The Import of Neoliberalism on Efforts to Encourage Agency

in Three Fields of Development Action

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Abstract

This article examines the dynamics of population agency and empowerment in each of three fields of aid provision—humanitarian relief, international development and peacebuilding—during recent decades. It first describes how the concept of active agency and participation has been commonly defined in these fields. Thereafter the analysis explores the obstacles and challenges analysts have identified, to date, in aid organization efforts to realize efficacy among targeted populations. Third, this study sketches the principal-agent accountabilities regime operating in major donor nations and international organizations in the three domains surveyed. The argument suggests that funders need to revisit their accountability assumptions and measures and broaden those to acknowledge the socio-cultural, political and economic conditions and governance capabilities of the nations and the populations targeted, since these ultimately mediate both citizen engagement and efficacy and intervention outcomes. The article concludes with a brief exploration of its implications for aid practice in the three fields treated.

Introduction

For more than two decades, scholars active in each of three fields of aid provision—humanitarian relief, international development and peacebuilding—have called on bi-lateral aid organizations (United States Agency for International Development, Canadian International Development Agency and others), international organizations (World Bank, International Monetary Fund and others), international development nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to proceed in their assistance work in ways that encourage agency

in those with whom they interact (Copelovitch, 2010). These initiatives have gone by several names, depending on the services provided and the field involved, including participatory development (Barnett, 2013) in relief and development; coproduction (Gaventa, 2006a and 2006b) in development; and most ambitiously, local ownership (Fourth High Level Forum, 2011; Pouligny, 2009; Richmond, 2012) in humanitarian relief, international development and peacebuilding.

This article considers the issue of population agency in these major areas of outside actor intervention in developing nations. The analysis has three basic aims related to examining and comparing experience, as revealed by these literatures, concerning initiatives in each of these domains. First, the study treats how the concept of active agency and participation has been defined in these fields (Cornwall, 2008). As it happens, each has defined the construct similarly. As these areas of intervention have evolved, too, each has distinguished among the concepts of efficacy, participation, empowerment and local ownership, with the last listed construct implying the most robust role for local populations in the projects being pressed. The distinctions among these ideas, while similar across the domains treated here, nonetheless imply important differences in the actionable space available to individuals to participate in interventions targeted to them.

Second, the analysis treats the obstacles and challenges analysts have identified to date in realizing efficacy among targeted populations, from the standpoint of the aid organization(s) involved and the groups they have sought to serve. The article briefly compares and contrasts lessons learned from experiences across each of these fields regarding common obstacles and challenges in the realization of agency among those populations addressed. Among relevant issues these literatures have treated that diminish

citizen engagement, and thereby the possibility of increased agency, are social fissures arising from the ethnic, race, tribal, religious and class structures in the affected population. National and local governance capacities of various sorts, including public sector professionalism and fiscal capacity, especially when the political system is characterized by clientelism, corruption or cronyism, also shape a citizenry's potential for agency (Chhotray & Stoker, 2009; Cornwall & Coehlo, 2007; Halloran, 2011). In addition, interested scholars have cited social trust within the targeted population and existing widely accepted social and cultural norms and mores as significant factors in aid intervention outcomes (Hordijk, 2005). This inquiry explores how analysts in the three literatures examined have treated the links between these concerns and citizen efficacy.

Finally, this article sketches the principal-agent accountabilities regime operating in major donor nations and international organizations in these three domains of development and social change intervention to determine whether there are ways and means by which to better encourage aid recipient efficacy (Lane, 2005). This analysis argues that funders need to revisit their accountability assumptions and measures and broaden those to acknowledge the socio-cultural, political and economic conditions and governance capabilities of the nations and the populations targeted, since these ultimately mediate both citizen engagement and efficacy and intervention outcomes. In particular, the argument suggests that those providing resources need both to reframe how they conceive of assistance, away from a rational-technical managerial enterprise whose interventions may be narrowly understood in such terms, to one that views the possibility of stimulating agential possibility as an adaptive process linked to individual and social learning for funders and recipients alike. While a step forward in principle, increasing

donor adoption of evidenced-based practice (borrowed from medicine and public health) in the three fields analyzed here has not to date changed the basic control orientation of aid provision, nor broadened the scope of accountability measures in general use (Sackett et.al. 1996, p.71). The article concludes by suggesting that accountability rubrics currently widely used by donors, including those predicated on evidence based practice, now often work at cross-purposes with their stated aims of ensuring beneficiary efficacy, agency, empowerment and local ownership.

Agency, Empowerment and Participatory Relief and Development

Scholars of humanitarian relief organizations and efforts have long recognized the vital significance of the role of agency, understood in this domain, as in international development and peacebuilding, as a perceived capacity to take individual action on the basis of personal choice, among individuals in the populations that those entities seek to serve (Pouligny, 2009, p.5). In the case of post-disaster relief, analysts have contended that such efficacy is crucial if individuals are to take steps to change the conditions of their vulnerability and to adopt patterns of living and norms for the future that are likely to conduce to improved communal resilience and sustainability. Interested scholars, too, have argued that since residents are first responders to disasters in nearly all situations, it is important that they be engaged in planning processes that take place prior to such events to mitigate community vulnerability, and that these make clear not only how they can work with aid agents, but also what steps they can take immediately at the onset of humanitarian emergency to assist those most directly affected (National Research Council, 2012). Pouligny has suggested that while the term "local ownership" is still not

widely employed in humanitarian relief discussions, it implies a number of specific

characteristics that all assume residents' agency to take action on their own behalf:

> In the international aid discourse, 'ownership' as part of the notion of 'local ownership' does not have its conventional meaning, i.e., rights of exclusive possession. Nor is it used in the organizational sense, referring to the owners of a business firm, or to the members of a non-profit association. 'Ownership' refers instead to relations among stakeholders in development or humanitarian action, particularly their respective capacity, power or influence to set and take responsibility for an agenda and to muster and sustain support for that. This means that part of the implementing bodies need to be firmly rooted in the recipient country and represent the interests of ordinary citizens. In this respect, appropriate mechanisms of representation are needed. Among other conditions traditionally underlined are the need for transparency and accountability among the various stakeholders, insiders and outsiders included (Pouligny, 2009, p.8).

These imperatives have led analysts to maintain that engagement in disaster

planning efforts, while welcome, is insufficient if it is not sustained and if it does not

conduce to adaptive change in affected communities when such is necessary to cope with

known disaster risks (Heifetz, 1998; Seybolt, 2009; Stephenson & Schnitzer, 2006). That

is, the challenges to be addressed in planning for disasters are often very difficult in the

sense that they frequently require not only that residents of affected areas take personal

action as well as collaborate (often via both their governments and nongovernmental and

international nongovernmental organizations) to respond to emergencies with alacrity and

purpose, but also go further following those often tragic situations to stand ready to

engage in reflexive processes that may suggest that their past ways of living and knowing

might require partial or wholesale rethinking. A key problem confronting such initiatives

is that it is difficult to engage individuals in reflection aimed at addressing hypothetical

future risk events, even if similar scenarios have unfolded in the past. For many residents

who live in a region of frequent droughts, hurricanes or earthquakes, for example, if they

have not personally experienced such an event or if a natural disaster has not struck in

recent memory, it remains only a possibility and therefore a concern that may be set aside in the face of more pressing and obvious daily concerns. Likewise, citizens may not assign primacy to meetings concerned with planning for possibilities that they are not sure will obtain.

If these motivations hold for individuals, they also are in play for developing nation governments and their funders. It is not always clear either to international or national officials why seeking to develop complex cross-sectoral collaborative planning processes among organizations with diverse stakeholders, with all of the organizational and political capacity and effort and conflict such routinely entails makes sense, when the results of those labors may not be employed in a timely way to address a disaster in any case. As a practical matter, too, it is difficult for these decision-makers to know for what to plan beyond the immediate requirements that might arise to house and feed a displaced population of uncertain size.

That is, it is often not obvious that changes in ways of life might be required following a disaster until an event makes such clear. For example, Haitians learned only after that nation's 2010 earthquake that many of their most common forms of housing construction were particularly vulnerable to seismic jolts and dangerous and had to be rethought. Likewise, a large tsunami that struck the fishing communities whose residents had always lived at the edge of the sea in Indonesia in Banda Aceh in 2005 highlighted the risk of continuing to reside so close to the water's edge and posed quite starkly the question of how individuals in these communities should organize to live in their new reality.

In addition to these concerns about incentives, one may not always assume that the governments in both developed and developing nations possess either the political will or resource and administrative capacities or both to plan for disasters or to respond to them. Haiti lacked each of these requisites in 2010, both because its existing government was ill developed and too often corrupt and because the earthquake killed a sizable share of its professional workforce. In the United States (U.S.) in 2005, federal government authorities initially were unable to mobilize capacity to respond to the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina as a result of a dearth of prior planning and a President and agency leaders who did not at first evidence political will to assist until well after it became clear that state and local officials could not respond adequately (Wise, 2006). Governments in both of these examples had failed to plan appropriately, had insufficient administrative resources and capacity available to respond effectively and did not possess the necessary political or professional wherewithal to respond in a disciplined and coordinated way to the massive needs created by the events confronting them. For Haiti, the government's inability, due to its lack of professional capacity (qualified staff and funds), to help to coordinate the large-scale international assistance that followed the quake reflected and exacerbated the nation's existing sharp resource and professional constraints. In Haiti, too, it was unclear just how much the population could itself do to respond to the cataclysm it confronted, both because of the scale of the damage and because so many affected had been living at the survival level already and in a regime that had rarely encouraged any sense of political efficacy historically. This was partly the result of corrupt rule under the Duvalier regimes and intense conflict and social disquietude during the Aristide years (Abbott, 2011; Diederich, 2011; Fatton, 2002). The

Duvaliers had practiced systematic venality, cruelty, corruption and cronyism at the expense of the general population for decades.

What all of these concerns illustrate is how critically significant it is for populations to develop some semblance of agency prior to a disaster event, because all possibility for effective planning for first response and later recovery depends ultimately on such efficacy, at least in democratic or democratizing states. The potential for securing change in ways of life and norms of social coexistence demand it too, if nations are to take steps in the aftermath of disasters to secure their resilience and sustainability in the face of future similar events. Haiti, for example, is located in the Caribbean region, where hurricanes are a frequent occurrence. Haiti has also undergone less common, but sizeable earthquakes. Ideally, that nation should plan for their possibility as well as hurricanes since the risk of each is known. For adequate capability to respond to both forms of natural disaster, the country's population will require agency and appropriate governmental and civil society organizational channels for engagement to secure that appropriate preparatory steps are taken. The same is likewise true for the example of hurricanes in the southeastern United States. In each instance, such planning and engagement processes require sustained political commitment and public resources and neither has held steady in Haiti in recent decades and each has been unevenly available in the U.S. as well during the same period.

These illustrations could be multiplied, but they suggest that a population's efficacy will be exercised within a social, political and economic opportunity structure. Notably, even an effective and resource-rich government's capacities to respond to disasters and to develop possibilities for change in ways of life when such are necessary

to allay the risk of future events is limited. That is so because the affected residents must believe they possess the power to modify their ways of thinking and living and must adopt needed changes before risks can be mitigated. Individual efficacy and social capacity in the form of governmental and civil society organization resources and capability are thus integrally and dialectically interrelated in humanitarian emergency response and planning.

The broader dynamic this discussion reveals is the need for societies and especially their governments to find ways and means both to encourage citizen agency and then to devise social choice processes that allow them to act on it. Participatory development approaches that seek to offer residents multiple and multivalent engagement opportunities have been employed to address this challenge, with varying degrees of success (Kapoor, 2002). Almost irrespective of the venue in which such efforts have been launched, those employing them have confronted the reality that not all groups, or indeed majorities of populations, have historically possessed or practiced agency in many societies. As a result, securing their involvement in disaster planning or relief efforts is not so simple as requesting it. More, participation alone will not necessarily conduce to individually self-conscious agency.

Instead, often, governments and international actors must work to open social and political space (latitude for individual choice-making) for them to do so and encourage residents thereafter to avail themselves of it. Governments and international development actors can help open opportunities for participation, but they cannot alone guarantee that those targeted will avail themselves of any possibility they may create. Whether citizens act on the potential offered depends on whether they believe they actually can do so. This
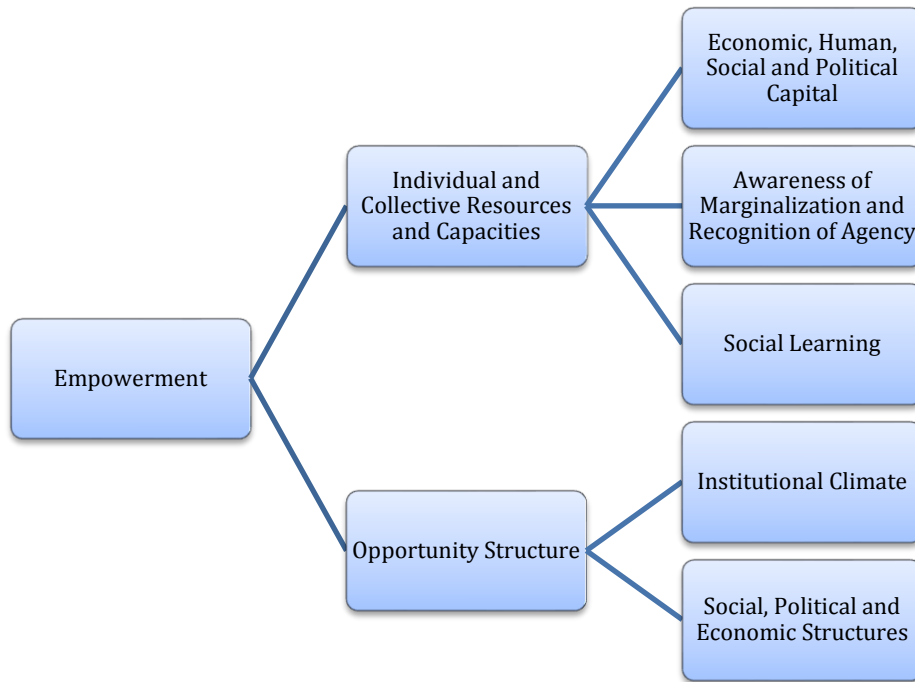
reality implies that governments and NGOs alike should work hard to design processes that permit citizens to share their knowledge of their communities with those experts charged with disaster planning or relief, but doing so will prove a difficult dynamic that may not simply be assumed for the reasons noted. Post-disaster contexts particularly may be especially politically charged since they often suggest, for example, the need to reconsider long-lived assumptions among citizens concerning housing location and related ways of life. Moreover, if opportunity structures have routinely denied individuals agency in the past, they will be keenly aware of that fact, and that reality will shape their orientation to, and willingness to engage in, such processes and participatory spaces as are made available to them (Al-Daily, 2013, pp. 87-91).

International Development, Agency and Empowerment

As with disaster relief efforts and planning for long-term resilience and sustainability in the form of social change when necessary, scholars of international development have pointed to agency as a critical mediating factor in a nation's long-term capability to secure positive political, social and economic change (McLaughlin & Dietz, 2008). But as in post-disaster scenarios, agency in populations is hardly automatic; it requires a populace that demands and exercises efficacy and elites who are willing to work to ensure it, rather than pursuing, as economists call self-regarding and aggrandizing behavior, "rents" for themselves. Rents may take the form of misuse of political power to secure funds either by cronyism or via tax advantages or in some cases by graft and outright bribery. Narayan (2005) has neatly captured the principal factors at play in development initiatives as they relate to individual and population agency and empowerment for change. They parallel the factors required for efficacy and self-

awareness of that possibility for disaster response, relief and recovery. Figure 1 outlines those concerns.

Figure 1

Halloran (2013), p. 68; Adapted from Narayan (2005)

The diagram illustrates the significance of the confluence of population awareness and capacities, including those linked to social learning, with political and economic structures in creating space and opportunities for citizenry empowerment. Considering the interplay of these factors implies that those NGOs and INGOs that would seek to intervene to collaborate with a government and/or a share of a nation's population to secure development of whatever sort must first gain a deep awareness of that people's and government's needs and capacities. Equipped with such understanding the NGO can then design strategies that are appropriate to the context in which it is working. If substantial segments of the citizenry have not gained a sense of efficacy under their

governance structure and in their current social environment, that fact will materially affect any initiative undertaken that seeks to encourage them to recognize and act on that capacity. If a government is corrupt or its leaders self-dealing, that circumstance may undermine a population's agency, even if its members recognize and are otherwise able and willing to exercise that faculty; that is, even if they are empowered. In addition, a majority of a population's norms can prevent some citizens from realizing agency through prejudice and discrimination. Prevailing social mores may also inhibit some citizens from gaining and exercising efficacy, as is the case for women in many Islamic nations, and for members of certain social groups in many countries, including, for example, the Roma in many nations, the Dalit in India and the Akhdam in Yemen.

Figure 1 also points to the longitudinal character of development when socio-political and economic conditions are not already aligned to permit it to occur (which is typically the case). When citizens do not already possess agency, or when groups of individuals must change ways of thinking to accommodate needed innovations for development, those pressing for change must create processes aimed at encouraging both so that social learning may occur that can permit these necessary steps. Those efforts inevitably require time and intense communication between the would-be developers pressing for change and the affected population(s). The latter must first come to understand the proposed shift in beliefs or practices, thereafter grapple with what that means for their existing values and perspective and then adopt a new understanding that incorporates the suggested innovation (or a variant) in their norms and behavior. Paradoxically, none of these steps is automatic and those suggesting change may mandate

none, if they wish to honor the integrity and (actual or potential) individual agency of those with whom they are working.

Put differently, it is necessary but not sufficient for a development NGO or INGO to claim an intention to work with the population they wish their efforts to address. If a share of that group does not already possess efficacy, or if an organization's efforts do not work to change the constellation of political social or economic conditions that make it difficult for citizens to make choices for themselves, its efforts are likely to prove insufficient to engage and empower the targeted populace, and therefore to secure the sought-after social change. Narayan has defined empowerment multi-dimensionally as, "the expansion of freedom of choice and action to shape one's life" (2005, p. 4). This concept implies, as noted above, not only that individuals must possess a sense of agency, but also active recognition of its existence and portent.

As Figure 1 suggests, Narayan has also argued that empowerment may be divided conceptually between the opportunity structures in which individuals are enmeshed, composed of the social, political and institutional arrangements (typically created and controlled by the powerful) that enable and constrain individual and group behavior, and the personal and collective resources and capabilities that allow actors to possess and exercise agency within the spaces available. Residents must possess the capabilities necessary to act and must also recognize their ability to do so if they are to exercise efficacy and to engage (or not) in NGO-or other external actor-proposed aid efforts. In this important sense, development efforts are identical in the challenges they pose to those that arise in disaster and recovery initiatives. Analysts working in each of these literatures have grappled with how to connect with residents and when, as is often the

case, those individuals do not already possess and/or recognize their agency, scholars have sought to identify strategies to allay or overcome the factors at play in their opportunity structures so as to permit them to do so. Effectiveness in each domain depends on achieving this aim. Likewise, success requires realizing large-scale change demands social learning and often, not simply by the groups most affected. This is particularly true when majority prejudice or enmity toward a minority group prevents those individuals from realizing their political and civil rights. In short, and paradoxically, would-be disaster relief and development agents often find they must work first to create conditions for agency in the populations they would serve, if they are to involve them in helping design and implement programs or in planning for their collective futures as implied by conceptions of 'participatory development' or 'local ownership.' By any measure, this is a delicate *pas de deux* and one that requires sustained resources, commitment, time and a variety of forms of support and engagement.

Understood in this way, neither disaster aid nor development assistance may be regarded as simply asocial scientific processes, even when the proposed innovation involves diffusion of a technology-based innovation, such as cleaner burning stoves or improved water treatment forms or availability. The chief challenge for those offering these new ways of thinking or behaving is precisely that they are proffering innovation, and populations must come to accept the need for change that such initiatives imply. That is always a social and political process and not simply a technical one.

Peacebuilding, Local Ownership and the Challenge of Agency

By definition, those involved in peacebuilding are engaged in efforts to address the conditions that had previously led to open and often violent conflict in a society. Such

strife can take the character of civil war, as in Sudan in recent years, long running class and religious differences that result in terrible civil discord, as in Northern Ireland, or open war among nations, as in the Serbian spurred conflict in the Balkans in the early 1990s following the dissolution of Yugoslavia (Stephenson and Zanotti, 2012; Stephenson, 2013). While the character of the conflict at issue surely matters, the challenge for would-be peacebuilders is ever the same, finding ways and means to rebuild governance and civil society institutions that may serve as channels for communication among previously antagonistic groups so as to develop new ways for the populations involved to come to regard one another amicably and to live peaceably. The conflict may have been prosecuted or instigated by government or by social groups or by both. Nonetheless, peacebuilders always aim to overcome the beliefs, values, animosities and vitriol that fed the violence and find ways for previously divided groups to acknowledge the legitimacy of the previously "hated" others and to live together, if not immediately in harmony, at least with acceptance of the socially and politically equal standing of previous foes (Lederach, 1998).

While they are typically not dealing with publicly sponsored active violence or overt conflict (except in those instances in which a government or other actor has deliberately created a humanitarian emergency, as for example, in Myanmar currently, Rwanda in the 1990s and Cambodia in the 1970s), this set of challenges for peacebuilders is very similar to those that confront relief and development actors seeking to engage populations in disaster planning and recovery or improvement initiatives of various sorts. In those domains, as in peacebuilding, would-be development agents wish to engage residents in determining a course forward and routinely encounter opportunity structures

16

as well as cultural and social norms that mediate the extent and the possibilities available for such to occur, including their own assumptions concerning what steps should be taken in a given national context and why (Richmond, 2012). Like their peacebuilding counterparts, too, a country's governance resources and capacities mediate humanitarian relief and development actor effectiveness. In the instance of nations sponsoring violence, that condition must first be addressed before meaningful peacebuilding initiatives can proceed.

As with those domains as well, the success of peacebuilding is shaped most deeply by the animating beliefs of the populations involved (Lederach, 2010). Peacebuilders must work to comprehend the origins and multiple dimensions of the resource, religious, ethnic, tribal, ideological or other enmities that created a conflict and go further to develop strategies that allow those involved to engage in the same process of critical reflection. The goal of such efforts is to permit principals to become aware of the foundations of their behavior and beliefs, take responsibility for the consequences of those and become convinced themselves that changing them is both necessary and appropriate to advance their individual welfare as well as that of their society. That is, at least ideally, the realization of local ownership in peacebuilding implies the need for dialogue leading to reconciliation while ensuring that all of the primary stakeholders also value self-determination, pluralism and human rights as central claims and aspirations (Richmond, 2012).

Local ownership in peacebuilding assumes that those previously engaged in conflict will be able and willing to participate in ongoing processes of negotiation and dialogue aimed at developing a more fruitful conception of society that will permit

previously aggrieved parties to live together without continuing violence. It also imagines that peacebuilding efforts can be devised that will encourage that result while respecting the agency of all parties involved. In this sense, peacebuilding seeks to engage those previously in conflict in what Paolo Freire called the construction of critical consciousness, or a process of conscientization (Freire, 2013). Goldbard has captured the idea neatly:

> Conscientization is an ongoing process by which a learner moves toward critical consciousness. This process is the heart of liberatory education. It differs from "consciousness raising" in that the latter may involve transmission of preselected knowledge. Conscientization means breaking through prevailing mythologies to reach new levels of awareness—in particular, awareness of oppression, being an "object" of others' will rather than a self-determining "subject." The process of conscientization involves identifying contradictions in experience through dialogue and becoming part of the process of changing the world (Goldbard, 2006, Glossary).

In short, successful peacebuilding demands not only that those previously involved in conflict reassess their reasons for that involvement, but also do so voluntarily while consciously aware of their agency and responsibility-demonstrating empowerment-to choose a new path forward for themselves and their society. Given the relative intensity with which individuals typically hold basic (epistemic scale) beliefs, this process innately implies a period of social learning of initially indeterminate length and scope. It also suggest a difficult challenge for peacebuilders, who must devise strategies to encourage this possibility, but who meanwhile cannot dictate how principals may respond or how quickly they may come to reconsider their beliefs or change their views of the previously despised "other" or "others" with whom they had been in conflict.

The Accountability Regime for Humanitarian Relief, Development and Peacebuilding

As with Western societies more generally in the last forty or so years, relief, development and peacebuilding efforts have been shaped by adoption of a neoliberal frame for their design and implementation. Harvey has defined neoliberalism as,

> … in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. … It holds that the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions, and it seeks to bring all human action into the scope of the market. This requires technologies of information creation and capacities to accumulate, store, transfer analyse, and use massive databases to guide decisions in the global marketplace (Harvey, 2005, pp.2-3).

This basic structuring imaginary has had tremendous impact on how Western nations and the international organizations they dominate have defined relief, development and peacebuilding efforts. The political architects of these policies have uniformly turned to bureaucratic organizations and sought to control those with whom and through whom their efforts are directed to achieve specified outcomes by means of those institutions. A Barrow Cadbury Trust-sponsored report by Demos described the orientation of the government of the United Kingdom this way a decade ago, and little has changed there or in other major western nations since:

> The demands and expectations of central and local government-with their strict performance criteria, emphasis on quantitative outputs and formal participatory structures, such as local strategic partnerships-all act against community projects achieving their aim … as this report shows a heavy audit culture often breeds an atmosphere of mistrust and risk aversion, which encourages uniformity in programme design and inhibits the distinctive contribution that community based organizations make (Demos, 2003).

This principal-agent and audit-oriented culture is designed to secure donor control of how funds are used while ensuring against potential malfeasance. The entire reporting structure for relief, development and peacebuilding alike is driven by a management

19

control paradigm dedicated to achieving donor specified targets and goals. While those providing assistance embrace the ideal of local ownership and control the management structures they employ to hold NGOs and INGOs accountable for those funds provide little space for bottom-up creativity, "unpredictability and complexity and incremental or non-linear change" (Wallace, 2006). Perhaps the quintessence of this donor orientation to project and program support is the United States Agency for International Development's adoption (and ongoing use) of log frame (logical framework) analysis as a requirement for recipients of its funds. This rationalist planning tool is predicated on the assumption that funds, goals, objectives and time lines can be tightly integrated to achieve pre-determined project goals and within carefully overseen and defined time periods. This orientation places enormous pressure on NGOs to prove their value against such metrics and thereby distorts their efforts toward donor aims and assumptions and away from efforts to learn with and from those they seek to serve.

This control emphasis aimed at attaining pre-determined quantifiable metrics also severely limits the degree to which NGOs can work to encourage agency among the populations they serve or to stimulate individual recognition of efficacy and thereby empowerment and engagement (Smith & Lipsky, 1993). In short, the neo-liberal assumptions that have guided major donor actions for some decades now have created a management culture that assumes that donors and their agents (INGOs and NGOs) can control all of the factors at play in peacebuilding, relief and development initiatives and can specify rubrics that can ensure that result. As a guiding proposition this stance assumes that government officials can employ managerial expertise to address and overcome what the philosopher Alisdair MacIntyre has memorably called, "the pervasive

unpredictability in human life [that] also renders all of our plans and projects permanently vulnerable and fragile" (MacIntyre, 2002, p.103). Neoliberalism has meanwhile also enshrined the market as the legitimate primary locus for social decision-making in society, with the consequence that in many instances donors may imagine that the marketplace alone will suffice to address relief, development or peacebuilding dilemmas. This assumption may or may not accord with the realities on the ground where it is imposed (Harvey, 2005, p. 2). In any case, such an orientation will do nothing to encourage change in the prevailing values and norms of populations, but will instead reward existing ones, whether they conduce to or undermine peace or development.

In an important sense, this penchant to ensure regulator power and to maximize supposed performance in projects across all three domains considered here denies agency in principle to those whom donors otherwise aim to assist by requiring that NGOs adopt a priori aspirations carefully framed against criteria and aims that funders delimit. It is difficult in principle to discern the space in this donor framing necessary for individuals, groups and populations to find ways to adopt new perspectives or to integrate new ways of knowing into their ways of life—essential to secure social learning. Some have argued that evidence-based practice and evaluation accountability metrics permit this result by combining attentiveness to careful research studies of "what works to secure desired changes" with a sensitivity to local norms and values (Peile, 2004: Thomas and Pring, 2004). Here, for example, is what the editors of a leading medical journal argued concerning the concept when it began to emerge in that field in the 1990s:

> Evidence based medicine is not "cookbook" medicine. Because it requires a
> bottom up approach that integrates the best external evidence with individual
> clinical expertise and patients' choice, it cannot result in slavish, cookbook
> approaches to individual patient care. External clinical evidence can inform, but

21

can never replace, individual clinical expertise, and it is this expertise that decides whether the external evidence applies to the individual patient at all and, if so, how it should be integrated into a clinical decision. Similarly, any external guideline must be integrated with individual clinical expertise in deciding whether and how it matches the patient's clinical state, predicament, and preferences, and thus whether it should be applied (Sackett et.al., 1996, p.71).

The difficulty in realizing this aspiration in practice in the fields discussed here to date is that donors have placed strong emphasis on supposed "best external evidence" and too little focus on ensuring deep contextual awareness and stakeholder engagement and efficacy.

It is equally challenging to imagine how populations can obtain space to ponder change or to engage in critical reflection of the sort that Freire and others have suggested is elemental to social change. In short, paeans to local ownership notwithstanding, the primary and antecedent devotion of the major governments and international organizations supporting relief, development and peacebuilding to neo-liberalism works against its realization in practice. That fact implies that the critical space for social learning and participation necessary to secure social change is unlikely to be available in the lion's share of Western sponsored projects in these domains. It might be said that the character of the quest for accountability in present donor nation practice is neatly undermining the purported aspirations of those efforts in principle.

Conclusions

This analysis has highlighted the fact that those offering relief, development or peacebuilding interventions aimed at the populations of other sovereign nations may not simply assume that if they ask, the citizenry of those states will engage deeply and efficaciously in the efforts they offer. Instead, would-be interveners face a complicated mosaic of factors that make it difficult to predict precisely whether, when and under what

circumstances residents of targeted nations will participate fully in initiatives in these three domains. Although major donor nations have for decades now called for engaging local populations in their efforts, that rhetoric does not acknowledge the many difficulties in practice related to attaining such lofty democratic goals. In many instances, disaster planning and recovery, development and peacebuilding imply changed ways of thinking and behaving, and shifts in the deeply held values that underpin these are unlikely to occur without protracted communication, negotiation and multiple opportunities for residents to imagine the new possibilities on offer. Moreover, in many cases, national governments do not possess resources or administrative and professional capacity to participate as a legitimate partner in activities in any of these domains. This may be the result of clientelism, corruption, cronyism and/or a dearth of resources. Governments may also simply lack the political will to work to provide agential opportunities for their citizens, especially when a majority wishes to deny members of a specific minority group its rightful political standing and civil rights. To succeed in honoring their aspiration both to stimulate and honor the agency of those they would "assist," donor nations would need to acknowledge the many social, political and economic challenges implicit in securing such adaptive social change in the various and varied contexts in which they seek to intervene. To date, they have not.

Beyond these basic complexities innate to external intervention of any sort in the internal affairs of another nation, international embrace of neoliberalism has virtually insured that the accountability measures employed to gauge success in each of the fields examined here will undermine the agency of the targeted population. This situation is likely to remain unchanged until major Western donor nations shift their current

conception of accountability. The present narrow focus on controlling processes and

demanding that virtually all efforts be conceived as technical ones must be reimagined to

conceive instead of intervention efforts as opportunities to encourage citizen agency,

empowerment and learning. Unless and until such occurs, their efforts to promote

supposed local ownership in the three fields treated here will remain more rhetoric than

reality.

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