

1998

Measuring Progress; Evaluating the Strengthening of Communities

Phil Bartle

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Recommended Citation

Bartle, Phil, "Measuring Progress; Evaluating the Strengthening of Communities" (1998). *Evaluation/Reflection*. 12.

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Community Management Programme (CMP)



Measuring Progress; Evaluating the Strengthening of Communities



by Phil Bartle pbartle@imul.com

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The Problem We Face

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Our goal is stated; we want to strengthen communities. We feel that we have a methodology to do so, but how can we know when we have succeeded, or to what extent?

What we may mean by the above question, is, "How do we measure the strengthening of communities that we claim we are doing?" Put in other ways, "What do we mean by strengthening communities, by increasing their capacities, by empowering them?" We can use these three (1 **empowering**, 2 **strengthening**, 3 **capacity building**) interchangeably, although one or another may be more acceptable to different people. The word "empowerment," for example, seems to appear more like a political goal, while "capacity building" appears more "neutral" (a-political), thus more acceptable to technical specialists who do not want to be contaminated with anything that might appear to be ideologically tainted or "political." The word "strengthening" may be somewhere in between.

"Measuring" and "defining," as you can see, are closely connected to each other here.

We have noticed that, in our programme of community strengthening, our objective that is least realised has been that we want to set up a systematic process (or set of procedures) of monitoring and evaluating the results of all our activities aimed at achieving that strengthening. We can not measure something unless we know what it is we are measuring, and how we are going to go about doing that measurement (what tools we can use).

By the way, just in passing, the object of our affection, "**the community**," is also problematical in terms of being identified precisely. While that is a topic for another paper, perhaps, we mean here by community as something more than a collection of individual people; it is the organization (the super-organism) of the community that we wish to strengthen. If individuals in the meantime get stronger, well so be it, but it is the organization of the community as a whole whose capacity we wish to see increased.

Unfortunately, we do not have a little electronic meter that, when it moves from 62 to 78, we can say that strength has been increased by 16 points.

What can we do? Well, perhaps we can analyse the concept of "strength," "power" or "capacity," as applied to communities, look at its various components, and see if, from them, we can identify a set of observations that will indicate to us that some empowerment or increase in capacity has taken place.

Here are a few (16) elements of a community that may change as the community gets stronger. Since these are not ranked here, they are listed arbitrarily in alphabetical order:

The Elements of Community Strength

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- **Altruism.** The proportion of, and degree to which, individuals are ready to sacrifice benefits to themselves for the benefit of the community as a whole (reflected in degrees of generosity, individual humility, communal pride, mutual supportiveness, loyalty, concern, camaraderie, sister/brotherhood). As a community develops more altruism, it develops more capacity;
- **Common Values.** The degree to which members of the community share values, especially the idea that they belong to a common entity that supersedes the interest of members within it. The more that community

members share, or at least understand and tolerate, each others values and attitudes, the stronger their community will be;

- **Communal Services.** Human settlements facilities and services (such as roads, markets, potable water, access to education, health services), their upkeep (dependable maintenance and repair), sustainability, and the degree to which all community members have access to them. (This is an index, not a cause, of community strength). The more that community members have access to needed communal facilities, the greater its degree of empowerment;
- **Communications.** Within a community, and between itself and outside, communication includes roads, electronic methods (eg telephone, radio, TV, InterNet), printed media (newspapers, magazines, books), networks, mutually understandable languages, literacy and the willingness and ability to communicate (which implies tact, diplomacy, willingness to listen as well as to talk) in general. As a community gets more and better communication, it demonstrates more strength;
- **Confidence.** Although expressed as confidence in individuals, how much confidence is shared among the community as a whole? eg an understanding that the community can achieve what ever it wishes to do, positive attitudes, willingness, self motivation, enthusiasm, optimism, self-reliant rather than dependency attitudes, willingness to fight for its rights, avoidance of apathy and fatalism, a "vision" of what is possible. Increased strength includes increased confidence;
- **Context** (political and administrative). A community will be stronger, more able to get stronger and sustain its strength more, the more it exists in an environment that supports that strengthening. This environment includes political (including the values and attitudes of the national leaders, laws and legislation) and administrative (attitudes of civil servants and technicians, as well as Governmental regulations and procedures) elements. The legal environment. When politicians, leaders, technocrats and civil servants, as well as their laws and regulations, take a "provision" approach, the community is weakened, whereas if they take an "enabling" approach to the community acting on a self-help basis, the community will be stronger. Communities can be stronger when they exist within a more enabling context;
- **Information.** More than just having or receiving unprocessed information, the strength of the community depends upon the ability to process and analyse information, the level of awareness, knowledge and wisdom found among key individuals and within the group as a whole. When information is more effective and more useful, not just more in volume or amount, the community will have more strength;
- **Intervention.** What is the extent and effectiveness of animation (mobilising, management training, awareness raising, stimulation) aimed at strengthening the community? Do outside or internal sources of charity increase the level of dependency and weaken the community, or do they challenge the community to act and therefore become stronger? Is the intervention sustainable or does it depend upon decisions by outside donors which have different goals and agendas than the community itself? When a community has more sources of stimulation to develop, it has more strength;
- **Leadership.** Leaders have power, influence, and the ability to move the community. The more effective its leadership, the more stronger is a community. While this is not the place to argue ideologically between democratic or participatory leadership, in contrast to totalitarian, authoritarian and dictatorial styles, the most effective and sustainable leadership (for strengthening the community, not just strengthening the leaders) is one that operates so as to follow the decisions and desires of the community as a whole, to take an enabling and facilitating role. Leaders must possess skills, willingness, and some charisma. The more effective the leadership, the more capacity has the community;
- **Networking.** It is not just "*what you know.*" but also "*who you know*" that can be a source of strength. (As is often joked, not "know-how," but "know-who" gets jobs). What is the extent to which community members, especially leaders, know persons (and their agencies or organizations) who can provide useful resources that will strengthen the community as a whole? The useful linkages, potential and realized, that exist within the community and with others outside it. The more effective the network, the stronger the community;
- **Organization.** The degree to which different members of the community see themselves as each having a role in supporting the whole (in contrast to being a mere collection of separate individuals), including (in the sociological sense) organizational integrity, structure, procedures, decision making processes, effectiveness, division of labour and complementarity of roles and functions. The more organized, or more effectively organised, is a community, the more capacity it has;

- **Political Power.** The degree to which the community can participate in national and district decision making. Just as individuals have varying power within a community, so communities have varying power within the district and nation. The more political power that a community can exercise, the higher level of capacity it has;
- **Skills.** The ability, manifested in individuals, that will contribute to the organization of the community and the ability of it to get things done that it wants to get done, technical skills, management skills, organizational skills, mobilisation skills. The more skills (group or individual) that a community can obtain and use, the more empowered is that community;
- **Trust.** The degree to which members of the community trust each other, especially their leaders and community servants, which in turn is a reflection of the degree of integrity (honesty, dependability, openness, transparency, trustworthiness) within the community. More trust and dependability within a community reflects its increased capacity;
- **Unity.** A shared sense of belonging to a known entity (ie the group composing the community), although every community has divisions or schisms (religious, class, status, income, age, gender, ethnicity, clans), the degree to which community members are willing to tolerate the differences and variations among each other and are willing to cooperate and work together, a sense of a common purpose or vision, shared values. When a community is more unified, it is stronger;
- **Wealth.** The degree to which the community as a whole (in contrast to individuals within it) has control over actual and potential resources, and the production and distribution of scarce and useful goods and services, monetary and non monetary (including donated labour, land, equipment, supplies, knowledge, skills). The more wealthy a community, the stronger it is.

The more any community has of each of the above elements, the stronger it is, the more capacity it has, and the more empowered it is.

The Measurement Methods

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How can strength, or changing levels of strength, be measured? More than by a researcher devising a questionnaire with each of these elements on it, these could be better observed and verified by a discussion led by a facilitator who calls for the observations of all community members in a meeting, asking how much each of the above has changed.

The goal of the community is different from the goal of the community strengthening agency. The goal of the community, for example, may be to install a water system or clinic, whatever it has decided, eg with the assistance of the enabler or animator. The agency which provides the animator, in contrast, has a different goal, ie to use the self-help action of the community as a means of strengthening that community (increasing its capacity, empowering it). Monitoring and evaluation by the agency and by the community members, therefore differ, because they are measuring progress towards achieving different objectives. Monitoring the physical construction of a clinic is relatively easy; they can report, for example, that construction has reached the foundation level or wall level. Monitoring the changing strength of a community, in contrast, means performing some sort of a sociological measurement of the changing social characteristics of the community (as listed above).

Knowing that the goals differ, it is still important for the community itself to be part of the process of measuring strength and evaluating any increase in strength. When it builds a clinic, it has a limited or finite objective, and it is easy to see the point at which the clinic construction is completed. In measuring strength or capacity of the community itself, the goal is open ended; there is no definable finite end to the process. The community itself (its members in a group meeting, not just a few factions or influential individuals) must be the main source of assessing if there has been an increase in strength, which (if any) of the above elements contribute to that strengthening, and if it is still desired by the community. The methods of tapping community observations, must differ between the monitoring of the construction of a facility versus monitoring the strengthening of the community which constructed it.

The animators or mobilisers who organised the community to engage in its self help activity, did so by taking a "facilitating, not provision" approach. That approach, bringing together the whole community in public decision making meetings, appears to be the most useful method also of monitoring the increasing strength of the community. Facilitating the monitoring can be done by the same mobilisers, or by others familiar with the community and its

history.

Taking a cold, arms-length, neutral (supposedly objective) and structural approach, in contrast, including the devising of a set of questions on a questionnaire (by persons unfamiliar with the community), is sterile, will hinder and limit community involvement in its monitoring process, and will yield results that will be less reliable than if a process approach is taken to involve the whole community in its own evaluation.

(A lab technician can stick a thermometer into a patient to obtain a reading of temperature, and that will yield very different results than when a doctor asks the patient, "How do you feel?" and allows the patient to respond. The patient does not have to understand the principles of a thermometer, but does have to understand the question by the doctor. Unfortunately, in sociology, questionnaires are far less objective or accurate than thermometers because most respondents, and many interviewers, do not understand the nature or purpose of the questions, or what they are trying to measure, and there are no universally accepted standards of measurements as there are for temperature).

That means, however, that the community members must be made aware of the goal of strengthening and the elements of strengthening (as well as their immediate objectives of constructing the facility), and these can not be kept only by the researchers. It is important for the community to participate in evaluating its own strengthening, that it be made aware of the elements of strengthening. The facilitator must therefore explain these elements during a process of community self monitoring its own capacity increases.

Ideally, the community as a whole will meet annually, and be led by the same facilitator. The facilitator will list all the elements of strengthening, explaining any that need explaining. They will then discuss the degree that the community has changed since the last year's evaluation meeting. A written record of the discussion will provide information to be interpreted as indicators of the amount of strengthening since the previous such discussion.

In the real world, facilitators change; community members come and go; not everyone in a community can attend a meeting; total participation is not possible; the very changes that take place in the community affect the perceptions and values of members. It is to be expected that in the very early stages, for example, the community members are aware of their poverty and see the acquisition of resources from donors outside the community as the sole means of alleviating poverty. At later stages, as the community members gain confidence by successfully engaging in self help activities, they would not necessarily diminish the desire for outside donations, but would also see the value of making decisions within the community, and identifying and using available resources from within the community.

To initiate a community based monitoring of the strengthening process, there should be a facilitator, a recorder, and a community meeting. The facilitator can start with procedures similar to the ones used in mobilising the community members. (The mobilising techniques start with unity organising, asking what are the priority problems, writing responses on the board with no criticism allowed, and when consensus is reached the facilitator changes the "problem" into the priority "goal" of the community). Similarly, during a community monitoring session, a facilitator describes the above elements of community strengthening then, element by element, with a blackboard or sheets of newsprint on a wall, asks members of the community to indicate the degree of change, and writes their responses on the board. While criticism is not allowed in a brainstorming session, the facilitator asks which of the elements have changed the most, and which the least, and why. Every item is written on the board by the facilitator, and the recorder writes them down in a notebook, including any details that might be missed on the board. The responses are manipulated on the board to indicate which elements changed the most and which the least, and the facilitator aims at consensus among the members in making the assessment. If there have been more than one session in the past, the meeting might then go on to see if the rate of change was greater in the previous phase or the immediate past phase. It is important that all members of the meeting are aware of the meanings of every one of the elements of strengthening.

A report of the meeting should be prepared, a first draft the very same day. It should be reviewed by both the recorder and the facilitator. If there is time, the facilitator can show it to some selected members of the community for purposes of cross checking. The report should list each of the above elements, and the comments (in narrative form) by community members against each one. You will see that it is difficult to measure degree of change, but there will be several variations of interpretation in the nature of the changes, as observed by different community members.

The Facilitator's Form for Measurement of Power

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Method:

Hold a community meeting (annually) similar to mobilization meeting. Facilitator uses adapted brainstorming facilitation techniques. Recorder records all details of suggestions while facilitator marks main notes on the board. Ask for group consensus after explaining each element:

- . (a) relative strength at present,
- . (b) change over the last twelve months,
- . (c) change over the previous four years.

Allow for different interpretations, then aim for group consensus. Invite shy and humble persons to speak up. Record main points on board while recorder writes details.

Use a form like the one below. Design it yourself to suit your requirements and conditions.

Element	Community Members' Responses
Altruism Current Strength: 12 Month Change: 5 Year Change:	
Common Values Current Strength: 12 Month Change: 5 Year Change:	
Communal Services Current Strength: 12 Month Change: 5 Year Change:	
Communications Current Strength: 12 Month Change: 5 Year Change:	
Confidence Current Strength: 12 Month Change: 5 Year Change:	
Context Current Strength: 12 Month Change: 5 Year Change:	
Information Current Strength: 12 Month Change: 5 Year Change:	
Intervention Current Strength:	

<p>12 Month Change:</p> <p>5 Year Change:</p>
<p>Leadership</p> <p>Current Strength:</p> <p>12 Month Change:</p> <p>5 Year Change:</p>
<p>Networking</p> <p>Current Strength:</p> <p>12 Month Change:</p> <p>5 Year Change:</p>
<p>Organization</p> <p>Current Strength:</p> <p>12 Month Change:</p> <p>5 Year Change:</p>
<p>Political Power</p> <p>Current Strength:</p> <p>12 Month Change:</p> <p>5 Year Change:</p>
<p>Skills</p> <p>Current Strength:</p> <p>12 Month Change:</p> <p>5 Year Change:</p>
<p>Trust</p> <p>Current Strength:</p> <p>12 Month Change:</p> <p>5 Year Change:</p>
<p>Unity</p> <p>Current Strength:</p> <p>12 Month Change:</p> <p>5 Year Change:</p>
<p>Wealth</p> <p>Current Strength:</p> <p>12 Month Change:</p> <p>5 Year Change:</p>

OK, that is the essence of developing a community based monitoring system to evaluate the degree of empowerment, strengthening or capacity increase, of or within a community (as I see it). Nothing is absolute, orthodox, written in stone or unchangeable. Your comments, feedback, and suggestions are invited.

A Workshop



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