted outcomes. The work plan contains specific instructions for community actions, list of work schedules, responsibilities and budget for community programmes. Work plan comes from the strategies translated in the form of specific actions or measures that need to be taken by the community. To ensure that the implementation is on the right track and produce meaningful accomplishments towards achieving community development goals, the community needs to set the benchmark to measure success and to assess the outcome of the achievements to improve community well-being. An empowered community is capable of implementing the work plan and self-designed plan as intended without intervention (Reid; 2002).

### **6. Finding Resources**

Once the budget is done, the next step is to find resources to support the implementation of the plan. Resources like money, skills and knowledge can be obtained from various sources either from the government or private parties. For example, money can be obtained in many forms such as grants, loans or membership fees. However, the most important and should be given the focus at this stage is the plan must be made based on the resources available, and must not be altered due to lack or excessive resources.

### **7. Creating Success**

To maintain the momentum especially in the phases of implementation is very difficult. Failure to do so mean the end of the empowerment process even before it is completed. Hence, to ensure community development continues to exist, it is necessary to create and promote the initial victory to convince the community members that it is not impossible for change to occur with persistent efforts and spirits despite many challenges and obstacles.

### **8. Developing Community Capacity**

The main emphasis of the strategy plan and work plan is to highlight on capacity development to improve community ability to achieve the set goals. In the empowerment process, capacity development should be managed by the community members themselves and not by the outside organisation in doing something for the community. Continuous capacity development within a community is necessary to ensure the sustainability of empowerment process.

## 9. Adapting Strategy Plan

The next step in empowerment process is adapting strategy plans. For development project or programme that goes off track from the plans, strategy plan is considered not suitable and does not meet the objectives and goals of the development programme. Therefore, it is important for the community to check and review the goals and strategies periodically, and make amendments, if needed, at the planning stage. The process of reviewing programme plans includes looking at the level of participation among community members, assessing achievements and altering strategy plans to ensure that development has achieved the goals and visions set in the early stages.

## 10. Development Towards Sustainability

To ensure the success of the empowerment process, the development must move towards sustainability. The process of community development does not end with just being able to meet the needs of the community to improve their living standard. Sustainability can be achieved in many ways i.e. increasing the capacity of community leadership, enabling partnerships between organisations, appointing new members to engage in the process, creating self-improvement programme, and preserving the ecology, economy and social environment of a community. The empowerment process is measured not only based on the results or products (i.e. the number of houses constructed, employment opportunities created or decreased crime rates). On the contrary, it is measured by the community's ability to continue the process of developing a sustainable community.

## CONCLUSIONS

In development, community empowerment occurs when they have demonstrated the ability to identify problems, obtain resources, improve skills and experience, implement, lead and mobilise all community members to be actively involved in each programme conducted for mutual benefits. Furthermore, the more community members are involved in the community development process, the more it can be empowered. In other words, the community empowerment can be achieved if the community members can master and control their living environment.

The ability of the community in carrying out activities to fulfil their wants and needs is the nature of community development. Similarly, the communities with initiatives, clear goals, resilient and resourceful are also the main attributes of communities that are empowered to make changes and developments within the community. Through community development, community members can face challenges and problems to ensure the well-being of their lives.

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