Community development in the Arab world*)

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I. The Concept of Community Development

Community development has, on the one hand, a theoretical basis that is still limited, and, lacks, on the other hand, a thorough empirical background. Consequently definitions have always been vague. This will probably not easily

*) The area covered in this article is the Arabic speaking Southwestern part of Asia. This somewhat cumbersome circumscription is used in order to avoid the undefined and vague terms of Middle East, Levant, Arabian Peninsula, Eastern part of the Arab World, etc. The region under discussion consequently consists of Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and all the Sultanates, Sheikdoms and States of Southern and Eastern Arabia. As, however, no community development programmes are under implementation in South and East Arabia, this part of the region will be virtually ignored. This article is dealing with the situation mid-1966. The state in the field of community development was at that moment:

Saudi Arabia: 16 community development centres; each one serving about 20,000 people with activities in the fields of education, health, social welfare and agriculture.

Iraq: 22 units in which only a very few casual activities.

Syria: 4, though very comprehensive, centres.

Lebanon: 12 units, nation-wide but with rather fragmentary activities.

Kuwait: 44 units undertaking literacy activities for adults.

No community development programmes in Yemen and the fringe states of the Arabian Peninsula.

change, because the formation of a clear concept of community development meets the serious obstacle that community development is marked by a competitive interplay of theories and perspectives from various disciplines so that two sets of tensions emerge, namely 1) one resulting from the competition among the viewpoints of the disciplines involved, and the other, from the different interests between theorists and practitioners. This situation that community development can be described as "a new, nebulous unsynthesized amalgam of social sciences" 2) gives raise to a variety of interpretations. Nevertheless, at a closer look one can discern something common among the different opinions. A basic element common to all is: the orientation towards fuller utilization of human resources. There is a certain consensus that community development means the recruitment of the vast human resources that are available in the community, and the application of these resources for development purposes. It is this common orientation that ties all interest


groups together, and, although the approaches are often far from the same, agreement exists on the central issue that community development aims principally at activating and promoting human resources in order to bring about (community) action directed towards welfare in its broadest sense. This implies that people are more or less helped to help themselves. For that reason community development is sometimes shortly defined as the method of aided self-help 3).

But, although the same basic idea is underlying community development, irrespective of the approach — some reserve about its significance should be made. The process of community development 4) can imply a gradual as well as a basic change. It can just mean the transition from a situation in which public affairs are decided by a small exclusive group to a system with a more democratic basis. It can, however, also mean a process implying the emergence of the community from a situation in which plain impotence of influencing its own fate exists, into a state in which it begins to determine own destiny. The extent of change will mainly depend on local circumstances. The change that could, for instance, take place in American communities in which the members "had a direct perception of common needs, the satisfaction of which depended upon the citizens themselves rather than on an established order" 5) was no more than a gradual one 6). But, one can also refer to the much more deep-going transition in the Arab World, where the Arab has accepted for centuries his lot in life and has a contentment that is "derived from his acquiescence in what has been ordained by God and cemented by tradition" 7). There, one can note a complete change-over, because the replacement of fatalism by self-confidence and by awareness of own capacities to direct major private and public problems is very fundamental. So community development can differ substantially from one area to the other, and its significance can vary considerably. Nevertheless, the ultimate goal will always be the same: activating the human resources for welfare in its broadest sense with "the fullest possible reliance upon the

3) The more extensive formulation by the United Nations — Community Development and Economic Development, Bangkok 1960, pp. 1 — "the processes by which the efforts of the people themselves are united with those of governmental authorities to improve the economic, social and cultural conditions of communities, to integrate these communities into the life of the nation, and to enable them to contribute fully to national progress."

4) Irwin T. Sanders indicates in "Rural Sociology", March 1958, that comm. dev. is simultaneously: a. a process (the transition from one phase of the other); b. a method (the system of aided self-help); c. a programme (thought through in content as well as in procedure, with concrete targets); d. a movement (a kind of development philosophy, the idea stressed with an emotional attachment).


6) Alexis de Tocqueville described a strikingly typical community development attitude inherent in the early American communities, in writing of his visit to America in 1830: "These Americans are the most peculiar people in the world. You'll not believe it when I tell you how they behave. In a local community in their country a citizen may conceive of some need which is not being met. What does he do? He goes across the street and discusses it with his neighbor. Then what happens? A committee comes into existence and then the committee begins functioning on behalf of that need, and you won't believe this but it's true. All of this is done without reference to any bureaucrat. All of this is done by the private citizens on their own initiative."

Stating that differences in nature and significance occur, one should add that these differences are, moreover, often differently interpreted. The process of change should, for instance, in the eyes of some traditional religious leaders not be looked upon in the sense that it means emancipation. They would not agree that it is a historical process in which communities begin to order their own lives, to determine their own destinies and to direct history. That would be identical with rejecting Islam. The essence of Islam is the submission to God’s will. Man has not the freedom and also not the power to change his own life. Allah has ordained the life of each individual because it is written (Qur’an 9/51): “Nothing can happen to us, apart what has been ordained by Allah”. History is likewise in God’s hand and man’s action (like in comm. dev.) cannot influence the historical process.

While in the instance just mentioned a particular interpretation is given to the process-aspect of community development, we can also meet special interpretations of the other aspects (community development is simultaneously a process, a method, a programme and a movement, see footnote 4). The Lebanese authorities are, for instance, not very much inclined to place community development activities under the umbrella of a movement understood as a kind of development philosophy or an ideology preached with an emotional attachment. In fact, I did observe on several occasions that officials did not like to use even the term “community development”. They preferred to use neutral expressions like “rural development” and “L’animation rurale”. L’animation rurale is the goal striven after, although they state (as a kind of afterthought) that community development will be used as the technique. “Les méthodes … sont celles du développement communautaire, adaptées aux conditions libanaises”.

This remarkable cautiousness in terminology has to be seen as a result of political considerations, because it is a twofold political reason that has created reserves towards community development. In the first place, Lebanon is a neutral country with a strict non-alignment and non-involvement policy, and, moreover, highly liberal. The government assumes that the slightest deviation from this line would have serious repercussions on the economic life of the country. It does not therefore want to make the impression of sliding into a certain direction by flirting with the “commune”-idea. The second reason underlying Lebanon’s attitude is that it is hesitant to promote community feelings and the sense of independence of the communities. Community development is appreciated, but only as a technique for overall development, not as a movement directed towards the emancipation of the communities. The country has already e-
ough trouble to reconcile the existing "strong local and community loyalties, which lead to anything between sporting competition and civil war". The adherence to and dominance of sectional interests of regional units and rival religious creeds have caused a situation in which national unity is more a wish than a reality. National unity is rather artificial and "technical" indeed, as suggested by the Lebanese historian Ph. K. Hitti, when he states: "the religious elements have worked out techniques for Christian-Muslim co-operation in politics and other phases of life". One may add that the negative technique of evading and forbidding any action or statement that could lead to the slightest controversy is a very common one. The foregoing remarks may partly explain why Lebanon, for political reasons, rejects the idea of seeing community development as a movement. Having shortly elaborated on the movement aspect of community development in Lebanon and on the process aspect of community development in some traditional parts of the Arabian Peninsula in order to assess to which extent community development is looked upon as more than a technique, I should like to revert to the concept of community development, as it tries, by involving authorities and people, to stimulate the human potential. This means that arousing of people's effective participation, the transfer of the citizen into an initiator of change, and combining governmental efforts with people's action are of primary interest. We can even say that more such preconditions for development rather than the outcome, is the objective. Community development tries to prepare the base for development, or the base for 'growth plus change'. Change in itself does not form the real goal. On the contrary, both social and economic change are products rather than goals of community development. For instance, change in the social field is not the end aimed at, but the effect caused by the increasing ability of people to analyse issues, weigh alternatives and make decisions themselves. Economic change is, likewise, an outcome rather than a goal, and is caused by the widening of alternatives and facilitated access to them, while "it is for the members of society to choose among the alternative opportunities". This additional statement about free choice and a voluntary participation on the people's side preserves the personal freedom. This is very important, because...
cause development may never mean becoming tied down\(^{16}\)).

Summarizing and concluding this short discussion on the concept of community development, one may state that, in view of the essence of community development, the real test of the effectiveness of a programme does not lie in the changes brought forward, but rather in the increased ability and willingness of the people to plan, organize and apply themselves effectively in the achievement of their own welfare.

II. The Community Development Programme

A community development programme\(^{17}\) should be oriented, as stated before, to the promotion of preconditions for development, and to the creation of a 'human' base. People should be made ripe for development. This, of course, is easily stated, but how to programme for such a goal is a different matter. It must then be much clearer what we really mean and what we practically strive after. In approaching this it is not sufficient to list general preconditions or most badly needed attitudes, since we should be aware that the targets of a community development programme can only be drafted against its specific background\(^{18}\). Different targets are needed for different environments since community development is not applicable in the same way to every set of circumstances.

Still another confusing element enters the picture, i.e. in this kind of region an ocean of local peculiarities and personal circumstances have also to be taken into account. In this respect it is possible to refer to a similarity with planning in general, and it is interesting to quote the following self-explanatory comment\(^{19}\): "The discussions concerning development planning make it appear as though we are dealing with an exact science and that each step follows logically from an almost superhuman concept of what ought to be done in the development of a particular region. For example, I have read of plans to develop particular areas which propose to utilize advanced techniques such as inter-industry schemes, linear programming methods, operations research and advanced-econometric methods. These descriptions tend to leave the reader with the feeling that development planning has left the field of political pressures, hunches and guesswork, to take its place among the exact sciences. Too often, upon investigation one discovers that these plans, which are nicely printed and bound, are placed upon shelves where they gather dust when they are

\(^{16}\) Here one can refer to a similarity with planning in general and quote the sociologist Réné König: "Planung kann einzig dann ihren Zweck vollgültig erführen, wenn sie sich vom obersten Zweck der Wahrung and Sicherung der menschlichen Freiheit und Würde leiten lässt". (Soziologie Heute, 1949).

\(^{17}\) I shall not go into theory and classification of community development programmes. One may consult the United Nations publication "Public Administration Aspects of Community Development Programmes", 1959. A handy summarizing article (in Dutch) of the various — mainly U.N. — thoughts on these aspects by Drs. C. J. L. Bertholet, in "Sociale Wetenschappen", 1962, nr. 1.

\(^{18}\) A very essential list of basic attitudes required are stated in J. Tinbergen, Shaping the World Economy, 1962, pp. 12: "(i) an interest in material well-being; (ii) a willingness to look ahead; (iii) a willingness to take risks; (iv) an interest in technology; (v) a willingness to co-operate; (vi) an ability to persist; (vii) a willingness to accept the "rules of the game" ".

\(^{19}\) Regional Economic Planning, published by the European Productivity Agency of the Organizations for European Economic Co-operation, pp. 142.
not being used for a conference". In underdeveloped areas it is, however, not only the implementation but also the planning itself which meets so many obstacles. Not only the waywardness of the human factor at the implementing end is a fantastic almost fascinating element that often spoils everything, but planning itself is often hardly possible. Reason is the lack of even very elementary data; in this connexion I may just mention that for at least two important countries in our region, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia, not even reliable figures for total population are known. In Saudi Arabia the figure varies from 3.2 via 6.6 to 8 million, and in Lebanon the last census was held in 1932 (present estimates fluctuate between 1.7 to 2.3 million). If factual information on such essential items is already so terribly lacking, it will be imaginable that nearly no information is available for less "countable" phenomena. For these reasons one has to accept that the drafting of the details of a programme must often be more "Fingerspitzengefühl" than science.

In view of the whole situation pictured above we have in this paper restrict ourselves to the broad outline of the programme. This outline should be oriented towards the preconditions instead of to the outcome, but this appears, however, not always to be the case. On the contrary, the urge from outside "to show results" has led to the trend of working more and more towards concrete achievements, and has in reality resulted in an inextractable mixing up of community development with rural development in general. Community development has indeed in many instances become identical with local overall development. Consequently, community development resembles in these cases something like the missionary approach, because one may not assume that it is within the scope of community development programmes to take care of nationwide local overall development programmes. That would certainly be outside its potential and therefore, I believe that community development is definitely doomed to fail if it tries to bring overall development onto its own hook; it should not try to be more than a small — although essential — part of a greater scheme. If community development wants to be nationwide (and it should) it must restrict its field of action and recognize its own limitations. Even with limited ambitions it will be difficult enough to fulfill its task. Take for instance the programme in Saudi Arabia. Sixteen units are operating and each one is staffed with a team of nine specialists (medical, social, educational and agricultural workers). Assuming that each team can serve, as it actually does, 20,000 people.

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20) See, for instance, the inaugural address of Professor Dr. J. J. Hanrath — October 1965 — at the State University of Utrecht, who states from his experience in development work that, firstly, the collecting of the data needed and after that the drafting of a "model" that is feasible, are two prerequisites very rarely possible in developing areas.

21) 3.2 million according to an unofficial census (with probably a small underestimation), this figure is denied by the government. 6.6 million according to the United Nations Demographic Yearbook 1964; questioning local authorities in different parts of the country it appeared that they had been informed of the figure: 8 million.

22) This wish for concrete results is also reflected in the latest fashion to stress particularly the economic aspects of community development which is mostly interpreted as directly promoting the production instead of promoting the base for economic activities, like entrepreneurial skills, credit facilities, the right kind of schools, etc.
we shall in this vast country (imagine, more than ten times England, Scotland and Wales) need at least 150 teams (probably, considerably more because of the isolation of localities). This means the “import” of minimal 150 physicians, nurses, social workers, etc. They must all be Arabic speaking (and are so in most cases needed in their own countries) and be induced by high payment to come to this hardship area. It is, I should say, doubtful whether it is realistic to assume that under such conditions the whole country could be covered by such teams. It is very likely that going on in this way the whole programme will always be limited to a few very costly pilot-projects. Here I touch on another argument against this approach, namely the high expenses involved. In Saudi Arabia the community development units operate in huge concrete buildings (like in Syria), which are well equipped and staffed with hired specialists (often foreigners). Thus, for each unit an enormous amount of money is involved, a factor alien to the idea of community development itself. One of the main attractions of community development has always been its relative inexpensiveness, and I believe that it should keep this character.

From the foregoing it has become clear that I have in general two considerable objections against the current community development programmes in this region. These are, the luxurious comprehensiveness of the approach and the emphasis on concrete achievements. These two phenomena are deterring comm. dev. from its real goal. This is therefore why I believe that community development in this region should turn its steps and again concentrate on the promotion of a development sphere and of activities for awakening the abilities dormant in the human resources. The desirable evolution in community development should in my opinion not be a change-over to an emphasis on economic or tangible results, or on comprehensiveness. The EVOLUTION IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT should be the change from considering people solely as local community members but more so as part of a national society. We should lay less stress today on the emancipation of communities, but more so on the preparation of human resources for national development and the opportunities for utilizing these resources. In the light of this aim — paving the path for development — I am inclined to see as the main targets of a community development programme, in this region:
1. The promotion of the willingness at local level to accept development and contribute to it;
2. The creation of a link between the government and the people (who are the two essential parties in the process of community development);
3. The encouragement of co-operation in order to avoid duplication and unnecessary gaps in development efforts.
If community development could achieve even part of these three basic prerequisites, which are generally lacking, then quite a contribution would have been made. Why these targets have been chosen will now be discussed in brief.

1. **The willingness at local level to accept development**
   It is well known that a substantial part of the Arab World contains a social system which is antipathetic to progress. The prevalent social structure and exist-
ing values, norms, goals and expectations have caused an impediment to modernization. As moreover a high degree of institutionalization exists in the social system, the introduction of change has become very difficult indeed. This unfavourable social system is reflected in and caused by religious, political, geographic and social circumstances. Religious ideas have discouraged confidence in individual ability and promoted a fatalistic view on life; political circumstances have been a source of instability and of feelings of insecurity; isolation has hampered stimulating contacts and traditionalism has counteracted every possible move towards change. Furthermore all these forces have had a mutual impact and have reinforced each other greatly, so that ultimately a very infertile soil for development has been created. People just take each day as it comes and do not question the order of things. This general feeling of impotence to influence one's own fate is less conspicuous in the more modern areas and these feelings decrease with the degree of openness of the society. When modernization breaks through this outlook regresses (or, vice-versa; frequently, cause and effect are not clearly discernable). This suggests that after the first push a kind of snowball effect can occur, and consequently, the key is how so set the ball rolling. It is in this field that in my opinion community development can play a major role, since community development can give that first push. The experience we have had in our C.D. units in Saudi Arabia strongly supports this idea. In the same community development centre where, at the inauguration in 1960, religious leaders put some educative posters from the centre which I attended in 1966 the first recreational cinema-show. Just imagine the moral change between condemning a simple instructive poster and accepting a cinema-show. It was also in this village that local sheikhs put the non-Saudi Pakistani doctor in chains and destroyed his radio for the only reason that he was listening to music, while five years later (1965), I accompanied the same sheikhs when they were entertained Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh and proudly explaining to him all the progress and modernization made. It is certainly justified that the United Nations Adviser, who introduced community development in Saudi Arabia in 1960 wrote on leaving the country after five years: "Community development in Saudi Arabia is helping to modify attitudes in removing resistance for change, thus facilitating the full expansion of individual capacities. There is every reason to suppose that such a course of affairs could be realized in the whole kingdom and also elsewhere in this Middle East region.

23) See footnote 7.
24) From "The Passing of a Traditional Society — Modernizing the Middle East", by D. Lerner (1958), we learn what a difference the degree of modernization makes to the adherence to the idea of personal impotency (Chapter III).
2. The Link between the Government and the people

People and government should work together towards the development of the country. Anyone will agree on this. Both parties need each other and action by one of these groups alone is not likely to be effective. In order to bring about this collaboration, two-way contact is necessary, but, unfortunately, communication between government and people is not very well established in our region. This large gap between the rulers and the ruled is due to the fact that government and people do not accept each other as partners and do not have a positive social relationship. The feelings between both were — on the contrary — always those of hostility, and still today "the 'otherness' of the government persists in the minds of most villagers in the Arab Countries... Traditionally, the government interfered in villages to keep law and order, collect taxes and conscript young men for the army or forced labour... The villagers are then on the whole suspicious of government and government officials".

Such contacts are, however, necessary for successful development aid, otherwise one may become confronted with very undesirable surprises. For instance, in Iraq, in March 1965, I visited a small settlement which contained brick houses, a school, a community building etc. The construction of this relatively modern village (each house had for instance a real bathroom) had cost the government a couple of hundred thousand pounds sterling, but unfortunately the houses had remained vacant since their construction four years before. This, despite the fact that people were living in traditional mud houses only a few hundred meters distant. Lack of consultation with the future inhabitants of these new houses was the cause of the failure of that project. In questioning some mud house-dwellers I was informed that the design of the houses was not in accordance with their traditions (no women's quarters, for instance) and that also the physical outlay of the village did not suit local circumstances (houses were too close to each other; streets too open, so that women could not go unseen, etc.). With some more investigations and contacts beforehand with the people concerned the project could probably easily have been a success. In reducing this enormous social gap between government and people, community development can play a useful role. It may bring about the first good contacts and effect the key-phene

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27) Communication and mutual understanding are often quite badly developed, which is for instance already suggested by the fact that even the very indirect contact through political representation is not present, because in many instances no democratic parliamentary system exists, or, if it does, parliament is not really the voice of the people.

within the community development organization a more or less formal channel between the people and the government, or, in other words, between the lowest and highest level can be established. Since a community development organization has, by its nature, appreciation of attitudes at local level, and since it can also gain access to all national authorities, effective communication between the Government and the people can be achieved. This link may take the form of district bodies with the following tasks:

a) To function within the community development structure as the link, so that it will be ensured that national plans take account of local aspirations, potentials and limitations, and that guidance and promotion can be given to relate local plans to national goals and targets. In this way, the community development organization becomes the channel of communication between people and planning authorities.

b) To co-operate at the district level with the technical ministries in order that, on the one hand, the relevant services of these ministries will be tuned to local aspirations and potentialities, and that, on the other hand, the local people will make the maximum use of the possible opportunities offered by the special ministries.

This is how I visualise that communication between government and people, co-ordination between community development and national planning, and popular participation in the national planning process can be introduced in this region.

3. Co-operation

Arab society has rarely known integration of its society at the national level. Convergency of opinion, similar emotional feelings and an equivalent willingness to co-operate between the different interest groups and authorities were always weak points. Arab society is mostly built up of small independent groups with very strong internal but rather weak external ties. In fact one can say that the Arab World has a "complexe minoritaire", of which it has been stated that it is a "reflexe fondamental de la psychologie des foules dans tout le Proche-Orient. C'est une susceptibilité collective et pathologique qui fait apparaître dans chaque geste de la communauté voisine une menace ou un défi à la sienne propre, et qui rend chaque collectivité solidaire dans son ensemble du moindre outrage fait à chacun de des membres; car, et c'est là le point essentiel, dans un pareil système, si paradoxalement qu'il puisse apparaître, aucune communauté ne peut échapper à ce complexe: toute majorité en effet devient minorité en certaines régions".

Co-operation is strange to the Arab, as is evident from the numerous national, tribal, village and family feuds. Such a situation thwarts development efforts considerably. Development action would greatly be helped if it could meet co-operation among the different executing authorities at both ends. If, for instance, the ministries would be willing to co-operate, and, cooperation could be forged between different local interest

29) Nevertheless it was and is sometimes present, like, for instance, with respect to the Palestine question.
groups. I am inclined to think that community development can help here. A community development programme can orient itself towards bridging this gap at both the local (which is quite clear of course), and at the top level. The latter possibility has hitherto only been considered in Iraq, although it is true that the community development organization in Saudi Arabia has also an inter-ministerial board, but this board co-ordinates only the activities within 16 community development centres and is even in that respect not very successful. In Iraq, however, circumstances urge this kind of co-operation so strongly that efforts may be more successful. Visiting the country in the beginning of 1965 it appeared that the Ministry of Municipality and Rural Affairs was operating 22 community development centres and had elaborated plans for another 8 centres, while almost no technical support was received from any functional Ministry;

- The Ministry of Education was operating 19 fundamental education centres with about the same kind of activities as in the community development units, and also without co-operation with other ministries;
- The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs was operating eight (urban) social centres with again the same community development activities, but, nevertheless lacking support from other Ministries;
- The Ministry of Health was planning to open more than one hundred rural health units in the coming five years 31 while nearly no contacts had been made with other Ministries in order to sound them out on possibilities for co-operation.

In view of this situation, it seemed useful to organize a kind of board consisting of representatives of the different ministries which would try to avoid duplication and consider the possibilities to orient activities to the efforts of other ministries and even consider ways and means to support this work. During my last visit to Iraq in December 1965, I was informed that cabinet approval had been obtained for the formation of such a board in the shape of an inter-ministerial community development committee whose main task would be to co-ordinate and strengthen (by studying possibilities for support from other ministries) all the various rural development activities and rural development plans in Iraq. If this committee becomes operational then a splendid asset will have been added.

III. Summary and Conclusion

As community development should interest itself in the preconditions of development rather than in the outcome, and should, more specifically, be geared to a fuller development of the human resources present in the communities, one may state that community development has in concrete terms as primary aim: the arousing of people's effective participation in the development efforts by transforming the citizen into an initiator of change, and combining people's action with government efforts towards national welfare in its broadest sense. Community development should, by its very nature, differ according to time and place, which means that its programmes have to vary according to local circumstances, environment and stage of

31) 139 units are planned, in respect of which it is hoped to allocate 5 million pound sterling.
development. Therefore, for every region other broad directives can be drafted. In this region the programmes should be oriented towards filling in the gap in some basic preconditions, which means:

a. the promotion of the willingness at local level to accept development and contribute to it. The social structure and existing values, norms, goals and expectations in the Arab World are hampering progress and have caused a reluctant attitude towards change.

b. the creation of a link between the government and the people. Communication and interaction between government and people are required for effective development efforts, but are unfortunately mostly lacking in this region.

c. the encouragement of co-operation in order to avoid duplication and to strengthen individual programmes. The various interest groups and authorities are not co-operating today and consequently duplication, unnecessary gaps and lack of mutual support have resulted.