Participatory development is the most important approach towards enabling communities to help themselves, and sustain efforts in development work. Today, communities are no longer seen as recipients of development programmes; rather, they have become critical stakeholders with an important role to play in the design and implementation of programmes and projects.

As a result, development practitioners are increasingly required to build their capacities to effectively participate in identifying and responding to community needs and aspirations. In his influential book ‘The Placemaker’s Guide to Building Community’, Nabeel Hamdi offers an exposure to much-needed knowledge, applied research, and innovative practice in community planning and development. The book is structured into four parts: presenting an array of examples and case studies through which the knowledge, skills, and tools that place-makers need to become effective and responsible development practitioners are described.

Section 1 lays out the conceptual framework of the guidebook. Over the years, academics as well as practitioners have often argued that community participation involves partnership, whereby planning and project designs need to be sufficiently flexible in order to create healthy, safe, and sustainable communities. In discussing the conceptual evolution of ‘participation’ in development discourse, Hamdi defines it as a complex and difficult process. It is nevertheless an essential and challenging endeavour to ensure project success and sustainability. Hamdi argues that planning processes are more effective when they are genuinely participatory, rather than consultative because they are built with a sense of community cooperation and ownership that facilitates a powerful drive for change. Furthermore, he advocates that true and meaningful community participation represents the shift from a position of providing for the poor to enabling them to provide for themselves, whilst respecting and reflecting local differences of community engagement, belonging, and unity.

In Section 2, Hamdi discusses the complexities of participatory planning. This concept is a popular paradigm in the development sector, increasingly sought after by donors and implementing agencies to warrant the credibility of development projects. Seldom discussed, however, are important issues such as how to conduct proper participatory planning, as well as the constraints and pitfalls of such exercises. First and foremost, Hamdi
encourages a dynamic, interdisciplinary, and multicultural way of learning and practising community development. Throughout Section 2 he emphasizes how a lack of understanding of local contexts can undoubtedly limit professional aspirations, thus impacting on expectations as well as the capacities of development professionals to deliver. To overcome such challenges, Hamdi encourages practitioners to adopt approaches to project design where plans are creative and specifically aim at reconciling with differences identified by communities. The author also underlines the significance of appreciating the dynamics of poverty and marginalization, while embracing community partnerships in development planning.

Community building can be extremely powerful in breaking barriers and building a sense of cooperation, especially with those who are marginalized. Yet, in order to succeed, development experts and practitioners have critical roles, responsibilities, and obligations. In Section 3, Hamdi presents the concept of PEAS (Providing, Enabling, the capacity to be Adaptive and the capacity to Sustain), and convincingly exposes how these four ideas are vital to good development practice. According to the author, Providing is the act to deliver. Any competent community developer should intend it to be understood as access to opportunities for the community rather than access to assets. Furthermore, a skilled community planner should also perform as an enabler to build people’s capacities for generating opportunities in adaptive and transformative ways. Hence, enabling implies cultivating places and processes that liberate the resourcefulness of people, and as a result promote a structural change and sustain resilience for lasting development. In the final section, Hamdi offers a short but detailed collection of precious examples from his teaching experience and explores different methods and techniques of building community, including negotiation, consensus building, and conflict resolution.

There are too few materials or good books available on community development that manage to integrate all these resources and insights in such a comprehensive way. Hamdi’s handbook is certainly one of those. Academic notions of development planning intersect with the practical skills and tools of place-making in this compendium of traditional and innovative methods and models of community practice. Methodologically, the author’s analysis provides the reader with a clear understanding of concepts and practical applications to enhancing existing community engagement practices. Among the merits of this book is the way that Nabeel Hamdi highlights the numerous dilemmas faced by the crafters of place-making, whether they are architects, planners, or urban designers. In addition, he powerfully presents pressing questions in community building such as the obsession of development practitioners with excellence and their continuous search for best practice that can be replicated. Readable, challenging, and engaging,
‘The Placemaker’s Guide to Building Community’ will probably provoke a wide range of readers, and would make an ideal book for courses on development, urban planning, and community participation.

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Challenging Capacity Building: Comparative Perspectives

This book provokes much thought about the area of community development and/or community capacity building (CCB) and its chapters offer some profound contributions and insights. While the collection deals with both the theoretical and practical challenges associated with the concepts of capacity building and community development, it is worth noting that almost all its chapters acknowledge the complexity in defining them. For example, in Chapter 2, Miller acknowledges that capacity building is an ambiguous concept which has simply replaced the equally ambiguous concept of community development. On the other hand, Ife, in Chapter 4, sees capacity building as synonymous with community development since the same expectations are made of both, i.e. community participation, empowerment, community resilience, etc.

Examining the meaning of ‘community’ in Chapter 3, Gary Craig believes that it too is an elusive concept: one that policy-makers and politicians use to convey a sense of ownership of programmes to the intended beneficiaries. In actual fact, ‘communities’ do not own such programmes since their members do not make any of the major decisions. It is particularly clear from this account that the word ‘community’ is used to divert people’s attention from ‘nitty-gritty’ issues. However, it is not apparent as to why policy-makers would want to give people such a false sense of