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Managing Dynamics of Power and Learning in Community Development: A Case Study of Iowan Farmers in Uganda

Abstract

Extension professionals facilitate community development through the strategic manipulation of learning and power in peer-to-peer learning partnerships. We discuss the relationship between empowerment and power, highlight relevant literature on the difficulties power presents to learning and the efficacy of service learning tools to facilitate mutual learning and present original findings from our research on an international development partnership in which Extension professionals had partial success in creating opportunities for mutually empowering learning among farmers from Iowa and Uganda. We recommend that Extension professionals encourage learning across power gradients by providing opportunities for informal conversations and encouraging reflection by participants.

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Introduction

To be effective, Extension workers, planners, and other community development professionals must be able to manage relationships between people with different levels of power in ways that empower the community as a whole. Power imbalances can become a barrier to successful community development even within partnerships, when two or more groups of people collaborate to achieve common goals (Johnson & Wilson, 2006). One approach to facilitating successful community development in partnerships with power imbalances involves encouraging mutual learning in ways that can empower all participants, while reducing differences in power over time (Babikwa, 2004; Johnson & Wilson 2006). In Iowa, Extension professionals have often employed peer-to-peer learning to reach underserved populations, to support rural economic development (Morse, Brown, & Warning, 2006), and to improve farming practices and pesticide applicator safety (Grudens-Schuck, Cramer, Exner, & Shour, 2003). Managing power imbalances between stakeholders is even more critical for effective collaboration between people in developed and developing countries.

Using USAID's Farmer-to-Farmer program format, a development partnership was organized by Extension professionals at Iowa State University (ISU) that involved staff at the Ugandan non-profit Volunteer Efforts for Development Concerns (VEDCO) and farmers from Iowa and Uganda. We discuss the relationship between empowerment and power, highlight relevant literature on the difficulties power presents to learning and the efficacy of service learning tools to facilitate mutual learning, and present original findings from our research (Lauer, 2013) on mutually empowering learning in an international development partnership. We recommend that Extension professionals integrate opportunities for informal conversations and reflection into their programs, especially when power gradients are present. Because power gradients exist within communities and countries as well as between them, our findings should be of interest to all Extension professionals, planners, and community development professionals who facilitate peer-to-peer learning domestically as well as internationally.

Literature Review

Empowerment and power are similar in that both involve agency and the ability for someone—an individual, group, or community—to impact others in a shared, social environment. Empowerment is a process of "enhancing an individual's or group's capacity to make purposive choices and transform that choice into desired actions or outcomes" (Alsop, 2005). Power can be defined as "the ability to achieve a wanted end in a social context, with or without the consent of others" (Vermulen, 2005). Greater power comes from greater access to material and social resources, which provide an agent with more pathways to influence others to comply with the powerful agent's desires.

Empowerment and power differ in that empowerment has an explicit normative dimension, while power does not. Empowerment is morally good, and empowered agents are expected to form appropriate and ethical relationships with others. By contrast, the morality of power depends on how it is used. Power is bad when it is abused, and one ethically valid response to abuses of power is to level the power-gradients that enable power to be abused. On the other hand, Chambers (2006) argues convincingly that powerful agents can, and sometimes do, use their power for good. While it is unrealistic to expect Extension professionals to level entrenched power gradients, they are expected to facilitate empowering outcomes through their work.

Literature on organizational learning suggests that power dynamics are inseparable from learning processes (Lawrence, Mauws, Dyck, & Kleysen, 2005), and evidence of the influences of power on learning has been found even when mutual learning is embraced as part of a partnership (Babikwa, 2004; Percy, 2005).

Powerful actors are often less motivated to learn than those with less power. Learning is "first and foremost the ability to negotiate new meanings" (Wenger, 1998: 226), and there is less incentive for a powerful actor to negotiate new meanings when the current meanings imbedded in the status quo are acceptable to them. In general, powerful actors tend to be more comfortable with the status quo than those with less power.

Powerful actors also have trouble learning from less powerful actors because those with power are more likely to overlook or dismiss the viewpoints and values of the less powerful. This oversight need not be intentional, but rather comes from the greater ability of the powerful to define the context in

which new meanings are negotiated (Chambers, 1994). In defining the context, powerful actors may exclude other viewpoints and values from discussions, thereby diminishing any opportunity for the powerful to learn from the less powerful.

When this exclusion is inadvertent, the powerful actors might not even be aware of the potential for learning that they are missing. Alternatively, they may know that they are missing potential learning opportunities but be unable to articulate specifically what they are missing. The latter scenario would occur when the powerful actors recognize that there is value in the less powerful actors' body of knowledge taken as a whole but have excluded or dismissed some of the values or viewpoints that are necessary for understanding and learning from that knowledge.

Methodology

To explore empirically how learning and power interact in community development partnerships, we undertook a case study (Lauer, 2013) of a USAID Farmer-to-Farmer project, Bridging the Gap: Increasing the Competitiveness of Ugandan Women Farmers in the Marketplace. This Farmer-to-Farmer development partnership was organized by Extension professionals at Iowa State University (ISU) and involved staff at the Ugandan non-profit Volunteer Efforts for Development Concerns (VEDCO) and farmers from Iowa and Uganda.

During 2011 and 2012, the Bridging the Gap project sent six groups of Iowan women farmers to Uganda to support VEDCO's extension and outreach efforts by helping teach Ugandan women farmers about improving grain quality, collectively marketing grain, increasing soybean production, and keeping farm records. On each exchange, three Iowan farmers spent between 2 and 3 hours with each of eight groups of 10 Ugandan farmers. The objectives were for the Ugandans to move from subsistence to commercial farming and for both groups to benefit from the cultural exchange. The program positioned the Iowan farmers as teachers and the Ugandan farmers as learners.

The purpose of our study was to discover what Iowan and Ugandan farmers learned through the project, to explore the effects of power on what and how each group learned, and to make recommendations for improving learning outcomes when power gradients are present within a partnership.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with program staff and farmers who participated in the Farmer-to-Farmer project. Interviews with farmers provided information about their backgrounds and farms, their expectations going into the project, their experiences participating in the project, what and how they taught and learned during the project, whether they felt they could have taught or learned more, and areas where the project could be improved.

Interviews of project staff supplemented the interviews of farmers by providing information on the process of designing the project, assessing the staffs' perceptions of the success of the project, and exploring their perspectives on what each group of farmers taught and learned through the project.

Interviews of 28 Ugandan farmers (out of a total of 80 participants) from five farmer groups were conducted in Uganda between May and June 2012. Farmers were selected by VEDCO staff to

represent a range of ages, farm sizes, farmer experience levels, duration of involvement in the project, and success at implementing improved farming practices. Interviews took place on-farm with the assistance of a VEDCO staff translator, with each interview lasting approximately 30 minutes. Three VEDCO staff members were also interviewed.

Interviews of an Iowan farmer who was also on staff at ISU and six Iowan farmers who participated as volunteers (out of a total of 12 participants) took place in Iowa between July and October 2012. Interviews were requested from all Iowan farmers. The duration of interviews of Iowan farmers ranged from 30 to 90 minutes.

Additional information was acquired from informal conversations with participants, materials prepared by Iowan farmers and ISU staff as part of the project, informal observations of farmers and project staff in Iowa and Uganda, and two informal conversations with groups of Ugandan farmers who were familiar with, but not involved in, the project.

Data analysis was guided by the grounded theory approach (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Results and Discussion

The study provides empirical evidence for the following claims, in the context of experiential learning across a power imbalance:

- Learning is both possible and empowering for both more and less powerful people;
- Mutual learning can promote more equitable relationships, even across a power imbalance;
- Mutual learning is encouraged by providing opportunities for informal conversations (which reduces the effects of a power imbalance) and for reflection (which encourages learning across a power imbalance).

Learning Through the Project

Both Ugandan and Iowan farmers learned from each other through the Farmer-to-Farmer project, and both groups were empowered by what they learned. However, the Ugandan farmers learned more specific agricultural practices than the Iowan farmers. Most Ugandan farmers learned and implemented at least seven specific agricultural practices as a result of the program, including using tarps and mechanical shellers for improved grain quality, marketing maize as a group, planting in rows, planting high-quality seed and conducting germination tests, increasing acreage of soybeans planted, farm recordkeeping, and collectively marketing soybeans. Ugandan farmers also described these new farming practices positively as having major impacts on their lives, the success of their farms, and the health of their families. As a result of the project, many Ugandan farmers began to see farming as a business and helped to pass on the farming practices that they learned from the Iowan farmers, becoming teachers within their communities as well as farmers.

The Iowan farmers, on the other hand, learned fewer agricultural practices through the program, and even those practices were less significant to their livelihoods. Taken as a group, the Iowan farmers

implemented five specific agricultural practices as a result of the project: growing sweet potatoes using Ugandan methods of planting and hilling, reducing custom-spraying of pesticides, planting non-GMO soybeans, growing garden vegetables under partial shade and starting a food garden for the family. No individual Iowan farmer, implemented more than two of these practices as a result of the project. The Iowan farmers who made changes on their farms described them positively, but did not indicate major impacts on their lives or on the success of their farms. However, every Iowan farmer interviewed believed that they could have learned more about farming from Ugandan farmers, with several indicating a renewed or stronger appreciation of the ability of Ugandan farmers to teach them about both farming and life in general.

The study showed that empowerment was manifested differently for the Iowan farmers than for the Ugandan farmers. Unlike the Ugandan farmers' experiences, the Iowan farmers did not see the new practices implemented on their farms as life changing or critical to their success as farmers. The Iowan farmers' empowerment was manifested through a greater sense of gratitude, a stronger or renewed feeling of purpose in farming and sometimes in life, and in some cases through new roles as teachers or citizen ambassadors in their communities. As with the Ugandan farmers, learning was necessary for the Iowan farmers' empowerment.

Learning and Power in the Project

Over the course of the Farmer-to-Farmer project, learning reduced the initial difference in power between Iowans and Ugandans. The belief that the Ugandan farmers can teach the Iowan farmers is incompatible with a totally asymmetric relationship. It implicitly recognizes that the Ugandan farmers have a source of power because they can choose to teach the Iowan farmers or not.

Ugandan farmers came to understand that they had some activities and values in common with the Iowan farmers. This empowering realization helped them to relate across differences in culture and power:

I didn't know that even people from US are farmers; now I know... I feel different because I never thought in my life I'd talk with a Mzungu [White person]. I used to just see them in cars, but now I've spoken with them for hours.—Ugandan Farmer

As Ugandan farmers talked with Iowan farmers, they increasingly saw the Iowans as people whom they could relate to and teach. Some Ugandan farmers who had previously believed that Americans had the technology and resources to solve almost any problem came to realize that they had taught, and could continue to teach, the Iowan farmers valuable lessons:

[The Iowan farmers] learned how I was drying my beans, because I hang them up. They'd never seen anyone do that. They learned how I was charging phones on solar panels. They learned how to make the mats [out of reeds], and also about new fruits and cassava in my garden... I learned that Whites are farmers, but I got to learn they're also farmers like us.—Ugandan Farmer and Group Leader

All of the Iowan farmers believed that they could learn from the Ugandan farmers. In several cases, Iowan farmers went beyond a tacit recognition of the Ugandan farmers' power to teach by pointing out specific areas where the Ugandan farmers are more successful than farmers in Iowa:

They use their resources far better. They also have bugs and disease and everything like that; they just don't have the resources like I do to control it. And so it was amazing to see how they do handle things like that.—Iowan Grain Farmer

They could teach us a lot about working together as a community. I think that something I always take away from my visits to Africa is just how well the community works together; how no one is looking out for their own best interest but everyone is looking out for the best interest of everyone. I think that's something we lose here in America.—Iowan Vegetable Farmer.

Unfortunately, there were fewer opportunities for such learning by Iowa farmers.

Informal Conversations and Reflection Encouraged Learning

Most of the learning by the Iowan farmers occurred through informal conversations with the Ugandan farmers, rather than through structured activities. Iowan farmers brought up a lack of time to learn when describing the difficulties they had in learning from Ugandan farmers:

There's a limit too on what you can ask, and for those questions you almost need an interpreter. And you only have so much time... I feel bad saying that I didn't learn anything that I could use here [on my farm in Iowa]... You might get the sense there isn't anything of value that they could teach but that's not the case.—Iowan Grain Farmer

As the project provided relatively little time for informal conversations and the formal curricula focused on Iowans teaching Ugandans, it makes sense that the Iowan farmers felt that a lack of time constrained their ability to learn. Under these conditions, Extension professionals could have facilitated learning by the Iowa farmers by incorporating more time in the schedule for informal conversation.

While the project did not encourage participants to reflect or provide them with information about how to practice reflection, the Iowan farmers learned by spontaneously reflecting on their experiences through conversations with their family and friends and by giving presentations to their communities in Iowa:

I give presentations and talk to people about it, more one-on-one. It changed my conversations, what I share with people. It changed and broadened my perspective but I don't even think about it. I had people from five countries, including people from Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan on my farm—people who are equivalent to Extension or agribusiness workers. My conversation

with them was impacted by Uganda.—Iowan Vegetable Farmer

One farmer described the process of being interviewed for this study as an opportunity to reflect on what she learned:

I felt I left one question inadequately [answered]. You asked what I learned about farming from the Uganda women. I learned a lot when I was over there... In retrospect, since we are [currently] experiencing a drought of a lifetime, I would have liked to have asked questions about drought adaptations they have made, besides waiting for the rain to come; and I was reminded of our interdependence on suitable weather.—Iowan Grain Farmer

Extension staff who implemented the project could have facilitated further learning by encouraging more reflection before, during, and after the exchanges.

Implications for Extension Professionals

Reflection, or "thinking about what we do," allows people to make meaning out of their experiences by linking thoughts to actions. Dewey (1938) recognized the importance of reflection for learning early in the history of cooperative Extension. Stafford, Boyd, and Lindner (2003) describe reflection as critical for transforming community service into service learning in 4-H programs and show improved learning outcomes when opportunities for reflection are included. Extension professionals working with adults could likely achieve similar benefits by integrating reflection activities into their programs (Torock, 2009). Because they are built around participants' efforts to meet a community need, insights from service learning programs are of particular value when helping people with more power learn from those with less power.

The literature on service learning provides the following recommendations for designing reflection activities in an experiential learning context (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Eyler, 2002; Campus Compact, 2014):

- Begin the process of reflection before engaging with the community, by encouraging participants to write down their assumptions, expectations, values, and "hopes and fears"; and by encouraging participants to write goals for themselves that include what they hope to learn as well as their desired service outcomes.
- Encourage participants to keep a reflective journal during their engagement with the community. A common journal method is for participants to take time after each community interaction to write about their experience ("what?"), discuss what it means to them and to the community ("so what?"), and consider the implications for future actions by themselves and others ("now what?").
- Continue reflection after engagement with the community has ended through presentations and conversations with others.
- Build opportunities for group conversations and reflection into the program before, during, and after

engagement with the community.

- Invite members of the community to join group reflection activities.

Extension professionals can promote reflection as part of experiential learning programs by providing participants with instructions on how to reflect and building opportunities for reflection into the program.

Conclusion

Extension professionals facilitate community development through the strategic manipulation of the relationships between learning and power in the context of a development partnership. Mutual learning reduces power imbalances in a partnership while providing an opportunity for both parties to be empowered. Although greater power makes it more difficult for the more powerful partner to learn, Extension professionals can facilitate mutual learning by providing opportunities for informal conversations and encouraging reflection by participants. Because power gradients exist within communities and countries as well as between them, our findings should be of interest to all Extension professionals, planners, and community development professionals who facilitate peer-to-peer learning domestically as well as internationally.

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