

# **EMPOWERMENT, REDISTRIBUTION, AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES OF A COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATION: THE EXPERIENCE OF THE GURAGE ROAD CONSTRUCTION ORGANIZATION IN ETHIOPIA**

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Many development researchers and practitioners believe that community-based organizations (CBOs) can effectively promote the participation of local populations in certain projects. However, critics of development have argued that participation actually promotes the interests of national and international institutions and reinforces existing power differentials in the society. Such criticism reminds us of the problems inherent in the development process. However, the opposite extreme may result in another form of socio-economic exclusion, namely the isolation of the community from redistributive processes in larger publics. In this paper, I consider two interrelated issues that concern the political aspects of CBO activity: the relationship of a CBO to the state authority and the relationship between the CBO and the people whom it claims to represent.

The Gurage Road Construction Organization (GRCO), in operation since 1962, is one of the most successful CBOs in Ethiopia. This organization was established in Addis Ababa by Gurage migrants from a district in southern Ethiopia to raise funds for road and school construction in their homeland. The GRCO obtained a wide base of support through its negotiations with members of both urban and rural communities, as well as with the state bureaucracy. The leaders of the GRCO intended not only to conduct massive public projects in their villages, but also to develop alternative social relationships to counter exclusionary politics in rural Ethiopia.

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