
Learning from Power in Development Cooperation: Lessons from Senegal

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Abstract: *This paper considers how inter-institutional power relations, managerial discourses, and informal learning coalesce within a network of development actors. To do so it explores examples from within a progressive Non Governmental Organisation in Senegal and a farmer's Federation which they support in ways which produced complex outcomes, but also present opportunities for learning and critical reflection. These moments of informal and incidental learning, I argue, can play an invaluable role in making visible relations of power and domination, informing future struggle, strengthening collective strategy and resolve, and ultimately helping to strengthen or reassert peoples' independence, agency, and ability to provide for themselves. I examine where these learning opportunities presented themselves and were acted upon within these cases, and identify factors that affected peoples' ability to successfully draw upon learning and critical reflection.*

1. Introduction

This paper draws together lessons learned from doctoral research conducted in Senegal in 2007-2008. The research sought to explore how power is exercised through relations of development cooperation and coordinates peoples' activities at various sites within networks of international, regional and local institutions and actors. More specifically, it aimed to provide a concrete illustration of how development practice – imbued with an institutionalised model of operation, largely established extra-locally and disembedded from the context where the development is actually being “done” – has increasingly homogenised its norms and forms of practice. Drawing on these examples of how power has coordinated peoples' activities and aligned their practices with institutionalised

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norms, the study reflected upon the ways that institutions and collectives in the South might draw upon these experiences to “speak back” to the development process, and the conditions and processes that enabled or constrained them in doing so.

The paper reflects on this exploration of how inter-institutional power relations, managerial discourses and their associated technologies, and informal learning coalesce within a particular network of development actors with the following aims: Better understanding how the subjectivity of the development practitioner is constituted through the complex range of networked actors and institutions that he/she must engage with; Considering the scope for transforming the institutionally-driven or mediated initiatives aimed at effecting social change, and; Identifying the conditions and scope for engaging in transformative learning processes from within the development apparatus. In doing so, it aims to draw a conceptual link between ethnographic accounts of the influence of power as it circulates through the development apparatus (cf. Eyben, 2000; Ferguson, 1994; Mosse, 2005) and Foley’s (2001: 84) call for “contextualised ethnographic accounts of learning in social action that —enable us to see the warp and weft of emancipatory and reproductive learning that occurs as people struggle against various forms of oppression”.

Drawing on Foley’s (1999, 2001) work on learning in counter-hegemonic struggle, I argue that moments of struggle have an instructive dimension that is important to reflect upon. However, the learning these struggles present is often embedded in the complex processes at hand and is therefore easily overlooked. When reflected upon collectively, however, these moments of informal and incidental learning can play an invaluable role in rendering visible relations of power and domination, informing future struggle, strengthening collective strategy and resolve, and ultimately helping to strengthen or reassert peoples’ independence, agency, and ability to provide for themselves (Kapoor, 2004). I consider specific examples from fieldwork conducted with a progressive Environmental Non Governmental Organisation (ENGO) in Senegal committed to promoting the agency of marginalised peoples, and a farmer’s Federation which they support in ways which produced complex and mixed

outcomes. In looking at these contexts I explore where these learning opportunities presented themselves and were – or could have been – acted upon, and consider the factors that affected peoples’ ability to successfully draw upon learning and critical reflection.

2. Institutions, Networks and Power

Underlying the investigation I have described above is a need to better understand the complex ways that power relations and knowledge production are constructed, transmitted, and put into action across multiple levels of action within a particular setting. Susan Vincent’s research on development actors in Peru has drawn similar conclusions to this proposed starting point:

[U]nderstandings of the political roles of individuals, communities, and governments has changed over the last century, leading to a political contract in which locals are supplicants while outsiders are patrons. The multiple levels of this contract imply that a focus on the local, however complexly contextualized and empowering, cannot fully solve local problems. These problems have at least part of their origin and means of reproduction elsewhere, and I propose that the search for a solution must begin with the form of political relationship or contract between the multiple levels of action. (Vincent, 2004: 112)

This has meant developing a theoretical and methodological approach that is dynamic and multi-focal, and importantly, that avoids imposing reductionist theoretical frameworks upon a research context that springs from different locales, ideologies, and forms of social and institutional organisation. To address these concerns I have drawn upon a Foucaultian analysis of discourse and power (particularly disciplinary power) as an analytical starting point, while at the same time drawing upon competing and complementary perspectives to expose other ways of perceiving the issues I have examined.

For Foucault (1980: 236), “power is not an institution, a structure, or a certain force with which certain people are

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endowed; it is the name given to a complex strategic relation". Rather, power is understood to be both a repressive and productive force; one which induces pleasure and produces discourse, but also enables the domination of one group by another. Foucault's interests laid primarily in making visible the *exercise* of power; in the tactics, techniques, and functionings that we impose upon ourselves and on others in a wide range of forms and fields. His investigation of power "in its ultimate destinations, [at] those points where it becomes capillary, that is, in its more regional and local forms and institutions" (Foucault, 1980: 96), paired with a *bottom up* analysis of capillary power, from its "infinitesimal mechanisms" as they are displaced and extended into ever more general and global forms of domination – provides a powerful lens with which local articulations of power can be mapped across web-like networks. This form of analysis allows for the association of groups, institutions and actors with the exercise of specific strategies of power without depending upon binary, uniquely structuralist, or exclusively capital-focused frames of analysis, which I argue overlook and even obscure the complexity of these relations (cf. Mosse, 2005). This does not deny the relevance of structural relations and capital to the contexts which I have investigated, but rather aims to situate them within a broader web of relations and interdependencies.

Power is also understood to flow *through* institutions and actors, rather than being born *from* and resident *within* them. This distinction avoids the potential oversimplification of identifying particular institutions as being the sole sources and agents of particular forms of power, and the premature conclusion that it is the physical dismantling of these institutions that would address the exercise of these forms of power. "The exercise of power" Foucault (1983: 224) argues, "is not a naked fact, an institutional right, nor is it a structure which holds out or is smashed: it is elaborated, transformed, organized; it endows itself with processes which are more or less adjusted to the situation". In analysing power relationships within specific institutional contexts, according to Foucault, one can begin to reveal the *topography* of capillary power and its mechanisms. This offers such analyses a privileged point of observation of such

mechanisms are “diversified, concentrated, put in order, and carried through to the highest point of their efficacy” (Foucault, 1980: 222). In the field of international development, where actors implement policy at the level of often isolated and disparate communities, while major development policy-making bodies are centralised in a few of the world’s major cities, primarily in the global North, this form of analysis appears particularly relevant.

While Foucault’s (1980) analysis of power can uncover important insights into the unseen or *normalized* ways in which power shapes the everyday ways of working between actors, it stops short of addressing the question of what specific outcomes resistance and agency might produce in responding to these relations, arguing that the intellectual’s role lies in providing instruments of analysis, not defining the project of resistance or its goals. It is here that I feel the linking of a complex analysis of institutional power with approaches to collective *learning in action* (Foley, 1999) or *learning in/through/from struggle* (Foley, 2001; Von Kotze, 2000) can provide a means to extending the analysis through a critical engagement with peoples’ experience and learning. Pettit (2006: p. 72-73, emphasis in original) notes the value of this form of extension:

If we accept that power is multidimensional, defined by various forms of agency and socialization, then the learning process should enable us to access, explore and understand as many of these dimensions as possible. [...] [U]nderstanding and addressing power calls for more innovative learning processes, which stimulate not only the *conceptual* and *rational* re-evaluation of one’s assumed perspective, but also the more *experiential*, *embodied*, *creative*, *practical* and other *non-dialogical* means of reflection, or making sense of one’s experiences of power, and of realising one’s capacity to shift power.

Learning and Critical Reflection in Development Practice

The value of informal and incidental learning, particularly within professionalised or workplace contexts is well documented. Schön (1983) argued that workplace

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learning develops through reflection upon the ambiguous dilemmas of practice, and that this reflection during and after the doing provides the process through which experience can be transformed into knowledge. This observation is extended and expanded by theories of praxis, such as Holford's (1995) extension of "organisational" knowledge into the realm of social movements, which sees movements as sites of "cognitive praxis," and allowing for the generation of both identity and new knowledge. However, it is important to recall that neither *learning* nor *change* are inherently positive concepts. Praxis can itself be understood as either reproductive or revolutionary, or as Shaul (as cited in Freire, 1972[1996]: 16), drawing on Freire, has put it "education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate integration...into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes the 'practice of freedom,' the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world".

The discourses of lifelong and experiential learning in the workplace have been amply shown to create a potential avenue toward further socialisation or skilling of adults in line with the dictates of global labour management (flexible, adaptive, transferable, etc.) (Murphy, 2000; Welton, 1991). Edwards (1998), Fenwick (2001) and others have also highlighted the increasing use of reflective practice as both a "technology of the self" within modern professional environments. Edwards (1998: 387) notes that "self-management within organization frameworks displaces the forms of autonomous activity which are often associated with professional work. In this sense, reflective practice may be well part of the moral technology and forms of governmentality through which work is intensified and regulated". Even learning termed "transformative" can be understood as a pathway of personal emancipation rather than collective social change (Finger, 1989), or ultimately disempowering if it fails to actually help people change their situations (Bevins, Moriarty and Taylor, 2009). As a result, it is imperative that we better understand the perspectives on learning which might strengthen collective voice and agency and expand the limits of what is deemed possible at specific sites and instances of struggle and contestation. The

concrete impacts (both real and potential) and challenges of engaging in these forms of reflection and analysis are explored through the investigation which follows below.

3. Shaping the Development Institution

As development *brokerage* has become an increasingly lucrative and professionalized endeavour, the number of NGOs and agencies working in Senegal has grown dramatically, from fewer than twenty in the 1970s, to over 250 NGOs and Community Based Organisations (CBOs) in 1994, and with still more operating today (Guèye and Dieng, 1994). In the process, the influence of larger international NGOs and Inter-governmental Organisations (IGOs) with country or regional offices in Senegal has shaped the broader landscape of development cooperation (both actors and institutions) and civil society engagement more broadly, in line with the international norms of practice they have established – what Sonia Alvarez (1988) has aptly referred to this transformation as “NGOisation” (cf. Fall, 2004). Uma Kothari (2005: 438; see also Bebbington, Hickey & Mitlin 2008) has explored the process of NGOisation at a more global level, noting how the professionalization and accelerating expansion of institutionalized development practice after the 1980s “encompass[ed] alternative approaches which were previously marginal to the development mainstream”. Kothari (2005: 439) notes how radical and alternative discourses were co-opted by mainstream multi- and bilateral development agencies and:

became increasingly technicalised in order to fit into the more formalized development planning frameworks and models favoured by these organisations. [...]This strategy of appropriation reduced spaces of critique and dissent, since the inclusion and appropriation of ostensibly radical discourses limited the potential for any challenge from outside the mainstream to orthodox development planning and practices.

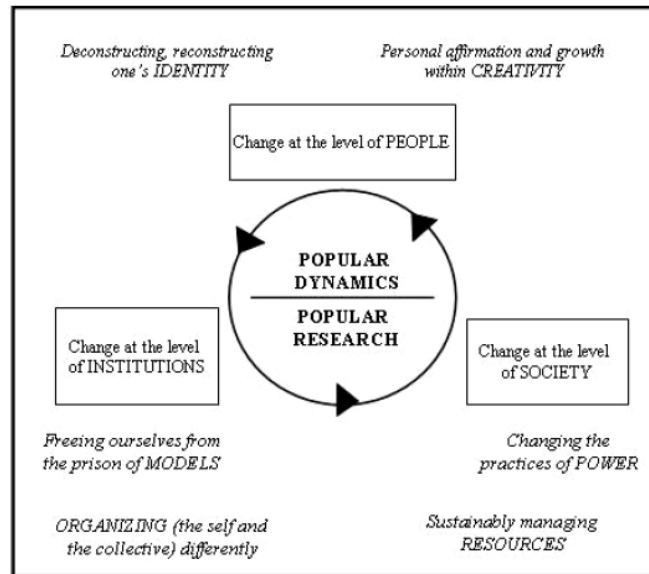
In the case of *Environment and Development Action in the Third World* (ENDA-TM), whose work has explicitly

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sought to develop alternative development models, the pressure (both direct and indirect) that has resulted from this shifting landscape has produced a number of challenges which will be briefly explored.

ENDA is an international non-profit organisation, founded in 1972, and headquartered in Dakar, Senegal. Drawing upon the strong post-colonial standpoints of its founding architects, Jacques Bugnicourt, Samir Amin, and Cheikh Hamidou Kane, ENDA committed itself to establishing a clear Southern (and particularly African) focus with a particular attention to the concerns of poor, marginalised populations and the environmental issues that affect them. Bugnicourt described the niche and originality of ENDA's work in the global South as "implementing certain techniques with peasants and slum-dwellers based upon the needs they express... and, at the same time, publishing works and articles on technology or taking part in the debates of agencies and specialist at the level of the Third World"; adding that a great challenge lies in ensuring that these activities "constantly retain their sense of solidarity and retain ongoing close contact with what is happening in the countryside or the slums, and that the concerns of those who inhabit these areas constitute the *defining elements* of the range of research, training and action undertaken" (*Trans.* Bugnicourt and Mhlanga, 1980: 1). A theory of change emerging from these aims sees locally oriented research and popular dynamics embedded within social and institutional, and is captured in the figure below.

Figure 1: Theory of Change



Source: ENDA Graf, 2005 (trans.), www.enda.sn/graf/presenta/theo.html

Today ENDA has grown into one of the largest Southern-based NGOs worldwide. It collaborates with grassroots groups in search of alternative development models on the basis of the experience, expectations and objectives of marginalised peoples, activities closely in line with what Escobar (1998) terms “progressive” Southern NGOs. Accompanying its growth and spreading engagement in the South (particularly in West Africa) has been a growing recognition of the institution as a “centre of excellence” for partnerships with International and Intergovernmental organisations including UN agencies, the World Bank, and others. This has presented an ever-expanding range of new opportunities for partnership and engagement, but has, at the same time, introduced challenges to the retention of its clear and locally-oriented vision for social change amid the growing “intellectual hegemony” (Chambers & Pettit, 2004) of institutionalised development practice described above. Some of the key challenges which have emerged include engaging and retaining staff members committed to developing transformative and experimental approaches to effecting change amid this broader climate of homogenization

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of development practice; maintaining a spirit of collaboration within and between ENDA's teams rather than the free-market-inspired competitiveness that current funding protocols have encouraged; and balancing resistance to dominant development frameworks in favour of locally articulated alternatives while remaining accessible to funders upon whose funding their work depends. It is through their engagement with these networks of differently situated actors and their accompanying protocols that the team both shaped and defended its identity, as I will explore below.

Balancing Resistance and Viability

The mediation of tensions between external pressures from institutional partners and the institute's own articulation of meaningful social engagement teams, presented challenges, but also opened opportunities for collective reflection and informal learning. In the case of one ENDA team, this took the form of weekly meetings for reviewing current and upcoming work; meetings which occasionally shifted to debates over the direction in which particular initiatives were leading the team. Numerous examples could be cited here, including collaborative research with Northern institutions which attempted to shift the focus of contracted research toward issues that contravened ENDA's core principles (such as the promotion of nuclear energy as "clean energy"); partnerships seeking to engage them as a community intermediary for the introduction potentially objectionable initiatives (such as large-scale biofuels projects); and invitations to work with Northern research institutions that have previously engaged in highly extractive forms of collaboration with ENDA.

This points to ways that opportunities for relatively open discussion and debate over the broader question of program direction sometimes afforded by the team's weekly meetings served an important and often-unacknowledged purpose. On those occasions when the team was allowed (or allowed itself) to forego the expediency of running through the agenda of "to-do" items for the week and delve into the messier and less immediate questions of direction and principles, members were able to challenge each other's

views, present arguments for their positions based upon their interpretation of ENDA's purpose, on their own experiences, or on their understanding of local needs and concerns. In doing so they reflected upon and began to assert its agency in the face of external pressure, and helped shape the contemporary identity of the team and the institution more broadly. Conversely, it seemed that those moments where the opportunity to delve into greater detail about such thorny questions was passed over for the sake of concision or expediency (perhaps, for example, in avoiding an extended discussion around the principles that might govern engagement with outside institutions) represented lost opportunities for collective learning and strengthening of solidarity within the team.

The institutional challenges noted here represent a site of struggle *within* the institution and its teams where the constancy of external pressure and micro-technologies of institutional power threaten to uproot and de-legitimise the transformative potential of critical and creative social engagement. Driving and giving direction to this resistance within the team is a (sometimes sporadic) critical reflection over the principles and theories that the team wishes to uphold, the threats to these principles and appropriate responses. If, as their principles suggest, one of the institute's aims is to help people bring about changes in power relations through critical reflection and learning about themselves and their environment to better understand the obstacles they face (ENDA Graf, 2005), then it would seem that more dedicated attention on this resistance *within the team* could serve as an important starting point.

3.1 Engaging with Community

Serving as a counterpoint to the internal challenges described above, the second section of this examination considers the ways that another ENDA team has worked to shape the sustainability and environmentally sound practices of a community of cotton producers in rural Senegal over a period of approximately 14 years. In this context, where ENDA's perceived roles as facilitator, capacity builder, funding conduit and advocate placed them in a position of authority and influence, it becomes possible to

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see how individuals and groups “are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising power” (Foucault 1980: 98). It also serves to illustrate how this particular community struggles to balance the desire for autonomy and self-definition with the perceived security of partnership with NGOs and other external institutions and the models of development they espouse (cf. Marsden, 2004).

Here, I argue, in a community where reliance on outside support is so deeply engrained and articulated through a wide range of processes, the degree to which identities and roles of community members have been shaped by outside forces and institutions is especially high; and this reliance is exacerbated on two fronts, each revealing some of the complexities of development relations. The first I will explore is through the Federation of producers’ willingness to subject themselves to new, often complex forms of scrutiny and accountancy in the hope of securing safer and more equitable livelihoods through organic and fairtrade cotton production. The second arises from the fact that locally-active NGOs and development brokers are themselves financially and professionally reliant on facilitating the implementation of aid initiatives at the community level (and thus, of representing the community’s needs and potential for “successful development” within the international development community).

It is important to note that this critique is not necessarily aimed at advocating against organic cotton production in the region. Clearly there are important health, financial and environmental justifications for its pursuit among those who pursue these forms of livelihood activity and remain engaged in global trade markets. Further, given the current situation of conventional cotton markets (globally and nationally) and the current status of conventional cotton farming in Senegal, Federation members, by their own admission, would most likely still be subjected to other forms of external coordination with perhaps even less opportunity for response were they engaged in conventional production as it is currently structured (cf. Williamson, Ferrigno and Vodouhe, 2005). Instead, this discussion aims to highlight the ways that the nascent organic and fairtrade cotton markets, established partly under the premise of empowering local producers (through a fairer income, safer

working conditions, more democratic decision-making processes, etc.) activates a new and different series of power dynamics that must be better understood when reflecting on its potential impacts and benefits. It also considers how this process is enacted through the Federation's engagement with ENDA, and the implications this has on their capacity to shape a vision of the future.

Community Collaboration

ENDA first began their collaboration with cotton producers about 450km east of Dakar in 1995. They initially helped a small group of peasants produce organic cotton with an aim of responding to environmental and health concerns related to pesticide use in the cotton production process, resulting in the establishment of the first organic cotton project in West Africa. In 1997 a Federation of organic farmers was established, and has since grown to nearly 2000 producers from over 80 villages in the region. In this time it has received both organic and "fairtrade" certification for its cotton; and has expanded its livelihood activities to include the production alternative indigenous crop varieties, as well as initial ventures into the production of value-added cotton-based products such as thread and clothing.

However, the development of a market and strong production base for organic/fairtrade cotton has proven difficult. Organic agriculture represents a miniscule percentage of agricultural production in Senegal; costs related to training, regular inspection, certification and processing of crops are high; and there is virtually no domestic market willing to pay the additional premiums for organic/fairtrade commodities (cf. Ferrigno, Ratter, Ton, Vodouhê, Williamson and Wilson, 2005). Thus, the Federation remains highly dependent upon external support, both for finding exporters for their harvests, or, barring that, for paying the difference in price between conventional and organic cotton should they be forced to sell their crops on the conventional market. The need for ENDA's guidance and regular intervention extends beyond the need for financial and marketing support, however, and in fact arises at the level of the day-to-day management and monitoring of farmer's crops in line with the much stricter regulations of

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organic farming. Farmers now opting into organic agriculture find themselves essentially forced to re-learn more traditional approaches to their trade, now re-presented through the scientific/managerial technologies of formally-educated agricultural *specialists*.

Modern-day production of organic cotton is an exacting and highly regulated practice. The degree of control over production processes is, foremost, justified by the need to guarantee that the product has not come into contact with the more commonly-grown conventional cotton or its chemical treatments, sometimes being grown only a few metres away from organic crops. Cotton must be formally certified as organic (and/or fairtrade) to be saleable as such on the global market. These forms of certification and the processes required for obtaining them have been developed in the North and are frequently delivered by Northern institutional representatives, and are not well adapted to the socio-economic contexts found in places like rural Senegal. Producers are expected to abide by strict transparency protocols, providing a meticulous paper-trail documenting the conditions in which the cotton was produced, treatments it received, and the environment in which it was grown. In the case of fairtrade cotton, as is produced by the Federation, producers are also expected to provide documentary proof of the democratic and equitable processes through which they work together (meeting minutes, vote tallies, annual reporting, etc.) (cf. Bassett, 2010). Given high rate of illiteracy among cotton producers in the area, and the costly certification processes, it becomes obvious that the process is nearly impossible without extensive outside support from individuals or organisations accustomed to working within these types of norms (ENDA, 2007).

In examining the standardised precision with which crop treatments, surroundings and history must be recorded, compiled and submitted for inspection, it becomes clear how heavily the process is controlled from outside/above, demanding the “compulsory visibility” (Foucault, 1977) of producers and their collectives. Bassett (2010: 51), drawing on research in West Africa, also notes that:

Fairtrade certification largely focuses on the democratic and transparent operations of *producer groups*. The conduct of other actors in the commodity chain (ginning companies, traders, and national producer associations) is not as closely monitored. Although one [...] extension agent found “laughable” the suggestion that cotton companies would be willing to let producers scrutinize their financial records, it is not a laughing matter for cotton growers.

While Bassett’s study and others (cf. ENDA, 2007) focus on questions of equity within such international trade arrangements and rightly question to what extent these arrangements actually challenge the marginalising trade practices of conventional cotton, less has been said on how these processes (and the NGO support that often accompanies them) “re-organise” farmers’ lives in line with external norms. This point seems highly relevant in considering how this support relates to ENDA’s stated aim of helping people bring about changes in power relations through critical reflection and learning about themselves and their environment. Here, Dorothy Smith’s (1984, 2001) work on how replicable texts organise people across space and time proves particularly appropriate in considering the protocols noted above, which are developed in Europe, translated in Dakar, and intervene daily at the level of the local farmer across a whole region of Senegal. Smith (2001: 174-175) posits that:

Reproducing the same managerial and accounting procedures across many local settings hooks [people’s] local work organization into ‘centralized’ regulatory and decision processes that are themselves located in particular settings. [...] The multiple replication of exactly the same text that technologies of print made possible enable an organization of social relations independent of local time, place and person [and] suture[s] modes of social action organized extra-locally and co-ordinating multiple local sites of people’s work to the local actualities of our necessarily embodied lives.

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The result, says Smith (2001: 180), is that “people’s doings are no longer just that, but become interpretable as expressions or instances of a higher order organization, independent of particular people”. Smith’s comments also shed light upon another phenomenon observed within the individual cotton producers that highlights how central ENDA’s role is perceived to be; the fact that a great deal of the producers refer to the crop they produce as “ENDA Cotton.” This seems to suggest both how distant the concept of organic cotton is from the daily reality of these farmers, as well as the degree to which ENDA represents or embodies this “higher order of organization” to which Smith refers, and how the processes that regulate their farming practice are seen to come from and be enforced on behalf of them.

The Struggle for Self-Definition

The Federation’s dependence upon ENDA’s support is well-recognized by its current leaders (themselves farmers), and is a source of concern and frustration. Federation Secretariat members described the challenges they currently face in shaping their own identity, having a greater role in the production, processing and distribution of the crops they produce, and avoiding being themselves “traded” as a development commodity among NGOs and funders (as I will discuss in the section below). The Federation’s President described his ultimate vision of them becoming “75% self-sufficient,” allowing for occasional and limited support from outside agencies. In speaking of the capacities that they need to achieve this desired independence, they noted a need to obtain internet access, and develop capacity in ICTs so that they could begin reaching out on their own to the foreign markets that purchase their cotton. Their capacity to do so thus far has been extremely limited, given the physical distance (two days of travel from Europe) from prospective buyers, their lack of capital (economic, political, social) for developing new markets, and their lack of local infrastructure. As such, international access to the Federation is generally initiated through ENDA’s office in Dakar. However, members noted that these issues were rarely given priority in the assessment of their capacities and needs, with focus instead being directed toward enabling

them to better meet the inspection requirements mandated through organic/fairtrade protocols.

“Inventing” the Peasant

Funders and cooperants such as ENDA often bring pre-conceived notions about the priorities, values and needs of subsistence farmers and their communities, and how best to help them to improve their lives. These groups, who tend to have clearly-defined political or epistemological orientations toward notions such as progress, development, and the environment can often privilege these orientations (perhaps unsurprisingly), over the agency of the communities with whom they are working. This tendency is particularly pronounced if these communities are perceived as vulnerable, limited in capacity, and of a static identity (e.g. peasants and farmers, not “businessmen” as the assumption appeared to be here). The tendency to presuppose the community’s lack of interest or aptitude in negotiating the purchase of crops or pre-financing agreements with potential buyers was evident in this relation, and was central to the re-presentation of the Federation’s identity to outsiders, and thus served as a vehicle for the construction of their subjectivity. Alvesson (1996: 102), drawing on Foucault, notes that “in the creation of subjectivity, the individual is made into an object for subordination as well as developing (being provided with) a particular identity. [...] Power is thus exercised by binding the subject to a particular identity or form. Here, I would argue, the identities of individuals that made up the Federation’s Secretariat and membership are fundamentally shaped by and kept in line with the discursive practices associated to them by the broader development apparatus within which they are embedded.

To be clear, this assertion does not necessarily imply a violent or even overt restriction of the mobility or agency of the Federation’s members. Nor is the shaping inherently inaccurate or exclusively constraining. The Federation has, in this case, been cast as a model for successful and empowering rural agricultural development by ENDA and a range of other champions of organic farming and environmental development, and thus as innovative,

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empowered, democratic, etc. However, the Federation's depiction is always embedded within a broader network of actors, described above, including certification agents, funding agencies, national *sociétés*, and collaborating NGOs, and the complex patterns of textual and discursive organisation that assigns each of them their roles and identities. It is here that it seems that these funders, cooperating agencies, and the like have a vested interest in ensuring that individuals, communities and peasants' organisations *do remain* as they have been discursively framed; incrementally 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*.

This would be particularly true in cases heralded externally as "success stories" such as that of the Federation. Let us recall that development funding in Africa (and throughout the global South) is highly lucrative in comparison to the subsistence activities the majority of these "vulnerable communities" are involved in, and employs thousands worldwide. In the context of international development practice, it may be fair to say that the community itself (or the discursive identity in which it has beencast) has become a resource for (sustainable) exploitation. The question of capital, however, is not the only incentive that explains the need to ensure the discursive construction of these actors remains intact. Rather, as noted at the outset of this paper, these forms of coordination and subjugation are fundamental to the maintenance of the "regime of truth" that justifies the entire development endeavour.

While this discussion has sought to demonstrate the forms of dependence that have stemmed from the Federation's compliance with the international protocols on organic/fairtrade agriculture; ENDA, like the Federation, is also subject to the same discursive framing, as are the agencies that fund these initiatives. Thus, both subordinates and those 'in power' (at times, as this paper has sought to illustrate, one being both at once) find themselves being bound to discourse and its structures. As such, in order for ENDA to continue being a development NGO, they need

communities in need of “developing” and who are responsive to their strategies of action.

One of the questions that arises in considering these dynamics of power is how the Federation and community members can therefore “speak back” to power, and strengthen their positions as advocates and spokespeople for their own agency. What different arrangement of actors (if any) would facilitate this ability to draw into question the shaping influence of the development apparatus? What strategies or practices might better position them to respond to these outside pressures with a clearly articulated collective vision? In concluding, I turn to the learning dimension of these challenges to consider how collective informal and incidental learning might help to identify and challenge the processes and systems that constrain their abilities to remain “independent, self-provisioning, and agents of their own histories” (Kapoor, 2004: 43). These questions cannot be answered easily or definitely, particularly from a community outsider. Indeed, given the urgency of current pressures upon the community (near-subsistence-level incomes, extreme vulnerability to environmental, political, or social stresses and shocks, etc.) alongside the deeper concerns of autonomy and self-determination, it would seem that one of the key challenges is balancing the short-term urgency of self/community-improvement with a long-time, experimental aim of effecting deeper changes in social order (Lindeman, 1961). This question appears to have been identified by Federation leaders, but they have struggled to create spaces and opportunities where they could consider them collectively and independently of the institutional players whose vested interest in their activities has deeply organised their daily activity and visions of the future. I would argue that collective reflection on these points of contention and struggle could provide an entry point for learning, and re-orientation. This process could inform both the current and longer-term visions of the Federation and its associated communities and open discussion about the impact of “allied” institutions and global market forces on their livelihood activities.

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4. Challenges to Learning and Collective Action

The story of [counter-hegemonic] struggle is one of gains and losses, of progress and retreat, and of a growing recognition of the continually contested, complex, ambiguous and contradictory nature of the struggle between domination and liberation. This struggle also has a learning and educational dimension which emerges when we examine concrete situations. I say 'emerges' advisedly, because the learning is often embedded in other activities and has to be uncovered. (Foley, 2001, p. 77)

Learning and Power

It seems that in the case highlighted by this paper, a clearer understanding of how relations of power within partnerships shaped the options that were (or were not) being presented, the ease with which certain choices could be made, or the degree to which assistance would be offered for particular forms of action, may have helped participants to make sense of their lived experience and struggles. A more formalised reflection upon the struggles that arose in the course of social action could help to schematise the collective informal and incidental learning that is inherently embedded in these moments of struggle (as noted in the quote from Foley above) and inform future courses of action. I would argue that in order to appropriately engage with this larger sphere of the development apparatus, as ENDA's own principles of action call upon it to do, or for the cotton producer's Federation to engage with the community and institutions beyond its membership, there must first be a clarified understanding of its own relationship with power and capacity to affect change, as well as an appreciation of the internal dynamics and meaning-making processes of those who constitute these collectives.

Pettit's (2006) assertion that understanding and addressing power requires innovative ways to think about learning provides a useful opening to shift this discussion toward a more detailed exploration of how this process can be put into action, and what conditions can either support or constrain it. In reflecting on the actions, inactions, and outcomes that figured in the contexts described above, I am

drawn to Klouda's (2004: 2) challenge that the development community's continued attention to critical reflection as a means to stimulating social change has failed to address two key questions: "Why, if people really are capable of doing this, don't they do it more often"? This concluding discussion does not purport to provide a complete answer to Klouda's question, but it does aim to clarify some of the preconditions that played a role in taking those who were involved in this study from recognising the need for change toward feeling equipped and motivated to act accordingly.

4.1 Factors which Enable and Constrain Learning in Action

Spaces for Change

The notion of space emerged repeatedly over the course of this study. Its presence, absence, colonisation, and defence, as well as its nature and origin have proven to be fundamental factors in determining the scope for reflection and consultation and, consequently, it shapes peoples' capacity to re-imagine the terms of their engagement with others. Thus, space has a potential productive value as the site where groups can engage in radical rethinking and the acquisition of skills to put this thinking into action, making it at once constitutive and expressive of power relations and people's agency (Cornwall, 2004).

The question of *physical* space emerged in discussions about the potentials and limits of the meeting space at the cotton Federation headquarters, which had previously been shared with ENDA but was now their own. Its value was also visible in the weekly meetings convened in ENDA's offices, where all team members could gather and debate the impacts of the work they were engaged in. *Temporal* space was constantly at a premium within the ENDA offices, as can be found nearly anywhere that a culture of managerialism has become embedded. This meant that extended discussions on the aims and direction of the team, reflections on new ways to engage with partners, and opportunities to collaborate and dialogue with potential collaborators from within the institution all found

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themselves in competition with the demands placed upon the team by others. The limited and limiting notions of what constitutes “productive” time in dominant managerial frameworks (generally utilitarian, capital driven, linear, etc.) often exclude the types of temporal space required for collective reflection and deliberation on change. Perhaps most important, however, is the *conceptual* space for imagining new terms and forms of engagement. On this point, it is important to recognise the intimate link between space and praxis (which is central to our 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”. This was particularly relevant to the Federation’s relationship with ENDA, one which was so deeply embedded, that it left little opportunity for members to gain this critical distance and reflect on the options they might have.

A second approach to assessing the form and role of particular spaces, as articulated by Gaventa (2006) and Cornwall (2002), among others, distinguishes between *closed* (which restrict access to decision making or participation to an elite few), *invited* (which have been regularised or institutionalised, and are open on a restricted basis), and *claimed/created* spaces (which may come from popular mobilisation around sets of common concerns or a rejection of hegemonic spaces). This categorisation can be useful in highlighting the link between learning and the struggle for participation and recalls Tembo’s (2004) assertion that marginalised groups lack space within which they can exercise their images of reality rather than simply affirming the plans established by others. Further, the degree to which invited or claimed spaces are seen as “safe” for those engaged in a learning and reflection process to take on the risk and challenge of being critical of themselves and others (cf. Langdon and Harvey, 2009). It is important to note here that space is a dynamic construct and always subject to transformation. Thus, it can be understood not only as a site where learning, reflection, and planning for change are enabled, but also as a site of incidental learning around struggles over it. To quote Bebbington (2004: 280): “Only by understanding how spaces that are won are then lost will it

be possible to win spaces that are more resilient to capture by conservative forces". This can be as true about forces from outside the group in question as from within it.

Acknowledgement and Appreciation of Risk

Risk has often been cited as a potential barrier to poor or vulnerable people's willingness to adopt alternative practices in community-based agricultural and environmental adaptation and disaster management (Faichamps, 2003), and risk has been explored in literature on action research (Denzin, 2005; Fine, 2006), but its role in collective learning and action within development literature has been less widely recognised. For Kluda (2004: 6) this oversight is fundamental. He argues that:

It is not critical thinking or even consciousness of reality that is the issue: it is the ability to speak out and act for change in relation to one's own social situation that poses the difficulty. The difficulty is there precisely because an individual has to make an assessment of the level of risk involved in making that challenge.

Risk (or perception of risk) is not uniform across a particular group of actors, as individuals are differently positioned vis-à-vis the change or action under consideration, and differently exposed to the struggle at hand. It is closely related to people's relative ability to dictate their own pathways and the tenuousness with which they hold their current positions, as in the case of the Federation, whose members' very livelihoods were in question. It cannot simply be dismissed as conservativeness or a lack of criticality, and must be recognised and addressed in order to enable people to fully engage with processes of learning and change. Doing so is dependent upon the fulfillment of some of the other preconditions noted here, particularly the availability of a space to dialogically explore people's varying interpretations of risk, and the presence of appropriate leadership and support to help people navigate their understanding of risk, and to help attenuate this risk when possible.

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Leadership and Support

The notion of leadership and support as a potential enabling or constraining force in transformational learning has been thoroughly debated in the fields of adult education (Brookfield, 2001; Mezirow, 1994; Tennant, 1998) and action research (Kapoor, 2009). In relations of leadership and support I would argue, much like education, “the task is to encourage human agency, not mold it in the manner of Pygmalion” (Aronowitz, 1998: 10). Where the line must be drawn between encouragement and moulding, however, is a more challenging question; one which recalls Foucault’s (1978) question of whether the growth of human capabilities *can* be disconnected from the intensification of power relations, and what forms of supportive arrangement might achieve this effect. Opinions are divergent on two important points here: a) The degree to which leadership can be directive in struggle, and b) the sites from which this leadership can legitimately arise. Rahman, among others, argues that it is “absolutely essential that the people develop their own endogenous process of consciousness raising and knowledge generation and this process acquires the social power to assert itself vis-à-vis all elite consciousness and knowledge” (in Kapoor, 2009), implying a restrictive view of the scope to which outside leadership and support might be engaged. Holford (1995: 106), by contrast, calls for a stronger leadership role among what he terms “movement intellectuals” in articulating and leading struggle, arguing against seeing educators as merely “equal participants in movements”, and sees these leaders as operating at the margins of a particular movement or struggle and the “wider world,” but stresses the need for reflexive and self-conscious leadership (or educators) that recognizes the partiality of its own knowledge. I find myself aligned with Rahman and others who argue that strategies for struggle must arise from and reflect the lived experience of those engaged in that particular struggle and facing the forms of domination which make that struggle necessary. I do feel, however, building upon Denzin’s (2005) notion of the “allied other,” that there is scope to act in solidarity with that particular struggle and from the locations where our life experience positions us, if we are continuously reflective of our own embeddedness

within relations of power and subjugation and the effects that this may be having.

A Common Articulated Vision of Change

Reflecting upon the internal discussions that were initiated within ENDA team describe earlier in this paper, I feel that the articulation of a shared vision of change allows groups engaged in struggles with power to come to a common understanding of where they stand and what they hope to achieve, to guard against institutional *drift*, and to better communicate their perspectives outside of the sphere of the group and its allies. “Non-negotiables” among community groups engaged in development cooperation, for example, can help to demarcate the terms and limits to their engagement with others (Chambers and Pettit, 2004). Hardy, Palmer and Phillips’ (2000) depiction of *strategy discourse* as a resource that can be used to construct social reality may also be helpful seeing how the construction of a vision of change (through the production of texts and discursive “acts”), the practices that arise from this vision and strategy, and the interplay of these with broader societal discourses can ultimately change an organisation and its environment. These impacts are demonstrable not only to those inside the organisation but also to those outside of it. This is not to say that changing reality is as simple as one day changing discursive acts, but rather that discourse can serve as a tool to eventually detach “truth” from particular relations of power, and that the power to generate new forms of discourse is fundamental to the strategic reversibility of truth regimes.

Equity and Democracy within the Community of Actors

The final point upon which I would like to elaborate on here is the importance of sustained efforts toward equity and democracy within the community of actors. If the articulation of the common vision discussed above must be the product of a dialogical process that leaves space for participation and voice if it is to stimulate a genuine propensity to act, then questions of equity and democracy within this process are fundamental. Further, on the basis of

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the theory of power upon which I have developed this study, even spaces characterised by a shared vision and sense of identity are subject to relations of power that hold one person or sub-group in a dominant position over another. Equity and democracy in this context are best understood as *processes* rather than fixed endpoints, particularly given a view of power that sees it as continuously in flux. Normative understandings of these concepts can prove difficult and often inappropriate, particularly within post-colonial contexts, and their imposition can become a tool for silencing rather than for the flourishing of dialogue (Brookfield, 1995). Thus, the implications of this precondition will vary according to setting, and will need to be the product of a collective meaning-making that may not necessarily match with the expectations/understandings of outside participants, and must be open to re-evaluation.

5. Conclusions

This paper has highlighted links between an ethnographic account of the influence of power on networks of development actors and institutions, and Foley's (2001: 84) call for "contextualised ethnographic accounts of learning in social action" to explore the opportunities and conditions for drawing on collective learning to contest the subjugating power of development. Using the case an NGO with a stated commitment to challenging relations that marginalise communities in the South, I have sought to illustrate the complexity of negotiating these relations, demonstrating how individuals and institutions are constantly engaged in processes of undergoing and exercising power (Foucault, 1980). On this basis, I argue, it is imperative that people engage in critical reflection about their own agency and the ways in which they have been situated by the development apparatus in order to work toward change. While this aim is laudable, it is no easy task, and better understanding the factors which enable or constrain these forms of reflection and action is a project which must remain central to rethinking development.

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