NON-POLITICAL CLIENTELISM: A LESSON IN CONFUSION FOR SUSTAINABILITY

Adam D. Kiš
Asia-Pacific Research Center,
Adventist International Institute for Advanced Studies,
Km. 45.5 Aguinaldo Hwy., Lalaan 1, Silang 4118 Cavite, Philippines
Corresponding author: adamkis@gmail.com

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Abstract: The word “sustainability” is differentially understood by various key stakeholders in the development process. Viewed through the lens of non-political micro-level clientelism, however, yet another definition for sustainability emerges. How one interprets sustainability matters, for development project outcomes often hinge upon a shared understanding between development implementers and development beneficiaries on project goals. A framework is proposed for bridging potential gaps in understanding over the meaning of sustainability in such a way that affirms both the core principles of development implementers and the sensibilities of project beneficiaries.

Keywords: clientelism; culture; semantics; sustainability.

INTRODUCTION

“How many of you have been able to keep hold of some of your belongings after your husband died?” Almost before my question could be fully translated into Chichewa, the throng of widows standing before me burst into a cacophony of misery. “My husband’s family took everything!” “I only remained with the clothes on my back!” “I have no money to feed my children!” “My entire household is desolate!” My poor interpreter struggled to keep up with the litany of woes being shouted at him, and I equally struggled to be heard as I protested the misunderstanding of my question. “What I would like to know is if any of you have *succeeded* in retaining any possessions when your husband died,” I clarified. Still, the outbursts of distress kept coming. Finally, after a third attempt at rewording the question, a few widows came forward to identify themselves as less than entirely destitute.

The year was 2003, and I was conducting ethnographic fieldwork for my Master’s degree in anthropology from the University of Florida. In the village of Njolomole, and indeed throughout Angoni villages in Malawi, the levirate, or “wife inheritance”, is traditionally practiced. When a man dies, one of his brothers or other close male relatives will marry the widow, so as to continue providing economic security and protection for her and her children. In addition, property-grabbing is widespread. In traditional Angoni society, all household belongings are considered to be the husband’s possessions, while any children born to the couple are considered to be the wife’s possession. Thus, when a man dies, his relatives (any living parents, brothers and sisters, cousins) come to his house and strip it of all its goods, leaving the children for the widow to take care of. After all, household belongings are their dead relative’s possessions, so blood relations are more entitled to them than an unrelated widow is [1].

Taken together, these two practices are somewhat complementary. A widow may lose everything in the house – including cooking pots, sleeping mats, and wash basins – but she will gain everything back when she marries her deceased husband’s brother, who will furnish her with new household goods that she may use for the duration of their marriage. But in an era of widespread AIDS and suspicious deaths of erstwhile healthy and vigorous men, the practice of the levirate is significantly scaling back, even while property-grabbing remains alive and well. The consequences are disastrous for widows. They are stripped of all household belongings, while retaining responsibility for caring for their semi-orphaned children. No one wants to marry the potentially-infected widow of an AIDS victim.

In this context, I was trying to identify any widows who *had* retained some household goods when their husbands had died, in hopes of perhaps identifying strategies that other widows could use when faced with similar situations. Were those who had retained some household goods simply lucky? Were their husbands' relatives more magnanimous than most? Had they negotiated or brokered some kind of deal? While attempting to answer that research question, however, I was troubled by the widows' seeming oblivion to the fact that I was there only for research purposes. At the time, I didn't work for any humanitarian agency, and I thought that I had made it abundantly clear that there was no financial reward for participating in my study. Yet their tales of woe kept coming, along with pleading looks and outstretched hands.

In the years since, as my career did eventually lead me into humanitarian work elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, I frequently returned to that memory. As I saw one development project after another fall when the agency propping it up pulled back in the name of sustainability, I started to see a common thread weaving between those failures and the widows' pleas: clientelism.

LIENTELISM

The concept of clientelism has long been described and discussed in the academic literature [2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8], and it is still alive and well today [9, 10, 11]. However, most discourse on patron-client networks focuses on political clientelism, discussing how well-placed patrons in the government distribute wealth from public coffers to their clients in exchange for votes and political support. But formal political power is not the only benefit that clients can provide to their patron; non-political patrons within the economy may also enjoy prestige, a reputation for generosity, and honorific recognition at public events. Thus, anyone with access to large amounts of wealth, be it through formal government appointment, successful enterprise, employment with a non-governmental development organization, or inheritance can play the role of a patron (see [12] for an excellent case study of a non-governmental organization engaging in clientelism). This broader definition beyond just the political realm allows clientelism to flourish both at the centers of formal power and at the periphery. Indeed, an otherwise unremarkable villager who happens to own a car can become a patron to those around him, providing access to his vehicle in exchange for a respectable seat at a wedding or the public announcement of his presence at the opening of a new soccer field in town.

That political clientelism stifles macro-level economic development has already been argued by others (see [6], for example). The role that non-political clientelism can play at the micro level in thwarting development, however, has been insufficiently examined. That is the aim of this paper.

What does non-political micro-level clientelism look like? Despite being a non-political actor in Njolomole village, I now believe that I had been viewed as a potential patron to those destitute widows – one who had access to wealth, and who could channel that wealth toward them if they positioned themselves as the neediest amongst needy widows. I argue here that non-governmental development organizations are similarly viewed as patrons to the beneficiaries upon whom they bestow projects. It matters little to the clients in this system whether their patron wields political power or not. All that matters is that the patron possesses vast resources and is willing to share them with the client. In such a context, opportunities for confusion over the meaning of the word "sustainability" are rife.

THE VARIOUS SHADES OF SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainability is a slippery word to define. At times it is used interchangeably with the term "sustainable development", which has environmental connotations. The concept of sustainable development first entered the development lexicon as a crossover from ecology – the notion that resources are not limitless, and any intervention that solves the problems of today while depleting the resources of tomorrow is not sustainable in the long-term. The Brundtland Report described sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" [13]. But even the term "sustainable development" itself is not limited to ecology. For example, "the focus of sustainable development is far broader than just the environment. It's also about ensuring a strong, healthy and just society" [14].

At other times, rather than being used as shorthand for "sustainable development", the word "sustainability" refers to the durability of development interventions themselves. Take, for example, USAID's declaration that "We will make our investments predictable and sustainable by implementing multi-year plans for foreign assistance" [15, page 10]. Or "Sustainability of the investment plans will require sustained large-scale donor financing for at least a decade to come, and in many cases for two decades" [16, page 276]. Implicit in these definitions is the notion that after a fixed period of time, the development agency will withdraw and the interventions themselves will continue sustainably.

In the context of non-political micro-level clientelism, however, I argue that the term "sustainability" takes on a third meaning. In a patron-client system, it is the relationship that is of primary importance to be sustained. Patron-client relationships take time and effort to groom and maintain, and clients have a lot to lose by losing the support of their patron. Social security comes from maintaining the patron-client relationship for as long as possible. Thus, sustainable development would be that in which the patron (in this case, a development implementing agency) is kept around for as long as possible. Rather than independent self-sufficiency, prolonged dependence is the goal. It may not be defined this way in so many words by the clients (in this case, development project beneficiaries), but that is the express purpose of clientelistic relationships, as described in the literature. As Chabal and Daloz put it, "it is as well to recognize that there is today an international 'aid market' which Africans know how to play with great skill" [7, page 23]. The rationale may not be intentional deception on the part of the beneficiaries, but simply following the accepted rules and norms of a very different society from that in which the development agencies are embedded.

When such confusion occurs, beneficiaries may go through the motions of preparing for a development agency's impending departure from the field – setting up cooperatives that are foreign to their culture, stocking clinics with supplies that will never be replenished – but the real underlying hope is that the agency will return for round two or even three. And when development agencies see their initial efforts collapse upon pullout, it is very tempting to take the bait and return for round two or three, perhaps with different funding this time. And the cycle goes round and round indefinitely – development agencies trying to foster a definition of sustainability that implies independent self-sufficiency, beneficiaries holding to a definition of sustainability that implies keeping the development agency coming back for more. In this context, it is fair to ask who is more successful. It would seem in many cases that beneficiaries' definitions of sustainability are predominating in practice, even while development agencies' definitions of sustainability maintain rhetorical hegemony.

A New Paradigm For Sustainability

What are the implications of this crossing of definitions of sustainability? Does this mean that there is no hope for consensus between implementers and beneficiaries on the aims and goals of development? Some have argued that the differences between the international aid system and beneficiary entities are irreconcilable, and it is better to close down all aid than to implement it poorly [17]. I, on the other hand, would argue that the prospect for achieving understanding is not hopeless, but it does require a paradigm shift along several dimensions.

First of all, a recognition by development implementers of the existence of different definitions of sustainability is crucial. As long as various stakeholders in the development process are each using somewhat different meanings for the word "sustainability" without realizing it, they may be sharing the same vocabulary without necessarily seeing eye to eye on the goals.

Secondly, there needs to be an acknowledgement that beneficiary views on clientelism and sustainability operate at a deep level of consciousness – not at a superstructural level which is easily susceptible to alteration through education or diffusion of practice. Bernard [18] describes three levels of society: the structure (where physical realities reside, such as cars, houses, and computers), the infrastructure (a deeper level than the structure, where structures are themselves networked, such as roads, the electrical grid, and the Internet), and the superstructure (a shallower level than the structure, where people's thoughts and opinions about structural- or infrastructural-level realities reside, such as which brand of car to buy, which kind of housing is preferred, or whether one is a Mac or a PC). The superstructure, being the shallowest of the three levels, is the easiest to influence. A well-placed advertising pitch or an eloquent campaign speech can sway consumers' opinions relatively easily. But advertising and impassioned discourse cannot change physical realities; if one is too poor to buy a car, then showing them 100 advertisements for a car will have no greater impact upon their actual buying power than showing just 2 advertisements. The structural level, alas, is less susceptible to influence than the superstructural. The same goes for the infrastructural level.

Clientelism is rooted in structural and infrastructural realities. It is not a mere opinion or preference. It is the difference between life and death for those with insufficient means to feed and clothe themselves; it is the difference between educational advancement and lifelong unemployment for those with insufficient resources to pay their own tuition; and it is the difference between health and debilitating illness for those unable to pay their hospital bills. As such, clientelism is a deeply-rooted system that, for all its alleged faults and foibles, operates in the structural and infrastructural realm to bring about real advantages. Such a system is not likely to be easily discarded. And because it runs so deeply, it may not even be consciously recognized as such by the very participants in patron-client networks. Indeed, deep-seated worldviews do not often rise to the level of conscious awareness (development beneficiaries may not be aware that they are operating within a clientelistic paradigm), making it especially difficult to address any proposed paradigm shifts. The paradigm shifts, then, must be made by the party that is consciously aware of the disparity in approaches to the acquisition of resources and advantages. Thus, the onus is upon development implementers to be the first to reach across the divide of understanding, rather than expecting beneficiaries to be in a position to do so. After all, they have been selected as development beneficiaries precisely because they are at a disadvantage in the existing global power structures.

Finally, acquiring a deep understanding and appreciation for the clientelistic system that development beneficiaries are coming from does not mean that development implementers must abandon their own core principles of fostering beneficiary independence from development agencies and promoting ecological sustainability. Intervention strategies can be modified so as to satisfy both implementer and beneficiary sensibilities. In this regard, it is particularly salient to point out that community organizations in the developed world are not independent entities, devoid of context, but are also plugged into networks of differential economic means in a quasi-clientelistic fashion. Churches and associations such as Rotary Clubs and the Lion's Club are nested into patronistic hierarchies that provide support, regulation, and overall meaning and identity. Cooperatives, unions, and political parties are plugged into networks that provide structure, resources, and greater combined influence than if each entity were operating in isolation. Likewise, social structures that are put into place by development agencies for the purpose of fostering beneficiary independence from outside resources must be plugged into other clientelistic networks in order to survive. To put it another way, development agencies must "pass off" their beneficiaries to a new patron, albeit a local one, who will continue to support and sustain the development outcomes both financially and morally. Such an approach affirms both beneficiaries' and development agencies' definitions of sustainability, rather than making it an either/or proposition.

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About the author:
Adam D. Kiš holds a Ph.D. in cultural anthropology with an emphasis in research methods and medical anthropology from the University of Florida. A native of the United States and Canada, he has worked for nearly a decade in developing countries in sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia as both a development practitioner and an academician. He is currently the Director of the Asia Pacific Research Center (APRC) and Assistant Professor of Research and Statistics at the Adventist International Institute for Advanced Studies (AIIAS) in Silang, Cavite, Philippines. Adam is fluent in English (his mother tongue), French, and Portuguese. He lives in the Philippines with his wife and two children.
Tel: (+63)46 414-4390
Email: adamkis@gmail.com