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The normative practitioner

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2. Theoretical perspectives on organisational learning as a normative practice

Uganda's field of lifelong learning for development is uniquely shaped by the historical interplay between local and international actors, the country's neoliberal political-economic climate and the multitude of initiatives aiming to complement formal education programmes. NGO practitioners operating in this field are exposed to varying levels of technical and normative complexity that require not only technical rational knowledge and solutions, but also the capability to continuously generate practical solutions that help uncover and achieve what is 'right' in a given situation. This chapter elaborates the context of the field of lifelong learning for development in Uganda, and positions organisational learning as a strategy to strengthen the normative practice of education NGOs. By doing so I clarify the epistemological underpinnings of this research. Finally, I revisit field theory as a theoretical framework to analyse how and whether organisational learning leads to transformative social change for participants of lifelong learning and beyond.

2.1 Introduction: swamps and high grounds

Aid and development efforts have been scrutinised increasingly since the start of the 21st Century. Scholars and practitioners have criticised the ineffective evaluation of development programmes (Banerjee & Duflo, 2012), the way in which development is narrowly defined in economic terms (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 2001), but also the persistent structural power imbalances driving the north-south cooperation (Moyo, 2009; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Odora Hoppers, 2001). The lifelong learning for development domain has not been excluded from this critique; large groups of learners remain excluded from learning opportunities and there is a persistent mismatch between learning interventions and the requirements for a sustainable global society (McGrath, 2018; Odora Hoppers, 2001; Van der Linden, 2016; Zeelen et al., 2010). The solution to making 'aid work better' has been sought in various domains – such as reconceptualising development itself,

advocating for new forms of financing, shifting programmatic emphasis, etcetera. One of the most influential responses to rising critiques has been the 'accountability wave', which introduced a series of tools and policies to recipients of aid funding to increase transparency and efficiency in the development sector (Chambers, 2010; Guijt, 2010; Ramalingam, 2013). NGOs make up a majority of these recipients and took up the task to use Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) systems, logical frameworks and results-based management methods to account not only for their spending, but also the effectiveness of their activities. In line with the same logic is the evidence-based movement that rapidly gained terrain in the development sector. Evidence gathered through rigorous scientific methodology, in particular, randomised controlled trials, would help create transparency and accountability, but also guide decision-makers on which approaches and programmes could more effectively achieve goals (Banerjee & Duflo, 2012). This promise gained traction and influenced major donors to include 'evidence' as one of the prerequisites for funding (Chambers, 2010; Ramalingam, 2013).

In theory, the expectation that organisations should justify their actions could trigger increased efforts for learning and innovation. However, in practice, accountability and learning seem irreconcilable. Trends of rationalisation and fragmentation of work have limited the discretionary space of NGO practitioners rather than enriching it. As Guijt (2010) states: "planning processes lock down plans into watertight projections of change which dictate the spirit of development as a controllable process in mutually reinforcing cycles." (p. 279). If the accountability efforts are not helping development organisations to learn what to do, when and where, then what would? In this chapter, I argue that to support a more ethical and productive practice we need to review the epistemology of this practice and seek to create learning and professionalisation processes that are rooted in the same assumption grounds. This argument is not new; Schön (1983) for example has proposed 'reflection-in-action' as an alternative epistemology of practice. He problematised that the orthodox paradigm - 'technical rationality' - cannot help practitioners deal with the complexities faced in the 'swampy lowlands'.

This dilemma of 'rigour or relevance' arises more acutely in some areas of practice than in others. In the varied topography of professional practice, there is a high, hard ground where practitioners can make effective use of research-based theory and technique, and there is a swampy lowland where situations

are confusing 'messes' incapable of technical solution. The difficulty is that the problems of the high ground, however great their technical interest, are often relatively unimportant to clients or to the larger society, while in the swamp are the problems of the greatest human concern. Shall the practitioner stay on the high, hard ground where he can practice rigorously, as he understands rigour, but where he is constrained to deal with problems of relatively little social importance? Or shall he descend to the swamp where he can engage the most important and challenging problems if he is willing to forsake technical rigour? (Schön, 1983, p. 42)

In more recent years, the same argument has been used in the development sector as well, especially by those who suggest complexity thinking can advance development practice. Authors like Ramalingam (2013), Ramalingam et al. (2014) and Chambers (2010) problematise that the positivist paradigm that assumes linear causality can be problematic in cases where practitioners and organisations deal with complex problems.

The typical approach to such wicked problems is to act as if they can be simplified, or tamed, and then made amenable to quick fixes. But the evidence in a number of areas – from disease to urbanisation, from conflict to climate change, from economic growth to governance reforms – suggests that the underlying problems remain untamed. This forces programmes to adapt and change, and adds to both managerial challenges and costs. The mismatch between the reality of the problems faced and many of the assumptions that guide analysis and action poses a considerable challenge to the sector. (Ramalingam et al., 2014, p. 2)

In his book *Aid on the Edge of Chaos*, Ramalingam (2013) cautions development actors to be critical about the type of knowledge guiding their decisions, since knowledge is not only power but power also conveys knowledge. He observes trends showing that actors and organisations in the development sector adopt organisational models and knowledge hierarchies from the Global North. This critique on euro-centric epistemological frameworks dominating institutions in Africa is problematised by Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) and Odora Hoppers (2001) as well. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) advocates for epistemic freedom: “the right to think, theorise, interpret the world, develop own methodologies and write from where one is located and unencumbered by Eurocentrism” (p.3). Along the same lines, Kunneman (2016) urges us to grapple not only

with technical complexity, but also ethical and epistemological complexity that exists in today's work organisations. These normative forms of complexity point towards tensions practitioners will experience between personal advancement versus the common good and values versus rationality (Kunneman, 2016). Bringing it back to the field of education and learning, McGrath, Ramsarup, et al. (2020) equally problematise that:

[...] the world is not made up of atomised individuals guided by the hidden hand of the free market. Rather, reality is heavily structured by the operations of political economies that have emerged out of contestations and compromises in specific historical and geographical spaces. As a result, specific forms of labour markets and education and training systems have arisen, characterised in profound ways by inequalities and exclusions. These specific forms profoundly influence individuals' and communities' views about the value of different forms of learning and working. However, they do not fully define what individuals dream, think and do. (p. 480)

Using these theoretical lenses, in the next section, I portray the research domain; the work of education NGOs in the field of lifelong learning for development in Uganda. I describe the topography of this field and what the swampy lowlands look like for NGO practitioners. Finally, I explore which type of organisational learning approach could help practitioners in navigating their field and which epistemology of practice should guide us when reviewing these processes of knowledge generation and usage. To get a handle on the 'complexity' of embracing complexity, I present field theory as an overarching framework that can help us connect the role of (epistemological) paradigms, agency, and structure when analysing social change.

2.2 The practice of lifelong learning for development

Though lifelong learning is often associated with adult education, in Uganda a strong emphasis is placed on youth. The trends of educational exclusion and the young demographic of the Ugandan population has activated numerous actors to introduce education and learning programmes that could build youths' capabilities to sustain livelihoods, exert their civic and sexual and reproductive health rights and support the sustainable development of the nation (Ahaibwe & Mbowe, 2014; Commonwealth Secretariat, 2016). It would be beyond the scope of this research to sketch the entire lifelong learning landscape here. But to understand the historical spaces and political

economy that made the field what it is today I focus on a few parameters that in my view affect the learning and knowledge demands NGOs face.

2.2.1 Demarcating the research domain

Lifelong learning for development in this study refers to the field at the intersection of international development cooperation and lifelong learning. It is an arbitrary field; not all actors in this field will use the term lifelong learning for development to describe their specialisation. However, in this research, I use it to refer to the body of knowledge and practice related to programming learning and education interventions aimed at achieving development goals. Although the term 'education for development' is more mainstream, I have chosen to expand our focus to lifelong learning to draw attention to formal, informal and non-formal learning services as well as a variety of learning domains. Especially when we look at the work of NGOs we shall predominantly deal with education and learning programmes that do not fit neatly within the mainstream education system.

Within the field of lifelong learning for development, we could identify a multitude of actors such as funding organisations, NGOs, policy makers, regulators, educators, learners, parents and communities. Service delivery in this field is commonly associated with not-for-profit organisations, but with trends of privatisation and social entrepreneurship, there seems to be an increasing number of organisations aiming to achieve social outcomes whilst earning profit. This PhD research focuses particularly on the work of NGOs. Although there are other providers, NGOs form an interesting type of organisation to study for two reasons. First, in the non-formal education sector in Uganda, NGOs are the predominant service providers (Blaak, 2010). Whereas there is no clear data on the number of education NGOs operating in Uganda, the NGO directory states that 182 NGOs operate in the domain of education (NGO Forum Uganda, n.d.). However, with a broader lens of lifelong learning, this number could be much higher, for example, if we include agricultural extension work or skilling efforts for youth. Secondly, NGOs take up an intriguing position in relation to other actors in the field; they often act as intermediaries between multiple actors (Anderson & Patterson, 2017; Lample, 2018). Some NGOs directly implement education and learning activities whereas others focus on advocacy or technical assistance to government partners or other education organisations. In both cases, they seem to take up an intermediary position between funders, learners, governments, their board etcetera. While exploring the field below, I

illustrate the unique challenges and learning requirements resulting from this positionality. Overall, by focusing on organisational learning in education NGOs we can generate practical insights for the main group of lifelong learning service providers, while critically analysing the macro dynamics to better understand processes of contextualisation in lifelong learning for development, and how NGOs may support other institutions and actors in the field.

2.2.2 A background to complexity thinking

The portrait I sketch of the field of lifelong learning for development in Uganda is inspired by complexity thinking. This school of thought assumes that the problems we witness in the field today are rooted in dynamic systems set up by the actions of various actors at local and international levels. Consequently, there is no single or simple cause to explain how learning opportunities are shaped today and why they remain unavailable to large groups in Uganda. These problems have emerged due to interconnected forces and dynamics which are not a game of chance, but are influenced by power structures (Kunneman, 2016; McGrath, Ramsarup, et al., 2020; Odora Hoppers, 2001; Ramalingam, 2013). Complexity thinking is gaining terrain as an alternative epistemological paradigm to the conventional evidence-based movement, as it urges practitioners and researchers to avoid the simplification of development processes into linear models of change. As Byrne (1998) states: “The issue is that in the social world, and in much of reality including biological reality, causation is complex. Outcomes are determined not by single causes but by multiple causes, and these causes may, and usually do, interact in a non-additive fashion. In other words, the combined effect is not necessarily the sum of the separate effects. It may be greater or less, because factors can reinforce or cancel out each other in non-linear ways.” (p. 26). Rooted in this thinking, Ramalingam (2013) proposes a new perspective to aid that embraces the complexity of the realities we work in and moves away from linear modes of thinking in conventional aid perspectives (see table 2).

Table 2 Conventional and alternative development approaches

	Conventional aid thinking	New perspectives
Systems and problems	Systems and problems are closed, static, linear systems; reductionist- parts would reveal the whole.	Systems are open, dynamic, non-linear systems far from equilibrium. Macro patterns emerge from micro behaviours and interactions.

Human agency	Individuals use rational deduction; behaviour and action can be specified from top-down; perfect knowledge of future outcomes is possible.	Heterogeneous agents that mix deductive/inductive decisions, are subject to errors and biases, and which learn, adapt, self-organise and co-evolve over time.
Social structures	Formal relations between actors are most important; relationships are ahistorical and can be designed; actors can be treated as independent and atomised.	Interpersonal relationships and interactions matter in form of culture, ties, values, beliefs, peers. Informal matters, relationships are path-dependent and historical.
The nature of change	Change is direct result of actions; proportional, additive and predictable; can hold things constant; simple cause and effect.	Change is non-linear, unpredictable, with phase transitions.

Source: Ramalingam, 2013, p. 142 adapted from Beinhocker (2006)

Neely (2015) underlines that such complexity thinking should not only happen at the meso and macro levels, but especially at the community level. “Beneficial outcomes are only built at the community level through hundreds of unique situation-dependent interactions, choices, collaborations, and competitions that create patterns that form the emergent structures that help communities move away from poverty.” (p. 797). Complexity thinkers do not propose all problems are complex, but as Ramalingam (2013) suggests, the tools and concepts of complexity thinking are vital in enabling development practitioners and policy makers to see beyond the immediate horizon.

Acknowledging rather than denying complexity can make us feel more at home in our world. It can help us understand the world better than we do, in some key areas where our understanding, ways of thinking and ways of acting are lacking. It can help us ask the right kinds of questions, it can serve as an engine for intuition, and it can help us critically engage with the answers. It can point to possibilities we might not have otherwise considered, ideas we may have discarded, approaches that could be more relevant and appropriate. However, complexity research, like all scientific endeavours, may be limited in

what it can tell us about what to do about the implications it generates.
(Ramalingam, 2013, pp. 361-362)

To sketch a portrait of the complexities of the field of lifelong learning for development, in the next section, I first use a historical lens. As McGrath, Ramsarup, et al. (2020) underline, we must understand the field of education as a result of contestations and compromises. Therefore, I do not only try to describe the field as it is today but also highlight important turning points in history that seem to have influenced the way lifelong learning is shaped. I do want to recognise that education NGOs take on varying approaches towards diverse goals within the field of lifelong learning for development. So, not all NGOs necessarily address complex problems. But the field in which they operate does form a complex system that makes it impossible to predict how change will occur. I support this argument by illustrating features that make the field a technically and normatively complex system. Technical complexity refers to the level of difficulty and certainty with which a task or strategy can be executed to achieve a particular goal (Snowden & Boone, 2007). Most functions in lifelong learning programming can be executed through more or less systematic and predictable processes - but I explore which aspects of the work of education NGOs could be complex rather than complicated. Additionally, technical complexity is not the only type of complexity NGO practitioners have to deal with. There are dynamics at play of conflicting interests, power forces and meaning-creating processes (Kunneman, 2005, 2016; McGrath, Ramsarup, et al., 2020; Odora Hoppers, 2001). Development itself is a value-laden process and thus any intervention aiming at facilitating it will have to grapple with ethical choices (Sen, 2001). In light of this, Kunneman (2016) stresses the importance of acknowledging ethical and epistemological complexity inherent to any field of work (summarised here as normative complexity). After presenting the topography of the field of lifelong learning for development, I present premises about which type of knowledge practitioners and organisations would benefit from navigating not only the hard high grounds, but especially the swampy lowlands.

2.2.3 History and context

From traditional lifelong learning practices to foreign interference

Traditionally, learning and education experiences in Uganda were facilitated by communities to prepare members for family roles, various vocations as well as spiritual growth. Whereas organised and written forms of education have been reported in places

like Timbuktu as early as the 11th Century, education in Uganda was predominantly informal and took place through oral methods such as legends, songs, poetry, proverbs and apprenticeships (Nafukho, Otunga, & Amutabi, 2005; Okech, 2004; Preece & Haynes, 2011). A variety of members of society were included in the learning process, from young to old, with a special phase demarcated for adolescents who went through initiation rites as they transitioned to adulthood (Preece & Haynes, 2011). Educators were foremost mothers, but also traditional intellectuals such as chiefs, storytellers and priests (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). In various accounts of education and learning in early African societies, authors underline the interdependence of members and the spiritual interconnectedness that formed key elements of the learning experience (Preece & Haynes, 2011). Others, however, caution that African traditional society was not inclusive to all. Irakoze (2020), for example, encourages scholars and policy makers to use a lens of intersectionality to understand whether indeed everyone was included through processes of socialisation, including education, in patriarchal traditional African communities. She argues that particularly women were disadvantaged and that this theme often remains underlooked because of the reliance on oral history – which was predominantly narrated by men. In addition, we can also question to what extent disabled people were able to participate in education and learning activities.

Ssekamwa (1997) explains that foreign forms of education were introduced to the Buganda kingdom in 1877 by Christian missionaries from Britain and France who founded schools (though at first without buildings) to convert people and instil morals. At the same time, Arab traders started teaching Ugandans how to read the Koran. Initially, both forms of education were embraced by the Baganda and their royal leader, Kabaka Muteesa I. However, this support dwindled due to several political, spiritual and inter-religious conflicts. Through their increased political engagement, the Protestant and Catholic missionaries continued to safeguard their provision of education albeit amidst conflicts between the two groups. In 1892, the British East Africa Company started pressing its agenda and mediated between Protestants and Catholics to ensure a unified approach which ultimately supported the establishment of Uganda as a British Protectorate in 1894 (Ssekamwa, 1997). After Britain took control over Uganda, the church remained the primary provider of education; after all, its teaching of a Euro-centred mode of civilisation supported the British mission to exert control over the people of Uganda. In the 1920s, however, for various political and financial reasons, the British Government claimed control over the education system. They established the

Education Department in 1925 and formalised the education system that created a pathway from primary to junior and senior secondary, to technical schools or university (Makerere University). Though implementation was still largely left to missionary groups, besides teaching morals, education widened its objectives to equip Ugandans to support agriculture and manufacturing (Ssekamwa, 1997).

Parallel to this formal system, which only catered for a few, indigenous education continued to equip Ugandans with the skills and knowledge required in traditional society (Ssekamwa, 1997, Openjuru, 2010). However, these latter forms of education became marginalised by the epistemicide the colonial project created (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Odora Hoppers, 2001). Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) warns that colonialism was deceitful: “it presents itself as bringing about civilisation, progress and development [while] it subverts and destroys the order it found”. (p.17). Education and learning were redefined and shifted from the informal, interconnected, spiritual and intergenerational forms of learning to a Euro-centred epistemology enforced through a formalised education system. Divinity took on a Christian cloak, traditional intellectuals were shunned and replaced by the ‘formally educated’ who were hand-picked by the colonialists, and learning content was selected and prioritised based on a colonial development agenda (Ssekamwa, 1997). Besides redefining hierarchies of knowledge, the British education system also introduced a new class system that turned formal education into a ladder for growth within the new colonial order. In the lifelong trajectory of learning, this continued formalisation of the system created a divide between the educated and uneducated. The colonial administrators provided significant benefits to the academically educated, in terms of jobs and power over others, therefore to achieve University education became an aspiration to many Ugandans (Openjuru, 2010). Lample (2018) and Ssekamwa (1997) note that a large part of the struggles against the British education policy was in fact to gain access to this ‘capital’ rather than to overthrow the policy. Though this weakened resistance should be seen in the broader context of the oppressive structures used and the epistemicide itself (Mamdani, 2018; Odora Hoppers, 2001).

An era of nationalisation and neoliberal reform

When Uganda regained independence in 1962, education was considered a key driver for socio-economic development and the growth of the ‘new’ country. Despite initial plans to Africanise education, these efforts did not concretise and the formal education system

in Uganda (including its structure and curriculum) mimic the colonial British system to date (Lample, 2018). The government's education strategies since independence show a continuous effort to increase access to primary education as well as to develop professionals to fill up the immense gaps in the labour force (McGrath, Ramsarup, et al., 2020; Openjuru, 2010). However, these strategies rarely led to their intended impact. Under-financing as well as periods of war stalled the delivery of education. Critique emerged on the curriculum too. Education committees, such as the Castle Committee in the 1960s and the Educational Policy Review Commission in the 1990s, argued that the school curriculum did not prepare Ugandans for productive livelihoods (Ssekamwa, 1997). However, their proposals to 'vocalionalise' the curriculum did not materialise. This was in part due to the public preference for academic education – following the hierarchy of knowledge introduced by the colonial project (Openjuru, 2010). Instead, programmes were introduced to offer universal access to primary and secondary education: the Universal Primary Education (UPE) policy in 1996 and Universal Post-Primary Education and Training (UPPET) programme in 2007 (Delta Partnership, 2013; Openjuru, 2010).

Regaining independence did not mean the discontinuation of international interference in the education sector. First of all, the inherited British colonial education model continued to exert foreign epistemologies. In addition, the significant financial constraints Uganda faced created a dependency on foreign donors whose financial aid came with terms and conditions. During the 1980s for example, loans from the IMF and World Bank came alongside the pressure to reduce public investment in education. The logic of return on investment led to a prioritisation of primary education (McGrath, 2018; McGrath, Ramsarup, et al., 2020; Odora Hoppers, 2001; Wiegratz, Martiniello, & Greco, 2018). Moreover, as Wiegratz et al. (2018) claim, the neoliberal agenda of IMF and World Bank have greatly contributed to commodification, privatisation and a class order that is still visible in Uganda's education policy and practice. These authors, however, also underline that neoliberalism is not simply forced on Ugandan policy makers, the Ugandan elite utilises the capitalist model to advance personal gain. This pattern of governance has positioned education as a political-economic tool, demonstrated for example with the Universal Primary Education policy, which was introduced as a political project framed as a poverty reduction strategy during a campaign period, without rigorous planning and resource mobilisation (Asiimwe, 2018; Delta Partnership, 2013). As a result, lifelong learning remains narrowly defined as advancement in a formal system and its outcomes are measured in terms of economic results. What should be noted,

however, is that this neoliberal influence in the lifelong learning sector spans beyond Uganda. The international dynamics of financing and 'policy travel' created a discrepancy in the lifelong learning agenda between the global South and the global North. For example, in the South the emphasis was on access to basic education whereas the North upheld all domains of lifelong learning cited by Delors: learning to be, learning to do, learning to know and learning to live together (Preece & Haynes, 2011).

Isomorphism is also noticeable in recent curriculum reforms in Uganda. 'Learner-centred pedagogy', for example, is a commonly accepted norm in recent education policies in Uganda, and the 'competency-based education' approach has inspired the recent lower secondary reform (The Independent, 2020) and the National Teacher Policy (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2017). Travelling policies and practices may not necessarily be bad, but if we follow McGrath, Ramsarup, et al. (2020) assumption that reality is a result of compromises and contestations in geographical and historical sites, we should be critical about who benefits and who loses. Odora Hoppers (2001) warns that the architecture behind the international education for development field drives neoliberal norms of materialism and positions human beings as human resources, and in the education discourse that prioritises economic outcomes, there is a power imbalance favouring the global North. "Given the evidence of the strategies used in mind and space control within the North-South partnerships, 'acculturation', long associated with the goals of education, does begin to lose its innocent definition as the 'inflow of knowledge that is external to an individual society'." (Odora Hoppers, 2001, p. 34). Therefore, the processes through which these strategies are incorporated in local education efforts should be scrutinised.

Neoliberalism is not the only force observed in the international lifelong learning for development discourse, but other emerging theories and paradigms did not gain much terrain in the Ugandan education landscape. For example, popular education, which takes on the Freirean approach to learning to deconstruct oppressive power structures, has not had much influence in the African context (Hoppers, 2006). Nor has the human capability development approach (HCDA) inspired by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum. This approach draws attention to the aspirations of individuals and what they value in light of development. It further positions individuals as agents of development – not as recipients of development (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 2001). In light of a more critical view on education and development, this capability approach has been

expanded to more explicitly make power and structure a subject of analysis. This Critical Capability Approach (CCA) views this interplay between structure and agency from a multi-dimensional perspective. For example, from a feminist perspective, problematising barriers women face. The CCA also views work as a broad concept, and in line with the HCDA, pursues learning outcomes that are valued by individuals. An important concept mediating what individuals pursue and find meaningful are aspirations – which the CCA positions as continuous life projects (McGrath, Powell, Alla-Mensah, Hilal, & Suart, 2020). This CCA approach goes beyond enabling individuals to act as agents of development, but carefully analyses the power dynamics through which one person or group may interfere with the aspirations of others. The latter include the ‘others’ of the future, especially in terms of ecological sustainability (McGrath, 2018; McGrath, Powell, et al., 2020). This CCA has not had a significant impact on the Ugandan lifelong learning discourse. Though it may seem like an abstract affair, the processes of colonialization, isomorphism, and financial aid have contributed greatly to certain gaps and challenges in the field of lifelong learning for development in Uganda as I illustrate below.

Status quo: lifelong learning for development in Uganda today

Besides the historical perspective and brief analysis of the national and international discourse in the field, I discuss three major shortcomings in the field of lifelong learning in Uganda today. These shortcomings have clear roots in the historical developments of the field. Though the portrait below is not a comprehensive picture, it does illustrate important gaps NGOs seek to address.

1. *An excluded majority*: The formalisation of education (both in systems and in minds) introduced a new order, dividing people into categories of the educated and the uneducated. According to this ‘order’, Uganda faces an excluded majority given the realities of access to education (Blaak, 2010; Tumuheki, 2017; Zeelen et al., 2010). Despite successes in increasing access to primary and secondary education in Uganda, completion rates, as well as transition rates, remain low. For example, in 2016, only 59 per cent of pupils transitioned from primary to secondary school (UNESCO, 2020) and of those participating in lower secondary education only 26 per cent completed the full cycle (World Bank, 2020). There are deep inequalities disadvantaging girls, children in rural areas and poor households – not just in terms of access, but also in terms of quality of education (UNESCO, 2020). Alternative education forms are scattered and sparse and

are not in reach of the majority of Ugandans. The learning environment at home is also characterised by inequality between high income and low-income households. Only 38 per cent of children in poor households have a stimulating home environment compared to 74 per cent of the richest households (UNESCO, 2020). In a UNESCO column, Zeelen (2020) recently wrote that a new at-risk group has evolved: the educated youth. He hints at the low level of learning outcomes generated through the formal education systems in Uganda and other countries. Several studies have problematised the quality and relevance of the formal education system fuelled by teacher and student absenteeism, misaligned curricula and ill-equipped schools (Tumuheki, 2017; Zeelen, 2020; Zeelen et al., 2010). Youth themselves also expressed that the education they received insufficiently equipped them to succeed in the labour market (MasterCard Foundation, 2016).

2. *Neoliberal agenda:* As described earlier, Uganda – like other countries – followed the political-economic perspectives introduced through funding frameworks. The education policy discourse follows a neoliberal agenda that focuses on driving industrialisation and the commercialisation of agriculture towards economic growth. The sciences and technology are prioritised, as these domains seem to support this enterprise more effectively. The role of education is to equip the youth bulge with the skills to fit into the modernised industrial economy (National Planning Authority, 2013). Though Uganda's Vision 2040 also mentions education as a means to strengthen human rights, the human capital narrative dominates. Higher education is positioned as a mechanism to prepare a skilled workforce that can deliver monetary returns (Asiimwe, 2018; Odora Hoppers, 2001). Though, as hinted at above it is debatable whether tertiary education has successfully transformed into institutions producing human capital. Not only has the curriculum been influenced by a neoliberal logic, but the delivery mechanisms have also followed the assumption that the market can deliver services more effectively than the Government. The 2020 Global Monitoring Report states that Uganda has not met the funding for education benchmarks at any point in the last ten years. As a result, to complement the services delivered by the Government, private actors have started schools – comprising approximately double the number of government schools (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2021). The liberalisation of the market further deepened the inequalities in terms of access and quality education – those who can afford it access better quality education (Asiimwe, 2018). As proposed by the authors referenced earlier, it may be necessary to expand the educational discourse and funding frameworks

beyond neoliberalism if we want to ensure that lifelong learning interventions support transformative and sustainable development.

3. *Reliance on non-state education providers:* It may seem that this section so far has focused on education rather than lifelong learning. This is not because I want to narrow the definition of lifelong learning to focus on formal education structures, but rather because there is little data on non-formal and informal education outcomes in Uganda (UNESCO, 2020). This may generally be a result of Government and public focus on formal education, especially foundational education. As mentioned, the implementation of formal education has relied heavily on non-state actors – from the colonial period up to now. For non-formal education, this is even more the case. The Government White Paper (1992) only mentions a few forms of non-formal education that are officially recognised; most are forms of alternative basic education or accelerated learning programmes. Non-formal education spans various domains from health education to citizenship education, guidance and counselling and Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) (Blaak, 2010). Though the White Paper proposed instituting a council for Adult and Non-Formal Education, such a body was never established, leaving a large portion of the lifelong learning interventions run unregulated. However, NGOs – which play an important role in the delivery of non-formal education – are regulated by the NGO Act of 2017. This is a generic act for any NGO operations and does not give clear standards in regards to the quality of education and learning activities. The NGO Act does stipulate that all activities carried out by NGOs should be approved by the District Non-Governmental Monitoring Committee (DNMC) (Government of Uganda, 2017). Even though the Act does not identify which activities of NGOs could lead to an offence, several authors have stressed that these measures may lead to intimidation of NGOs promoting human rights (Jjuuko, 2016). This ambiguous regulatory framework leaves non-state providers free on the one hand to organise lifelong learning in any form, but on the other hand, allows the government to scrutinise programmes without a clear standards framework. In addition, a survey conducted in 2003 illustrates that most NGOs in Uganda are small and are unspecialised. The ability of these small NGOs to learn and develop expertise towards solving a specific complex problem is limited by the high transactional costs of setting up small projects towards rapidly changing thematic areas (Barr, Fafchamps, & Owens, 2003). Barr et al. (2003) further note that there is a prominent level of duplication in efforts of small NGOs, signalling a lack of coordination.

2.2.4 *The plight of practitioners in education NGOs*

As mentioned earlier, this thesis focuses on NGOs as providers of lifelong learning for development. In light of the historical perspective described above, NGOs cannot be detached from international influence – if not through funding, through processes of isomorphism. What this positionality implies will depend on the type of NGO, their mission, funding mechanisms and many other factors. So, what I describe in this section is not a uniform scenario that all NGO practitioners will have to deal with. However, I reflect on elements of their core business and the topography it presents for practitioners to navigate. I particularly explore the complex and messy lowlands in this field – both in terms of technical and normative complexity. By highlighting these facets of practice, I present a foundation for epistemological models for organisational learning that are consistent with the type of problems practitioners face.

The technical complexity of lifelong learning for development

a) Learning needs are emerging, diverse and multifaceted: Learners targeted by education NGOs are often those who face unique barriers to education. Consequentially, the learning needs NGOs are aiming to address are often multifaceted. In the case of early school leavers, for example, one has to take into account multi-dimensional causes such as negative experiences in education, early pregnancy, poverty, orphanhood etcetera (Blaak, 2010; Blaak et al., 2013; Momo, Cabus, De Witte, & Groot, 2019). Besides learning needs being multi-dimensional, these needs and aspirations evolve as learners progress in their learning trajectory (McGrath, Ramsarup, et al., 2020; Van der Linden, 2016). When working outside of the formal education system, NGOs will likely face a highly heterogeneous group of learners, demanding a level of tailoring to serve all (Blaak, 2010; Waniha, 2008). This poses the technically complex task of tailoring, diversification and adaptation to cater for these diverse learning needs.

b) Rapid change and relevance of learning content: The task to align education programmes to diverse needs and aspirations is further complicated through the rapidly changing society. The world is changing fast, challenging lifelong learning practitioners to continuously scan their domain for advances and tailor this to learning content and activities suitable for the learning abilities of their learners (Nafukho, Wawire, & Lam, 2011; Van der Linden, 2016). As a result, lifelong learning practitioners are faced with a level of uncertainty whether the content they deliver is relevant to their learners by the time they are ready to apply it (be it in the world of work, family life, health, etcetera).

For those NGOs that seek to co-create knowledge in a more Freirean manner, this balancing act of combining grassroots knowledge with external advancements is even more complex. In this case, following Freire's curricular ambitions of creating consciousness about problematic power structures changes the role of facilitators significantly (Freire, 2005).

c) Change relies on multiple actors: To enhance and sustain learning outcomes, lifelong learning programmes should be executed in collaboration with multiple actors. Indabawa and Mpofu (2006), for example, recommend collaborating with government agencies, civil society, organised youth and adult groups to ensure alignment and avoid opposition or passive resistance. Communities can also provide role models, facilitators and venues for learning (Waniha, 2008). Furthermore, by involving the community, education NGOs can pave a way for learners to receive opportunities to apply newly acquired competencies (Tukundane & Blaak, 2010). This demands a diverse skill set of practitioners in education NGOs to broker and maintain relationships with these actors.

d) Knowledge on what works or does not work is contextual: Even though there is a large body of knowledge that provides methods and solutions for many of the issues raised here, in the field of education and learning there is no universal solution for effective lifelong learning interventions. Knowledge about what works and what does not work is highly contextual; depending on the geographical area, time period, target population, stakeholder relationships, historical background and learning goal. Berliner (2002) emphasises, "doing science and implementing scientific findings are so difficult in education because humans in schools are embedded in complex and changing networks of social interaction, participants have variable power to affect each other and the ordinary events of life." (p.19). This is why quality lifelong learning interventions rely strongly on the embodied knowledge of educators (Van der Linden, 2016). Learning how to be a good educator (or education designer or planner) is largely through experience, whereby research and standards can feed the actions of practitioners but these always need to be tailored to the context.

e) Self-inflicted complexity in NGOs: The above issues are not unique to NGO providers of lifelong learning; practitioners in public or private organisations would equally need to navigate these technical complexities. However, practitioners working in NGOs face another layer of complexity in their work due to their dependence on funding that is often restricted and short-term. There is an increasing sense of competitiveness driving NGOs

to commit to ambitious goals in the face of scarcity. “Development and humanitarian organisations are notorious for the imbalance that is almost inevitably found between aspirations, capabilities, and resources (human, financial, and temporal).” (Roper & Pettit, 2002, p. 14). On top of delivering a meaningful learning intervention, this poses the challenge of being resourceful and fulfilling the accountability needs, often requiring additional staff dedicated to fundraising and grants management processes.

Normative complexity of lifelong learning for development

Though complex in its own way, finding solutions to the above-stated problems is more or less achievable through experimentation – seeing what works. However, there is another layer of complexity interwoven in most of the issues above: the ethical and epistemological complexity of lifelong learning for development. Below I illustrate five aspects of the normative dilemma in the field of lifelong learning for development, which are undeniably intertwined with the technical aspects of the work.

a) Multiple rationales for education: Whereas education has been widely accepted as a catalyst for development, what is ‘right’ or ‘good’ education is highly contested. While reflecting on the history of education for development and the evolving discourse, McGrath (2018) concludes that “Education is motivated by multiple rationales even within the individual” and that “it is wrong to think that there can be a single way of understanding the relationship between education and development.” (p.228). Yet, by making decisions about content, assessment criteria, pedagogy, scheduling, etcetera, practitioners in education NGOs enact particular rationales. Using the case of sexuality education, De Haas (2017) illustrates that educators develop action strategies through a complex interplay of cultural schemas that often display conflicting facets of the professional identity, students citizenship and well-being, values and discourses. NGO practitioners may also not be governed by a single educational philosophy and approach. Though we may have observed that neoliberalism underlies educational policies this may not guide practitioners per se, yet, NGOs may have to align their narrative to such dominant paradigms. This means that NGO practitioners take up a significant normative responsibility, shaping and reinforcing rationales of education and learning through their actions. Odora Hoppers (2009) emphasises the importance of acknowledging one is confronted by a normative situation: “One of the most important moral differences between people is between those who miss, and those who see various moral features of situations confronting them. Perception is the setting for action and salience, i.e., the

adequacy of agent's consciousness concerning the situation, or ability to grasp the contours of a problem prior to being called upon to exercise that agency. It is key in this." (p. 612).

b) Globalisation and Africanisation: As illustrated above, the lifelong learning for development discourse in Uganda (and beyond) has largely taken on a neoliberal agenda, fuelled mostly by globalisation and international development narratives. On the other hand, there is a call for an Africanisation of education – or what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) calls epistemic freedom. Critical of the power dynamics underlying globalisation, some scholars are calling for a radical re-thinking of education and learning, rooted in an African epistemology (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Odora Hoppers, 2001, 2009; Odora Hoppers & Sandgren, 2014; Preece & Haynes, 2011). This is not to say that globalisation and Africanisation are mutually exclusive. As Preece and Haynes (2011) argue: “in spite of the influence of international aid agencies for pursuing narrow, neoliberal, market-focused goals for lifelong learning, it should be possible for countries in the South to articulate a coherent vision for their own learning societies that embrace indigenous philosophical world views, but in a way that also recognizes the hybrid nature of the contemporary world.” (p.1). Odora Hoppers (2009) emphasises that the push for the inclusion of more diverse knowledges is naturally dialogical and breaks the hierarchy of knowledge – something she argues is difficult because of the absence of ‘bicultural experts at the epistemological level’. In line with the previous point, we could ask: are NGO practitioners aware of the epistemological models they shape or reproduce through their interventions?

c) Interdependent agency: As mentioned before, lifelong learning for development requires practitioners to foster collaboration between various actors. It is important to note that these relationships are embedded in an intricate web of power relations. Several authors have noted that the Northern institutions take up positions of power and through funding requirements, policy discourse and other mechanisms reinforce their power positions. But as Odora Hoppers (2009) notes: “Africans are not passive victims of cultural imperialism although they have been subject to coercive interventions, but active agents in negotiating unfamiliar, strange and alien cultural terrain.” (p. 605). Speaking about agency in the field of public health, Anderson and Patterson (2017) propose the term ‘dependent agency’ to underline that beneficiaries are not powerless recipients of aid programmes, but enact agency in their relationship with programme

implementers and donors, adjusting their actions to obtain access to services and resources that can benefit their personal goals. Given the multi-dimensional nature of power in aid and development, however, I would slightly reframe this term to ‘interdependent agency’ because the dependency factor is not one-directional. Without learners participating in programmes, NGOs do not have the legitimacy to exist and without implementing NGOs, funders would not be able to achieve their goals. In this architecture, every actor plays a role and can choose to utilise facets of the mainstream narrative to obtain access to resources and opportunities to act. As a result, fostering collaboration comes along with an intricate power game, played by all actors. A game in which an isomorphism of language occurs – possibly hiding authentic interests – and a game in which power is distributed unevenly and yet no one is powerless. NGO practitioners are not powerless agents who simply follow what the donor is requesting them to do, nor are learners powerless in simply following the programme set by an NGO and their educators.

d) Epistemology is power-laden: The uneven distribution of power in the development context is to a large extent exerted through the epistemologies underlying this practice. For the development sector in general, Ramalingam (2013) problematises that aid organisations tend to carry knowledge as a commodity into the context in which programmes are implemented and ignore grassroots knowledge. Odora Hoppers (2001) refers to Foucault, who connects meaning and power – knowledge is constructed through processes and systems of power and the emerging discourses shape the perceived realms of possibilities. If NGO practitioners are not aware of these normative and power-laden facets of their work, which is likely given the embodied and tacit nature of their knowledge in-action – they may reproduce processes that marginalise diverse knowledges. This unawareness would be further fuelled by the Tayloristic organisational forms of education and learning, where thinking and doing is separated and practitioners have limited space to use their professional discretion (Ramalingam, 2013; Van der Linden, 2016). Evidence-based programming is put forward as the golden standard reinforced by the demand for rigorous evidence as a condition for funding (Ramalingam, 2013). Not only is the professional’s knowledge cramped, but, as illustrated earlier, epistemological frameworks from the global North have greatly shaped what learning experiences will be offered and prioritised. Some scholars have argued that a level of Euro-centricity has also been internalised amongst local leaders and communities demanding a more formalised, theoretical form of education (Indabawa & Mpofu, 2006;

Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018) or pursuing local political interests (Wiegratz et al., 2018). The power interwoven into these epistemologies does not only play out at the higher levels of policies and programme designs; micro-power dynamics also exist in the direct learning context and play a role in shaping and reinforcing epistemology. Mainstream education in Uganda is characterised by authoritative relationships between teachers and learners and bias towards theory and teacher-centred pedagogy (National Curriculum Development Centre, 2012) – a model that is often carried forward to non-formal learning settings (Blaak, 2010). How do practitioners prioritise knowledge to guide them in their day-to-day work? And do they perceive knowledge as a potential tool to deconstruct problematic power structures?

e) Accountability paradox: Amidst the intricate web of power dynamics that shape the ethical and epistemological choices of practitioners in education NGOs lies the question: who do NGOs account to for their actions? Whereas it would be expected that NGOs are accountable to the people they serve, there seems to exist an ‘upward’ accountability to donors rather than mutual accountability with communities (Ebrahim, 2005; Guijt, 2010). Ebrahim (2005) hints at the need to prioritise which accountabilities organisations commit to, and he suggests that an internal accountability to the mission is necessary to reflect accountability to the communities the NGO serves. Though both Guijt (2010) and Ebrahim (2005) suggest that too much accountability can hinder organisations from learning how to achieve their mission, there is an undeniable need to secure funding and fulfil donor demands. As illustrated earlier this results in technical complexity but also in an ethical dilemma: who deserves accountability from an NGO in regards to their actions?

2.2.5 Recapitulation

As expected, because of the lifelong and life-wide nature of lifelong learning for development, the field is diverse and populated by a large number of actors. It may have been an impossible undertaking to sketch what this field and practice looks like. However, I hope that the features described above have illustrated the ‘swampy lowlands’ which, according to Schön (1983), are common in many fields. Again, the reason why I started by sketching this portrait is to illustrate that the problems education NGOs seek to solve – such as access to education, building capabilities, transition to decent work etcetera – do not exist in a vacuum. Lifelong learning is not a neutral undertaking, it involves choices and decisions that practitioners make as active agents,

where the learners, too, are agents in this process. These agents operate in a field that is characterised by power structures and dominant narratives which influence the perceived possibilities for action. Therefore, to deliver more relevant lifelong learning interventions that achieve not just narrow goals for economic gain, but also foster cultural diversity, ecological sustainability, gender equality, etcetera, we may need to set up these NGOs to act more responsively towards the complexities they are grappling with – both the technical and the normative complexities. Perhaps NGOs can then become the agents of change they have always claimed to be, rather than agents stuck in a web of conflicting narratives dominated by powerful actors from the North.

2.3 Advancing the field of lifelong learning for development: an epistemology of practice

In this section, I present considerations for an alternative epistemology of practice to position NGOs towards more transformative action in the field of lifelong learning for development. Following the logic of Schön (1983), Chambers (2010), Ramalingam (2014), and Kunneman (2016), amongst others, to achieve more meaningful work and organisations we need to address complexity at the epistemological level of our practice. This follows the assumption that the nature of the problem at hand should dictate which type of knowledge and professional environment one needs to solve these problems. These authors problematise that policy, academia and management practices are often incongruent with the type of knowledge practitioners require to solve complex dilemmas. Below I revisit their suggestions for a more fitting epistemology of practice and explore what this implies for education NGOs who seek to more effectively navigate the complexity presented by the field of lifelong learning for development.

2.3.1 Rigour and relevance

The incongruence between the nature of work and the epistemology underlying structures and policies in the workplace is rooted in a narrow definition of rigour. In the 1980s, Schön (1983) pointed out that in a bid for professionalisation in various sectors, a scientific approach was introduced to practice. This approach assumed that solutions to our practical problems could be created through a systematic, rational approach of experimentation to establish causality between interventions and their results – ideally, these experiments were executed by scientists. He problematised that this epistemological approach of ‘technical rationality’ did not match the nature of the

practice – particularly the ‘lowlands’ – and may thus be considered rigorous but not relevant. In the 21st century, a similar critique resounds in the development sector; there is still a mismatch between the standards used to assess good solutions or valid knowledge and the type of solutions and knowledge required in a complex context. What Schön refers to as the technical rationality paradigm, Chambers (2010) refers to as the ‘paradigm of things’ or the ‘neo-Newtonian practice’. In this paradigm, a logic of linearity is utilised to establish causality which is then translated into best practices, manuals, routines, quality control mechanisms, etcetera. This paradigm has greatly influenced the practice of development organisations, which can be observed in artefacts such as logical frameworks or results-based management systems (Guijt, 2010; Ramalingam, 2013). And like Schön, authors like Chambers and Ramalingam highlight that this paradigm does not suffice in the development sector because it limits the discretionary space of practitioners. They risk losing sight of relevance by focusing on jumping bureaucratic hoops in the name of rigour: “Good practice and performance, so often dependent on intangible personal and inter-personal unmeasurables like commitment, honesty, energy and trust, were undermined and sapped by the spreading culture in much development of targets, indicators and measurement, and the implicit and even explicit orientation of ‘if it can’t be measured, it won’t happen.’” (Chambers, 2010, pp. 13-14).

Though they problematise the paradigms of ‘technical rationality’, ‘paradigm of things’ or ‘neo-Newtonian practice’, none of the authors cited above suggest that rigour is not important – rather, they want to work towards an epistemology of practice where rigour does not distract us from relevance. Kunneman (2016) stresses that: “In our times we urgently need ethically more complex narratives, encouraging us to venture into ‘swampy lowlands’ where we are both ‘out of control’ and can experience deeper forms of ‘civic meaning’, both on the level of personal and of professional relations.” (p.430). Odora Hoppers (2009) also underlines the need to depart from the reductionism of the Euro-centred scientific approaches and build fraternities between types of knowledge – she similarly calls for policy and ways of organising that embrace pluralism. Van der Laan (2006) also critiques the scientific approaches that have led to fragmentation in social work. He argues that the whole is more than the sum of parts and practitioners and clients/learners and managers need to be granted discretionary space to utilise their knowledge – both explicit and tacit – to find solutions. This approach refocuses accountability away from the funder to “showing how learning has led to adaptation or ‘response-ability’”. Capacity development is then about increasing abilities to gather the

right information in order to make sense of what is going on in real time and adjust accordingly.” (Guijt, 2010, p. 287). The organisation’s legitimacy is not in achieving targets, but in the success it has in helping its target population (Van der Laan, 2006).

What could relevant rigour look like? Snowden and Boone (2007) propose a ‘probe, sense, respond’ approach in complex situations. A basic premise behind this approach is that in complex situations you can only truly understand patterns in hindsight. So, instead of locking in long-term goals and pathways, practitioners create environments to experiment allowing them to observe patterns and trends (Snowden & Boone, 2007). Such approaches should not be mistaken for the scientific approach to experimentation or input-output, behaviouristic logics of change. Van der Laan (2006) warns that becoming too methodical externalises thinking from acting – yet these two cannot be separated. It is thus important to clarify that ‘sensing’ is not based on data or targets only, but it follows the practitioner’s second nature, their feeling and sensing, which does not always happen consciously, but can be identified through cases. By presenting ‘reflection-in-action’ as an alternative epistemology of practice, Schön (1983) underlines that practitioners know-in-action; through experience, observing the results and being open to surprise, reframing problem situations and eventually being able to explain patterns (knowledge-in-action). “This dilemma of rigour or relevance may be dissolved if we can develop an epistemology of practice which places technical problem solving within a broader context of reflective inquiry, shows how reflection-in-action may be rigorous in its own right, and links the art of practice in uncertainty and uniqueness to the art of the scientist’s art of research” (Schön, 1983, p. 69). Chambers (2010) calls his alternative paradigm ‘participatory adaptive pluralism’ in which he emphasises that for the development practice multiple knowledges should be included and that this should be acquired through a diverse set of tools and methods. Rooted in the same principles, Van der Laan (2006) and Sennett (2008) call for an approach of craftsmanship as a means for re-professionalisation – embracing the tacit as well as normative nature of work. They point out similar professional roles as Kunneman (2016) underlines in his concept of normative professionalisation – which equips practitioners to deal with the ethical and epistemological ambiguity of their work.

Underlying these alternative epistemologies is the assumption that relevant knowledge to guide development interventions is contextual and tentative. Thus, if we are looking for an epistemological paradigm that is in tune with the complex nature of

the practice, rigour needs to be re-defined as a measure that warrants relevance in context and time. Rigour in paradigms such as 'reflection-in-action' or 'adaptive pluralism' involves a continuous process of testing, observing and re-adjusting, a process that can happen 'in-action', in a participatory manner and using a variety of methods. The type of rigour that is relevant in this alternative epistemology of practice is context-dependent, but also value-laden and inter-subjective. What is further emerging is that the logic of knowledge cannot be separated from the processes of knowing, and thus from the knowers. Next, I explore how we should view knowledge if it is no longer an external, abstract object that sits outside of the knowers.

2.3.2 What is knowledge and who are the knowers

The Newtonian knowledge paradigms are often associated with what Aristotle termed 'episteme', a type of knowledge that presents a theory of causality, derived from deduction (Eikeland, 2008; Flyvbjerg, 2001). By aspiring relevance for practitioners, our attention is drawn to other types of knowledge too, for example, 'techne' and 'phronesis'. Flyvbjerg (2001) describes techne as technical know-how and phronesis as practical knowledge and practical ethics – knowing what is right. Eikeland (2008) goes a step further in his explanation of Aristotle's knowledge typology. He distinguishes knowledge that is acquired from perception and knowledge that is acquired from practice. However, he notes that both categories of knowledge include elements of theory. Episteme can be a theory that is an explanation of external objects (theôrêsis) or a theory that is insight gathered from practice through deliberation and dialogue (theôria). The latter is a form of practical knowledge, a theory of practice. In his review of practical knowledge, Eikeland (2008) further differentiates technical and ethical aspects of knowledge. Practical knowledge could for example enable a practitioner to act competently (praxis or khrêsis), to manipulate a situation for personal gain (poiêsis) or to act justly, in a virtuous manner (phronesis). If we follow Kunneman (2016), who calls for more ethically complex narratives, this embeddedness of ethics in practical knowledge becomes relevant. Phronesis, especially, seems to be the type of knowledge that can enable practitioners to navigate normatively complex situations (though poiêsis helps to navigate these situations too, the results may not necessarily be just or sustainable).

Eikeland (2008) suggests that phronesis – how to act 'rightly' – is developed through a rationality of deliberation. Practitioners thus become significant knowers of their practice and the boundaries between practice and research blur. Practitioners can

be considered researchers of their actions, but researchers, too, can be considered practitioners of research (Eikeland, 2008). So, who then is best positioned to develop phronesis? If this form of knowledge is acquired through action and interaction (or deliberation), practitioners seem best suited to articulate and develop this type of knowledge, though researchers can contribute to developing phronesis as well. Flyvbjerg (2001), for example, makes a case for phronetic social science and emphasises the value of conducting case study research to generate contextual knowledge about what is right in a given situation. Stake (1995) also underlines the importance of case study research in social science to enable a multi-dimensional analysis that is spatial, historical, social and personal. Others emphasise the importance of involving the practitioners and people affected by the research problem to make explicit their embodied knowledge (Carr & Kemmis, 2005; Chambers, 2010; Van der Linden, 2016). Besides, Ramalingam (2013) points out the benefits of involving people from multiple disciplines to grasp the complexity and understand dynamics and feedback loops affecting micro-situations. Van der Linden (2016) also suggests that practice-oriented research that aims at high-quality lifelong learning for groups at risk is best situated in communities of practice: "involving various research contexts and combining professionalisation of its members with research undertaken. In this way professionalisation is based on the processing of experiences in practice-oriented research whereby the knowledge gained is not fragmented but part of a joint research programme" (p. 229). Therefore, the knowledge that can help overcome complexity lives in different people and is ideally developed through inter-subjective processes for which the methodology may rely on the context.

2.3.3 The role of power and values in the epistemology of practice

Since phronesis is concerned with the question 'what is desirable', power and values are inherent. The status quo – including the dominant epistemological paradigms – is upheld through a complex web of power dynamics (Bourdieu, 1977; Flyvbjerg, 2011; Odora Hoppers, 2001). Flyvbjerg (2008) poses the following value-rational questions as a guide to developing phronesis in organisational research: "1. Where are we going with this specific management problematic? 2. Who gains and who loses, and by which mechanisms of power? 3. Is this development desirable? 4. What, if anything, should we do about it?" (p. 153). Referring to Foucault's theory of power, Flyvbjerg (2008) emphasises that to understand processes of power, one needs to focus on the concrete, as power directly establishes reality. By understanding how power processes shape micro-situations, practitioners cannot only identify what could be 'right' in the moment,

but also contribute to deeply transformative action towards deconstructing power imbalances in the development sector such as racism, classism, patriarchy, etcetera (see for example Freire, 2005). “Dominant narratives tell convincing stories based on the interests of the powerful, persuading us to act for the benefit of privilege. But, when we start to question these stories, asking in whose interests they are told, we see different possibilities for changing the story and therefore changing the world” (Ledwith, 2017, p. 49). However, Guijt (2010) cautions us that in the development sector we should not be tempted to blame the ‘powerful donor’ for everything. She explains that the accountability wave, for example, is not kept in place by ill-intended individuals; rather accountability and the accompanying standards and interpretations of rigour are reinforced through systemic forces.

Though practitioners may act on their ideal of alternative futures, Kunneman (2005) underlines through his concept of normative professionalism, that there will always be a level of ambiguity in our realities and our actions due to co-existing, conflicting paradigms and hybrids that emerge. “Beyond the grand narratives of modernity and beyond the absolute notions of transcendence characterising traditional religious worldviews, new forms of moral deliberation and existential learning are emerging, centring around creative frictions between a plurality of different moral perspectives and existential scripts” (Kunneman, 2005, pp. 10-11). He uses social work as an example, and illustrates how social workers are continuously trying to connect “questions of productivity and efficiency with moral commitment and existential meaning” (p. 12). In a way, this is what Guijt (2010) also describes when she encourages development practitioners to find synergies between learning and accountability. De Haas (2017) illustrates ways in which educators already merge conflicting cultural schema – suggesting that educators also enact normative professionalism. Meyerson (2001) calls this creative manoeuvring in between value-sets ‘tempered radicalism’. Chambers (2010) stresses that these acts of defiance require a process of demonstrating the level of rigour adaptive pluralism delivers. In short, it does not only matter whom you ask what is the right thing to do at what time, there will co-exist several ‘right’ solutions given the normative complexity of work situations in the field of lifelong learning for development.

If we move away from the ‘neo-Newtonian’ idea that external researchers should generate the knowledge practice requires, organisations now carry a great responsibility to generate phronesis and other forms of knowledge required to navigate all corners of

their topography of practice – including the lowlands. It also poses a normative responsibility – how do these organisations define meaningful lifelong learning? Who ensures that this ‘meaning’ is in line with the needs of the populations they serve and not personal interests or the status quo? How can organisations – like education NGOs – enact such an alternative knowledge paradigm and set up their members to be reflective and response-able practitioners? Can organisational learning play a role in this process of normative professionalisation? In the next section, I illustrate how organisational learning has fallen into the trap of uncritically serving the epistemological assumptions of technical rationality. And I touch on theoretical concepts that can help us analyse how we might ‘learn our way out’.

2.4 Shaping organisations that learn to deal with complexity

The quest to set up organisations as knowledge-generating has been the ambition of organisational learning scholars since the 1960s (Easterby-Smith & Lyles, 2012). In the opening pages of the book that popularised the idea of becoming a learning organisation, Senge (2006) states: “As the world becomes more interconnected and business becomes more complex and dynamic, work must become more ‘learningful’. It is no longer sufficient to have one person learning for the organisation [...]. The organisations that will truly excel in the future will be the organisations that discover how to tap people’s commitment and capacity to learn at all levels in an organisation” (p. 4). It is beyond the scope of this chapter to present a full discussion of organisational learning and learning organisation literature. For a more comprehensive review, I would refer to other works such as Easterby-Smith and Lyles (2012) or Dierkes, Berthol Antal, Child, and Nonaka (2001). In this chapter I focus on the following questions: Are the concepts of the learning organisation and organisational learning still relevant to education NGOs today? And, can becoming a learning organisation help equip practitioners in overcoming the complex challenges to ensuring meaningful lifelong learning for all?

2.4.1 The learning NGO

Though the concept of the learning organisation was popularised in the corporate sector as a means to remain competitive, organisations in other sectors were quick to embrace it as well. One of the most cited definitions of the learning organisation is that of Senge: “An organisation that is continually expanding its capacity to create its future” (Senge, 2006, p. 14). Pedler used a similar definition: “An organisation which helps the learning

of all its members and persistently transforms itself" (Pedler, Burgoyne, & Boydell, 1991, p. 1). In the development literature, authors have expanded these definitions to make more explicit 'what' it is that a learning organisation should achieve. Aiken and Britton (1997) defined the learning organisation as: "An organisation which actively incorporates the experience and knowledge of its members and partners through the development of practices, policies, procedures and systems in ways which continuously improve its ability to set and achieve goals, satisfy stakeholders, develop its practice, value and develop its people and achieve its mission with its constituency" (as cited in Britton, 1998, p. 3). Kelleher and The Gender at Work Collaborative (2002) emphasise the following qualities of a learning organisation in the development context: "permeable to outside ideas and pressures; sufficiently democratic that those ideas with merit can flourish from all levels of the organisation and evolve into practice; possessing teams capable of functioning democratically and effectively; capable of resolving apparent contradictions between such issues as stability and change, and support and pressure; capable of using processes and tools for organisational learning" (p. 314). Though in essence very similar to the conceptualisation of the learning organisation in other sectors, authors in the development and non-profit sector seem to emphasise the mission-orientation of NGOs and other development organisations. Their definitions are also more explicit about the accountability, which focuses more on adding value to communities rather than pleasing the shareholders (Aiken & Britton, 1997; Kelleher & The Gender at Work Collaborative, 2002).

Because of this mission orientation, several authors have pointed out that the idea of being a learning organisation is particularly necessary for the development sector. Britton (1998), for example, states: "[...] if NGOs do not learn they are likely to cease to exist as they will not be able to adapt sufficiently well to the changing circumstances in which they find themselves" (p.7). In the context of adult education organisations in Africa, Nafukho et al. (2011) also stress: "Only learning organisations that are flexible, adaptive and productive can thrive, hence the need for organisations to transform themselves into learning organisations" (p. 147). In addition, others suggest that learning should resonate deeply with development organisations, because in the development sector learning is widely associated with the potential for transformation and has inspired a vast participatory practice in which organisations seek to mobilise multiple knowledges to generate change. At the same time, practitioners who join development organisations are interested in facilitating change and transforming the status quo (Roper & Pettit,

2003). Edwards (1997) also states that in theory, NGOs have an advantage in terms of organisational learning: “Because NGOs are embedded simultaneously in the worlds of action and understanding, have a presence that crosses national boundaries, and possess a value system which (in theory) promotes learning and communication, they have a strong set of comparative advantages in learning terms” (p. 237). Not specific to the development context, but for education organisations in general, Lumby (1997) also suggests having learning as your main business would suggest you are better equipped to facilitate organisational learning.

However sound the logic that NGOs should excel in learning, amidst the dominant neo-Newtonian paradigm and accountability wave, it seems NGOs are just like other organisations: not perfect. In general, literature illustrates that NGOs have a plethora of organisational learning systems in place. Intricate monitoring and evaluation systems, team meetings, staff development, and community dialogues are a few examples of learning mechanisms deployed by NGOs (Roper & Pettit, 2003). However, Ramalingam (2013) adds a critical note: “these [learning efforts] are all built on a mechanical perspective; that somehow the organisation will automatically be able to absorb the lessons and ideas generated from these efforts” (p. 79). As earlier discussed, there is an element of self-inflicted complexity in the sector. Edwards (1997), for example, problematises that funders encouraging NGOs to run on low overheads can make it difficult to invest in staff development, learning activities etcetera. And even though NGOs may claim to be flat and organic, their organisational structure remains hierarchical, and decision making, thinking and doing remain divided (Britton, 1998; Edwards, 1997; Ramalingam, 2013). In the Ugandan context, the majority of NGOs are small and unspecialised, and the ability of these small NGOs to learn and develop expertise towards solving a specific complex problem is limited by the high transactional costs of setting up small projects towards rapidly changing thematic areas (Barr et al., 2003).

Edwards (1997) concludes: “In practice, there is nothing magical about NGOs as organisations that enables them to resolve these complex learning dilemmas, whatever their comparative advantages in theory” (p. 4). The accountability wave and positivistic paradigms that dominate the aid landscape significantly limit the space practitioners have to experiment, look out for the surprise elements etcetera. Referring to education professionals, Van der Linden (2016) problematises that education organisations

externalise knowledge from the professional. “Many professionals, willingly or unwillingly, follow the prescribed steps without really observing or hearing the learners. The textbooks may be very good, based on many years of experience in teaching, and the primers may assure that the right knowledge and skills are taught, but even then they should not blur the sight of the learners” (p. 227). The narrow definition of rigour that is operationalised through accountability measures, procedures, guidelines and monitoring and evaluation tools may work for those activities of practitioners that happen in the high grounds, but do little to help them ‘muddle through the lowlands’ (Kunneman, 2016; Van der Laan, 2006).

Before I look at ways in which an alternative paradigm of practice can be operationalised through organisational learning, it is worth noting that development actors are not always unaware of the epistemological mismatch. In fact, there are signs of a growing movement to equip professionals and organisations to act more adaptively and ethically amidst complexity. One example is the Global Learning for Adaptive Management (GLAM) initiative implemented by a coalition of NGOs led by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) (Global Learning for Adaptive Management, 2019). Another example is the Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA) approach, which has been used in several country contexts to collaborate with governments and other partners to find solutions to complex problems (Harvard University, 2021). However, translating these approaches to mainstream practices requires a paradigm shift that demands intentional effort. As mentioned earlier, Guijt (2010) underlined that it is not because of ill-intentions that the accountability paradigm has remained dominant. Chambers (2010) links this to the fact that those with decision-making power are often far away from the realities: “The misfit is little perceived by those furthest from field realities and with most power. But then all power deceives. Recipients do not tell donors what they experience. They think about future funding. Because funds and power are involved, these tightening and constraining shifts pass largely unremarked and unchallenged. And what can be called ‘things procedures’ like the log frame are convenient for understaffed donors: they transfer transaction costs and any blame to those whom they fund” (p. 14). Besides incentives against sharing about the realities and criticising the status quo, dealing with complexity is also complex. It seems like a human tendency is to respond to complexity by trying to control it.

Leaders who don't recognize that a complex domain requires a more experimental mode of management may become impatient when they don't seem to be achieving the results they were aiming for. They may also find it difficult to tolerate failure, which is an essential aspect of experimental understanding. If they try to overcontrol the organization, they will preempt the opportunity for informative patterns to emerge. Leaders who try to impose order in a complex context will fail, but those who set the stage, step back a bit, allow patterns to emerge, and determine which ones are desirable will succeed. (Snowden & Boone, 2007)

In the adult education sector, Nafukho et al. (2011) recognise that complexity can be overwhelming and that therefore managers of lifelong learning programmes should adopt a level of optimism and persistence: "It means that the managers and leaders of organisations involved in relief and development, including adult education organisations, must reject the possibility of defeat and renew their firm commitment to the aims and objectives of their particular organisation. The Swahili proverb – *Penye nia ipo njia* ('Where there is a will there is a way') best captures how challenges facing managers of adult education should be viewed and handled" (p. 224).

From this brief review of literature, a paradoxical picture emerges. If the learning organisation as a concept and practice would be relevant and achievable one would expect (education) NGOs to excel at it. But literature suggests that NGOs are handicapped in facilitating critical learning that enables them to navigate complexity. Despite numerous efforts, NGOs are stuck in the dominant paradigm of accountability (technical rationality). Given that this challenge is not unique to NGOs, in the next section, I review the body of knowledge on organisational learning to explore: how can NGOs work through these tensions and enable reflection-in-action?

2.4.2 From the learning organisation to organisational learning

A first step to help NGOs learn to deal with complexity more effectively is by making a conceptual switch from 'the learning organisation' to 'organisational learning'. Just because NGOs do not meet the ideal type of organisation described by Kelleher and The Gender at Work Collaborative (2002) or Aiken and Britton (1997), does not mean that they do not learn. "Demystifying the learning organisation means stepping back from the false dichotomy between organisations that learn and those that do not" (Lipshitz, Friedman, & Popper, 2007). Lipshitz et al. (2007), comment that instead of focusing on

transforming an entire organisation, we should focus on the processes of learning that can help overcome specific problems. They define organisational learning as: "a conscious and critical process of reflection intended to produce new perceptions, goals, and/or behavioural strategies" (Doving, 1996 as cited in Lipshitz et al., 2007, p. 16). This definition itself does not make it much easier to locate where learning happens, but their multifaceted model might. Organisational learning in this model is located in Organisational Learning Mechanisms (OLMs): "structures that enable organisational members to jointly collect, analyse, disseminate, and apply information and knowledge" (Lipshitz et al., 2007, p. 16). These OLMs are not necessarily formal systems but can happen informally or spontaneously as well. In addition to OLMs as a structural facet of organisational learning, their model considers multiple facets to analyse whether organisational learning is productive or not. For example, the cultural and psychological facets to analyse the influence of cultural norms conducive to learning and the degree of psychological safety, or the context, policy and leadership facts that tease out the possible influence of the organisational context (Lipshitz et al., 2007).

Based on an extensive literature study and multiple empirical studies in a variety of organisations, Marsick and Watkins (2003) identified similar dimensions that make organisations more or less effective at learning:

1. Create continuous learning opportunities: Learning is designed into work so that people can learn on the job; opportunities are provided for ongoing education and growth.
2. Promote inquiry and dialogue: People gain productive reasoning skills to express their views and the capacity to listen and inquire into the views of others; the culture is changed to support questioning, feedback, and experimentation.
3. Encourage collaboration and team learning: Work is designed to use groups to access different modes of thinking; groups are expected to learn together and work together; collaboration is valued by the culture and rewarded.
4. Create systems to capture and share learning: Both high- and low-technology systems to share learning are created and integrated with work; access is provided; systems are maintained.
5. Empower people toward a collective vision: People are involved in setting, owning, and implementing a joint vision; responsibility is distributed close to decision

making so that people are motivated to learn toward what they are held accountable to do.

6. Connect the organisation to its environment: People are helped to see the effect of their work on the entire enterprise; people scan their environment and use information to adjust work practices; the organisation is linked to its communities.
7. Provide strategic leadership for learning: Leaders model, champion, and support learning; leadership uses learning strategically for business results (Marsick & Watkins, 2003, p. 139).

In the context of this research, such multifaceted models may help locate where learning in an organisation happens, who is part of it, who sets the agenda, and what changes it leads to, but also analyse the forces that make such learning effective or not. These models especially identify the internal adjustments organisations can make to learn towards overcoming particular problems – albeit simple or complex.

By locating and analysing OLMs, we can further investigate to what extent the learning that happens is rooted in the transformative reflection-in-action epistemology of practice or the instrumentalist technical rationality – and whether this matches the nature of the problem at hand. For example, whose knowledges are considered in existing OLMs? How effectively do OLMs make explicit the embodied knowledge of practitioners and learners? What changes are made to the curricula and do these changes help learners fit into the status quo or transform it? Consequently, rather than seeking to 'become a learning organisation', this focus on organisational learning provides guidance as to which organisational aspects might be tweaked to create more conducive learning spaces for its members to tackle complexity. This quest will be deeply contextual, Robinson (2001) notes that it may be futile to work towards a universal and generalisable set of learning capabilities and that it could be more worthwhile to look at the particular learning task at hand. To support researchers and practitioners in untangling how OLMs can be shaped by practitioners to fit the environment, Shani and Docherty (2003) introduced the concepts of learning requirements and learning design dimensions. Learning requirements are the conditions posed by the unique work context that practitioners need to work towards for learning to be productive. Learning design dimensions are the various possibilities practitioners have towards achieving these conditions, for example, different learning systems or decision-making processes. In their view, mechanisms could be considered the organisation's capabilities to enact the

learning requirements and dimensions to achieve long-term results. In short, by looking at organisational learning (mechanisms) rather than the learning organisation, researchers and practitioners might more effectively generate practical knowledge to learn to navigate complex work environments.

2.4.3 Field theory to connect individual learning to organisational learning

Organisational learning and OLMs perhaps do not fully demystify how organisations learn as entities. Jarvis (2007) for example comments about Argyris and Schön's classical work on organisational learning: "While Argyris and Schön rightly recognise that learning is personal so that it appears that this type of organisation is person-centred, they are suggesting that when organisational procedures are changed positively as a result of social pressures, then it is what they call organisational learning so that once more we can conclude that organisational learning, as a concept, is not actually learning per se nor necessarily people-centred – but it is change in the right direction" (p. 112). Various authors have attempted to clarify how organisational learning can be conceptualised as a form of human learning that takes place at a supra-individual level. Lipshitz et al. (2007) do this by comparing Organisational Learning Mechanisms (OLMs) to what the central nervous system is to individuals – data is gathered, processed and translated into changes in beliefs, action strategies or goals. And as we have seen, the various multifaceted models of organisational learning illustrate how individuals might be agents for organisational learning, but their learning process is a social one and is influenced by the social context. However, there is one perspective that seems to connect human and organisational learning in a more comprehensive manner; field theory. Friedman and Sykes (2014) pose that field theory does not only help explain the connection between human and organisational learning but actually vanishes this dichotomy: "both individual and organisational learning can be understood in terms of a set of constructs that are neither specifically human nor organisational." (p. 150). To clarify this premise, I first revisit core concepts of field theory and how they can help explain how individuals and organisations learn their way towards meaningful change.

Field theory is developed by leading scholars like Cassirer, Bourdieu and Lewin and can be placed within a relational worldview (Bourdieu, 1977; Friedman, 2011; Friedman, Sykes, & Strauch, 2014; Lewin, 1939). And field theory has been widely applied in organisational research (Friedman, 2011; Friedman et al., 2014; Friedman & Sykes, 2014; Hilgers & Mangez, 2015a; Tatli, Özbilgin, & Karatas-Özkan, 2015). Field theory

assumes that “reality is best grasped as an ordering of elements of perception through a mental process of construction that gives them intelligibility and meaning” (Friedman et al., 2014, p. 4). Social reality is perceived spatially – viewing all actors and properties as interdependent. Through social interactions, people give meaning to properties and relationships and as interactions become patterned, fields emerge within the social space. Each field forms its *symbolic order* – socially constructed meaning and values. Fields also differentiate themselves through a *structure of positions* and relationships between actors (Hilgers & Mangez, 2015b). Organisations could be viewed as fields, with a unique symbolic and structural order, but they also operate in relative autonomy to other fields – such as economic and political fields (Hamadache, 2015; Hilgers & Mangez, 2015b). Scholars such as Lewin and Bourdieu presented field theory as a plea to analyse social phenomena and social change from a comprehensive perspective – acknowledging that due to the interdependence of factors we cannot fully comprehend social phenomena without exploring them in their historical, cultural, economic context and by viewing how human action has shaped a particular field and at the same time is affected by it. To understand how this field theoretical perspective helps connect human learning and organisational learning two concepts are relevant: habitus and social transformation.

In view of relationalism, “fields can be understood as spaces that not only link different elements into a kind of network, but also exert force and shape the behaviour of its constituents.” (Friedman et al., 2014, p. 6). As fields emerge and actors operate in these fields, actors internalise social norms, governing rules, structures and meanings. Bourdieu (1977) refers to this internalisation of the external as ‘habitus’. Through habitus, people are able to *play the game* and pursue what is at stake in a field. As such habitus is a stabilising force – disposing people to act in a reproducing manner. But habitus is also an externalisation of the internal - our cognitive activities, actions and interactions also shape the field. Particularly in situations of ambiguity, spaces emerge where actors can choose to create new meaning, take up new positions, access new forms of capital and as such change the configuration of a field (Friedman, 2011). The discretionary space of practitioners is thus shaped by the field’s configuration (and related fields), but that configuration itself was shaped and developed through the agency of practitioners (Buch, Andersen, & Klemsdal, 2015). Habitus thus suggests that agency and structure are two sides of the same coin – this redefines change as a result of learning too as something that is not specifically human nor organisational (Friedman & Sykes, 2014). This idea of habitus can be connected to one of the core concepts introduced by Argyris (1999) in his

theory of organisational learning: theories-of-action. Argyris too recognised that people are guided by mental models that they developed over time; a set of assumptions about the situation they are in, goals in this situation and follow a logic in choosing an action strategy. Theories-of-action are socially constructed in his view, given we build these assumptions through observing and interacting with our social environment. These theories or mental models become shared over time – creating norms about the way things are done. Organisational learning then becomes an act of revising theories-of-action and establishing whether alternative theories-of-action could lead to more desirable results. It is from this view that single-loop and double-loop learning can be differentiated. “Single-loop learning happens when matches are created, or when mismatches are corrected by changing actions. Double-loop learning occurs when mismatches are corrected by first examining and altering governing variables and then actions.” (Argyris, 1999, p. 68).

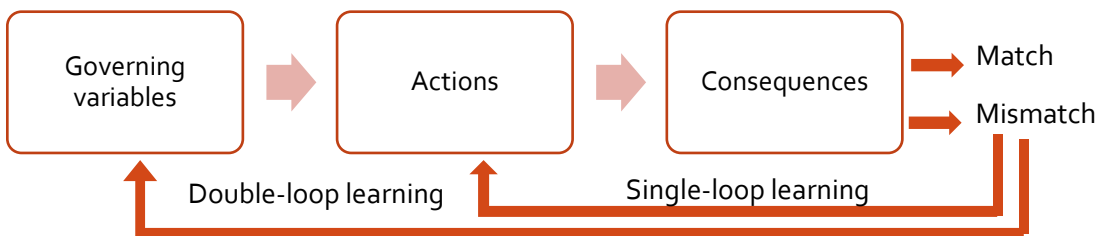


Figure 2 Single-loop and double-loop learning (Argyris, 1999, p. 68)

Both single and double-loop learning have effects on the field and are connected to our mental models that are a result of an internalisation of the field. Though Argyris (1982) warns organisations and facilitators of learning that in many cases single-loop learning allows problems to reoccur considering it does not address the underlying causes. In their review of Lewin and Bourdieu’s work, Friedman and Sykes (2014) reconceptualise learning as: “particular patterns of changes within the structure of a field (e.g., differentiation or restructuring) or the rules governing its behaviour (e.g., habitus). These changes can occur at various levels: within an individual, among individuals, between the individual and the organisation, between groups and the organisation, and between the organisation and its environment. However, the pattern of change is the same regardless of the level.” (p. 150). Friedman (2011) describes six different patterns of change that may occur at any of these levels:

- 1) Differentiation which for an actor, means the division of a large relatively amorphous field into smaller fields with more specific rules of the game and meaning that connected to each in particular configurations.
- 2) Knowing one's place in which actors in the field accept and settle into the positions dictated to them by the rules of the game.
- 3) Migration involves agents moving, or at least trying to move, from one position in the field to another position.
- 4) Emigration involves agents leaving one field and entering into another with a different configuration with different rules of the game and new meanings.
- 5) Forming enclaves involves differentiating a new field within an existing field, but with its own configuration of positions and different rules of the game.
- 6) Transformation, which involves a major reconfiguration of a field and of the rules of the game. (Friedman, 2011, pp. 251-253)

This perspective of learning as trajectories of change, illustrates that learning leads to change in an individual's actions and mindsets but also to changes in the field. Change at any of these levels, means a change in the other level given the processes of internalising the external and externalising the internal (*habitus*). This also poses critical questions about the space individuals are given within a field to pursue certain actions and dispositions and whether aspirations have been biased through processes of power. And to what extent individuals in particular positions of a field are granted (or do perceive) the power to act on alternative value sets and beliefs that may go against the status quo. I explore this critical angle of organisational learning in the next section.

2.4.4 Critical organisational learning towards meaningful lifelong learning programming

Since the concepts of organisational learning and the learning organisation were introduced, authors have raised concerns that if not used critically, these ways of organising could lead to organisations becoming more effective at doing the wrong thing (Argyris, 1999; Jarvis, 2007; Pedler & Hsu, 2019; Symon, 2003). "All such criticisms rest on the idea that organisational learning is not a value-neutral activity but proceeds from values, has implications for values, and is subject to critique in terms of a conception of what is good or right, and for whom" (Argyris, 1999, p. 11). Or as Pedler and Hsu (2019) state: "What is often ignored in this dominant discourse is that learning and any non-reflexive application of knowledge, may lead to uncontrollable outcomes and harm to

people and society" (p. 99). Could field theory, as an overarching framework, offer an antidote for the uncritical nature of mainstream organisational learning theory? I have already illustrated that field theory draws our attention towards reflexivity – a capability that helps practitioners become aware of how their personal beliefs and dispositions are influenced by the field. Depending on the parts of our theories-of-action that change we may achieve more or less transformative change in a field. In this view, organisational learning does not only result in better organisational outcomes in view of the narrowly defined indicators that dominate the technical-rationality paradigm. Rather, the pathways for change introduced by Friedman (2011) illustrate how shifts in positionality, redistribution of capital and the development of new meanings and rules of the game may happen as a result of deeply critical forms of organisational learning. How could NGOs become catalysts of this deep change not just within their organisation, but towards alternative paradigms of practice? How could NGOs offer practitioners spaces to unpack their embodied experiences and approach complex dilemmas reflexively and in a multi-disciplinary manner? One factor that both complicates and enables operationalising these critical forms of organisational learning is that of power.

Though mainstream organisational learning theory is often silent about power and the role of values/normativity (Jarvis, 2007; Pedler & Hsu, 2019), field theory offers tools for a critical analysis of the role of power in organisations and their surrounding fields (Bourdieu, 1977; Hamadache, 2015). Power in this perspective is a multifaceted and dynamic force that is created through an interplay of agency and structure. It is, for example, through habitus that we internalised power structures in a field and are disposed to see limits to the possibilities for us to act in certain ways. Habitus also offers us the ability to operate more effectively within existing power structures, either by learning the rules of the game and accessing forms of capital meaningful to us, or by using forms of 'dominated power' to exert power within power asymmetries. Bourdieu (1977) refers to women, for example, who in societies he studied had no formal power in marriage but could exert power implicitly within the available spaces.

Even when women do wield the real power, as is often the case in matrimonial matters, they can exercise this fully only on condition that they leave the appearance of power, that is, its official manifestation to men; to have any power at all, women must make do with the unofficial power of the *eminence grise*, a dominated power which is opposed to official power in that it can

operate only by proxy, under the cover of an official authority, as well as to the subversive refusal of the rule-breaker, in that it still serves the authority it uses. (p. 41).

This speaks to the concept of dependent agency (or interdependent agency) used by Anderson and Patterson (2017) who “recognise both the existence of neo-patrimonial structures and the ability of individuals to manoeuvre around, reinterpret, utilise, and at times, be constrained by these structures” (p. 6). By focusing on agency, we can analyse how paradigms may be transformed. As Chambers (2010) states: “So paradigm as redefined has to be living and enacted. People are central since it is they who give energy and life to make paradigms work” (p. 42). Finger and Asún (2001) suggest that through reflexivity people can choose to ‘distance’ themselves from problematic paradigms. Driven by a vision for sustainable communities, groups can develop a new praxis rooted in their resistance. This interplay between structure and agency is key in understanding how power influences organisational learning processes. Bourdieu (1977) illustrates that as fields mature those in a position of power do not depend on exerting their power directly – rather methods of influence, dominance and dependency are reinforced through institutional structures. “The absence of a genuine law [...] must not lead us to forget that any socially recognised formulation contains within it an intrinsic power to reinforce dispositions symbolically” (p. 21). This perception of power can support our analysis of organisational learning as a critical practice that helps education NGOs navigate the technical and normative complexity of their work.

First, organisational learning itself is influenced by power and reconstructs or reinforces it. “Because learning is a social activity it is therefore always power-laden: as constructed in specific social settings, which are sites of power relations and political activity, learning activities serve particular purposes” (Pedler & Hsu, 2019, p. 99). As we have seen, the current order which is enforced by the dominant epistemology of practice has influenced how organisations learn, which information is gathered, which questions are asked, and who is included. From Friedman (2011) trajectories of change, we might conceptualise OLMs as fields of their own. If we perceive fields as arenas of power relations, we must observe through which processes the powerful influence what is considered at stake in a field (Bourdieu, 1977; Hamadache, 2015). Since fields exist in relative autonomy to each other, who determines what is at stake is not always within the organisation. Fields could have their symbolic order, power relations, meaning-giving

processes, etcetera. Therefore, OLMs could be a means for individuals to learn 'to know their place' but they could also be enclaves or microcosms with a unique *modus operandi* (Friedman, 2011). The multifaceted models of organisational learning have offered ingredients such as psychological safety and cultural norms that may enable people to be more or less open to critically analyse their lived realities. Field theory adds concepts such as symbolic order, structural order, habitus, positionality and capital, which can further enrich our analysis of current organisational learning practices to understand how these are either enabling practitioners to respond to problems in line with their complexity levels or forcing technical rationality on problems that require reflection-in-action (or adaptive pluralism).

Secondly, organisational learning can offer a space for individuals to exert their power. Through reflexivity, people can become aware of the power dynamics and how these can influence the options one does or does not perceive. In his work with Israeli schools, Friedman (2011) illustrates how a reflective approach helped education practitioners open up new solution spaces. In this case, practitioners reflected on the mental models guiding their action strategies and were able to reframe the situation. By looking differently at problematic situations, they were able to unlock new solution spaces. While habitus is shaped by the field, it does not limit individuals to only those actions that reproduce the way the field is configured. Individuals do have the power to reshape 'how things are done'. Reflexivity is a capability that requires intentional effort by the individual and the organisation in which they work. This is because it has to overcome defensive routines and self-sealing processes at both individual and structural levels (Argyris, 2010). At the individual level, Bourdieu (1977) illustrates that as people develop habitus, they become unaware of the rules governing their actions: "The explanation agents may provide of their own practice, thanks to quasi theoretical reflection on their practice, conceals, even from their own eyes, the true nature of their practical mastery, i.e. that is learned ignorance (*docta ignorantia*), a mode of practical knowledge not comprising knowledge of its own principles" (p. 19). Like Bourdieu, Argyris (2010) found that people are often unaware of their actual dispositions, beliefs and norms (our theories-in-use) and he adds that we often espouse different beliefs than those actually guiding our actions (our espoused theories). For example, a manager may say they have an open-door policy and that they want staff to share openly about challenges, yet their actions are guided by an objective to cover up challenges to save face. What makes double-loop learning – or reflexivity on the field dynamics – difficult

according to Argyris (2010) is that when we become aware of inconsistencies in our actions, defensive routines are triggered which can result in self-sealing processes. For example, the manager at some point may assign high-profile projects to those staff who praise his work and do not bring up challenges – a trend that in itself may become undiscussable. Argyris' work on organisational learning has been criticised for being uncritical about the role of power. However, I join Bokeno (2003) in reading Argyris' concept of double-loop learning as a potentially critical learning project. Inspired by field theory one can analyse connections between mental models, positionality and power dynamics that influence what is considered desirable or even discussable. Therefore, if we develop double-loop learning skills, we might also gain (and extend to others) power to revise how success is framed and align our actions to what is meaningful to us and those we are trying to support. It is not only personal defensive routines and self-interest that limit reflexivity; organisations are also generally not modelled towards supporting it, as I have illustrated.

An analysis of critical organisational learning thus should take into account which self-sealing processes may hinder reflexivity from happening - from the individual level to the wider field of lifelong learning for development. This requires us to look beyond the espoused theories-of-action and find ways to uncover theories-in-use. OLMs too can be evaluated for their capacity to make explicit these theories-in-use and the level of change occurring as a result of collective learning. And learning can be evaluated by its impact on the power structure and agency of individuals to act on alternative rules of the game. In addition, following Bourdieu's interpretation of field theory, it would also be important to avoid the pitfall of 'demanding a logic of practice that is not that of practice'. He warns of the theorisation effect: "One thus has to acknowledge that practice has a logic that is not that of logic, if one is to avoid asking of it more logic than it can give, thereby condemning oneself either to wring incoherences out of it or to thrust upon it a forced coherence" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 109). Theories-of-action, therefore, may be useful to explain the interconnectedness between mental models, actions and the socialisation processes through which they are developed – they should be used with care not to oversimplify human action. "Practical logic – practical in both senses of the word – is able to organise the totality of an agent's thoughts, perceptions, and actions by means of a few generating principles, themselves reducible in the last analysis to a fundamental dichotomy, only because its whole economy, which is based on the principles of the economy of logic, presupposes a loss of rigour for the sake of greater simplicity and

generality and because it finds in “polythesis” the conditions required for the correct use of polysemy” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 110). Thus, when it comes to practical knowledge, especially phronesis, there is a level of fuzziness implied.

2.5 Conclusion – a framework for inquiry

In this chapter, I portrayed the lifelong learning for development landscape in Uganda to illustrate the technical and normative complexities practitioners in education NGOs could encounter. From this portrait, I discussed the dominant epistemology of practice – technical rationality or neo-Newtonian – in light of alternative paradigms: reflection-in-action and adaptive pluralism. To operate in complex environments, practitioners would benefit from articulating and generating phronesis, a practical form of knowledge that does not only guide on how to act competently but also justly. This type of knowledge is generated through deliberation and involvement of multiple knowers, and because it includes all knowledges, organisations become important knowledge actors. Organisational learning is commonly associated with the knowledge-generating and adaptation abilities of organisations. However, I illustrated that organisational learning should be shaped in line with learning requirements that a work context (and desired paradigm) presents. This calls for a more critical theory of organisational learning. From the literature review and theoretical frameworks discussed above, I derive five premises that could guide our quest to improve organisational learning in education NGOs as a means to more meaningful lifelong learning opportunities in Uganda.

1. Because organisational learning requirements are contextual and organisational activities are in constant flux, it is most useful to focus on organisational learning – in particular OLMs – rather than the concept of the learning organisation. By analysing these spaces of learning we can explore how well these processes fit to address specific problems an organisation is trying to grapple with. This is also a reason why this chapter first mapped the field of lifelong learning for development in Uganda to understand which learning requirements this practice presents to practitioners and organisations.
2. To identify levers for transformative change – in and outside the organisation – we should avoid a dichotomy between individuals and social systems. Rather, through concepts such as the field and habitus, we can analyse the interconnectedness between the two. This provides lenses to analyse and facilitate reflexivity on

theories-in-use and effect change not only in action strategies, but also beliefs, assumptions and goals, as well as self-sealing and defensive routines that could hinder us from 'acting justly'.

3. Power should be an object of study in research on organisational learning – especially in the development context. The history of lifelong learning for development in Uganda and the positionality of education NGOs present a dynamic and complex web of power dynamics that may sustain and reinforce a status quo in which lifelong learning remains narrowly defined and unavailable to an excluded majority.
4. Deeper insights into these dynamics can be gained from a detailed analysis of specific cases in which theories-in-use may be reconstructed. This should happen with the practitioners to make sense of their lived realities and through a methodology that is sensitive to power dynamics and defensive routines that may be triggered by such a reflexive process.
5. Generalisations about critical organisational learning in complex contexts should consider the same epistemological premises of reflection-in-action and phronesis: this knowledge is subjective and contextual. Field theory as reflexive sociology, however, offers an opportunity to identify how the interplay between context, learning requirements and the effectiveness of OLMs may occur, which could hint at generative principles that could occur across contexts.

The conceptual framework offered by field theorists seems to offer a critical yet pragmatic framework to shape these analyses together with practitioners. Field theory provides conceptual lenses that guide inquiry, but also a premise about agency that can inspire change. Before illustrating how these theoretical lenses helped us analyse and improve organisational learning in education NGOs in Uganda, I first present the research methodology used to shape a collaborative process of inquiry.