Community Development as Collective Action and Social Movement

An Alternative Approach to Conceptualizing Our Work

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Why Theory?

Theoretical frameworks are important for making sense of the world and our actions within it.

As a field of inquiry and practice, community development has a reputation for more “doing” than “thinking,” yet there have been some broad-based attempts to construct theoretically informed approaches to professional practice.

Theory as “conversation” (Neitz), “sense making” (Knight) and “orienting frames” (Domahidy).
“Developments” in the Delta?

Development is a contested concept.

Definitions of development are constructed, struggled over, and reconstructed by social actors, including individuals and organizations.
Concepts of Action

Collective Action -

Collaboration of two or more people based, to some extent, on shared means and ends.
Often interested in the production and/or consumption of joint/public goods.

Social Movement -

Collective action by a broad-based combination of individuals, informal groups and formal organizations.
Social movements go beyond specific ends to incorporate broader agendas, and the best means to achieve these ends are often contested.
Example framework - Polanyi’s “double movement of societal self-protection.”
## Three Dimensions of Social Movement

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<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>Issues of Interest</th>
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| Political-Economic Constraints and Opportunities | Political-economic characteristics of time and place  
Social actors as “insiders” and “outsiders”  
Perceived contradictions in structures and processes |
| Mobilization and Organization           | Organizational infrastructure  
Access to and use of resources  
Complimentary organizational structures  
Communication networks |
| Grievance and Collection Action Frames  | Social actors’ understanding of prevailing structures and processes  
Claims and frames concerning what needs to be done  
Social actors’ identities and roles |
Strategic Theoretical Model
Linking Micro and Macro

Macro-Level Structures and Processes

Top-Down Mediating Institutions

Bottom-Up Mediating Institutions

Everyday Lives
The Delta: Focus on Constraints

- The geological metaphor (Massey; Meert), such as Cosby’s reference to the River, is helpful for thinking about constraints.
- History of race and class-based conflict.
- Consolidated landownership.
- Persistent poverty.
- Environmental conflict (river and levees, crop dusting, chemicals).
- Traditional approaches to development (‘race to the bottom’).
- Global pressures.
- Disinvestment.
The Delta: Focus on Opportunities

- Strong regional identity.
- Rich culture (music, food, literature).
- Attachment to place.
- History of organizing and struggling for change.
- Community-based organizations providing outreach, education, direct services and advocacy.
Examples of Development
Collective Action and Movements in the Delta

Civil Rights
War on Poverty
Equal Access/Improved Education
Poor People’s Cooperatives
Sustainable Agriculture
Health
Heritage Preservation

Taking all of these together, does it make sense to conceptualize a movement toward sustainable development?
Questions to Consider

Are these movements separate from or part of globalization?

Are these efforts simply a form of adaptation to the dominant system, or do they represent an attempt to create something new?

What policies are needed to promote and better secure the livelihood of people through these efforts?