
Individuals, Structures, and Human Agency in Community Development

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Community development, especially in developing societies, has focused on mobilizing community members for collective action. Little attention has been paid to creative efforts of individuals engaged in transformative activities that improve their lives and from which other members of a community can learn. This paper examines how individuals creatively engage in activities that improve their households. The research, done in a rural area of northern Malawi, Africa, involved in-depth unstructured qualitative interviews of a number of individuals and careful observations of what was going on in their households. The analysis reveals evidence that creative individuals improved their households' well-being through meaning-making, learning, and acting while navigating structural imperatives. Some of their actions were counter to social and cultural expectations, others were behavioral outliers, but all were driven by choices each made. Community development facilitators ought to consider identifying creative individuals (could be Christians) in a community, enhancing their agency, and organizing communities of practice around these individuals for other members of a community to learn from or for them to engage in the spreading of the Good News. I term this constructivist community development / evangelism and argue that it is particularly relevant in subsistent, substantive, and allocentric communities where group norms are a significant factor in people's behavior. These group norms are important for collective action but can stifle individuals' creativity.

Introduction:

Community development aims at improving the lives of people in a community and the community itself. To a large extent, the process of community development has involved community development practitioners mobilizing community members to act collectively to deal with their common concerns. I refer to this as the conventional community development practice.

This conventional practice of community development fails to acknowledge the important agentic role of individuals, many of whom engage in creative activities. The influence of these individuals in contributing to development in a community is invaluable. Their role is an uphill battle in that in their action they have to take into consideration the demands of various structures in their socio-cultural environment; these structures can compromise their agency. This is probably the case more so in subsistent and substantive communities. These communities are subsistent in that people heavily depend on natural resources and physical labor to meet their livelihood needs. They are substantive, as Polanyi (2001) defines the term, because non-market-based reciprocity, redistribution, and exchange, rather than

market-driven, rational-choice decision-making processes that are responsive to price mechanisms, characterize community members' socio-cultural and economic behavior. In these subsistent and substantive communities, socio-cultural processes are significantly allocentric; people tend to be organically collaborative, interdependent, define themselves in terms of the groups they are a part of, and behave more so according to group norms (see Triandis et al. 1985, and Triandis and Trafimow 2003 for definition of allocentrism). In such communities, one's well-being and dreams of improving one's life are heavily linked to collective expectations; one's choices are influenced by collective norms. Allocentrism is good for conventional community development practice. However, allocentric behavior can stifle individuals' agency and their God-given potential in the pursuit of their goals. Community development facilitators would do well to identify agentic individuals in a community, encourage them in their life-improving creative endeavors, then mobilize other members of communities to learn from these community members through what Wenger (1998) and Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) term communities of practice, that is, groups of people

learning from one another in pursuing goals. This is reminiscent of house churches, Bible Study Groups, fellowship meetings, and various Christian groups engaging in some collective group activities where converts receive the much needed support to grow in their faith and are encouraged to live a victorious life in Christ.

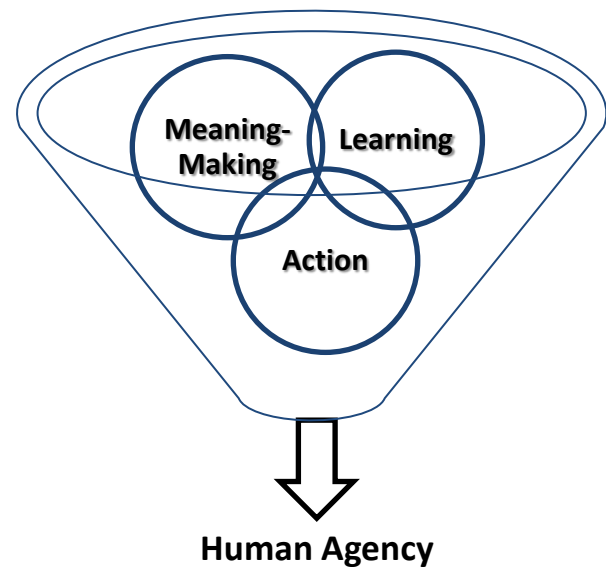
I first explain human agency, self-efficacy (a springboard of agency), and structures positing them as critical concepts in creative action and the use of God's gifts. I propose that when individuals' agency does not blindly follow allocentric behavior but involves individuals being creatively entrepreneurial (thinking outside the box) in their behavior to improve their well-being, the individuals engage in what I have termed constructivist transformative human agency. The community development (and any evangelism activity) that results is constructivist; it emerges from life-improving creative endeavors, which transform well-being in the households involved. The research focused on documenting transformative human agency and the emerging changes in households in the four contiguous rural communities in northern Malawi, Africa. I explain how the research was carried out starting with a description of the socio-cultural environment in the communities where the research was done to document allocentrism. Thereafter, I explain how the interviews and observations were undertaken. In my analysis, I draw on exemplary case studies of a few individuals to demonstrate their transformative agency and the emergent improvements in their households. I argue that creative individuals deploying their self-efficacies and negotiating socio-cultural structures in their efforts to improve their household's well-being can be encouraged to engage in communities of practice. This is an effective way of individuals fully applying God's gifts to attain what is best for their families. Such communities of practice would be loci for community development directed at transforming well-being in households and for spreading the Gospel.

Human Agency, Structures, and Self-Efficacy

Human agency refers to individuals in a given social environment choosing to act in response to a situation or to address an issue, a problem, to take advantage of an opportunity, or to just fulfill a social responsibility. Agency has the 'effect of influencing a specific process or state of affairs' (Giddens 1984, 14). The human agency process is constructivist; it involves meaning-making, learning, and acting feeding into each other as represented in Figure 1. Individuals engage in negotiation of meaning in any given situation, learn or acquire knowledge from each other, reflect on the knowledge, and use the knowledge in doing something in the process initiating further negotiation of meaning.

I would argue that what Ledwith (2005, 41) terms praxis, "the synthesis of reflection and action undertaken through critical consciousness or the making sense of the world in order to transform it" is transformative human agency involving meaning-making, learning, and action. I draw on Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and practice to shed light on Ledwith's argument and on what I see as constructivist community development. Further, I argue that meaning-making, learning, and acting are foundational not only to community development but also to evangelism or the spreading of the Good News.

Figure 1
Human Agency:
Meaning-Making, Learning, and Action



Meaning-making is about the making sense (what does this imply, portend, or entail) of events, situations, new information, relationships, experiences, and even one's self. Thus Ignelzi (2000, 5) notes that meaning-making is "the process of how individuals make sense of knowledge, experience, relationships, and the self [personality, character, or identity]". The 'making sense' is a process in which meaning is negotiated. The negotiation of meaning encompasses (a) participation of those involved in some interaction and (b) reification or asserting the meaningfulness (relevance, significance, or consequential qualities) of a situation (Wenger 1998, 52-62). Advertently, meaning-making is linked to learning (acquiring knowledge) and practice or action (using the knowledge). Thus meaning-making as a process inherently has those engaging in meaning-making learning, then doing something, if so inclined,

about or with the knowledge gained. The whole meaning-making, learning, and action is influenced by one's self-efficacy, that is, an individual's belief in his or her ability to achieve or accomplish a task (Bandura 1977). Part of the reason is that agency is "associated with notions of freedom, free will, action, creativity, originality, and the possibility of change through the actions of free agents" (Barker and Jane 2016, 280-281).

It is important to note that while agency involves acts by individuals, the individuals are not "self-constituting—they do not bring themselves into being out of nothingness" (Barker and Jane 2016, 281). Individuals are social products; they are products of their socio-cultural environment (Berger and Luckmann 1966, and Callero 2018). Agency is thus socially and culturally produced in that agents are part of social systems, which Giddens (1984) defines as the reproduced relations between agents. Agency, Giddens informs us, is a reflection of lived-through experience embedded in, influencing and being influenced, and enabled and being constrained by structures.

Structures can be cognitive, cultural, and social. White (1979) defined cognitive structure as "the knowledge someone possesses and the manner in which the knowledge is arranged" (3). Cognitive structure engenders the pattern of thought, aptitude, reasoning, perception, or understanding in individuals. Garner (2007, 2) views cognitive structure as "the basic mental processes people draw upon to make any sense of information." It inheres in knowledge, skills, talents, aptitudes, and an awareness of one's socio-cultural environment, which dialectically influences the pattern of thought as well as the attitudes, beliefs, values, desires, dreams, and dispositions individuals attain. The cognitive structure hence has foundational influence over agency. In his social cognitive theory, Bandura (1989 and 2001) developed a model of emergent interactive agency. He argued that cognitive and other personal factors, behavior, and environmental situations interacted and influenced each other. Agents' behavior was influenced by personal factors (cognitive, affective, and such others) and environmental events. Agency, Bandura argued, is thus neither an autonomous product of personal factors nor simply a product of environmental influences but an emergent outcome of personal factors, environmental events, and behavior. The environment is of course the arena,

domain, realm, or field for cultural and social structures.

Hall (2000) provides an insightful definition of cultural structure. He first defines cultural meanings. These are "the invented, received, synthesized, reworked, and otherwise improvised idea-patterns by which individuals and social groups attach significance to their actions" (341). The cultural structure, according to Hall (2000, 341), is the "patterned logic with identifiable generic features that comprise diversely situated cultural meanings." The cultural structure refers to patterns of beliefs, habits, styles, conventions, traditions, and rituals in the socio-cultural environment; these form the springboard of cultural meanings (what a particular cultural element means and entails) and the actions or practices informed by these meanings. Cultural meanings thus guide cultural practice, what somebody is supposed to do in any given circumstance (Miller and Goodnow 1995). As Swidler (1986) argues, culture is a tool kit for people's actions; culture informs how people act.

Following Bandura's (1989; 2001) argument, personal factors (such as cognition) arouse individuals' agency which, I would argue, is normatively legitimated or justified by the cultural structure and enacted through the social structure. Giddens (1984) defines the social structure as rules and resources or sets of transformation relations organized as properties of social systems where social systems, as stated before, refer to the reproduced relations between agents or actors. Social structure thus comprises the patterns of relationships or social network of ties between actors connected to each other through positions or statuses through which they perform roles following rules (which change based on social situations) and utilizing resources available to the agents. Human agency is enacted through these social networks of ties, legitimated by culture, and given credence through the cognitive structure. An individual's human agency is thus informed by the cognitive structure. It is in response to the position the individual has. It is enabled or constrained by the rules and resources appertaining to the position an individual has in society; it is affirmed by the ability, inclination, and willingness of an individual to act in a way the individual thinks he or she should. As Giddens (1984) informs us in his structuration theory, agents produce and reproduce social structure¹. I would add that agents produce and reproduce cognitive and cultural structures.

¹ There is significant scholarly discussion on the autonomy of individuals in their agency versus the influence of the structure (social) over the individuals' agency. I do not get into this debate here. Instead, I have aligned my thinking with Giddens' duality of structure argument. In this view, structures (not only social but also cultural and cognitive in my opinion) have some constraining and enabling influence over individuals' agency. I (arguably) take Archer's (1982) morphogenesis argument, that society has no particular pre-set form or preferred state and that structures take their form from the intended and unintended consequences of agents' interactions and activities, as basically providing more insight about structuration (action enabling and constraining) processes.

Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and practice help us to understand the nature of production and reproduction of cognitive, cultural, and social structures. Bourdieu (1977, 72) defines habitus as "systems of durable, transposable dispositions [a way of being or a habitual state], structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations." Habitus is a structuring mechanism operating from within individuals. It enables them to cope with unforeseen and ever-changing situations. Habitus operates at both the mental and socio-cultural environmental levels. It is thus a "socially constituted system of cognitive and motivating structures, and the socially structured situations in which the agents' interests are defined, and with them the objective functions and subjective motivations of their practices" (Bourdieu 1977, 76). Individuals thus draw upon and transform structures in that lived experience is structured and structures perception and action. An individual can, within limits, transform the world by transforming its representations because structures (mental/cognitive, cultural, and social) are recursively linked in practice (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Individuals or agents thus produce and reproduce structures and "may or may not be aware of the reasons that cause their behavior" (Bhaskar 2015, 80-81). In fact, there is a "dialectical interplay between structure and action" (Archer 1982, 458).

The human agency activities of meaning-making, learning, and acting rouses individuals to deploy their self-efficacies (a cognitive matter) in undertaking an action while taking into consideration the demands of the cultural and social structures in one's socio-cultural environment. Agency can be of a routine nature (very traditional) in that individuals carry on business as usual: how things are done follows how things were done in yester-times. It can also be entrepreneurially transformative, that is, can depart from the business as usual practice. Transformative human agency can either involve creative actions that are not common in a community or actions, also creative, that counter socio-cultural expectations but both with the objective of improving one's well-being. The research explored this transformative human agency, that is, individuals engaging in meaning-making and learning that lead to emergent action to improve their well-being. The research basically explored how individuals engage in constructivist learning, meaning-making, thinking, and acting to improve their household's well-being.

The Research and its Findings:

The research aimed at finding innovative individuals (in the research communities) who have engaged in constructivist human agency and have improved their household's well-being. It further explored how the individuals were able to achieve goals and how they could be reference points of communities of learning and practice. The research was undertaken in communities served by Pamoza International, a non-profit Christian outreach and community development organization, during my two separate trips to the area Pamoza was serving. The first of these visits was in June-July 2013 and the second in June-July 2014².

Pamoza International operates among the *Tumbuka* people in northern Malawi, Africa. The Tumbuka are patrilineal and patrilocal. Families are organized around a clan leader, the oldest male with his sons and their families living together in a contiguous stretch of houses. A clan thus comprises grandparents, fathers, mothers, uncles, sons, daughters, cousins, and nephews helping each other with food, labor for farming or building anything, clothes, and a whole range of other items. A clan or several of them make up a village.

The area served by Pamoza International at the time comprised four communities covering 37 villages with a total population of about 6,000 in 1,100 households. A household is responsible for taking care of its members (meeting food, clothing, healthcare, education, and other needs) but is expected to help relatives within the extended family system or clan. The resulting family networks are channels for material (money, clothing, food, etc.) and non-material, mainly labor, exchanges. These exchanges are massive networks of what Coleman (1988) called social credit slips. These slips are a fundamental factor of allocentrism since they are used to enforce social norms in people's behavior. Clan leaders play a key role in ensuring that households follow stipulated norms in their behavior. When there is death in a family, for example, all members of a household (except children) have to attend and bring, as a household, something to help the grieving family. The only acceptable reason for not attending is sickness, old age, or being away. Failure to observe this socio-cultural expectation attracts heavy sanctions including shaming individuals and their households.

Normative behavioral expectations extend to other matters. Constructing an improved house for your family, for example, involves checking with your parents and the clan leaders who must approve the

² I have been involved with the organization since 2011 as its founder, board member, and currently its Director of Field Operations. My work with the organization has also involved research on various matters including contiguity of the community development process (Mtika and Kistler 2017).

project before you start it. One may not be allowed, as another example, to marry from certain clans just because members of such clans are believed to be lazy people or that they practice witchcraft. Individuals thus have to grapple with what is the expected and appropriate behavior in any situation in their agency or meaning-making, learning, and acting.

As part of its community development practice, Pamoza International documented types of houses, their assets (land, livestock, oxen, ox-carts, bicycles, furniture, food reserves, etc.), and their main means of livelihood for each of the 1,100 households of which 78 were well-to-do. To learn how people grappled with socio-cultural expectations in their agency, I, with the help of two research assistants, visited all the 78 households with the objective of building case studies to document how they improved their well-being status. I zeroed in on four households, which I visited several times interviewing the head of the household and observing how members of the households encountered and dealt with the cultural and social expectations in their attempts to advance their well-being. The interviews were unstructured and allowed extensive discussion with the interviewee (the head of the household, basically male), other members of the household, and others in the community who knew the household. Analysis involved bringing forth key issues and themes pertinent to agency in the household. The case studies of four households—Hima, Samu, Remo, and Sijere (the names are pseudonyms)—reveal insights about agency in the households, that is, actions household members engaged in to improve the well-being of their households.

1. Hima: Pursuing Opportunities

Hima, like any other man among the Tumbuka, sees himself as the primary breadwinner for his household. Hima followed the footsteps of his father; he became a migrant worker. Hima's father died at 63 years old. He had engaged in circular migrant work in which he would be in South Africa for two to three years, then return for a vacation of two months, going back to South Africa for another two to three years of work (Mtika 2007; 2015). He did this for a little over 40 years, basically all his working life. Hima was only 11 years at the time of his father's death.

Though he followed his father's footsteps in being a circular migrant worker in South Africa, Hima behaves very differently. To start with, his father, during his two months vacations, would share whatever he brought with various relatives in his clan. Connecting with members of his extended family was very important to Hima's father. The bicycle, work-oxen, ploughs, and ox-carts he had acquired over the years were available to all members of his clan; they used them at no charge.

All this brought a lot of honor to Hima's father. Unlike his father, Hima sparingly shares his resources with anyone else other than his wife, children, and mother. Asked about why he sparingly shares his resources with others in the clan, he remarked:

I am not sure why you have to go to South Africa and work so hard then spread what you have earned to many mostly able-bodied people. This only encourages them to expect you to provide for their needs. They need to be responsible for their own welfare. They should have personal goals and should pursue those goals instead of expecting others to take care of them.

Asked whether he tells people about his views, he responded:

No, why should I? By not giving them anything, they should know that I do not condone their expectation that I have to give them something. Moreover, most of us young people in my clan are working in South Africa and earning something for our families. The people who need our help are parents because they are old and cannot go to South Africa and work especially when it is your mother who has no way, being an old woman, of going and working in South Africa.

Hima's sisters, like other relatives, complain that he provides little help to them and rarely visits them when he is on vacation. He indicated that he visits them when he hears that they or a member of their household is ill and if there was death in their household or clan. "Vacation time [just as much in length as was his father's] is too short; there is little time to spare on unnecessary things," he remarked. He has specific projects for every vacation. In one of the vacations, he was building his house, a modern three bed-room, iron-roofed, and cement-floor type. He has recently installed solar power to the house (there is no grid electricity in the community) so that he can watch videos when he wants to. He has bought a lot of cattle, which he hopes to use in whatever way that advances his household's economic status. He is building a house at a Trading Center some seven miles away from his village. He hopes to rent it out, and thus earn some income.

While he comes home for his vacations once every two years, his wife visits him in South Africa about twice every year. His mother never visited his father in South Africa. His mother is not happy with this arrangement. Many other older folks in his clan and communities are very much against this practice but the younger ones have no problem with it. Hence, while Hima was the first in his clan (and community) to invite his wife to come and visit him in South Africa, a number of other

migrant workers in his age-group have had their wives visit them in South Africa. Asked why he invites his wife to visit him, Hima remarked, “unless one is willing to either have another wife in South Africa [his father had one in South Africa] which would be very expensive or to engage in sex with other women in South Africa to relieve himself, a dangerous thing to do in this era of the sexually transmitted AIDS disease, one must invite his wife.” He indicated that he can live away from his wife for some months but needs to connect with her after a couple of months. During these visits, his wife is also able to bring back other resources needed in the many projects the household engages in.

2. *Samu: Engaging in Diverse Means of Livelihoods*

Samu and his wife Kete are in their thirties. Samu reached the eighth grade in school but his wife attained the tenth grade. Asked why he was unable to go far with school, Samu sadly replied,

You have to be selected in grade eight for secondary [high] school; you cannot go to secondary school without being selected. I was not able to pass well enough in grade eight to be selected to go to secondary school. After several attempts, I stopped.

Samu got married after trying several times to go to high school and failing. Samu’s father was a migrant worker and engaged in circular migration to South Africa. He died in South Africa like Hima’s father. Unlike Hima, Samu did not follow the footsteps of his father. Instead, he invested the resources his father had accumulated into farming. He produced significant surplus and sold the surplus produce generating significant income. He also learned to be a bricklayer and is being hired by other households to build their houses. He used his bricklaying skill and built himself a three-bedroom house. He then uses the income from farming and construction of other people’s houses to buy farm produce and livestock (mainly cattle and goats) from other people, which he resells at a profit. This has enabled him to accumulate much more income, some of which he invested in a bank and earns interest. Realizing that mobility in his selling of produce and cattle is important, he bought a motor cycle which he uses to supervise those who are either trekking his cattle or goats to some market or those helping him to sell his farm produce at trading centers.

Samu is financially secure not from migrant work but from diversifying his means of livelihood. He is into farming, buying and selling farm produce from other farmers then selling the produce at a profit, buying and selling livestock (cattle and goats), and building people’s houses. In terms of character, Samu has avoided the “over-drinking problem that most of his age mates

engage in” as he put it. His treatment of his wife and the whole family also differs significantly from the way his age mates treat their wives and children. When you find Samu at home, he is helping his wife with household chores and spends significant time with his child, a three year old daughter. Asked about his views on family, Samu indicated that his wife is actually his best friend. The two have become an example of a loving family who care for each other and share responsibilities in raising their child. Unlike many other households in the community, Kete knows how much money they have and how it is being used. She trusts her husband and is very sure that he “does not run around with other women as other husbands do” as she put it. Samu and Kete have engaged in family planning practices. They are not rushing into having another child. Kete actually practices birth control such that they can delay pregnancy until the two think it is time to have another child.

Samu is jovial and extremely friendly as well as helpful to others who ask him for views on how they can improve their households’ economic status. Asked about why he thinks his friends are not doing what he is doing, he said, “it may be because what I am doing is hard work that demands creativity and sacrifice of sleep . . . many times we have to start the day so early in the morning to follow up stuff . . . many may not be willing to do this.” Samu is an example of what Remo, now in his seventies, would like many of the young men in his community to be doing.

3. *Remo: Confronting Past Unhelpful Behavior*

Like Hima’s father, Remo was a migrant worker to South Africa. He did not accumulate any wealth out of migrant work and stopped being involved in circular migration when he was in his 40s. Back home, he trained as a carpenter through local apprentice opportunities. He is not a professional carpenter but provides rudimentary carpentry services when requested and gets paid some “good money” as he put it.

Remo has built an improved three-bedroom house with burnt bricks, cement floor, and iron roof. During one visit, he told me that it was all because of the training he attended that was organized by Pamoza International. In this training, a Pamoza Community Development Trainer talked about the need for the trainees to think about and engage in carefully saving and investing their resources (the focus during the training was on how to best use resources one has). The facilitator told the trainees that most of them probably wasted a lot of their money on beer without knowing how much they are wasting. She called this the “drinking away your money” habit saying “many of you would be surprised to find out how much of your money you are *drinking away* if you wrote down

whatever moneys you are spending on beer.” Remo was one of the trainees. He decided to record how much he was using on beer for about a month. He found the amount of money he could save to be sizeable. He felt bad that he had indeed been drinking away his money and decided he was going to stop drinking, save whatever money he could, and use the money on something worthwhile. He remarked:

I stopped drinking . . . I saved every little penny I earned from my herbalist activities, my selling of sweet potatoes and cassava, and my earnings from my carpentry work Within a year, I saved enough money to buy all the iron sheets and cement that I needed to build an improved house. You know I am a carpenter so I made my own door frames, doors, and window frames. I asked a young man [a bricklayer] to help me build the house. He did and all I did was pay him a goat. Here you see; I have this house.

Remo is very proud of what he has achieved. At every meeting he attends in the community, Remo always advises his fellow villagers, especially younger ones, to seriously think about changing how they use their money. He advises them to have a project and start saving whatever little money they make with the objective of financing their project at some point in time in the future.

4. *Sijere: Dimba Farming for Income Generation*

Sijere is in his sixties. He has many cattle, which he bought with money from farming. He grows enough food to last a whole year and has been a source of help for many food insecure households in that he provides *ganyu*, piece work that one does for payments of money, clothes, or food (Mtika 2015). Many do *ganyu* work at Sijere’s farms for food mostly during times of acute food shortage, December to February, which happen to be times when there is much more demand for farm labor. Sijere thus has access to much more labor (through *ganyu*) at a time he most needs it.

Sijere is busy during the rainy season growing field crops. During the dry season (May to October, a time when there are no rains and a time when many men spend most of their days resting from the hard farming work they engaged in during the rainy season), he is busy with *dimba* work. A *dimba* is a farm near a stream; the stream is a source of water to water the crops grown at a time when there is no rain. Sijere grows various leafy vegetables, onions, and tomato using water from the stream to irrigate his crops. The crops he grows are high cash-value types; he earns a lot of money from them. Thus, Sijere works year-round. He is into farming corn, beans, peanuts, and such other field crops during the

rainy season, December to June. He then gets into *dimba* farming during the dry season months of July to November. He ends up having very little time for anything else including chatting with friends. Asked about working year-round and what he thinks about other men who avoid engaging in *dimba* farming, he explained:

Sometimes you have to take a lonely road if you want to make a difference in your life and that of your family. I do not understand why so many men, many of them strong and younger than me, cannot take advantage of all this land and use it during the dry season to grow crops like onions and tomatoes that are always on demand. I have young men who come here to buy tomatoes, onions, some rape and cabbage for their wives! Why they cannot grow these for themselves is beyond me! I guess they are lazy for *dimba* work is arduous.

People respect Sijere for his hard work and for ensuring that his family does not run out of food even when there has been a terrible drought. Most of them find the amount of hard work he invests in farming too much. “Sijere never rests,” a neighbor remarked. When I visited his home, this neighbor told me, “if you want to talk to Sijere, go to his *dimba*.” I did and always met him at his *dimba* when I wanted to talk to him. He reiterated, “this is grueling work; there is no vacation with this work; it demands no rest but that is what good life is about!”

A number of young men are following his example. They have started their own *dimba* farms and have come to realize that to make it they need to invest a lot of time and labor during the June to October rest period. Those who need some rest from the hard work of the rainy season drop out. Only a few are making it but none to the level of Sijere, at least not yet.

Agency in the Practice of Constructivist Community Development

The case studies reveal individuals’ constructivist agency in the pursuit of their goals. Hima built a big house for his family. As a result, a lot of his age mates who also engage in migrant work have built improved houses although not as big as his. Second, he allowed his wife to be visiting him in South Africa, something that had not been done before by any migrant worker in his community. A number of his age mates have followed the behavior; they have had their wives visit them in South Africa. Third, he did not succumb to socio-cultural expectations of sharing what he earned with a whole range of relatives as his father did. He finds the idea of spreading his earnings among his many relatives archaic. He is all the time looking for ways to

improve his household's well-being. His mother is complaining that her son is outrageous; she complains that he is over-concerned with improving his life even if it is at the expense of other people's feelings. However, she enjoys and appreciates that Hima is not overstressing his benevolence to a whole range of relatives. Hima's behavior has allowed him to give a lot more help to his mother. She has an improved house, something that her husband did not achieve. Hima's behavior has been socially accommodated by his clan. Part of the reason is his dialoguing with age mates, his mother's increasing support, and clan leaders accepting that his behavior does not compromise the well-being of the clan members.

Samu thought of creative ways of investing the resources his deceased father left behind. He first invested in farming and produced significant surplus farm produce. He got into trading his produce moving on to buying and selling other farmers' produce at a profit. He diversified his income-earning ventures to livestock rearing and buying from others, then selling also at a profit. His treatment of his wife and child is different from many other families. As he indicated, he and his wife are partners in their endeavors to improve their well-being and raise a family. In working so cooperatively with his wife, Samu has been ridiculed many times that his wife probably has applied love potion on him. At the same time, he is admired in his community.

Remo has come to realize that he wasted a lot of money in the past on beer. He is on a mission to change the thinking of others about the use of money whatever amount they get. He thinks people should dream of a better life rather than just accepting their present social situation. He is frustrated that people think that they are poor while "throwing away their wealth into beer," as he put it. His advice to people has been "please save whatever you can from the little you earn and invest in a project that will improve your well-being." Remo thinks that his message that people should think of saving their money seems to be falling on deaf ears. Many people younger than he, though, are admiring how this old man has improved his well-being. He is an inspiration to them.

Sijere went against the normative 'rest in the off season' mentality by investing his labor into dimba farming. He is gaining a lot of respect and has been an example to young men. His view of work and rest is very different from other community members. He questions the sensibility of having a five-month dry season (when there is no rain) vacation that most community members seem to just accept as a way of life. While some view Sijere as being imprisoned by his dimba work, many see his hard work paying off. He has a lot of food, cattle, and has been able to have all his children attain some high school education, with some

even getting into college. Many community members admire what Sijere has been able to achieve, and attribute his success to his hard work.

Individuals in the case studies engaged in constructivist transformative agency. They operated within the bounds of structures (cognitive, cultural, and social), which can be enabling or constraining (Giddens 1984). These individuals played a unique role in transforming these structures, and this entailed a certain level of self-efficacy in dealing with their situations (see Figure 2).

Figure 2
Individuals' Constructivist Agency in Community Development



Cognitively, they deployed their self-efficacy, a high level of belief in their capability and desire to do something about their situation (Bandura 1977). They believed in the possibilities of achieving their goals. Bandura (1989) argues that an understanding of external factors, those within the socio-cultural environment, influences an individual's self-efficacy. I would argue that this entails meaning-making (a cognitive process that involves changes in one's thought patterns) and learning while negotiating social and cultural structures, then deciding, if so inclined, to act. Individuals' engagement in such transformative agency thus demands deploying one's self-efficacy (a cognitive matter) to confront one's habitus (dispositions in one's thinking and acting) and venture into new behaviors as one negotiates cultural and social expectations. These individuals do not passively take in knowledge and use it as has been socio-culturally stipulated but challenge the foundations of the routine knowledge claims and venture into new understandings and action.

In engaging in any creative action or practice “defined by the cognitive and motivating structures making up the habitus” (Bourdieu 1977, 78), individuals indeed have to negotiate cultural and social expectations while creatively defying the status quo as Hima did or going beyond the social and cultural behavioral limits as Sijere, Remo, and Samu did. Bourdieu provides a deeper sense of how agency operates. Agency should be regarded as “dispositional”. Wrestling with the socio-cultural expectations, individuals follow a disposition to act in ways that are coherent with the socially structured situations in which the agents’ *interests* are defined. Agency, in this sense, is not exactly routine, but neither is it purely rational; it does not follow the “wisdom” of rational choice theory. It is adaptive and also adapting. It structures structures; it is constructivist. It is the basis for structuring structures to the extent that it pertains not only to agents’ subjective motivations but also to the objective functions of their practices. Agency is thus about constructivist practice.

Practice here can also be viewed as a “way of talking about the shared historical and social [cultural as well] resources, frameworks, and perspectives that can sustain mutual engagement in action” (Wenger 1998, 5; Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002). When a group emerges that engages in practice, we have what Wenger and his colleagues call community of practice.³

Communities of practice can be facilitated around creative individuals in a community drawing on their self-efficacies to understand the structures in their social environments then engage in transforming these structures (making them more enabling) to their advantage as they engage in practice. Communities of practice become loci for transformation in households. There was evidence of this already going on around the individuals studied. Others are following their behavior. Hence, the innovative individuals and others mobilized around them can be organized into communities of practice. These communities of practice are constructivist in that they arise out of individuals’ creativity, refining their knowledge, then acting. Community Development Facilitators would do well to encourage creative individuals to deploy their self-efficacies to negotiate (or even navigate around) cultural and social structures. Facilitators ought to then mobilize individuals around these innovative ones thus bringing forth communities of practice. I would like to term this constructivist community development. It starts with development facilitators identifying creative individuals.

They could be the very needy or not, they could be Christians, they could be the inquisitive people in a community, or just those very much wanting to make a difference in their lives. Development facilitators ought to then mobilize others around them, then facilitate significant dialogue with and among these members of a community of practice.

Dialogue plays a critical role in community development and the spreading of the Good News. Westoby and Dowling (2013, 21, 22) define dialogue as “a deep, challenging, responsive, enriching, disruptive encounter and conversation-in-context; and also a mutual and critical process of building shared understanding, meaning and creative action.” All four individuals engaged in dialogue with age mates, clan leaders, and various other people they interacted with. Through dialogue, the status quo was questioned, expectations were challenged, meanings were reformed and reified, and structural demands were negotiated. Dialogue itself is transformative (Gergen 2015); it ignites the cognitive process of meaning-making, learning, and acting. It propels individuals to work through cultural structures that inform people’s beliefs, values, and conventions using this as a springboard for legitimating action as Hima did. It challenges individuals to wrestle with social structures that they are a part of with the objective of making these structures more enabling of desired change. Dialogue, as Gergen (2015) tells us, is historically informed because meaning-making, learning, and acting are subject to continuous refashioning influenced by rules and resources over the course of time. It is thus not surprising, to take one case study, that while Hima’s father might have had a difficult time changing cultural and social expectations, Hima had an easier time since socio-cultural demands in 2000s are not as rigid as was the case during his father’s migrant years, the 1950s to early 1980s. Through dialogue, Good News, in the holistic sense, can be shared in these communities of practice.

Conclusion

I have argued for a constructivist community development approach that involves creative meaning-making, learning, and acting. For members of households, this entails deploying their self-efficacies and negotiating (dealing with, maneuvering, working through) structures which influence people’s creativity.

³ Bourdieu’s conception of practice covers cultural practice, i.e., one acting following cultural beliefs, values, traditions, or conventions while possibly effecting some change in the culture (Miller and Goodnow 1995). It also applies to social practice, that is, activity located in a group or an institution, which involves agents working towards a goal while taking into account cultural and social situations (Chaiklin, Hedegaard, and Jensen 1999; Smolka 2001). Communities of practice (groups working to achieve whatever goals they have) would thus be engaging in what we could term constructivist transformative cultural and social practices.

Dialogue is at the center of this community development venture. Dialogue enables creative community members to make sense of the world and reflexively act on it in order to transform or change it, an argument that Ledwith (2005; 2016) makes. This demands that community members engage in communities of practice through which the members further engage in constructivist and transformative human agency involving learning from the venturesome individuals and acting following what they have learned (Wenger 1998; Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002). Through dialogue in these communities of practice, the Good News can be shared. Structures play the role of enabling or constraining community development activities as well as evangelism or the spreading of the Good News.

Structures (cognitive, cultural, and social) are arguably more deterministic of people's behavior in allocentric, subsistent, and substantive communities because of socio-cultural demands for individuals to conform to group norms in their behavior. Emergent community development and the sharing of the Good News in such communities would be confronting allocentric socio-cultural expectations. A critical concern is how to facilitate individuals' meaning-making, learning, and acting, and how to enhance self-efficacies and achieve well-being without fracturing the benefits of allocentric norms which make life in subsistent and substantive communities culturally and socially rich. Stated differently, there is need to avoid cutthroat individualism. This is a particular challenge for the constructivist approach to community development and the spreading of the Good News. More specifically, how can communities of practice enable the rise of beneficial, aka dispositional (from Bourdieu's perspective), allocentric norms, beneficial not to just one but many households' well-being? This is a matter requiring further research and analysis.

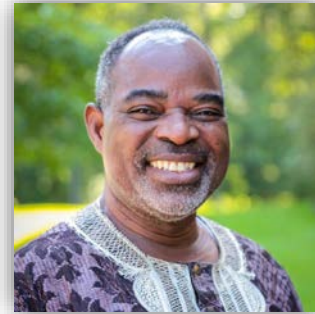
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