

Role of social and grassroots movements essay



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1. Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to critically discuss the roles that social and grassroots movements as popular initiatives play in development. The essay will commence with a brief explanation of what popular initiatives are with particular focus on social and grassroots movements and in so doing, position them within the context of development. The essay will use the case of the Red Thread movement and other examples to clarify these developmental roles and conclude with a brief appraisal of the limitations bearing on grassroots and social movements.

2. What are popular initiatives

According to Steward and Rakolojane (2010: 2) popular initiatives relate to those actions taken by ordinary people within society, and which actions do not originate from government or any other external agency, in order to develop themselves. This means that people faced with particular challenges do not wait for or rely on others to address their challenges or to tell them what to do, but are able to initiate or start processes that are geared towards independently improving their own lives. Steward and Rakolojane (2010: 2) note further that such actions include those that are not necessarily developmental in nature, but may aid development of a particular people, and indeed in a particular context. Of importance, as noted in Steward and Rakolojane (2010: 7), is that the popular initiatives will ordinarily rely on local resources such as family cooperation, knowledge of the environment, including the social, cultural, economic and physical environments which are inaccessible to outsiders. These initiatives, according to Steward and

Rakolojane (2010: 18-25), manifest themselves into social and grassroots movements as well as self-help groupings, which are characteristic of the prevailing circumstances of people who formed them or participate in them, and the purposes for which they have been informed.

2. 1 What are social movements?

Steward and Rakolojane (2010: 19) attribute the arising of the social movements to the responses by people who perceive the authorities; that is official structures, to be failing, being unable or unwilling to resolve particular problems that people face. This suggests that the social movements are those formations in society that emerge as a result of the people organising around and acting on the failures by the failures by the powers that be to address major problems that affect the general public. According to Steward and Rakolojane (2010: 19-21), examples of these social movements are international environmental movements, which are in response to local and global problems of the environment; as well as the women's movements and groups, which deal with disadvantaged situations of women, particularly in poor Third World countries. The Third World countries, according to Cornwell and De Beer (2010: 41) are those countries that have been colonised, have the majority of their populations living in poverty and are to be found predominantly in African, Asian and Latin America.

2. 2 What are grassroots movements?

According to Steward and Rakolojane (2010: 19), the focus of grassroots organisations are on issues that directly affect their members, which include

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food production to address poverty and food insecurity, land rights and the defense of people's cultural rights and addressing their immediate environmental concerns. This suggests that these initiatives seek to address concerns and challenges that people themselves experience in their lives, and which demand of them to act by helping themselves or to perish.

Grassroots movements can, according to Steward and Rakolojane (2010: 21-24), take different forms such as (i) traditional self-help; which are based on mutuality, that is repaying good deed with a good deed, (ii) transitional forms of traditional self-help initiative which while mutual, may involve material and nonmaterial benefits such as saving clubs or stokvels, relief aid, legal and infrastructural support, access to work and housing as well as for socialization and integration.

The third type of grassroots movements is that of non-traditional self-help groups which can take the forms of cooperative and credit unions (Steward and Rakolojane (2010: 24) From the foregoing, it can be surmised that the common thread that binds all these grassroots movements is that they are survivalist and mutualistic in nature and are formed voluntarily and spontaneously to respond to the pressing realities that people face.

Furthermore, as noted by Durning (2010: 900), these groupings share common characteristics, which include their abilities to utilize local knowledge and resources, being rapid and innovative in their responses to problems and being adaptable to the changing situations that people find themselves in.

3. Developmental Role of Social and Grassroots movements

According to Fuentes and Frank (2010: 185), community movements (or grassroots and social movements) rally and unify their members with the purpose to achieve both material and non-material benefits for their members, and which benefits are assumed to have been denied to them by the state and its established institutions. This appears to resonate with the assertions by Nettles (2010: 18) that social and grassroots movements can address the involved in the day to day struggles to bring about positive changes in people's lives; that is to bring about develop. The grassroots and social movements can indeed bring about development through both practical or material as well as strategic or nonmaterial means to the people involved, and to their communities at large.

3. 1 Practical role of social and grassroots movements in development As noted by Nettles (2010: 1-22), the roles of the social and grassroots movements in development can be illustrated in the case study on the Red Thread Women's Development Organisation (or Red Thread for short). This organisation was formed by women as a women's initiative to empower the otherwise disempowered women in a male dominated and racially separated political culture, and sought to do that by encouraging and facilitating women's economic, social and political empowerment (Nettles 2010L5). This was through enabling the ordinary women to learn a skill or utilised the skills they have t make and market a product, from which they could generate income (Nettles 2010: 2), and thus address their practical needs (Nettles 201: 18) The grassroots and social movements across the world, as noted in Durning (2010: 93), are by and large realistic, that is they are practical in

their approaches, are focusing on development, that is improving people's lives, and are concerned with people helping themselves.

These developmental focuses, according to Durning (2010: 106), include meeting practical human needs in areas such of land rights, education, health, income and the protection of the environment. To underscore these, Durning (2010: 89-139) mentions case studies in various developing countries such as Kenya, Burkina Faso and Zimbabwe, to name a few, where the poor have mobilised to address problems of poverty, deteriorating environment and deteriorating natural resources, and where women play a pivotal role. In the case of development countries, as the United States of America, Durning (2010: 99) mentions that local grassroots movements rally around environmental concerns with particular focus on environmental pollutions, management of toxic waste and the protection of groundwater. Noteworthy though, is that the social and grassroots movements in different countries respond to concerns and needs that are specific to the local circumstances.

3. 2 Strategic roles of social and grassroots movements in development As noted by Nettles (2010: 4), the Red Thread was involved in reshaping women's role the politics of Guyana, which were dominated by men and practiced along racial or ethnic lines, while women played supporting and welfare role within party politics. This thrust for empowerment was geared towards developing self-sufficiency and self-confidence in the participating women, and as noted by nettles (2010: 2), this created an autonomous entity focused more on what Molynux (in Nettles 2010: 2) has signified as strategic gender interest. According to Nettles (ibid), such interest are aimed

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at the reconfigurations; that is redesigning, of women's political and social status and role in both the public and private domains. The abovementioned suggests that the participating community women were enabled to actively assert themselves beyond the class and ethnicity divides, and challenged the male-dominant political culture.

This is to say that the women of Red Thread was themselves as their own liberators from the shackles of poverty and powerless towards empowering themselves. Noteworthy also is the assertion by Durning (2010: 105-106) that, while the local actions produce tangible benefits to the people, of equal importance is the immeasurable amount of dignity accruing to people and the disappearance of apathy and hopelessness amongst the people. Fuentes and Frank (2010: 185) also indicate that one of the nonmaterial aims of these movements is to achieve grassroots participatory democracy; which is about participation in decision making, and self-determination, that is the sense of independence, by the local communities which they are otherwise denied by the powers that be. This issue is further amplified in Nettles (2010: 19) who indicates that participation in the Red Thread has increased the participants' self-knowledge and enhanced their awareness of conditions of Guyanese women, and hence their motivation to do something about the status quo.

3. 3 Strategic roles of social and grassroots movements in development

Steward and Rakolojane (2010: 4) note that, since they exist within the prevailing political, economic and social contexts, popular initiatives can be constrained by the laws, regulations and prevalent political environment, access to money and ownership of means of production, as well as

community support and the skills of participants, amongst others. This suggests that the political and socioeconomic environments within which popular initiatives exist and operate have a bearing on their effectiveness. State differently, this suggests that popular initiatives are influenced and subjected to conditions which can restrict or facilitate their existence and effectiveness and over which they do not have control. With particular reference to social movements, Fuentes and Frank (2010: 167) note that because they are cyclical and respond to changing circumstance,,

They tend to falter when their demands m, or the purposes for which they have been established, are met. Furthermore, Fuentes and Frank (2010: 185-186) note that forces of national and global economy, which are beyond the control of social movements, have a restraining effects on the extent to which these movements can manoeuvre The foregoing suggests that these popular initiatives cannot sustain themselves as they become irrelevant as the situation changes and also that the environment with in which they operate. And over which they do not have control, limits them. However, as asserted by Fuentes and Frank (2010: 171), social movements play an important role as agents of social transformation and they articulate a new vision for the people. Indeed, as articulate by Fuentes and Frank (2010: 171), they plug the gaps in areas where the government and other social and cultural institutions have failed to address the interests of the people.

4. CONCLUSION

The essay has demonstrated that grassroots and social movements are important role players in the development and the empowerment of the

poor. They do this by providing a vehicle through which poor people's practical and strategic needs can be realised. Notwithstanding the limitations imposed by the fact that they do not have control over the circumstances within which they operate, such as prevailing political, economic and social contexts, the grassroots and social movements play a pivotal role in giving a voice to the voiceless and instilling in the poor a reason for hope. The case of the Red Thread has demonstrated that, given the means and the know-how, the poor can be the architects of their own development.