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Efficacy of Adult Education Programs of International Non-governmental Organizations

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to present an exploration of the efficacy of international NGOs' adult education programs for social change, empowerment, and transformation by examining a theoretical model and analyzing the application of the model to specific case studies.

The CONFINTEA V Hamburg Declaration (UNESCO, 1997) outlines an agenda for the future of adult education that includes, to name just a few, active citizenship, education for all, gender equity, alleviation of poverty, and the preservation of the environment. The goals and plans set forth by the Hamburg Declaration (UNESCO, 1997) and the Belem Framework for Action (UNESCO, 2009), the corresponding document from CONFINTEA VI, are indeed important but are also undeniably enormous.

In a time of declining economic resources for adult education, no single institution can possibly bring about the magnitude of change or implement all the recommendations from the Hamburg Declaration (UNESCO, 1997) or the Belem Framework for Action (UNESCO, 2009). Just a few months after the conclusion of CONFINTEA V, Forrester (1998) recognized that the responsibility for implementing adult education services and programs would be shared in partnership among United Nations and state agencies, Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) and community organizations, workforce related programs, and special interest groups.

Alfred and Nafuko (2010) are blunt in their description of the future financial challenges for adult education in the international context and advocate for innovation in financing and entrepreneurship. One approach to innovation and entrepreneurship is the engagement of NGOs, particularly in non-Western nations. NGOs serve to fill a gap in the adult education services left by insufficient governmental programs (Nordtveit, 2008) and advocate for the development and preservation of adult education as a priority (Dimitrova, 2007). However, while NGOs can play a significant role in addressing the needs of global adult education, what is yet unknown is the extent to which these organizations actually do so.

Research into the educational programs of NGOs with a charge of social change is relatively new to the field of adult education (Hoff & Hickling-Hudson, 2011). Although Hoff and Hickling-Hudson (2011) present an overview of theoretical perspectives on globalization and colonialism in adult education and make suggestions for future work, they also acknowledge that they have not provided "the detailed case studies that are needed to test our propositions" (p. 187). Thus, in this paper, we compare the theoretical framework proposed by Hoff and Hickling-Hudson to the findings of several relevant case studies from a variety of fields, including adult education, international comparative education, and the study of NGOs. Through this comparison, we are able to explore the efficacy of international NGOs' adult education programs for social change, empowerment, and transformation.

The Purpose of NGOs

NGOs exist to fill a gap in public services left by insufficient governmental services, often in cooperation with the government, and funded by international donors (Nordtveit, 2008). Nordtveit (2008) presents three main reasons for cases of partnerships between public and private sectors: (a) the government prioritizes some sectors and uses nongovernmental providers to implement services for others; (b) public social services are ineffectual or neglected due to a lack of resources, and donors believe that investing in NGOs is a more effective and efficient strategy than overhauling government institutions; and (c) many donors view NGO programs as less corrupt than government run programs. In each of the three circumstances, NGO services are perceived to implement programs more quickly, distribute services more effectively, and thus generate a larger impact than comparable governmental programs. Nowicki (2000) uses the adjective “nonprofit” generally to refer to independent and nonprofit or charitable service providing organizations, but also trade unions, political parties, housing cooperatives, and similar associations and intends for the word to subsume the related terms NGO, voluntary, and third sector. For the purposes of this discussion, the terms will be considered synonymous.

For international NGOs with an adult education charge, the educational activities may vary according to goals and objectives, the target population for services, financial or personnel resources, and the degree to which the organization functions independently of political or commercial interests (Hoff & Hickling-Hudson, 2011). However, regardless of any differences, most educational activities are designed to improve the living conditions of the poor by providing literacy, basic adult education, or vocational training. Hoff and Hickling-Hudson (2011) argue that these educational programs may not be specifically directed at changing underlying policies or social institutions but, independent of expressed intent, such educational programs do advance social change by taking the first steps towards empowerment and social justice for the populations served by the programs.

Theoretical Framework

Hoff and Hickling-Hudson’s (2011) framework recommends a research agenda for promoting adult education for social change and outlines the roles that international NGOs can and should play in global adult education. The five-part framework of analysis is situated in anti-capitalist post-colonial theory and is intended to guide and support the work of researchers who study international NGO adult education programs for social change, including services related to literacy, adult basic education, and vocational training. The five components of the framework are (a) representation, (b) transformational potential, (c) multiple perspectives, (d) multi-causality, and (e) historicism.

Part one, representation, refers to the necessity of ensuring that local interests are represented in both theory and practice. Local ways of knowing and knowledge construction, local context, not Western perspectives, should be used to design, build, and deliver programs that accurately represent the problems and concerns at hand, and address those issues in a way that has value and meaning for local participants. Transformational potential, the second part of the framework, refers to the political nature of adult education. Hoff and Hickling-Hudson (2011) argue that capitalism has failed the world economy in general and marginalized populations in particular and, thus, adult education programs should maintain an agenda of social justice in order to impart participants with a sense of political agency or power to improve living conditions and combat oppression. The use of multiple perspectives, part three, suggests that researchers and program planners should avoid the use of dichotomous categories and focus on a holistic view of economic and social development in local and global contexts. A holistic assessment

would consider all viewpoints and investigate nuances to build an informed position from which to address social and economic concerns. Part four, multi-causality advocates for researchers to investigate non-economic factors that contribute to oppression and marginalization, such as culture, identity, and ethnicity, as well as economic and material factors. Lastly, historicism keeps in perspective the political and economic trends that have influenced the global economy to date and which may be in opposition to efforts to promote social justice.

While the authors (Hoff & Hickling-Hudson, 2011) make comprehensive theoretical recommendations, they acknowledge that the practical application of the framework is left to the field researcher and remains as yet untested, requiring further study. As a first step in evaluating the five-part framework, the following analysis is an application of the theory to published case studies that investigate international NGO adult education programs for social change.

Method

To explore the efficacy of international NGOs' adult education programs for the purpose of social change, empowerment, and transformation, we conducted an analysis of selected case studies to examine alignment with the theoretical framework. To be included, case studies must have investigated NGOs operating in non-Western settings, without restriction on geographic location. Although Hoff and Hickling-Hudson's theoretical framework specifically referenced post-colonial locales, virtually all developing nations have received foreign aid or participated in international affairs of some nature and are thus considered relevant for the purposes of this paper. The search and selection procedure resulted in five studies.

Humphreys (1999) examined the programs of a Thai NGO to preserve traditional crafts while creating sustainable work for fair pay to benefit people in impoverished regions and counteract urban migration. Working primarily with women, Humphreys found economic initiatives must challenge gender stereotypes to create long-lasting change. While the NGO in this study did achieve some success in creating economic opportunity for participants, the underlying causes of poverty were never addressed, resulting in unsustainable change.

Jongeward (1998) investigated a community-based NGO that provides training to participants in rural India to improve economic and social conditions. The results of the case study indicated issues of trust are central to successful operations and that international connections are important to support economic growth. By incorporating local perspectives and interests with broader planning support and expertise, the NGO in this study was represented by Jongeward as the most successful organization discussed in the present paper.

Nordtveit (2008) conducted a case study on a women's literacy program in Senegal for the purpose of economic development. Nordtveit concluded that a lack of participant input and a top-down management approach undermined program success. Because the programs did not meet the needs of local learners, the literacy initiatives were ultimately ineffective and dramatically underperformed in comparison to their cost.

Nowicki (2000) explored NGO operations in Kazakhstan through the historical development and the obstacles NGOs face as a result of the governmental and legal context and regional culture. Building trust within the local communities was a major obstacle for NGOs in this study. The NGO programs were never able to resolve the lack of trust and operations ultimately disintegrated.

Stiles (2002) investigated the efforts of NGOs to empower civil society in Bangladesh, focusing on the conflict created by pressure from international donors competing with local and national political systems. Stiles argued that conflicting political pressures undermined the work of NGOs by diverting resources away from the programs, resulting in minimalist and futile initiatives.

Findings

Each of the five studies was evaluated for alignment with the components of the theoretical framework and for program efficacy and success with regards to the teaching and learning mission and the social justice charge, as represented in the case study. The results of the evaluation are presented in Table 1. The columns of the table correspond to the five components of the theoretical framework plus an indication of overall program success, as judged from the presentation in the corresponding study.

Although the case studies' contexts vary, all of the studies examined are strong examples of how difficult it can be to balance social and economic concerns when local, national, and foreign interests intersect. While not all of the researchers discussed here have prioritized their findings in such a way that the five-point framework of Hoff and Hickling-Hudson is immediately visible, it is arguable that both the academic research and the NGO program planning in each of the cases would benefit from a serious consideration of the aforementioned theoretical framework in their program plan.

Table 1

Alignment of NGO educational programs in Non-Western contexts with the theoretical framework components, as represented in the corresponding studies

Study	Representation	Transformational Potential	Multiple Perspectives	Multi-causality	Historicism	Success?
Humphreys, 1999	P	Y	N	N	Y	P
Jongeward, 1998	Y	Y	P	Y	P	Y
Nordtveit, 2008	N	Y	N	N	P	N
Nowicki, 2000	N	Y	N	P	Y	N
Stiles, 2002	N	Y	N	N	N	N

Note. Y = yes, the component was present; N = not present; P = partially present.

All five of the studies describe NGO programs with transformational potential. Presumably, NGOs exist to meet a need within a community or region. If there were no potential for transformation, the social justice charge of the NGOs would not make sense. Hence, alignment with the theoretical framework in this regard is unsurprising.

The alignment of the NGO programs with the other four criteria indicates varying degrees of success. The NGO in Jongeward's (1998) case study meets or partially meets all components of the theoretical framework with its programs and is the only NGO that is described as being mostly successful. The NGO programs described by Humphreys (1999) and Nowicki (2000) both meet two criteria and partially meet a third but differ in the final determination of success. Of the two remaining

unsuccessful programs, the NGO in Nordtveit's (2008) study only fully meets one criterion and partially meets a second while Stiles (2002) report indicates the NGO aligned with only a single component of the framework.

The case studies most likely to be considered as describing successful NGO operations, those of Humphreys (1999) and Jongeward (1998), are also the only two that met or partially met the representation criterion. Although these two programs were considered successful, they did still have flaws. For example, the lack of attention to multiple causality by the Thai NGO (Humphrey, 1999) perpetuated gender bias in the workforce, and the conflict of multiple perspectives between leadership and workers of different castes in the Indian NGO's project (Jongeward, 1998) required substantial negotiation to reach a resolution.

While the NGO in Jongeward (1998) was aligned with all components to at least some degree, by a simple count Humphreys' (1999) NGO would not appear to be any more successful than that of Nowicki's (2000) case. Yet it was described as partially successful while Nowicki's NGO was represented as unsuccessful. The commonality between the successful and partially successful programs on the issue of representation suggests that, of the five components, representation may be more critical to program success than are other elements.

Applying the framework suggests that the aspects of the NGO operations that were less successful can be attributed to components of the framework that did not receive due diligence. The less successful NGOs in the case studies of Nordtveit (2008), Nowicki (2000), and Stiles (2002) all had obvious flaws with regards to implementation of Hoff and Hickling-Hudson's (2011) theoretical framework. These three cases have a number of qualities in common: top-down leadership without the representation of local interests or participants, lack of inclusion of multiple perspectives, and only minimal attention to multi-causality and historicism. For example, Nordtveit (2008) found the neglect to include local perspectives in planning and design meant the programs did not meet the needs of the participants. As judged by Stiles (2002), the unresolved conflict between local interests, corrupt government, and international donor influence distracted the NGO from meeting its social justice charge. In each of these cases, the transformational potential was hindered by or entirely lost to negotiating political barriers, mediating the misalignment of local interests and NGO programs, and serving disconnected international and donor needs rather than the needs of the local participants. While the robustness of Hoff and Hickling-Hudson's (2011) theoretical framework as yet remains untested in the field, this paper demonstrates that it can be successfully used as an analysis tool to diagnose flaws and prescribe changes in NGO operations.

Conclusions

By analyzing the impact and efficacy of international NGOs, as aligned with the theoretical framework, we were able to diagnose flaws in operations and prescribe strategies to address those flaws for the future efficacy of international adult education programs. Alignment, or lack thereof, with Hoff and Hickling-Hudson's (2011) theoretical framework, is a strong indicator of the successes and challenges international NGOs' operations may encounter.

By designing programs that incorporate the components of the theoretical framework in the early design stages, administrators, program planners, educators, and advocates can improve the likelihood of success in fulfilling their NGO's charge. For example, involving local participants in the planning process, engaging a variety of stakeholders, and accounting for the complexity of causation for

oppression and poverty are matters to be considered. In this way, NGOs are better positioned to contribute to the success of global development initiatives, enabling the international community to realize the goals and recommendations set forth in the Hamburg Declaration and the Belem Framework for Action.

Alfred and Guo (2007) argue that American and Canadian adult educators remain generally absent from the conversation around globalization and social justice. Merriam, Courtney, and Cervero (2006) suggest that there exists untapped potential for adult education as a field to respond to the effects of globalization critically and constructively to reclaim its effects for the development of equity and social justice. By aligning with the theoretical framework of Hoff and Hickling-Hudson's (2011), the adult education programs of NGOs may work to provide education for all, gender equity, and the alleviation of poverty. By investigating such NGO programs, North American adult educators can meet the challenge set forth by critics and engage in issues of globalization and social justice.

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