

A relational approach to human development in a crisis: perspectives from two case studies in South Africa during COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

This research joins people-centered approaches to development in understanding how social relationships are integrated into the efficacy of human development organizations in South Africa during a crisis. It positions itself within a Relational Thinking approach. A relational tool was applied to measure the relational dynamics within two organizations in South Africa who provided support to people economically affected by the COVID-19 crisis and the accompanying lockdowns. An existing computer-generated program called the Relational Health Audit (RHA) was used to study the proximity or distance between individuals and groups in their organizations. The findings show the relational footprint of development organizations due to deepened connections, continuity, understanding of context, sensitivity to power dynamics and commonality. These relationships allowed quick adjustments and responses to people's needs in the crisis. Through a relational approach, the article highlights why development cannot simply be viewed through a singular lens, but instead needs to be understood through a wide ranging and open-ended set of inquiries into systems, interventions, and outcomes.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 27 January 2023
Accepted 9 May 2023

KEYWORDS

Human development; South Africa; relational approach; COVID-19


1. Introduction and background

Organizations working in human development are predicated on relationships and function through social networks. This research asks how social ties and relationships effect human development organizations in South Africa in a crisis. The world-wide spread of COVID-19, which started in Wuhan, China, in December 2019, has wreaked havoc to the global economy, not seen in a century. The global pandemic poses serious challenges to the current way that our economies and societies are operating and has exposed the fragility of inward-looking and insular political, economic, and social systems. The national lockdowns to reduce the spread of the virus have resulted in economic slowdown, which has affected every aspect of the South African society as it has globally. As a result, South Africa's already weak economy faced even higher levels of unemployment, poverty, and inequality (UNDP 2020).

On 23 March 2020, South Africa's President Cyril Ramaphosa announced a 21-day national level five lockdown effective from 26 March to 16 April. Level five was the highest level to restrict the movements of the population as a mass quarantine strategy. The economy came

to a standstill due to the restrictive nature of the lockdown, which left people isolated and undermined business operations. Within the first month, three million South Africans lost their jobs which contributed to further food insecurity and poverty (CRAM 2020). There were several groups, individuals and political parties who criticized the government for the socio-economic consequences and uncertainties of a lockdown that endured for too long.

The pandemic also had a direct effect on organizations who focus on human development, including the availability of funding and resources for people at risk. Key NGOs in South Africa worked closely with the government and business through the Solidarity Fund which was set up by government with the aim to augment the work done by NGOs in the health sector and allocating budgets toward food security assistance. The COVID-19 response involved NGOs such as the Red Cross Society, FoodForward South Africa and Gift of the Givers (PMG 2020). It also brought about responses between existing networks and new approaches, such as the Movement for Change and Social Justice who teamed up with Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) and

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This article was originally published with errors, which have now been corrected in the online version. Please see Correction (<https://doi.org/10.1080/21665095.2023.2290430>).

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the Activist Education and Development Centre to set up a rapid COVID-19 mobilization campaign in April 2020 (UNDRR 2020). Several initiatives emerged to support NGOs during the most difficult time of COVID-19 and the lockdowns (Barnard 2020). The challenge is that it left other NGOs with decreasing funding, or fear of funding cuts in the future, due to the shift in distribution of funds to address the crisis. What has followed are critical questions on the sustainability of non-profit organizations.

We maintain that the effectiveness of social and economic interventions is particularly apparent during moments of crisis. A relational approach was applied to two organizations that have played a role in providing critical support to people economically affected by the COVID-19 crisis and the accompanying lockdown. The assumption of our research is that how we operate and the systems we build are intrinsically integrated and require us to place more value on the embeddedness of people's well-being in and constituted of social relationships.

The article begins by situating our relational approach to development in current development theory and practice, including the tools to measure the efficacy of development interventions.

2. Situating a relational approach in current development theory

Relational ties, social connections, or social networks are terms that are important in development studies. Findings have shown that relationships between people have a significant impact on the outcomes of development interventions. Various research disciplines have contributed to the understanding of how relationships between individuals and groups can foster cooperation, build trust, and facilitate socioeconomic growth.

One such area is the study of social capital, which refers to the access of resources such as information, support, and opportunities that individuals and groups have access to through their social networks. Theorists argue that building strong relationships and trust promote economic and social development through 'bridging' social capital between diverse individuals and groups to ensure cooperation and reduce social divisions (Putnam 1993). In the study of community development, studies have shown that the success of initiatives and programs are often dependent on the strength of social capital and connections within the community (Narayan 2002).

Another prominent field is Network Analysis, which studies social networks and patterns of relationships between individuals and groups. These theorists argue

that the structure and dynamics of social networks and identifying key actors and nodes to promote cooperation and social capital, are important to understanding social behavior and promoting social change (Borgatti and Foster 2003). Political Studies also build on the concept of trust as a key element to building effective political institutions and promoting economic development. This includes in-group trust where trust between individual members of a group become a critical factor in fostering cooperation, social capital within communities and social cohesion (Levi and Stoker 2000).

Anthropologists have also conducted extensive research on the significance of relational ties in development studies. These studies are within a range of theoretical perspectives and ethnographic methods, highlighting the ways in which social networks and kinship relationships are central to the lives of individuals and communities, as well as the intersection with broader political and economic structures (Bledsoe and Sow 2011; Campbell and McLean 2002). Anthropologists such as Adia Benton, Luisa Enria, Didier Fassin, and Simukai Chigudu have found the significance of relational ties and social networks in shaping health outcomes and highlight the need for more nuanced and context-specific approaches to health that pay greater attention to social determinants to health (Abrams and Lupton 2020).

The above show the importance of relational ties and social networks in promoting development. However, despite extensive research and the proliferation of development indicators and measures beyond economic ones, more research on the sustainability of embedded development organizations is needed to understand how social ties and relationships effect planning and management in a crisis. This study explores additional ways of conceptualizing and measuring relational ties in development during a crisis.

With the above aim in mind, this research positions itself within the Relational Thinking perspective. This relational approach follows people-centered approaches to development that has developed from theory and practice as presented from highly pluralistic disciplines and radically different world views, such as the human economy (Hart, Laville, and Cattani 2010), social and solidarity economy (Satgar 2014), well-being economy (Fioramonti 2017) and relational economy (Mills and Schluter 2012).

In development theory, relationships are often broadly defined as social connections, ties and interactions among individuals, groups and institutions that can affect development outcomes. These networks, alliances, partnerships, and other forms of collaborations can be formal or informal and based on mutual trust, understanding, respect, reciprocity, and mutual benefit

to play a role in social, economic, and political development (Narayan 2002; Schroeder et al. 2019).

Relational Thinking's definition compliments the above and highlights factors that are essential preconditions for close and trusting relationships. This includes mutual understanding between individuals or groups; mutual respect, fairness and participation; and the alignment of values and goals. A Relational Proximity Framework (RPF) was developed as a measure with indicators and questions to allow for a more dispassionate exploration of how individuals and organizations are functioning relationally (Ashcroft et al. 2017). This is also known as the Relational Health Audit (RHA) which was developed by Team Focus and the Relationships Foundation, a social reform think tank in the UK, as a means by which to analyze reasons for the falling levels of 'social capital' or assessing the strength of stakeholder relationships in an organization. It includes comprehensive indicators to measure (quantitatively and qualitatively) both organizational and interpersonal perceptions of the proximity or distance of relationships between people or organizations. These indicators are broken down into the following descriptors with aspects that drive the relationships toward certain outcomes:

- Communication (directness). Presence in the relationship is mediated by time, technology and/or other people, which influences the quality of the communication and experience of connection. Encounter – do the ways you communicate (face-to-face, email, text, etc.) help avoid misunderstandings and create a sense of clarity and connection?
- Time (continuity) is the sequence of interactions over time that builds stories. Storyline – do the various interactions over time build a sense of momentum, growth, stability and ultimately a sense of belonging and loyalty?
- Information (multiplexity). How information gained enables breadth of knowledge; allows effective interpretation and management of the relationship; sense of being known and appreciated. Knowledge – consider the types of contexts that shape how we are known and our ability both to read a person and to manage a relationship. Do both of you know enough about each other to manage the relationship effectively and with predictability and understanding?
- Power (parity). Distribution and use of power influences. Fairness – consider power and how it is used and experienced in relationships. Is authority used in ways that encourages participation, promote fairness, and convey mutual respect?
- Purpose (commonality). Considers depth, breadth, and clarity of alignment of purpose, values and

goals, and the degree to which they are shared in ways that bring synergy and motivation to a relationship. Alignment – when examining the purposes of an organization and its people, how deeply rooted are their intentions or are the two parties pulling in different directions?

The RHA relational survey questionnaire poses a positive as well as a negative statement for each question with a rating from one (very negative) to six (very positive). The respondents provide a rating on the scale, depending on whether they associate more closely with the negative or positive statement. This questionnaire can be completed online and takes 40 minutes to complete. The results are then used as a baseline for further facilitation and sensemaking from the group to better understand where the gaps are and what is needed to bridge the gaps.

Development theories have increasingly paid more careful attention to power dynamics, cultural norms, historical legacies and finding more context-specific approaches to positive and sustainable development (Mosse 2004). This research paid particular attention to the language and communication of participants within a relational frame to gain insights into how power is viewed in the organizations. The above will be detailed in the findings and analysis section, but it is important to mention the significance of power dynamics as it relates to relationships in development.

Non-profit organizations often aim to support the alleviation of those in need and/or to 'empower' people or groups. The purpose is to produce change to situations that are perceived to be dire. Embedded in the expectations of change are power dynamics which are attached to the resources and relationships between the different parties. For the last few decades, power disparities in developmental organizations, especially between donors, technocrats and recipients of resources, have been challenged extensively (Chambers 1995). Critiques include arguments that development agencies and organizations have a tendency toward adopting 'empowerment' as a path to improvement as providers of services to 'empower' individuals and communities. However, words such as 'empower' and 'empowering care' assume a power dynamic where the 'receiver' of care will be 'empowered' by the 'giver' of care. It presupposes participation and the transfer of power to those in 'need of care' as the 'agents', but much is assumed, and this may have more disempowering effects (Weidenstedt 2016).

Researchers and practitioners are increasingly recognizing that approaching power dynamics and disparities in development organizations from binary 'top-down'

(institutionalized, measurement based) or ‘bottom-up’ (participatory) approaches are not sufficient in recognizing the complex interdependence between various components in development to ensure that organizations can provide sustained development efforts (Hennink et al. 2012; Parfitt 2004). Nuanced perspectives and approaches to the dynamics in development organizations lack due to the limited focus on measures and indicators that are ‘unseen’. The intangible includes the chains and functioning of relationships in terms of contact, longevity, trust, parity, values, and factors that support or hinders sustainability and positive impact in development (Sheikh, Ranson, and Gilson 2014). A deepened understanding of people-centered systems that are critical for organizational capacity has the potential to build multi-sector partnerships; strengthen effective and sustainable initiatives by taking policy-specific actions that strategically addresses intangible development interventions; and influencing the achievement of social change and equity goals (Erasmus et al. 2017).

3. Methodology

This research utilizes the Relational Health Audit (RHA) which is an existing tool and questionnaire that produces quantitative data on the views of ‘proximity’ or ‘distance’ between different individuals or groups. The RHA was used to measure the relationships of two organizations in South Africa that are involved in development interventions in response to the COVID-19 crisis. Individuals within the organizations were asked to complete a questionnaire which measured their relationship with others in the organization and to the organization as a whole. Focus group discussions about the results of the RHA were held with members of the two organizations. The results of the RHA were analyzed through a computer-generated program, whereas the focus groups were analyzed using standard thematic analysis.

The two organizations selected for this research are both based in the Gauteng province of South Africa. Organization A is relatively large and well-established organization and is a more ‘typical’ example of a human development NGO in terms of its structure and operations with donors, sponsors and formal management and employee structures. Organization B is a much smaller, emerging organization rooted in the community in which it was established and the model they follow is different from most NGOs and development organizations.

The larger of the two organizations, Organization A, is an NGO based in Pretoria, the capital of South Africa, with 175 full-time staff members, operating on the

level of the city. The NGO follows a relatively traditional organizational structure with management and staff who draw salaries from the organization. There are managers and employees who work on different projects with communities in the city, including children, teens, the elderly, parents, students, homeless people, sex workers, and drug addicts. The organization is widely known in the city since its original establishment in 1992 as a faith-based organization. A relational focus is ingrained in the philosophy of the organization and is evident from the language used by one of the managers:

Our dream is to enable and support [our] programs and [our] employees to grow and reach their goals to ignite change, nurture togetherness and heal communities ... we value partnership and involvement where it supports our vision to truly ignite change, heal communities and nurture togetherness. (Focus Group, 29 March 2021, Sunnyside Pretoria)

The second case, Organization B, in the west of the city of Johannesburg, has been practicing what they call ‘alternative economics’ for the past 3 and a half years. They describe this as being rooted in ‘community’ and their mode of operation is centered on ‘sharing’ the resources that they have as a group. They do not do this on a salary basis, but each group member gives 2% of their monthly income (when they are employed) to share with people in their relational networks who need financial and other support. The group uses an online platform to facilitate their activities, including the sharing of needs, discussions about the distribution of resources and voting on priority areas. Through WhatsApp, members of the group share identified needs (their own or someone they know), discuss these and decide together which needs will be responded to and in what way.

Organization B developed from an organization that has been present in the city and the surrounding informal settlements for more than 12 years with community-based partners who are positioned to assess needs and help connect the group’s funds to those who may otherwise ‘fall through the cracks’. The organization has intentionally focused on the relational aspect of their organization, through developing community-based partners who can identify needs, communal structures which can assess and prioritize those needs and a transparent accountable platform to administer funds (Focus Group, 18 April 2021, Randburg).

Despite the differences between the two cases, both organizations are similar in prioritizing relationships as essential to what they aim to achieve and are aware of the dynamics and challenges in the relationships as important to development. As was discussed at the start of this section, a relational approach with

relational indicators was used to establish the role of relationships in the development models of the two cases and how it has influenced the practices, interventions and degree of impact of the two cases where relationships are valued, even if the cases differ in many other respects. The two cases operate on different levels and within different relational dynamics, but both have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic through a network of relationships.

Organization A has various care projects with managers and employees overseeing each project. Since it is a large organization, the manager-personnel relationships are complex with various reporting channels. Due to several limitations, we were only able to measure the relational dynamics of those working in the organization. We limited the RHA to some of the project's manager-personnel relationships. Each person was asked to keep specific groups or people in mind when they completed the questionnaire. For example, Manager X filled in the RHA in relation to personnel on their project, and the personnel filled in the questionnaire in relation to their manager on the project. Confidentiality was emphasized, but in the questionnaire, names were included to be able to trace managers and personnel on the same projects. In total, 33 participants from Organization A answered the RHA, which includes 11 managers and 22 personnel. An invite was sent to all participants who completed the questionnaire to attend the focus group. The focus group included 12 people, six managers and six personnel of the various projects.

Organization B is much smaller than A and the relationships were also measured differently but using the same RHA survey with its relational indicators. Since Organization B's members are part of the same group, one of the leaders of the group sent out an invite to group members to answer the RHA. Of those, six people responded and answered the questionnaire in relation to the organization as a whole. The same group of participants were invited to the focus group, but due to COVID-19 and other challenges, as well as time constraints, only 3 people attended the focus group.

The data from the RHA informed the focus group discussions. The results were presented to the groups and questions were developed based on the dimensions, drivers and sub-drivers of the RHA. There was a feedback session on the RHA results of the five relational drivers during the focus group with a broad overview provided on the overall scores from the group. The drivers were workshopped further in focus groups to get an overall sense of how the group interpreted the relational indicators in a group setting.

Limitations of the research are largely due to resource constraints. We wanted to measure the relationships between various stakeholders in each organization, but had limited time, capacity, and funding. We decided to allow key leaders in the organizations to lead us in whom they thought needed to participate in the research with what was practical and feasible. This was during stricter COVID-19 lockdown levels which made it more difficult to meet in larger groups. As a result, for this research, we limited ourselves to measuring the internal relationships within the organizations. However, during the focus groups, we also asked questions on participants' perceptions of their relationships with other stakeholders to gain some of their insights and perspectives. In future projects, we plan to capture and measure the relational perceptions of more stakeholders and link responses and outcomes to the relational results.

We were also limited in doing the RHA with those who had internet access. The organizations helped us with the practicalities, but we will need to readjust our approach in the future to make the questions more easily accessible to a wider group of people. With the time constraints, we met with the leaders prior to the research and ensured that we would communicate the ideas and aims of the project clearly with all those involved. We were guided by the organizations on the best way to go ahead. It was important to them to understand the significance of the project and we are committed to share all the findings and are open to feedback and input. We had a well-skilled and sensitive organizational coach who facilitated the focus groups and relied on the relational data to guide the conversations.

4. Results and analysis

4.1. Relational footprints and surprised growth

The two organizations in our study revealed that the centrality of relationships over a long period were significant in the growth of both. During strict COVID-19 lockdown measures, when many companies and other organizations were scaling down, both Organizations A and B experienced a significant increase in funding, support, and resources to extend what they were doing. Their relational footprint in the city has cultivated trust between the organization, the recipients of care and the sponsors of care, which increasingly led people with resources to support them during the crisis.

Organization B's income increased from R80,000 through their own salaries, stipends, and wages in the first three years to R120,000 in the first nine months of

the pandemic. This is because people outside the group were invited to contribute financially to the group due to the great need that was exacerbated during COVID. Because of Organization B's relational approach, when the COVID-19 lockdown measures were implemented, they were able to distribute money, food, and other resources to families in need across Johannesburg quickly and meaningfully.

Organization A's increase in funding from sponsors enabled them to start additional projects, particularly for children and homeless people who were greatly affected by the COVID-19 lockdowns. Organization A was able to maintain all their employees without any salary cuts and was able to increase support to those in dire need of additional support. In 2020, the organization had 55 Early Childhood Development Centres in the city, a 100 per cent pass rate of students in their study programs and had made 30 job placements. When the organization was asked during the focus group discussion how COVID-19 changed the organization, most of the group agreed that the crisis created relational opportunities and helped the organization to grow. Most of the participants rated COVID-19's impact on Organization A with an eight out of ten on a scale of one (COVID destroyed us) to ten (COVID created opportunities for us to grow). The sense that COVID-19 created opportunities for Organization A to grow closer relationally as an organization was confirmed by the RHA. The personnel scored on average four out of six and the managers five out of six on the levels of contact and communication in the relationship in terms of the quantity of contact (medium used and access to each other); quality of contact (responsiveness and style); and impact (a sense of connection in the relationship).

4.2. Agility and adaptability during a crisis

In Organization A, members described how the COVID crisis challenged the work they do due to the inherent relational nature of their work and how they quickly had to adjust the ways in which they operate.

'It was always face to face, never a zoom meeting. That's a big change. Face-to-face is [Organization A's] preference ... without it ... "I don't know who you are" ... ' ... to build a relationship on zoom is very difficult. To share your motive, your stories, who you are, to show people around, that human touch is the nature of the NGO, it is a human thing. We need to show people, relate, and engage. We need people to assist us through the kinds of work we do. Even to sponsors, we need to show them to get them engage and interested. I hate using zoom, you have no idea.' (Focus Group, 29 March 2021, Sunnyside Pretoria)

However, Organization A adjusted to online communications during the strict lockdown and managed to continue operations with a much greater focus on care, but because they are relational, they had to learn to reconnect differently and more intentionally. During the focus group (29 March 2021, Sunnyside Pretoria), one of the managers explained how they made an 'intentional effort' and 'became closer' during lockdown.

... a lot of effort was made that everyone was included. WhatsApp groups were created. We wanted to use other means that was the most accessible for everyone. A lot of effort was made in terms of checking in, intentional effort, and it felt to me that we became closer during covid because of the intentional way of reaching out.

The group nodded in agreement when the facilitator asked, 'most organizations report that people feel more distant. You are reporting a general sense that you are getting closer?' Another personnel member commented that it is the relationships that sustained them, 'I think we would have been done without relationships. This did not only help us but the whole community of Pretoria.' As a faith-based organization, one of the Managers also spoke about the intentional spiritual relationship that the organization nurtures as 'an important marker' that 'helped to navigate the crisis better'.

Another member commented,

The nature of our organization, a lot of what we do, is engaging with people with needs. So, it's an inspirational thing of engaging closer with the community.

Participants explained that they managed to make these changes because they are relationally invested to make it work. However, the different structures and sizes of Organization A and Organization B seem to influence how changes and decision-making within the organizations occur, even if both managed to adapt their approach in terms of the support and delivery of care and resources. Organization A is well known in the city and has managed sensitive sponsor relationships through stories and relationships. One of the managers mentioned that they are careful with the balance between their care operations and their communications with sponsors, since there is risk that the sponsors relations could take up a lot of their time. Also due to their size, much time is spent on personnel structures and relationships. The core group of managers have not changed significantly over the last 30 years but the personnel changes frequently and is a different demographic. During the focus group, participants shared how they experienced some gaps due to the size and internal differences. One of the managers explained,

... in my dealings with managers and staff I do feel that there is a gap ... It is the sense of sometimes 'I do not have a say in decision making'. If you talk about the scope and being part of the vision, it is difficult for me to understand someone in my team who is not part of all the talks and how do you bring that person in? For me it is absolutely important to get input from everyone in my team about a matter because I might miss something that that person is seeing. But the systems in [Organisation A] are not always allowing everyone to be included ... We say you have a voice but there is not always space to voice ... People don't always feel free to voice even if it is said 'voice it'.

The organization is engaging and grappling with these issues as part of the reality as a larger salary-based NGO.

The smaller organization has a different model since the lines between the givers and receivers of care are less clear than a typical NGO. Every member of the group contributes toward the group and form part of the decision-making on how the resources are spent. Organization B is riskier and more robust in their sponsor and internal group communication, but it stems from having built high levels of trust and setting up intentional directness from the beginning that is sensitive to understanding power dynamics and vulnerability.

And I think we've realised, you can't avoid that but sometimes when you're just direct and you just confront it and see what happens ... at least that's my approach rather than when we dance around it, we often don't make progress as a group. It's just like 'what do you need?', 'why do you need it?', let's have the conversation ... (Focus Group, 18 April 2021, Randburg)

The organization's size and scope also mean that they have less financial risk than Organization A since they use their own salaries and feel strongly about being accountable to group members first. There is a strong sense of ownership from the group since the entire group carry the risks. A contributing factor to the efficacy of their intervention is that while some of the members of the organization are middle class and suburban, others are part of the very communities who needed support. As one of the members from such a community said:

We told people in the suburbs, 'don't tell us what people need. You have no idea, so just give us the money and we have the connection'. We know what it is like to be a victim of charity and we know how to not make it feel like that in the redistribution ... so that was actually compelling to people. (Focus Group, 18 April 2021, Randburg)

The results from the RHA showed consistency in how group members scored in relation to the group. The scores for all the relational indicators were above four

(mostly five) out of six. The responses from participants show consistency in terms of a positive view on the group relationships and why they felt that they were able to respond to the crisis. It was the continuity of their presence which has built history and stability overtime. As indicated above, Organization B felt that they had an appreciation of both the breadth and the depth of the relationships. The group was able to get aid to families that other organizations reported not being able to access because, while others were still 'trying to figure out how to build connection' (Focus Group, 18 April 2021, Randburg), Organization B already had established relationships with community partners. Each of the families they supported had a long-standing relationship with their organizational network. In the focus group discussion (18 April 2021, Randburg), one member simply stated, 'we were there'. There was no need to 'figure out' how to reach people or distribute resources as the processes, integrated into the well-developed relational networks, were in place.

One of the central themes that emerged from the focus group discussion with Organization B is that they were well positioned to deal with the COVID-19 crisis and the effects of the lockdown, in that they had given particular attention to the relationships within their organization as well as having a robust relational network within affected communities. As one member of the organization stated:

We had something that worked well under [the] covid situation because it was relational, responsive, quick. We could see all these big bureaucratic entities struggling on how to get help to people. They did not actually have the relationships. (Focus Group, 18 April 2021, Randburg)

On several occasions, reference was made to the 'heavy lifting', which one member described as 'the hard work that was done in the early stages' of their emergence as an organization. Another member spoke about the 'slowness of the relationship', referring to the fact that they were built intentionally, over time. This allowed the organization to be 'responsive' rather than 'reactive' (Focus Group, 18 April 2021, Randburg).

The members of Organization B stressed that their way of working would not typically be perceived as being efficient, in that it is slow and time-consuming, and decision-making is oftentimes painful as every person in the organization has an equal voice and vote, and is fully heard before a decision is made. As one member put it,

... in terms of who we are, we are very inefficient. But on the other hand, when Corona hit, we could get money to

specific households within a day. (Focus Group, 18 April 2021, Randburg)

Another member expanded on this as follows,

... let's say in a group, efficiency is a big thing – how are we efficient? That's how a corporate is setup, but we do not work like that in any way. Things take much, much, much, much longer. But at the end, the heavy lifting of how we have worked has led to the group having some clear-cut purpose. We understand what we are about, and we understand how we do it is probably an invitation to dream more about where we are trying to go ... Most of the groups might be better in operations but feeling that sense that 'I am part of a specific story' is probably less clear. (Focus Group, 18 April 2021, Randburg)

The idea of story, related to one of the measurements of the RHA, is evident in how trust has been built over time. Organization B was able to get resources to households due to the group's structure and relationships, but not only did it take time to build trusting relationships to do so, but it is also the consistent story that has been built relationally over time that leads to growth, stability, loyalty and connection in the relationship. Their story has developed momentum that has helped them to be more sustainable in their efforts during a crisis. When the above was communicated to people outside of the group the 'vision was compelling' and the response was, 'Wow, you can get resources to a particular family tomorrow. I can't. I want to help but how do I do it?' (Focus Group, 18 April 2021, Randburg).

Organization B's response speaks to the significance of approaches that are sensitive to the relationships in development. In the literature, NGOs are sometimes critiqued for using a technocratic approach to poverty and development that does not allow for a thorough understanding of the power relations that exist in the societies where they operate because they are largely distant and removed from those contexts (Shivji 2007). A further challenge for NGOs is that they tend to be staffed by urban, educated, middle-class liberals who do not necessarily understand the reality for most members of their societies (Fowler 2013).

This is not to say that large donors need to do all the relational footwork and 'heavy lifting', but rather that the above is evident of models that are small but effective because of the work that has been done on the ground. A deeper understanding of these relational networks that have already been formed and how they operate can help to better link the needed resources with those who have done the 'heavy lifting'. These organizations also have different insights into the power dynamics within and between organizations, recipients, and other stakeholders that are further removed

from the context of crisis. Organization B was especially reflective on this, as will be discussed below.

4.3. Lessons of power, resistance, and collaboration

Due to Organization B's relationally considered approach, members emphasized the importance of being vulnerable, compassionate, respectful of the dignity of all, and wary of being 'victims of charity' as central to their way of functioning as an organization. One of the respondents explained what happened with resources that were distributed during the strict lockdown,

... a lot of companies would just come with a truck in a squatter camp and that caused them more grief than good. You are setting up a war. You can't come into a neighbourhood like that and just bring a truck full of food without any form of communication or procedure in place. And then they had to shut down (*name of squatter camp*), for example, because people literally took the food by force. It's like, what are you expecting? (Focus Group, 18 April 2021, Randburg)

During the focus group discussion, one of the group members in Organization B, described this behavior as 'rushed' and simply about 'taking a picture' and 'signing a form' without deeper knowledge and understanding of the context and recipients of the resources. Organization B described wanting to see more 'meaningful' responses focused on quality and not simply quantity (Focus Group, 18 April 2021, Randburg).

One of the leaders in Organization B recognized that they would need substantially more resources to respond to the large-scale human need that arose during the COVID-19 crises, which is what larger development agencies were able to bring. But they also reiterated the values that allowed them to offer a more nuanced response on a small scale:

... we had the relationships and ethos, but they [larger agencies] had the food and the money. They [larger agencies] could distribute a ton and half of food, but we could do it because we were connected. They had all the money and resources but no relationships. (Focus Group, 18 April 2021, Randburg)

Organization B has robust conversations in the group to ensure that directness and power relations are managed through building high levels of trust overtime between members of the group. The scores in the RHA indicate that the group is comfortable with how power is exercised in terms of participation, fairness and mutual respect among members. The lowest score for parity/power was four out of six and this was one of the

founding members of the group who was acutely aware of the risks of power imbalances in the group due to his own position as someone with more resources in the group (Focus Group, 18 April 2021, Randburg). As a result, intentional directness in the group was set up from the beginning and is built into understanding power dynamics and the vulnerability of group members.

The above speaks to development practices that are aware of and managing the complexity of power dynamics between various stakeholders to shape more accountable and sustainable development practices. Organization B can have robust internal conversations with members and with sponsors because they do not feel as tied down by the donor expectations as many organizations do. The critique of the traditional donor-recipient relationship has been well explored in the literature and within development practice but changing the power dynamic between the donor and recipient has remained elusive in the work of most development agencies (Andrews 2013; Tavakoli et al. 2013). What is called for in order to change the power dynamic, according to scholars such as Booth (2012) and Unsworth (2010), is to assess when direct funding of development initiatives is ineffective or harmful; the willingness to adopt strategic and operational frameworks that support long-term engagement; incremental change that allows for experimentation; learning-by-doing and flexible instruments that accounts for the relational and power dynamics between various parties and stakeholders.

As way to illustrate how critical these levels of understandings are, members in Organization B explained the significance of understanding what people need through what they called 'intentional dialogue' and 'connection'. An emphasis was placed on the relevance of vulnerability in shifting power dynamics. During the focus group discussion, members highlighted how 'multi-layered' their vulnerability is. They explained this through an example of someone in the group who was in debt due to 'not making good decisions'. The group saw the need to then be 'honest about it in a community' even though it meant answering 'uncomfortable questions'. One of the members added that, because of the open dialogue (Focus Group, 18 April 2021, Randburg),

... the person who took that risk gave a huge gift to the group. (*Name of group member*) was willing to allow us to develop that directness, she was willing to put herself out there and you see the positive impact of that trajectory.

The member was able to resolve her debt through the support and engagement with Organization B. It was

apparent that it was difficult for her to be vulnerable but,

... it created a whole new space for us to be more direct. She had to be willing to take that risk and say, 'here's all the debt, here's all the payments I'm making and let's talk about it'. It was a huge risk.

Participants contrast the power dynamics between distant donors and fear of becoming 'victims of charity' to the close relationships within the group where vulnerability has led to positive trajectories and changes. The above refers to what the relationships reveal about power dynamics when we consider the long chain of communication (continuity) between the different parties and how the 'social stock of knowledge' is shared between parties (Weidenstedt 2016).

On a small scale, the above illustrates the significance of grappling with power, resistance and collaboration which also nurtures reflexive approaches to development as a dynamic and complex process that requires commitment, openness to learning, feedback and adaptation (Cornwall and Coelho 2007; Mosse 2006). Power remains significant in the distribution of resources and requires development interventions to be sensitive to power dynamics. The resistance from an embedded organization to large donor approaches and their interactions with communities' results from their deeper contextual understanding of what is needed. They then challenge this through explaining collaborations that are costly and even painful for all those who are involved but deals with the deeper underlying challenges that go beyond simply distributing resources. More time spent on how various groups function in their contexts and relationships could help researchers, public officials, donors, and development practitioners to better understand the kinds of resources and interventions that are required for sustainable development.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

Research has consistently shown that social and relational ties play a significant role in development outcomes and effecting planning and management in a crisis. Therefore, policymakers and practitioners should pay attention to social connections and networks that exist within communities and design interventions that leverage and strengthen these ties. Increasingly, various fields in research and practice are indicating the risks of the volatility of funding short-term and unsustainable efforts instead of long-term and steady commitments; focusing on results that are short-term over more complex and less measurable, long-term results; and placement of people who lack in-depth local knowledge and more continuous contact with

local stakeholders (Joshi and Carter 2015). Important changes in economic development thinking and the growing literature on focusing on people-centered approaches to development have brought significant shifts in not only how we think about the distribution and sharing of resources, but also about what happens to people receiving the resources.

This research provides insights into the surfacing of embedded organizations in South African cities and the kinds of understandings needed to build more long-term and sustainable responses in a crisis. The two organizations under study showed how participants make sense of the significance of relationships which enabled them to address the growing needs of those without support during a crisis. These organizations have left a relational footprint due to the contact, the depth of knowledge and understanding, sensitivity to power dynamics and commonality built over a long period. This allowed quick adjustments and responses to people's needs in the crisis. Those with robust relational networks within affected communities become the interlocutors that ensures that resources are distributed from large donors. Understanding and measuring the relationships within small-scale initiatives 'grounded' in communities and between larger institutions/bureaucracies could hugely benefit the understanding, learning, flexibility, interaction, and engagement between different levels of associations toward more sustainable development models. Based on the strength of relationships between people, aid and resources can be distributed quickly and meaningfully, as has been evident from the organizations in this research that used their relational network to distribute food and resources to those most in need. The organizations would have difficulty functioning outside of the relational network that it had carefully fostered over a long period of time at great cost.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by Social Science Research Council (10.13039/100001345 SSRC) under Rapid-Response Grants on COVID-19 this work is based on the research supported by and the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences.

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