

PLANNING AND COMMUNITY
DEVELOPMENT:
CASE STUDIES

UC Berkeley - Technical University of Madrid

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Published by Grupo GESPLAN-UPM

ETSI Agrónomos, Ciudad Universitaria s/n, 28040 Madrid (Spain)

ISBN: 978-84-616-2381-5

Printed by Graficas Ulzama SL.

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INDEX

FOREWORD	1
<i>James Midgley</i>	
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PART I THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

PLANNING THEORY IN POSTMODERNITY	9
CONCEPTUALIZING GOVERNANCE IN LATIN AMERICA.....	33
SOCIAL CAPITAL MEASUREMENTS FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN RURAL AREAS.....	69
NOT FOR MEMBERS ONLY: COOPERATIVES AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT	93

PART II CASE STUDIES

A PROPOSAL FOR POLICY MANAGEMENT IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION.....	117
FROM BLUE PRINT MODEL TO WORKING WITH PEOPLE (WWP): AYMARAS COMMUNITIES CASE STUDY IN PERÚ... 	153

**EMPOWERMENT EVALUATION CROSS-CULTURALLY:
GUIDING THEORIES, PRINCIPLES, AND CONCEPTS IN
SPAIN AND THE UNITED STATES 183**

**A PARTICIPATORY APPROACH TO MULTIFUNCTIONALITY
OF AGRICULTURE: A LOCAL VISION OF THE BANANA
SECTOR IN THE CANARY ISLANDS, SPAIN 203**

**THE ACTORS CAPACITIES TO DIRECT THE NEW
GOVERNANCE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY 233**

**THE SOCIAL CAPITAL, INSTITUTIONS AND ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT: 249**

EPILOGUE285

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FOREWORD

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Despite continued urbanization, a sizable proportion of the world's population today lives in rural areas. Many also face major challenges to their livelihoods and wellbeing. In the Global South, many rural people work under arduous conditions to make ends meet and many are in poverty. Rural communities in many parts of the world have limited access to modern services and social deprivation is widespread. In the Western countries, rural living standards are comparatively high but even here, poverty remains a problem and rural communities are also disadvantaged when securing access to education, social services and transport. On the other hand, the contribution of rural communities to economic development is widely recognized. They produce the food and other commodities societies require and contribute significantly to national development. In many countries, agricultural commodities are a major source of exports.

For these and other reasons, many governments have adopted rural development policies designed to enhance the well-being of rural communities and a great variety of programmes and projects have been introduced to achieve this goal. They are usually implemented by government agencies but various non-profit associations and cooperatives are also involved. In addition, rural people themselves now play a major role. Most rural development policies are focused on agriculture and are intended to improve both the quantity and quality of agricultural production; they also to support agricultural processing and other rural industries. Rural development is also concerned with infrastructural improvements such as the construction of roads, canals,

railways and irrigation systems. The social needs of rural people are also addressed through rural development programmes and today educational, health, housing and other social services form an integral part of rural development initiatives.

Since the first rural development programmes were introduced in Europe, the United States and other Western countries in the latter half of the 19th century, a great deal has been achieved but few would claim that the economic and social problems facing rural communities have been solved. As suggested earlier, poverty and deprivation among rural people as well as inequitable access to services and opportunities remain widespread. In addition, many working in the rural development field believe that rural people are not fully involved in decision making or implementing the programmes and projects designed to improve their wellbeing. This is not a new problem and indeed, since the introduction of the first rural development programmes an expert, top-down approach which sees rural people as the passive recipients of services and resource allocations has continued to exert a strong effect. Of course, this was the explicit intention of the first rural development programmes which sent agricultural extension workers into rural communities to advise farmers on agricultural techniques on the assumption that their traditional methods were outdated and in need of modernization. Rural people who failed to respond enthusiastically to this advice were often branded as ignorant and bound by traditional superstition. Their genuine concerns about adopting new methods and taking risks by abandoning well tried approaches were not addressed. On the other hand, those who cooperated were often rewarded with additional resources and expertise. This tendency was particularly marked in the nations of the Global South that were under European imperial rule where colonial officials too often held ill-informed prejudices about the people they ruled.

The top down, expert approach to rural development was eventually challenged and the principle of peoples' participation became widely accepted. Some of the first efforts to promote participation originated in the anti-imperial struggle when, for example, Gandhi in India created the first of several rural communities where local people collaborated to

improve traditional textiles and craft production and enhance agricultural efficiency. A similar approach was introduced by Rabindrinath Tagore, the Indian poet, at the Institute for Rural Reconstruction he founded in Bengal in 1921 (Bhattacharyya, 1970). In West Africa, British colonial officials who introduced the first rural literacy programmes in the 1940s realized that much more could be achieved if rural communities were involved in decision making and implementation. Midgley (1995) reports that these programmes were augmented by other activities which later became known as community development. In addition to adult literacy, they included the construction of community centers, health clinics, safe drinking water supplies and sanitary facilities as well as productive activities such as crafts, small holding agriculture, and poultry raising, and a variety of producer and consumer cooperatives. These formative state sponsored programmes were based on the idea that local people would supply labour while government would provide materials, funds and expertise. In addition to providing labour, local people play a major role in decision making about which projects should be given priority and how they should be implemented. Self-help and self-determination became guiding principles of the new community development approach. As news of these innovations spread, the British government and the United Nations began to support rural community development and as Campfens (1997) notes, its basic principles and methods have been adopted around the world.

However, community not always implemented as intended and the goal of promoting peoples' participation was not always realized. In some countries, rural community development programmes were directly linked to local government administration which it was hoped would ensure decentralization and full participation. However, since local councils and other bodies were often appointed or otherwise elected in ways that mirrored existing patterns of power and authority, women and the poorest sections of the community were seldom fully represented. In some cases, ruling political parties used rural development programmes for electoral benefit and rewarded those