

The role of individuals in organizational change (or the role of individuals in organizing the change?)

Synthesis paper

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between individuals and structures in development organizations by reflecting on my experience in Action Aid UK as a case study. I discuss the different ways this relationship is grasped and informs the way development organizations and their purposes are conceptualized. I confront two main paradigms of thought through my case study in order to discern the meanings of power, agency, learning and change underlying the practice of development organizations. I defend the argument that understanding social change as the core purpose of development organizations and recognizing the complexity involved in it implies a change in valuing the role of individuals in development organizations.

Introduction

In 2006 I evaluated a Spanish Non-Governmental Organization's (NGO) education programme in Nicaragua. José Luis, the Spanish expatriate managing the project was apprehensive about me, a consultant judging his work and deciding how accountable the project was. I had a very clear mission to accomplish; to assess how the planned project on paper was implemented and to measure the impact achieved. This was a requirement from the donor (The Spanish Government) but my role was also to satisfy an explicit demand of José Luis' boss in the NGO's headquarters in Madrid who was sceptical about the project and José Luis' 'professionalism'.

According to the terms of reference agreed with the donor I could not say that the project was 'effective'; several planned activities were not implemented and part of the budget still remained unspent. But the more people I met involved in the project and the more I got closer to José Luis the more I realized that the project was more than effective, it was transformative. The main controversial point lay in the fact that most of the money expected to be spent in building a school in a remote area in the Atlantic coast of Nicaragua, still remained at the end of the project. José Luis's boss was afraid of having to refund the money to the donor which it could be seen as a weakness of the NGO's planning capacity.

Instead of building the school José Luis decided to spend time in the community reflecting with people on why the NGO should build the school and not the government. Several months of conversations and workshops with the participation of citizen movements of other parts of the country resulted in popular consensus that the regional education authorities should build the school and assign one teacher to it. The words of José Luis justifying this change in the plans remained stuck in my mind: *'These people can do it'. 'Development is about rights. If we construct the school they will remain passive about their future. The mission of the NGO talks about rights. Well, this is what I am doing, working for rights'.*

This and other experiences lived during several years spent evaluating NGO development programmes in different contexts, made me realize that individuals' character, values, empathy, passion and critical reflection of their role and their organizations are such important factors in bringing about transformative and empowering changes as much as missions, visions, policies, strategies and other organizational features. Furthermore, as this story shows, sometimes is precisely the subversion of organizational norms, values and procedures that makes the transformative difference. Since this personal dimension is generally absent in analysis and reflections of development practice, I decided to spend some time looking at the relationship between individuals and their organizations and how they shape each other and why; in order to observe to what extent development organizations can facilitate empowerment. These are some of the questions I asked in the course of my field-work, and that guided the structure of this paper.

Paper structure

In my Analytical Paper I discuss the different perspectives through which organizations can be conceptualized. This involves the specificities of development organizations compared with private sector and public sector organizations. Deepening this reflection, Section 1 discusses the implications of understanding development organizations' purposes from private or public organizations' goals. I argue that in this comparative approach development organizations appear to be dysfunctional institutions.

Furthermore, I explore the concept of social change as the 'functional' purpose of development organizations and its implications for understanding learning and change. This discussion leads me to raise the central question of this paper: Can development organizations learn? This final part of section 1 reflects on three theoretical debates about organizational learning and learning organizations, as well as the relationship between organizations and individuals; specifically how these theories consider individuals and/or organizations the subject of learning.

Using a narrative approach, Section 2 presents my case study by confronting two of the three theories exposed in the previous section. I present two different stories about my experience in ActionAid. The stories shed light on two different paradigms. Each story is developed from the two different paradigms selected. This confrontation of paradigms allows me in Section 3 to explore the different meanings of power, agency, learning and change emerging from the two stories.

In section 4 I reflect on different implications for practice and understanding of these concepts. Moreover, I position myself in regard to the theories analysed.

METHODOLOGY AND CONTEXT

An actor-oriented approach

My research perspective gives importance to subjectivism in approaching reality. Attempting to understand why José Luis acted as he acted is fundamental to learn more about the relationship between individuals and structures. An actor-oriented perspective of enquiry gives me the opportunity to analyse the role of individuals and their discretionary power in policy and organizational change (Long, 2001) but also enables me to understand how structures are interiorized or exteriorized by individuals. This approach helps me to discern the differences between personal interests and organizational interests and how they interplay in development organizations (Eyben, 2008).

I pay attention to how individuals' experience and meaning construction of their reality informs the way they see themselves and their organizations (Hatch, 1997). In this regard this paper understands knowledge as something constructed to make sense of

the relationship between individuals and structures rather than finding a truth. Accordingly, this writing constitutes an exercise of reflective practice aimed to make sense of my previous experience, specifically the experience I had in ActionAid UK, and to inform my future professional practice.

Selecting my case study

Amongst the different experiences I had in my fieldwork presented and reflected in my Reflective Essay, I have chosen the one in ActionAid UK for different reasons. On one hand, my internship in ActionAid UK constitutes the more in depth experience I lived during the fieldwork. Concerned about not having enough data for my research I engaged in different activities that did not provide relevant information for it. For example, I had different unfruitful interviews with different development actors in different positions (ex-World Bank officer, British NGO founder) reflecting on individuals and structures. Because of lack of trust I realized that the information provided was not the kind of information I was looking for. Additionally, it showed me the importance of trust in researching the personal dimension of development practice.

Consequently, I decided to choose my experience in ActionAid UK as a case study, because of the trust built during the fieldwork. Moreover, this experience provided me with more input for reflection and analysis than this paper could cover, such as the role of the use of participatory methods in the northern NGOs or the similarities and differences of power relationships in southern communities and in northern NGO's' Headquarters.

The Context

ActionAid is an International NGO aimed to 'to help people fight for and gain their rights to food shelter, work, education and healthcare and voice in the decisions that affect their lives'¹. The organization works in 42 countries worldwide in different prioritised areas such as education, HIV and AIDS, food rights, emergencies, women and girls and governance.

1 Action Aid's Mission

In December 2003, ActionAid established its head office in Johannesburg, South Africa, in the attempt of 'making all our country programmes equal partners with an equal say on how we operate' (Action Aid Website). This relocation of headquarters signified a pioneering action of development organizations in strengthening NGO's accountability to the people, communities and countries where they operate by decentralizing power. This decision was the result of a process of organizational change influenced by rights-based approaches in development organizations.

Fighting Poverty Together is the name of the 4-year strategy (1999-2003) that supposed a major shift of Action Aid understanding of poverty: 'From services delivery to addressing the fundamental causes of social injustice and poverty' (David, Mancini and Guijt in Eyben, 2006). In this regard, it was aimed 'to empower poor people to secure their basic human rights' (Owusu in Groves and Hinton, 2004).

In this process of decentralization of power, Action Aid UK became a partner of ActionAid International. ActionAid UK is in charge of raising funds and campaigning for poor people's rights. I joined the Economic and Social Development Team (ESDT), part of the Policy and Campaigns Department. ESDT is composed of two main areas, tax justice and aid. My main duty was to support Mary², the only Officer in the ESDT in charge of aid advocacy issues, in designing a new advocacy strategy on aid.

The aid debate

The role of funding is important in order to understand the context of my fieldwork. ActionAid UK's Policy and Campaigns Department is mainly funded by DFID's Partnership Programme Arrangements (PPA). PPAs were established in 2000 to improve funding arrangements with 10 UK-based NGO's as 'a common ethos and vision and a strong match in priority areas' were shared by DFID and the 10 NGO's. (PPA 2008, DFID-ActionAid).

In considering the design of the aid strategy, we had to take into account the general tendency to avoid questioning the nature of aid, considering the fact that the ActionAid UK, like many International NGOs (INGOs), received official funding. It

² This is not her real name, but as I am interested in personal change I think it was important to give the staff member a name.

appeared that although not all kinds of aid can be defended, it was strategic for ActionAid to send positive messages about aid to the public opinion, given that aid effectiveness is increasingly under question.

In this respect, it is important to note that there are a range of views concerning what role INGOs should play in relation to aid given by Northern governments. The debate is around whether INGOs should be campaigning for more aid, for 'better' aid (for example; untied aid, and aid directly linked to a pro-poor agenda), or for an end to aid (due to the global power relations that are reinforced by aid flows from countries in the North to countries in the South)? Where an organization stands will depend on its values, on its analysis of the causes of poverty and its response to the current context.

Opportunities and limitations of my positionality in ActionAid UK: the issue of intentionality.

As I mentioned in my Reflective Essay, the interplay of different aspects of my positionality in Action Aid UK determined my understanding of the case study. I joined ActionAid as a volunteer. On one hand as a volunteer I found myself in a privileged position, able to take the time to reflect on what I was doing and why I was doing it. There is less pressure on volunteers than there is on paid staff members to show results. From this position I was allowed to play a role of participant observant and to be more able to be critical and reflective.

On the other hand, being in an outsider or temporary insider position limits my possibility to generalise my own learning as characteristic of the individual/structure relationship. I am aware that my research question, the role of individuals in organizational change, influenced the way I interacted with the context. It is necessary to clarify that the core reason for joining ActionAid UK was to explore that relationship. Thus, my attitude was shaped by this intentionality; an intention to learn more than an intention to achieve expected research outcomes from the experience.

Nevertheless, to some extent I was keen to experience if organizations change by individual and collective reflections and actions. If they do, how does it happen? Although changes were needed to answer this question I did not expect them to

happen nor did I plan for them to happen. In fact, as reflected in the first research report one month after joining ActionAid, I was sceptical about whether or not the context I was working in was the most suitable for something to happen.

From the very beginning I informed Mary about my intentionality and I shared with her my Analytical Paper in which I stated my research question. I was explicit in our first conversations about this experience as intended to be part of a process of learning that started in the first term of the Master at IDS some months before the fieldwork. At the same time she was clear about the need for someone assisting her work as she was the only person working on aid advocacy issues in her team and in the whole department.

At the beginning I helped with literature reviews and data collection and analysis. But, as the trust between us emerged, we started to share more personal views and professional knowledge. This trust leveraged a process of learning and change in both of us. As a part of a reflective process, Mary and I explored the values held in ActionAid. We discussed how, when and where ActionAid discussed and understood aid, and how this interacted with its concept of development. We built from this to look at the policy implications of these understandings and definitions.

At the end of this process, 4 months after joining ActionAid UK we both reflected by writing about what had changed and why. She shared a document reflecting about those changes and I asked for her permission to write an article about our journey of learning. I asked her to use her quotes and to comment on my successive drafts. In this sense this paper aims to be a meta-reflection of this experience

Section 1: Can development organizations learn?

Framing the question

Prior to discussing whether organizations can learn or not, I will briefly tackle two necessary previous questions such as how development organizations are conceptualized and why learning is relevant for development organizations.

Defining an organization depends on different ontological standpoints. As I reflected on my analytical paper, and I will elaborate further in the next pages, organizations can be understood as objective real entities that can be designed and managed. They also can be understood as paradoxical entities constantly constructed and reconstructed by interpretations and interactions of its members. They can even be grasped as spaces where power relations take place by language construction. Hatch (1997) refers to these three different understandings respectively as modernist, symbolic-interpretivist and post-modernist perspectives of studying organizations.

Other classification of organizations lies in their for-profit or non-profit nature. Non-profit organizations can be distinguished between governmental and non-governmental organizations. Lucrative or non-lucrative organizations can operate in national or international environments or in both at the same time. Non-lucrative organizations can be aimed to achieve different purposes regarding the mission stated by their founding members. The organizations concerning this paper are those non-lucrative and non-governmental organizations aimed to alleviate poverty in international contexts.

Purposes of organizations have an important role in defining organizations and in determining the relationships between its members and its structures. In the private sector the relationship between individuals and organizations is clearly defined by the purpose of profit. If we accept that profit is the main *raison d'être* of these organizations, relationship between individuals and its organizations are fundamentally shaped by costs and benefit.

Public organizations are also defined by their specific purpose, accomplishing the will of the state. Delivering services back to the taxpayers determines the way these

organizations are understood and conceptualized. The relationship amongst individuals within these organizations is guided by the way health, education or other services are provided.

Regarding the purpose of development organizations it seems to be an uneasy task, starting from the point that they are usually defined by what they are not rather than what they are. To be more precise, we often name them from other organizations' purposes such as 'non-profit –or non-lucrative- organizations' or 'nongovernmental organizations'. Furthermore, they are frequently referred to as the 'third sector', not the private, nor the public.

Anheier (2000) explains that these (I will call) 'defined-in-negative' organizations have been coping paradigms of the other organizations' purposes. This is due to its newness and big expansion in the north, especially in Europe and the United States in the last four decades. This tendency to compare them with other organizations, is likewise explained by their increasing dependence on the public sector and, more recently, on private sector funds for their operations. These sectors' specific definitions of effectiveness and efficiency have been influencing the management of 'defined-in-negative' organizations and the kind of relationships between individuals and structures. Concepts such as 'results-based management' or 'knowledge management' are present in the development organizations jargon (Broad in Cornwall and Eade, 2010).

Are developments organizations dysfunctional entities?

Problems emerge when logics of the two other 'sectors' are applied to understanding these 'define-in-negative' organizations. As I explain in my analytical paper, both for-profit and public organizations are informed and shaped by their services' end-recipients in the form of taxpayers or clients. In the private sector the market and the prices set by the demand and supply let theoretically organizations learn about what to do and how to do it. Clients' satisfaction informs lucrative organizations decisions and operations. Similarly, tax collection guides public sector organizations purposes of providing different services to the taxpayers.

Both rationalities face difficulties when applied to 'defined-in-negative' organizations. On one hand, these organizations have difficulty in finding a 'regulatory' system or market. They are not dealing with goods or services but with inequality, deprivation or poverty. Since these concepts are not easily meaning agreeable, measureable and countable, these organizations often find themselves deciding both the demand and the supply. On the other hand, as they do not collect taxes they provide services 'without the legitimacy, democratic control and authority enjoyed by state agencies' (Anheier, 2000).

Therefore, these organizations tackle important information gaps or 'accountability dilemmas' as long as contrary to public and private sector organizations, the recipients and funders of 'services' are conceptually and physically distant (Eyben, 2006). End-recipients of aid cannot as in the public and private organizations, complain or inform 'defined-in-negative' organizations what they are doing right or wrong.

Therefore, under this recipients/funders' analysis it seems that these organizations are 'dysfunctional' (Analytical Paper). Then, it can be argued that the feedback needed for the success, survival and learning of these organizations is more based on their capacity to stimulate funders' minds or their 'cognitive dissonance'³ than in effectively improving recipients' livelihoods (Martens, 2004, analytical paper)

Then, the way funders (supporters, taxpayers, donors in the north) conceptualize recipients' reality (the 'poor', the marginalized in the south) informs the decisions made by these organizations; especially, when those funders are moved by the logics of other organizations' purposes. Critiques can easily arise under this 'in-negative' conceptualization of development organizations considering donors' biased perception of end-recipients reality.

Based on this idea, radical and systemic critiques even grasp development organizations trying to alleviate poverty as redeemers of consumerism. In this sense development organizations, emerging in heavily capital-based societies, constitute the

³ Martens uses the concept of "cognitive dissonance" to explore what motivates humankind to redistribute resources. He defends that redistribution is a need of a given donor to reduce the dissonance in his mind as "a deprived situation does not correspond to his own perception of how the world should be" (2004:5).

necessary option to hold up the same unfair system that creates poverty and inequality (Zizek, 2009).

‘Social change’ as the purpose of development organizations

If neither profit nor service delivery are the purposes of development organizations, then what is the purpose of ‘define-in-negative’ organizations? If analyzing them through the purposes of private and public organizations converts them in dysfunctional institutions unable to learn from their end-recipients, then what is specific of these organizations that could help to conceptualize them differently or at least ‘in positive’? Are development organizations more than redeemers of consumerism?

Having acknowledged that both conceptual and methodological adoptions from other organizations’ purposes is problematic, recent efforts to answer these questions have had illuminating results for conceptualizing development organizations and for understanding both their purposes and the kind of relationships between individuals and structures that define themselves (Groves and Hinton, 2004, Eyben, 2006, Taylor, Deak, Pettit and Vogel, 2006 and Ramalingam, 2008 and Shutt, 2009).

In this effort of finding a purpose for these organizations it seems adequate to look at their stated missions and other documents that theoretically guide their actions. A critical revision of these organizational statements reveals the difficulties for understanding change as a purpose or in the absence of a ‘regulatory’ mechanism (Shutt, 2009):

- ‘Lack of clarity about the changes development organizations are seeking and the means to achieve them.
- A sense that Big International NGOs (BINGOs) gave far more control over change processes than they do in practice.
- Normative assumptions about the behaviour of partners and citizens.
- Idealistic assumptions of organizational coherence, obscuring the diversity that exists within these organizations’.

Through different meetings in 2008 and 2009 a group of members of 8 UK-based BINGOs and academics discussed about how change happens (Shutt, 2009). These conversations identified 10 different ways of understanding change. Furthermore, other research works to understand change identified that, even within a particular team in an organization, different explanations of social change coexist and that they are embedded and mixed in the individuals' unconscious shaped by education and previous experiences (Eyben, Kidder, Rowlands and Bronstein, 2008).

In short, the personal interpretation have been pointed out as a one of the necessary dimensions to re-

conceptualize development organizations by accepting social change as a complex and 'unregulated' and 'unregulable' purpose. Under this paradigm the personal, the organizational and the institutional are understood as necessarily overlapped and linked lenses through which social change is learned and grasped (Taylor, Deak, Pettit and Vogel, 2006).

Furthermore, the idea of the personal dimension in interpreting the purpose helps to take further the 'dysfunctionality' analysis

referred above and in defining development organizations more positively and non-comparatively. In the coexistence of theories of change amongst individuals power relations emerge in regard to the question of whose interpretation of social change prevails and informs decisions. Nevertheless, this need for interpretation and

10 ways of understanding change (Shutt, 2009)	
1-	Modest small steps towards letting communities understand their rights
2-	Mobilization through communication of compelling narratives (social movements, international forums)
3-	Balancing risks and opportunities and identifying potential drivers of change (using logics of the private sector as a driver for social change)
4-	Using accidents and luck opportunistically (e.g. food crisis)
5-	Developing relationships with established institutions to maximize impact (e.g. influencing education curricula in schools)
6-	Empowering through conscientisation and dialogue (e.g. by shifting power relations within a community)
7-	Linear technical instrumental approach to problems (e.g. by increasing income on marginalized groups)
8-	Marxist models using confrontation to challenge power relations
9-	Rights-based approaches (e.g. by federating solidarity groups to leverage social and political change)
10-	Changing ideas and beliefs of individuals (i.e. changing attitudes towards the socially accepted norms)

interaction characterizes both the fuzziness of the purpose and the kind of relationships of this iterative and 'under-construction' dynamic of understanding.

Implications for understanding development organizations and their specific learning process

Two main issues arise from this particular understanding of the purpose: one is an ontological standpoint emergent to see these organizations regarding this fuzziness, and the other is the primacy of a particular style of learning coherent to this different ontological perspective.

According to the different ontological perspectives referred at the beginning of this section, understanding development organizations from a modernist ontological position seems to be problematic and dysfunctional. Development organizations are not objective entities governed by relatively complete information systems or 'auto-regulatory' mechanisms (producers/deliverers of services-clients/taxpayers). Instead, if these organizations are accepted as evolving and dialectical entities constantly constructed and reconstructed by interpretations and interactions of its members, there is an opportunity to refer to them within the same evolving and non static character of their purpose as exists in social change.

In this perspective social change is a 'process of dialogue, debate and action resulting in major shifts in social norms, and is generally characterized by the highlighting and legitimation of discordant voices, particularly of those marginalized in society, and leading to improvements in their rights, entitlements and living conditions' (Taylor, Deak, Pettit and Vogel, 2006). This definition indicates the (de- re-) constructing feature of development organizations since 'dialogue debate and action' accepts the dialectical dimension of social change.

Nevertheless, further implications of conceptualizing development organizations as evolving and complex purpose entities arise when the 'conceptual and spatial distance' is borne in mind (Eyben, 2006). This becomes relevant when considering the multiple possible interpretations and relationships emerging from the interplay of understandings of social change between those receiving funds defining and

constructing a meaning of social change and those receiving services; or, to put it better - regarding this emerging purpose- receiving the results of that 'process of debate, dialogue and action' of those with the funds.

It has also been noted that this interplay is not that simple but it happens within a far more complex web of relationships (Eyben, 2006). This web is formed by funders, northern and southern citizens, northern and southern supporters, northern and southern national taxpayers, national and international northern and southern donors both individuals and organizations, big and small, international, national, local development organizations, northern practitioners working for local or international organizations, local southern practitioners working in northern or local, national or international organizations, local and global social movements, local leaders in global movements and global leaders in local movements, private national and international consultancy companies, national and international, northern and southern research and academic institutions, southern researchers working for international research and academic institutions and northern researches working for southern national or international research and academic institutions, local, national and international bodies of government and communities, and a wider array of different combinations of individual and organizational actors.

In this 'under construction' picture of social change learning appears to be a necessary effort to be coherent to this dynamic purpose of defining social change. If there is something that is not fully understood or open to interpretations and power relations by such amount of individuals and organizations, learning seems to be a key element for social change. Individuals construct social change by their interaction in a constantly changing environment conceptually and physically characterized by distance.

Currently there are increasing efforts to bring different analytical lenses. Complexity science helps to understand better these organizations and the kind of knowledge required to the environments in which they operate (Ramalingan, 2008)- maybe, much more as its value for guiding interpretation rather than its value as a theory (Hayles, 1990 cited in Tsoukas and Hatch, 2001)-.

Some argue that, since there is not a perfect knowledge of the future or how changes will happen, development organizations should focus their functioning, management and decision-making 'on understanding the dynamics of change and promoting a collective learning framework through which concerned stakeholders can constantly, through dialogue, express their respective interests and reach consensus' (Selamna 1999, cited in Ramalingan 2008)

But then, how to promote a collective learning framework? Who learns? Do organizations learn? Do Individuals? How do these 'overlapping lenses' of the personal, the organizational and the institutional interrelate if we want to learn about social change?

Organizational learning and/or learning organizations debate

In an attempt to conceptualize my understanding of learning I explored the vast and contested discipline of organizational learning. My first reaction was very positive regarding the wide range of perspectives from different disciplines and sectors. Furthermore, I thought that this specific character of organizational learning literature would provide me with a more holistic grasp of the issue in order to challenge the notions of organizational learning that I have articulated in my recent experience. Nevertheless, my second reaction was more overwhelming as I realized the existing endless amount of literature reviews since the 80's defending, defining, redefining and creating concepts. Different standpoints responding to diverse angles, worldviews or interests tackle learning as a question of management, sociology, market competitiveness, productivity or culture (Easterby-Smith, 1997 cited in Pasteur 2004).

Some see this variety of approaches as 'complementary rather than fundamentally original or conceptually different' and therefore, unproblematic (Matlay 2000 cited in Wang and Ahmed 2003). Others explain the recurrent character of organizational learning debates as the result of previous unresolved or disagreed ones (Easterby-Smith, Crossan and Nicolini, 2000). Furthermore, authors pay attention on whether the conceptual fragmentation is a strength as it responds to the specificity of each ontological standpoint or whether a single integrated framework of concepts should

be agreed (Cohen and Sproull 1991 cited in Wang and Ahmed 2003 and Easterby-Smith and Araujo 1999).

According to different ontological conceptions of what is an organization and therefore what learning means, some authors focus their work on exploring understandings of learning in a more theoretical and descriptive manner. These authors give importance to the concept of organization learning as a process (Argyris and Schön 1978, Stacey 2003). Others however provide a more pragmatic and normative approach (Senge, 1990) by referring to learning organizations as an aspiration, a state or an ideal or as an achievable result. Furthermore, some authors use both phrases indistinctively (Wang and Ahmed 2003) as well as others who see them as complementary (Gorelick 2005).

Nevertheless, in this evolving, dynamic and contested context there are two elements that occupy a relevant position in different, confronted or complementary definitions of learning organizations and/or organizational learning: Individuals and organizations (Collectivities, structures). This last part of the section will briefly explore some different perspectives on understanding the relationship between the individual and the organization in relation to learning in order to explore the kind of learning that would help to understand social change as a prime purpose of development organizations.

The Individuals or/and organizations debate

In responding to the question of whether organizations can learn, I found four different answers amongst this body of literature:

- **Yes**, 'of course organizations can learn. Organizations, in fact, are living entities that indeed are capable of learning'. (Örtenblad 2005)
- **No**, 'The "learning organization" doesn't exist. The critter is mythical. Organizations don't learn. People learn' (Belasco 1998 cited in Örtenblad 2005)
- **Yes, but..** 'The learning organization depends absolutely on the skills, approaches and commitment of individuals of their own learning' (Mumford 1994 in Örtenblad 2005)
- **No, but..** 'Learning is an activity of interdependent people' (Stacey, 2003)

The core topic of discussion lies in whether or not organizations constitute an entity of learning in order to specify the kind of learning that they can facilitate. This debate has developed different ways of understanding how learning happens and therefore, it has informed different methodologies of action.

Yes, organizations can learn

The defenders of organizations as 'living entities' capable of learning, hold the idea that organizations store the learning of its individuals in organizational memory (Argyris and Schön 1993). Knowledge in this view is perceived as something collective that remains beyond the learning of single individuals in form of norms, routines, symbols and dialogues (Blacker, 1995 cited in Örtenblad 2005). Other arguments in this stream of thought are associated with the idea of know-how. When a group of people develops an ability together to carry out an activity the learning resultant of this process can be called organizational learning. Furthermore, organizations are seen as animate entities that help people to be structured by norm systems in order to 'guide their behavior' (Örtenblad, 2005).

Main critiques of this conception come from the social strand of organizational learning literature which Easterby-Smith (1999) distinguishes from the technical strand by the different understanding of knowledge. For the technical approach knowledge is something accumulative and objectified. Therefore, learning happens by processing and acquiring information. The social strand understands knowledge as something evolving and dependant on social construction of meaning. In this respect knowledge cannot remain but is relational. Then norms, routines and symbols cannot be understood outside of individuals' relationships.

The other methodological critique arises around the limitations of studying organizations by its collectivity prioritizing collective phenomena over facts about individuals (Stacey, 2003). The understanding of the social as a whole tends to reify organizations as anthropomorphized structures or 'superpersons' (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1994).

No, organizations cannot learn

At the other extreme of this spectrum to the relation individual-structure there are authors defending the idea that organizations cannot learn but it is individual members who learn. Understanding the whole as the sum of its parts learning is the sum of organization members' individual learning where organizational learning is the collectivity of individual learning (Lee and Roth 2005). From this perspective learning starts from individuals, therefore major practices linked to this idea tend to focus on warranting and respecting individuals' process of learning to achieve organizational learning.

The main critique of this approach lies in the fact that individual learning does not always lead to organizational learning. In that case a learning organization -an anthropomorphized superperson- should take the responsibility of channeling the individual learning to organizational learning (Wang and Ahmed, 2003).

Yes, organizations can learn but...

In a more relational view there is an approach that tends to see individuals as agents of organizational learning specifying some conditions. In this view individuals and organizations are different entities but mutually dependant. To explain this duality Nonaka makes a distinction between explicit and tacit knowledge.

Explicit knowledge is observable and transmittable and therefore accumulative (Nonaka, 1996 quoted in Pasteur, 2004). It happens in the realm of the individual's mind. An example of it is the learning of subjects in school such as mathematics or physics (Clutterbuck and Wayne in Mumford 1994). Here learning can happen by individuals' interaction with objects of knowledge. On the contrary tacit knowledge can only be transferred through socialization process by discussing, by collectively performed activities (Pasteur 2004). While explicit knowledge is characterized by individuals' awareness of it, tacit knowledge is emotional and unconscious. In this respect learning organizations should be aware of these two types of knowledge to achieve organizational learning.

Stacey (2003) argues that this thinking as the one underlying the yes/no answers implies a form of anthropomorphism of organizations as there should be an abstract superstructure, metaphorically reified, that regulates the interaction between both kinds of knowledge. Furthermore it seems to be close to the idea of a system which follows its own rules and logics.

If a human-like system exists outside the individual we still should ask how it operates. Another option is to think that powerful individual agents are the ones who take the responsibility to identify the mission and the vision of this collective entity.

No, organizations cannot learn but...

The fourth answer to the question defends the idea that both the individuals and the organizations are in the same space and one cannot exist without the other. This implies a notion of knowledge as socially constructed in which the dialogue between both shapes both the individuals identity and the organizations culture (Lee and Roth 2005).

This dialectical perspective influenced by different disciplines like critical psychology or cultural sociology, constitutes what Easterby-Smith calls the social strand of organizational learning. Under this dialectical conception individuals' action only make sense in an organizational framework and organizations only exist in the individuals' exercise of sense-making or creating an identity. Under this logic system it is possible to understand that neither the individual nor the structure are in polarized spaces (Yes/No) nor in different spheres (Yes, but) (Stacey, 2003).

The reasons provided to defend the indivisible characteristic of this relationship are rooted in the Hegelian understanding of the individual. In this view the individual cannot be extracted from her/his (social) relation with others. Rather, it is mutual recognition through which individuals become aware of their existence (Stacey, 2003). In this regard consciousness only appears in social institutions 'which give identities, self concepts, to individuals'. According to Giddens concept of 'structuration,' structure is both the medium and outcome of social practices. Accordingly, instead of being in

opposition, structure and individual are mutually constitutive. (Sewell, 1992 quoted in Garud, Hardy and Maguire, 2007).

Giddens (1986) provides an illustrative example of this relationship comparing the structure with a language and the individuals to its speakers. In this relation and regarding the evolution of languages, speakers are both users and creators of a given language that at the same time allows them to interact.

The dualistic versus the reciprocal approach

In order to illustrate this debate I find useful the three distinctions pointed out by Stacey (2003) in approaching studies of the individual and the collective: the dichotomic approach (Yes/no) regarding the exclusive focus on the individual or the organization as relevant objects of study; the dualistic approach (Yes, but) which accepts certain knowledge constructed by social interaction of individuals but still understands organizations as reified entities; the reciprocal approach (No, but) under which both individuals and organizations are understood as aspects of the same processes of sense-making through interaction where both are 'forming' and 'being formed' by the other (Stacey, 2003).

Amongst these three approaches, the reciprocal approach seems to resonate more within the purpose of social change referred to above as it opens some windows to conceptualize differently these organizations. It also helps me to understand better three relevant issues emerging from my fieldwork: how individual/organizational learning and change happens, how power emerges and operates and what agency means in development organizations where the interaction between individuals and structures constructs a reality. This reality is uncertain and complex; uncertain, as long as matters, individuals and structures are highly interrelated and interdependent, and complex, since both individuals and organizations do not know how matters are related towards social change (Fischer, 2003).

Nevertheless, the appropriateness of the reciprocal approach will be assessed in the next section by confronting it with the dualistic approach prominent in organizational learning literature and highly influential in understanding learning in development

organizations. I will explore this by analyzing the relationship between individuals and organizations through my case study. In doing so, I will present two stories (one reciprocal, one dualistic) of my fieldwork in the form of imaginary letters I write to my family and friends explaining my experience in two different communities.

Section 2: Case Study

Letter one: Nomads in ActionNOMAiD

Dear Family and Friends,

I enjoyed my time in ActioNOMAiD; ActioNOMAiDerS are very interesting people. As their name says they are nomads. They live in tents made of a very light material since they are constantly moving from one place to another⁴. They have tents spread almost all over the world. I am writing you some days after leaving one of their camps in the north where I was living for a while. They are looking for something they call 'social change'. One evening seated with one of the villagers staring at the sunset at the seafront in the last camp where the community had moved in, I asked about social change. This is what she said:

'Look in front you. How far can you see? The horizon is your limit, the limit of what you can understand. You know there is something behind the skyline but you cannot see it. The sun you are staring at is one but people living beyond that line see it from a different position. While we are saying good bye to the day, they are saying hello. Same way social change works. We only understand what we see from our present position, so we need to keep moving to understand what it means to different people living beyond the limits of our understanding.

Furthermore, as you will point out, relationships between both families inside our camps and those in the outside of our community with which we work with are not easy. There are quite different interpretations of the sun and different skylines. When you consider the complexity that this involves, we ask ourselves: why be more consistent than the world around us? That is why we live in provisional camps. We move from one to another when a family or individuals give a good reason to the others or manages to persuade them or part of them to move away in the search for

⁴ The metaphor of seeing organizations as 'tents' is taken from Hedberg, B., Nyston, P., and Starbuck, W, 1976 cited in Anheier (2000) and it refers to those organizations that 'places emphasis on creativity, immediacy and initiative, rather than authority, clarity and decisiveness; the organisation emphasises neither harmony nor durability of solutions, and asks, "Why be more consistent than the world around us?"

social change. You will understand soon how this process works because you will be part of it.⁵

After this conversation I was curious about the families in the camp to see the relationships amongst them and with the outsiders and how their interaction was regulated. Above all, I was keen to learn how they move from one camp to another. I was also wondering how I would be a part of this process.

There are different families living in each tent. Each of them has its own role in learning for social change and its own relationships outside and inside the community. This interferes in how they look at sun. While all the families believe that their mission as a community is to 'to help people fight for and gain their rights to food shelter, work, education and healthcare and voice in the decisions that affect their lives'⁶ their interpretations, their position under the sun and their relationships with the outsiders shape the way this mission is understood.

Different people from different families for certain periods of time influence others and make the community or part of it move to a new camp. This happened some years before I visited ActioNOMAid. Two persons (Mancini and David) from a particular family (Impact Assessment Unit) have understood from their relationships with those people working in camps near to the people referred in the mission that 'poor people and their own organizations are capable of managing their own development process' (David, Mancini and Guijt in Eyben, 2006). Apart from this belief, different circumstances encouraged them to persuade other families to move to another camp; one where the way the sun was seen by 'poor people' was taken into account in the way the community communicate its efforts to learn about social change both towards the inside and the outside of the community (Accountability, Learning and Planning System, ALPS)⁷.

⁵ This is an invented quote

⁶ Action Aid's Mission

⁷ ALPS is a framework that sets out the key accountability requirements, guidelines, and processes that emphasizes the voice of poor and excluded people.

The community had previously moved their main camp to the south⁸ understood as a common effort to understand change differently: 'from services delivery to addressing the fundamental causes of social injustice and poverty' (ibid, page 135). That was a good moment to propose the change. These two persons developed a way to be persuasive and to make people buy-into this new camp. The new strategy to learn for social change (*Fighting Poverty Together*)⁹ was a good opportunity to show coherence with the idea of a new accountability system. There were also good arguments to construct a good narrative using one critical review (Taking Stock)¹⁰ where the performance of the community was questioned.

In coalition with some influencing members of the trustees' family they succeeded in convincing southern camps to move to the new accountability camp (ibid, 136). Nevertheless, even having the Chief Executive Officer on board, they did not have such success in convincing northern camps to move to the new camp. Northern camps and specially the one I was visiting are so far from the southern camps and their relations with donors and supporters shape the way they look at the sun. Also, people come and go so quickly in different families to the point that new faces cannot be properly influenced by the process of persuasion (ibid, 141). To this day it is still a tension between different families around the issue of moving all together or not to the new accountability camp (ibid, 142).

I started to understand how families behave and how they move or partly move from one camp to another. Nevertheless, I still wondered how I could be part of this process being a new person in the camp.

I joined the Policy and Campaigns (PC) family. This family is composed of more than 20 members. Their work consists of looking for social change through influencing and challenging outsiders' ideas about social change. They do that by ensuring that the voices of the 'poor' are taken into account by outsiders like, amongst others, private companies operating in 'poor' contexts, politicians making foreign and home policies

8 In 2000 Action aid Headquarters where moved to Johannesburg as a process of decentralizing power within the organization

9 FPT was the first ActioAid strategy (1999-2003) that included the rights-based approach as the mean of alleviating poverty

10 Taking stock is a an evaluation of ActionAid performance that showed the lack of transparency of the organizations towards the end-recipients of the programmes (David, Mancini and Guijt in Eyben, 2006).

and private and public donors giving aid to what they call 'poor countries'. As far as I understood, they assume that they represent the voice of the 'poor' and that the family can help to improve the life of the group that they are representing by both changing the way those outsiders behave and by influencing the decisions they make.

I spent some time in one of the subfamilies of the PC family in charge of influencing and promoting debate around the activities of both, private companies and public donors of aid. I worked with Mary, the person in charge of the public donors. My duty was to help her in designing a new strategy to influence public donors of aid.

As a new person in the community I showed my curiosity. I wanted to understand the main ideas put forward by the community. Mary started to act as a translator, explaining the community's opinions and ideas to me. In a way I was constructing my ActionNOMAiDer identity through making sense of ActionNOMAiD by Mary's explanations on this or that issue. But at the same time through our conversations Mary was redefining her identity as an ActionNOMAiDer by rethinking about what ActionNOMAiD was in the process of explaining it to me. Both the way she saw the sun and the way I was making sense made us both construct a new sense of the strategy we were designing.

First we thought about aid, and what it means. Looking at the sun we understood that we had to ask ourselves what is our position and if others' position was influencing the way we understood aid. We had a look at how other families and ours understood aid by their positions towards the sun. The marketing family was very influential in this respect. Thanks to their efforts in capturing funds for social change our family could do their work towards the outsiders mentioned above. They managed to get funds from public donors for us. They were particularly keen to see aid in terms of 'the more the better'. They think that the more funds they can get, the better opportunity all of us will have to work towards our mission as a community.

We thought that this was the reason why they might expect us to defend the idea of aid to the public or to focus our campaigns towards donors that are not helping us to work towards our mission. This was a very good story, quite coherent.

Nevertheless, another interpretation of aid coexists with this one and recognizes that not all aid can be defended as long as not all the outsiders and communities like ActioNOMAiD understand social change in a unique manner. Furthermore, some of them could prevent 'poor people' to 'gain their rights'. In this respect is our duty to influence how these actors make decisions about helping the poor. This story was quite spread around northern camps and it supposed to be a good option to coexist with the one of the Marketing family as long as we understood that the donor (DFID) funding us was not classified as 'bad aid'.

The third interpretation and the one we liked more as it was more coherent to our process of understanding aid, bears in mind the idea that as long as people fight for their rights depending on us we need to be clear about when to leave them fighting for their rights. In this regard our strategy should be based on tackling aid dependency.

We constructed a good story around this idea to persuade others about how this topic could help the camp and maybe other camps to learn for social change. Just like the ALPS persuaders did in the past, we draw on different community devices and discourses to argue this idea. First we rewrote the history of the community through the lenses of the rights approach community main documents. For example we referenced previous community efforts to define what 'real aid' is and what 'phantom aid' is¹¹. We also strengthened our arguments highlighting strong discourses in the literature about aid dependency and we tried to link them with the rights history of ActioNOMAiD. Furthermore, we engaged people from the southern camps in the debate. Their perception and interpretation of this discourse constitutes a very important issue for moving on to another camp, the exit aid camp.

I cannot say that we proposed a new camp to move on to. The versions of the strategy I received on paper after leaving the community were a mixture of the three perspectives on aid I referenced above despite having a strong reference on aid dependency and some activities included further debates about it with southern camps. In spite of this, I understood how I, being an outsider could be a part of this process of looking for social change. I learnt that in ActioNOMAiD the reasons for

11 'The Real Aid report - released in 2005, and Real Aid 2 – released in 2006, both analyse the quality of bilateral aid provided by donors'. 'Phantom aid' is referred to that 'aid which does not fight poverty'. (ActioAid website)

moving from one camp to another are out of the control of particular individuals. But I also understood that the interpretation, the interaction and the process of sense-making that those individuals experienced are potentially valuable to others, both new and old members of the community, to propose new camps in which the sun is viewed from a different position. As long as in any new camp their knowledge will be limited by horizons, I acknowledge that this journey will never end. They will keep moving from one camp on another in their efforts at learning for social change.

Letter two: The dwellers of the temple of Actiopomorphus

Dear Family and Friends:

I am writing you some days after leaving Actiopomorphaid. There people live in a big temple full of big and small rooms. The dwellers of the temple are such interesting people. They believe in a sort of deity called Actiopomorphus. Their relationship with her/him is not easy to understand. Nobody has seen her/him but she/he is present in the everyday life here. You can hear things like: *'Actiopomorphaid has campaigned on aid quality for nearly two decades'*. But at the same time they refer to her/him as 'us'; *'Our aid advocacy reflects our commitment to global solidarity'*¹².

Actiopomorphus has a mission which is 'to help people fight for and gain their rights to food shelter, work, education and healthcare and a voice in the decisions that affect their lives'. Then, this is the mission of 'us', the believers in Actiopomorphus. I understood that this is comparable to a sacred text that organizes and guides the life of dwellers of the temple. Everybody works towards this goal but not everybody is equally capable of interpreting the sacred words. The knowledge and experience that individuals have accumulated categorize their position in interpreting the sacred word for the others. They call this knowledge 'expertise'. In my early days there I was frequently asked 'what is your expertise'¹³. The more expert you are in interpreting the sacred text, the higher position you hold in the temple.

¹² These are quotes from the September 2010 draft of the Aid Advocacy Strategy, three months after I left ActionAid .

¹³ This is a real question I was asked during my fieldwork

Another important concept to learn in Actiopomorphaid is 'evidence'. Evidence is the empirical and objective data that is used to make decisions. It appears to be clear but I did not fully understand it. Evidence can be 'gathered', 'provided', 'exposed', 'reported' or 'can be used'¹⁴ by everyone but, normally, the more expert you are the more you are able to decide what data are more empirical and valid for decision-making.

The experts usually have a theory to interpret Actiopomorphus' words better (how 'to help people to gain their rights') based in their previous knowledge. Then, they provide evidence or ask the people at lower levels of expertise to gather evidence to prove the theory. But sometimes, if you have enough empirical data and this data is approved by the higher interpreters of Actiopomorphus, you can participate in the process of decision-making. Let me tell you two stories to explain this dynamic. One happened some time before I joined Actiopomorphaid and the other was when I worked there.

Some years ago there were two members of one of the temple rooms called Impact Assessment Unit (IAU) with a theory of interpretation of Actiopomorphus' words based on the idea that 'poor people and their own organizations are capable of managing their own development process' (David, Mancini and Guijt in Eyben, 2006). They gathered evidence to prove their theory and developed a system (ALPS) that allowed taking evidence for decision-making from the people to whom the mission of Actiopomorphaid is addressed. Other evidence provided by other experts' evaluation about the performance of the NGO (Tacking Stock) gave empirical data about the little results that under this interpretation of the sacred word (or theory) Actiopomorphaid was achieving.

The supreme interpreter of Actiopomorphus (CEO) approved the evidence and the system. ALPS was institutionalized and mainly implemented in some rooms of the temple- Country Programs. (Ibid, 140). Nevertheless, other high-level interpreters from other rooms questioned the objectivity of the data provided by this system. Their validity was under question because it did not provide enough 'measurable and fixed indicators to satisfy senior managers' (Ibid 143). Members of the IAU room identified

14 Human rights-based approaches to poverty eradication and development, Action Aid 2008

that one of the main failures of the implementation is that this system 'requires a huge investment in building staff and partner capacities' and that Actiopomorphaid 'has not yet built up the personnel and expertise required to give such support right across programs' (Ibid, 147).

I experienced something similar and learnt more about how Actiopomorphaid operates. I joined the Policy and Campaigns (PC) room of the temple. Their work consists of providing evidence about how the actions performed by, amongst others, private companies operating in 'poor' contexts, politicians making foreign and home policies and private and public donors giving aid to what they call 'poor countries', affect the people stated in the mission to inform their decision-making process. I worked with Mary, the person in charge of giving evidence towards donors' actions. Above her there were two higher-level interpreters, the team leader and the head of the PC room in the temple. The aim of my work was to help her in gathering empirical data and evidence about what decisions the team should take towards public donors. There were different topics to deal with as aid in 'fragile states', aid effectiveness, aid and climate change, self-interest aid and defence of aid. One of the most important methods to find evidences is literature reviews. I did several of them. I was confused at the beginning because I was not sure about what kind of information was the appropriate data or which was more empirical.

For example when I explored what is a 'fragile state' I struggled over whether I must understand 'legitimacy of the government' or 'failure of the state in meeting citizen's basic needs' (Governance and Social Development resource Centre, 2010) or 'the expectations of their citizens' (OECD, 2008) as a more important issues. But I still wondered what the authors of the quotes meant by 'legitimacy' or 'needs' or 'expectations'. I concluded that it was my lack of expertise on 'fragile states' what left me in doubt.

The more questions I addressed to Mary the more confused we both were about certain issues to the point that we decided to write on a flipchart all our questions. In doing that, we realized that core topics that we were dealing with were in fact, quite related. After some discussions we came up with an idea that resonated very well with

the words of Actiopomorphus. We defended the idea that as long as people fight for their rights depending on Actiopomorphaid we need to be clear about when to leave them fighting for their rights. This would allow the temple to give evidences to influence public donors' decisions towards aid.

We were afraid of this idea and its implications as long as we were still far from being high-level experts, especially me. We had to be sure that our presentation was based on empirical evidences like:

- 'Official Development Aid to 37 Lower Income Countries was the equivalent of 17 % percent of their GNI in 2008 and it was 13 % in 1998
- 15 of these countries have received more than a tenth of GNI or more in aid for at least the last two decades. This is a lengthy time period for receiving sizeable aid with few historical precedents. (Moss, Pettersson, and van de Walle, 2006)¹⁵

On the other hand we looked for support in evidence defended by Actiopomorphaid before like 'real aid' and 'phantom aid' and in previous decisions made about how to 'help people gain their rights' like Fighting Poverty Together and documents on right-based approaches.

But more importantly, we found that in the temple there are formal and informal spaces. In formal spaces decisions are officially made but informal spaces like private conversations some times are so much more important than formal spaces for letting high-level interpreters of the sacred word validate evidence. In informal spaces people are often more open and able to consider different kind of evidence, whereas in formal settings they tend to stick to a specific role – they hold onto the opinions and reputation that they have developed for themselves previously within the group setting.

We started by sharing our ideas with potential allies, using both formal and informal spaces. We held one-to-one meetings, to ensure that higher-level interpreters were aware of our evidence. We also deliberately included certain concepts in our analysis

¹⁵ First Aid Strategy Draft.

to provoke reactions and engage potential skeptics in the process. We also gained the approval of Mary's immediate higher-level interpreter, this was crucial for defending our interpretation of the mission.

I have learnt a lot about these people and their peculiarities. I still do not understand very well the issue of 'evidence' but I realized that its lack of clarity is usually compensated with what occurs in informal spaces. It seems to me that people aware of both spaces have an advantage in interpreting the words of Actiopomorphus to the others.

Section 3: Case study analysis: meanings of power, agency and learning/change in both approaches

This section is addressed to defining the main differences between the reciprocal (Actionmaid) and the dualistic (Actiopomorphaid) approach emerging from the case study presented.

Verisimilitude versus truth

The first distinction is the different ontological standpoints towards reality and truth. Nomads in the first story give more importance to verisimilitude rather than truth. The coherence of a specific story and its ability to appear truthful (verisimilar) is more valuable than the truthfulness itself. A good story -and how the story is told- as the 'aid dependency story' or the 'downwards accountability story' in ALPS is valid to give a meaning to reality under the assumption that individuals have always a limited understanding of reality (a horizon) not being capable of reaching one truth. Reality then depends on the specific circumstances (or position towards the sun) under which an interpretation is created and believed. The main circumstances in the story presented are place (camp), time, position (family) and relationships with outsiders.

On the other hand, the dwellers of the temple tend to believe in one truth revealed by a reified superior entity (Actiopomorphus). Therefore their goal is to know the truth. Reality appears to be something understandable and objectively explicable that exists outside the individuals' minds. Individuals' efforts are addressed to prove the theories explaining different phenomena such as 'fragile states' or 'aid effectiveness'. They use 'sound arguments' based in causal relations such as 'if X, then Y' in order to explain the already existing reality and to find the truth (Bruner, 1986 quoted in Tsoukas and Hatch, 2001).

In contrast, 'nomad camps' reality is constructed by individuals' interaction for making sense and for being aware of themselves as individuals and as groups; in temples reality exists outside individuals' minds and can be objectified and hence, rationally explained.

POWER: EMERGENCE AND SIGNIFICANCE

Emergence of power: individuals' interaction for sense-making versus hierarchic interpretation of deity's words

Power emerges in 'nomad camps' from the idea of verisimilitude. The recognition that reality can only be interpreted but not reached (position on looking at the sun) as long as human perception of it is limited (horizon in the sunset) characterizes power as something temporal and theoretically available for all the sense-makers in their identification process as individuals and as a group. The better narrative or story works in specific circumstances to make temporarily collective sense of a specific interpretation of reality (Roe, 1994). An example of this can be found in the first story when two persons ('ALPS persuaders') temporarily made sense of the relationship between Actionmaid and the people who are the community's mission.

In 'temples' power emerges from the understanding the collective as an entity. The reification of the organization –or deification of the organization, according to the metaphor used in the second story- is the emergence of a particular form of power amongst individuals. Since the deity itself is absent to guide the dwellers of the temple, this absence provokes a hierarchy of individuals and their knowledge interpreting the sacred word of Actiopomorphus. As Stacey (2003) argues, 'the powerful are supposed to make the choices according to which the organisation, an objective reality outside of them, is to develop'. 'They are to unfold what is to be unfolded by the development of the organisation'.

The main difference in the kind of interpretation required in 'tents' and in 'temples' lies in the ontological distinction mentioned above. The dwellers of the temple interpret the words of the deity under the assumption that the truth exists. In contrast, the nomads interpret reality as a need of 'endowing their experiences with meaning' (Bruner, 1986 quoted in Tsoukas and Hatch, 2001).

Distribution of power: diffused power versus spaced power

In 'tents' power is everywhere; it can be temporarily gained or lost by different coalitions of individuals in their process of sense-making. It is not systematized nor fixed through hierarchies but 'diffused and embodied in regimes of truth' in what Foucault calls 'discursive power' (Taylor and Clarke, 2008). Here discourse is understood as one of the possible 'truths' that, on one hand, helps individuals to construct the social identity of the self and, on the other, enables the construction of social relationships between people (Fairclough, 1992). Hence, a discourse builds the social consciousness of the individual to make sense of reality and it is at the same time built by individual and collective efforts to make sense of it. This mutually defining and reciprocal character of a discourse can be identified in the Actionomaider story.

In the process of constructing my Actionomaider identity through making sense of Actionomaider by Mary's translation of it, both Mary and I were shaping a discourse (defense of aid discourse) within the same process of understanding it. In her case, the mere fact of having to explain Actionomaider to me was redefining and therefore changing Actionomaider. In this reciprocal relationship we empowered ourselves to defend the aid dependency discourse.

In 'temples' power is perceived as something more static and systematic. The vertical system of power emerging from the need for a hierarchy make dwellers of the temple acknowledge and pay attention to visible power understood as 'the formal rules, structures, authorities, institutions and procedures of decision making' (Gaventa, 2006). This form of power is mainly recognized in formal spaces for decision making under the assumption that the empirically-demonstrated information provided by experts or 'higher-level interpreters' enables the organization to make rational decisions in formal structures.

Nevertheless, power also operates in informal spaces. In these spaces such one-to-one meetings or tea-talks experts influence or are influenced by different kind of evidence to the point that different actors, especially those with higher authority of

interpretation, (but, not only as the ALPS case illustrates) are able to control the formal 'decision-making table' by maintaining a certain 'hidden power' (Gaventa, 2006). Theoretically, this implies a subversion of the system as long as it is not (or not only) the 'objectivity' of data presented that informs decisions.

In this systematic perception of power a third form of power can be identified, invisible power. This form of power operates neither in a formal nor an informal realm but in the unconscious of individuals by dictating 'psychological and ideological boundaries of participation' (Gaventa, 2006). In a more diffused and discursive conception of power such as the one nomads believe in, what Veneklasen and Miller (2002) call 'invisible power' grasped as a limitation or a boundary to participation, can be grasped more positively as common social effort to interpret the world.

Assuming that discourses help to construct social relationships between people to make sense of reality, in a more 'ideational' or systemic level, discourses also contribute to the construction of a system of knowledge and belief (Fairclough, 1992). This idea is in line with what Roe (1994) called 'metanarratives' such as religions or ideologies that allows collectivities of individuals to make sense of the world. In this line of thought is the reification of organizations and the power emerging from it what implies the need of distinguishing power as something visible, invisible or hidden.

KNOWLEDGE: LEARNING AND/OR CHANGE

Making explicit the tacit versus distinguishing the tacit and the explicit

In 'tents' knowledge is contextual as long as it is only meaningful in a specific position 'under the sun'. It is also meaning-centred since its goal is to let people interact through negotiated truths. In this respect there is no distinction between the explicit and the tacit as different kinds of knowledge. The explicit and the tacit are stages of the same knowledge that emerges through the social process of sense-making and constructing identity. For example choosing aid dependency as the main topic of the aid strategy was the result of the interaction between Mary and me.

In this case the tacit became explicit during the process of sense-making. The values of our interaction as trust built or confidence gained helped us to make explicit a specific knowledge about aid. Under this view the explicitness of the knowledge we created is only explicable through the relational (tacit) aspect of our interaction.

In 'temples' there is fundamental distinction between explicit and tacit knowledge. Explicit or 'evident' knowledge is shaped by vertical power relations in which it is decided what knowledge is transmittable and '*storageable*' (explicit) and what is relational (tacit). Nevertheless, according to the perception of power operating in different spaces, the emotional and relational is only acknowledged in informal spaces of hidden power. Under this view, for example the CEO was convinced of the ALPS process because of the evidence presented not because of the way Mancini and David constructed a relationship with him.

Furthermore, since in 'temples' knowledge is theory driven there is less space for personal interaction for meaning construction in the experts' effort to prove the validity of a given theory. It is the object of knowledge and its explicitness which informs decisions rather than the subject of knowledge. Therefore, in 'temples' there is a big distinction between 'professional' and 'personal' knowledge while in 'tents' both became fuzzy or reciprocal. The role of the emotional aspect of knowledge is what characterizes both perceptions of knowledge.

An illustrative example of both perceptions of knowledge is the case of a student learning mathematics in school. Probably, the dwellers of the temple would tend to think that the student understands and masters mathematics mainly by her/his interaction with the object of knowledge while the nomads would find a big part of the explanation of this knowledge in the relationship constructed between the student and the teacher of mathematics and the emotional drivers of knowledge.

Organizing the change versus organizational change

In 'tents' it is personal interaction which leverages wider changes. Changes emerge from the interpretation of reality and the specific relationships and trust constructed between different coalition groups (Mancini and David, Mary and me). It also happens

under specific circumstances by rereading the past of the structures to come up with a new convincing narrative.

Learning is change under the assumption that relationships between Individuals and structures are reciprocal and mutually defining. Furthermore, assuming that power is diffused implies that learning or interpretation of reality is in itself a change that shapes both individuals and structure in the double process of meaning construction and self-identification. The way Mary and I understood and gave meaning to aid is the way that we learnt about aid and the way we changed our perception of aid and hence, the way we necessarily provoked wider changes in the social (organizational, in this case) perception of aid. In this sense all individuals are agents of change who by learning and change are organizing wider changes in the structures that are, at the same time, helping them to make sense of reality.

In 'temples' change is more believed to happen in the name of Actiopomorphus, the one who holds the capacity for change. Individuals in this sense, even those at higher levels of interpretation, are learning an object of knowledge already existing. Then, knowledge is something more unfolded rather than generated. Learning and change operates in different realms. Learning happens without necessarily provoking changes as long as it is grasped as a step in the hierarchy of knowledge. In the 'temple' social change is something learned (expertise) and static rather than experienced while in tents social change is something in the process of being learnt by experiences lived by individuals in a certain place, in a certain moment.

In 'temples' change can be institutionalized since knowledge is perceived as not needed for interpretation or judgment of non-higher-level interpreters, and thus, it is reliant on formal procedures (Pasteur, 2006). Nevertheless, as happened in the ALPS process in the second story, if the evidences provided are in line with the knowledge objectified lower interpreters can participate in the decision-making process.

On the contrary, in 'tents' the organizational change cannot be institutionally organized. Organizations change in a non predictive way. Actionomaid temporarily camps or partly camps in different places and concepts due to specific circumstances

and specific individuals' interactions. Change, in a wider sense, cannot be foreseen nor projected or controlled by individuals or coalitions of individuals.

AGENCY: MEANING CONSTRUCTION VERSUS SUBVERSION

In 'tents', agency is part of the process of learning and change. In that sense agency should be understood as an individual and group effort to make sense of reality and to look for identity within a social group. If power is diffused amongst actors, agency is 'distributed within the structures that actors themselves have created' (Garud and Karnøe, 2003 quoted in Garud, Hardy and Maguire, 2007). Emirbayer and Mische (1998) defend a definition of agency that appears to be coherent with the notion of discursive power accepted by nomads in which,

'Agency is the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments – the temporal–relational contexts of action – which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations' (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 970 quoted in Garud, Hardy and Maguire, 2007).

As long as the individuals' understanding of a specific phenomenon from their specific position (under the sun) influences the phenomenon, individuals have a necessary role in shaping social processes of meaning construction (Tsoukas and Hatch, 2001).

In 'temples' the understanding of agency is linked to the recognized system of power existing amongst individuals. Since the hierarchy of knowledge is recognized and interiorized by individuals, agency becomes a subversive activity instead of a need of constructing meaning. It occurs only when individuals are aware of the existence of formal and informal spaces in the 'temple'. This awareness of the system produces certain fear -as Mary and I experienced when proposing the aid dependency option in the aid strategy process- and helps to explain the subversive nature of agency. In 'temples' individuals 'are assumed to be automaton-like processors of objective information rather than interpreters of intrinsically ambiguous symbolic inputs' (Garud, Hardy and Maguire, 2007).

Nevertheless, this recognition of the system allows individuals at lower levels of the hierarchy to let higher-level interpreters validate different evidence to make decisions. In 'temples' this process of validation is more focused in the results or evidence that, rationally, prove a theory. On the other hand, in 'tents' the process of argumentation itself is just as important as the result (Majone, 1989). The persuasive capacity of the story is at least, as important as the purpose of the story. The association of ideas such as the different discourses defended by Actionmaid on 'real aid', 'rights-based approaches' are important features in the process of argumentation. In 'temples' only the rationality of the evidence provided is theoretically recognized in the process of decision-making (Bruner 1986, in Tsoukas and Hatch, 2001).

Section 4: implications and limitations for practice

Tents or Temples, Nomads or Dwellers: A matter of belief?

The case study and the analysis presented attempted to show how the same series of events (my experience at ActionAid) can be interpreted and signified in such different ways. Both stories have their own logic. In this sense, neither of them provides a better explanation than the other. Both respond to two different and possible worldviews coexisting in the non-fictional world. Both emerge from two different philosophical traditions. Nomads' worldview is close to hermeneutics as the art of understanding and interpreting the world, while the dwellers of the temple are closer to positivism accepting the predominance of the scientific method in explaining the world.

Both philosophical traditions 'claim to universality aspire to cover whole the range of human behaviour, to accommodate to its particular scheme' (Giddens, 1993 quoted in Mowles, 2010). It is not the aim of this section to try to reconcile them or find a common space in between them, but rather to identify how both worldviews operate or not operate. Furthermore, I defend the idea that the hermeneutical paradigm needs to operate more explicitly in development organizations understanding social change as their main purpose.

Having acknowledged that neither of these worldviews is intrinsically better or reconcilable (Flyvnjerg 2001, quoted in Mowles 2010) it might be a matter of belief and culture to give more value to one or the other; a matter of how practitioners and the structures they follow and transform, interiorize and construct concepts such as social change, power, learning, change or agency. The importance we give to certain beliefs limits or expands our ability for change. For example, if we doubt our own 'expertise' it is more probable that we will accept some hierarchies upon us and some specific kinds of knowledge over others. Instead, if we believe that knowledge is a result of a process of sense-making, we will probably have more possibilities to gain power and provoke changes within a workplace.

Paradigmatic awareness for paradigmatic thinking

Nevertheless I consider that development organizations, including ActionAid, have bits of both worldviews. This worldviews do not operate in such a distinguishable manner that the previous section aimed to analyse but are more mixed and embedded in different practices, relationships and spaces. In this line of thought, it is fundamental to consider to what extent we, practitioners of development organizations are aware of the ontological paradigm used in different moments and places to make decisions in our daily practice. In this sense this paradigmatic awareness constitutes one of the main implications for practice emerging from this paper.

Paradigmatic thinking enables practitioners to discern under which system of thought, tents or temples, people behave or a specific decision is made. This distinction can be helpful for understanding which values operate in a certain workplace. For example, regarding the different meanings used to concepts that guide our daily work, power can enable or prevent learning. Learning can be creative and constitutive of change or can be a constant repetition of tasks. In this sense, change can be grasped as possible or out of our hands. Likewise, agency can be something organizationally celebrated or a subversive action. Accordingly, we can see development organizations as prisons, machines, organisms, brains, cultures, political systems, rivers or instruments of domination (Morgan, 1986).

Reflective practice for paradigmatic thinking

Using metaphors and symbols -as I used tents and temples- can help us to identify what theories of knowledge, power or change underlie our and other's behaviours. Understanding the assumptions underlying that behaviors helps us to deconstruct and reconstruct the discourses that influences the way we and others act (Eyben, 2008).

In my action research, collaborative learning played a fundamental role in decoding the system of belief in which Mary and I were immersed in order to critically engage with power structures in the organization. 'Reflection' in this case can be understood in its sense of showing the image of each of us in the surface of the other. Furthermore, reflexivity in the form of reviewing my experience from different

paradigms, has allowed me to understand different dynamics of interaction between individuals and structures. This will have a fundamental footprint in tackling my next professional steps.

Implications and limitations of understanding development organizations as ‘tents’ for social change accepting the existence of ‘temples’

Assuming that once paradigms are identified ‘camping in tents’ or ‘dwelling in temples’ is a matter of belief, I agnostically believe in ‘tents’. I believe in ‘tents’ since I assume that social change is the purpose of development organizations. If social change as I discussed earlier in Section one is understood as a purpose ‘under-construction’ the relationship between individuals and structures, described in the ‘tents’, harmonizes with this understanding of the purpose. Specifically the meaning of power, learning/change and agency enables development practitioners to be aware of their role in constructing social change while accepting their opportunities and limitations.

On the other hand I am agnostic when it comes to seeing development organizations as ‘tents’ for three different reasons. On one hand following the ontological standpoint defended by the nomads, I accept camping temporarily in tents since it is a ‘good story’ that provides verisimilitude to my and hopefully, others’ practice. Therefore, I am not able to consider it as the truth as long as from this point I would become a dweller of the temple, the paradoxical temple of the tent.

Secondly, the ideal of the camp requires that all the sense-makers are equally aware of the hermeneutic paradigm that believes in the interpretative character of reality. If not, power would not be equally diffused and some ‘good stories’ could be more easily understood as positivist truths. The third reason to critically accept the ‘tents’ metaphor, is that the potential excessive emphasis in emotional intelligence as the unique driver of learning could deny the necessary value of rationality as existing and governing aspect of human behavior (Elias, 2000 cited in Mowles, 2010).

Nevertheless, it is the excessive emphasis on rationality as the valid behavior in development organizations that pushed me to explore the relationships between

individuals and structures. In this sense, the more emphasis on emotional intelligence needed implies giving more value to the meanings that nomads made of power, change, learning and agency.

Exteriorizing power structures for change

The awareness of the system of power which practitioners act in and its logics of emergence and significance, enables us to strategically use informal spaces and identify and/or develop the hidden power. Furthermore, if power is understood as temporal and diffused in the individual and collective attempt to make sense of social change, we are more capable of gaining power. If vertical power structures are not interiorized –or are explicitly exteriorized- we have a major role and responsibility participating in constructing sense for social change.

The same recognition of power as temporarily gained or lost not held by hierarchical knowledge-holders, allows people for whom development organizations exist to be perceived as sense-makers. The hierarchies of knowledge governing development organizations indirectly positions aid-recipients in the bottom of the knowledge scale. This relationship converts them into objects of development instead of subjects constructing their own narrative about their perceptions of reality. At the same time this relationship boosts the sense of dysfunctionality in conceptualizing development organizations as analyzed in Section 1.

In this sense, while ‘temple’ practitioners act through hierarchies of knowledge, we, nomad practitioners, act through networks of evolving sense-making. Under the tents’ paradigm we are more able to be agents of change as we are participants and more responsible for change (personal, organizational and social). Our actions of challenging assumptions and developing agency are not subversive but our core responsibility, being aware that our understanding of others’ reality is limited by our different positionalities (professional, cultural and educational). We are reflective and self-critical in paying attention to not accommodating our learning in temples of truth. We accept that knowledge is contextual and valid as long as it helps individuals and collectivities to make sense of the world.

We are optimistic agents of change by learning despite our inability to control changes

The agnostic believers in 'tents' can be optimistic about changes even when we cannot control them. Changes do not always happen in a linear manner but emerge from individuals' interaction in our effort to understand and endow our experience with meaning as long as we are interconnected by the process of socialization.

The same non-linear dynamics that operate in social change are present in organizational change. The complexity involved in the collective effort of tackling complexity or a second-order complexity characterizes the way we see changes (Tsoukas and Hatch, 2001). This, instead of discouraging us, makes us more humble in approaching our practice by acknowledging our limitations in perception. Neither particular individuals nor particular structures can control the change but all participate in the change. We tend to believe that changes are not only possible but are at the heart of the social evolution.

Playing with evidence, good stories and words

As long as we practice paradigmatic thinking we strategically use the concept of evidence. Our advantage is that as long as we understand the logics of both conceptions of reality we develop the ability to identify what satisfies different audiences in different environments and positions. We learn to adapt our story-telling to different mindsets. We learn to identify who needs numbers and who need words to defend our story for making sense. We are in the process of learning about how to play with the concept of objectivity when the situation is required. For example, if we identify that literature reviews are accepted in a certain place as objective data to make decisions, we use the chance to include some critical ideas to challenge a given discourse using association of ideas and referring to the vision of the organizations or other organizational documents to gain authority.

We also pay attention to the language. We want to know where the use of words comes from, but more importantly, we analyse how people make sense of them. Sometimes we remain proactively naive and ask for definitions and explanations of

concepts that are supposed to be clearly defined like 'fragile states' or 'aid effectiveness'. This strategy gives us the opportunity to challenge or influence the meaning that is being constructed by us and the people that interact with us.

We acknowledged that if structures change as languages do, we necessarily need to be aware of when we act as users of the language and when as creators of the language. For example, when I was making sense of the meaning of 'fragile state' by reading articles, I thought that the right question to ask the text was: what is a 'fragile state'? By assuming my 'ignorance' about the concept I was positioning myself in the knowledge hierarchy. But more importantly, by posing this question I was indirectly recognizing the existence of 'fragile states' when I had not yet decided whether this new category could help me to make sense or not.

Afterwards, I realized that the right question to ask was: Why is the author creating, consuming or criticising the concept of 'fragile state'? What is her/his position under the sun? This attitude helped me to critically engage with the discourse and to start deconstructing the paradigm behind the 'truth' of 'fragile states'.

These reflections on the use of words help us to recognize our potential and responsibility in changing the language and the structures that affect our perception of social change.

Conclusion

'If we understand how it is that we participate in the construction of our own realities, then we can take a more active and purposeful approach toward making this the sort of world we want to live in' Jodi O'Brien (2001, in O'Brien and Kollock)

How can development organizations and practitioners learn to combat existing dysfunctionality in their midst to bring about the kind of social change that ensures empowering practices in organizations delivering aid?

This paper explores issues of power and agency in bringing about learning for social change. It describes the complexity of the many, many participants in the aid web. The paper asks the question, 'if change is central to social development, how can a climate of learning be created where social change can be creatively brought about?' I problematise the current low decision-making status given those to whom the aid is delivered. I pose the question of how social change manifests itself and suggest that behind the meaning of 'change' rests the whole issue of what 'learning' and 'making meaning' means.

I challenge the current tendency in development organizations of adopting understandings of learning from other organizations' purposes. Using the metaphor of tent and temple dwellers to illustrate my argument, and using my own lived experience working in an NGO as reflective practice, I compare two models of how 'social change' can be brought about.

In one 'knowledge' used for promoting social change is passed down from on high; it is monolithic and based on data collected by hierarchies of 'experts'. I reflect on the implications of reifying organizations with a distinct hierarchical structure operating top-down. The capacity of the individual to contribute to debates leading to change is under-played. I defend the argument that the power relations emerging from this reification diminishes the role of individuals in organizing collective transformations for social change.

In the other, diversity of perception and negotiation of meaning is emphasised, and debate seen as an essential component in the construction of meaning and identity,

offering far greater opportunities for social change. The nomads by their very mobilisation and shifting of points of view, will have greater insights to contribute to debates about what change is needed and from whose point of view.

I point out that these two paradigms do not exist in isolation but can operate in conjunction with each other within the same organization. Paradigm awareness enables development practitioners to discern how this interplay affects their and others' practices for social change.

This paper constitutes an attempt to contribute to create a specific knowledge about learning in development organizations. The motivation behind this paper is to encourage development practitioners to explore these issues critically and to incorporate their new awareness into their working lives.

It is also an attempt to make sense of my own practice and to inform my future personal and professional steps. After several years working in development I became pessimistic about aid. This action research has provided me with new energy to see development organizations and their purposes in a different manner. I am more aware of my potential and responsibility in constructing sense for social change.

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