Understanding power asymmetry in participatory development spaces: Insights from Ghana’s Decent Work Programme

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ABSTRACT
Participatory modes of local economic development are laudable policy aspirations, but are often difficult to cultivate in practice. Thus, attempts by international bodies, such as the International Labour Organization (ILO), to institutionalize participatory development in localities of the Global South have often faced serious implementation challenges. Key to this is the issue of power asymmetry. This study uses Giddens’ notion of duality of structure and draws upon a qualitative case study research of the Ghana Decent Work Programme (GWDP) implemented in Ajumako Enyan Essiam to deepen the understanding of the nature of asymmetric power relations among actors within a participatory development space. The key finding is the dynamic nature of asymmetric power relations. The ensuing asymmetric power relations manifest in the negotiations and contestations that contribute to shaping the trajectory of the participatory development space. The study, therefore, challenges the static notions of asymmetric power relations within participatory development spaces by revealing their fluid properties.

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participatory development space; asymmetric power relations; local economic development; local governance; agency; structure

INTRODUCTION
There is an acceptance of the interrelationships between participation and local economic development (Pike, Rodriguez-Pose, & Tomaney, 2007). Hence, the many international local economic development interventions aimed at institutionalizing participatory development spaces for engaging relevant actors in the pursuit of development. Despite this broad consensus on the virtues of participatory development, many localities of the Global South have faced serious impediments during implementation (Pugalis, Giddings, & Anyigor, 2014). There is, therefore, a clear research and policy need to deepen the understanding of participatory development approaches. For instance, such a need is amplified by the attention drawn to the scarcity of research on local economic development in Sub-Saharan Africa (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2010). Key in this regard is the issue of asymmetric power relations among actors in shaping the trajectory of participatory development spaces. Some proponents of this view, however, adopt a

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static notion of power asymmetry as permanently skewed in favour of certain actors (Barnaud & Van Paassan, 2013; Mansuri & Rao, 2013). For instance, participatory development spaces have been labelled as ‘invited spaces’ (Gaventa, 2004), to depict how power is skewed towards the initiators of those spaces such as actors within the state and the international development arena. These conceptualizations fail to acknowledge adequately the contribution or agency of the supposedly subaltern in the shaping of the trajectory of the participatory development space. This study, therefore, adopted an analytical framework based on Giddens (1984) notion of duality of structure to examine the nature of power asymmetry within a participatory development space set up under the Ghana Decent Work Programme (GDWP) with support from the International Labour Organization (ILO) from 2003 to 2009.

The study reveals the dynamic nature of asymmetric power relations. Actors such as the ILO, national and local government politicians, and technical staff and small business operators in the local informal economy exercising reflexive knowledgeability in pursuit of specific interests drew on structures emanating from the international development arena, the local informal economy and the local governance system which both enabled and constrained their agency. The ensuing asymmetric power relations manifest in the negotiations and contestations that contributes to shaping the trajectory of the participatory development space. The study, therefore, challenges the static notions of asymmetric power relations within participatory development spaces by revealing their fluid properties.

AGENCY, STRUCTURE AND POWER ASYMMETRY IN PARTICIPATORY DEVELOPMENT SPACES

Taking inspiration from Cornwall (2002), a participatory development space is an avenue through which opportunities for engagement are conceived or actualized by citizens in the pursuit of development. Despite the potential for collaboration, there is the proclivity for such spaces to degenerate into spaces of asymmetric power relations (Gaventa, 2004), where different actors exercise different levels of power in relation to each other. The exercise of this asymmetric power relations contributes to shaping the trajectory of the participatory development space.

Giddens’ (1984) notion of duality of structure provides a useful means of understanding how this process evolves. According to Giddens, agency is enacted by knowledgeable and reflexive actors and it is the recursiveness of agency that creates structure that enables and at the same time constrains agency. The participatory development space as reproduced social practices exhibits these properties. Actors within the participatory development space in exercising agency continually reflect, rationalize and monitor their conduct and that of others to draw on the structural rules and resources that best serve their interests. Rules are the generalizable procedures applied in the production or reproduction of social action. Resources are the media through which transformative capacity is employed as power in the routine course of social action. Hence, the use of power characterizes not specific types of conduct but all action. As agency implies power, different actors at different times exercise different levels of power as enabled and constrained by the prevailing structures. It is the exercise of this asymmetric power that manifests in the negotiations and contestations among the actors and which contributes to shaping the trajectory of the participatory development space. This is demonstrated using the empirical case of the implementation of the second component of the GDWP in Ajumako Enyan Essiam district.

STUDY SETTING AND METHODOLOGY

The GDWP was implemented by the government of Ghana with support from the ILO from 2003 to 2009. The programme had two components. The first was policy oriented and aimed at promoting the incorporation of decent work principles, namely, security of employment, access
to social security, protection of workers’ rights and social dialogue into the Ghana Poverty Reduction Strategy. The second was to create a participatory local economic development space for enhancing decent work in the informal economy. This was known as the Subcommittee for Productive and Gainful Employment (SPGE) (Grooten, 2005). The SPGE was a 15-member committee made up of the representatives of the local government and small business operators. Key among the initiatives of the SPGE were the set-up of a credit union and capacity-building training for operators in the local informal economy. This component was the first international local economic development programme in Ghana and the focus of this study.

The study was set in Ajumako Enyan Essiam, one of the first districts to pilot this component of the programme. The district is in the forest interior of Central Region in the southern part of Ghana with a projected population of 153,691 people for 2019. A predominantly rural district and agrarian economy, it has a high incidence of poverty with estimates suggesting that the informal sector accounts for over 90% of employment in the local economy (AEEDA, 2014). Data for the study were collected based on a qualitative methodology. The methodology provided an open-ended way of looking at the interlocking arenas pertinent to the local economic development process. Key actors in the programme such as ILO staff, local government politicians and technical staff, small business association executives and members were interviewed using purposive and snowballing sampling approaches. Interviews were carried out to the point of saturation (n = 31). The meetings of three small business associations were observed and the work-sites of three other small business associations were visited. The study also involved the review of documents such as the district medium-term development plans, programme evaluation reports and other secondary data. The fieldwork was undertaken from August to October 2016. The analysis involved identifying the structures exhibited within the participatory development space and how that enabled and constrained the agency of actors that shaped the trajectory of the programme.

(UN)MAKING A PARTICIPATORY LOCAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT SPACE

This section offers empirical evidence for the dynamic nature of power asymmetry among actors within a participatory development space. It shows how this power asymmetry manifests in the agency of actors, enabled and constrained by structures, and contributes to shaping the trajectory of the SPGE.

The need for the SPGE as a participatory local economic development space can be traced to structures in the international development arena which manifests in the problematization of development and the formulation of solutions. In this case, the ILO problematized the prevalence of decent work deficits in the informal economy in Ghana, namely, the lack of adequate income, social protection and job security. Again, the ILO problematized the existing approach to local development as non-participatory as it was dominated by the executive committee of the local government which consisted of local government politicians assisted by technical staff. Local economic development was also subsumed within the broader local development goals pursued by the local government. The ILO argued that for local economic development to be participatory, the private sector and other civil society groups had to be given an enhanced role.

Relying on structural resources such as its international legitimacy and the availability of donor funds, the ILO initiated the establishment of the SPGE made up of actors from the public and private sectors as a participatory development space for local economic development. This was to be the vehicle through which the decent work deficits in the local informal economy were to be resolved. This involved bringing on board different actors with varying interests, such as national and local government politicians and technical staff, and the small business operators in the informal economy. To legitimize and institutionalize the SPGE within the structures
of the local government, the ILO exploited provisions in the enabling law at the time, the Local Government Act (Act 462) section 24.1(j), which empowered the local government to set up additional subcommittees to the executive committee.

In these instances, the ILO could be seen as the dominant actor defining and delineating the space according to preconceived goals. There were, however, other prevailing structures that constrained the power of the ILO as the dominant actor. These structures enabled the other actors also to exercise agency as they pursued their interests. For instance, the ILO had to pursue the goal of establishing the SPGE by also offering incentives to the other actors, especially the small business operators in the informal economy. The use of incentives arguably could be likened to a structural rule in the development arena as the supposed beneficiaries, in this case, the small business operators, were accustomed to such inducements. The reversal of power positions at this instance enables the supposed subaltern to stake specific claims. Their acquiescence to the proposals of the ILO could be described as strategic. As this enabled them to advance their interests, namely, the maximization of incentives received as can be inferred from this interview comment: ‘Even if you send a letter to the small business operators that, oh you are wanted. They would say, ahhh is there money in it, so it was not easy bringing them to the gatherings’ (Programme District Focal Person, September 2016). As can be deduced, the supposed beneficiaries did not play a passive or a subservient role. Through their demand for incentives, they actively contributed to shaping the trajectory of the SPGE.

This also brings up the issue of the pursuit of multiple interests, some of which conflicted with the goals of the SPGE. The pursuit of such interests entailed actions that bordered on corruption, mismanagement, loan default and political patronage. This affirms Cleaver’s (2001) ‘myths of community’ where development initiatives are based on a false assumption of altruism and uniformity in the interests of actors. For instance, on the issue of corruption, there is admittedly a structural problem of corruption in Ghana. The Afro Barometer Survey of the perception of corruption in local governments in 2008, at the peak of the implementation of the programme, was 71% (Okuru & Armah-Attoh, 2015). The local government staff involved in the programme were perceived to have used their positions to misappropriate funds allocated for the programme, as can inferred from this interview comment: ‘Two assembly officials who were part of the SPGE were the signatories, so any money that came in they dismantled it, you understand’ (President of a Small Business Association and member of the SPGE, August 2016). ‘Dismantled’ here refers to the misappropriation of funds. These perceptions of the local government staff contributed to the gradual loss of interest of the small business operators in the work of the SPGE.

Another instance was the issue of mismanagement and loan default at the credit union. The credit union was set up by the SPGE due to the difficulty small business operators faced in accessing finance. A high loan default rate coupled with the mismanagement of the credit union led to its collapse, with some members losing their savings. This situation made it more difficult for the SPGE to mobilize disgruntled small business operators.

Adding to the above was the effects of political patronage structurally embedded within the local governance system. Political patronage in Ghana manifests in the heavy influence of the central government in local governance. For instance, the 1992 Constitution (Art. 243(1)) mandates the president to nominate the district chief executive (the political head) for approval by two-thirds majority of the local government. Additionally, the president appoints one-third of the membership of the local government (Art. 242(d)). These positions in the local government are offered to party activists to help consolidate a government’s hold on power. The general election in 2008 was won by the opposition party, which took office at the start of 2009. The subsequent change in the local government led to attempts to change the membership of the SPGE. This was to enable the new government to replace actors appointed during the tenure of the previous government with its party activists. This can be gleaned from the following quotation:
It is politics as you know, if the person who appointed you unto the SPGE is no longer in charge and a new person comes and he wants to put his own person into that position, then it brings up a whole lot of issues, the politics involved. (Local Government Politician and member of the SPGE, September 2016)

These changes were resisted by the ILO and the old membership of the SPGE, but to no avail. The structure of political patronage embedded in the local governance system, while enabling the agency of the actors in the new government, constrained the ability of the ILO and the old members of the SPGE to resist. The ILO’s agency was further constrained by the fact that the donor-support phase had ended, another feature of the international development arena. The new members of the SPGE unexposed to the kind of training their predecessors had lacked the requisite expertise to mobilize adequate resources to continue with the programme. The SPGE gradually became dysfunctional and, by 2012, had become defunct.

CONCLUSIONS

The study has shown the dynamic nature of power asymmetry among actors within a participatory development space using Giddens’ notion of duality of structure. It has shown how this power asymmetry manifested in the agency of actors enabled and constrained by structures, and shaped the trajectory of the SPGE in Ajumako Enyan Essiam district in southern Ghana. These structures emanating from the international development arena, the local governance system and the local informal economy in Ghana enabled and constrained the agency of actors such as the ILO, national and local government politicians, and technical staff and small business operators in the local informal economy as they pursued their interests within the participatory development space. The ensuing asymmetric power relations manifested in the negotiations and contestations that contributed to shaping the trajectory of the participatory development space.

The study, therefore, challenges the static notions of asymmetric power relations within participatory development spaces as espoused by Barnaud and Van Paassan (2013) and Mansuri and Rao (2013). The possibility to draw on different structures as the actors observe and reflect on advancing their interests meant that no one actor held dominance over the participatory development space. As power characterizes all forms of action (Giddens, 1984), asymmetric power relations among actors within a participatory development space are better understood as dynamic and not static. Hence, in cultivating participatory development spaces, attempts at reducing power asymmetry should be aimed at reforming the structures that enable and constrain the agency of actors.

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