



Participation, empowerment and capacity building: Exploring young people's perspectives on the services provided to them by a grassroots NGO in sub-Saharan Africa



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 16 November 2014
 Received in revised form 18 March 2016
 Accepted 15 April 2016
 Available online 16 April 2016

Keywords:

'Street children'
 Informal slums
 Sub-Saharan Africa;
 Children and young people's perspectives
 Participation
 Empowerment, capacity building
 Evaluating services

ABSTRACT

This paper explores young people's perspectives on the services that were provided to them by one NGO in sub-Saharan Africa. Semi-structured interviews and discussion groups were carried out with 71 young people, aged between 10 and 18 years old, who lived and worked on the street. Volunteer facilitators ($n = 26$) who run the groups and who had either previously lived on their street themselves or who lived in the 'informal slum areas' also took part in the discussions. A number of challenges and tensions became apparent from discussions including issues around capacity building, empowerment, participation and the depoliticised nature of social action.

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1. NGOs and international development

Non-Government Organisations (NGOs), defined as 'self-governing, not-for-profit organizations that are geared to improving the quality of life of disadvantaged people' (Vakil, 1997:2060), have over the last three decades or so, become powerful players in international development. NGOs are seen to have an important role to play in service delivery, advocacy, and capacity building of individuals and communities and are held up as being well positioned to offer innovative and flexible services which are grassroots and respond to local need (Coates & David, 2002; Brown & Korten, 1989). Moreover, as part of civil society, NGOs are thought to have an important part to play in ensuring that the voices of the 'poor' and 'disadvantaged' are heard at policy level and that governments are held to account for their policies and the provision of 'pro-poor' services (Brown & Korten, 1989; Chambers, 1997).

However, there are numerous difficulties that arise around the role of NGOs in international development. One source of conflict concerns funding and how donor requirements may undermine the ethos and mission of NGOs as well as lead to a reduction in innovation and diversity across the NGO landscape. Furthermore, a lack of funding can result in the work of NGOs becoming 'funding led' with the value base of the donor organisation often dominating the relationship (Wallace & Mordaunt, 2007; Chambers, 2005). This is seen as potentially

problematic as many donors, based in Northern countries, may have particular visions of what needs to be the focus of development initiatives and hence services provided in countries in the Global South, for example, may be influenced more by international dictates than local need. A power dimension exists, therefore, between donors and recipients of funding and this can be magnified when the government of the country is the donor of funding, for example through direct budgetary assistance; compromising the ability of NGOs to hold governments to account or be critical of their policies.

2. Participation, empowerment and capacity building

One of the important roles ascribed to NGOs is that of empowering local communities through the use of people centred participatory processes as well as through building the capacity of local people. The participation of stakeholders, including local people, in the design and running of projects is seen as important by many in international development because client participation is said to result in projects that meet local needs, are more sustainable and thus more effective (Johnson & Wilson, 2000). Moreover, grassroots participation is held to be about social justice and emancipation bringing about empowerment or 'conscientization' (Freire, 1970). Thus, participation is viewed by many as a political act which supports the 'vulnerable' or 'poor' in taking charge of their own destinies with the end result being the transformation of society (Chambers, 1997; Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Freire, 1970). However, participation as a concept can be problematic

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and very often the political nature of participation can be down-played. Cornwall (2002, 2003) highlights this by distinguishing between invited and claimed spaces of participation. Cornwall argues that the former (invited) are more formal events where development agencies create forums for stakeholders to contribute, have their voices heard and reach consensus. However, these invited spaces for participation, which are very popular with development agencies, do not necessarily result in political transformation of the way that society operates. Claimed participation, however, according to Cornwall, is more organic and involves the poor taking control of the political processes without necessarily being invited in and equates more to Freire's notion of participation. Parfitt (2004) argues something similar with the distinction between 'participation as an end' (for example participation in the way envisaged by Freire and claimed participation as envisaged by Cornwall) and 'participation as a means' (for example as an apolitical way to improve service delivery through listening to the voices of service users).

How participation is thought about, therefore, by NGOs and by development agencies can impact on the type of social action that occurs. For example, a common critique of many participatory projects is that they can maintain the status quo and are used to support dominant ideas of development which are influenced by neoliberalism, citizenship and free trade as opposed to responding to local need (Cooke, 2004; Laverack & Wallerstein, 2001; Cooke & Kothari, 2000). Invited participation or 'participation as a means', therefore, may be used to mask power dynamics which ensure that those with the most power have the most say (Mosse, 1994). This can, in turn, further disempower the most vulnerable by giving the impression that their voice is being listened to whilst in reality what is taking place is a form of tokenistic participation which is supportive of the agendas of the more powerful (Arnstein, 1969).

Empowerment of local people is often held up as one of the goals of many development agencies and NGOs, but the term empowerment, like participation, problematic. An important aspect of the term empowerment is the word power and this is often not reflected upon by development agencies. Rowlands (1995), as well as Mayoux and Johnson (2007), outline four types of power relations: power within (relates to self-worth and is according to Mayoux and Johnson also about 'giving voice'), power to (an individual's ability to act including increasing capacity, knowledge and skills), power with (collective action) and power over (obedience or force). Mayoux and Johnson (2007:183) also highlight how development agencies can challenge 'power over' by focusing on 'changing attitudes and behaviours of the powerful and changing discriminatory and unequal institutional structures and policies'. It is not always clear, however, given the different types of power relations which exist, what it means to be empowered and single strategies for empowerment, therefore, can be problematic given the complexity of power (Mayoux & Johnson, 2007). Questions arise, therefore, as to what the role of development agencies are in relation to empowerment. As Mayoux and Johnson (2007) suggest is it about increasing voice and capacities (invited participation or participation as a means or power within) or is to confront and transform power relations which maintain the status quo and disadvantages some groups; or is it a combination of the two? What form, therefore, should empowerment take and what is the aim of empowerment? Supporting peoples voices being heard without really doing something about the status quo which positions people in subordinate roles is highly problematic and a common critique of many empowerment projects is how much structural change has actually occurred and how far empowerment of groups has any longer term impact on how things are done politically and socially (Laverack & Wallerstein, 2001).

Moreover, Pettit (2012) shows how power can be both visible and formal (i.e. power relations between people or organisations or laws and rules which define what is acceptable) or invisible or informal power (norms and beliefs and values which are part of everyday life – the discourses that no-one questions). Empowerment which focuses

only on visible forms of power and does not tackle invisible forms of power can also be problematic and can lead to the position of poor children, who live on the street, not being questioned. Furthermore, Rowlands (1995) talks about how 'power over' can become internalised by those who are oppressed so that they themselves do not question their situation nor do they question how they are represented.

However, politically empowering 'vulnerable' groups, especially children who may challenge norms of what children should be like, is not without its own tensions and issues and may result in these groups being at increased risk of aggressive behaviour from those in powerful positions or from authoritarian governments. Moreover, questioning mainstream development approaches and power relations too much can also lead to difficulties for NGOs. As Pettit (2012) p7) 'a major obstacle to achieving liberating empowerment is that institutional drivers will often determine the approaches that are favoured and rewarded'. Those NGOs, for example, who question too much or who are too radical may be ostracised by losing funding.

Capacity building or capacity development has been defined in a number of ways. One definition is the

'process whereby individuals, groups, and organisations enhance their abilities to mobilize and use resources in order to achieve their objectives on a sustainable basis. Efforts to strengthen abilities of individuals, groups, and organisations can comprise a combination of (i) human skills development; (ii) changes in organisations and networks; and (iii) changes in governance/institutional context'.

[ADB 2004 cited in DFID (2008)]

Capacity building, however, is often understood in relation to human skills development per se and the premise that by participating in initiatives or interventions individuals and groups will learn new skills, attitudes and knowledge which will increase their human and social capital; making it more likely they are able to be agentic actors who are able to bring about sustainable change in their lives. This can be, in part, related to Sen's idea of 'freedom' and his focus on human development and of strengthening human capabilities (2001). However, Sen's work on capability (and the definition above) goes further and Sen shows that without opportunities, for example jobs, capacity building programmes which focus on new knowledge and skills will not be enough to improve well-being. Instead reflection on the opportunities which are available to individuals and groups is needed to uncover structural processes and power relations which may disadvantage some groups and stop them realising their capabilities.

There are many tensions, therefore around the concepts of participation, empowerment and capacity building and this can result in the rhetoric not always matching the practice (Chambers & Pettit, 2004) with the rhetoric being "little more than fashionable labels attached to the same underlying systems" (Chambers & Pettit, 2004: 138). This is a point also made by Oxaal and Baden (1997: 24) who state that many "agencies run the risk of merely renaming top-down approaches as part of an empowerment policy". This can result in a depoliticised system where participation, empowerment and capacity building does not bring about structural change or social transformation but is rather about enabling the 'poor' and 'vulnerable' to have their voices heard in relation to agendas that are set by more powerful players (Freire, 1970; Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Cornwall & Brock, 2005). Moreover, this type of system can limit and constrain the ability of NGOs to advocate and be political on behalf of the groups that they represent in case this 'upsets' agendas which have already been set; this can result in NGOs having 'thin agency' (Klocker, 2007).

3. Services for 'street children'

Children and young people who live and work on the street or 'street children', as they are commonly known, are a marginalised, socially excluded, group of children and young people who face a range of risk

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