Editorial introduction

One concept: many practices
The diverse understandings of Community Development in East and South-East Asia

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Globalization is renowned for its Janus-faced persona. On the one hand, it provides continuing economic development for regions and/or localities within regions. East and Southeast Asia, which is the regional focus of the Special Issue of the Community Development Journal, and particularly countries in East Asia, are among those candidates benefiting from the global changes economically even though the extent of development among these Asian countries is uneven. Doing injustice to the complexity involved and the resultant diversities within the region, economic growth through export-oriented manufacturing development (Corbo, Krueger and Ossa, 1985; Lall, 1994; also Gereffi and Wyman, 1990; Haggard, 1990; Wade, 1990; Appelbaum and Henderson, 1992; Orru, Biggart and Hamilton, 1997; Olds, Kelly and Kong, 1999; Hira, 2007) is regarded as the ‘development’ model practiced firstly in the East Asian region and then pursued by those lesser developed candidates in the Southeast Asian region. The consequent substantial economic growth was labelled in a World Bank Report as ‘the Asian Miracle’ (World Bank, 1993). Social development is renowned for lagging behind its economic counterpart. Differentiating between the two aspects of development helps to focus on the former for a proper understanding of the well-being of social groups within localities. The resultant social development in the region, given the diversities within and between them, is as remarkable as their differing economic trajectories. At the very least, the relative extent of poverty alleviation in East Asia and some countries within the Southeast Asia area is quite stunning.
Concomitantly, global economic and social change witnessed the continuation of the neoliberalisation process (Peck and Tickell, 2007; Brenner, Peck and Theodore, 2010). The deregulation of national financial markets was accompanied by a continual eruption of financial crises, with an increasing incidence and magnitude of financial crises of various kinds evident in the past two decades of which the Mexican crisis, the Euro Monetary Region crisis, the Asian financial crisis, the Brazilian crisis and, of course, the Global financial crisis being amongst the most renowned ones. Focusing on the East and Southeast Asian region, the impact of the Asian financial crisis, which broke out in 1997, its ramifications spreading throughout the world, has not yet subsided; and another financial crisis at a global scale, the Global financial crisis, which had its origin in the US in 2009, happened again. The impacts of such crises have negative implications even for the future generation. The consequences of different financial crises are dissimilar, particularly for those of the Global financial crisis, in part due to the ‘rescuing’ measures of the states involved. However, it is not only the disadvantaged communities, which are understandably the groups suffering the most (because of their lack of sustainable economic alternatives), who have to survive the resultant disasters; even the middle classes which have experienced sudden change in life chances and suffer the repeated risk of downward mobility and a loss of real income, are now caught up in the consequences of such crises. Symptoms of this are evident everywhere with, e.g. the younger generation being regarded in many countries as the first to have a standard of living below that of their elders and with access to affordable housing now becoming markedly narrowed.

Inequality is not only growing between countries as a result; in addition, countries within regions and localities within countries exhibit trends of rising social and spatial polarization and inequality. Different theses documenting these changes have developed, including and not restricted to, the ‘divided city’ thesis, focusing on the spatial segregation of the rich and the poor and the resultant difficulties for disadvantaged communities (Fainstein, Gordon and Harloe, 1992; see also Musterd, Priemus and Kempen, 1999); the ‘revanchist city’ thesis, the disciplining and displacing process and its impacts on the neighbourhoods of the disadvantaged groups (Smith, 1996); the ‘advanced marginalities’ thesis, the ‘hyperghettoisation and hyperincarceration’ of the communities where the poor reside (Wacquant, 1996, 2010); and the ‘responsibilized communities’ thesis, the enforcement of self-reliance norms and practice among disadvantaged communities in shouldering their welfare collectively alongside the shedding of welfare responsibility by the states (Wallace, 2012). The popularity of community development services in different parts of the developed and developing countries (Chaskin, 2001;
Checkoway, 2007; Fung and Hung, 2011) might reflect such neoliberalising changes of welfare provision for disadvantaged groups.1

Focusing on the East and Southeast Asian region, the negative sides of these global economic changes are evident. Studies revealing the disastrous impact on disadvantaged communities due to the financial crises testify to that (Cook, 2009; Cook and Pincus, 2014). The welfare regimes in the region, which emphasis economic growth as the main mechanism for welfare development for the disadvantaged, and the significant role of family and/or communities in welfare provision for their members, have magnified the difficulties, consequential upon the rising risks, social and spatial changes, envisaged by the disadvantaged communities.

To capture the bizarre implications of globalization, the Department of Social Work at the Hong Kong Baptist University organized a conference, titled Global Social Sciences Conference in April 2014 in Hong Kong to provide a platform for interested academics and practitioners to share on the related policy and practice changes as well as the resultant impact on the disadvantaged communities. Stimulated by the exchange in the Conference, it was proposed to explore opportunities to publish material from a range of countries analysing the impact of these changes, particularly the disastrous implications for disadvantaged communities. In view of the gaining popularity of community development Popple (2007) and the lack of a special collection on the experience of community development practice in the East and Southeast Asian region, and with the helpful support of the Community Development Journal, a special issue was planned to help stimulate debate in this part of the world on the place of community development within a range of national contexts. Altogether nine analytical papers, three case studies and one personal reflection paper were finalized. Six discussion papers and one case study reflect on East Asian experience while three discussion papers, two case studies and one reflection paper are concerned with Southeast Asian experience.

The East Asian papers from Chen et al. (China); Fung (Hong Kong); Kornatowksi (Singapore) and Chen and Ku (Taiwan), and the Southeast Asian papers from Kenny, Hasan and Fanany (Indonesia); Methala (Cambodia); Bruyninckx et al. (the Philippines) highlight in different ways the residual orientation of the governments in welfare provision for the poor. Chen et al., though focusing on the capital, Beijing, similarly reports

1 In the UK, this was badged originally by the Conservative party in 2010 as ‘the Big Society’, a term which appeared to encourage local voluntary and community groups to fill the gaps in local healthcare, social services, libraries, etc. formerly provided by the state created by cuts in public expenditure and a climate of financial austerity. Within the UK, at least, the warm cloak of voluntarism was been worn thin as local communities have come to realize what the loss of these services has really implied.
the shedding of welfare roles of state-owned enterprises in China; Fung sheds light on the continual neoliberalisation of the social welfare services of the Hong Kong government; Kornatowksi reveals the structural reasons behind the neglect of the welfare of migrant labour by the Singapore government which has also adopted a residual orientation towards welfare provision; Kenny et al. discuss the significance of an indigenized understanding of community development for disadvantaged communities within the context of the Indonesian government emphasizing collective self-reliance by communities with limited welfare provision; Methala points to the contribution of community development in civic education, again in the context of the authoritarian Cambodian government under-emphasizing the welfare and civic rights of the public and particularly in disadvantaged communities; and Bruyninckx et al. examine the impact of elite schools on children in urban slums also within the context of the limited welfare provision from the Philippines government.

The popularity of community development in general and in welfare services for the disadvantaged in particular, is reflected in many ways throughout these various contributions even though the meaning of community development differs substantially in these different national contexts. The nine discussion papers and three case studies reveal the existence of community development practice in China (Tang and Sun; Chen et al.; Hu, Liu, and Chen), Hong Kong (Fung), Taiwan (Chen and Ku), Singapore (Kornatowksi), Indonesia (Kenny et al.; Eng), Myanmar and Vietnam (Nuttavuthisit), Cambodia (Methala), Japan (Kusago and Hirata), and the Philippines (Bruyninckx, Cauchie, and Meuris). The personal reflection from Belton further points at the popularity of community work in the Southeast Asian region, and echoes arguably the ‘responsibilizing communities’ thesis in seeing community work in the region as a political tool of the ruling elites.

Regarding its meaning, and stripped in many cases of an explicit and coherent value base in theory and practice, community development is coming to fill the welfare gap left by the governments in the Southeast Asian region, and particularly in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and welfare services in rural development in Indonesia, and Cambodia. In addition, the ‘community approach’, increasingly adopted by many mainstream services all over the world as a pretext for quasi-consultative but usually top-down programmes is adopted in the environmental policy and particularly in the river improvement system of China as highlighted in the paper by Hu et al.; the educational policy for economic development in Myanmar and Vietnam as revealed by Nuttavuthisit in his proposal of an alliance model to involve the private for-profit and non-profit sectors, and local community in the planning and implementation of the public
vocational education in the two countries; education policy in the Philippines as described in the service to children in urban slums by an Non-governmental Organisation (NGO), the Makabata School Foundation Inc. (Bruyninckx et al.); and in rural development policy in Indonesia reported by a consultant of the ‘Creative Communities project’ supported by the World Bank (Eng).

Furthermore, community development is increasingly being used to serve the legitimization function specified by central government in a top-down manner in China, noted particularly by Chen et al. through discussion of its role in urban governance, in Japan (Kusago and Hirata) through involvement of community members in district governance by the district governments, and in Southeast Asia in general in the personal critique developed by Belton. Notwithstanding this generally bleak picture of community development being used, or should we say abused by governments to pursue their own political agendas, the paper by Kenny et al. exposes the complexity of the meaning of community development in action. They argue for the significance of attending to the indigenous meaning of community development in Indonesia, which reflects the existence of multiple meanings regarding community development in any locality, including at least the formal meaning proposed by the government, and/or the international funding agencies, and the informal or underlying meaning upheld by the workers through their resistance in everyday practice which may only be revealed through informal accounts and research such as that carried out by the authors. Papers on Hong Kong, Singapore, and Cambodia also touch upon the resistance of workers in countering the mainstream top-down definitions of community development, usually from the government and/or the international funding agencies, through emphasizing the bottom-up and empowering dimensions of community development. Fung’s paper reveals the resistance of community development service workers in Hong Kong through adhering to the identity of community workers rather than of social workers as emphasized by the government and mainstream perspectives, practicing a conflict approach to empower service users in their service delivery. Kornatowski’s paper on migrant labour in Singapore also reveals the resistance of the NGOs in helping the migrant labour to act on their oppressive situations despite being oppressed by a context of government against community mobilization and conflict actions. Methala’s paper on the impact on civic education of the bottom-up community organizing practice of two projects in Cambodia, is one more albeit modest example of workers resisting the dominant definition of community development shaped by an authoritarian and repressive state. All these testify to the need for attending to the informal, or indigenous meaning of community development through
highlighting the resistance of workers in the actual delivery of the services if one is to capture properly the multiple meanings of community development prevalent in any localities. The significance of resistance by workers is arguably overlooked by Belton in his reflection which results in his tendency to reduce the meanings of community development to one, emphasizing its instrumental role or political tool for governance by the different ruling regimes. Failing to capture the existence of multiple meanings of community development could arguably result in simplifying the picture of community development in Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, the alarm raised by a deeply thoughtful set of reflections from an experienced practitioner in the Southeast Asian region deserves attention.

Other than all these, different relatively new concerns (for the region) in the community development field, including the neoliberalization of state services, the resistance of service agents, sustainable development, the indigenization of community development, and resilience of community organizing, are identified in the papers. Fung interrogates the neoliberalization process increasingly shaping the development and financing of welfare services in Hong Kong and draws attention to the constraining impacts of competitive bidding. Chen and Ku in the context of Taiwan and Chen et al. in the context of China (Beijing) identify similar financing mechanisms at work and their critical impacts in affecting the development of community development services in their separate contexts. Concomitant with the concern with the growing process of neoliberalization is the call for deeper investigation of the resistance of service agents in struggle over the meaning and implications of the welfare services (Leitner, Peck and Sheppard, 2007). The previous discussion on the changing meaning of community development in different localities of East and Southeast Asia testify to such significance. Concerning the concept of sustainable development, in which community development should play a key role, it might be hoped that ever since the publication of the Brundtland Report which pointed at the importance of the social, economic and environmental dimensions of development, such a perspective encompassing the interest in social sustainability might gain weight (Cuthill, 2010; Dempsey et al., 2011). Despite the controversies around the meaning of social sustainability, the significant role of community participation is beyond doubt. Papers on the river protection system in Jinan (China), indigenizing community development in Indonesia, the Hyogo Long-term Vision Project in Japan and the vocational education in Myanmar and Vietnam have attested to the significance of sustainable development. Nuttavuthisit even adopts the sustainable development perspective as the organizing framework for his proposed model. Furthermore, the significance of indigenization is a critical preoccupation among, though not exclusively, Southeast Asian studies...
(Forrest and Lee, 2003; Goh and Bunnell, 2003; McGee, 2007). Kenny et al. arguably testify to such a concern and shed light on the contribution of the indigenous view in Indonesia. Lastly but not least, the resilience of community organizing in recent years in different parts of the globe have found an echo in the papers reporting on Cambodia, Taiwan and Hong Kong. The significance of community organizing in civic education in Cambodia, as one critical work approach in Taiwan, and as the defining method of those holding the community worker identity in Hong Kong demonstrate, despite what is all too clearly an ideological attack on the principles and practice of community development as a whole, that it will continue to play a key role in ideological struggle in the coming decades in the East and Southeast Asian region. Whilst all these papers reveal the notional popularity of community development in the East and Southeast Asian region under the current neoliberalising global changes, this struggle to maintain its identity as concerned with issues of equality, social justice and human rights whilst under implicit or explicit attack through the influence of governments and not infrequently, the international funding agencies, must learn to incorporate also a concern with differing cultural influences, deriving its mission from the participation of community members and the resistance of community workers themselves. In addition, the community development field needs to exhibit its vigilance in incorporating new theoretical and practical concerns of the day, as we hope this CDJ Special Issue will have done, and continue to be a critical stakeholder in the welfare development of disadvantaged communities in the region.

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References


