Book review

Varun Vidyarthi and Patricia A. Wilson

Reviewed by: Angelique Chettiparambil Rajan, University of Reading, UK

Development from Within is a book that talks about self-help group activities. It is, however, not another book on micro-finance or self-help but advances a couple of steps beyond. In it one can find theorization and the identification of principles behind practice, but the book is about more than this. It endeavours (successfully) to advocate change at individual and collective levels using a reflective, contemplative and, in many ways spiritual, tone. One of the authors – Wilson – is an academic grounded in contemplative traditions while the other – Vidyarthi – works within the Vedantic tradition in Hindu philosophy. What is refreshing is that the book does not place the development practitioner or the planner at centre stage, a viewpoint that I could not agree with more (Chettiparamb, 2007a). It takes a process view of development that is located both at individual and collective levels supported by material infrastructure and appropriate systems for management.

The structure of the book makes it an easy read. Most of the chapters are in the form of a dialogue between the two authors. Key sentences are picked up in bold and separately highlighted in textboxes. It is also not very long and is printed in a readable font size. One can therefore, if so inclined, finish the book in a sitting or two. There are also a number of vignettes that illustrate and bring the reality of the setting and the work to the (potentially unfamiliar) reader. The geographical settings for the book are the tucked-away rural villages in the state of Uttar Pradesh in India. The subject for the conversation between the authors is the educational and training work that the Manovodaya (meaning human awakening) Institute for Participatory Development, established by Vidyarthi, is doing to facilitate development in these villages.

The Introduction by the authors provides the background to the book and concisely summarizes the key messages that the book puts forward. These are:

1. The key to sustained development is change in individual and group consciousness: development from within.
2. Deep dialogue allows this to happen. However, dialogue is not enough, for there is a need for material and organizational infrastructure to support the change of
consciousness. This is achieved by enabling groups and communities to build their own systems.

3. Groups must be federated at higher levels to allow a dialogue and an interface with the larger economy, the government and the private sector. These cross-sectoral dialogues are the vehicles for wider transformation and sustained change.

The voices of the two authors are collectively and separately recorded. For Vidyarthi the book is about value-led-development, and for Wilson it is about a spiritual understanding of development work. Chapter 1 advocates the linking of inner and outer change by setting aside fear and engaging in a process of dialogue that enables collective reflection. Chapter 2 describes the stages in transformation. For development facilitators, this starts with the development of a basic humility that enables them to listen and learn. This comes through working with people, for such work leads to a realization that what is to be achieved cannot be achieved primarily because of barriers in one’s own self. Listening and such collective learning breeds mutual trust and respect for all forms of knowledge. This trust must also be created in the community. Outside interventions can create barriers in the community due to the appropriation of benefits by a few. It is important that the facilitator is aware of this and works towards creating trust in the community. Trust in the community, in turn, can lead to the formation of people’s institutions.

Vidyarthi, however, also argues that a material stake is an important facilitator of the process. In the context of self-help groups, thrift amounts (miniscule amounts in savings) collectively pooled and dispersed as credit provides a strong material anchor. The development and sustenance of trust is crucial in this process and formal activities such as maintaining a book of accounts must be learned and carried out by the people themselves. This can happen only by investing in time and allowing for mistakes and learning.

Groups once formed also require external support. This can be for financial and social audit, as often an outside individual can step in more effectively to sort out issues or enforce a minimal strictness that guarantees adherence to rules. External support can be organized through the formation of regional networks that work across many groups. These regional networks can also be further scaled up across larger spatial scales. The regional groups need not be homogenous and can deliberate and make collective decisions on issues that are different to those raised at group level. They can also connect better to wider socioeconomic processes.

Chapter 3 is about preparing process leaders, as development facilitators are termed. At Manovodaya this is done in stages, which starts with enabling the facilitators to share fears and doubts and then collectively reflecting upon these. This is followed by first-hand experience of a field situation, where participants can enter into conversation with self-help group members. The experience is then later discussed and shared through a learning dialogue. Not every participant sustains the change once back in the work place. Local and regional support networks and follow up through sharing of information and collective reflection (currently being developed at Manovodaya) can allow the process of change to be sustained, enabling further evolution.

Chapter 4 departs from the conversational format and presents the process of collective reflection. Five themes that have emerged in collective reflection sessions over time
are presented. These lead to steps in action. An eight-point programme for steps in action that spans both individual and collective or family effort has emerged over time.

Chapter 5 returns to the conversation format, presenting five vignettes of development practitioners who have benefited from the programme. The chapter essentially argues for the need for raising group consciousness and developing new organizational patterns and leadership from local needs and aspirations.

Chapter 6 presents a visual metaphor for the process – Indra’s Net. This is a description of a mythological net in the heavenly abode of the Hindu god Indra, wherein every node contains a jewel that reflects all other jewels and the reflections in them, making the process infinite. The whole is thus contained in each part, representing a unity of purpose in life. In the self-help group this translates to the formation of individual identities connected and evolving with group identities, which are in turn connected and evolving with regional identities. The impact at each level is dependent upon the formation of such collective identities both above and below and also upon the development of cross-sectoral dialogues between the government and the private sector.

Chapter 7 recapitulates the main arguments made in the book. The development of individual, group and regional consciousness is stressed. The key input for developing group consciousness is individual practice through self-discipline. This is reinforced through dialogue and organic institutions. Dialogues in self-help groups are best facilitated by homogenous memberships for this helps the formation of a sense of belonging. However, at regional levels the dialogues benefit most from having different groups and diverse sectors. The consciousness that emerges thus goes beyond that of the individual or the group. Three arenas of action where innovations are being developed in both the North and South are highlighted. The first aims to achieve individual and collective reflection. The second aims to achieve self-discipline, including right speech and conduct. The third aims to achieve collective action based on collective reflection.

I read this book while engaged in fieldwork on self-help groups in the state of Kerala in India. My field experience resonates with much of what is claimed in the book and I am inclined to be convinced about the transformative potential of self-help groups. In development studies the concept of self-help is fairly well-known and there are many analytical and critical accounts of self-help groups that seek to examine empirically their workings in different geographical and social contexts. These studies serve to highlight the local factors and mechanisms that influence the trajectories of particular self-help groups and have contributed much to understanding the conditions for success in particular settings. The contribution made by this book, however, is to identify principles that can be claimed to be fundamental, in the sense that they can be operationalized in different forms of successful self-help groups.

As with most theorization, the empirical manifestation of the principles may not be explicit, especially when those involved are not conditioned or trained to realize in practice a set of principles through a set trajectory. In the case of Kerala, the nested structures at local government, ward and neighbourhood level were more or less imposed from the top (as opposed to organically evolved from below) but facilitated carefully and systematically by the state. Through the years these structures have become stabilized to form what can be arguably described as one of the most successful
programmes in the state for poverty alleviation and empowerment. The process of change in Kerala is, however, a reversal of what Vidyarthi and Wilson describe. It’s a development towards within from without, from the organizational form to the individual. The nested structure, then, enables a transformative process and, as a corollary, a stable transformative process develops a nested structure in the long run. I have argued elsewhere for such a proposition (Chettiparamb, 2005). In a conceptualization of such nested structures as fractals (starting from the scale of local government and moving up to the district and state), Clearly, more work that examines the systemic features of such structures is needed.

The nested form advocated by Vidyarthi and Wilson is also important for debates on communities in planning. As we know, the notion of community was first romanticized in planning and urban governance for its potential to provide care and feelings of identity and belonging to members. Many planning attempts consequently reinforced, and continue to reinforce, this community identity through place-based and non-place-based interventions. Notions of the desirability of community have, however, been critiqued for their tendencies to exclude the other and, as a normative ideal, have been problematized as being perhaps unfit for today’s multicultural cities. As an alternative, the fostering of tolerance for the stranger has been argued to be more desirable (Young, 2002). Vidyarthi and Wilson, however, bring back communities, and do so in the context of a society that is highly divided along on caste lines. They argue that only groups with a strong sense of identity can create an impact, but that these identities must be forged within a sense of the whole. Is the forging and consolidation of such collective identities a necessity, then, for the marginalized who can only claim their (rightful) position in society through the mobilization of such collectives? The systemic and operational link of such communities to wider collectives that encompass the other, in turn, can ensure the presence of mediation and thus the transformation of these identities. Again, yet another topic that requires more work.

The book, though interesting in various ways, also has a few problems. Firstly, given the multitude of organizations that are working in self-help in developing countries, many of the results on the ground are similar. Yet the book hardly acknowledges this and the narrative claims the results are derivative of the particular approach followed by Manovodaya. This approach may be unique in its systematic articulation of the process of development that occurs from within to without, yet it is only one of the ways in which the process can be initiated. The design of appropriate institutions can also bias agency towards specified non-determinate outcomes, just as much as agency at the individual level creates institutions to sustain particular initiatives (Chettiparamb 2007b; Jessop, 2001).

The second problem is in the use of vignettes and case studies. These vignettes are stories from group members, group leaders and development facilitators and are mostly used as illustrations for arguing for the success of the process advocated by Manovodaya. The book would perhaps have been academically more interesting if the vignettes were data for analysis, with an examination of unsuccessful narratives included. At the moment it reads almost like a handbook for development practitioners.
References