Understanding the Process of Community Capacity-Building: A Case Study of Two Programs in Yunnan Province, China

JUAN M. MORENO [a,b], LORI M. NOGUCHI [c] and MARIE K. HARDER [a,b,*]

[a] *Fudan University, Shanghai, China*
[b] *University of Brighton, UK*
[c] *Hong Kong University, Hong Kong*

Summary. — In recent decades, development discourse has increasingly acknowledged the importance of participation and ownership of development programs at the local level. As the discourse has advanced, terms such as community-driven development and community capacity-building (CCB) have become widely used and attracted significant funding. Yet, despite the prominent place CCB has come to occupy in development discourse and practice, relatively little attention has been given to the process of capacity-building at the level of the community, particularly as it is understood by key protagonists. The authors present a descriptive case-study of two CCB programs in Yunnan, China, examining how capacity is understood by the key protagonists at the level of individuals, institutions, and communities, and which capacities are identified as built at each level. The authors show that while there are expected differences in the perceptions of the CCB process and outcomes at different levels, there are also clear overlaps, and that capacities develop simultaneously at different levels, in an interactive and mutually reinforcing manner. The results suggest that the interconnection across levels may be very important to study further. This study helps fill a gap in the CCB literature and contributes insights that could improve the effectiveness of community development projects. In addition, it provides insight into the specific case of CCB in China, where literature has tended to focus on institutional capacity and relationships between civil society organizations and the government rather than process and outcomes at the community level.
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1. INTRODUCTION

(a) *Background*

The last 20 years have seen a considerable shift in international development from government-centered and donor-led programs of agricultural and industrial growth to more participatory and community-driven projects (Craig, 2007, p. 339). During 1999–2011, the World Bank allocated around $85 billion to community-based development programs (Mansuri & Rao, 2013b, p. 15). Changes in international development policy have been accompanied by an increasing interest in "community capacity-building" (CCB) (De Vita, Fleming, & Twombly, 2001; Eade, 1997).

Behind this change is the premise that development does not lie solely in the recognition of rights, the availability of resources or the provision of services, but more in the development of concrete "capabilities" and "positive freedoms" that allow individuals to participate in social, economic, and political transactions that may lead to improvements in human wellbeing (Sen, 1999, 2010). Following this proposition, the development community postulates that improvements in the governance and organizational capacities of institutions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) would eventually enrich the connection and effectiveness of development projects with their "intended beneficiaries" (Mansuri & Rao, 2013a; Putnam, 1993; Straussman, 2007; Wilhelm & Kushnarova, 2004). Furthermore, it is assumed that by supporting and enhancing local people's capacity to self-organize and determine their own priorities and values, CCB projects may lead to their increased ownership of the process of change, making it more sustainable and relevant to their realities (Eade, 2007).

Development scholars and practitioners, however, have highlighted structural contradictions of the current development system. For instance, Aragón and Giles-Macedo argue that NGOs and development practitioners often fail to align their mission statements and how they think about development with their practices because they act based on "assumed conditions for change" which may not be endogenous or contextually relevant to the realities of the communities they work with (Aragón & Giles-Macedo, 2010, p. 87). James argues that the "distressing dissonance between espoused principles and actions" of some CCB efforts owes much to the strong audit-oriented direction of projects in terms of funding requirements, deadlines, and the need for efficient and measurable results (James, 2010, p. 14).

Because the content or aims of projects tend to respond to donors' agendas and pre-established outcomes, "beneficiary" communities end up with little or no ownership of the capacity development process (Diamond, 2004, p. 180). Furthermore, the construction of discourses and practices of CCB within narrow, instrumentalist terms of reference following orderly approaches with foreseen outcomes, fails to grasp the organic nature of "community life" which is "messy, chaotic, and

Abbreviations

CBO	community-based organization
CCB	community capacity-building
EduP	educational program
EnvP	environmental program
FG#	focus group # (e.g., FG#1, #2)
GI#	group interview # (e.g., GI#1, #2)
I#	individual interview # (e.g., I#1, #2, #3)
ID#	informal discussion # (e.g., ID#1, #2, #3)
INGO	international non-governmental organization
INGO CR	INGO chief representative
INGO SOO	INGO Senior Operating Officer
LEdO	local education official
LGO	local government official
R#	report # (e.g., R#1, #2, #3)
YC	Yunnan city
YMS	Yunnan Middle School
YV#	Yunnan village # (e.g., YV#1, #2, #3, #4, #5)

contradictory [and] may lead to very different places from what might have been envisaged" (Ife, 2010, p. 76).

Eade criticizes NGOs and donors' failures to take contextual factors and local understandings of the process into consideration, reinforcing rather than challenging, existent power relationships (Eade, 2007). Lack of prior and careful examination of local perspectives and priorities during CCB projects, however well-intentioned, may be detrimental to pre-existent community social networks and endogenous capacities (Simpson, Wood, & Daws, 2003). As Miller argues, CCB efforts are often at risk "of being reduced to little more than rhetoric" because they tend to occur within depoliticized contexts and despite increasing socio-economic inequalities (Miller, 2010, p. 23).

In the context of China, most scholarly work on capacity-building has been focused on the institutional and organizational capacities of Chinese non-profit organizations and governmental bodies implementing development projects rather than in the development of capacities in the communities themselves (Huang, Deng, Wang, & Edwards, 2014; Li & Guo, 2015). [1] A rare exemption is Ku's 7-year social work project with a group of rural women in Yunnan province (Ku, 2011). In his study, Ku examines the process and outcomes of a single-case economic project, the making and selling of traditional hand-made arts and crafts, using oral testimonies and other enhanced participatory research practices (Ku, 2011, pp. 363–366).

Nevertheless, the bulk of Chinese works on capacity-building have specifically dealt with aspects of governance, public administration, and financial capacities of NGOs and state institutions (Kim & Jones, 2006; Li, 2009; Li & Wang, 2002; Ma, 2009; Wu & Meng, 2008), the opportunities and challenges for NGOs collaboration (Guo & Acar, 2005), corporate social responsibility and the development of Chinese NGOs regarding changes in legislation, NGOs functions,

legitimacy, and relationship vis-à-vis government institutions and agencies (Chan, 2014; Chen, 1997; Chen & Li, 2014; Jing, 2010; Marteens, 2006). Another substantial body of Chinese literature has examined the increasing demands for capacity-building courses and professional training programs in health, education, social work, and environmental protection deriving from the socio-economic and environmental problems caused by the economic reforms, rapid urbanization, and migration processes of the last 30 years (Deng, 2014; Jiang & Guo, 2006; Ku, Yeung, & Sung-Chan, 2005; Ku, Yuan-Tsang, & Liu, 2009; Li et al., 2001; Liu & Xu, 2012; Shang, 2002).

(b) *Research question and purpose*

The emphasis on institutional and organizational capacity-building, and the politics and contradictions of the development system in the international and Chinese contexts, highlight the lack of research on the process and contextualization of CCB (Mansuri & Rao, 2013b), and the confusion on what is understood by "community capacity-building" (Brinkerhoff & Morgan, 2010; Morgan, 2006). Existing research on what capacities are built has generally taken an econometric approach, and little research examines how the actors involved understand these outcomes and their relationship to the CCB process. These open questions show a fundamental need for more deep, qualitative research studies that focus on the process of CCB, and how it is understood by the actors.

This paper contributes to these gaps in the literature by examining *how capacity is built within the community* in terms of two interrelated sub-questions:

1. How is the process of CCB understood by its direct actors?
2. What capacities do direct actors identify as being built?

Examining the process of CCB in this way is important for at least two reasons. First, it provides a ground for developing local understandings of capacity that are both contextually relevant and can be owned, transmitted, and sustained by members of the community. Second, it is useful for future research and collaborative efforts to make CCB projects more meaningful and effective to the realities and priorities of those communities.

To answer these questions, the authors examine two CCB programs in the province of Yunnan, China. The programs are relevant to current academic discourse both because they enrich the Chinese CCB literature and because the fact that interactions between the different actors involved are very visible in China is useful for understanding the processes of capacity-building in other contexts, where the interplay between different stakeholders is not as visible but equally relevant. Finally, the present paper is a contribution to the scarce availability of English literature on case studies of CCB efforts in the region.

(c) *Outline of the paper*

In Section 2 of the paper, the authors review the development literature outlining current approaches and understandings of "community" and CCB. Section 3 introduces the case-study and describes the methodological approach. Findings are presented in detail in Section 4, and later discussed in Section 5. We conclude the paper by summarizing the contribution of the research and pointing toward opportunities for future research and collaboration.