Re-imagining Capacity and Collective Change: Experiences from Senegal and Ghana

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Abstract This article presents two studies which examine learning among community collectives in Ghana and Senegal, in their struggles to sustain their livelihoods and agency amid political, environmental, and socioeconomic pressures. In doing so, we consider how these experiences are reflected in the ways that human capacity is conceptualised and supported within international cooperation and development. We argue that dominant practices described as 'capacity development' overlook the complex and locally-contingent character of development in favour of replicable and scaleable models; take an apolitical view of capacity as the acquisition of discrete skills; and privilege the development of individual capacity and self-improvement over collective change. This limits the extent to which learning and capacity development can genuinely empower peoples to imagine and work toward social change. In contrast, we argue for a view of capacity which is embedded in learning through collective struggle; an analysis of and engagement with power relations; and attention to both short- and longer-term change.

1 Introduction

In this article, we reflect upon two studies examining the learning of community collectives in West Africa in their struggles to sustain their livelihoods and agency amid political, environmental, and socioeconomic pressures. In doing so, we consider the implications of these experiences on the ways that human capacity is conceptualised and supported within international cooperation and development. In line with other critiques (Land, Hauck and Baser 2009), we make the case that dominant practices described as 'capacity development' tend to overlook the complex and locally-contingent character of development in a quest for replicable and scaleable models; take an apolitical and technocratic view of capacity as the acquisition of discrete skills; and privilege the development of individual capacity and self-improvement/transformation over collective change. These tendencies, we argue, based upon our two case studies, limit the extent to which learning and capacity development can genuinely empower peoples to imagine and work towards social change, and may ultimately work against

it. On this basis, we make the case for a view of capacity which is embedded in local experiences of learning in/through collective struggle; takes as a point of departure an analysis of and engagement with power relations (both outside and within the community); and seeks to balance the short-term need for self-improvement with a longer-term project of changing social order (Lindeman 1961). Finally, we consider the challenges and feasibility of such an approach within dominant forms of development cooperation, as well as the implications it presents for communities and collectives in the global South, and West Africa in particular.

2 Reflections on individual and collective transformation

Before embarking on our discussion of capacity within the two case studies mentioned above, we wish to take a moment to situate our motivation for writing on these particular points of discussion. At a recent conference on 'Transformative Learning and Social Sustainability' we found ourselves perplexed by many participants' singular preoccupation with

individuals' 'disorienting dilemmas' (Mezirow 1995) and the resulting psycho-emotive journeys towards personal change. Largely absent from these discussions was a clear consideration of how personal change is both *embedded in* and *subject to* broader structural conditions and power relations, issues that, in our experience, are key in determining the extent and sustainability of efforts toward empowerment and/or emancipation. This absence led us to identify a divergence in contemporary discussions on learning and change around the question of collective engagement, and to reflect on our own positions within this field, as well as the positions articulated by the African co-investigators with whom we have worked. It also led us to reflect upon the link between these debates on learning and transformation and the framing of human capacity development in international development, a field in which we, the authors, are both active.

We see a number of important parallels emerging between our experience at the conference mentioned above and current debates around capacity; parallels which invite us to examine how these practices might learn from one another's strengths and shortcomings. For instance, we see potential linkages between calls for a more learning- and complexity-centred approach to capacity development aimed at empowerment (e.g. Morgan 2006); the principles articulated in theories of *informal* and *incidental* learning (Foley 1999); and the empowering potential of collective counter-hegemonic action (von Kotze 2000). Conversely, we would argue that critiques of the apolitical and econocentric models of practice in both areas of practice can enrich one another and offer strategies for response. These issues are considered more closely below.

3 Developing capacity for what?
Debates over the forms and sites of learning and transformation are not new, particularly within the fields of adult and vocational education, but also within management and organisational studies and, to a lesser extent, literature on capacity development. The discourse of workplace learning (within which human capacity development often sits, as 'training') is often posited in terms of skilling in line with the dictates of global labour management (flexible, adaptive, transferable, etc.) (Collins 1991;

Murphy 2000). Even learning termed 'transformative' can be understood as a pathway of personal emancipation rather than collective social change (see debates between Tennant 1994, 1998; Inglis 1997 and Mezirow 1994), or ultimately disempowering, if it fails to actually help people change their situations (Bivens, Moriarty and Taylor 2009).

These concerns are particularly relevant to the context of development cooperation, where capacity development initiatives are frequently conceptualised not only outside of communities, but of entire nations, and enacted through networks of institutions more concerned with seeing an improved management and delivery of activities in line with predetermined (or programmed) objectives than with challenging the frameworks within which they operate (*cf* Morgan 2006: 4–5). This raises the question of whether local (or endogenous) priorities that diverge from these frameworks are considered and supported through capacity development interventions, and the spaces available for such forms of dialogue.

4 Seeing the global in the local
Efforts toward facilitating collective capacity development for social change must be based in an analysis of power, both in the way it affects collective struggles, but also the ways in which it circulates within them. In this sense, we are informed by the work of Ferguson (2006) and Gupta (Ferguson and Gupta 2002), which provides a way to re-spatialise relations between localities/communities, national governments and transnational institutions or forces. Ferguson (2006) re-configures discussion of the grassroots away from a traditional topography of power, where the local resides under the umbrella of national governments and transnational institutions or interests, and rather suggests that the interests and agents of both of these forms of governmentality exist in the local, and the local is thus where power manifests itself. In this sense, we need to be aware of the way in which power plays into all actions within a given locality. A growing body of literature echoes this re-spatialisation by acknowledging the role of NGOs in acting as agents of this type of transnational governmentality (*cf* Kamat 2002; Kapoor 2003). This power dynamic is reflected clearly in the Senegalese case below. We would also add to this analysis by insisting that actors

at the local level seek to understand not only the ways power affects them, but also the way in which power transects them. This addition is something Foley (1999) has described well in connection with incidental learning within social movements that are often deeply affected by these processes of power stratification. For instance, he notes how the popular education associated with the Zimbabwe liberation struggle was embedded in power struggles, and that these tensions transferred into the nascent state – an ambiguous result that undermined the collectivist intentions of its beginnings. This understanding of power stratification within progressive movements is reflected in the Ghanaian case below.

5 Intergenerational power dynamics within a natural resource defence movement in Ghana

The first case focuses on the ongoing learning in the struggle of the Songor salt flat defence movement of Ada, a local movement defending communal access to a natural resource in Ghana. The Songor salt flats have for centuries been communally accessible not only to people from Ada, but to any who travel to cull this resource (Langdon 2009; Manuh 1992). This is based on a traditional resource management system that regards none of the surrounding clans, nor the priests that guard the spirit of the lagoon that produces the salt flats, as outright owners. Therefore, this resource should be considered a national rather than just local asset (Langdon 2009; Radio Ada 2002). Despite this history of accessibility, for the last half-century the movement has had to defend this traditional resource management system in the face of repeated colonial and post-colonial government, as well as corporate attempts at expropriation (Amate 1999; Manuh 1992; Langdon 2009). These struggles include a pitched battle with one company during the PNDC military Regime of Jerry Rawlings of the 1980s. Importantly, this battle, and the deaths of innocent bystanders as a result of company-bought military support, led to a new natural resource code that placed the future of the salt flats in trust with the head of the government (Radio Ada 2002). When Ghana became a democracy again in 1992, this code was embedded in the new constitution (Ayine 2001). This constitutional codification is something the salt flat movement has consistently contested due to the unilateral power it grants the country's President (Langdon 2009; Radio Ada

2002). Likewise, the movement has contested arguments that central government control implies national use of the resource, countering this with the history of access elaborated above, where the traditional natural resource management allowed all Ghanaians access. As such, a major aspect of this movement's learning has been through struggle and involved not only contesting attempts to expropriate the salt flats, but also fighting part of the very architecture of Ghana's democratic constitution (Langdon 2009).

With this history of struggle and learning in mind, a key to this movement's continued momentum is the collective transformative learning process that has seen the lessons of, and capacities for, struggle in the past being passed on to a new generation of local activists. Yet, even though this new generation has learnt from the successes of the past, new challenges face them: the communal access to the salt flats is now being restricted through a series of enclosures set up by local – not external – forces. What is so pernicious about this current case is that the enclosure process is being led by some of the local chiefs – a fact that is coupling a process of the privatisation of enclosures with the very maintenance system intended to ensure communal access (Langdon 2009). This has led to a new round of incidental learning, where the colonial legacy of privileging chiefs over the local priests who guard the Songor lagoon is being questioned by this new generation of movement activists.

Unfortunately, this incidental learning in struggle (Foley 1999) has taught them the limits, complicity and complacency of the older generation's support. The youth destroyed some of these enclosures and were subsequently arrested, and the older generation of activists were quite slow in coming to their aid (Langdon 2009). Unfortunately, the implications of this (negative) learning in struggle risk negating the transformational learning that sparked this new generation's commitment, as well as the capacity of this community to self-determine what is best for the salt flat.

This first case provides a complex illustration of the potential for collectives to determine their own paths to social change. The success of the Songor salt flat movement in contesting external expropriation of this important natural resource

is inspiring. Yet, it must be acknowledged that this capacity can also be eroded through local power relations that transect collectives, in this case power relations between generations which have their root in local manifestations of transnational governmentality. This new challenge necessitates new learning within the movement if it is to maintain the ongoing communal access to the resource. The ambiguous nature of this learning (Foley 1999) is such that it may challenge the very survival of the movement as a source of local capacity for autonomy, should it fail to place collective interest ahead of those of the purported local leadership. Recognising this complexity, and its roots in local manifestations of transnational governmentality, is a key starting point if this process of learning in struggle is to enable the movement to reconfigure itself to meet this latest challenge.

6 'Inventing the peasant' through community-NGO cooperation in Senegal

The second case, focused upon a nascent organic and fair trade cotton industry in eastern Senegal, reveals how institutionally-driven revitalisation of community livelihoods presents a set of different challenges. This case study examines the relationship between a Federation of organic farmers, and a Senegal-based international environment and development organisation which has worked with farmers in the area for nearly 15 years. This relationship has profoundly shaped the lives of hundreds of small-scale farmers – who struggle to subsist on the meagre revenues offered through an exploitative global conventional cotton industry – in many positive ways. Through capacity development activities for both farmers and the Federation's secretariat (including farmer field schools and training in crop monitoring) livelihoods have diversified, the use of toxic chemical fertilisers and pesticides has been reduced, energy has been invested into adding value to the raw materials being grown, and support has been given to help the farmers' Federation organise itself and expand its membership. However, within this relationship, which in many ways exemplifies a 'model' of community-level engagement for sustainable development, struggles emerge that suggest fundamental flaws within the nature of these forms of cooperation.

With the formal criteria for what is deemed 'fair' and 'organic' in the cotton industry monitored and enforced through transnational governance networks, and a virtually non-existent domestic market for goods that meet with these criteria, the Federation's dependence on NGO support remains deeply engrained and seemingly inescapable – a power relationship that is not unknown to NGO-community relations. Community members find their work subjected to increasingly complex and foreign forms of scrutiny, normalisation and accountability processes in line with a model of sustainable environmental development that they have had no hand in defining, and which many of them do not fully understand. This process of shaping individual subjectivities through external regulation in defence of the environment reflects what Agrawal (2005), drawing on Foucault (1980), terms *environmentality*. The alternatives of conventional cotton production, however, or of simply not complying with the prescriptions of certifiable fair trade organic cotton, mean continued personal and ecological exposure to dangerous toxins, or even greater impoverishment due to the loss of the premium offered for certified cotton. Neither of these alternatives appears more attractive to the Federation than enduring these forms of control and scrutiny, thus their reliance on NGO financial and capacity support in negotiating these foreign exigencies in the hopes of securing better livelihoods.

A second related challenge to the autonomy of the Federation lies in the nature of the relationship they have established with their NGO counterpart; a relationship which sees the very identities of their members defined, supported and represented externally in line with a model of the 'development success story', as a means of ensuring the support on which they rely. Implied in this arrangement appears to be an assumption that the Federation should remain, first and foremost, a collective of peasant farmers, earning a fair and liveable income from their work, but not reaching out beyond the bounds of this identity and thereby disrupting the narrative of their 'story', as it has been developed by others. This process of *inventing the peasant* is used to ensure that individuals, communities and peasants' organisations remain as they have been discursively framed by the institutions that support them; incrementally strengthening their capacities, improving the quality of their livelihoods and embodying the agreed-upon

principles of 'good practice', without evolving to such an extent as to rupture the continuity of their cooperation, or each other's *raison d'être*.

The tension between the Federation's desire to ensure that they continue to benefit from the environmental and livelihood improvements offered through a shift to organic and free trade cotton production and their desire to become more autonomous and self-sufficient presents an important site for critical collective reflection and an opportunity to re-shape their engagement in new ways. However, the increasing external coordination that they face under the banner of capacity development in the form of trainings, management, and reporting, to name a few, also colonises the physical, temporal and conceptual *spaces* fundamental to these types of critical reflection and learning (Cornwall 2004), thereby weakening their capacity to re-imagine the terms of their engagement with the outside support that has so shaped them. It is important to recognise the intimate link between these spaces and peoples' ability to reflect upon change and put it into action. As Mayo (2009: 100) notes, 'praxis constitutes the means of gaining critical distance from one's world of action to engage in reflection geared toward transformative action'. In the case of the Federation, whose existence is so intimately intertwined with the structure and ethos of the outside institution that supports it, it becomes difficult to see how such a critical distance can be gained.

This second case provides a concrete illustration of the boundaries between two ways of understanding capacity. Here we see a programmatic approach which genuinely seeks to improve the lives of farmers by enabling them to conform to new models of practice, models which may improve individual incomes and provide new local infrastructure, but which also present ever greater external coordination upon the collective. Through its colonisation of conceptual space, and in line with the discursive construction of peasant identity, the partnership crowds out opportunities for a radical departure from conventional models and the development of capacities that would further such a vision.

7 Convergence and divergence between the two cases
Both the above cases consider how learning and capacity development can either sustain the normalised logic of development discourse, or explore alternatives to its truth regime. The Ghana case challenges the normative notion that embedding natural resource management in constitutional rules is actually the best approach not only for surrounding communities, but also for Ghanaians. Similarly, the Senegal case provides a reminder that even the most benign (or seemingly positive) approaches to development – such as organic and fair trade agriculture – can give rise to forms of domination and ruling relations. Yet, in both of these cases the potential to question dominant development paradigms is seen to be embedded in learning processes: where the salt flat movement is embroiled in an internal process of learning and reconfiguration, the farmers' Federation is dependent on its partner NGO for much of its guidance and access to the organic market – a relationship that stifles much internal reflection within the Federation.

In this sense, both cases reveal the way in which power relations, either within or external to the collective, shape and constrain the potential actions of its membership. Similarly, these power relations have important implications on the way in which learning takes place within the collective. Foley (2001) notes that incidental learning is often embedded in ambiguous and contradictory forms of struggle – such as a partnership that at once strengthens livelihoods and limits agency – but that the emergence of this learning can be limited when the capacity to question, not only the shape of this intervention, but the very contours through which those involved can imagine their identity, is curtailed. Similarly, the success of previous challenges to external capital's attempt to expropriate the salt flat resource led first to the alienation of local resource rights through constitutional codification, and most recently to fracturing within the salt flat movement as a result of local efforts to enclose the resource. In this way, these two cases invoke Pettit's call for a 'pedagogy of power', which prompts us to examine the forces that shape and constrain our own actions, to reflect upon the nature of our own power and agency, and to recognise 'one's capacity to shift power' (Pettit 2006: 73).

Both cases also reveal individual learning emerging in the midst of collective engagements – where, for instance, ruling relations become

visible to individual members of a collective as a result of new challenges that confront it. At the same time, it needs to be recognised that this control, or agency, still matters. For instance, local communities' capacity to determine their relationship with development and development discourse can be dramatically complicated by the involvement of external allies – even those with the best intentions.

8 Conclusion: collective capacity development that questions the development project

In reflecting upon the points raised through the two case studies presented here, we feel that a number of questions emerge about the way that learning and capacity are understood and supported within development. In particular, we wish to highlight questions surrounding efforts targeting individuals versus collectives; the possible roles of external organisations (such as NGOs) and the limits to these roles; and finally, the limits to which the contemporary development model can accommodate the forms of learning and capacity proposed here.

To return briefly to our discussions on capacity at the level of individuals and collectives, we argue that, within the two cases we have examined, collective learning and empowerment is a prerequisite to effecting broader social change. Individual learning can provide an important pathway to collective capacity, but on its own can only offer individual emancipation. This position is supported by other studies within the African context (von Kotze 1998 provides a particularly poignant testimony from South Africa), and is well-demonstrated in the Ghanaian case above. However, the Ghanaian case also reminds us that collectives are themselves dynamic and subject to internal complexities and political or power struggles that must also be examined. The case from Senegal, finally, recognises the value that individual capacity can have in strengthening livelihoods and increasing income, but raises the question of how this can best be balanced against more transformative longer-term aims, particularly given the potential trade-offs between the two aims evidenced here. Answers will likely be context dependant and linked to existing capacities, resources and levels of solidarity within the collective. They will also be linked to the collective's capacity to articulate an alternate vision of change in the face of external political, social and environmental pressures.

The cases also contribute complex perspectives to debates about the locus of social change, especially where this change enhances local capacity for self-determined development. While the Ada salt flat movement presents a historical and contemporary case of self-determination through local struggle and learning, it needs to be recognised that the local is not a pure site somehow outside transnational power relations: new articulations of resource alienation take on a local face, and in so doing destabilise the momentum of the movement, and fracture its intergenerational strength. Nonetheless, it needs to be acknowledged that the potential for this new challenge to deepen local capacity for self-determination is there. Meanwhile, the Federation presents a different case where external intervention has apparently led to strengthened livelihoods, but at the same time has placed new limits of containment on local capacity for self-determined change. Key in this analysis is the role of NGOs as external agents of transnational interest, even when these interests are apparently progressive, and the NGO in question has the best of participatory processes at heart. This begs a further set of questions about the role of any external agent in a locality – even while we acknowledge power transects the local even when NGOs are not directly involved. Along these lines, we could also add the role of external researchers, such as ourselves, to these forces – something that is beyond the scope of this article but whose recognition is an important component of both our research approaches (*cf* Harvey 2009; Langdon 2009). A further extension of this is the implication of these two stories of local capacity development for dominant development models and discourse.

Dominant notions of development – or what is often termed development discourse – tend to present external interventions as a normalised process for successful social change, where success is equated with economic growth (McMichael 2008). Who determines the criteria of success within this discourse has been the subject of much contemporary critique (Rist 2002). Likewise, critiques have been levelled at development's programmatic and technocratic nature (Kothari 2005). The two cases described above reveal how these development models can be further reinforced through local-level capacity development initiatives that originate from these transnational sites. Alternatively, the self-

determined path of the Ada movement presents a different stance, where external decisions concerning resource use are resisted – yet this case is also fraught with its own contentions from within both the community and the movement. From this perspective, the development project is problematised for the ways it reduces, rather than enhances, local capacity for self-determination. In undermining this objective, the goals of development must be deeply questioned as they limit people's possibilities in both the Senegalese and Ghanaian case; the former through direct disciplining and containment; the latter through repeated attempts to undermine alternative resource value systems through commodification. Exposing this problematic reality leads us to join others in fundamentally questioning whether the contemporary models of development can meaningfully contribute to emancipatory capacity development.

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