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ABSTRACT

Discussions surrounding participation in development projects often frame knowledge exchanges in a unilateral manner. However, in the implementation of participatory activities by grassroots international nongovernmental organizations (GINGOs), community members frequently serve not only as beneficiaries but have essential impacts on the organizations guiding these participatory engagements. In this study, we examine these reciprocal engagement dynamics through a case study analysis of GINGOs based in the US working on development projects with communities in the Global South. Our analysis details ways these organizations are learning and applying knowledge from communities, and the importance of addressing questions of beneficiaries and power dynamics.

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1. Introduction

Researchers and practitioners frequently examine the engagement of local communities in planning and development projects. Seminal works have attempted to understand the application of these engagements (Arnstein 1969; Choguill 1996) as well as critique the overwhelming emphasis on participation (Hickey and Mohan 2005; Leal 2007). However, one area frequently overlooked in discussions of participatory exchanges are explorations into the directionality of knowledge exchanges. Much of the long-standing conversations surrounding participation often frame the outcomes of participatory engagements in a unilateral manner. For example, studies often focus on how communities are affected by participatory exchanges with organizations, governments, and larger development institutions (Kothari 2005; Gumucio Dagron 2006). This work often fails to address the ways communities may be shaping external bodies initiating the participatory exchanges. In the implementation of participatory activities, there may be instances of two-way exchanges, where community members are not mere beneficiaries of participation but play an essential role on the external individuals and organizations guiding these participatory engagements. Acknowledging this is an important step in recognising novel forms of community agency.

The case of grassroots international nongovernmental organizations (GINGOs) working on development projects uniquely brings this other side of engagement into view. GINGOs represent a growing type of organization working in the development sector that engage in development projects in the Global South from their headquarters in the Global North. GINGOs are frequently defined by their small-scale, heavy reliance on private individual donations, and low budget and operating costs (Appe and Telch 2020). These organizations are also typically founded by individuals without

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formalized training or professional development experience and are often sustained by volunteers, rather than paid staff (Schnable 2015).

In terms of areas of focus, these organizations tend to work on specific development-related activities. The work of GINGOs frequently falls into what Korten (1987) describes as “first-generation” development strategies, which includes a predominant focus on providing relief and welfare services through the provision of goods and services. For example, recent research exploring the programmatic foci of GINGOs (specifically in the case of Canadian GINGOs) has shown that these organizations most frequently engaged in education, health, and social service-related activities and tended to not work in areas requiring large investments and governmental relationships (Davis 2020). For this reason, GINGOs are often better poised to make changes in specific development arenas, rather than addressing large-scale development issues and shifting broader development agendas.

Despite the fact that GINGOs may not be well-positioned to address structural issues, they are able to have a unique influence in the areas where they do work. Scholars note that due to the funding and structure of these types of organizations, they are not as heavily hampered by the accountability concerns and challenges that regulate many NGOs in development (Appe and Telch 2020). For this reason, GINGOs may be less shaped by professional orthodoxy and formalisation and can potentially push forward programmatic approaches that may be in opposition to those of the field experts and elites (Schnable 2015). Furthermore, because of their lack of connection to the established international development structure, these groups are not as burdened by the requirements and demands that influence the activities of larger, more established organizations. As such, they can potentially experiment with how they connect with local communities, incorporate ad hoc ideas, and approach development activities in their day-to-day operations. In many instances, these organizations are uniquely positioned to be guided by their work and their relationships with community partners in the specific spaces where they work.

In this study, we highlight the ways GINGOs working on development projects are able to engage with communities in a manner that falls outside the unilateral outcome framing of participation. To better understand these alternative aspects of participation, we use this paper to focus on this “other side” of engagement. We analyse whether these knowledge exchanges present a unique approach towards participation that is potentially different from the unilateral focus frequently emphasised in the planning and development literature. We attend to the utility of this framing in advocating for a more ethical and equitable approach towards undertaking engagement activities with local communities surrounding development projects in the Global South. Furthermore, this analysis will add to the broader field by expanding our knowledge of how community engagement is used by GINGOs and by presenting alternative forms of critical community engagement that can work to enhance future research and practice in the field of community development.

2. Literature review

2.1. *Involvement of international organizations in the development sector*

Past research and practice have well documented the long, complex, and frequently problematic history of Western involvement by individuals and organizations in the Global South. Much of this early work was carried out through religious missions, with charitable actions centering on everything from evangelization to educational, medical, and agricultural initiatives (Schnable 2016). Activities of this sort continued to dominate international activities until the post-war era, as focus steadily shifted towards more formalized development efforts. With growing interest by Western nations in providing relief and modernization to newly independent states, the predominant focus became establishing the institutions that constitute our modern development sector (Paras 2014). This time period saw the widespread growth of humanitarian organizations, with international NGOs rising as key actors in the development system (Bratton 1989; Schnable 2015). Part of the reasoning

for this expansion can be attributed to the view of NGOs as intermediary bodies that could work directly with communities to address needs more efficiently and effectively than the state (Harsh, Mbatia, and Shrum 2010). While initially NGOs may have been seen as bodies capable of delivering improved outcomes in the Global South, long-standing critiques of the sector have highlighted the ways in which factors such as accountability pressures and government discourses hinder their ability to make substantial development gains (Appe and Telch 2020).

In light of these issues, grassroots international organizations (GINGOs) have emerged as a growing subset of the broader NGO sector. Through the nature of their informal origin stories (tourism, volunteer experience, family ties) and nontraditional leadership (westerners with little to no professional training or experience in development), GINGOs are often able to circumvent the bureaucratic structure that has controlled development activities in the post-war period (Schnable 2016). In addition, scholars note that the growing numbers of GINGOs working in the Global South highlight a significant change in the focus of the field as the sector shifts towards prioritising the decentralisation of international aid (Davis 2020).

While the founding and organizational structure of GINGOs affords opportunities for the advancement of new perspectives, it also presents challenges due to underlying interests and power dynamics. GINGOs are frequently led by volunteers and non-specialists, who often initiate their development work based on emotional drives or out of interests towards gaining fun or hands-on international experiences (Appe and Schnable 2019). Motivations such as these can be highly problematic, as scholars note that emotionally driven justifications for development activities do not necessarily align with improved attitudes or “solidarity” with communities (Mostafanezhad 2013; Haaland and Wallevik 2017). Furthermore, this drive towards emotional connections often works to prioritise the interests of those within the GINGO above the needs of the communities being served, which can result in ineffective decision-making surrounding development activities and continued power imbalances (Appe and Schnable 2019).

2.2. Organizational characteristics, approaches, and changes

Reflecting on the importance of attending to micro-level characteristics of GINGO operations, a meso-level understanding of the ways these organizations work is a critical component of the development process. Research in organizational theory offers input into the ways different organizational characteristics can shape the structure, lifecycle, and approach of organizations (Scott 2008). For instance, one factor that can influence an organization’s work is organizational size, with much of the foundational organizational literature noting that it can be one of the most critical conditions guiding organizational structure. However, despite studies noting the relevance of these types of characteristics, how these factors influence organizational work and approach continues to be unclear, particularly as it relates to the implementation of activities and engagement practices.

In addition to work on organizational characteristics, there has been much research done to explore specific models and theories of change specific to the work of organizations. Much of the work in these areas has focused on addressing how and why organizations learn, adapt, and change (Hailey and James 2002). However, there has been minimal exploration into the specific ways local knowledge is (or is not) incorporated by organizations. Furthermore, when changes do occur, limited work has looked at how the changes actually take place, including noting the specific types of changes organizations are enacting. Questions remain as to what these changes look like in practice and what are the difficulties faced by organizations in engaging in the process.

2.3. Participation and directionality

Research exploring community participation and engagement appears frequently in the development literature. There is much work touting the positive contributions that may come about

from participatory engagements. However, scholars increasingly argue that many applications of participatory approaches in the development mainstream fall short of their idealised intentions. They argue that participation is used at times merely as a tool for achieving pre-set objectives, not as a process to empower individuals and communities to assume leadership, envision their futures, and improve their lives (Cooke and Kothari 2001). Furthermore, there are reoccurring discussions of the complexities that often arise surrounding participation, including unexpected negative outcomes, difficulties in soliciting stakeholder feedback, wide variation in types of activities and contributions, and potential burdens and responsibilities that can fall on communities as a result of their involvement in participatory engagements (Davidson et al. 2007). Therefore, despite the dominant ongoing discussions emphasizing participation, there continue to be many areas worthy of exploration that may assist in improving how participatory activities are enacted in the development sector.

Analysing directionality in participation is one such topic in need of further investigation, as the focus on unilateral efforts particularly dominates when looking at how nongovernmental or nonprofit organizations work in the Global South. While much work has focused on looking critically at participation, this work has mostly centered on addressing how organizational engagements with communities have a positive or negative impact on the communities the organizations work with. Thus, analysing how organizations themselves are changing as part of engagements with local communities is frequently left out of the conversation on participation.

2.4. Local knowledge, decolonisation, and the development process

An essential aspect of understanding the directionality of participatory exchanges centers on the incorporation of local knowledge into the approach, process, and activities of development organizations and institutions. Studies frequently discuss issues related to knowledge generation, particularly as it pertains to the exclusion of the knowledge and priorities of vulnerable households and communities (Hordijk and Baud 2006). These issues are further complicated when considering the ways in which participatory processes are frequently designed such that recipient communities are treated as homogenous groups, which can lead to mismatches or misrepresentations of needs and design solutions used in these efforts (Davis and Garb 2017). For these reasons and more, there has been a growing interest in a decolonial approach, which focuses on offering critiques of how long-standing knowledge delivery has emphasised Western and often external knowledge, language, and culture. A key focus of efforts towards decoloniality centers on understanding the logic of other praxis and knowledge systems and considering how this knowledge can and should shape planning and policy decisions (Mignolo 2018). Thus, work in this area questions who produces and transmits knowledge and understanding.

Although past studies frequently note the value of local community knowledge and the importance of organizations adapting to the input of local communities (Chambers 1994; Nieusma and Riley 2010), there has been less exploration focused on how these ideals are incorporated into practice. Additionally, specific areas of research have emerged, which center on understanding the incorporation of non-expert and non-technical knowledge. This includes explorations into partnership building, action research, and the co-production of research (Beebeejaun et al. 2015). However, despite these efforts, recent work notes that local policy and decision making, particularly that focused on technical rationality, continues to advocate the use of expert-driven knowledge (Nightingale et al. 2019). Thus, it appears that current work in the development and planning sectors continues to include minimal space for local knowledge and non-experts. Therefore, it is important to better understand the incorporation of alternative knowledge and the learning processes of organizations so that we can make progress in creating a more inclusive and representative planning process. For this reason, this paper aims to explore the knowledge exchange process and further discuss how alternative knowledge is being incorporated by organizations working in the Global South.

3. Research methods

3.1. Case study

The overarching goal of this research was to study the role of knowledge exchanges in the work of GINGOs, working on development projects in the Global South. Driven by an interest to better understand these types of organizations and a methodological decision to conduct in-person interviews and observations of organizational events, we decided to focus the study on GINGOs based in the Colorado region, where the authors were located during the time of data collection for this study. In addition to the location proximity, Colorado was a logical choice since the state has a notable growing sector of nongovernmental and nonprofit organizations working in the international development space (Daniels 2018).

We used a purposive sampling technique to identify organizations working at a co-located nonprofit center. Similar to other sectors, the co-working model is of growing interest in the nonprofit field. These spaces (also known as co-located nonprofit centers, multi-tenant nonprofit centers, or shared space nonprofit centers) offer a physical location for nonprofits and other types of social-mission organizations to co-locate that is often affordable, has modern technology and decor, and through the multi-tenant model provides access to a community of individuals working internationally from the United States (Vinokur-Kaplan 2018). The Posner Center for International Development is an example of one such co-working space and network, opened in 2013 as an independent nonprofit organization in Denver, Colorado. Created as part of an effort to increase the efficiency and influence of organizations in Colorado working internationally, members of the network come from a variety of disciplines and focus their activities on addressing challenges in poverty, human capacity, and sustainable development (Larsen et al. 2014). Furthermore, this centralisation of locally based nonprofits in the Colorado area served as a useful connecting point for the data collection of this study, as we were able to expand this initial sample to other GINGOs based in the broader-Metro area through snowball sampling. Our final sample included seven GINGOs.

We limited our sample to registered 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organizations based in Colorado that were actively doing infrastructure work in countries in the Global South (Haiti, Nepal, Guatemala, and Malawi). Types of projects engaged in included school, housing, and WASH (water, sanitation, and hygiene) planning, design, and construction.

In alignment with the previously cited research, the case study organizations had less formalized structure and relationships to the broader international development field. Alternatively, experience and background in development were typically assembled from a patchwork of experiences in the social-entrepreneurship sector, faith-based activities, Peace Corps, or other humanitarian and international development-related work. However, despite the smaller size and less formalized training, these organizations were found to experiment with how they connected with local communities, incorporated ad hoc ideas, and approached development activities in their day-to-day activities. Furthermore, as a result of the freedom of their characteristics, they were found to be uniquely positioned to be influenced by their work and their relationships with community partners, which motivated us to explore the details of their work in this study.

3.2. Interviews

Data collection for this study involved conducting in-depth, semi-structured, and open-ended interviews with organizational representatives and affiliates of Colorado-based GINGOs. Guided by past research on the prioritization of key informants, we undertook interviews with country directors, executive directors, and country advisors. In addition to these targeted interviews, the authors also interviewed other Colorado-based individuals working in this development space to collect information about the community of GINGOs based in the region. In total, we conducted 15

interviews with organizational representatives and affiliates. It is important to recognise that our sample size represents a smaller pool of what is a much larger space of organizations, with recent studies noting that the network of international NGOs founded in Global North locations has been steadily increasing in size and diversity over the past few decades (Davis 2020). However, despite the existence of this broader space of organizations, there continue to be limitations in our understanding of the specific programmatic aspects surrounding the work of GINGOs (Clifford 2016). These gaps are further deepened when considering that there have been minimal in-depth, qualitative, and community-engaged focused explorations into the work of GINGOs. With research of this sort being difficult to assess at a large scale, we believe our study provides useful contributions to this area of research. However, we encourage readers to be mindful of the potential limitations of our sample size when making generalisations to the broader GINGO space.

Respondents were invited to participate in the study via email. Interviews were conducted at locations convenient to participants, such as the co-working center, coffee shops, or over the phone. Interviews took place from May 2017 to September 2017 and lasted between 1 to 2 h in length. Before beginning the interview, respondents were read and asked to provide informed consent in alignment with the studies approved human subjects' procedures. All interviews were audio-recorded, with detailed notes written during and following the interview.

Due to our use of semi-structured interviews, we were able to investigate specific themes of interest related to organizational change and knowledge exchanges while at the same time providing space for participants to share new information and contributions. Participants were asked about their personal history in the development field and about how they became involved with their current organization. We asked them about their work with communities, methods of engagement, tensions, successes, failures, and lessons learned. We probed for their reflections on ways they and their organization changed through working with communities and examples of community leadership. We also explored their perceptions of expertise, including their individual expertise and the expertise of members and leaders in the communities they worked with. In addition, we asked targeted questions focused on assessing the contributions of GINGOs in development activities, including addressing the difficulties, opportunities, and differences in approach associated with being a GINGO. While we are unable to make comparisons in approaches across different types of organizations (such as between GINGOs and more traditional professionalised NGOs), our data collection approach allowed for gaining critical insights from representatives of GINGOs themselves on how they believe they are able to approach their development work, particularly as it relates to their activities with local communities, in unique and flexible ways.

3.3. Observations

In addition to interviews, we also observed events that GINGOs were participating in, within the Colorado region. These activities were typically sponsored talks, workshops, and networking events for development-sector organizations, staff, and students. These events were mostly held at development co-working spaces or at nearby universities. Information on observation events was obtained through email announcements from co-working spaces, weekly bulletins from the universities, or by invitation from individuals working in the area. Observations took place from March 2017 to September 2017 and ranged from 1 to 2 h in length. In total, we observed 32 development-related events in the Colorado area, with a subset of seven of the events being specifically advertised or hosted by a group in the GINGO network.

While undertaking observations of events, hand-written or computer-generated notes were taken. These notes were later transferred into fieldnotes that detailed how interactions and experiences with local communities shaped organizational activities, processes, and decision making. By taking part in a variety of events over the seven-month period, we were able to understand how different themes and patterns emerged or varied across different contexts. Additionally, by using both observational and interview data in our analysis, we were able to assess claims made by

respondents, as well as follow-up on questions or areas of contention that arose during observational events.

3.4. Data analysis

We used all collected data to generate broader themes related to the knowledge exchange process and the work of GINGOs working on development projects. Transcripts from our interviews, interview notes, and observation notes were imported into the ATLAS.ti qualitative software package (ATLAS.ti v.8). This data was analysed using inductive qualitative content analysis methods to explore themes underdeveloped in the previously discussed literature. This focused on coding for themes from the literature and themes that emerged in the process of data collection and analysis (Saldaña 2009). Data analysis involved several stages. First, we performed an initial round of coding to organize the content in our transcripts and notes into codes relevant to our broader research questions, such as evidence of “the other side” of engagement, community empowerment, and dislocations of expertise. In the subsequent phases of analysis, similar codes were grouped into themes to identify larger patterns, relationships, and conflicts. We used this approach to better understand the topic of interest, as experienced by the respondents, through their direct language. As codes and broader themes developed, a coding dictionary was developed and updated over different analysis iterations. The use of the dictionary allowed for the data set to be efficiently coded over multiple rounds and ensured that analysis was conducted consistently across coders and data. In alignment with Saldaña (2009), our analysis focused on a reflective rather than a linear process, where codes and themes were continually reassessed and refined.

4. Results and discussion

The results of the qualitative analysis revealed key themes related to two-way knowledge exchanges surrounding development projects. Our analysis suggests that particularly important factors to consider in understanding these knowledge exchanges are: (1) ways organizations are learning and implementing knowledge from communities; (2) difficulties faced in implementing knowledge from communities; and (3) understanding beneficiaries and power dynamics in community knowledge exchanges. The examples provided in the subsequent sections highlight the details of findings in each of these areas.

4.1. Ways organizations are learning and implementing knowledge from communities

We find that when organizations learn and subsequently apply knowledge from communities, these changes are reflected in different types of development activities. Specifically, our findings suggest that organizational learning is frequently reflected through three types of changes: the incorporation of knowledge on community needs and local context, the modification of project designs and activities, and the shifting of broader organizational processes and focus.

Incorporating knowledge of community needs and local context

In perhaps the most basic sense, we found ample evidence of organizations adapting their work based on receiving community input on local needs and context. For example, when describing how an organization began their work, a representative explained, “the communities gave their input and ... collectively they came ... to us and said this is the list of the top ten schools.” Efforts of this sort are frequently framed as being very inclusive, particularly due to the fact that this type of work may be more responsive to community interests than organizations initiating projects with little to no community input. However, despite the willingness of these organizations to engage and ultimately adapt based on information regarding community needs, these interactions frequently did not disrupt the existing power structure between the organization and community.

As another organizational representative described, “the communities reach out to our director of schools ... and say, “hey, our community needs a school,” and then our team ... will go visit the community and see what they [really] need, assess the needs ... and then kind of work with the community that way.” Thus, organizational changes such as this may not always represent full acceptance of community knowledge, as there may be a valuation by the organization that occurs before any organizational changes or learning actually takes place. Furthermore, despite questions of power structure, knowledge sharing of this sort frequently falls within the scope of what organizations consider in their community engagement and organizational learning efforts.

Modifying project designs and activities

Beyond learning about community needs and local contexts, organizations also discussed ways that specific project and organizational activities were developed based on knowledge from community members. In some instances, organizations were found to take on new efforts that were outside of the original scope and plans of their activities. For example, a participant described a community recycling and waste management effort that came about based on the ideas and work of the community,

These youth clubs ... came up with this idea of becoming open-plastic free ... And it's still in this community ... And now all the other neighboring communities have also picked this up. And it's a great example of community ideas and community impacts that we may have a very small role in helping start, but that actually have really cool results that we never would have thought of.

Instances such as this highlight the ways organizations may develop project activities based on community knowledge and input.

Similar to the adoption of new ideas, the organizations we studied also made modifications to existing organizational efforts as a result of input received from community members on the design of their activities. As was described by one respondent,

for a while, we were trying these drip irrigation systems that USAID was promoting here ... these things were [supposed] to be transformative, and the farmers just hated them. Nobody ever used them. It was a total failure. And so in the aftermath of that ... one local farmer started taking old coke bottles and piercing them with a needle and was sticking them in the ground next to his tomato plants. And it was like the perfect local drip irrigation kit. The issue with the USAID ones [was] that you had to plant on a certain grid that nobody there really had the resources to do because they didn't have a greenhouse, and they couldn't lay it out systematically. But the coke bottle you can put anywhere ... and we just said wow that's really neat and asked this one farmer if he would be willing to come give trainings to his neighbors which takes what 5 s and then they learned it. And those good ideas spread like that. There's many, many, many examples of all different levels of that.

In another example, a participant explained his organizations experience adapting the designs of their school construction program. In this situation, the organization's original plan called for the schools to have glass windows, however, this was changed after feedback was received from community members that their preference was for open windows with no glass. As the organizational representative explained, “We realised that there's wisdom in their design ... and actually, the buildings are better without glass than they would be in the heat of the day. They are cooler than they would be if we had put glass windows in. That's crazy. So you're always kind of looking for that on the ground ... what they teach you.” Acknowledging this form of learning may not represent an existential form of change or organizational evolution. However, it highlights the ways organizations are able to make changes to their programmatic efforts, and represents the potential openness, anticipation, and celebration that may occur from the incorporation of community knowledge in these sorts of organizational activities.

Shifting organizational processes and focus

Lastly, we find that organizations learned in ways that transformed not just their activities in the field but also the broader organization itself. These lessons often shaped organizational processes and

structure. The board member of a housing construction organization explained that “right now we’re actually creating new systems based on recommendations [from the community] which are ... making more formal processes ... signed agreements with the mayors, signed agreements with community leaders in a sense ... making some of this process a little more formalized and tighter, [the idea] came directly from [the] communities themselves.”

In addition to organizational processes, this learning also often influenced organizational focus and model. An organizational representative explained how they came to focus on water and sanitation: “[a local community member] talked to me about water and sanitation and how it’s really the other side of healthcare in developing worlds. We were trying to help with the infrastructure part of it and the supplies and equipment. He said, “look, 70% of people in Malawi that are in hospital beds are there from a preventable water-borne disease, so if you can attack it from the other side of the coin, we’re going to achieve better health.” Thus, as is highlighted in this example, many organizations interviewed for our study detailed similar experiences of modifying their organizations in significant ways based on the feedback and knowledge sharing from local community members. Many of the organizational founders, leaders, and managers that we spoke with were finding their way through the development and humanitarian sectors. Their approach was colored less by formalized protocols and extensive institutionalised best practices of large and multi-national development organizations. Being that they were more nimble, these organizations appeared to be able to shift the focus and procedures of their work based on lessons learned in the field in a much more fluid way than may be the case with other types of organizations.

4.2. Difficulties faced in implementing knowledge from communities

Despite these instances of organizations changing based on these community interactions, it is also necessary to recognise the tension and potential for resistance that can occur through this kind of learning when additional organizational variables factor in.

Differing opinions on community input

The organizations we studied discussed experiences of learning that were anticipated in some cases and unexpected (or even somewhat challenging) in others. An organizational respondent working on the management of WASH projects recalled, “the kindergarten teacher [local community member] goes no we don’t want that. We want what’s called a full-flush toilet. The key trap is right in the toilet. It just drops into a pit and drains, but there’s no odor ... That’s what the school wanted ... So that was a good example listening to what the users wanted, and it worked out best that way.” Despite potential disagreements around project and design decisions, in examples such as this, interview participants did not contend with the community’s expertise, which can be taken to represent organizations giving some level of prioritization or value to community knowledge.

In other instances, there was evidence of deeper frictions and the need for more involved negotiations surrounding community knowledge conflicts. This dynamic was highlighted in a disagreement described by an organizational representative centered on the location selection of a well and latrine for a school construction project,

One of the things that’s essential in [the development] of our ... schools is that they have a well that provides fresh, non-contaminated water. And that we provide some kind of a latrine system. And where we wanted to put the well in relation to the latrine and where [the community] wanted to put the well and the latrine were very different ... [The community] wanted the well to be more accessible to who would be coming to get [water], but where they wanted to put it would have been contaminated by the latrine. So, to try to convince them that we had some knowledge and experience that benefit them without stepping on them is ... it’s you know kind of touchy ... But you know ... there’s a few things that guide our decision-making, and one is what they want. So to try to come up with what they want in a way that we know is scientifically sound.

A similar example was noted in another organizational representatives’ description of a disagreement surrounding the material selection process for a school construction project.

The first building that we did [the] architect ... said you know for these walls we should do concrete plaster. Concrete plaster is the way to go because it lasts longer. And [the community] said no no no no here in our village when we do plaster, we do mud plaster. That's just the way that our village does it. So we are not going [with] concrete. So, they finished the school with the mud plaster and now fast-forward eight years later, the mud plaster is falling off the walls and exposing the bags that are filled with earth. And the building is at risk because they used the mud plaster.

Examples such as these highlight complex dynamics surrounding the incorporation of community knowledge by organizations. First, despite somewhat intense conflicts between organizations and community members, in the end, the organization often defers to the interests of the community, which may represent a level of agency on the part of the community. However, this opens up questions of whether this incorporation is always in the best interest of the community, when organizations may be able to contribute useful knowledge on the material, design, and construction process. Furthermore, it is unclear whether organizations deflecting to the desires of community members represents a genuine change in community-organizational relationships or disruption of the traditional power dynamics between the two parties.

4.3 Understanding beneficiaries and power dynamics in community knowledge exchanges

It is also important to recognise that organizational learning often has multiple facets. While there are many positive benefits that can arise from organizations learning based on their engagements with local communities, it is also necessary to reflect on who is truly benefiting from these interactions while also being mindful of the underlying power dynamics that frequently shape these community knowledge exchanges.

Who's benefiting from community knowledge exchanges?

When working in the development space, organizations frequently present engagement activities as being initiated in the interest of the community and the community alone. However, despite often positive intentions, organizations can be motivated to undertake participatory related activities, more out of a desire to produce successful project outcomes and in benefit of the organization itself. This was highlighted by an organizational representative who noted, "[learning from the community] tells us what we need to know about that specific community because there could be current barriers to entry ... or ... things that are happening politically or other drama that might be happening. And it just helps us understand ... what kind of issues, if any, may arise in the future working with that community." This description exemplifies how organization's need and use information gained from the community to design and benefit their organization's activities. The potential usefulness that exists in being able to obtain information on community needs and local context has been discussed by others as a benefit in using community participation, with studies noting how this can assist in reaching planning and policy goals (Yung and Chan 2012). However, it is necessary to identify the specific ways in which organizations benefit from these interactions, particularly because of the unilateral benefit and framing that more frequently dominates the discourse on community participation. Additionally, this form of organizational learning does not fundamentally question the organization's work or its presence. Instead, it reflects a change that the organization itself primarily benefits from, as the organization frequently needs contextual information to carry out its larger goals and mission. Thus, whether in terms of community needs or local contexts, organizations may use these knowledge-sharing engagements as opportunities for gaining knowledge that is often very useful, if not critical, to their organizational efforts.

Furthermore, while the idea of organizations gaining knowledge can be argued to have broader positive benefits, the larger issue for many becomes how this dynamic influences organizational relationships and prioritization of the community. As was described by one organization, "The conflict that it naturally creates when you put [those] two things together is ... who is the

beneficiary? And I think for a lot of organizations ... this is an ongoing debate. Some ... would actually admit yeah the beneficiary ... is [not the community]." Moreover, beyond the identification of conflicts, other organizations went so far as to note that organizational and community learning cannot exist together. This sentiment was captured by an organizational representative when describing their work by noting, "We are trying to focus more on what the community is learning out of the process of doing development so they can take that development skill into their own future rather than what we learn from that community. Because [we should not be the ones at] the center." Thus, although there can be many positive outcomes surrounding organizations' learning, it becomes necessary to understand who the true beneficiaries of these activities are.

Unequal power relations

Lastly, despite the best intentions by organizations engaging with local communities and attempting to learn from these exchanges, it is essential to recognise that issues of unequal power relations appear to continually persist. Organizational respondents often described their learning not from a place of equality but from a clear position of power and authority over community members. This was evidenced in the broader context of organization-community partnerships and in terms of their descriptions and language. For example, organizations frequently described ways *they* permitted community members to lead or share as a part of the knowledge exchanges. Though the difference is subtle, it continues to indicate significant nuance in terms of power and control.

For the majority of the organizations, open to learning from community members, there was a level of awareness of the broader power dynamics that continue to exist between organizations and communities. Despite this fact, there continue to be gaps in organizational understandings of how to institute improved policies and approaches with community members. As was described by one organizational representative,

There's a power dynamic between a lot of NGOs and communities they work with. And I think a lot of NGOs, whether they know it or not, are struggling with that. I think if you pulled everybody in the center and said, do you want to be paternalistic? Do you want to be the power player in the relationship? Everyone would say "no no," but when it comes to those actions again, it ends up being that way because you have the money and you are requiring reporting in a certain way, and you are the one that has to you know crack the whip if things are over budget. You are inherently in that dynamic.

Thus, in moving forward, it is vital to recognise the ways these broader relationships and dynamics influence the learning and knowledge-sharing process between organizations and community members.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, we highlight novel ways that grassroots international nongovernmental organizations (GINGOs) set out to engage communities in their development projects. Our findings reveal new knowledge regarding how participatory activities and knowledge exchanges occur between GINGOs and the communities they engage. From interviews and observations with GINGO leadership, first, we identify that such organizations learn and apply knowledge from the communities they work with through different mechanisms. This frequently involves organizations gaining knowledge of community needs and the local context, modifying their tactics towards their design and field activities, and making more substantial changes to their organizational priorities and focus areas. It is important to recognise that GINGOs may engage in one, some, or all of the identified learning and implementation activities. With organizations existing as multi-faceted entities, instances of change can be reflected in a variety of ways across the life-span of a project and community relationship.

Second, we found that GINGOs face unique challenges in utilising the knowledge they gain from communities. These challenges include conflicts in opinion on the one hand and resource constraints on the other. Third, despite the three types of learning and in light of the challenges of adapting to those lessons, this analysis shows that there remained evidence of the maintenance of power

inequities. Often, our participants described their learning as voluntary or as permitted by them—in other words, they framed the learning as a choice that they owned. It remains to be determined whether this indicates cursory efforts or a more equitable attitude toward community partnerships.

A foundational question for this line of inquiry is whether and how organizational change, in the context of GINGOs, reflects community empowerment. The capacity of community members to alter the work of GINGOs highlights a particular form of agency. However, acknowledging the larger colonial or capitalist forces that disadvantage communities in the Global South leads us to be skeptical of any deep empowering potential of GINGO-community cooperation. This suggests that underlying power dynamics continue to persist despite alternative knowledge exchange interactions used by GINGOs. Future efforts to mitigate these issues may center on encouraging more critical reflexivity of the role broader systematic and historical structures play in organizational interactions with communities in the Global South. Thus, despite the continued prevalence of these dynamics, organizations' attempts at change and learning detailed here present examples of potential solutions that may be taken on by GINGOs to assist in dismantling these problematic power relationships in the future.

While we argue that GINGOs offer a unique view into this problem, we acknowledge that the focus on one of many kinds of development organizations is a limitation of this research. Future research exploring levels, challenges, and dynamics of multilateral organization/community learning would extend the significance of this inquiry. Furthermore, while the data we present here represents important findings on the community-engaged work of GINGOs, it is important to recognise that there are some potential limitations of our methodological approach. Most critically, it is necessary to acknowledge that our findings detail the experience of two-way knowledge exchanges from the perspective of the GINGOs themselves. Ideally, to understand the complex dynamics unfolding surrounding knowledge exchanges, it would be beneficial to assess perspectives from both organizational and community representatives. Due to logistical constraints, we were unable to include community-level data collection efforts in this phase of the study. Thus, it is important to note that the data presented here has not been corroborated against the experiences of community members. Future work in this area would benefit from more expansive and comparative work exploring community perspectives on two-way knowledge exchanges. However, despite these limitations, we believe our findings offer critical insights from GINGOs that offer useful takeaways for the enactment of engagement efforts by organizational representatives.

We see this line of inquiry as part of a broader effort to decolonise ways we think about the agency of communities and organizations in development work. Attending to the scope and informality of GINGOs work in the development sector, this research suggests that the study of equitable community engagement models is a topic worthy of expansion, as having an understanding of the ways community actors shape development organizations would mark an evolution of our understandings of agency. By starting with the ability of community actors to transform the work of GINGOs, we aim to acknowledge expressions of power that have remained underappreciated. Fundamentally, the findings presented in this paper undermine axiomatic assumptions about the placement and protection of expertise. In this vein, we hope that by questioning “who’s learning from whom?” that we can advance efforts to undermine the presumption of northern expertise benefiting southern communities unilaterally.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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