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Teaching A Man To Fish: NGDOs, Development Interventionism, and the theory and practice of the Capacity Building approach

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Abstract

The international development world has witnessed a marked increase in the presence and participation of transnational non-governmental development organizations (NGDOs) over the last two decades. This has in turn inspired much deliberation concerning what the appropriate roles and approaches for NGDOs in the development and poverty alleviation effort are. A large part of this discussion has been characterized by sustained criticism regarding NGDOs failure to engage with political processes in the developing world and the inability of most popular approaches to inspire empowerment for the marginalized and rely on their own agency towards achieving the improvement of their societies. Considering the recent growth in the popularity of ‘capacity building’ as a preferred development intervention, this study contributes to the ongoing conversation by examining the theory and practice of this approach—critically evaluating its innate ability to escape from the forgoing constraints and envision long-term development solutions that are not pursued at the expense of the empowerment of the marginalised and of the development of their own institutions. To further characterize capacity building as a development approach, this study examines both available literature on the concept and a few examples of NGDOs and bilateral organizations that rely on this approach in their work within the context of certain Least Developed Countries (LDCs). Following this, it goes on to conclude that capacity building does not innately escape this political empowerment constraint faced by previous approaches. It also concludes that unless (i) cognizant of and seeking to engage with development as a larger process of change rather than on a project or single policy level; (ii) directly and intentionally engaging issues relating to civic life, rights, and responsibilities; (iii) and aware of and seeking to counteract power imbalances in their interaction with beneficiaries, NGDOs working in capacity building have a very limited ability to contribute to empowerment towards long term development.

**Key Terms:** NGDO proliferation, development interventionism, Democratic Republic Of Congo, empowerment, institutional formation, capacity building
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The development problem starts precisely here: there can be no development (which is endogenous) unless the people's pride in themselves as worthy human beings inferior to none is asserted or, if lost, restored.

(Muhammad Anisur Rahman, Towards an Alternative Development Paradigm, 1991)

1. Introduction

As vehicles for tackling social challenges and contributing to long-term development in the global-south, transnational non-governmental development organizations (henceforth NGDOs and used interchangeably with ‘NGOs’) for their particular structures and approaches have at some points been regarded with much optimism and expectation, and at other points been the subject of significant criticism and even identified as inhibitors to development and progress. This ambivalent assessment of NGDO (particularly northern based NGDO) contribution to the development effort experienced much broadening and growth itself following their relative rise to prominence in the development discourse and practice in the 1980’s, which are referred to in the literature as the ‘NGO decade’ (Bratton, 1989), (Mitlin et al., 2002, p. 4). Either as a result of the growing criticism that followed the recognition of NGDOs inability to surmount certain major constraints in the field (including their lack of engagement with larger development processes and radical empowerment for the marginalized), or as a result of NGDOs’ own recognition of their failure to achieve larger development goals, the past few decades were also characterized by notable changes in the preferred approach of NGDOs in dealing with development challenges. Both these constraints—particularly that of their limited engagement with political processes and empowerment—and the resulting changes in intervention styles leading up to the current preferred approach of ‘capacity building’ are explored further in this study.
Defined as the “process by which individuals, organizations institutions and societies develop abilities to perform functions, solve problems and set and achieve objectives (U.N. Economic and Social Council, 2006, p. 7), capacity building has increasingly been utilized as a development approach by NGDOs and other organizations in response to the increasing emphasis on the importance of skill building and institutional strengthening in the development discourse (Ulleberg, 2009, p. 7). Alan Rogers, a senior strategic communications advisor at UNDP (which, as we will see, was one of the forerunners in the development of the capacity building approach), invoked the ‘teach a man to fish’ adage when he cited its ability to escape such constraints as dependency as a major strength that justifies the position of ‘capacity building’ as the current preferred approach (personal communication, November 13, 2012). To further characterize the ‘capacity building’ approach itself, we not only engage in some consideration of its theoretical foundations, but also examine examples of its application in the field. A number of organizations working in capacity building in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the Congo itself for its historical and current characteristics, provide a useful empirical context for examining the impact of capacity building on empowerment and institutional formation.

In addition to this, the concept of empowerment as it relates to the broader process of development receives some examination. This concept plays a crucial role in the discussion about the contribution of the ‘capacity building’ approach to the larger processes of development for the fact that empowerment and its link to better governance and institutional strengthening has been identified in the literature not only as a primary prerequisite for development, but also as a crucial benefit that development should produce (World Bank, 2002, pg. 7). This exploration of the link between empowerment, and development not only as concepts, but also in the empirical example of the development process in the Democratic Republic of Congo, provide a crucial framework for our elaboration of the contribution of the ‘capacity building’ approach to empowerment in its use as a development intervention by NGDOs.
2. Methodology

Tackling the subject of development, particularly on the level of NGDOs contribution to it through the capacity building approach has required unpacking not only the concepts of development, NGDOs, and capacity building themselves, but also a few other intimately associated concepts. As some of the most important of such notions, empowerment, for its position as a prerequisite for development, and the extent to which capacity building plays a beneficial role in its evolution will form the basis of our analysis.

In order to situating our inquiry in the best position to engage in this analysis, selecting a context that best illustrated not only the challenges of development, but also the importance of empowerment and institutional formation in surmounting these challenges constituted a crucial step. The scope of our research in terms of timeframe and access to experts also meant that this context had to be accessible enough to be examined. The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), which fulfilled these criteria both from the conceptual/relevance and research/practical standpoints, was thus chosen as our exploratory context. Understanding the forgoing critical concepts in our question, as well as their particular relevance within this chosen context has benefited immensely from both a review of the literature on the subject and a number of interviews with experts in the fields investigated.

2.1 Literature Review

Engaging the varied perspectives and identifying the consensus view on each of the crucial concepts that our question incorporates provided the rationale for undertaking a literature review. As a reflection of the broad range of subjects in which these concepts find theoretical foundation, this process required investigative work in such areas as international development, development history, and political theory. More specifically, this process required exploration of the literature in three of the following major areas: NGDOs—specifically their role
in development as it has been historically and currently understood, capacity building in definition and practice, and empowerment as it relates to the concepts of institutional formation and development.

For the first of these three areas, (our investigation of NGDO’s roles and approaches in development) our selection of literature focused on the last two decades (1987-2010 with the majority of articles coming between 1990 and 2012). Through addressing various perspectives and undertaking both theoretical and empirical investigations, this selection provided a sound basis for our exploration while also appropriately reflecting the stages of development in the understanding of what roles and approaches have been considered most appropriate in general for NGOs in society, and specifically for NGDOs in development.

For our second area, which considers capacity building in development from its theoretical foundations to its practical application in the field, it was beneficial to look at reports commissioned by notable organisations such as Oxfam, the World Bank, and UNDP, all of who were key contributors to the launching of the capacity building approach into prominence in the development discourse (Eade, 1997, p. 10). Furthermore, our investigation (for the previous section) of the evolution of the understanding of NGO roles in development provided a suitable historical background for the emergence of capacity building as the preferred approach, while a brief exploration of the work and influence of Paulo Friere and Latin American liberation Theology (also referenced by Eade, 1997) provided the appropriate theoretical context (p. 10).

The third element of our question, which attempts to propose a description of the development process aims at answering three main questions. These are: “what do empowerment and citizenship formation mean?” “what is institutional development?” and, “what role do these play in development?” Appropriately dealing with this question required looking at literature that engaged the term ‘development’ on both the ontological and empirical levels in order to avoid unjustified normative assumptions while also tying these concepts to our broader question.
2.2 Interview/Case Study

The author’s proximity and access to experts in the field while carrying out this study, as well as the projects particular stipulations ensured that interviews with experts were both constructive and (relatively) more conveniently carried out. This was also hugely beneficial in our construction of brief case-outlines of the programs and particular styles of a number of NGDOs whose work in capacity building we rely upon to illustrate our argument, include Mercy Ships, Bukavu Youth Action Center (BYAC), and Oxfam. These organizations were selected for reasons of relative accessibility (email and live), presence in the literature (particularly true in the case of Oxfam), presence in the DRC, and of course reliance on the capacity building approach. Communications with experts in these organizations were carried out either via email (BYAC and Mercy Ships), live conversation (over skype with BYAC founder and director) and through available material on websites and organisational reports (Oxfam and Mercy Ships).

The main objective these interviews were designed to accomplish was to identify each organization’s particular rationale for favouring the capacity building approach, specific manner of utilizing this approach, demographic targeted, and constraints faced in using this approach. Besides this, the interview also sought to explore the perspectives of these organizations on the long-term development impact of their intervention, their perspectives on the role of empowerment in development, the power dynamic between the organization and the demographic it served, and issues related to funding. As stated earlier, drawing up a case-sketch of each organization provided the primary rationale for pursing this line of questioning. Alongside this, our interview questions were aimed at gauging the interviewee and organizations general perception of their intervention in solving development challenges and how this has been shaped or affected by the academic perspective on NGDO roles and approaches.
In addition to these a number of supplementary interviews were conducted (or attempted) with other organizations in capacity building that for reasons of accessibility or contribution to the development of the current perspective in the field were deemed essential. These organizations included WHO, UNDP, and the International Centre for Migration Health and Development (ICMHD). The line of questioning pursued with these organizations although similar, approached more of a general conceptual view of NGOs in capacity building and sought to evaluate its overall justification, strengths, and constraints.

3. Results

3.1. NGDOs: phases, influences, and approaches

As briefly described above, the literature on NGDOs depicts a varied, complex, and uniquely fascinating interaction that these organizations have had with both actors and thought in the development effort since their initial inauguration into the development universe. The following section will advance an operational description of this interaction that although by no means exhaustive, will be enough to provide a picture of the some of the theoretical basis of the capacity building approach, and later on for our examination of the link between this and political empowerment.

In conceptualizing the manner in which the current understanding of NGDO roles developed, as well as the dominant ideas within the discourse that had an effect on this development, it has been useful to draw out three distinct stages in their development. As described in the literature, these roughly coincide with other significant changes in the larger development world, which although providing some justification and a historical background do not attempt to dictate precise dates for each phase (Mitlin et al. 1997, p. 14).

The first of these three phases as described by Mitlin (et al.) was characterized by NGOs whose primary motivation was providing services and
advocacy for people “perceived as poor” and who received limited external attention (1997, p. 15). This same review goes on to add that these mostly Northern based organizations were usually embedded in larger movements (e.g., abolitionist, pro-peace movements), and were geared towards raising awareness, raising funding, and influencing legislation in home countries, while in some cases also running service delivery or missionary relief efforts in Southern countries. According to the literature, at least some of these interventions were influenced by the lingering paternalistic sensitivities of colonialist thought that understood certain populations as ‘under capacitated’ and in need of superior external expertise (Mitlin et al. 1997, p. 15) (Awa, 1989, p. 310).

The second phase in which NGDO interventionism is situated (described in both Mitlin et al. and Fowler [2000] as having occurred roughly between 1960 and 1980) is characterized in the literature as having witnessed a stronger emphasis on the role of governments in services delivery and development (Mitlin et al., 2008, p. 15-16) (Fowler, 2000, p. 2). As a reflection of the dominant ideology of the period, Fowler describes NGDOs during this phase as being merely “tolerated as marginal contributors but [not] embraced by the official system” (p. 15). Mitlin et al. highlight another relevant characteristic of this phase in describing the influence of the political struggles of the time including not only the civil rights and independence movements, but also the Cold War and anti-dictatorial radicalism across Latin America and Africa. This conflicted space in which NGOs found themselves resulted in what amounted to an adversarial relationship with the state in some cases, and a partnership towards achieving mutual goals in others (Mitlin et al., 2008, p 15). In both cases, both Northern and Southern based NGO’s sought to bring about change by influencing the state through popular mobilization and direct lobbying while Northern NGDOs working in the South increasingly served as role models for Southern counterparts (Fowler, 2008, p. 2).

The 1980’s made significant alterations to this picture, beginning with the Reagan-Thatcher popularization of free market economics, and going through
the end of the Cold War and the disaster that were Structural Adjustment Programs (Eade, 1997) (Fowler, 2000, p. 2) (Zaidi, 1991). The growing disillusionment with the state’s position as the conveyor of development, which was to some extent a result of all of three of these conditions, also filtered into the discourse of NGDOs roles in development, and consequently influenced their practices and chosen approaches. This disillusionment with the state that characterized the period, coupled with hegemonic agendas to hasten the consolidation of democracy in former Soviet states, contributed immensely to augmenting the recognition of NGDO’s as a critical player in development (Fowler, 2000, p. 2). Alongside this, the increased inclination to look to market forces as the source of development progress—and poverty as developments key inhibitor—resulted in a ‘commodification of social relations’ and the narrowing of the field of approaches that NGDOs favored. Of course the increased availability of funding that followed this increasing recognition of NGDOs potential role did much to spur growth in the sector, thus inspiring the coinciding ‘boom’ during the period to which Bratton bestows the title ‘NGO decade’ (1989) (Mitlin et al., 2008, p 21). This, coupled with the identity crisis that resulted after democratization (in parts of Latin America and SE Asia in the 1980’s, and in Sub-Saharan Africa in 1990’s) and rendered outmoded NGDOs previous approach of contestation with formerly authoritarian states, left NGDOs with limited intervention options besides becoming social service contractors (Mitlin et al., 2008, p 22). This new set up, referred to in the literature as the ‘new geopolitical economy of nongovernmental aid’ did much to undermine previous approaches, as shifting funding streams meant that NGDO’s (both local Southern based and Northern) were increasingly encouraged to abandon political radicalism in favor of social service projects aimed at welfare and poverty alleviation (Mitlin et al. cite the case of Proshika and GSS in Bangladesh who undergo shift from mobilization focused NGOs to micro-credit organizations) (2008, p 23). Although Mitlin et al. relate the latter of these characteristics with an emerging fourth phase in the perception and self-conceptualization of NGDOs, the fact that they hold insignificant differences from those of the third phase,
coupled with the fact that both Fowler and Korten place both contemporary and post 1980’s characteristics within the same phase serve as the rationale for our limiting this representation to the three phases described (Fowler, 2000, p.3) (Korten, 1987, p . 149) (Mitlin et al., 2008, p 23). This proliferation of NGDOs in the field and discourse since the 1980’s has also been accompanied by a variety of critical perspectives suggesting everything from slight refining of current approaches (e.g. Fowler 1993) to a total deposing of the entire NGDO interventionist paradigm (e.g. Zaidi, 1991). These critical perspectives, and their contribution to the emergence of the capacity building approach will receive some examination in the following section.

3.2. NGDOs: proliferation, constraints, and the emergence of the capacity building approach

As earlier stated, the period in the 1980’s that for the aforementioned reasons saw the proliferation of NGDOs in the developing world (Salamon’s ‘associational revolution) also witnessed a marked increase in available literature seeking to investigate, assess, and critique this movement (1994 p. 109) (Mitlin et al., 2008, p 4). These critical voices represented a vital contribution to the development of current understandings of constraints faced by NGDOs especially in such major areas as accountability, effectiveness, transparency, and contribution to democratization (Edwards and Hulme, 1997) (Mitlin et al., 2008, p 4) (Zaidi, 1991). These and other major constraints related to aid and sustainability, NGDO interaction with local political and economic realities in the developing world, and most importantly NGDO contribution to grassroots empowerment, also constituted major themes that framed our conversations with experts in the NGDO and development field.

Edwards and Hulme’s critical exploration of NGDOs increasing presence in the field which represents one of the most seminal of such reviews specifically addresses NGDOs perceived comparative advantage over governments in the developing world by examining their relative effectiveness, legitimacy,
sustainability and other related considerations (1996). In the section dedicated to exploring effectiveness (specifically cost-effectiveness), Edwards’ and Hulme’s review cites the case of certain NGDOs in Bangladesh as well as numerous studies to the same effect, all of which indicate that NGDOs desire to achieve expansion (which is related to funding concerns) often erodes their capacity to actually reach the ‘poorest of the poor’, resulting in an intervention that is increasingly wider rather than deeper (1996, p. 9). As an illustration, this review goes on to indicate that taken together, the largest NGDOs in Bangladesh (Grameen Bank included) “reach less than 20 percent of landless households in the country” (Farrington and Lewis, 1993 cited in Edwards and Hulme, 1996, p. 10).

NGDOs reliance on foreign funding for virtually all activities in service provision also comes up as a significant constraint on the level of sustainability in this review (Edwards and Hulme, 1996, p. 10) (Zaidi, 1991). On this issue Dr. Manuel Carballo of the International Center for Migration, Health and Development (ICMHD) agrees with dominant perspectives in the literature that the typical horizontal structure of funding schemes for NGDO service delivery programs are fundamentally unsustainable since a change in donor priorities results in the end of such programs and often a return to previous conditions for beneficiaries (personal communication, November 21, 2012). The example of World Vision’s health and welfare projects in Uganda, and the unfortunate impact on its funding that the World Banks changing priorities had, serve to illustrate this point in the literature (Edwards and Hulme, 1996, p. 11).

Also on the level of sustainability, Dr. Carballo suggests that the time limitation of many NGDO projects is itself evidence of the inherent unsustainability of popular approaches since many development problems continue to persist after the 5 or 10 year timeline for an NGDO project has expired. In response to this point, large NGDOs such as BRAC argue that they serve in a temporary but crucial placeholder role in society that puts conditions in place which can be inherited by the public sector in the future (basic idea of scaling up) (Farrington and Lewis, 1993, p. 22). Edwards and Hume as well as
Lora Nelson Cirhigiri of BYAC, and Dr. Carballo astutely observe the problem with this rationale in its failure to recognize the inability, and in most cases the unwillingness (vested interest in doing the opposite in fact) that governments often exhibit in picking up these roles that NGDOs claim to develop (Edwards and Hulme, 1996, p. 11) (personal communication, November 14, 2012).

In addition to this issue of sustainability, both the literature explored and our conversations with experts in the field provided significant insights into other constraints related to legitimacy and accountability that mainstream NGDO approaches face. Dr. Carballo was particularly forthright on this subject, citing the fact that assistance agenda’s are almost always set by donor organizations and how this makes organizations more accountable to the donors than to the population served (personal communication, November 21, 2012). This, he suggested, effectively undermines the notion that these NGDOs represent the interest of the ‘poorest of the poor’, actually serving as stronger evidence to the argument these organization in fact represent the interests of the richest of the rich. Lora Nelson Cirhigiri of BYAC went further in describing the legitimacy constraint, adding that while living and working in the DRC, she has observed not only that the funding source determines the priorities of most NGDOs, but also that these NGDOs through influencing local economic realities and providing temporary employment opportunities for locals on ground informally set the development agenda there, indirectly overruling priorities that people on the ground may actually find more pressing (personal communication, November 14, 2012).

This particular constraint we found to be intimately connected to the issue of empowerment (which we explore further down the line in the discussion) and NGDOs interaction with it. Our earlier look at the NGDO interventions and approaches as they have evolved in recent decades was particularly informative in illustrating the difference between current and passed paradigms, specifically the fact that the current paradigm typically exhibits a certain level of detachment from the political processes in the developing world (Mitlin et al., 2008). This notion is again engaged in Edwards and Hulme’s (1996) consideration of how
NGDOs may participate in “rewriting the social contract” between government and its citizens by serving in unelected positions in service delivery that may weaken the elected ones that are (formally if not actually) accountable to the populace (p. 15). Mitlin et al., echoes this concern when speaking of how NGDOs being increasingly invited to the decision making table on key development issues may claim to (and sometimes do) represent the interest of the poor, yet do so in a ‘pseudo-democratic’ fashion which precludes the empowerment of the poor to look out for their own interests (2008, p. 24-25).

These and many other concurrent outlooks serve to illustrate the point that the work of NGDOs continues to face certain constraints that have (at least in the literature if not in actual practice) encouraged a re-imagining of roles and approaches that NGDOs favor. Although far from exhaustive, this review of the constraints that most popular approaches face illustrates the angst within the discourse that provided some of the impetus for the development of alternative approaches such as capacity building. In the following section, we flesh out the results of both our review of the literature and interaction with experts on the definition and application of this particular approach.

3.3. Capacity Building in Theory and Practice

As we have seen, this angst whose growth and presence in the literature coincided with the onset of the amplified growth and presence of NGDOs in the field of development, coupled with a few other conditions that we will endeavour to explore, served as inspiration for the launching of the capacity building approach, which at its current state in the development discourse sits at ‘the top of the development agenda’ (Eade, 1997, p.10) (William, 1998, p.57). Along with these conditions that contributed to propelling capacity building to its current popularity, we will also briefly examine capacity building in the field as utilized by Oxfam, Mercy Ships, and BYAC.

Eade’s *Capacity-Building: An Approach to People-Centred Development*, which besides providing an extensive investigation of Oxfam’s role and
perspectives in capacity building represents one of the more influential works on the subject, dedicates its first few chapters to exploring the emergence and definition of the capacity building approach. Besides the connection to changing perspectives on NGDO approaches that we have earlier outlined, Eade suggests a link from the perspectives of Latin American liberation Theology and Paolo Freire’s awareness-creation pedagogical approach to the concepts of participation, empowerment, and social movement in which the theory of capacity building takes root (1997, p. 10). Specifically Eade suggests that the Frierean approach contributed three major concepts to the foundations of the capacity building approach (1997, p. 11). These are the notions that:

a) “Learners and their own experience and knowledge are of crucial importance.

b) Awareness learning, self-esteem, and the capacity for political action are mutually reinforcing.

c) Poor and marginalised people have the right, and the capacity, to organise and challenge authority in order to create a society that is not based on exploitation and oppression.” (My ordering)

In addition to these, Eade cites the purpose and appeal of Latin American Liberation theology—its support for the radical empowerment of poor women and men to challenge and oppose injustice and poverty—as a key source of influence for the concepts of empowerment and participation as utilized by the capacity building approach. These factors according to Eade, coupled with the emergence of a number of voices in the 1980’s and 1990’s questioning the dominant view of the ability of economic growth to bring about equitable and sustainable development contributed to the search for alternative approaches to conceptualizing and participating in development (1997, p.14). UNDP who was a key participant in this search also contributed to this development of an alternative view by its creation of its Human Development Report series, which approaches the development challenge from a human—rather than economic—centred point of view. These developments in the field, coupled with simultaneously changing views regarding NGDOs and their approaches
contributed to shaping the approach of capacity building. With this in mind, an examination of capacity building as it is utilized by organizations currently operating in the field provides a basis for analysis of the characteristics of this approach that goes beyond its foundational or theoretical identity.

As one of the organizations that contributed significantly the theoretical development and field application of the capacity building approach to development work, Oxfam joins UNDP and the World-Bank on the list of organizations that have not only began to increasingly utilize this approach in the field, but also represent key proponent of its adoption by the wider development world (William, 1998, p.56). Through a review of a number of Oxfam publications on capacity building, as well as the web-space dedicated to summarizing its work in the Democratic Republic of Congo, it has been possible to create a working profile of Oxfam's effort in the first of the aforementioned capacities. Eade’s (1997) description of capacity building as defined by Oxfam, approaches the question of development from the standpoint of identifying first the ‘constraints that women and men experience in realising their basic rights’, and after this ‘empowering women and men to bring about positive change in their lives” (1997, p. 24). Eade adds that the broadness of this definition allows Oxfam to approach capacity building as a “multi-dimensional process of change”, as opposed to a “discrete or pre-packaged technical intervention intended to bring about a pre-defined outcome” (1997 p. 24). As this translates into its field operations, this vague definition allows Oxfam to utilize an intervention model that is context specific and reflects the constraints and empowerment opportunities that exist in a given setting. Thus in the DRC considering what Oxfam identifies as a weak institutional context characterized by post—and unfortunately current—conflict generated fragility, Oxfam favours an intervention model that is emergency/response oriented, working to increase school enrolment and access to water and sanitation, while also providing direct support for people living with HIV (“Democratic Republic of Congo,” n.d.). From Oxfam’s point of view this approach falls within its general model of and definition for empowerment while also not ignoring the immediate and context specific needs of the people on
ground. As Eade puts it, “there are many ways to enable women and men to improve their quality of life”, and as such, flexibility on the part of the NGO is what is most important (1997, p.29).

Mercy ships, the second organization we consider, is an international faith-based organization that strives to ameliorate healthcare access problems in rural West-Africa by running the Africa Mercy a private hospital ship that delivers free health services, and by undertaking capacity building projects (“What we do” n.d.). Based on slightly different theoretical foundations than the Oxfam’s model, Mercy Ships utilizes a capacity building method that aims at improving the major problems that it identifies such as, lack of knowledge about basic healthcare and hygiene, illiteracy, poor agricultural practices (“What we do” n.d.). To combat these problems, Mercy Ships runs classes in agriculture and basic health care, while also providing training for surgeons, nurses and other local health care workers. In doing this, the organization aims to break what it terms “the cycle of disease” by imparting knowledge and education (“The Mission: Capacity Building” n.d.). Having recently signed an agreement with the Congolese Ministry of Health (the first of such agreements in its 30 years of operation) the organization will be extending its services to the Congo, were it will also help evaluate the countries health system and identify areas in which it can contribute (Democratic Republic of the Congo Officials Visit Mercy Ships, April 19, 2011)

On a much smaller scale than both of the previously examined organizations, the Bukavu Youth Action Center (BYAC), a membership based youth leadership organization more informally relies on the capacity building approach in its efforts to ‘instil a sense of leadership’ in Bukavu youth (“Youth For Change”. n.d.). Our conversation with Lora Nelson Cirhigiri, as well as our review of BYAC’s self-description on its website has served to provide our framework for understanding how BYAC orders its energies towards the end goal of inspiring its members (usually recent Secondary School graduates and University students in Bukavu) and members of its immediate community to imagine new avenues and approaches for transforming their society. On the level of specific undertakings, BYAC requires its members to execute community activities that include a
mentorship program with local orphans with the two-fold purpose of passing on the vision to these orphans, while also empowering its members with a sense of responsibility for their immediate community and an understanding of their present and future leadership potential (“Who are BYAC members?” n.d.). In explaining the organization’s rationale for opening its membership to university and high school students (who in her view would be considered by most other organizations to be ‘elites’ in that society) Lora Nelson Cirhigiri, one of BYAC’s founders and directors, suggested that these students who will play roles as future leaders in their communities and country have the most potential to not only have immediate influence on society but also to contribute to the needed larger structural changes in the long run (personal communication, November 14, 2012). As Lora affirmed, through this targeted and intentional approach to capacity building BYAC’s seeks to consciously and specifically influence current and future empowerment.

Having undertaken a brief review of the theory and history of the capacity building approach, considering its development and definition, and looking at some examples of its application in the field, we go on to tackle our central question by considering the innate ability of capacity building to contribute to the development effort through empowering the powerless. To carry out this ambitious task, we will engage in a discussion that attempts to relocate political empowerment within the concept of development and then examine the extent to which capacity building contributes to this empowerment, both from the level of its innate theoretical characteristics and in its practical application by the organizations we have examined.

3. Discussion

3.1. Empowerment and Development

The following two rather obvious questions require answering before we can attempt to evaluate the extent to which the capacity building approach can contribute to empowerment and development. The questions “what is political
empowerment?” and “how does empowerment relate to development?” are critical concerns that must be addressed before we proceed with our discussion. The former of these questions, which attempts to define political empowerment, will receive first consideration.

Our discussions particularly with Lora Nelson Cirhigiri of BYAC, coupled with a number of investigations we encountered in the literature have been particularly helpful in clarifying what this concept entails in the context of development. Within the literature, Uphoff’s explorations of power as conceptualized through Max Weber’s discourse supplies the most appropriate theoretical grounding for our work with these terms, defining power as the probability that a person can achieve her or his desired objectives despite resistance (Weber, 1947, cited in Uphoff, 2005, p.3). In terms of the empowerment of the powerless, Uphoff goes on to discuss how “collective action” on the community and local, rather than the individual or household level more sustainably improves the probability that those classified as poor will be able to accomplish their desired objectives (2005, p. 9). To the extent that mechanisms for (political) accountability such as ballots exists, his assertion is that the most reliable leverage for the poor is one that ensures that the “better off” group in any power relationship benefit from the participation or suffer as a result of the abstention of the poor (2005, p. 11). This was in line with Lora Cirhigiri’s articulation of the concept, which favoured an ‘end focused’ approach that emphasised the ability of a population to overcome obstacles such as corruption which undermine institutions and preclude the fulfilment of collective objectives (personal communication, November 13, 2012). Thus with support from both Uphoff’s analysis and Mrs. Nelson Cirhigiri’s input, we propose that political empowerment is the extent to which a population is able to both formally and radically achieve a certain desired social or political objective. The empowered status of a given group therefore becomes apparent to the extent that they can together pursue their own priorities with a reasonable chance of success through means that are collectively favoured.
Having examined what political empowerment is, the question of how it is achieved, and more specifically how it is achieved within the context of quasi-democratic societies like that of the DRC still remains. Although even a summary of the perspectives on this concern is beyond the scope of this report, certain key aspects of the concept relating to self-agency, institutional formation, and incentive structures emerged in the general literature reviewed on NGDOs in development and on empowerment. Social contract, an idea that Fowler (2000) briefly engages in the literature, considers empowerment in terms of a sovereign citizenry, who collectively decide to endow the state with the authority to rule (p.4). The concept of citizenship, an important aspect of the idea, again relates to a collective enterprise to which the individual is responsible, upon which the individual can exert influence, and in which he or she owns a stake (Hickey & Mohan, 2005). Within the context of “post democratization” African states, this process of citizenship formation has represented one crucial avenue through which political empowerment can be generated. Hickey’s case study of “political literacy” work engaged in by women’s groups and community organizations in Cameroon emphasised not only the potential for this citizenship formation to influence empowerment, but also the central role that a sense of self-agency plays in this process (2002, p.850). In this case study, participation in these women’s groups increased solidarity and sense of collective engagement, while building capacity for analysis and engagement with issues of citizenship and self-determination (p. 853). Again, this example serves to illustrate the point that Eads communicates in saying “women and men become empowered by their own efforts, not by what other do for them,” adding that, “when development and relief programmes are not firmly based on people’s own efforts to work for change, their impact may be disempowering (Eads, 1997, p. 4).

Regarding the impact of this empowerment on development Uphoff’s lecture on community, local governance, and measuring empowerment for the poor also had much to share. According to him since “collective action” or citizenship is more likely to accomplish the desired objectives of the disempowered, such action becomes both a means to achieving empowerment,
and an expression of power itself. Such an exercise is thus able to go beyond just the meeting of basic needs and is connected to people’s wants and desires, “things that affect their dignity, satisfaction, and personal fulfilment” (Uphoff 2005, p. 11). Viewed side by side with a definition of development that considers a reduction of vulnerabilities and an increase in the overall capacities of a group (as well as their capacity to deal with their particular vulnerabilities), the presence of such collective action becomes both an avenue for and a reflection of development (Anderson and Woodrow, 1989). As such, collective action (as it represents empowerment) ensures that the group in question will be able to pursue and is more likely to achieve the objective of reducing its vulnerabilities and increasing its capacities. Stated simply, this view paints a picture in which empowerment is a critical prerequisite as well as a goal of development. This process begins however, only after the group in question is empowered with the knowledge that their concerted efforts, despite current or historical realities, can with support from both immediate and larger communities bring about the changes they seek. In the context of the week democratic institutions of a country like the DRC, if such empowerment is pursued on the large scale, the achieved ability (through voting for example) to reform the structure of who influences the exercise of authority as well as to define the conditions under which such authority is exercised (through the reformation of institutions) describes the state of political empowerment through which development can be achieved (Uphoff 2013, p. 5).

3.2. Teaching a Man to fish as Empowerment?

So where does this all leave us? Is capacity building as envisioned in its theoretical foundations and in its field application by NGDO’s necessarily able to contribute to this political empowerment? Put more precisely, does capacity building innately “support the capacity of local people to determine their own values and priorities [and] to organize themselves to act upon and sustain these for the common good” (Eade, 2007)? The definitions and various applications of
this approach that we have previously explored seem to suggest that no such innate ability is present. Beyond this, it has also become apparent that to the extent that this approach exists within the ‘NGDO-as-state-substitute’ structure of external intervention, it is likely to not only suffer from the other major constraints that plagued previous approaches, but also unfortunately to contribute to the disempowerment of ‘beneficiaries’ (Hickey, 2002, p. 847).

As we have previously seen, the structure of NGDO interventions, particularly the way that priorities are decided upon, funds are raised, and success are evaluated have posed several significant problems in the areas of accountability, transparency, effectiveness, and the legitimacy of the entire paradigm (Edwards and Hulme, 1997) (Fowler, 1993). Under this same structure, there is no reason why the change of intervention style from direct welfare programs to skills building classes or other forms of “pre-packaged technical interventions” will escape these constraints (Eade, 1997, p. 24). In fact, in the absence of the critical assessment and theoretical grounding from which this structure would benefit, capacity building is likely to become just another avenue for reinforcing the existing power structures on both the local and international level. Under the capacity building model, donors can still determine the priorities of what specific capacities need to be built (which may or may not align with needs on the ground), NGDO’s can still run time limited projects necessarily more concerned with measurable rather than authentic and long term solutions, and this approach can still contribute to eroding local self-confidence and be an obstacle in the avenues through which the ‘poor’ can generate innovative solutions to their own problems.

As such, it seems interventions of this sort, which NGDOs still favour, have themselves less of a capacity to target the underlying power imbalances that nourish the problems of health care inequality or poverty which these interventions are ostensibly trying to remedy. The idea of teaching a man to fish rather than given a man a fish definitely seems laudable on face value. However, the complexity of this sentiment is illustrated in Eads review which asks, “what if
that fisher is not a man but a woman? And what if she doesn’t own the water in which she is fishing?” (Eade 2007, p. 634). Even beyond this the question “What if the teacher doesn’t know how to fish” becomes a vital one when dealing with NGDOs who suffer from the level of constraints in legitimacy and accountability that we have earlier outlined (CDRA, 1995). Despite all of this, it is true that within certain contexts and under a number of conditions (which we conclude by considering) capacity building can in fact break out of some of these constraints. As Dr. Caraballo put it however, most NGDOs have exhibited a limited degree of concern for issues of empowerment, and for reasons of capacity or obliviousness would rather continue in their state of unexamined and even potentially disempowering ‘service’ (personal communication, November 21, 2012). To conclude we will explore some of these conditions in which capacity building has the potential to contribute to empowerment and imagine some recommendations for moving forward.

**Conclusion**

_The sad reality is that most development aid has precious little to do with building the capacities of “The Poor” to transform their own societies. Not even the best-intentioned NGOs are exempt from the tendency of the Development Industry to ignore, misinterpret, displace, supplant, or undermine the capacities that people already have._


As we have seen in this study, NGDOs in accordance with the quote above have faced significant challenges when it comes to accomplishing some of developments must central goals that they have been unable to overcome. Our exploration of the history and structure of this sector was informative in illustrating and exploring this inability to tackle issues of accountability, legitimacy, and (most central to our question) empowerment— a factor without
which the development efforts lacks fundamental direction. As we have also seen, the term ‘NGDO’ covers a range of organizations and groups that are as broad in dispersion as they are varied in purpose and approach. Notwithstanding the problem this represents for generalization, knowledge of this fact has allowed us to consider a number of alternative approaches to NGDO intervention that provide some avenue through which an escape from this political empowerment constraint can be imagined. The three organizations we considered (Oxfam, Mercy Ships, and BYAC) all of whom work in capacity building, evaluated through the lens of our understanding of the crucial role that political empowerment plays in development may help us tease out some of the characteristics that could contribute to a capacity building approach that is able to be empowering.

Oxfam’s sheer enormity relative to Mercy Ships, BYAC and most other non-governmental organizations in the development sector certainly provides some justification for its ability to explore its theoretical foundation and carry out such responsibilities as self evaluation, which for most other NDGOs would be too great a task to handle (especially considering the time they must dedicate to fund-raising and related concerns). This engagement with the theory of the practice is of course evident in the numerous reports and publications that the organization sponsored, many of which have been cited earlier and have provided some of the foundations of the capacity building approach. Although the conflict/post-conflict context of the DRC makes interventions more urgent and (appropriately) immediate-situation oriented, Oxfam’s work in development seems to reflect this conceptual grounding, as it still (through its active citizenship support system) keeps in mind the long term development goals of empowerment, while at the same time advocating on the world stage for a reform of the global power system (‘Oxfam Purpose and Beliefs’, n.d). This willingness to engage with social movements and the larger processes of development stands in contrast to capacity building as envisioned by Mercy Ships, whose project to project approach more directly engages technical rather than political concerns. Working on a much smaller scale, the BYAC approach deals almost
entirely with empowerment concerns, working with youth in projects and classes that inspire activism and political engagement. Although the size of this organization makes the scale of its work quite limited, its membership-based structure allows it escape accountability and legitimacy constraints, while placing much confidence in the self-agency and innovative potential of members (Lora Nelson Cirhigiri, personal communication, November, 2012)

As these examples illustrate, the capacity building approach takes on very different personalities even within a single context such as the DRC. The literature and these examples also indicate that this approach becomes most beneficial and escapes the major NGDO constraints to the extent that it meets certain criteria while working in the field. As in the case of BYAC, organizations that participate in direct empowerment initiatives aimed at strengthening the concept and practice of citizenship contribute to political empowerment and do so that much more efficiently when beneficiaries recognize their inclusion in and responsibility for the organization through a membership-type model. This model represents not only participant ownership of the intervention resulting from a favourable power relationship between the organization and its beneficiaries, but also an experience in collective problem solving, which can set a valuable precedent for future translation into civic action. Oxfam’s model also exhibits strength in this area. By keeping in mind both its recognition of the innovative capacities of the populations it serves, and long term development concerns, Oxfam can serve a multi-part function of both adding to this latent capacity while working in advocacy to create new avenues for the marginalized to demand for better representation both locally and on the international level. As such rather than teaching a woman or man to fish, what this model begins to look like is a recognition of the inherent ability of a woman or man to fish and a willingness to partner with her in surmounting the challenges that prevent her from fishing efficiently.

One challenge that this study has faced stems from a recognition of not only the diversity of manners in which the capacity building approach is utilized, but also (and perhaps resulting from) the difficulty in nailing down a fixed
definition for this approach. This issue has made it difficult to address the capacity building approach from any central position and precludes sweeping generalizations about what the approach can and cannot achieve. Also as Hickey notes, statements that pin the slowness of the development process on NGDOs ineffectiveness also illustrate a radical lack of confidence in the ability of the disempowered to pursue solutions to their own problems notwithstanding the presence or absence of NGDOs. This realization provided the rationale for engaging the capacity building approach first on the level of its theoretical foundations in order to see wether at that level, the approach was itself capable of surmounting the constraints that initially necessitated its adoption. Thus as a final word, although we have seen that this inherent capacity within the approach can not be taken for granted, its has become clear that certain avenues for partnership can be envisioned as long as equitable power relationships are favoured and political empowerment is pursued rather than ignored or undermined.

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Annex: ISP Work Journal

August 25th—Developing an agenda for my research

• Want to approach a subject that incorporates my political science background, international relations, development, and possibly health.
• Considering looking at external interventionism and how much this contributes to development and interacts with politics.

August 26th—First advising session with Mrs. Caratsch

• Talked about how I wanted to explore NGO roles in development
• Want to look at NGO proliferation in developing world
• Want to consider goals and accomplishments of such NGOs
• Want to look at and define long term development
• Should consider the contribution of external interventionism on democratic development
• Consider looking at case study of NGOs in Morocco?
• Consider looking at NGOs working in health

Mrs. Caratsch advises to switch to Dr. Viladent since her focus is more technical science, health, and research rather than development theory and politics.

September 11th—First conversation with Dr. Viladent
• Talked to Dr. Nidal Salim about possible collaboration with my project
• Spoke about international collaboration on water issues
• Talked about potential for private and public cooperation in water economics
• Considered a subject change that focused more on this specific issue

September 14th—First advising session with Dr. Viladent
• Expressed interest in my subject and recommended I look at “Turning the world upside down by Nigel Crisp
• Spoke about how NGOs in development interact with local social and political institutions
• Also spoke about how this could possibly tie in with conversation with Dr. Salim about Water and health in Morocco
• Described my idea to see if NGOs that worked with existing Institutions in the developing world were likely to do more beneficial work
• Considered the question “Do International organizations working in global health issues in the developing Worl seek to interact with existing political process in the regions were they work”
• Also recommended that I look at ICMHd and consider talking to director of the organization

September 17th —Email exchange with Dr. Viladent
• Dr. Viladent recommends a number of books on NGO/Government relations in the developing world.
• Also encourages looking at book collection in SIT office in Nyon

September 22nd —Email exchange with Dr. Viladent
• Submit ISP subject and Justification paper
• Paper narrows focus to NGDOs in development and the relationship between political and overall development
• Considers examining history of development and seeing what levels of political development existed in comparable levels of economic development in now developed countries (NDCs) and developing countries.
September 30th — Received feedback on ISP justification paper from Dr. Viladent
  • Feedback suggested a narrowing of the subject considering the time frame
  • Suggested that I exert more efforts into teasing out a distinct question

October 8th — ISP Proposal
  • Start considering looking at the DRC as a context for my research.
  • Maybe focusing on a certain approach that NDGOs favour
  • First contact with Lora Nelson Cirhigiri of BYAC Democratic Republic of Congo regarding ISP work and direction of research which will look at interaction between NGOs and political institutions in development

October 9th — Group conversation with Christopher Spennemann at UNCTAD
  • Intellectual Property rights conversation talks about technical capacity development for Governments in the developing world as an approach to intervention
  • Possible angle for my research?

October 11th — WHO Group meeting with Dr. Carlos Dora
  • Again speaks of Governments in capacity building
  • Talks about how persuading governments to change legislation is one form of intervention that changes realities on ground.
  • Suggest that Who structure doesn’t allow for direct intervention in grassroots without government authorization.

October 14-15th — Follow up email exchange with Dr. Dora
  • Ask general questions regarding literature on issue brought up in group meeting (specifically health and oil/gas projects in Ghana), which was either useful for the recommendations you worked on, or came about as a result of them.
  • Rationale behind this is seeing what sort of arguments convince the government that legislative change is necessary.
  • Dr. Dora Responds with article on Health impact assessments and WHO work in this area.
• Dr. Dora fails to respond to direct question regarding benefits and drawbacks of this intervention style

October 17th — Meeting with Dr. Viladent
• Talked about structure and format of ISP
• Talked about Interview process and how this should be carried out.
  Suggested books on NGO proliferation and relations with government.
• Further encourages that I seek to speak with Dr. Carballo

October 23 — Lora Nelson Cirhigiri
• Email exchange regarding her work in the DRC
• Lora expresses concern regarding NGO ‘interference’ in the development project
• Lora encourages more specified question

October 24th — ISP Literature review week
• Literature describes history of NDGO approaches
• Suggest current paradigm is in favour of capacity building both at the top level (government technical capacity) at the middle level (organizational capacity) and at the bottom level (individual and community capacity building projects).
  This seems like an interesting angle and is included in the review as the specific intervention style to be measured.

October 25th — Email Exchange with LNC
• Talk about the Literature speaking of NGOs as often an inhibitor of political development
• Consider looking at NGOs and democratization in the African context
• Talk about DRC being a suitable context for a case study look

October 30th — Email Exchange with LNC and Literature Review work
• Brief debate on the suitability of democracy for the African context
• Lora encourages to look at development as a process that involves political empowerment
• Consider NGOs in light of literature on approach styles and see how they contribute to this political empowerment

• Ask for recommendations from LNC on organizations that work in either the area of health or directly in development

November 1\textsuperscript{st} — Complete and send LRE

• Have now chosen to look at Capacity building as a discrete intervention style, consider what potential this style has to escape constraints of previous approaches

November 4\textsuperscript{th} — Email exchange with LNC

• Discusses difference between UN and International organizations approach to capacity building which is targeted at inspiring legislative or policy changes rather than direct empowerment

• Lora suggests looking at international organizations and specific programs such as MUNESCO

• Lora also recommends comparing NGOs to direct bilateral aid.

November 4\textsuperscript{th} — Email Exchange with Dr. Viladent

• Speak about contacts at either UNDP or UNICEF

• Dr. Viladent extends contact info for Ms. Moussalli

November 6\textsuperscript{th} — Email Exchange with Ms. Moussalli

• Speak about capacity building and its position as a favoured intervention style in development

• Ask about capacity building and democratisation and if this approach engages the grassroots

• Ask about drawbacks of this approach

• Ask about rationale behind UNDPs pursuit of this approach

• Gisele (Ms. Moussalli) sets up interview between author and Alan Rogers for Tuesday 13\textsuperscript{th} November

November 13\textsuperscript{th} — Interview with Dr. Rogers

• Short interview that considers rationale and general strengths and drawbacks of capacity building as used by UNDP
• Alan Rogers suggest a strength is its ability to circumvent development problems
• Invokes “teach a man to fish” maxim
• Talks about the fact that capacity building in terms of policy recommendations can be slow to trickle down to the marginalised.

November 14th—Skype Interview with LNC
• Consider BYAC as an organization in development intervention
• Consider BYAC specific membership-based approach and evaluate strengths constraints, and contribution to political empowerment

November 20th—Email Exchange with Giselle and Mr. Rogers
• Follow up question regarding how UNDP incentivises governments to follow its recommendations
• Follow up to say thank you for opportunity to interview

November 21st—Christina Scott helps arrange conversation with Dr. Carballo
• Dr. Carballo and author explore strengths and drawbacks of current paradigm of NGO intervention
• Dr. Carballo suggests many constraints NGOs have been plagued with
• Dr. Carballo address major problem with approach (including capacity building) is lack of adequate planning

End of November—ISP Complete!