

Project Management and Community Participation within Small Island States: An Examination of Stakeholder Engagement in Belize in an Era of the Sustainable Development Goals

Joseph Kweku Assan¹ & Samantha Hunt¹

¹ Center for Global Development and the Sustainability, Sustainable International Development Program, Heller School for Social Policy and Management, Brandeis University, Waltham, USA

Correspondence: Joseph K. Assan, Center for Global Development and the Sustainability, Sustainable International Development Program, Heller School for Social Policy and Management, Brandeis University, MS. 035, Waltham, MA, 02454, USA. Tel: 1-781-736-3989. E-mail: joeassan@brandies.edu

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Abstract

This paper seeks to understand how Local Community Development and Conservation Organisations manage their relationship with their key stakeholders, which in the context of our paper are the donors, local partner communities and the government. The study ascertains how organisations pursue the quest to achieve their goals/mission, in an era of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by using the stakeholder accountability framework. The paper further examines how Local NGOs manage the relationship between such missions and project implementation and whether they reflect stakeholder needs and expectation. The authors use qualitative methodologies involving interviews, focus group discussions/meetings and participants' observations to address the research objectives and questions. The study observes some (dis)connection between community participation in projects that are being implemented, organisational goals and local needs. The study further reveals that there is a potential disconnect between organisation mission and the pursuit of participatory sustainable development. The study underscores the fact that effective stakeholder participation is critical for achieving local sustainable development targets. The authors conclude that upward accountability to donors and governments seems to be a stronger incentive for Local NGOs compared to downward accountability. We argue that such patterns must be addressed to ensure the attainment of the critical local targets of the Sustainable Development Goals. The paper recommends the need to formalise both downward and inward accountability mechanisms in order to ensure that community development values are being integrated into project implementation that are aimed at addressing local development needs.

Keywords: Belize, small island states, NGOs accountability, stakeholder participation, livelihoods and poverty reduction, sustainable development goals

1. Introduction

Although participatory community development has anti-establishment and anti-hierarchical roots, it has permeated international political economy and been adopted by most development organisations especially in the current dispensation of the United Nations Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In contemporary community development discourse, it would be difficult to find a development organisation that does not include some participatory rhetoric in their programming (Mansuri & Rao, 2013). Subsequently, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have prioritized project participation to include their stakeholder communities in the project design and management process (Kilby, 2006). Community development is a development strategy that initially arose out of the 1950's as a response to the top-down development strategies that were common at the time (Mansuri & Rao, 2004). Development was very focused on economics and decisions were made by governments and development practitioners without input from those that were to benefit from the development. Community development was suggested as a way to refocus poverty alleviation at the community level rather than at the national level.

However, projects were implemented within the existing social and economic structures, which maintained the power structures that perpetuated the very poverty that it was trying to eradicate. It soon fell out of favor until the

1990s when the second wave of interest in community development and participatory development occurred (Mansuri & Rao, 2004). Much of the interest during the second wave was due to Amartya Sen and Robert Chambers, who wrote about the transformative potential of participatory community development.

Amartya Sen argued that “freedoms are not only the primary ends of development, but they are also among the primary means” (Sen, 1999, p. 10). Rather than seeing development as increasing incomes or as correlated with a country’s GNP, Sen redefines development as an expanding of freedoms or capabilities. He argues that if individuals are provided the opportunities and or freedoms required to shape their own development, they will not be “passive recipients of the benefits of cunning development programmes” rather will have agency to decide the type of development means and how it should apply to their own lives (Sen, 2001). This kind of development can be used to disrupt the traditional social and economic structures in such a way that power is redistributed and communities are not only able to articulate their own needs but are able to lead the development process (Brocklesby & Fisher, 2003).

The mainstreaming of participation and community development brings about the challenge of how to implement this sort of development. This challenge is not new and in fact, since the 1990s development practitioners have been exploring the best ways to implement the kind of development that Sen refers to. Chambers, (1995), in his seminal book, *Whose Reality Counts*, discusses the potential disconnect between how development practitioners view poverty and how poor people view their own realities. The views of development practitioners as professionals tend to be “universal, reductionist, standardised and stable”, which disregard the specific and contextual dynamics of the lives of poor people (Chambers, 1995, p. 173). Chambers emphasises the importance of prioritising the voices and realities of the poor and underscores the need for a professional and institutional shift to allow this to happen.

Community development NGOs are often presented as a solution to the problem of *disconnect* that Chambers discusses, as they are assumed to have been formed in rejection of top-down development. Community development NGOs are seen as representatives of the poor and their involvement in development projects ensures that the community can participate and have control over the decision making process. There is also the assumption that NGOs will improve development accountability as they are expected to advocate for policies that will meet the needs of the poor (Namara, 2010). While most community development NGOs do express pro-poor values and work to maintain their relationship with the communities they work, there is something problematic about the assumption that the NGO is a representative of the poor. It is especially problematic as the development sector, with NGOs included, continues towards more standardised planning and organisational processes that often preclude NGOs from implementing meaningful participatory community development, which further widens the disconnect with their stakeholders.

This paper uses the case study of a local community development and conservation organisations to ascertain the role of the NGO in development and to examine how NGOs manage their relationships with their key stakeholders, which in this paper are the donors, the beneficiary community, and the government. The paper looks at how the Local NGO manages its relationship with its community development mission and the association between this mission and how projects are actually implemented. The paper seeks to examine the kinds of accountability mechanisms that are already in place and how do these affect the Local NGO’s relationship with their stakeholder communities? The study also seeks to understand the implications of these accountability mechanisms for project implementation? These questions are imperative in an era of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, which seeks to serve as a framework for achieving long term development targets (UN, 2015; Sachs, 2012). This requires active participation from countries, local communities and households who are expected to own the outcomes development programmes.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: section two presents the literature review whilst section three outlines the study background and the research methodology. Section four discusses the results and finally, section five presents the conclusions and policy recommendations of the study.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Community Development NGOs, Normative Views and Critiques

Since the 1990s there has been a rapid increase globally in registered NGOs (Bebbington, Hicksley & Miltin, 2008). The role of NGOs in the development sector is not clearly defined. However, there are different views on the subject. Bebbington et al., further argue that NGOs represent alternative development and that their role is to act outside of the normative neoliberal development agenda. By implementing an alternative development agenda, NGOs are able to avoid the different procedures of the development agenda and work with communities to meet needs that may not be in line with the international development policy framework of the moment. These

authors reveal that “NGOs are only NGOs in any politically meaningful sense of the term if they are offering alternatives to dominant models, practices, and ideas about development” (p.3). These authors specifically emphasise the potential for NGOs to enable “alternative ways of organising the economy, politics and social relationships in a society” while also identifying NGOs as integral to civil society (p. 5). The normative view of NGOs also identifies the organisations as a part of civil society. However, this view posits NGOs as strengthening civil society and working within existing structures rather than presenting alternative ways of organising a society (Mercer, 2002).

NGOs are also seen as a mechanism for holding the state accountable while also facilitating mechanisms for democratic change. In this model NGOs are a part of civil society working with existing structures and procedures to add to policy debates and discussions rather than allowing the state to be the only voice (Mercer, 2002). Rather than presenting alternative forms of development NGOs are seen as taking a bottom-up approach rather than a top-down approach that is seen with governments and international agencies. This approach is closely related to the view that NGOs are necessarily participatory and representatives of the poor and that allows them to be effective in enabling participation and including more marginalized people in decision-making processes (Namara, 2010).

While these characteristics of NGOs are sometimes true, Mercer (2002) examines each of these characteristics and presents some complexities in the reality of the NGO landscape. She argues that NGOs do not universally strengthen civil society and that civil society is a much larger and more complex sector than is being presented. NGOs are therefore able to strengthen some aspects of civil society while also weakening others. Bebbington et.al (2008) agree with this, but emphasize that NGOs are an integral part of civil society and that rather than weakening aspects of civil society NGOs role in civil society is more fluid than other normative views prescribe and that this role should be analysed historically and contextually. While Bebbington et. al (2008) focus more on how NGOs fit into civil society as a whole, Mercer examines the relationship that NGOs have with their target communities. Mercer argues that these communities legitimise the NGOs and are in fact integral to the continuation of the NGOs work.

Although this would seem to be a strong incentive for the NGOs to continually strengthen the relationship with their target communities, Mercer found that many NGOs are in fact going through “a crisis of legitimacy” (Mercer, 2002, p.15). Whilst their relationship with the community and marginalised populations initially legitimised the NGO, this same relationship is what attracts donors. Donors see NGOs as a proxy for working with the community and as a way to direct donations towards strengthening civil society. Although this appears to be a positive development for the NGOs, and it more certainly can be, it is also the source of the “crisis of legitimacy” (Mercer, 2002). NGOs must decide whether they prioritize legitimization from the community or the donor. Often, because of the resources offered by the donor, the NGOs prioritize the donor and their needs and procedures, which erodes the connection the organisation has with their target communities. This is, in turn, means that the NGO is no longer truly representing the poor and marginalised. Rather they are implementing the formal procedures of donors that want to scale up development projects, which could erode the connection that the NGO has with its target communities.

Nevertheless, Namara (2010) scrutinises NGOs’ relationship with both the donor and the state, and how these relationships affect NGO accountability and legitimacy. Using Uganda as a case study, Namara examines NGO involvement in the development of Uganda’s Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP). In this context NGOs were initially approached to participate in the PRSP process to incorporate a pro-poor perspective into the PRSP. The NGOs were expected to represent the interests of their stakeholders/beneficiaries and advocate on their behalf at the policy level. The donors and the state saw the NGOs as a mechanism to enhance participation of the poor and enable the poor to be more involved in the decision-making process. Namara further argues that NGOs were also used as a political tool to decrease resistance within the stakeholders/beneficiary communities to the PRSP and to also decrease the risks as the NGOs through their involvement agreed to assist with the implementation of the PRSP programmes. NGOs saw this process as a chance to prove themselves to the donors as capable partners. While many of the NGOs did in fact advocate for pro-poor proposals, most were swayed by the legitimacy offered by the donors and often sanitised the proposals so that they were acceptable to donor standards rather than reflective of the reality of their stakeholders/beneficiary communities.

Also, the participatory methods used by the NGOs to develop these proposals were often focused on extractive information gathering rather than true participation that led to empowerment. This kind of consultative participation, however, served the interests of the donors as they could claim the participation of the NGOs as a proxy for the participation of the beneficiaries. Consequently, NGOs were yet again given an opportunity to be legitimised by the donor. Namara (2010) does acknowledge the utility of donor legitimisation, which gives

NGOs access to more resources which would serve as a rationale for more projects and further criticises the NGOs for not using their access to the community to allow for great analysis of the poverty reduction policies by the beneficiaries themselves.

Participation is defined by the World Bank as “a process through which stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives, and the decisions and resources which affect them” (Mathbor, 2008, p. 8). Participation serves as a channel through which communities use their capacities to influence community development and diversification of ideas (Assan, 2014). Others define participation by the context in which it is being used and depending on the context it can be a process, the product and or the outcome (Mathbor, 2008; Assan and Razak, 2018). Joseph Stiglitz (2002) differentiates between participation as a broad term and participatory processes. Participation is defined as “transparency, openness, and voice” while participatory processes are the actions or means in which participation as broadly defined is achieved. Stiglitz emphasizes the importance of the processes and argues that participation is necessary for effective development and societal transformation.

Amartya Sen (1999) also discusses the importance of participation and addresses some of the criticisms levied at participation. Some argue that participation could ultimately have a negative impact on development and could specifically lead to the disappearance of cultural traditions. Sen argues that participation is not actually in conflict with traditions, but that the real conflict is between sources of authority and legitimacy. As Mathie and Cunningham (2003) argue, community development depends on community members using their social capital to achieve some sort of development, which means that the community needs to have the authority to use that social capital. Sen (1999) argues there are both processes and opportunities that need to be in place for individuals to truly have the freedom to be agents of development. Processes mean participatory processes, such as democratic voting, or development consultations, but opportunities refer to more systematic blockages. For example, there may be democratic voting processes, but some people are unable to exercise their freedoms because of systematic injustices and prejudices. Both the processes and opportunities are necessary for meaningful development. He further argues that development is not just about the ends, meaning the outcome of development, but also the means (Sen, 1999).

Many scholars write about the value of participation, but there are just as many critiques of participation as a conceptual framework for community development. One key critique focuses on the danger that the community participating is being defined solely for the project, which inherently limits the possibility for meaningful long term development. Botes & van Rensburg (2000) in “Community participation in development: nine plagues and twelve commandments” present similar critiques to Mansuri & Rao, but focus more intensely on the role of the development practitioner and the development organisation. One of the so-called “plagues” is the paternalistic role of development practitioners in community development projects. In many cases of community development, the community is used to validate policy decisions that have already been made or to legitimise project choices that have already been determined by the development organisation. The agenda and opinions of the development organisation are conflated with local knowledge, which limits the potential of participation to enhance empowerment (Botes & van Rensburg, 2000; Mansuri & Rao, 2004).

The community rarely initiates community development projects but rather the projects are presented as a solution by the development organisation that also usually identified the problem rather than the community. Participation begins after the project proposal has been submitted and so any changes that the community would suggest are not able to be incorporated. There is often a tension between the development organisation and the community when the community levies any criticism at the organisation. Development organisations expect the community to play the role of the grateful beneficiary and allow the development organisations to control the development process. Community development initiatives are sometimes used by NGOs or other development organisations as a mechanism to convince the beneficiaries of what is best for them (Botes & van Rensburg, 2000).

NGOs do not have malicious intent, and many do in fact try to push for policies that benefit their communities, however, they too often bow to the desires of donors or abandon some aspects of their missions to gain legitimacy in the eyes of the donors. Legitimacy from the donor comes in the form of upward accountability.

2.2 Accountability and Empowerment

Accountability within the development sector is defined by Lloyd (2005) as different actors explaining their actions and allowing those impacted by those actions to have input and oversight. Kilby (2006) offers that accountability is about power, authority, and ownership and essentially defines the relationship between different actors. Lloyd summarises what NGO accountability looks like with the following: “An NGO that is accountable

to multiple stakeholders not only ensures that decisions are effective in meeting the needs of those interests, but also forces decisions to be made in a more equitable and fairer manner” (Lloyd, 2005, p.3). There are four different stakeholders that NGOs are accountable and these accountabilities can be described as upward, downward, inward, and horizontal. Upward accountability is the accountability that NGOs have to their donors and to the government, which provide them with financial support and a legal base. Lloyd (2005) focuses more on the accountability between NGOs and donors and points out that the relationship that NGOs have with the government is very complex since NGOs are often providing services that normally would fall within the government sector. NGOs also in some countries outnumber the government agencies and have more financial resources and powerful networks than the government, which limits the government's ability to hold the NGOs accountable. NGOs are downwardly accountable to their target communities and beneficiaries or those on whose behalf they speak. They are inwardly accountable to the organisational mission, values, and staff and finally horizontally accountable to their peers.

These four kinds of accountability are not equal and often vary tremendously in strength and depth. Often NGOs are more deeply and strictly accountable to their donors, while less accountable to their beneficiaries. This is often because NGOs are self-regulatory. Though they gain their legal status from the government, most governments do not have enforcement mechanisms in place to identify or analyse programmatic or policy issues at the NGO level. This means that besides being upwardly accountable to the donors, which is ensured by donor procedures and regulations, NGOs accountability is based purely on the good will of the NGO (Lloyd, 2006). Lloyd (2006) argues that there needs to be a greater focus on increasing downward accountability, which would allow the accountability framework to be for positive organisational change and greater social change. Kilby (2006) has a similar hypothesis and says that:

“NGOs move the debate away from the accountability to their donors and supporters toward looking at workable mechanisms to ensure accountability to their constituency in a way that enables them to be true to their values while at the same time ensuring that their constituencies can engage more fully in the development processes that affect them” (Kilby, 2006, p.960).

Kilby (2006) contends that there are fewer natural incentives for downward accountability and that for organisations to be effective, they need formalized mechanisms. Lloyd argues that *“Increasing accountability to beneficiaries however is problematic, as it requires more extensive organisational reforms and far greater self-reflection and self-criticism”* (Lloyd, 2005, p. 9). Lloyd further argues that accountability is an ongoing process and requires the stakeholders to be involved continuously and to provide input into the decision-making process (Lloyd, 2006). Nonetheless, Kilby argues that although downward accountability is difficult for NGOs, as they are reluctant to cede control or power to their beneficiaries, that it is necessary for NGOs to fulfill their supposed role of enabling participation and empowering populations. Downward accountability is a form of power transfer and therefore a mechanism for empowerment. These authors reveal that if NGOs can formalise inward accountability mechanisms through ongoing organisational learning and self-reflection, it would in turn strengthen downward accountability and enable greater participation and empowerment of their target communities. For example, if an NGO includes participation and empowerment in its mission, a formalised inward accountability mechanism would ensure that these values are built into all of the NGOs programmes, actions and activities.

3. Methodology

3.1 Study Background and Research Methodology

This paper uses a case study of a Local NGO to examine the (dis)connection between community development NGOs and their stakeholder communities and the ways in which this (dis)connection is being negotiated through different accountability mechanisms. The Local NGO is a small NGO located in Belize that focuses on conservation, environment and development issues. This paper will explore how the Local NGO presents its own mission and operating principles as a community development NGO and what factors limit the implementation of this mission. The Local NGO's relationship with its different stakeholder groups will be analysed in terms of an accountability framework and the degree to which the Local NGO is accountable to the different stakeholder groups.

While the development sector moves towards a more inclusive aid agenda with words such as empowerment, participation, and community being common buzzwords, there has also been a move towards standardisation of planning, reporting and accountability practices. The donor sets these practices and development organisations must adhere to these practices or risk losing funding opportunities (Rauh, 2010). This has had a huge effect on community development NGOs as it rewards organisations that have the capacity to do good reporting rather

than organisations that are just implementing projects with positive impact. It can also incentivise organisations to rewrite their organisational priorities so that they align with the priorities of the donor (AbouAssi, 2012). For community development NGOs, this could fundamentally change the relationship between them and their target communities.

The Local NGO was founded in 1997 as a community-based organisation (CBO) that was managed by a group of volunteers, but as the organisation grew it registered as an NGO with the Government of Belize.

Belize is a very ethnically diverse country with five ethnic groups being represented across the country. The main ethnic groups include Garifuna, Kriol, Mestizo, Maya and East Indian. English, Kriol and Mayan languages (Kekchi and Mopan) are the principal languages with Spanish being a common second language (Collins, 2009). This diversity contributes to the richness and uniqueness of the district but complicates the implementation of development projects as development organisations need to contend with the social dynamics between the groups as well as the logistical difficulty of choosing a language (Collins, 2009).

The Local NGO works with nine different stakeholder communities, which are termed buffer communities as they surround three different protected areas (PAs). The Local NGO's primary stakeholders are fisher folk and their households. The Local NGO also works with some locales in urban areas of the country. As the economic potential of fishing declines, many of the stakeholders have been diversifying into alternative livelihoods, of which tourism is becoming increasingly important (Dallen & White, 1999).

3.2 Data Collection Methods

The methods used to inform this paper include: Informal field interviews, conversations and observations. The researchers also attended and participated in Project Management and Planning Meetings, field activities with stakeholders and group visits.

3.2.1 Informal Interviews/Conversations

We developed an informal guide for these conversations to ensure validity and accuracy of responses in relation to our research questions. Our conversations were informal and used organisational documents to provide context.

Since these conversations were informal, they often meandered in different directions, which provided us with interesting and deeper insights into local context and perspectives. These meetings also gave us an insight into local NGO's organisational structure, challenges, strengths and limitations. The researcher was moreover able to observe the interactions between the different staff members and their roles. Such interactions also provided the context for some of the development strategies and organisational decisions. In addition, we were also fortunate to have the opportunity to attend meetings with donor organisations. This provided us with further information on the donor perspective and how the donors influence the relationship that the NGOs have with their stakeholders and communities they work in. From these meetings we were given access to donor organisation's annual strategies and investment priorities, which offered a regional and national perspective of the impact of the local NGO's work.

3.2.2 Participation in Community Meetings and Field Activities

The researchers had the opportunity to attend some community meetings and trainings, as well as the bimonthly forum for traditional fisherman. These meetings, trainings and forums provided excellent examples of the strategies that the local NGO was employing in community development projects. To gather data from these observations, we maintained detailed notes and paid particular attention to the community development as well as the participatory elements of field activities including fishermen's fora and community meetings. We randomly and informally interviewed the members of the respective stakeholder constituencies as well as the staff and interns of the local NGO who were involved in the management and setting up of each of these activities. These unstructured interviews allowed us to gather in-depth qualitative data on the local NGO's activities as well as the organisational and institutional structures that guide these activities.

4. Results and Discussion

The background and literature review provide the foundation needed to discuss and analyse the role of NGOs in development and how NGOs manage their accountability to their different stakeholders. The discussion section will use the case study of the local NGO to examine the extent to which community development NGOs are able to maintain their value systems while negotiating accountability to their different stakeholders. The primary unit of analysis are the donors, the government, and the participating stakeholder communities. Since the case study focuses on a community development organisation, the principles of community development and community

participation serve as the main lens of analysis. Ultimately, this paper does not only seek to understand how community NGOs are negotiating accountability, but how this influences development outcomes and the sustainability of projects. As the number of NGOs increases in Belize and globally, the role that NGOs must play in development needs to be continually examined and redefined. The discussion is divided into two sections. Section 4.1 presents our findings on the core challenges associated with implementing the local NGO's mission/goals as identified by staff. Section 4.2 also examines the intersection between inward and downward accountability and the effectiveness of local fishermen fora and community meetings as mechanisms of accountability in project management within communities in developing countries.

4.1 Challenges, Conflicts and Contentions: Implementation of Participatory Community Development

The findings from our fieldwork reveal that several factors undermine the Local NGO's implementation of community development projects. One such concern, as identified in the NGO's Management Plan 2012-2017, is that there is a lack of understanding within the stakeholder communities about what the Local NGO actually does and the impact it is seeking to achieve. This lack of understanding has generated a certain degree of conflict and contention between the Local NGO staff and the stakeholder communities. The antagonism has gone unaddressed, which has further exacerbated the situation and widened the gap between the NGO and its stakeholders. A Science Researcher of the NGO explained that *"It is difficult to negotiate what we [Local NGO] want and what they [community] want. It is a struggle to make them see our point of view"*.

According to the NGO staff, some of the communities have exhibited some form of antagonism towards them. For example, during a visit to Community A (original name withheld for the sake of anonymity), a coastal community bordering a protected area and home to several of the traditional fishermen and a primary stakeholder in almost all of the Local NGO's projects, the community was described as being "tough". A member of the senior management team described the community, in more harsh terms, as *"unappreciative"* and *"purposefully difficult."* In her frustration, she further stated that *"the [stakeholders] are so openly truculent. They claim that the Local NGO hasn't kept any of its promises which makes me question why we even work with them"*. Although she must have made such statements out of frustration and in a moment of stress, when a crucial project was yet delayed, these words illustrate the extent of the tension that could exist between NGOs and their stakeholder communities which often not discussed in the academic and policy literature.

Nevertheless, Community A is in fact considered to be a tough community to live in by its own residents. It is reported as once a major town in Belize, but as economic opportunities dwindled the population also declined which has also impacted negatively on its social dynamics. Community A is also downstream from several banana farms, and the agricultural techniques used by these farms have negatively impacted the community. The banana farmers have taken to dredging the river, which has contributed to coastal erosion. Climate change has also exacerbated this erosion and Community A is steadily losing parts of its socio-economic identity. Due to the coastal erosion and the increased incidences of flooding, the Government of Belize and many NGOs have advised the community to make plans to move (Gombos, 2015). The community is however vehemently opposed to this idea due to its strong familial and cultural ties to the present location.

With the help of a Climate Change and Development consultant, the community has developed a Local Early Action Plan. We were informed that this plan is a product of a community led participatory process during which the community members identified different environmental threats to their community and developed an action plan to address these threats. Coastal erosion was identified as a primary threat as was the declining viability of fishing livelihoods as commercial fish stocks decreased in the protected area. Two specific actions were identified in order to address these threats. The first was that the Local NGO would run an alternative livelihood training specifically for the traditional resource users and their families to learn a skill to supplement their fishing livelihoods. The second action was to form the Community Watershed Alliance, which would be a community group that would act as a liaison with the banana farmers and encourage them to use more sustainable techniques (Gombos, 2016).

While the Local NGO is committed to supporting these actions, several factors limited the successful implementation. The first is that the initial community meeting was attended by the elites of the community, and by mostly men. The follow-up meeting that we attended was however more representative of the community as a whole. We were informed that that is was mainly due to the effort of the Head Ranger at the Local NGO, who went door to door in the community to ask the community members to attend. However, many of the community members were angry and frustrated and reluctant to participate in the meeting. They also felt that the Local NGO was using the community meeting to validate decisions that had already been made.

A second challenge, which is now considered as a source of contention is the lack of follow-up and commitment

to understanding the community. The consultant identified in her report that although the Local NGO includes participation in its project proposals, the organisation lacks facilitation skills and its staff are not committed to implementing participation. She also wrote that there needs to be more time spent in each community and updated community assessments to better understand community dynamics the context in which projects are being implemented. A female resident of the community stated during the community meeting that *“we as a Community know that organisations think of us as a “difficult community,” but nobody listens to us so when NGOs come in we make a lot of noise. But this is our community, and nobody listens to us”*. This might be an area of conflict management that development organisations will have to focus on and train their staff as they engage with their partner communities and stakeholders.

The third challenge that we observed during this meeting is that the Local NGO is concerned with voice and ownership, but not how it relates to the stakeholder communities. Rather the Local NGO is interested in how they can own the projects and express their priorities. Although the Local NGO mentions participation and stakeholder engagement in all of their mission and strategic documents, it appears participation is used as a means to achieve donor approval for projects. The stakeholder communities seem to perceive this and feel like the Local NGO is using them in order to get funding and to add to their myth of community development without being accountable to the communities that they are supposedly helping.

A member of the senior management team of the NGO argued that they use participatory methods, however, it could be time-consuming and expensive. The management team also explained that the stakeholder communities lack capacity to engage in participation. The staff also stated that the stakeholders and communities place enormous pressure on the NGO without fully understanding how project proposals work or how the project cycle functions. Nevertheless, our conversations and observations of the stakeholders to a large extent suggest otherwise. We consider them to have the capacity to participate as the community members present at the meetings offered valid and insightful comments and clearly expressed their interest and priorities regarding projects.

Although there was clearly a lack of understanding about the time frame of project proposals, there was a willingness to listen despite the clear frustration and historical antagonism between Community A and the Local NGO. Botes and van Rensburg (2000, p. 51) argue that *“when the complaint is made that participation does not work, most often than not, it is likely that participation has not been seriously tried, or has been wrongly facilitated”*. This seems to be consistent with our observations during the community meetings and fieldwork. A stakeholder indicated that *“in my view participation is a checklist that the Local NGO needs to complete in order to satisfy the requirements of the donors and there is little commitment to the priorities of the community stakeholders, especially if our priorities are not in line with the priorities of the Local NGO”*. An NGO staff also explained that *“many [Local NGO staff] fear implementing projects in the community and avoid community visits.”* There are few capacity building training offered for staff members to facilitate participatory activities, which means that when community meetings happen, the meeting is not well facilitated. This is another area that development organisations and agencies need to address.

As discussed in the literature review, there are critiques of community development and community participation. Almost all critics agree that when community development is undertaken in the right manner, it will have the potential for true transformation and the expansion of capabilities (Assan, 2014). Participation should be seen as both a means and an end to development. While participatory methods are a means to achieving certain development outcomes, such as more sustainable projects, and better targeting of participants, it is also an end to development. Participation as an end to development is really about empowerment or the expansion of capabilities. This kind of development outcome is just as important and valuable as project indicators. While there is a tendency for development organisations to focus on participation as a means of development, it is important that development practitioners are constantly assessing and asking how to deepen participation in order to allow for the possibility for empowerment. Reflection, analysis and self-critical awareness on the part of the development organisations and practitioners will ensure that participation is being used not just as means to complete donor requirements, but as a way to facilitate participants controlling the process and their own development (Parfitt, 2004; Assan and Beyene, 2013).

4.2 Downward Accountability and Inward Accountability

Whilst NGOs are upwardly accountable to the donors and the government, they are downwardly accountable to their beneficiaries. Many NGOs struggle with the political necessity of upward accountability to donors with the drive for greater ownership and trust that is inherent in downward accountability (Pasteur & Scott-Villiers, 2004).

Nature of Accountability	Stakeholders concerns supported by synthesis from literature	Local NGO Accountability Mechanisms	Views of local stakeholders and NGO Staff
Upward	Donors maintain power and local NGO lacks capacity or resources to override decisions of the donor. Donors incentivise adherence to donor rules/regulations, which often undermines downward accountability to stakeholders (AbouAssi, 2013).	Donor Reports	Donor reports can ensure that stakeholders are receiving promised resources and services. Donor reports also help organisations to track impact.
Downward	Stakeholders do not have real control over the subject matter of the forum or over the decisions made as a result of the forum. The agenda is set by the Local NGO rather than the community. Stakeholder groups are often not representative of the entire community. They may be representing community elites (Marsland, 2006; Botes & van Rensburg, 2000).	Managed Access Forum	Holding a forum involving stakeholders will empower stakeholders to share their opinions and give their own perspective on the organisation's mission and programmes. The forum is also a mechanism for the organisation to share strategic plans and solicit opinions and support.
Inward	Only management staff are included in these meetings rather than all staff. There is almost no reflection included in these meetings. The meetings focus on implementation and getting tasks done rather than on evaluation and learning (Thomas, 2008; Eyeben and Ferguson, 2004).	Management Staff Meetings	Management meetings allow the staff to check in on project progress and identify strengths and weaknesses in implementation. Meetings also allow staff to identify gaps in programmes and begin brainstorming on new projects to fill those gaps.

Figure 1. Accountability synthesis matrix

Source: Authors (2018).

As discussed earlier, many NGOs, the Local NGO included, feel more pressure from donors and are incentivised to prioritise upward accountability over downward accountability. It is also difficult because downward accountability lacks formalised mechanisms, and most NGOs are not required by their donors or their governments to be accountable to their beneficiaries. Downward accountability occurs at the goodwill of the NGOs and in accordance with their organisational values. True downward accountability involves the stakeholder communities in all steps of the project development and implementation process (Kilby, 2006). This means that the NGO must give up some control and power and allow the stakeholder communities to disagree with the NGO decisions. Eyeben and Ferguson (2004) argue that “accountability includes transparency but also involves the creation of mechanisms to ensure transparency. Nevertheless, accountability is often used as a term without clarity concerning who is accountable to whom and in what domain of life” (Eyeben & Ferguson, 2004, p. 167).

This is relevant to the discussion of the Local NGO and its stakeholder communities because the Local NGO in our study uses the terms accountability and transparency without any real commitment to acting on them. Without formalised mechanisms there is no incentive for the Local NGO to be truly accountable to its

stakeholder communities especially because the Local NGO is reluctant to allow anyone, let alone the stakeholder communities, to have control over project decisions. The downward accountability mechanisms that are in place, such as the Fisherman's Forum, are used as mechanisms to appease the stakeholder communities and to validate project decisions that have already been made. The following table outlines some of the accountability mechanisms that the Local NGO has in place as well as the limitations to these mechanisms.

The Managed Access Forum is a component of the Managed Access Programme, which was piloted in 2011. *Managed Access* is a marine resources management strategy that works with traditional fishermen and encourages them to be environmental stewards and participants in managing the shared resources (Foley, 2012). The Managed Access fisherman are invited to the quarterly Forum in order to discuss issues with the Managed Access strategy, including new regulations and research findings. It is also an opportunity for the Local NGO to listen to its stakeholder communities and allow these stakeholders to have input into the direction and priorities of the Local NGO. It has the potential to be a true accountability mechanism for the Local NGO. However, during the Managed Access Forum that we had to privilege to attend, we identified several factors limiting the potential of the forum. The first is that the Local NGO staff look at the forum as a way to accomplish their own goals rather than as an opportunity to truly hear what the stakeholder communities want to say. The Executive Director requested that the first twenty minutes of the forum be reserved for "bitching" and said that it's important to let people vent their anger?? and that this will allow the Local NGO to accomplish its goals more efficiently.

The Executive Director also insisted on being the facilitator but relied on charisma and bluntness rather than good facilitation and participatory practices. The Executive Director presents herself as a leader or director rather than an ally of the community. She is also very preoccupied with the idea of loyalty and biased towards stakeholders or communities who she feels are loyal to their organisation and programmes. She also feels personally affronted when participation happens, and the stakeholders do not agree. There is a focus on consensus rather than true transformative participation. She is also reluctant to bring up topics that she knows will be controversial during the Managed Access Forum. For example, during initial discussions about implementing new regulations, she reported that the stakeholders were opposed to the strategy and tried to back out. She found this to be "ungrateful" and "disloyal" and appeared to take this very personally.

The Managed Access Forum is always very well attended, and the stakeholders are willing to listen to the Local NGO staff and appear, despite early reservations, to want to make the Managed Access strategy work albeit with some changes. During the meeting the stakeholder plainly requested more alternative livelihood trainings and for fishermen to be more involved in the research process. They also asked for the Local NGO to facilitate a partnership between the tourism operators in the district and the fishing cooperatives so that fishermen could potentially rent out their boats during the tourist season. When we approached the senior management of the organisation about these requests, they insisted that the most important part of the Managed Access Forum was that the traditional fishermen are able to express their opinion and that they would consider the requests but they were unlikely to be completed. This is the core limitation to the potential for Managed Access Forum to be an accountability mechanism. There is a lack of commitment on the part of the Local NGO to follow through and to taking the requests of the stakeholders seriously. From our observation, this stems from a reluctance to let go of some power and control.

This observation could be considered as a failure of the Local NGO staff to let go of their personal and professional biases in order to prioritise and to focus on the realities of the stakeholder communities. It is also a failure of the organisation as a whole to implement inward accountability. Inward accountability refers to the idea that NGOs can and should be accountable to their own missions and visions. Like downward accountability, there are few NGOs with formalised mechanisms for inward accountability (Kilby, 2006). In the case of the Local NGO there is a definite disconnect between the organisational mission and how that mission is implemented. While the Managed Access Forum does need to be strengthened or adapted as a downward accountability mechanism, there could also be organisational mechanisms put in place that would ensure that the Local NGO is being inwardly accountable to its own organisational mission, which is driven by community development values. The inward accountability mechanism, if formalised, could help the Local NGO to recommit to community development and to better the relationship between the Local NGO and its stakeholder communities. This, in turn, would hopefully lead to better implemented projects and more effective development overall. Inward accountability also has the potential to be a catalyst for true transformational participatory development.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations for Policy and Practice

The study concludes that there is a weakness in the current form of downward accountability mechanisms in place in Belize as evident in this case study and calls for a willingness on the part of the NGO personnel to reflect on inherent biases and ultimately a willingness to change. In order to integrate participation back into the Local NGO's project planning and implementation activities, there needs to be a more robust stakeholder engagement and management protocols. This will allow the Local NGO to more effectively include the communities in the project design and management that are better tailored to the needs of the stakeholder communities. This will also encourage closer partnership between stakeholders and development organisations and thereby generate trust between the communities and the Local NGO.

Furthermore, there needs to be a greater focus on staff capacity building with regards to facilitation. Currently, most participatory activities being implemented are poorly managed. There is a focus on the activities rather than the process of participation and participation is viewed as a checklist to complete. By building the capacity of the staff to implement participatory methods, the Local NGO will be able to more effectively commit to stakeholder participation in all aspects of project management. The staff will be better prepared to invest in the communities and will be able to better identify challenges and solutions and a more nuanced understanding of the project context.

The study also observed that organisational learning and management are often ignored, yet a critical part of development. The Local NGO in our case study currently does not have staff meetings that include all project staff nor mechanisms in place to share lessons learned or to reflect on changes that might need to be made. The Local NGO and other similar community development NGOs skip organisational learning and management opportunities in favor of project implementation, which is ultimately detrimental to the organisation. With the increased focus on results based deliverables, it is often difficult for organisations, especially NGOs that are so dependent on grant funding, to pause and reflect and learn. In order to begin to engage with monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) the Local NGOs should include organisational learning in its strategic planning and plan to have regular and frequent staff meetings that include all project staff, as well as organisational learning workshops.

A common critique of NGOs is that they are often self-regulated and not held to the same strict standards as compared to government agencies. This is an important critique to address and strengthening NGO policies could have a positive impact on development effectiveness. While governments usually have an NGO registration process which gives NGOs their legal status and legitimacy to work in development, the government should continue to monitor the NGOs work beyond receiving the annual report. Stronger government policies for NGOs that require NGOs to show that they are being accountable to their stakeholders would have a positive impact on downward accountability mechanisms. NGO stakeholders are also the government's constituents so governments would presumably have an incentive to ensure that these constituents are being served by the NGOs that claim to be helping them. The stakeholders often do not have enough power to pressure the NGOs on their own so the government institutions, especially in Small Island States, should help provide the needed balance.

In the case of the Local NGO, the Government of Belize already has a NGO registration process, however, the NGO monitoring programme is minimal and involves a yearly meeting and annual report submission. The government of Belize could develop a rubric for project planning, which could be used by the Local NGO staff and stakeholders as a way of scoring potential new projects and programmes for participation. The rubric would look at the extent to which a project is in line with Belize's national development priorities, the Local NGO's priorities, the amount of time that would be needed, and extent to which the project addresses the priorities of stakeholders. This rubric will work towards making Local NGOs more transparent to its stakeholder communities and could work as an inward accountability mechanism.

The case study of the Local NGO illustrates the very real disconnect between policy and implementation as it relates to community development NGOs' missions and projects. Although the Local NGOs self-identify as a community development organisations and includes those values in its strategic planning, these values seem missing in the actual project implementation phase. Such disconnect undermines the Local NGO's ability to implement effective projects.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that NGOs in general hold a lot of power, and in order to improve the relationship with their respective stakeholder communities and improve project implementation, there needs to be a fundamental realisation about the importance of empowering individuals to lead their own development. In the past decade, the international development community has been discussing ways to make development more

inclusive by prioritizing concepts such as empowerment and ownership. As these concepts have been mainstreamed into development through the Paris Declaration and the Accra Agenda, there have been many incidents where organisations identify with these values but fail to implement them in practice. This is especially pertinent to NGOs as they are seen in the development community as representing the poor and acting as a voice for the poor. While this is often true, it is important to examine this idea in the context of each organisation and push NGOs to be more accountable to partner communities.

By being more accountable to their beneficiaries, NGOs can improve their project management and outcomes and thereby make such projects more targeted, effective and sustainable. The beneficiaries understand their own realities better than the NGOs. It is not enough for NGOs to simply talk about being pro-poor or include pro-poor and pro- community development rhetoric in their strategic plans.

There needs to be for more formalised mechanisms in place to ensure that NGOs uphold their missions and are accountable to the people they are seeking to assist. This will involve profound organisational and personal changes, but will ultimately result in more sustainable and inclusive poverty reduction and the attainment of sustainable development targets (Assan, 2018). It is imperative that development organisations seek to integrate reflection and organisational learning exercises into project implementation. It is also critical that they reframe from being obsessed with their own development priorities. Empowering stakeholders to prioritise their needs and interest will significantly enhance efforts to achieve the various local/national targets of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

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