Theorizing, Restructuring and Rethinking Nonformal Education in East and West African Communities[1]

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Introduction

Since its inception, the United Nations (UN) has emphasized creating educated citizenry. Beginning in 1948, the right to education was articulated clearly in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It recognized education as an "indispensable means of unlocking and protecting other human rights by providing the scaffolding that is required to secure good health, liberty, security, economic well-being, and participation in social and political activity." (UN, 2004). When the right to education is guaranteed, people's access to and enjoyment of other democratic rights are enhanced (UN, 2004).

Nonetheless, despite the great increase in school enrollments in developing countries over the last 40 years, 875 million adults are still illiterate, over 100 million children have no access to school, and countless youth and adults who attend school and other education programs fall short of the required level to be considered literate in today's complex world (UN, 2004).

In 1990, the world's most influential global education initiative, Education for All (EFA), was birthed to educate the illiterate populations of impoverished nations. In doing this, the UN specified that there exists a priority to promote EFA policies within a sustainable and well-integrated sector framework clearly linked to poverty elimination and development strategies. Initiatives must ensure the participation of civil society in the formulation, implementation and monitoring of strategies for educational development. In the context of UN policy discourse since the EFA conference in Jomtien (1990), The Dakar Framework for Action (1999), and the Decade for Literacy (2003), the possibility of nonformal basic education in sub-Saharan Africa has been debated by global education actors, policymakers, and grassroots advocacy networks because these actors, not the central government, have the onus for implementation of nonformal initiatives.

Despite numerous discussions concerned with the EFA agenda, there exists little in-depth information detailing the actual experiences and sustained efforts of these initiatives in the nonformal education sector. Against the background of UN meetings and the demand for education in Africa, we are obligated as policy shapers and analysts to improve our research and our understanding of such programs, specifically as they impact the social development of local communities.

Consequently, this article presents West and East African nonformal education projects as a platform from which to view the interrelationship of participation and

transformation in the educational experiences of community, NGO, and state participants. In the context of neo-liberal pressures, carried by an international free-market movement in the 1980s, a wave of administrative decentralization initiatives in education rippled across Africa. In the 1990s, a wave of democratization added itself to global decentralization pressures. As these cases demonstrate, the education decentralization process in nonformal education has resulted in varied and often unintended local interpretations, reactions, and ultimately inaction despite nationally and internationally accepted EFA reform directives. The implications of our findings argue for a rethinking of participatory development for nonformal education programs in decentralized systems.

Background of the Problem

Undoubtedly, globalization has introduced financial strains to poorer nations' already overextended educational budgets. First, structural adjustment policies have redirected many governments' funds toward building communication, transport and technological infrastructures in order to ramp up for world trade to increase outputs of goods and services, ostensibly making them more viable competitors in the world's markets. Yet, according to the World Bank's Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) educated citizenry are also necessary for development (Mutume, 2003). This premise holds appeal for global education initiatives because less developed nations must develop the human capital needed to improve the quality of life and compete in the global markets. However, a clash in paradigms has arisen when globalization has come at the expense of not only a nations' most needy (Klees, 2001), but also health and human services' expenditures of many African governments (Mutume, 2003).

Second, the North/South divide resulting in the polarization of wealth and labor has never been greater. For example, a recent report by the ILO (2004) in the early 1960s stated that the per capita income in the world's poorest nations was US$212. In the richest it was US$11,417. By 2002, the figures stood at US$267 and US$32,339. Given the fact that, in general, central governments have less money to spend on education combined with structural adjustment policies which have diverted funds elsewhere, one has to conclude that foreign investment and aid will be essential to expand education initiatives in developing nations. Additionally, to further defray educational costs, persistent economic and political pressures on numerous national governments have resulted in decentralization of their educational systems. More of the onus has been shifted to local governments, NGOs and citizens, where financial and professional resources may be least available.

Decentralization has been endorsed by researchers and reformers despite the surprising lack of data in that few education studies have generated or even considered empirical evidence of local decentralization processes (Rhoten, 2000; Cohen & Peterson, 1996). Despite the few empirically grounded studies of decentralization, the literature remains remarkably theoretical. Undoubtedly, without a clear understanding of how decentralization policy is being implemented in local regions, we have an unclear picture of education provision within the community.

For instance, decentralization has often come tied to the democratic notion of how to get more children into the classroom - a notion embedded in much education policy and

embodied by states' experiments with community-based schools, as in Senegal, Mali, Togo, and Tchad (Diarra, Fall, Gueye, Mara & Marchand, 2000). However, what has appeal in democratic principle of equality has often failed in practice. For example, in Southern Asia as well as Sub-Saharan Africa, less than three-fourths of the pupils reached Grade 5. In the least developed countries taken together, slightly more than half reached this level, and many drop out by the second grade (UN, 2004). Therefore, traditional education may be less than effective where conflicting priorities exist based upon local necessities.

As the global and national discussions of education development slowly move away from the question of how to get more children into traditional classrooms towards how to enable more children (and adults) to achieve agreed upon learning outcomes, the face of educational initiatives has been remaking itself. For example, the Decade for Literacy -- spearheaded by UNESCO -- stressed that nonformal education must supplement formal schooling because nonformal education teaches life skills, reflects community values and emphasizes learning by doing. Nonformal education, according to the Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW), provides an excellent means to reach girls in indigenous and disadvantaged groups and improve their quality of life.

Not surprisingly, UNESCO (2003) has clearly articulated the growing need for project partnerships to fund nonformal initiatives because of inadequate national or local resources. Yet, in procuring funds elsewhere, many local projects have been burdened with managing numerous outside stakeholders. This has raised the skepticism of indigenous peoples and anti-globalization pundits who warn of the dangers of subjugating local recipients of nonformal initiatives often culminating in the loss of regional, as compared to State, control. However, what has appeal in democratic principle of equality has often failed in practice.

Although it has a noble ring, participatory development has not necessarily originated from altruistic principles, but rather as an essentiality for outside funding agencies, which often come to the table with greater bargaining power. When considering local politics, participatory development has criticized outside investors for co-opting local communities into the sponsoring agency's agenda while serving primarily to legitimize the implementing agency as "grassroots oriented" (Chambers, 1994).

On the other hand, what Chambers' (1994) failed to anticipate was Kapoor's (2002) concerns that "local controls" may not be without their own duplicitous agendas. Arguably, village politics often mimic the gross inequalities at the global level. Therefore, as researchers and practitioners, if we accept that globalization combined with decentralization of nonformal education introduces a complex phenomena, we must further agree that site specific research must be dependent upon localized social and political contexts of reform as much as on specific national or global directives (Crook & Manor, 1998).

In illustrating the difficulty of accounting for the divergent interests of stakeholders, two brief case studies are offered to provide practical insight into localized educational initiatives in East and West Africa. While both cases illustrate the need for more in-depth planning and monitoring, the first case defends the conclusions of Chambers

(1994) while the latter case speaks to the comments of Kapoor (2002). What these seemingly disparate case studies underscore is that nonformal initiatives have very diverse configurations where the best of intentions can easily become sullied if subtle, yet consequential, incompatibilities are not anticipated.

Case 1- West Africa: Senegalese Nonformal Community Based Basic Education

The Senegalese case of the Ecoles Communautaires de Base (ECB), a public-private partnership for community-based nonformal basic education is important because it reflects an attempt to reform the system of education in Senegal. More importantly, it documents a historically centralized state's attempt to implement a real sharing of power among actors at all level of education provision - a struggle to build genuinely democratic processes in education provision. As the ECB initiative was pushed by Senegal's decentralization policies; however, significant problems in creating a localized EFA initiative unfolded.

According to official documents, the aims of the ECB are twofold: to increase access to basic education and to provide an education truly in the service of community development. Early in the ECB reform initiative, the principle objectives sought to reduce expensive education costs, minimize regional disparities in schooling, improve drop-out and repetition rates, particularly for girls, and minimize rifts between schooled students and their milieu, especially in rural areas (République du Sénégal, MEN & MCEBLN, 1996).

Additionally, this "permanent nonformal schooling" comprised the loftier objectives of several nonformal provisions: a compensatory bridge to formal schooling, supplementary vocational training, and a more socially relevant "alternative" to the formal schools. The perception then was of a "complementary relationship between the formal and the nonformal model" with ECBs as a "complementary path to EFA." (DAEB, UNICEF, INEADE, 1999).

Yet, in reality, within the Senegalese sub-sector of nonformal education, ECBs are characterized strictly as a compensatory provision, a literacy campaign that is secondary to that offered in the "classical" model (i.e. formal primary school). ECBs are presented by state actors as a crucial, cost-effective and compensatory school model, needed to provide a "basic education for all" and "to assure a minimum level of skills," but not to "liberate" learners and to "strengthen their contributions to social development" (UNICEF & UNESCO, 2000) as claimed by NGOs and desired by community participants.

Thus, it remains highly questionable as to what gives the Senegalese community-based school an identity as an "alternative" model of education, unless it is in the sense that communities, with the assistance of external agencies, carry the burden of the provision. As a result, the ECB is "alternative" in that it is exempt from the regulations governing publicly provided schools and as part of a "de facto emergence of an 'informal' sector in education where the state fails to provide" (Hopper, 2000, p. 25).

In support of these claims, the expectations expressed by community members were notably different from the assumptions of government and non-government ECB actors.

Local perceptions also differed from evidence presented in official publications and evaluations. For example, one parent expressed her expectation of a professional life for her children in the ECB; on the other hand, her perspective engaged social and economic options beyond those officially ascribed to the ECB initiative. The surrounding group agreed with the statement that

> Agriculture is the last thing we think of. Even when the agriculture is good, we don't earn more than 300,000 CFA (i.e., $550.00). In the past, there have been years when we have not returned a ton of peanuts. We want our children to be lifted up by other things. We want them to be civil servants, NGO trainers, or even security guards (Diarra et al, 2000, p. 99).

When other members of the school community spoke of the force of education in the lives of their children, views differing from the compensatory perspective, suggested by the majority of government comments, continued to surface. A representative of the ECB management committee expressed, for example, that the power of education was particularly transformative and meaningful for girls: "It [the ECB] could be very important to improve the lives of girls. They can get up through education. If they have ideas, they can do a lot of things"; while another member implied the ECBs' superiority over formal primary school as an alternative to formal secondary school: "We know that the authority of the ECB is invested in the households. But if we are attached to the ECB it's because it brings more advantages than the formal school" (Community respondent 3).

These excerpts suggest critically divergent perspectives of the ECB. First, community members explicitly endorse the policy aim of expanding access to formal education through "alternative" modes such as the ECB. Second, their expectations not only imply hope for an education that serves as a compensatory provision of productive skills and "bridge" to the formal system but also an alternative one that reaches beyond convention and impacts to transform lives in the village.

Elements in the comments of community members and teachers illustrate how the people in the village tended to prioritize the supplementary human resource training aims of "trade" and earning money but not to the exclusion of their hope for a formal education and not over the popular education goal, "to get up through education." It seems then that community actors are invested in the connection of the ECB to the conventional mainstream educational system. This is in line with the state's expectations of a complementary provision, but it diverges from national rhetoric primarily supportive of human resources training aims. In contrast to both state and community perceptions, the claims of NGO operators promoted a more exclusively alternative provision.

NGO operators, those organizations responsible for community mobilization, teacher training and ECB funding, tended to embrace expectations of an alternative schooling provision through ECBs over other aims. An ECB operator blamed the government for the divergent interests between ECB operators and ECB communities.

> The government is big into paradigms. And even after 30 years, they are still trying to force it on everyone. It was certainly not my vision to provide a bridge to formal education. They [the state] do know how to prepare a child for formal school, and they'll perpetuate that paradigm to get kids into formal schools. I'm into breaking paradigms while they are invested in getting kids to face it.

Similarly suggestive of progressive political paradigms, most representatives of the ECB operator in the Kolda region reported the ECB's impact in terms of the more explicitly political mobilization of participants: restructuring (i.e. transforming) the organization of the community and the life of the children through the ECB.

> But I think nonformal education, precisely the ECB's are going to help in the re-foundation of education in Senegal. It's the accomplishment of teaching in national languages. I think that we have seen children who have in two years in an ECB resolved problems, which children who have spent six years in the formal school could not. That's why people look to the ECBs.

This same sentiment is captured in the comments by an ECB teacher, an ECB supervisor, an ECB coordinator, and a Dakar-based Director of Pedagogy, all working for NGO operators. They cited the improved relations between families and villages "because it gives a civic and moral education that many children and adults don't have." As well, they noted, "Many new [community-based] organizations have been created in a dynamic inspired by the ECB to permit a participatory approach in the resolution of local problems."

The state and ECB operators did fulfill their promise to expand access to schooling to those who had previously not had a formal education. NGO operators also achieved their goal of enrolling more girls than boys in ECBs. In all, the actual achievement of ECB objectives at a deeper social development level, however, was not met. As data demonstrated, the recent ECB initiative sought to support local participation and organization but was not accompanied by adequate and sustained support. This gap between expectation and implementation merely undermined communities' organizational capacity and sociopolitical identity as "owners" of their local schooling projects.

This is not to say that community members did not comply with the directives given them by the ECB operator; in fact, they did cooperate. However, because their expectations were subordinated to government and NGO objectives, the local communities were not perceived as participating effectively. Subsequently, with extremely limited technical and financial capacity for participation and restricted mechanisms for cooperation, the resultant community behavior was one of "wait-and-see." As a result, both NGO and decentralized government agents were left to do what they had been doing all along - perpetuate exclusionary agendas.

Senegalese and other education policy makers must recognize that a standard framework in the form of official "terms of reference" is important, but it is only the first -- and probably the easiest -- step towards an effective education program (Rhoten, 1999). The multidimensional nature of education must integrate all agents in the ECB

program/alternative education system and include dialogue, common decision-making, and agreed upon responsibilities. The duty of the government is not only to monitor how agents fund and support their roles and responsibilities according to decentralization policy, but to actively plan and intervene where operators have shown they can not be efficient according to the goals outlined by educational policy.

In this Senegalese case study, unintended local interpretations and reactions has ultimately resulted in inactions despite nationally accepted EFA reform directives. However, the lack of mutual understanding relevant to the ECB community school programs is not an argument against nonformal community schools or other alternatives to formal school models. Simply, it illustrates the need for all actors to continue in a productive, ongoing dialogue that refines a mutual understanding of alternative social and educational goals. Similarly, Chambers (1994) articulated the promotion of a truly participatory alternative provision, which requires reflection and detailed planning at all levels, but not least at the community level.

Case 2 - East Africa: Ugandan Community Based Gender Training

In contrast, Kapoor (2002) stated participatory development "... valorizes local, as opposed to Western knowledge and aims to empower people to determine much of the agenda" (p.103). Kapoor further noted that Chambers (1994) was concerned with outsiders (often Westerners), taking on the role of experts. Using this as a starting premise, our second case describes a grassroots' initiative involving an East African University-sponsored community-based gender campaign and a US-based NGO.

In Kenya, where females comprise 70% of the illiterates (UNESCO, 2003), women leaders attribute the lower status of women to the country's social and political structures. "It is a deliberate intention by men; they refuse to give us the political or social space. You have to fight to get anything. But unless women hold key positions, nothing about this country will change." In education, this belief implicates Kenyan women's assumption that where gender inequalities exist, EFA goals will not be attained.

When President Daniel arap Moi, who ruled Kenya for 24 years, finally relinquished his tightly held reigns of power, many Kenyans, especially womanists rejoiced. The departure of Moi opened up a long awaited space for the women's movement to surge forward. As one enthusiastic observer jubilantly confirmed:

> This is a day to celebrate the end of a very long and difficult struggle against evil governance. Now, we Kenyan women are celebrating this change! We fully believe that this new government will construct the long-anticipated transition from dictatorship to democracy.

To fulfill its promise of installing more women in key government positions, the new government has appointed eight additional parliamentarians increasing the total to 16. Six women are in Kenya's Cabinet, with three as full ministers and three in assistant ministerial posts. Another womanist commented on these governmental changes:

> These appointments signify a strong indication of the new government's commitment to promote justice by constructing of a fully 'gendered citizenship'. Gender discrimination might soon be a remnant of the past, because this trend shows that the Kenyan people do have confidence in women!

Other spaces have recently opened in Kenya to further advance the rights of women. First, women-led NGOs are becoming more prevalent with over 200 organizations, including the largest: the Education Center for Democratic Women, FIDA (National Women's Lawyer Association), the League of Kenyan Women Voters, the National Commission on the Status of Women and the National Council of Kenyan Women.

Simultaneously, the women's movement has become more powerful. Specifically, Development of Women, Kenya's first women's organization, was established as a non-political NGO during colonial rule. However, since Moi's departure, it has become very closely aligned with NARC, the current ruling party. Thus, this and other established women's organizations now hold very elite status.

However, despite the mobilization of women and the relatively substantial progress in EFA initiatives, very serious violations of women's rights still remain. Women's organizations are frustrated claiming their complaints have fallen on deaf ears in a male-dominated society. They argue that patriarchal indifference towards gendered crimes continues to be further exacerbated by limiting women's social rights, thus, relegating them to second class citizenship.

Several Kenyan academics have been responsible for citing that both statutory laws and traditional society norms are, to a great extent, still restricted to the patriarchy, which employs social control mechanisms that perpetuate women's subordination. However, a large part of this problem lay in the fact that, "Most women are often unaware of their legal rights. Therefore, where the customary or tribal law conflicts with State laws, women are still highly disadvantaged."

However, the combined sociopolitical climates toward women with the staunch activism of Kenyan academic womanists provide fertile ground for gender campaigns. With these assumptions, a pilot was planned by a US-based NGO and a major Kenyan university. According to UNESCO's Decade for Literacy campaign (2003), the social benefits of girls' nonformal education included lower maternal mortality rates, increased family incomes and health indices, HIV/AIDS prevention and greater participation of women in economic and political decision-making.

Conforming to the guidelines of the Decade for Literacy, and grounded in the ideology that gender awareness must be heightened at the local level, initiating low-cost, nonformal village education projects led by university students held great appeal in furthering women's empowerment in fighting customary practices which conflict with legal rights. Before sending information and supplies to the university, students were to define the greatest obstacles for girls and women's education within their local villages. After receipt, they were to mobilize and advocate at the grassroots for elimination of these gendered inequalities through nonformal education projects. Upon completion, these students would write up their experiences noting the obstacles, challenges and

triumphs of their village campaigns. For their efforts, they would be rewarded monetarily in the amount of two months' local salary. To further enlighten, their stories were to be posted on the Internet and presented at well-attended educational conferences, thus capturing their voices and experiences and bringing recognition to them, their work and their institution. Additionally, this approach would have added a rare component to participatory development in that final project documentation compiled by local voices would breach the norm of reporting project outcomes by outside funding agencies.

This ideological approach might directly encourage activism from the next generation of leaders who are educated citizenry studying at a renowned local university in communities where access to higher education is reachable by a select few. Finally, it was assumed that this personal transformation would result in students' continued fight for change from within their Kenyan villages and communities.

In accordance with Chambers' (1994) ideologies, many of these project goals shifted the locus of control from the outside agency to the local level. However, as with the first case, too many goals were elusive from the beginning. Except for loosely defined objectives, a guiding framework was almost nonexistent. The NGO wrongly assessed that the head of the university gender department would be seriously interested in the plight of her village sisters. Moreover, it was also assumed that she would earnestly train students to intervene upon outdated and oft illegal practices within their communities. Several problems arose from these very basic assumptions combined with the laissez faire implementation style of the NGO.

First, the NGO did not account for the class disparities within this gendered campaign because women are the marginalized group, which in Kapoor's (2002) works comprise the voiceless and underserved. However, Kapoor (2002) did not anticipate that within this 'downtrodden subculture', inequities also exist. The point here was underscored as one citizen argued, "The feminist movement has too often failed to bring real changes into the lives of rural women, mostly due to their very close alliances with political and academic elites from which their success has been forthcoming."

Second, a close personal dialogue was not established between the two partners. In doing this, it might have been less acceptable for the offending party not to earnestly adhere to the intended goals. Nonetheless, after a short time, it became quite clear that the professor was not truly invested in grassroots' development, but rather she was more interested in utilizing the funding to develop her academic department. In fact, not one objective of the NGO was met during the course of the pilot project. In essence, supplies were sent and money was granted yet nothing was accomplished perhaps because of the intentionally vague priorities set by the NGO, which was overly concerned with being an egalitarian participatory development partner.

To be fair, some uncontrollable obstacles did arise during the course of the agreement. The country experienced a temporary "shutdown" of its universities due to labor strikes. Many students abandoned their courses and returned home to their local communities to wait for re-opening of their institutions. However, since that time, the university representative has neither offered to return any of the funding nor restart the project.

The NGO made the mistake of having a "hands off" approach because of the inordinate amount of trust placed in the university as well as the philosophy that local decisions would be the "right ones". Or as Kapoor (2002) stated,

> The lack of a critical stance can mean simplifying or ignoring broader relationships between, say, local communities and socioeconomic power structures. Similarly to privilege, 'what works and what does not' is to downplay such important political questions as 'what works for whom?' and 'whose interests are being served?' (p. 102)

This Kenyan case study gives an account of a development scheme that assumed that inclusion paves the way for equality. More importantly, it also provides a vantage point to examine the interrelationship of conflicting tacit priorities of project participants. By analyzing the intersection of intention, interpretation, perception, and inaction, both the East and West African cases make evident the obstacles of contested notions of participatory development in nonformal education initiatives.

Concluding Remarks

Both cases of decentralized nonformal education in West and East Africa presented here are characterized in terms of the unsuccessful resolution of their respective intended outcomes. The first failed more as a consequence of "outsiders". The second case floundered under the misaligned intentions of "locals" and those of the NGO. In this regard, what both Chambers (1994) and Kapoor (2002) underscore is the necessity of a truly collaborative effort. Consensus of this type is attainable only via ongoing dialogue between policymakers, implementers, and grassroots organizations in which long-term local reforms are more equitably decided. A more holistic approach has the potential to create more than local, non-uniform and non-sustainable initiatives. While the decentralization goals of administrative efficiency and political authority are seemingly clear-cut, the empirical evidence in support of these claims might often provide more speculative language than clear examples of success.

Finally, while we deplore the global polarization of wealth and remain skeptical of decentralization practices, pragmatism dictates that neither will be discontinued anytime soon. Therefore, our experiences buttress a call for research that deepens our understanding of how all participants are engaged in development projects; that is, if we are sincerely invested in laying the foundation for well-managed and socially just projects. Better research may help manage the precious few resources available for positive educational gains where essentially, time, money and good faith are running short.

Notes

1. This article draws on research conducted in Senegal between 2000 and 2001. This research examined documents and 30 respondent narratives, allowing a view into how an ECB education is shaped, interpreted, and received by devolved actors. Through the use of a multi-level model and a mixed set of analytic tools, representatives of national governmental agencies, international governmental

agencies, national NGOs, international NGOs, and local communities active in education and decentralization activities in Senegal participated in structured and semi-structured interviews and surveys. The surveys and interviews aimed to assess and probe participants' beliefs, attitudes and knowledge concerning the political, economic, and social milieu of an ECB education in Senegal.

This case study relies on research conducted in Kenya during portions of 2002 and 2003. Through the examination of local documents and news, national newspapers and radio broadcasts, the openness of Kenyan society for implementation of gender-specific programs was analyzed. Representatives of the university, national NGOs, international NGOs, local citizens and students participated in semi-structured interviews. These interviews aimed to assess and probe participants' beliefs concerning the political and economic advancement of women. Ongoing dialogue, including email sent between the university and the international funding NGO were examined to appraise the consistency and quality of the ongoing dialogue.

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