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The normative practitioner

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5. Towards collective learning between communities and NGOs: reflections on a series of temporary learning spaces in Central-Eastern Uganda¹⁰

Abstract

Contemporary development models present collective learning as an important means to tackle complex problems. NGOs have several mechanisms in place to facilitate learning with and from communities, however, these do not always realise authentic participation and meaningful programme adjustments. In a participatory research in Central-Eastern Uganda, we investigated community perceptions about community-NGO collaboration. In this chapter, we present findings, along with our reflections on the learning spaces that emerged in the research and what these can tell us about collective learning for adaptive programming, taking into account power dynamics, heterogeneity of communities, normative complexity and contextualism.

5.1 Introduction

I think you have also heard from the youths themselves, there hasn't been any programme designed for youths that has succeeded. They come and call

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us to meetings, we dedicate our time, but in the end the programme does not succeed.

Faith, youth, female, community-NGO meeting

In Uganda, the majority of the population is under twenty-five years of age. To tap into the potential of this youth bulge, numerous initiatives are launched to help youth succeed. In Faith's village, for example, eighteen NGOs – largely unaware of each other – offer a variety of youth development interventions. Yet, according to Faith none of them has succeeded. In 2018, a participatory research in Faith's village in Central-Eastern Uganda revealed areas where NGOs did and did not succeed in aligning their programmes to youth development needs and opportunities. This research aimed at understanding how the community prefers to collaborate with NGOs. By doing so, the study sought to support NGOs in improving their collective learning mechanisms towards meaningful youth programming.

Contemporary development approaches stress the importance of collaboration (across disciplines and actor spaces) to solve complex problems (Chambers, 2010; Guijt, 2010; Neely, 2015; OECD, 2019; Ramalingam et al., 2014). Ramalingam et al. (2014) suggest that through adaptive programming, NGOs should search for best fit solutions within specific contexts, rather than universal best practices. Does Faith's remark imply that NGOs in her village are not searching for contextual solutions? A glance at the literature suggests that it is not necessarily the lack of effort that prevents NGOs from learning and making meaningful adaptations (Guijt, 2010; Ramalingam, 2013; Roper & Pettit, 2002). Anyidoho (2010) and Cornwall (2002) portray collective learning as a delicate practice and encourage facilitators to be mindful of the situated nature of learning, the role of power and the heterogeneity of communities. As illustrated in chapter 2, others have attributed the difficulty of authentic learning to pressures in the field of aid that incentivise a focus on pre-set theories of change and quick results (Guijt, 2010; Ramalingam, 2013).

In this chapter, we complement existing literature on collective learning and participatory, adaptive development by presenting a community perspective on how collective learning can be shaped towards developing better fitting interventions, particularly for youth. The findings presented here were generated through a participatory research that itself revealed interesting facets of collective learning. As co-authors, we offer different perspectives on what occurred: Marit as the facilitating

researcher, Sophia as an NGO representative and Jacques as research supervisor. At the centre of this paper are insights shared by village members during interviews and dialogues, as well as turning points observed during the research as a result of their agency. Using a field theoretical lens, we reconstruct the learning trajectory that emerged and analyse the dimensions and outcomes of the learning spaces that were created. Finally, we present practical implications for practitioners seeking to facilitate collective learning as a situated practice, in a power-sensitive manner and taking into account diversity of values. We hope to demonstrate an optimistic account to readers; illustrating how one-off spaces for collective learning can facilitate small but significant changes towards meaningful adaptive programming.

5.2 Viewing collective learning spatially

Underlying this PhD research is a field theoretical perspective to illustrate how learning practices of NGOs are shaped, expanded and limited through a dynamic interplay of forces in the field of development and the agency of those involved. Field theorists such as Lewin (1939) and Bourdieu (1977) conceptualise reality as a social space that is formed through social interaction and action. Over time, when these interactions become patterned, fields emerge – which are internalised models of reality. Actors such as NGOs, governments, donors, and citizens, take up various positions in this field, forming an intricate web of power relations. Power is a strong force in the process of determining what is considered meaningful, acceptable and treated as a priority (Bourdieu, 1977). Chapter 4 already illustrated that the intermediary position of NGOs creates a unique force field with clashing interests of donors, governments and communities. In this arena of power, NGOs have to navigate normative complexity caused by ambiguity and value contradictions (Kunneman, 2016).

If we view reality as a socially constructed concept, learning can be seen as a possible force to reconfigure this reality and push perceived limits to action. In this research, we conceptualise collective learning as spaces wherein different actors come together to collaboratively analyse information and through interaction revise beliefs, assumptions, meaning and action strategies (inspired by Lipshitz et al., 2007). These spaces can form fields too, made up by participants, (power) relationships, meaning-giving processes and capital. Potentially, such collective learning spaces can be shaped to reconfigure elements of the field (Cornwall, 2002; Friedman, 2011). Below, we explore

how learning spaces and their outcomes can be characterised from a field theoretical perspective to help overcome common blind spots in collective learning: power and heterogeneity of thought.

By viewing collective learning spatially, several dimensions surface that can characterise these spaces. Cornwall (2002) suggests two dimensions: the temporal dimension and location of impetus. The first refers to the duration of a space – is it a one-time event or is it institutionalised and recurring? The second dimension describes who sets the agenda: it can be those in positions of power extending an invitation to participate or it can be a grassroots effort. Lipshitz et al. (2007) in their work on organisational learning further highlight that learning spaces can be formal or informal; some are spontaneously emerging and others are intentionally designed. They also differentiate spaces according to their location, either embedded in the primary work process or external to these. Lastly, they characterise spaces through the participants, who could be internal or external actors. In short, spaces for collective learning can be defined by who takes part, how participants relate, who sets the learning agenda, durability, location and the power dynamics at play. Cornwall (2002) argues that by being aware and intentional about these dimensions we can strengthen participatory development.

Secondly, from a spatial perspective, outcomes of learning can be characterised in terms of their effect on the field. Friedman (2011) differentiates six pathways of change as a result of learning. Four of these leave the field intact: differentiation, knowing one's place, migration and emigration – these trajectories help people find their way in existing fields. Two trajectories create *new fields*. One is *forming enclaves*: a temporary or localised field with new governing rules emerges within an existing field. The other is *transformation*: reconfiguring an entire field. These six pathways help identify whether learning reproduces or transforms the status quo. The five cycles of value creation of Wenger, Trayner, and De Laat (2011) widen our horizon to ask who benefits from learning and in what manner. The cycle of *immediate value* draws attention to the value inherent to participating – such as having fun or meeting people. Secondly, there is *potential value* in form of knowledge that could facilitate change in future. The third is *applied value*, leading to change in practice connected to the fourth – *realised value*, referring to improvements in performance. And lastly *reframing value* whereby participants redefine success. Together, these concepts help evaluate learning for its

subtle yet substantial influence on the status quo. Before reconstructing our learning spaces, we describe the methodology used.

5.3 Methodology

This paper presents a sub-study of Marit's PhD research on organisational learning in education NGOs. Using a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach, Marit facilitated cycles of action and reflection with an NGO working in Central-Eastern Uganda. Reflecting on their practice, the team realised some of their collective learning efforts were ineffective and asked themselves: "how do community actors prefer to be engaged throughout the project cycle?" They wanted to investigate this further in the context of the PAR, but designing this sub-study presented two dilemmas related to the authentic participation of community members. First, earlier in the research, the team had problematised not receiving critical feedback from community actors – they felt their involvement would hinder gathering authentic views. Secondly, PAR as an approach seeks to solve problems of concern to participants, yet in this case, an NGO raised the issue, not the community. To overcome these dilemmas, the NGO team and Marit opted to conduct this as a separate sub-study of the PAR. For this purpose, Marit recruited three research assistants to form an external research team and widened the research tools to inquire about all NGOs in the locality, not just the case-study NGO. Most importantly, through the initial research activities, the research team investigated whether the problem identified by the NGO mattered to the community and provided an opportunity to influence the direction of the research.

Table 14 presents an overview of the research activities. Inspired by field theory, the interviews and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) aimed at mapping the field of youth development in the village, including issues youth care about, actors, existing initiatives and ways in which youth and other community members like to relate with NGOs. The tools were developed by Marit and volunteers of the case study NGO helped contextualise these tools. The FGD tool included visualisation exercises – which invited participants to map their village and important places for youth, as well as knowledge networks. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, in the local language, and participants were selected through a snowballing method.

During a community dialogue, preliminary insights from interviews and FGDs – analysed by the research team – were presented for feedback. Based on the proposal from

participants in this meeting, a community-NGO meeting was organised to present recommendations to NGOs operating in the village. The organising committee met a few more times to plan for this NGO meeting. Details on the methodology of these activities are integrated into the findings section.

Table 14. Community research activities and participants

Seq.	Activity	Data collection method	Participants
1	Data collection about community perceptions	Focus Group Discussion Interviews	Female youth group members (9) Local leaders (2) Young male (5) Young female (5) Elders (5) Business people (3) Health worker (1) Head teacher (1)
2	Community dialogue	Dialogue, brainstorm	Young male (4) Young female (5) Adult male (3) Adult female (4) Incl. local leaders, religious leaders, elders, health worker, teacher, youth
3	Organising committee meetings	Action planning, meeting minutes	Community representatives (4)
4	Community-NGO meeting	Community feedback, Dialogue	Community members (37) NGO representatives (15) District and local government officials (4)
5	Spin-off	Field notes	n/a

All recorded interviews and meetings were transcribed and translated. In preparation for this manuscript, Marit analysed these transcripts using ATLAS.ti guided by the theoretical framework presented earlier as well as emerging issues (Hennink et al., 2011). Six code groups emerged: youth development status quo, actors, relationship aspects,

perceptions of NGOs, positionality and agency, and space dimensions. The analysis further occurred during conversations between the co-authors.

Ethical considerations

To enable informed consent, research objectives and the possibility to opt out were explained in the local language. Some members opted out or preferred to remain off-record. Before the study, approval was sought from the district government as well as village leadership. The overall PhD research was cleared by the Uganda National Council of Science and Technology. In line with the promised data protection, only Marit accessed interview and dialogue transcripts. Sophia only accessed the transcript of the community-NGO meeting in which she participated. The data were pseudonymised and the names included in this paper are aliases. Lastly, the research assistants signed a statement committing to ethical data collection and management procedures.

5.4 Findings

5.4.1 Setting the scene

To situate this research, we first describe the village context. In terms of youth development, participants stressed similar issues mentioned in the national discourse: unemployment, early school leaving, lack of skilling opportunities and early pregnancy. Looking at these matters in the local context provided insight into the dynamics shaping youth aspirations and choices: like the influence of gender, religion, industrial development, and role models. Participants mentioned several local initiatives to address these issues. For example, youth groups running income-generating activities, local artisans offering apprenticeships or youth receiving counselling from local leaders. The family unit, too, is a space where youth seek support to advance their goals –mothers especially were ascribed an important role. There is also *parliament*: an informal space where boys and girls meet separately to discuss issues of interest. The interviews not only revealed a large number of community initiatives, but in addition eighteen NGOs were identified by the research participants. These NGOs were known for several programmes such as building houses, health education, vocational skills training, savings and credit, and education support.

Community members mentioned several issues about the way NGOs run programmes for and with youth. Some noted a mismatch between programmes offered and youths' needs; youth would like more support in accessing market opportunities

through capital or vocational skills training as well as talent development in sports. Some mentioned family planning, on the other hand, is less relevant to them.

I don't usually follow, because when they pass around announcing the event, and they say: "the people of [this village] please come to [the village] primary school, there are things we want to teach you about your marriage lives, family planning." Then me who is not married, what would I be looking for there?

Pamela, youth, female, interview 22

Another issue members noted is that NGOs tend to work with the same people and exclude others. This was partly associated with community gatekeepers who influence what kind of participants are selected.

The problem is, most organisations when they come, they select the leaders in the community and they fail to deliver to us here.

Joseph, youth, male, interview 7

Several participants mentioned that NGOs made unfulfilled promises; sometimes these were *briefcase* organisations that solicited money for non-existent programmes. Overall, the first stage of this research helped to consolidate scattered information about the various initiatives for youth development and identify areas of overlap and misalignment. This more comprehensive knowledge acted as a trigger for the research process to become more collective.

5.4.2 Establishing a mutual agenda

The interviews and FGD showed traces of dependent agency – it seemed that some participants adopted a vocabulary aimed at accessing resources of interest to them (Anderson & Patterson, 2017). In six interviews, participants articulated support requests directed at the researcher. Marit had stayed away from the interviews to avoid being associated with NGOs as a white person. Still, despite the efforts of the research assistants to build rapport and create an informal atmosphere, the interviews seem to have mimicked conversations that NGOs conduct in communities. The logic of research apparently looks a lot like the logic of NGOs. The learning trajectory, however, took on a more collective nature during the validation dialogue. At this point, the relationship between the participants and the research team had strengthened during mobilisation.

Members had expressed a sense of surprise to see the research team returning – something they did not expect based on prior experiences with NGOs and researchers.

During the dialogue, the methodology explicitly aimed at collaboratively giving meaning to the findings and identifying the next steps. To open up a conversational space, the research assistants facilitated the dialogue in the local language (Angucia et al., 2010). This led to a lively conversation with members confirming, nuancing or contrasting findings (though young women participated visibly less in the plenary discussions). The dialogue opened a space where community members discovered the extent and implications of the problems surrounding community-NGO collaboration.

My thinking is that the problem has been there, but these people [refers to research team] have given us chance to talk about it.

Bagamba, adult, male, community dialogue

At the end of the meeting, participants brainstormed recommendations for NGOs, themselves as a community, and the local government. Strong recommendations for NGOs included: engage youth from the start and give them leadership in projects, clarify the organisation's agenda, include multiple community stakeholders, facilitate continuous touch-points and feedback loops, and connect with existing initiatives for youth development. Participants of the dialogue also noted that they as community members could more proactively support NGOs in search of better coordination. They recommended that government should regulate the work of NGOs and demand accountability. When the researcher asked what participants wanted to do with their insights, they unanimously answered that the NGOs should come for a meeting so they could share their feedback face-to-face.

The best idea that would work well if there is a chance to call all NGOs [...] and we talk to them face-to-face. It could help better than just report about findings.

Reverend, adult, male, community dialogue

To operationalise this idea, four representatives were elected to form an organising committee – intentionally ensuring equal representation of male/female and adult/youth. During a planning meeting with Marit, the committee suggested that youth should receive the majority of speaking time and that their main recommendation as

organisers was to form a *community-coordinating committee* that could act as a focal point for NGOs. So far, research activities enabled participating community members and the research team to form a mutual agenda, which was realised by organising a meeting to share feedback with all NGOs operating in the community.

5.4.3 *Turning the tables: zooming in on the community-NGO meeting*

Considering NGOs are usually in the driving seat, we could not be sure whether the NGOs would honour the community's invite. Sixteen NGOs were traced and invited through the Internet and district government officer and eventually, eight NGOs and the district NGO network were represented in the community-NGO meeting. In addition, a large number of youths was represented, as well as various local leaders. Whilst this was a diverse audience, one of the youths underlined that we may not be able to speak about representation.

We don't even make 100 but it's like we are representing a whole parish or a full sub-county. Many people are out there in the communities that would have loved to be helped but when they are not aware of the ongoing programmes. [...] If you had organised 'motor-drives' [...] or maybe put up a communal event like football match, many of the youths would be here by now.

Balondemu, youth, male, community-NGO meeting

A fellow PhD student from the region facilitated the meeting. He is well-versed with the local language and the vocabulary of local government, NGOs and the community – an important ingredient for establishing conversational space (Angucia et al., 2010). A research assistant provided real-time translations to enable participation for all. The room was set up in a semi-circle, creating a physical sense of equality. However, an impromptu *high table* was created by a local leader, putting selected senior people in front. After general introductions, youth were invited to share their feedback. In the second half of the meeting, NGOs and leaders were asked to respond. To characterise the learning space that emerged we present three scenarios; two that display a clash of logics and one that presents synergy.

Scenario 1 – Unfilled promises or unfulfilled requirements?

The first scenario illustrates how the logic of youth does not always correspond with the logic of NGOs. In this scenario, Patricia shares how she supported an NGO in mobilising

fellow teen mothers to start a project. She felt swindled by the local volunteer; they had collected money for registration of their group at the district but never received start-up capital as promised.

There was an NGO that came; [...] they even gave me power to lead. [...] So, when it came, I collected the teen young mothers below eighteen years. When we began, they requested for money from us I understand 'for registration', each of us paid. [...] It reached a time, and they sent us money, and it reached a time and they left. [...]. So, it's from that point that I say, for us that they always make to run up and down, how do we benefit from? As the community contact persons keep on eating up the money, they send to us.

Patricia, youth, female, community-NGO meeting

A headteacher supported her point by noting that the NGO volunteer was inexperienced. In response, a representative from the NGO explained that the volunteer was recommended by 'the community' and therefore the NGO could not be fully held responsible for his actions. In addition, she explained the group did not receive capital because they did not meet the requirements in time.

So, most of the things [the volunteer] used to tell them and they could not mind. [...] He told them to register at the sub-county because they give you money after you have registered; they did not. They were asked for a business plan; which business do you want and how are you going to run it? They did not do it. [...] They never did any of those. So, what they did, [the volunteer] got another group.

Agnes, NGO practitioner, female, community-NGO meeting

Agnes' final statement was that ultimately teenage mothers in the community did benefit, just a different group. Both parties had an explanation about what happened that made sense given their positionality. The facilitator framed this as an example of miscommunication, explicitly underlining that the meeting was not meant as a tribunal. As an external observer, Marit felt disappointed – in light of collective learning she was hoping for people to engage in inquiry to find out how such a miscommunication could have emerged, rather than advocacy. For Sophia this moment was uncomfortable too, raising questions around mutual accountability, ownership and responsibility.

Scenario 2 – Why are youth not benefiting from the NGO programmes?

A second scenario illustrates various conflicting perspectives about who carries a responsibility to create *best fit* interventions. Several youths shared sentiments in line with that of Faith: NGO programmes are not relevant for youth or fail to reach those youth who need it most.

They waste our time, like an NGO [name]; they used to pick us from school to go and participate in their programmes, for outreaches. They could tell our parents that they would pay for us school fees and later on they fail to do what they have promised. Yet they have wasted all our time working and participating in their programmes. To people like us, those things hurt so much.

Hasifa, youth, female, community-NGO meeting

When given their turn, NGOs provided several responses to the youths' feedback. In her field notes, Marit categorised these remarks as justifying, clarifying or defending their approach; calling for coordination; requesting youth to participate more actively; or, promising to report the youths' feedback to the headquarters. Joseph, for example, invited youth to actively find out what his NGO offers.

But I also encourage the youth, to really look out for the friends that are working with [our NGO] in the community and ask them: "what is that exactly you are offering and how can we be part?"

Joseph, NGO practitioner, male, community-NGO meeting

William stressed that programmes fail because of various challenges faced by youth.

The youths have frustrated us [...] We sponsor, they drop out with no clear reason. [...] The girls have done so much to get themselves pregnant, as they abandon money invested in them. So, my request to other NGOs, we should address the cause.

William, NGO practitioner, male, community-NGO meeting

Overall, NGO representatives seemed to engage more in advocacy – stating their views on why programmes were not successfully serving youth. This provided insight into the NGO perspective on hindrances faced when trying to engage youth, but did not contribute to an inquiry into causes or solutions. In response, one of the community

organisers introduced the idea of the coordinating committee – though not very elaborately – which could be a lever for collective learning and youth engagement.

If you want these programmes to move, like we equally do, we are requesting that let there be collaboration between NGOs and community members [...] So that there can be a committee to coordinate. [...] Coming to the community when people don't know you, what will be your destination?

Bagamba, adult, male, community-NGO meeting

At this point, no one responded to this suggestion. Instead, what emerged was a back-and-forth between NGOs and the local government about gaps in regulation and coordination. During this part of the meeting, the youth did not participate in the plenary conversation.

I would like to encourage all of the local leaders: [...] you need to take an interest in all the programmes that are running, an active interest. Because quite often organisations come to bring a new programme completely unaware that there were other programmes doing exactly the same thing because no one is sharing that information.

Margareth, NGO practitioner, female, community-NGO meeting

In a reflection interview with the case study NGO, one of their members noted that NGO representatives in the meeting may have been trying to save face for the government officials who could choose to discontinue their programmes. The clash of logics in scenarios 1 and 2 triggered feelings of discomfort and also led to interesting insights about the power dynamics and values guiding lifelong learning interventions.

Scenario 3 – A small synergy

Whereas the second scenario illustrated the conversation straying away from the youth's needs and preferences, at some point a small synergy did emerge. Fatuma, a young woman, expressed that instead of family planning she would like to learn how to make sanitary pads.

So, me I suggest for us that don't benefit from family planning, if you could come up and teach us about things that benefit us as girls. For example, learning how to make handmade pads.

Fatuma, youth, female, community-NGO meeting

Two NGO representatives guided Fatuma on where she may access an opportunity to learn this skill. One of them was Margareth, who explained the local headteacher could be of help.

The lady who said about making pads, I don't know where you are. We have a programme of making pads. So please seek out the head teacher of [school name], and you can come and learn how to make pads.

Margareth, NGO practitioner, female, community-NGO meeting

This scenario revealed how coming together could lead to resourceful solutions – first of all by knowing who is doing what. Several NGO practitioners appreciated this meeting for providing a platform for everyone to learn what NGOs are doing in this locality – leaving some longing for more.

And in my view, it's not also about finding the culprits [...] but to appreciate that there will always be gaps. But then the question is; spaces like this don't need to be events but it should be a process where we come and talk about these things and see, how can we move forward.

Joseph, NGO practitioner, male, community-NGO meeting

5.5 Discussion: taking stock

As illustrated by Faith's quote in the introduction and during the community-NGO meeting, NGOs may not always succeed in meeting the expectations of their participants. In this research, community members had several suggestions for NGOs on how they could engage them in finding best fit programmes that are more inclusive, just and relevant. Overall, community members underlined a motto often used by NGOs as well: 'nothing for us without us'. By reconstructing our short participatory research process, we unveiled additional insights into the dynamic nature of collective learning. For example, developing collective knowledge about the status quo of youth development turned out to be an important stepping stone to set a mutual learning agenda. Although the different learning spaces were all temporary and quite formal, over time the spaces started showing different locations of impetus and included a growing and more diverse number of participants. These spaces were in no way perfect – power

dynamics did bias who spoke and not everyone was fully aligned on the goals. So, we could ask: How much value did these one-off spaces create for improved collaboration between communities and NGOs? And what can we learn from this experience about shaping collective learning spaces? Table 15 provides a summary of the trajectory and our key observations on the dimensions and value of each space. Though we have not followed up with all participants of this research trajectory, from our perspective we particularly identify layers of immediate, potential and reframing value (Wenger et al., 2011). It may seem disappointing that the application of insights gained was limited and realised value remained invisible within our research process, but we do feel that the layers of the value of Wenger et al. (2011) help us appreciate the smaller successes that could trigger realised value in future.

Table 15 Summary of the collective learning trajectory

	Space	Observations about the space	Value creation
1	Interviews & FGD	Unilateral, triggered a dominant NGO modus operandi - acts of dependent agency to solicit for projects/support.	Knowledge capital for the research team: capability to navigate the site; understanding the great variance in the community; knowing who is who and what is important.
2	Community dialogue	The power exerted on community members to influence research direction, though girls less space to speak.	Improved relationship between community and research team, mutual learning agenda. The potential value in form of various action ideas; suggesting reframing value due to changing role of the community in influencing NGO interventions.
3	Committee meetings	Hybrid space: co-led to critically examine ideas for a way forward.	Applied value in form of executing action plans and small steps towards capability development to lead in an initiative holding NGOs accountable.
4	Community-NGO meeting	Community set the agenda and extended the invite – supported by an external neutral facilitator. First half: youth took the lead. Second half: intricate power dynamics	Immediate value in contacts made and success experience for organisers. The potential value in terms of knowledge on who cares for what holding which logic – testing assumptions held about youth perceptions.

between NGO & local government.

5 Spin-off	Grey area of responsibility and lacking capabilities to push forward coordinating committee locally.	Applied value in first steps taken towards coordinating committee and liaison with district official. Small realised value: NGOs returning to provide more information and community members asking local leaders for NGO contacts.
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A spatial perspective helped us view the community-NGO meeting as an enclave (Friedman, 2011): it brought together actors who do not normally meet in one space; the agenda was set by people who usually do not set the agenda, and the rules of the game changed, prioritising the views of youth. Such enclaves cannot be orchestrated; they emerged as relationships strengthened and spaces to provide meaning were opened. By minimising the use of dominant norms, we witnessed interesting clashes of logic as well as synergies that revealed a lot about assumptions held and perceptions about the other. To some extent, the community dialogue can be seen as an enclave as well. Though it mimicked a more conventional research validation setting, this space did allow synthesis of knowledge and creation of new meaning about the work of NGOs and their role in collaboration. The spaces emerging in this sub-study illustrate that – even though temporary – enclaves can result in reframing value as shared definitions of success emerge and relationships change (including power components of relationships). We too have reframed our definition of success; we appreciate the emergent, slow and messy nature of learning and learned to accept change as a series of smaller shifts in the way we relate and understand each other. Power has revealed itself as a multi-directional force – something that can be extended to ‘another’ and something that is not absolute. By untangling hidden encumbrances in the field of youth development we revealed why it is difficult to understand each other and what it might take to achieve a concerted effort between different actors.

While emphasising that collective learning requires a contextualised approach, we do want to share a few insights that could help practitioners in facilitating collective learning. We recognise that there are various practical limits to engage in collective learning – sometimes only allowing short and low-cost interactions within a project period. We hope that the pointers below help to creatively tap into the opportunities for meaningful collective learning amidst these tensions.

1. *Investing in conversational space* – To open up a conversational space, we found it helpful to develop an understanding of the status quo: what field currently emerges around the development problem, who plays what role and how do people currently relate? Some curiosity is beneficial to see beyond a specific programme model; what spaces and opportunities already exist that you could connect with? Familiarity and being present helped strengthen our learning relationship too, dismantling traditional power facets. Rooted in their understanding of the context, facilitators can select fitting methodology and identify who to invite. Certain methods such as dialogue can extend power to those people whose voices are commonly left out. Regarding the venue, in this case, the organising committee chose a place they were comfortable in – but one could also opt to choose a venue that is 'un-normal'. Lastly, choosing a competent moderator can greatly help open up the conversational space. In this case, we involved a neutral person who could open-mindedly explore the viewpoints of various actors.

2. *Embracing emergence* – Collective learning is unpredictable and we encourage those facilitating collective learning processes to be open-minded and leverage both institutionalised spaces as well as fleeting spaces (such as informal encounters at the football pitch). Building on existing initiatives and through continuous interaction, participants can establish a mutual learning agenda. Consequently, for NGOs, it may not be possible to set targets around the number and type of collective learning activities before programme implementation. Practitioners will have to use their discretionary space and adjust plans in conversation with (funding) partners. We are hopeful that the cycles of value and space dimensions provide an invaluable language to make 'small' changes visible and to articulate a contextual approach to collective learning and adaptive programming.

3. *Dealing with discomfort* – Both Sophia and Marit experienced a sense of discomfort during the community-NGO meeting. We imagine NGO practitioners recognise this when value systems clash or when time and budget limits get in the way of acting on

feedback. But these moments can be pivotal in collective learning and it is useful to learn how to embrace discomfort as a learning opportunity. Such conflicts could trigger reflection on underlying logics and assumptions – what could explain someone’s view and why is this important to them? It could also incite personal reflexivity – why does this situation make me feel uncomfortable and how does my response to discomfort affect my ability to learn from others? These reflections and inquiry do not have to happen in the heat of the (emotionally charged) moment, and resisting the pressure to draw conclusions can benefit inquiry. In addition, it may not always be possible to achieve consensus, but an understanding of what is important to whom can help prioritise actions by various actors – albeit collective or independent action.

4. *Creative partnerships between NGOs, communities and academia* – In our case, it was Marit’s PhD research that triggered this collective learning journey. Her being an engaged outsider did help to transcend the project-lens often applied to collective learning (Van der Kamp, 2002). Other scholars too could explore how they could help facilitate communities of inquiry – including participants from various spaces. They could feed the process by contributing external knowledge and, more importantly, synthesising various contributions made by participants. NGOs too can develop their internal capacity to learn in a boundary-crossing way by equipping staff with the required skills set and providing incentives for an adaptive and critical manner of working.

Since collective learning will take a different shape in various contexts, the field of development would benefit from further research into ingredients of meaningful collective learning and enabling conditions (Cornwall, 2002). This could take shape in form of Participatory Action Research, where practitioners test out various methods and reflect on the spatial dimensions, the value generated and enabling conditions. Researchers could also look at how to include actors commonly left at the periphery, such as business persons or community members who choose not to participate or who have opposing views. It would further be interesting to explore whether Argyris (2002) concept of double-loop learning (which is often associated with the question ‘are we doing the right thing?’) and defensive routines can help achieve more lasting transformative results, such as forming enclaves or full transformation (Friedman, 2011).

5.6 Conclusion

Collective learning is often described as the panacea for adaptive programming towards best fit solutions to complex development problems. However, juggling high and diverse expectations from different parties, NGO practitioners have to execute an act of defiance to take those steps that are fitting a particular situation and facilitate learning that creates a critical understanding of the problems at hand. Our experience in Central-Eastern Uganda illustrated barriers to alignment – such as heterogeneity of thought and power dynamics. By viewing learning in a spatial sense, we identified the humble nature of the change which can emerge through short-lived spaces for collective learning. This perspective helped us see the nuances of collective learning, yielding insights for NGO practitioners as well as community mobilisers who seek to facilitate change amidst complexity. If used reflexively, collective learning provides an opportunity for NGOs to find keys to unexplored, closed doors. We encourage our readers to start small in search of the *best fitting* approach in their development context.

Intermezzo 3 | Working between the edges of partners

By Anonymous Volunteer Educator

As a Volunteer Team Leader on a volunteer-led development programme for 3 months, I was an extension of the staff, which placed me in the position of an intermediary. That is to say, swinging between the edges of the organisation and stakeholders. I was like a car shock absorber, meaning that in case a challenge or problem came up either from volunteers or stakeholders, a Team Leader had to appropriately absorb and respond to all its primary shocks before reaching the organisation. I interacted with local government officials, community and district health workers, heads of schools, local political actors, youth group leaders and host parents. Whereas the role was a challenging undertaking, it rewarded me with learning experiences that I am proud to share. The diversity of experiences I had with stakeholders, volunteers and the entire working environment make it rather tricky to clearly narrate and separate the good and tough moments in the course of my duties. Interestingly, every stakeholder had a different version of telling the story and experience of contributing towards the successful implementation of the programme in rural communities. As a Team Leader I then had to promptly document and submit these narratives to the office. However, this implied that the way in which the Team Leader perceived and/or communicated such stories and experiences directly or indirectly posed a bearing on the future cooperation between that particular stakeholder and the organisation.

For example, it proved difficult working with the District Health Officials, who continuously demanded a Progress Report about the programme implementation, which they claimed they had previously requested from the Programme Officer but it had never been given to them. As a result, the Health Officials threatened to withhold any assistance I needed unless the organisation fulfilled their demands for reports. In addition, following a series of interactions and analyses of the situation during that time, I realized that some headteachers, host parents, district officials and local council leaders had lost genuine interest in working with the NGO. Some host parents, for example, confessed their lack of will to host volunteers, as they needed a break from it. Therefore, frequent concerns by the actors did not only jeopardize our working relationship but also undermined the execution and impact of programme activities. To my dismay, I did not

clearly understand why the organisation's management did not address such demands and concerns even though they were aware of some of them. The team leaders hypothesized that management perhaps did not take enough time to look through and discuss what we (team leaders and volunteers) were reporting about, maybe due to inadequate flexibility of the programme and their working schedules.

While my experience may have been challenging, I picked worthy lessons out of this role, for instance, always documenting and reporting the progress periodically, need for effective communication, levelling expectations, fulfilling commitments and promises, flexibility, responding to the feedback as required, to mention but a few. Relating my experiences to organisational learning, the best strategy for a good learner is continued consideration of the feedback they get, as it is important in improving the process of delivery. Creating time to discuss the feedback and finding possible solutions to the negative feedback is indeed a constructive approach. For instance, it can maintain a stable and cooperative working relationship with not only the stakeholders, but also actual beneficiaries, and upholds the reputation of the organisation. This would in return ease the completion of tasks for the extension staff like volunteers and Team Leaders that are always in the field.