Areas of Specialization

Development Policies for Socio-Emotional Well-Being

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To feel depressed, cheated, bitter, desperate, vulnerable, frightened, angry... to feel devalued, useless, helpless, uncared for, hopeless, isolated, anxious, and a failure; these feelings can dominate people’s whole experience of life, coloring their experience of everything else (Wilkinson, 1996, p. 215).

Executive Summary

Development planners pursue ambitious strategies to elevate the socio-economic living standards around the globe. Yet, while perhaps achieving economic or educational objectives, social change agendas upset social support network structures in charge of nurturing societies’ socio-emotional capital base. Social stress eventually weakens societies’ care-taking mechanisms, producing socio-emotionally impoverished community structures that deprive children and adults of the socio-emotional resources necessary for coping with the requirements of an unpredictable future. The research proposal summary that follows explores the development of instruments that would allow policy makers to foster decision-making procedures that are – using Goleman’s (1995) term -- emotionally “intelligent”.

Towards emotionally intelligent development policies: Exploring the validity of an idea

Any development agency interested in promoting social well-being will eventually have to consider how context enhances or inhibits socio-emotional development. Without effective social support networks that foster socio-emotionally healthy communities, a society’s capacity to nourish psychological well-being and cognitive capacity, trusting relationships and a social ethic is going to be crippled.

‘Third World’ development policies and projects have traditionally neglected the centrality of social support systems necessary for creating peaceful and “healthy” (e.g. socio-emotionally empowered) societies. Yet, development thinkers such as Nobel laureate Amartya Sen (1999) have made it clear that the current levels of deprivation, destitution and oppression in the world can only be overcome if humanity succeeds in creating social, political and economic arrangements that enhance “individual agency” and “freedom”. Sen writes:

What people can positively achieve is influenced by economic opportunities, political liberties, social powers, and the enabling conditions of good health, basic education, and the encouragement and cultivation of initiatives. The institutional arrangements for these opportunities are also influenced by the exercise of people’s freedoms, through the liberty to participate in social choice, and in the making of public decisions that impel the progress of these opportunities (p. 5).

Obviously, people’s exercise of “social powers” needs to be sanctioned through socio-political contexts that appreciate and nurture participation. However, optimal individual agency also requires intrinsic emotional and cognitive competencies. These tend to be the product of nurturing social support networks rather than a particular piece of legislation. On the other hand, experiences of uncertainty and emotional deprivation are likely to lead to social decomposition, or, in the words of Goleman (1995, p. 231), to “emotionally illiterate” societies. Amartya Sen’s plea for “freedom as social commitment” (1999, p. xii) – i.e. the necessity to develop the maturity necessary for using ‘freedom’ for socially constructive purposes -- then turns into a vicious circle of “emotional stress as prime cause of dysfunctional relationships and socio-emotional disempowerment”.

http://www.umass.edu/cie-Themes/socio_emotional_well_being.htm
Recent findings in brain research confirm what psychologists had proposed a few decades earlier, namely that healthy adult socio-emotional functioning is the outcome of engaging, meaningful relationships in childhood: “[A]ttachment is the essential bridge, because it is at once the primary relationship through which personality develops, and the relationship through which we create our sense of order” (Marris, 1991, p. 88). A child’s capacity to reach out, to connect with others and to explore the world is the product of an “emotional resourcefulness” nurtured across cultures through particular social support systems or networks that are sensitive and responsive to a child’s emotional needs, and which make a child feel that it is being loved and cared for. The quality of socio-emotional upbringing determines a person’s capacity to become an effective caretaker in return, whereas abuse or neglect create experiences of disconnectedness, frustration of fundamental emotional needs, and eventually leads to emotional numbness, and possibly aggression, violence and domination. Children who grow up in socio-emotionally impoverished contexts will find it difficult to develop those care-taking capacities that will enhance their children’s chances for becoming caring, non-violent, optimally functioning citizens (Staub, 2001). These adults stand in particular need of socio-emotional support, a fact emphasized by John Bowlby to who commented that “… if a community values its children, it must cherish its parents” (1951, p. 84).

In the United States and elsewhere, socio-economic development discourse has neglected the interaction between the psychological and social aspects of human behavior. The question whether development interventions inhibit or strengthen “socio-emotional efficacy” does not appear to be a priority in international development circles. Yet, in a world of “socially constructed uncertainty” (Marris, 1991) the depletion of emotional resources necessary for creating lasting social support structures appears to become the challenge of the 21st century. Bronfenbrenner (1995) wrote:

*For more than three decades, I have been citing systematic evidence suggesting a progressive decline in American society of conditions that research increasingly indicates may be critical for developing and sustaining human competence through the life course... At the most general level, the evidence reveals growing chaos in the lives of families, in childcare settings, schools, peer groups, youth programs, neighborhoods, workplaces, and other everyday environments in which human beings live their lives. Such chaos, in turn, interrupts and undermines the formation and stability of relationships, and activities that are essential for psychological growth. Moreover, many of the conditions leading to that chaos are often unforeseen products of policy decisions made both in the private and in the public sector. Today, in both of these arenas, we are considering profound economic and social changes, some of which threaten to raise the degree of chaos to even higher and less psychologically tolerable levels. The most likely and earliest observed consequences of such a rise would be reflected in still higher levels of youth crime and violence, teenage pregnancy, and single parenthood, as well as in reduced school achievement, and, ultimately, a decline in the quality of our nation’s human capital (1995, pp. 643-644).*

Societies of the so-called ‘Third World’ and former Eastern Block countries also face social disruption, and globalization itself appears to contribute to the depletion of care and caring labor (UNDP, 1999; Levinger, 1996; MacPherson and Migidley, 1987). Development agendas of the past few decades have done their share to uproot traditional social support networks, spark processes of mass migration and increase social morbidity, particularly in large cities (e.g. Escobar, 1995).

Here, as well as in North America and Europe, the combination of social deprivation and economic poverty has resulted in a new dimension of devastating human life experiences. Amartya Sen’s (1999) dictum of “development as freedom” therefore needs to be interpreted also as a call for policies that protect societies’ capacity for socio-emotionally appropriate care and caring labor. Although welfare systems have their role to play, the more important challenge remains in fostering the development of a citizenry that is emotionally prepared and intrinsically motivated to carry out the social support functions necessary for fostering the development of caring, non-violent, optimally functioning future generations (Staub, 2001), capable of dealing with the stresses of a rapidly changing competitive world.

In the United States, psychologists have begun to write about what appears to be a challenging and complicated task of harnessing the continued emergence of a socio-emotionally competent citizenry (Children’s Defense Fund, 2000; Garbarino and Kostelny, 1993; Comer, 1989). But to what degrees has it penetrated the minds of decision makers of the big international development agencies whose programs will affect social support structures in target countries? Folbre (1999) has expressed her concern that policy decisions makers have traditionally disregarded the question of socio-emotional well-being. Since it was believed that increased economic productivity was the key to the solution to all other problems plaguing human societies (Arndt, 1989), economists were hired to develop strategies that brought
about economic growth more than anything else. LeVine wrote:

_The logical connections between international development and child development – so transparently obvious ... do not guarantee [a] rapprochement, either in science or in policy. One reason is that policy analysis in the international development field draws its concepts of human behavior largely from economics, in which formal utilitarian models of labor markets provide the primary basis for analyzing microsocial phenomena. In economic analysis, the process of interest to child development research are more often relegated to the black box between aggregate inputs and outputs, or else they are ignored altogether._

_The International Year of the Child (1979) only served to emphasize the fact that most child development researchers are Western psychologists operating with experimental models on narrow empirical problems of limited interest outside academic contexts. Socially oriented research is unusual even in our society ..., and questions of relevance to the wider world are rarely considered. Investigators are largely unaware of the international development problems to which their research might contribute (1983, p. 46)._  

Development agencies that focus on social well-being may want to stand at the forefront in exploring how development discourse and practices enhance or obstruct socio-emotional development. As advocates for development policies that are socio-emotionally empowering, they may provide new direction for those development agencies governed by economic development rationales, and often disinclined to bring issues of child psychology or human development into the “development equation”. Furthermore, they may want to develop and propose analytical frameworks that sensitize decision-makers to the socio-emotional implications of development interventions. They also could provide training programs that allow staff of international development agencies to explore how their agencies can improve policy formulation, program design, as well as program and project evaluation activities in ways that enhance the socio-emotional focus of development interventions. The overall goal of these efforts would be the creation of “resilient social support systems” that strengthen adults and children in their ongoing struggles to survive in a world of volatile economies and cultural change.

One doctoral student at the Center for International Education is currently evaluating development agencies’ contribution to the socio-emotional well-being of target populations. Assuming that development practice is in part being formulated at the discourse and policy levels, a framework (see below) has been proposed that features a list of domains that appear to be crucial for promoting the development of caring, non-violent, optimally functioning children. The framework draws from insights produced in child development research, sociology as well as peace psychology. At the individual level, the framework urges development practitioners to explore the extent to which agencies are committed to strengthen social support networks that foster the satisfaction of emotional needs of children as well as adults (the potential caretakers of children), and (in cases of histories of emotional stress or even trauma) opportunities for healing. At the group level, the framework proposes to explore the effectiveness of (1) child support mechanisms; (2) women’s support mechanisms; (3) mechanisms for enhancing family protection; and (4) connection building processes that help to facilitate social integration between individuals and social groups with histories of conflict.

The application of this framework will make it possible to determine (1) if (and in what ways) development discourse, policies and programs express a commitment to strengthen social support systems, by inquiring (a) what elements appear to nurture and (b) what elements appear to inhibit the development of effective social support networks. Drawing a distinction between societies without recent experiences of violent conflict, and societies currently living in conflict, or post-conflict situations, this study will also explore (2) if (and in what ways) agencies adapt their policies and programs for facilitating socio-emotional capacity development and the development of “friendly” (e.g. non-violent, constructive) relations between groups in historical conflict.

**PREREQUISITES FOR SOCIO-EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING AT THE INDIVIDUAL LEVEL**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DOMAIN</th>
<th>PROCESS</th>
<th>MEANING OF PROCESS</th>
<th>ANTICIPATED PROCESS OUTCOMES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>SECURITY</td>
<td>Experiences that foster</td>
<td>Self-confidence and desire for</td>
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<td>SATISFACTION OF EMOTIONAL NEEDS</td>
<td>EFFECTIVENESS AND CONTROL</td>
<td>POSITIVE SENSE OF IDENTITY</td>
<td>COMPREHENSION OF REALITY</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Opportunities to develop a sense of capacity for self-protection and goal achievement</td>
<td>Experiences that allow for the emergence of self-appreciation, self-awareness and desire to forge social relationships</td>
<td>Development of an understanding of the world and its people (identities and functionalities).</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Enhanced self-esteem, trust in one’s own significance and desire to open up towards others</td>
<td>Positive outlook on one’s personal reality and being, as well as trust in capacity to transform oneself</td>
<td>Enhanced understanding on one’s own purpose and role in life</td>
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2. HEALING

| THERAPY | Experiences of social interaction that allow a traumatized person to reflect and make sense of experiences of violence such that they can become reintegrated into the experience base of the person | Decreases dysfunctional behavior tendencies of victims of violence. Increases competence of victims of violence to make meaningful contributions to society. |

PREREQUISITES FOR SOCIO-EMOTIONAL WELLBEING AT THE COMMUNITY LEVEL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>MEANING OF PROCESS</th>
<th>ANTICIPATED PROCESS OUTCOMES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. CHILD SUPPORT</td>
<td>CHILD DEVELOPMENT MECHANISMS</td>
<td>Institutions/facilities that foster physical health, psychological well-being and cognitive advancement.</td>
<td>“Healthy” child and youth culture</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CHILD</td>
<td>Children will be included</td>
<td>Enhances prosocial attitudes,</td>
</tr>
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### Development Policies for Socio-Emotional Well-Being

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PARTICIPATION-ORIENTED DEVELOPMENT PRACTICE</th>
<th>in development research, planning, decision-making and program executions.</th>
<th>critical thinking skills, psycho-emotional capacity development and comprehension of social reality.</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>2. WOMEN SUPPORT</strong></td>
<td>• WOMEN &amp; DEVELOPMENT</td>
<td>Contribute to the improvement of women’s social status; enhance women’s well-being at the physical, emotional and cognitive status.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Enhanced socio-economic and psycho-emotional well-being of segment of humanity traditionally in charge of providing caring labor and sustaining social support networks.</td>
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<td><strong>3. FAMILY SUPPORT</strong></td>
<td>• MECHANISMS FOR FAMILY PROTECTION</td>
<td>Physical means of family protection (e.g. shelter, food), as well as psycho-emotional means (employment, education, networks).</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>In-tact families which produce psycho-emotionally mature human and social capital</td>
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<td><strong>4. RECONCILIATION AND “FRIENDLY RELATIONSHIPS”</strong></td>
<td>• CONNECTION BUILDING PROCESSES</td>
<td>Provide opportunities to participate in events that encourage sharing, experiences of togetherness, collective learning and achievement</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Decrease in “Us-Them” thinking and in-group/outgroup polarization; increased “Us” thinking, feelings of connectedness, trust and mutual reciprocity</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• CONTACTS AT LEADERSHIP LEVEL</td>
<td>Provide opportunities for leadership interaction in the areas of politics, business, education, science.</td>
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<td>Decreases polarizations; connects, stabilizes social cohesion between groups with histories of conflict; accustoms groups to legitimate existence of other group</td>
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<td>• POSITIVE Bystandership</td>
<td>Organize collective events that require acts of reaching out to people in need; programs with prosocial content that foster group initiatives and emphasize positive bystandership.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Harnesses prosocial attitudes, moral courage and responsibility necessary for helping and preventing acts of violence</td>
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### Selected Bibliography

Affolter (2000). Towards “emotionally-intelligent” human development policies: exploring the validity of an idea. (Unpublished manuscript). First comprehensive exam paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Doctoral Degree in Educational Policy, Research and Administration, School of Education, University of Massachusetts at Amherst.


[1] The concept of the necessity to satisfy emotional needs for optimal human functioning, as well as the list of conditions that need to be fulfilled for guaranteeing effective satisfaction of emotional needs has been taken from Staub, E. (2001). A brighter future. Raising caring, non-violent, optimally functioning children. Unpublished Manuscript. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts.