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Power Holders and Social Dynamics of Participatory Development and Reconstruction: Cases from the Democratic Republic of Congo

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Summary. — One of the challenges of participatory development and reconstruction programs is how and where to engage with power holders. This paper analyses the dynamics of power relations within a community-driven reconstruction program in the Democratic Republic of Congo. It shows that, in some circumstances, elite control can be a way of ensuring the provision of pubic goods and that conflict between elites can benefit project outcomes. The paper concludes that in this and similar contexts, development programs should consider bringing elites into the equation of governance and invest in understanding better the working and accountability of existing institutions for development.
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Key words — community-driven reconstruction, power relations, public goods, elite influence, Democratic Republic of Congo

1. INTRODUCTION

Post-conflict reconstruction in the 1990s was criticized for being too state-centered and top-down (Barakat & Zyck, 2009; Kyamusugulwa, Hilhorst, & Van Der, 2014; Paris, 2004). In response, development agencies have increasingly sought to develop alternative approaches that aim to strengthen institutions at the local level. One of these approaches, popularized by the World Bank and international NGOs, is community-driven reconstruction (CDR). These programs have the dual objective of restoring services and infrastructure while enhancing accountability in development (Kyamusugulwa, 2013a). CDR has become an increasingly prominent approach, representing multi-million project portfolios, and has been adopted as one of the main instruments of direct development intervention both by bilateral donors and by international bodies and agencies, such as the World Bank, the International Labour Organization (ILO), the World Health Organization (WHO), and the United Nations Development Programme.

CDR programs need to consider how to deal with established power holders which may not be perceived by the intervening parties as accountable or democratic (Gaventa, 2006, pp. 23–27; Hickey & Kothari, 2009, p. 89; Kyamusugulwa, 2013b). CDR programs then face the strategic question: to by-pass existing power holders or to involve them? One of the key players in the development assistance sector, the International Rescue Committee (IRC), has opted for the first strategy and sought to establish elected committees of men and women that would handle a small fund for local reconstruction.

This paper is based on qualitative research in 15 of 34 target villages by the Tushiriki/IRC program in the chiefdoms of Burhinyi and Luhwindja in the South Kivu province of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). It focuses on the (hidden) roles of elites in this community-driven reconstruction program. Blair (2000) and Lyne (2008) recognize that chiefs, religious leaders, or other forms of authority play a crucial role in public sector reform and participatory development intervention. But their actual role and interactions are under-researched. By analyzing the role of power holders in CDR, this paper aims to contribute to debates on local governance in the DRC. It argues that, in some circumstances, elite control can be a way of ensuring the provision of pubic goods.

The next section of the paper elaborates the conceptual framework that underpins the analysis and is followed by a section that describes the evolution of the state, church, and traditional authorities in the DRC and South Kivu. Then, a section that outlines the questions, setting, and methodology which is followed by the description of the two case studies. The final section discusses the findings and concludes the paper.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: POWER, AUTHORITY, AND ELITES

Relations of power are relations of social influence in which the opinions and attitudes of one person affect the opinions and attitudes of another person (Gaventa, 2006, p. 22; Mitchell & Reid, 2001, p. 118). Power holders may use hard strategies by seeking obedience through intimidation and aggression, they may use rational strategies by bargaining and logic, or they may use soft strategies by seeking submission through a polite, friendly, or humble manner. But what makes domination continuous and systematic is the belief by the ruled in the legitimacy of the leaders (Adams, Sartori, & Waldherr, 2007, p. 21; Pakulski, 1986).

In central African countries, particularly in the eastern DRC, there are important actors that derive their legitimacy from what Weber called 'traditional authority', as authority is often primarily anchored in 'spiritual powers', or the energy

to command special healing powers (Douglas, 1966; Pakulski, 1986; Wolin, 1981). People believe that those holding positions of authority, such as kings and church leaders, are endowed with spiritual power which is not only subject to control and legitimation, but can also be used for blessing or cursing. At the same time, power is interactional and webs of power are woven through patron–client relations, where 'patrons' in the DRC are often referred to as 'big men'. People depend for their livelihoods in different ways on those who lead existing institutions. Local people can tolerate their patrons when they abuse the power in their hands, as long as the latter meet the demands of the former. The demands are often related to their daily livelihoods (Daloz, 2003; Platteau, 2004, p. 227; Richards, Bah, et al., 2004). These patronage relations are based on complex lineages and other social ties and fostered by hope that investing in the relationship will result in a certain level of social protection (Wood, 2003).

The relationship between elites and development are diverse. While the concern of elite capture, where power may be exercised for individual interest rather than for community interest, has often dominated development debates (Platteau & Gaspart, 2003, p. 2), there is increasing recognition that elite control can also be exerted for popular benefit rather than for personal enrichment (Dasgupta & Beard, 2007, p. 244). In relation to supplying public goods, elite involvement can take the form of 'bad elite capture' where local decisions are made by powerful local elites, who can dominate participatory development either by choosing projects that represent their own preferences rather than community preferences or by misusing the funds provided to the community (Blair, 2000, pp. 24–25; Munoz, Paredes, & Thorp, 2007, p. 1940). Community members, in these cases, can refrain from complaining about a project, even when it did not reflect their choice, for respect of the authority figure or because they are concerned they will not receive another project in the future (Labonne & Chase, 2007, p. 4).

However, Dasgupta and Beard state that not all powerful elites are corrupt and that a distinction between elite control and elite capture should be made (Dasgupta & Beard, 2007, p. 244). Similarly, Booth argues that Africa's own institutional resources and historical legacies might be harnessed for developmental purposes, rather than being viewed merely as barriers to change (Booth, 2009, p. 3). Kelsall and other researchers, for example, point to values of honesty pertaining to the extended family in sub-Saharan Africa and the role of religious foundations in many developmental institutions (Haar & Ellis, 2006, pp. 364–365; Kelsall, 2008, p. 638). Lund, moreover, demonstrates that even where elites capture development, this may change in the course of time (Lund & Saito-Jensen, 2013).

Elite involvement in development may thus also take the form of 'good elite capture' where notions of moral obligation and interpersonal accountability contribute to channeling energies into family, ethnicity, religion, and ritual. These notion are potential foundations on which to build a new development strategy. It has been argued that the autocrats' invisible hand may work, to a great degree, in the interests of the whole society as much as in the interests of those who are leading it (McGuire & Olson, 1996).

This paper centers on the question of how elites affect the production of public goods in a CDR program. Community-Driven Reconstruction has its origin in Community-Driven Development (CDD) that was initiated by the World Bank and it applies the same methodology as that of the CDD. The idea of CDR is that local populations and local institutions are key players in project planning, execution, and

monitoring processes by which ordinary people are actively involved in the intervention (Mansuri & Rao, 2003; McBride & D'Onofrio, 2008). The relevance of the approach stems from the idea that it is both for poverty reduction in post-conflict situations and strengthening local governance.

CDR projects invariably rest on the expectation that people will be motivated to contribute to the reconstruction of infrastructure, such as roads or class rooms, by providing free labor. It is supposed that people will profit from the public goods and hence should have an incentive to contribute to their production. The production of public goods, however, is notoriously vulnerable to the problem of free-riding a term coined by Olson (1965) to denote that individuals will have incentives to 'free ride' on the efforts of others if the group is working to provide public goods from which they cannot be excluded. The problem of free-riding has been qualified on a number of grounds. Ostrom challenges the idea that there are no incentives for collective action because behavior can also be regulated by reciprocity, reputation, and trust that can transcend the waves of short-run self-interest (Ostrom, 1998). In addition, collective action is driven by a myriad of interactional dynamics, including the divergent roles of elites. Ostrom has shown, for example, that authority systems, coupled to monitoring and sanction and strong group consciousness can overcome the free-riding problem (Ostrom, 1990).

The rationale of CDR does not explicitly raise the issue of free-riding. It is assumed that people are motivated to contribute to reconstruction especially when they control the decisions leading to the project. This is particularly questionable in DRC, where state institutions have been considered predatory for decades, and where the concept of public goods is not highly developed: public office for example is more likely to be considered as a private enterprise than a service to the public (Ndikumana & Boyce, 1998). The public works that are subject to community reconstruction overwhelmingly concern schools and roads. Roads, it can be argued, have little utility for the poor who cannot afford to pay fees for transportation and schools in DRC can be considered more private than public as school fees have to cover all expenses incurred (Titeca & De Herdt, 2011). It is thus more likely that collective action does not come about through participatory civic-driven processes, but is steered by 'invisible hands' (Mcguire & Olson, 1996, p. 73; Tilly, 2004), i.e., an elite or authority system of some sort. This is corroborated by our findings, as will be elaborated below.

The role of the elite in CDR in DRC is indeed invisible as the program under study aimed to by-pass community elites, out of fear of elite capture. Elite capture is seen as 'one of the most significant threats to the success of community-based approaches' (Blair, 2000; Dasgupta & Beard, 2007, p. 230; Munoz et al., 2007; Platteau & Gaspart, 2003). Some CDR programs, including the program under investigation in this paper, aim to prevent elite capture through by-passing elites and developing new institutions whose governance rests with elected people from the population at large. Developing parallel structures for development has been questioned both for its feasibility and its sustainability (Cliffe et al., 2003; Mansuri & Rao, 2003). The case of Sierra Leone, where Fanthorpe found such new institutions to be captured by the elite does not stand alone (Fanthorpe, 2005). Lund and Saito-Jensen quote a wealth of literature suggesting that 'pre-existing social structures within communities routinely reproduce and reinforce relations of domination and subordination between elites and non-elites, leaving little, if any, possibility for participatory initiatives to circumvent them, despite specific measures to prevent elite capture' (Lund & Saito-Jensen, 2013, p. 105).