

Community based development projects in countries affected with violent internal conflicts

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Abstract

Through community development projects, global development agencies of the North (NGOs, bilateral and multi-lateral aid agencies, Development Banks) have been bringing in resources to relatively resource-deficit rural communities of the South. Resources come in varying political, social and economic forms— basic infrastructure services, food supplies, technology, cash, vehicle facilities, salaries, allowances, contracts, training, exchange visits, foreign trips, leadership opportunities, etc. When such resources are brought in to countries affected with violent internal conflicts (CAVIC), it affects conflicts in numerous ways. This paper examines four cases of community development projects from four conflict ridden countries, namely Nepal, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, and Somalia, and suggests appropriate principles and practices for global development agencies to work inclusively in rural communities of CAVICs. Further the paper contends that when global development agencies bring in such resources into CAVICs, governments and insurgent groups not only contest for resources, but also the power of aid carried by development. At the practical and immediate level, they attempt to take advantage of the resources flow that are readily available, while at the strategic level, their actions are guided more by their political policies towards global development agencies.

Introduction

SOME of the major developmental casualties in countries affected with violent internal conflicts¹ (CAVICs) have been community based development projects supported by international development agencies. The global community faces a crucial challenge of doing development in conditions of violent conflict and working for lasting peace (Adams and Bradbury 1995:4). The situation is alarming, given that at least one hundred countries were engaged in 163 violent internal conflicts in the post World War II era 1946-2001 (Gleditsch et al. 2002). Further, the location of most contemporary violent conflicts have been communities of ordinary people, and nine out of every ten human casualties of war have been civilians (Eade 1996:5).

International development agencies promoting community based development projects emphasize strengthening the capacity of communities to achieve active citizen participation in project processes. However, doing so in communities in CAVICs becomes difficult as continued violence diminishes extant capacities of local communities. War generates a “new social reality for those affected by it and for agencies responding to it”, and “unpredictability

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and crisis become facts of life” (Adams and Bradbury 1995:28). Communities and other stakeholders involved are exposed to an unfamiliar set of circumstances during and after the conflict which renders them unable to carry out community based development projects. Regenerating community capacity to sustain community based development projects and to reduce further conflicts has remained a major concern of both development practitioners and researchers. CAVICs have a twofold challenge—to promote regular development and simultaneously “accommodate the additional burden of reconstruction and peace consolidation” (Castillo 2001:1967).

This paper builds on this premise and attempts to understand two issues related to community based development projects in CAVICs. The first concerns how international development agencies can help sustain community based development projects in CAVICs. The second explores how the insurgent groups react to the aid related resources. I draw from the experience of several CAVICs, particularly the cases of Cambodia, Somalia and Sri Lanka. Based on lessons learnt from these experiences, I highlight principles and practices for regenerating community capacity for community based development projects in CAVICs. Further, based on the experience of Nepal, I attempt to highlight in brief how aid related resources is contested by the insurgents and other actors.

Impact of Violent Conflicts on Community Capacity

In communities affected by violent conflicts, communities eventually lose the capacity to plan, implement and manage community based development projects. Capacity for peace is simultaneously degenerated. The factors diminishing community capacity for development are presented in Figure 1.



Figure 1: Factors Diminishing Community Capacity for Development and Peacebuilding in Communities Affected with Violent Internal Conflicts

Regenerating Community Capacity- Intersection of Development and Peacebuilding

From the literature of development and conflict we can discern two points where development and peace-building (i.e., transforming violent internal conflicts) clearly intersect. First, we find a similarity in terms of the rhetoric, goals and nature of participants of both development and violent conflicts. Violent conflicts revolve around problems of “justice, empowerment and participation, all of which are the rhetoric of long-term development” (Adams and Bradbury 1995:12). Both violent conflicts and development challenge the status quo. People adopting direct violence are generally trying to tackle structural violence; that is, they are trying to “achieve changes in the underlying economic, cultural, social, and political structures affecting their lives” (Lederach 1999:31). In terms of its nature, like violent conflicts, development too is “conflictual, destabilizing, and subversive because it challenges established economic, social, or political power structures, which inhibit individuals and groups from pursuing their potential” (Bush and Opp 1999:187). Second, we note that strengthening the community capacity is a basic requirement for both development and reducing potential for violent conflicts. Given this emphasis on strengthening relationships, and the commonality found in the rhetoric, goals and nature, there is a possibility that intervention for development can actually help reduce the potential for violent conflicts. Working in a community affected with violent conflicts is a development challenge in unique conditions of a war-torn society (Stiefel 1998: 15) and has to do with “mending relations and restoring dignity, trust and faith” (Stiefel 1998:12). These intersections, then offer us the point of departure for exploring further our research questions.

Figure 2 shows the relationship between community capacity and development in relation to communities’ potential for conflict. Development can have divergent consequences. It can reduce the potential of communities for conflict or exacerbate it. When development fails by becoming isolationist, and excludes people, it can provide the ingredients for violent conflicts. Such exclusion, when mixed with structural violence, may instigate violent conflicts. However, development that is inclusive of people and that seeks to empower them increases social cohesion and reduces the potential of the community for violence.

CASE STUDIES

In order to proceed with our investigation, we first examine a seed distribution program in Somalia. This is an example of an unsuccessful program where agencies have failed to strengthen local capabilities. Next, an innovative project *Listening to the Displaced* in Sri Lanka is examined. The project is an attempt to enable national and international agencies to hear the voices and assess the needs of the displaced. Then, experiences of six community based development programs in post-conflict Cambodia are reviewed. Each case study deals with the practices and principles, that is, the factors that strengthen community capacity in CAVICs. The principles and practices that strengthen community capacity are divided broadly into three areas - basic principles, community participation and organizational capacity.

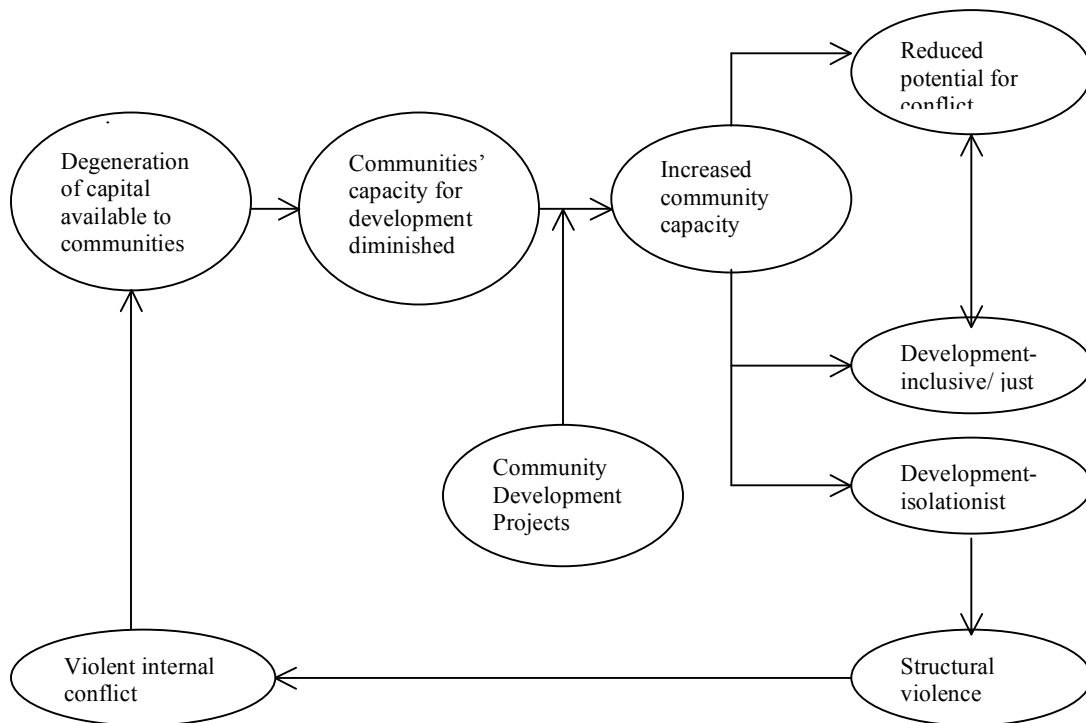


Figure 2: Macro-Level Model Showing Relationship Between Community Capacity, Development and Violent Internal Conflict

Case I: Supporting Seed Systems in Southern Somalia

FAO, CARE and Others (1991 to 2000)

Sources: Longley *et al.* (2001); Sperling and Longley (2002)

Project Context

During the final years (1988-1991) of his regime, dictator Siad Barre’s army conducted cruel repression in southern Somalia against civilians. There thousands were displaced; mines laid; infrastructure destroyed; grain, seed stock, water pumps and livestock looted; and fertile pieces of lands forcefully reappropriated. Added to the crisis was the famine. As a result, agriculture production had to be suspended for at least one season in many parts of southern Somalia. When farmers returned, they found it difficult to reclaim their lands, suffered severe labor shortage, and found themselves totally deprived of their means of livelihood.

International development agencies responded with various relief and distribution programs to recover southern Somalia’s agriculture from the market, security and famine ‘shocks’. One such response has been distribution of seeds. Some 2000 to 4000 metric tons of seed

were distributed annually since 1991 by international NGOs in southern Somalia. In 2001, Longley, Jones, Hussein and Audi undertook a field level study to assess the impact of such seed distribution on the local farming systems.

Case II: Sri Lanka, Project *Listening to the Displaced*

Oxfam Sri Lanka (1996-1998)

Source: Demusz (2000)

Project Context

One of the most massive displacements of the Sri Lankan civil war occurred in 1995 when an estimated half a million Tamils were displaced from Jaffna to the Wannu region of Northern Sri Lanka. As a response, the international community carried out a large humanitarian relief operation to help the displaced. The relief support programs carried out by various international agencies in the Wannu region, however, had several drawbacks. Agencies supported communities in specific areas of their expertise rather than actual community needs. Their needs were rarely assessed and voices seldom incorporated by agencies in their planning.

Oxfam staff felt the need to address the shortcomings of the customary relief programs. The challenge was to understand how the displaced people prioritize their overall needs, and how such needs could be included in agency interventions. As a result, the *Listening to the Displaced* project was designed and implemented in the Wannu region from 1996 to 1998. The project's aim was listening to those affected by violent internal conflicts, assessing their concerns, and incorporating their voices into programming in situations of violent conflict. Save the Children Fund joined the program in 1997.

Case III: Rural Development Programs in Cambodia

Oxfam, Krom Akphiwat Phum, United Nations Development Program (UNDP), Hun Sen Kraingyov Development Centre, German Development Agency (GTZ) and Partners for Development (1992-1997)

Sources: Charya et al. (1998), McAndrew et al. (1999), Colletta and Cullen (2000)

Project Context

Community capacity for development projects is reemerging in post conflict Cambodia. Though severely weakened by the civil war, various forms of social capital such as the pagoda, informal networks (rice- water- and plate sharing groups) and associations (rice banks, funeral associations and water users group) are reviving. Pagodas are Buddhist associations in rural Cambodia that have played historically an important role in the village decision-making processes. Such a revival has been partly possible because of various community based development projects launched in Cambodia since 1992.

Charya et al. assessed six community based development projects carried out in post conflict Cambodia including that of UNDP and GTZ. They examined four issues: distribution of

project benefits, extent of community ownership of projects, activities that supported program sustainability, and relationship between organizational structure and implementation. Their experience provides us important lessons for working in post-conflict communities, especially in the area of community participation such as balancing between process and output, generating participation, and focusing on extant capital.

Cross Case Analysis

(i) Basic Principles

(a) Neutrality: Neutrality in projects mainly implies the ability to work without any kind of bias towards any of the warring factions. It is important for an agency to make its organizational position known to the combatants in order to operate in the midst of war (Slim 1998:8) as done in the *Listening to the Displaced Project* in Sri Lanka. The *Listening to the Displaced Project* in Sri Lanka is a case which demonstrates that, although difficult, it is crucial to maintain neutrality while working in war zones.

(b) Transparency: In the cases of Sri Lanka and Cambodia, there is recognition that agencies working in communities in CAVICs need to hold themselves accountable to the communities where they work. Being accountable demands maintaining transparency about what is going on in the communities because of agency intervention. Methods practiced include developing education materials in local languages, conducting information campaigns to ensure effective dissemination of program objectives, and using simple and local language in writings and speech. Agencies can become more transparent by making information such as program documents (budget, expenditure, policies), project selection criteria and processes; and project related opportunities (representation, employment, training) publicly known. It is also important to make publicly known the decisions of community meetings.

(ii) Community Participation

(a) Fostering Trust: One of the preconditions for enabling participation is building trust. There exists little trust in each other in communities affected by conflicts, such as the between Tamils and Sinhalis in Sri Lanka. It is likely that such communities have significant “ethnic, religious and political divisions around access to resources” (Lewer 2001). The *Listening to the Displaced Project* in Sri Lanka, for example, experienced bias in selection of locations and participants on the part of the project staff because of caste backgrounds. It is important for projects to put emphasis on fair representation of once rival groups in user committees; providing equal access to information, resources and benefits irrespective of people’s ethnicity; as well as improving relationships between individuals of different ethnicity through project related training.

(b) People as Participants with Capabilities: War affected populations often tend to be treated as victims and beneficiaries, not as people and actors (Sorenson 2001:6). Too often they are seen as “victims rather than human beings with various histories and backgrounds,

ambition and resources” (Vincent 2001:9). The case of Somalia is an example. On the other hand, the ability to listen to the affected population was the major feature of the *Listening to the Displaced* Project in Sri Lanka. Treating people as human beings with capabilities is also necessary because the affected want to be heard, but have few forums in which to speak (Demusz 2000).

(c) Utilizing Extant Capital: Development activities that support communities in CAVICs should utilize various forms of extant capital. This is evident in the cases from Sri Lanka and Cambodia. Variations in practice could be noted, but at the beginning of the twenty first century, major agencies involved in community based development projects in CAVICs agree that development has to be inclusive of the marginalized section of the country. The approaches emphasize building relationships, strengthening local communities and organizations, and working with them in order to regenerate community capacity for development and peacebuilding.

Despite the breakdown in organizations, and rendering the social capital ineffective by violence, there exist some degree of social and other forms of capital that have survived violence. Cambodia is an example, where we note that despite the war, strong bonding social capital was found to exist in forms such as the pagoda. Although most agency documents advocate building on, supporting and working through local organizations, those in the field often end up strengthening one or two existing organizations while marginalizing others. Some even create new organizations because they feel the existing ones do not match their expectations. Agencies may bring resources such as food, medical supplies, money and expertise, but can weaken local potential and resilience (Large 2002).

Rather than creating new organizations, results would be better if development projects could build upon existing networks and organizations. Among the cases studied, in Cambodia we note that agencies have partnered with existing pagodas. On the contrary, neglecting the local seed system has resulted in the failure of the Somalian project. Large (2002) recognizes local ownership of projects as essential for breaking cycles of violence because local organizations have direct access to affected populations, knowledge of the local languages and the ability to gain people’s trust.

We can conclude from these experiences that international agencies operating in CAVICs should work to strengthen local and national NGOs. Local organizations have access to local population and need to be accountable to them. Such community based organizations and NGOs may lack experience in project management, and may need strengthening of their capacity by international agencies (Eade 1997:178).

(d) Encouraging Participation: We note that participation is a rather overused word in the discourse of community development. Very careful scrutiny is required when we enter the field of community based development projects in CAVICs. The simplest definition of participation would be full involvement of local people in planning, design and implementation of projects. Participation might be heavily emphasized in an agency’s planning documents, but hardly translate in the field (Gardner and Lewis 1996:126). If

participation is to be effective, it must be “a process initiated and based at the local level” (Mazur 1987:451). Participation of community and local organizations is the source of success in the Sri Lankan and Cambodian projects. Lessons learnt regarding participation from the Sri Lankan project are that participation in projects in CAVICs is necessary and possible. It is also important to gain consent of as many stakeholders as possible for working in communities. In Cambodia, community ownership of projects was found to be strong where villagers had participated well. Villagers were clearly informed about the project steps and participation involved dialogue with villagers.

It is noted that decision-making at the local level is emphasized in projects. However, decision-making at the local level is a process that goes beyond mere participation in community meetings, being informed and signing contracts with agencies. True participation in decision-making processes can be attained when villagers are encouraged to speak up, and their voices permeate throughout the project stages. Another useful lesson learnt from the Cambodian experience is that development workers need to be cautious while seeking participation such as in calling meetings. Meetings there reminded villagers of the Pol Pot days, when villagers had to listen to political propaganda, not participate (Colleta and Cullen 2000: 97-98). Furthermore, community based development projects demand time and physical labor from the communities, which are already stressed. This necessitates project designs that utilize villagers’ labor time efficiently.

(iii) Organizational Capacity

(a) Conflict Management -Integrated or Add-on: By the 1980s, development policy-makers were analyzing the impact of conflict on development processes. Developmental goals such as poverty reduction, environmental protection and good governance were presented not only as ends in themselves, but also as helping to lessen conflicts (Macrae 2001). Despite this development and subsequent recognition of the need for conflict to be brought to center stage, conflict is treated by many agencies still as an add-on in community based development projects. Conflict assessments during project inception and planning stage are not made effectively. Not enough input is made to analyze and map conflicts (Lewer 2001). Sophisticated situation analysis that could respond to the specificities of each situation in which agencies work is lacking (Atikson 2001). Agencies do not have a real understanding of the “social and historical fabric of communities they work with” (Lewer, Goodhand and Hulme 2001). Amongst various sociological issues such as gender, poverty and culture, conflict has received an ad-hoc treatment. Unlike gender analysis or environmental impact assessment, there has been no equivalent analysis of conflict” (Bush and Opp 1999:186).

In such a setting, most organizations do not have the necessary instruments to respond to violent conflicts. Treating conflicts as a short-term problem also demonstrates failure of agencies “to appreciate the nature of the current wars which have proved to be durable and pervasive” (Adams and Bradbury 1995:28). The Sri Lankan project can be noted as an attempt to integrate conflict analysis prior to project selection.

The success of any development projects in CAVICs depends on the ability of project staff to determine the tensions, dividers and connectors, and analyze how each project activity will affect them (Anderson 1999). Such factors should be identified genuinely based on actual systems, actions and interactions in the project setting. Just as the impact of violence on development, the impact of development activities on communities' capacities for both war and peace need in-depth exploration. Key questions to be asked while devising program logics and activities are: Will a project activity increase divisions and tensions? Or will it strengthen the connectors?

(b) Relief and Development: International agencies have been involved for a long time in development in CAVICs. As a result they have enhanced their ability to understand the links between relief and development, and to devise suitable policies. However, their capacity to “operationalize the policies remains low” (Stiefel 1998:21). Relief, development and peace are often overlapping without clear demarcation. There is a considerable confusion concerning the link between relief and development within agencies (Seaman 1994:33). There is a “crisis of theory” for development practice in CAVICs. Such crisis is situated in the “so-called relief-development continuum—a debate which might be better described as the relief-development conundrum” (Slim 1997:9).

In her analysis of how development programs change and grow during the rise of insurgency, Agerbak (1996:29-30) distinguishes four stages- damage, crisis, consolidation and recovery. In the first stage, emerging violence causes the existing development program to be reduced and conflict overtakes programs. In the second stage, intensified violence creates a turning point when development is deferred and short- term relief programs are established. No long term planning is possible. The seed distribution in Somalia was one such response. During this stage, withdrawal by agencies may impart a negative message for communities where agency presence may be one of the few symbols of hope for the people affected by conflicts. In the third stage, Agerbak argues that over time conflict settles into a pattern and agencies gain experience. During this phase, programs acquire development characteristics and long term planning begins for humanitarian and relief activities. The Sri Lankan case can be viewed as a project in this phase, while the Somalian relief program continued to remain in the second. In the fourth stage, when a peace settlement is reached, violent conflicts scaled down, and situations returned to normalcy from emergency, external support tends to become more development oriented, such as in Cambodia. Here the task of recovery requires transformation from a relief approach to a longer-term development approach.

(c) Flexibility and Balancing Process vs. Output: In community based development projects in stable non-violent conditions, social mobilization and building local capacity (such as forming groups, training villagers on managerial and technical skills, seeking their participation in meetings) precedes the tangible output such as constructing a public latrine or an irrigation canal. Agencies have had a difficult time to pursuing this approach in CAVICs, and have varying views.

The Cambodian experience demonstrates that agencies need to strike a balance between producing outputs and being process oriented for projects to be accepted by the communities.

A longer time spent in social mobilization contributes to building the managerial and technical skills required to plan, implement and monitor projects, but may frustrate communities that expect tangible outputs which ease their daily hardships. While an output oriented approach runs the risk of undermining sustainability, a total process orientation runs the risk of not generating benefits. In such cases, rebels get the opportunity to criticize development projects. For example, at one stage of the *Listening to the Displaced* Project in 1998, Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) wanted agencies to implement programs that met obvious needs of people and produced tangible outputs, such as wells, roads, health care centers rather than projects like the *Listening to the Displaced* project that emphasized on the process.

Being flexible also implies adjusting to the changing situation in field. This is particularly important because conflict dynamics change frequently. Agencies working in CAVICs encounter situations that are unforeseen during the planning stage. The inability to delegate authority to field offices slows down projects, and often puts staff and the project at risk.

(d) Staff Capability: To better understand the local context, some agencies have begun localizing their staff. Given that expatriates rarely speak the local language and never understand the cultural context completely (Parakrama 2001), and come and go with unpredictable frequency resulting in losses to an agency's institutional memory (Goodhand 2001), such localization has helped agencies to have better grasp of local reality. It has also helped to offset project costs.

Staff working in agencies often risk their lives to translate agency principles into practice in the field. To have projects operating implies having some staff present in the field, as well. An agency's effectiveness in carrying out projects in CAVICs relies on the quality of the staff (Slim 1997:10). The experience of the Sri Lankan case was that most NGO staff have limited practical experience of research and participatory methodologies and needed to be trained. The Cambodian projects also suggest the need for building staff capacity to work in conflict situations. Owing to the sensitivity of working in violence affected areas, staffs of agencies and partners often require instruction in the type of behavior expected from them while in the field. Staff must learn to respect local culture and customs, live with the people and be positive role models. This also implies not being provocative in any manner. In some areas, carrying a factory produced water bottle, for example, might pronounce economic differences between the development worker and villagers. The Somalian case demonstrated that agencies often lack the expertise required to undertake detailed assessments needed to understand local systems. Agencies are often better prepared for short-term relief interventions such as emergency distributions or development projects in stable settings rather than more developmental, capacity building interventions. As such staff need to be trained in various behavioral and managerial aspects of working in communities caught in conflict.

Contest for Resources

Next we examine the situation in Nepal to understand how resources brought in by development agencies is contested. In Nepal an eight -year old (1996-) Maoist-led insurgency has brought development projects almost to a standstill.

Maoist response to aid

Two recent events of May 2004 indicate the importance of external resources provided to an economically and administratively weak state such as that of Nepal. In the first incident, in response to the parliamentary forces (now in opposition to the Monarch), eleven donors showed conditional willingness to delay the Nepal Development Forum Meeting. In a second incident, several aid agencies announced suspension of projects from five districts owing to Maoists demands and threats. Although not new of its kind, the latter incident indicates that the insurgents are not comfortable with the presence of development agencies in the country.

The Maoists view foreign aid as “imperialist financial capital in disguise” and charge that huge amount of money is spent in rural Nepal in the name of NGOs and INGOs as parts of “the imperialist plan of checking the mounting crisis in oppressed nations from breaking into revolutionary upheavals” (Bhattarai, Baburam 1998). At the grassroots level, this has translated in to criticism of agencies for their ‘pajero-culture,’ and ‘dollar farming’. However, in some cases the insurgents are utilizing the aid resources brought in by development agencies. A leader of a development agency and a NGO field worker reflected this in the following statement:

We try to be neutral and offer to work with anyone willing to be our partners, as long as their interests are to help the poor. In some cases we have worked effectively with Maoists (Bhattarai, Binod 2001).

Similarly local people in a district benefiting from one of EU projects, for example, rallied behind the project when insurgents torched a project vehicle. Maoists there were forced to retract their position. This indicates that the insurgents might not be readily willing to reject the resources that are doing well to the communities.

Procedures for building local capacities in community based development projects are lengthy. This has given the insurgents good space to criticize agencies while winning local sentiments. Maoists oppose projects involving social organization because they see them as threat to their own political mobilization (Loocke and Philipson 2002: 41). As a response, projects have been asked to “fast track”, and “produce more outputs.”

Change in technical design of infrastructure projects has been one response for adapting to the changing dynamics of conflict. Some agencies working in the drinking water sector have replaced iron fittings with polythene ones in project designs. This was a reaction to the government ban on transporting iron fittings to areas affected by insurgency where Maoists confiscated iron fittings to make socket bombs.

Conclusions

Community based development projects that have achieved greater success have the following features: they espouse neutrality, transparency and flexibility in approach; train staff to prepare to work in violence areas; treat the affected population as full participants with capabilities rather than victims of violence, listen to them and incorporate their voices in planning; and build on extant social capital including local and national organizations. Such projects have been able to build both horizontal and vertical relationships by bringing in people closer, empowering them to participate in community based development projects through various means, and by partnering with their organizations. Our findings suggest that projects with such features can be helpful to sustain community based development projects and thus peacebuilding. This is irrespective of the stage of conflict, ongoing or settled.

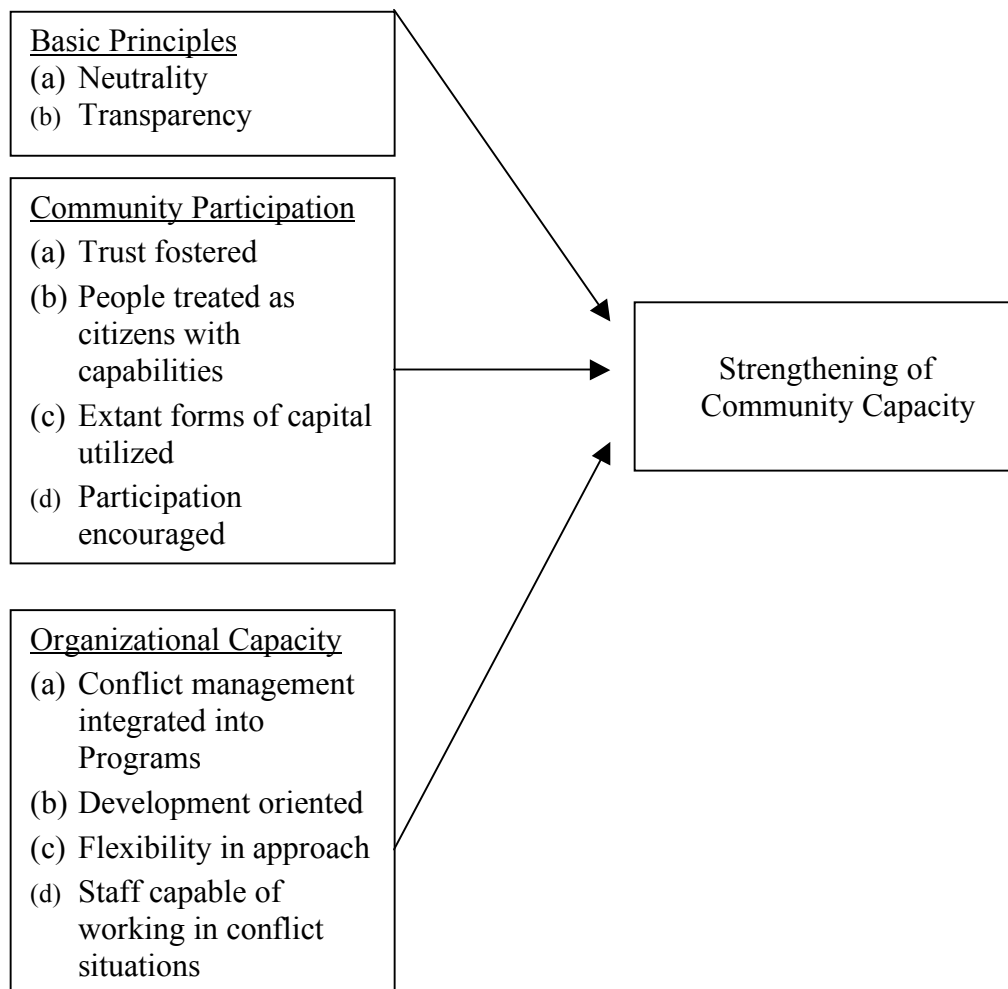


Figure 3: Micro-Level Model for Principles and Practices that Strengthen Capacity of Communities Affected with Violent Conflict

Through development projects, agencies bring in resources to relatively resource-deficit communities. Resources come in varying social, economic and political forms—relief supplies, employment, contracts, training, basic infrastructure services, exchange visits, foreign trips, vehicle facilities, training allowances, leadership opportunities, etc. When such resources are brought into CAVICs, it affects conflicts in numerous ways. Development needs to operate within a system of relationships created by resources flow. This makes development and peacebuilding based on principles of social and economic justice even more challenging.

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¹ An armed conflict between the government of a country and internal opposition groups, with or without intervention from other states, and causing at least 25 battle related deaths in a single year (Gleditsch, Wallensteen, Eriksson, Sollenberg and Strand 2002:619).