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Crafting Better Futures: An NGO's Educational Programs for Women Artisans in West Africa

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Abstract: This qualitative case study centered on the educational programs of an international NGO working in West Africa to alleviate poverty and empower local women. Difficulty with cross-cultural communication and a lack of educational expertise diminished an otherwise successful organization's efficacy.

The worldwide efforts to end the scourge of extreme poverty are subdivided into the United Nations' (UN) eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs; UN, 2013). Two of the eight goals (goals three and five) specifically pertain to women and their roles in developing regions. Additionally, women are more likely to live in poverty (goal one), less likely to attend primary school (goal two), have less control over sexually transmitted infections (a component of goal six), and maternal health (goal five) is strongly correlated to child mortality (goal four; UN, 2012). The prominence of women's issues in the MDGs suggests the UN considers women's empowerment, equality, and health crucial to the eradication of global poverty and the success of the UN's comprehensive development efforts. As one means to address the MDGs, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) proposes a variety of education programs designed to specifically target the MDGs. Specific to women, UNESCO asserts "no other policy intervention is likely to have a more positive multiplier effect on progress across all the MDGs than the education of women and girls" (UNESCO, 2012, para. 2).

Key ideas embedded in the MDGs and UNESCO's agenda are (a) the contributions of civil society organizations, such as Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs), (b) the importance of empowering women, and (c) the fundamental role education plays in development efforts. The present study exists at the intersection of these three ideas.

Purpose and Conceptual Framework

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine the exchange between an international NGO and the women artisans enrolled in the NGO's educational program. Specifically, I explored the ways the NGO and program participants influenced one another. For the purposes of this study, I have operationalized the term *exchange* to refer to the dialogic aspects of adult education and the outcomes of such dialogue.

Research into the educational programs of NGOs with a charge of social change is relatively new to the field of adult education. Therefore, no single theoretical framework fully addresses the complexity of the circumstances in which NGOs operate in developing regions. The two-part conceptual framework drew from Vella's (2002) 12 principles of effective adult learning and global feminist theory. Vella emphasizes teaching and learning with respect and consideration for the participants. Global feminist theory (Mies, 1993; Tong, 2009) specifically pertains to women's perspectives in the context of developing regions, such as the West African country in which this study was conducted.

Literature Review

There are few investigations of NGOs' educational programs, particularly in the field of adult education. Drawing from research across disciplines, a literature review reveals some key challenges and opportunities for international NGOs operating in developing regions.

Three key challenges for NGO educational programs appear in the literature. First, NGOs succumbed to neoliberal influences and reinforced elitism by being accountable only to donors and working at a distance from those they seek to serve (Timmer, 2009). Second, local governments challenged or undermined NGOs' operations or, by replacing government services, NGOs quickened the influx of neoliberal practices (Stiles, 2002). The last challenge for NGOs was working with developing nations as equal partners and not defaulting to globalized, colonialist perspectives (e.g. Bochman, 2011; Broussard, 2007).

Western NGOs operating in non-Western countries also created opportunities. First and foremost was the ability to financially support local efforts (Humphreys, 1999; Macpherson, 2009). Since Western nations are typically also wealthy, Western NGOs often have financial resources local NGOs in developing nations do not. Similarly, Western NGOs may have important connections to international export markets (e.g. Jongeward, 1998) and supply knowledge and skills that locals may not have, for example, management, marketing, or design.

Methodology

I applied a qualitative case study approach using a single-case design to an NGO founded and led by Westerners and operating in a West African country. In its 10th year of operations, this fair-trade organization provided training and educational programs for an extensive network of women artisans and exported their products abroad. The NGO had deep roots in the local community and a large international customer base. Four research questions guided the study:

- What are the benefits, perceived and realized, for the women participating in the NGO's educational programs?
- What are the benefits, perceived and realized, for the NGO as a consequence of working with the women participants?
- How does participating in the NGO's educational programs influence the women's lives?
- How do the women participants influence the NGO's operations and programs?

I collected all data at the NGO's West African location during the summer of 2013. Documents included teaching materials and NGO publications and reports. Observations derived from training events, NGO staff and strategic meetings, and routine daily activities. Semi-structured interviews lasted 0.5 to 1.5 hours. I used a constant comparative method of thematic analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to develop findings, informed by Creswell's (2009) process.

Fifteen women participated in this study, including two NGO employees, two short-term student volunteers, and 11 local artisans/entrepreneurs. All participants engaged with the NGO's educational programs as a learner, instructor, or program manager. Participants' ages ranged from approximately 20 to 74. Affiliation with the NGO varied from a few weeks for the newest volunteer to 10 years for a founding member. Education levels were varied, with some women having only a few years of middle school while others were working on Master's degrees.

Findings

Although the present case centered on an NGO generally regarded as successful, particularly with respect to economic factors, findings indicated opportunities for increased efficacy and collaboration within its educational programs. Three major themes emerged from

the analysis, including (a) ongoing cultural and communication barriers, (b) a precarious balance between economic and personal empowerment, and (c) limited educational program resources.

Culture and Communication

Negotiating cultural differences between the local women artisans and the Western employees and volunteers was a continuing challenge, even for this well-established organization. Margaret, an American employee, shared “I think that that’s my biggest challenge, that cultural communication/miscommunication.” Tamara, an African volunteer and student at an American university, noticed misunderstandings or incomplete comprehension were common between Westerners and West Africans. In contrast, nine of the 11 women entrepreneurs thought communicating with Westerners and foreigners was not a problem or no different than working with locals. The lack of expressed concern over communication issues was particularly mystifying given a major miscommunication between the NGO and locals.

Although the local artisans generally agreed communication with Westerners was satisfactory, every one of them brought up an issue regarding the term *vendor*. The misunderstanding arose after the NGO labeled the women entrepreneurs as vendors on a production assignment form. In the U.S., the word *vendor* would accurately describe the business relationship between the entrepreneurs, independent batikers and seamstresses, and the client organization, the NGO. In the local context, a vendor is a businessperson with very low status who might, for example, sell plantain chips at a traffic light, not the women entrepreneurs.

The entrepreneurs found the term disrespectful and alienating. The women felt a connection to the NGO and empowered based on their international visibility and exports. When the NGO began calling them vendors, they began to perceive the organization was no longer interested in collaboration or partnerships. The term’s use represented an altered status for Cora:

When I started with [the organization], I know we are an NGO. That is when I joined, but all of a sudden, our names were changed. Right now they call us vendors. Meaning we don’t participate. It’s like we are workers, you work and they pay you, you don’t belong to that site. To me that’s how I understand it.

The comments from other artisans supported Cora’s interpretation. When asked what they would prefer, many women selected the word *partner*, believing it a more accurate representation of their role and highlighting a desire for cooperation and community.

Both employees, Margaret and Gloria, were aware of the vendor issue. Margaret was open with her concerns, acknowledging, “that’s a grudge that’s going to stick. So, let’s think about how minute that detail is – one word.... So, that’s what’s scary to me.” The major worry, in Margaret’s opinion, was the word not being caught earlier. She elaborated,

I’m just thinking about the word vendor compared to partner [and] how easily that can be overlooked by [us], by like our biggest brains in the company.... That it can be overlooked, or not even overlooked, just not even recognized to look at because it is such a basic business term. And here it is such a low class label. And how many times have we done that? And not heard about it. It’s scary to think about.

In contrast, Gloria, a local, was seemingly unconcerned, as though she really did consider the women entrepreneurs to be vendors. In her view, the business relationship was “cordial” because “we are customers to them. They think of the company as a customer.” She explained,

I call this miscommunication because “vendors” in our local parlance is different, has different meaning. And in Western way too, it has a different meaning, so having a different name will mean something else. But with education, it bridges the gap. At the

moment, I would say they [are] still with local understanding. They've not gotten themselves to an international level where they will understand it all.

In essence, rather than validating the women's local cultural definition of the term vendor, Gloria was dismissing it as an error based on a lack of education and international experience.

Gloria admitted dialogic activities such as roundtable discussions used to occur regularly but there had been none recently. During interviews, the women entrepreneurs repeatedly requested more discourse and transparency regarding the NGO's status, practices, and plans. Cora felt the NGO was withholding information from the entrepreneurs. She complained, "whenever they are changing anything, they don't tell us. They don't have any discussion with us," and "if...I belong to that group. I should know whatever is going on in there." Similarly, Gladys believed, "they should be very transparent. That's what I want. Communication, yes."

Balancing Economic and Personal Empowerment

The balance between the goals of economic justice and social justice was precarious. In particular, the NGO's business needs were in constant competition for resources with the educational programs. Finding a successful equilibrium between these intricately connected operations was an ongoing challenge since the NGO's educational mission was necessarily subservient to its economic activity. If the entrepreneurs were unable to generate sufficient income to support their families, the educational programs' value would be greatly impeded.

In the participants' view, the NGO's economic benefits overshadowed the educational benefits. When applying to join, only one artisan respondent, Estelle, was even aware of the educational programs. The entrepreneurs agreed their NGO work supported their families, paid children's school fees, and grew their businesses. Sarah was proud of her children and her accomplishment of educating them "because some of their mates were not able to go as far as I have tried or helped them to be," meaning she had done more for her children than their friends' families had been able to do. She credited her NGO work, saying "I could not have been able to educate these children to this level if I'm only depending on my own business." All participants agreed local women had greater responsibilities for family and home than do men. Emily, an American volunteer, summed the situation up by declaring, "I don't know if you've met the ladies here, but they are strong women and they run this place." Emily may be correct, insofar as work was concerned, but, as manager Margaret clarified, "most of the women we work with are the breadwinners of their family" and acknowledged "they're working their butts off every, everyday but then that doesn't mean that any of their other duties at home are gonna be let go."

Despite the necessary emphasis on income-generating activity, educational programs were acknowledged as important opportunities for the women entrepreneurs. Nine of the 11 artisans found the trainings useful and indicated they would like to participate in future events. Regina liked the trainings and felt she had learned a lot. She said she would continue attending "any workshop that they do. I go because I'm going to learn something from it." Evelyn found the bookkeeping trainings addressed one of her business needs, explaining, "I want to know, how am I spending within a month? Because I spend a lot and I couldn't keep the records." The program's focus on business-related skills balanced both economic and personal empowerment.

Educational Program Resources

A lack of appropriate resources was a barrier to success. During five weeks of data collection, there were only two training sessions, each lasting between one and two hours, despite education's high visibility in the NGO's mission statement and publications. Aside from

material and financial limitations, development and delivery relied on volunteers, business or design students from Western universities with little instructional experience. The volunteers who led the trainings had appropriate content knowledge but no background in developing curriculum, interacting with adult learners, or planning an engaging learning experience.

For example, as part of preparing to lead a workshop on visual merchandising, American volunteer Emily conducted a needs assessment by visiting four or five entrepreneurs who ran businesses of varying success levels. She did not feel she was able to get the information she needed to effectively prepare for the event. She admitted, “I don’t know how talking to these women has prepared me for this workshop” and elaborated,

I’ve been like meeting and trying to ask them questions to figure out, you know, what sort of help they would want and need but they’re not really understanding. I don’t think they get what visual merchandising is.... But they’ve like expressed interest in it? Which is why Gloria is like ‘Oh this person wants your help with visual merchandising.’ And then I go and I meet with them and I ask them questions and they have no idea what I’m talking about. No idea what I’m talking about!

I accompanied Emily on a visit and expected her to conduct a needs assessment, asking what the women would like to learn and discovering what they already knew. Instead, Emily asked factual business questions about, for example, sales volume and merchandise types. The mismatch between what Emily thought she was asking and what she actually asked highlighted her lack of experience and skill with workshop design and planning, and teaching in general.

Certainly the opportunity was personally valuable for the volunteers, who cited their teaching as a highlight of their experience, but the quality of their work did not do justice to the learners’ needs. The NGO’s primary resource deficit was a lack of experience and instructional expertise among those planning and facilitating the educational programs.

Discussion

This case study’s findings reveal how precarious an international NGO’s operations can be. Trust must be reinforced constantly, as evidenced by the miscommunication over the term *vendor*. Although the NGO and local entrepreneurs arguably had good relationships prior, a single word’s misuse threatened to undermine those relationships. The local women understood the word was used differently in the West but that explanation was deemed unsatisfactory. The entrepreneurs did not trust the NGO had made a genuine mistake; rather they believed it was a sign they were becoming vendors in the term’s local sense, undermining the NGO’s mission. In contrast, the balance between economic and social goals within the educational programs spoke to trust’s existence. The women entrepreneurs trusted the trainings were valuable and worth their time; they believed in the content’s importance and strived to apply it to their own businesses.

Of course, limited resources are an intrinsic characteristic of many NGO operations. NGOs may function with tight budgets and therefore the supporting an educational mission, as in this study, can be financially challenging. When faced with financial or material needs, it is easy to overlook the technical and experiential resources required to deliver effective trainings.

Conclusion

Among the challenges derived from the literature, the present Western NGO largely avoided the first two pitfalls, neoliberal practices and competition with local government, but was inconsistent regarding its ability to work with locals as equal partners. As previously described, negotiating the differences in communication and business philosophies between

Western and local contexts was challenging even for this established organization. The findings from the present study also indicate NGOs could likely benefit from the adult educators' involvement when planning, designing and delivering educational programs. Practitioners can apply the challenges and opportunities derived from the literature and reinforced by the present study to increase the efficacy and impact of NGOs' efforts worldwide.

The existing body of academic literature on NGO educational programs is still rather meager. Given NGOs' potential impact in developing regions and the UN and UNESCO's advocacy of collaboration with NGOs to address the MDGs, this research line seems relevant and timely. Future research should continue to explore NGOs operating in diverse contexts and delve more deeply into the trainings and ways in which they can become more effective.

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