CAN AN ECONOMICALLY STRUGGLING UNIVERSITY BOLSTER COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AS A LEARNING CITY? EXPLORING ONE UNIVERSITY INITIATIVE IN MALAWI

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ABSTRACT

There is growing need to link universities and their cities in Africa. Yet current research paints a picture that the development relationships between universities and learning cities do not appear to have functioned sustainably in the African contexts. This article draws from UNESCO guidelines for a learning city to analyze one university efforts of linking community engagement that bolsters a learning city initiative. The case is based on empirical data with a total of 16 actors in community engagement that included deans, heads of departments, faculty in general and university administrators. The evidence, suggested that rather than a formalized and centralized approach, the current university case on the contrary employs an open-ended and ad-doc system that still bring to the fore the agenda for a learning city. The article concludes with a call for alternative ways to structure partnerships that do not always structure bureaucratic approaches in poorly resourced universities.

Keywords: learning city, community engagement, Malawi, adhocracy, equifinality

INTRODUCTION

The pursuit of sustainable development calls for universities to maintain strong links with cities, regions and communities. The mandate of post-independence universities in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) was clearly developmental – institutions sought to stay close to the needs of the people. With knowledge becoming the resource and learning the process in development discourse in the knowledge economy (Florida 1995), negotiating the knowledge production process at university and the role of external stakeholders within that process became of great importance (Wittmayer and Schäpke 2014). Concepts such as learning cities (LCs), co-production of knowledge and learning regions support the notion that universities are no longer the "taken for granted" home of Mode 1 knowledge in the new science-society interface (Bathelt, Malmberg and Maskell 2004; Hegger, Lamers, Van Zeijl-Rozema and Dieperink 2012). Mode 2 as well as the emerging "Mode 3" focus on how knowledge is re-oriented in a

way that makes it relevant for the social, economic and urban development needs of society. Universities are, therefore, expected to become strategic partners in city and urban development and not remain conclaves of teaching and research and this can be achieved by adopting a holistic view of their core activities and not operating in vacuums (Boyer 1996; O'Mara 2010).

The literature on universities and LCs has mostly been presented from a European and North American perspective. Preece (2017), for example, has linked the concept of LCs and community engagement (CE) in African Universities. Nonetheless, her conceptualization of the link between LCs and university CE, are similar to Goddard and Vallance, (2011a; 2011b) as they tend to support two approaches that do not align very well with initiatives of poorly resourced universities in Africa. The first approach is that university CE is mostly limited to specific institutional strategic plans and this makes contribution to LCs a challenge. Secondly, her view on the link between university CE and LCs tends to support a centralized approach rather than ad-hoc one. It is for this reason that Preece (2017, 99) states that: "although there is a strong academic rationale to justify university CE, the concept has remained largely disconnected from the discourses of other sectors". Hence, how have economically struggling universities located in cities in transition conducted CE? Can an economically constrained university bolster an agenda for LC? These questions are premised on two main assumptions. Firstly, it is assumed that a university attains its relevance by dealing with the various problems facing the city in which it is located and beyond via CE. Secondly, it is assumed that for a city to thrive, university education has to connect with various sectors to facilitate learning. Thus, this article draws from UNESCO guidelines on LCs in order to analyze a selected Malawian university's efforts towards CE that bolsters a LC (UNESCO UIL 2015b). The following section outlines a brief literature review on the contributions of universities to LCs. This is followed by research methods and a description of the study setting. The article also presents the study findings, a discussion of the findings before offering concluding thoughts.

FUNCTIONS OF UNIVERSITIES IN BOLSTERING A LC

The contribution of universities to city or regional development has received interest from a wide variety of scholars and stakeholders. The contribution has been summarized into two broad functions:

1. **Knowledge production and innovation for economic urban/rural development**, where urban developers and city governments focus on the contribution of universities through real estate or infrastructural development (Clark 1998; Perry, Wiewel and

Menendez 2009; O'Mara 2010; Melhuish and Bletter 2015). Perry et al. (2009) suggest that universities in different metropolitan areas have worked mutually with government, business and communities to define and shape individual and collective interest regarding city planning and development. Perry et al. (2009) argue that the high real estate capital that universities possess should enable the institutions to shape city development through the construction of new buildings which serve both academic and commercial purposes as opposed to the town-gown divide approach. Universities also play a leveraging role through knowledge production. As research institutions, universities drive knowledge production and academic excellence within the knowledge economy. In addition, as stated by Birch, Perry and Taylor (2013) universities are, as part of the global knowledge network, expected to generate, translate and diffuse research-led innovation which makes them globally competitive as well as locally engaged. Innovation scholars have considered the way knowledge, innovation and commercialization support local industry and development (Tödtling and Trippl 2005). This contribution also places significant focus on the evolution of science parks, spin-off firms and incubators within a spatial context. Furthermore, universities support the adoption and exploitation of knowledge through engagement with local business, enterprise and policy makers which is achieved through continuous formal and informal exchange of tacit and codified knowledge (Brubacher and Rudy 1968). The success of knowledge-led developments, such as in the Silicon Valley, is evidence of universities' knowledge role in development. Universities also venture beyond the knowledge role by developing backward linkages. These econometric contributions to city or regional economies include, inter alia, job creation, university expenditures, as well as student, staff and visitor expenditures along with its trickle-down effects in the city or region's economy. Hence, the various studies focusing on the economic impact of universities have significantly increased the understanding regarding universities' contribution to city and regional economies (Axtell 1998; Altbach 2004; Ehrenberg 2004; Guerrero, Cunningham and Urbano 2015; Psacharopoulos and Patrinos 2004).

2. **Skills, sociocultural and political development**, where universities also play key roles in the development of critical and relevant skills and human capital for the economy. The growing global rhetoric and local contradictions witnessed in the SSA context (Lebeau 2008) has resulted in higher education (HE) aligning their training to the unique needs of the labor market. As a result, universities have the responsibility to support both the

development of high skilled graduates (especially in the science, engineering and technology sectors) and the capacity of education at basic and secondary school as well as community colleges levels. This, demands strong CE, linkages and partnerships between universities, employers and other education stakeholders at local and regional levels. As a result, universities have had to respond to various tuition provisions and training demands, with the provision of short courses, lifelong learning, distance and online education as some of the ways through which universities are responding to the changing skills needs within the city and beyond (Oladejo and Gesinde 2014).

The potential contribution of universities in their region goes beyond the economic dimension. Universities are expected to play a key role in promoting equality of opportunity, foster values of diversity, enhance lifelong learning and serve the public in a wider variety of ways (UNESCO UIL 2014a). Human development scholars (Boni and Walker 2016; Walker 2012; Nussbaum 2006) have focused on the role of universities in promoting human development values and social justice and in fostering democratic citizenship. As a result, there is strong view that "research and political engagement can be mutually enriching" (Hale 2008, 2). Furthermore, the enhancement of society understanding and perception of the benefits of universities and science has become critical in achieving social justice. Cloete, Bailey and Pillay (2011, xvii) define these functions as the presence of a "pact", a "broad agreement between government, universities and core socio-economic actors about the nature of the role of universities in development". Nevertheless, the conundrum facing poorly resourced universities in SSA is that the "pact" has to greater extent been interpreted to mean the use of formal centralized systems that drive university engagements within the city or region.

CONCEPTUALIZATION OF THE LINKAGE BETWEEN CE AND THE LC

Fitzgerald and Zientek (2015) make a direct link between CE and LC. They use the systems change theory to explore the role of service learning and CE in their search for evidence that informs and contributes to practice. They explore the relationship between the four helixes of learning cities systems in a CE framework – higher education, civil society, business and government – and that of the seven characteristics of CE scholarship. The characteristics include notions of innovation, risk taking, knowledge and evidence. They also discuss the ways in which community-university partnerships can increase the asset base for addressing complex problems through community-based participatory research. They specifically refer to the contribution of community knowledge to the sustainability of community solutions within an

interdependent LC context. In this way, the authors position universities as key players in LC partnerships where the institutions contribute to building a culture of teaching and learning and provide research expertise that engage the network of partners in a mutual learning process.

Lee (2003, 1) notes that "learning communities place lifelong learning at the heart of community development, growing outwards to encompass the entire community". Lee (2003) also offers some national definitions of a LC or learning community. She points out that there are four principles that appear to underlie most definitions and these are: the aim for an integrated working together of different sectors; emphasis on communities finding their own solutions, establishment of partnerships; and the constant renewal the process.

Similarly, UNESCO has developed a unified definition of the LC. The description is supported by substantive practical guidelines on how to build LCs. The UNESCO UIL (2014b, 23) states that:

> "A LC mobilizes human and other resources to promote inclusive learning from basic to higher education; it revitalizes learning in families and communities; it facilitates learning for and in the workplace; it extends the use of modern learning technologies; it enhances quality in learning; and it nurtures a culture of learning throughout life."

Thus a LC or region, consists of a network of agencies that include the government and the public and private sector, whose aim is to foster a culture of learning within a specified geographical boundary. Preece (2017), Fitzgerald and Zientek (2015), UNESCO UIL (2014b) and Lee (2003) suggest that government policy and representation on an overarching planning committee are central organs for promoting the LC idea. This, perhaps, is the feature that most distinguishes the concept of a LC from the concept of university CE. As a result, while the CE discourses articulate a "triad" relationship between university, community and civil society, the learning cities notion considers a four-helix model of government, business, civil society and education providers. What is central for both in the resource rich settings is the existence of a bureaucracy that spearheads all these actions. Below is a description of learning cities conceptualization by UNESCO's organizing principles. It has three parts that have interrelated concepts and principles.

The first component has three areas of focus that reflect the wider benefits of building a modern LC, broadly defined as:

(1)   Individual empowerment and social cohesion;
(2)   Economic development and cultural prosperity; and
(3)   Sustainable development.

The second component has six areas of focus reflecting the major building blocks of a LC:

(1)   Inclusive learning in the education system;

(2)   Revitalized learning in families and communities;

(3)   Effective learning for and in the workplace;

(4)   Extended use of modern learning technologies;

(5)   Enhanced quality in learning; and

(6)   A vibrant culture of learning throughout life.

The third component has three foundational steps – areas of focus reflecting the fundamental conditions for building a LC:

(1)   Strong political will and commitment;

(2)   Governance and participation of all stakeholders; and

(3)   Mobilization and utilization of resources (UNESCO UIL 2014b, 28).

This framework has been translated into guidelines (UNESCO UIL 2015a) that emphasize six generic areas of action that are expected to be adapted to national and cultural contexts. These are summarized as follows:

•   Develop a plan for becoming a LC

•   Create a coordinated structure involving all stakeholders

•   Initiate and maintain the process with celebratory events

•   Make sure that learning is accessible to all citizens

•   Establish a monitoring and evaluation process

•   Ensure sustainable funding.

Therefore, the learning cities discourse expands the notion of university CE because it is premised on an ever expanding network of partnerships and aspirations to make learning visible and relevant (Cochrane and Williams 2010). Preece (2017, 117) states that "the extent to which (*universities and LCs*) contribute to developing a new learning culture, contribute to economic development, or build social cohesion and social capital depends on how they are sustained and how they are evaluated". The reality however, is that there are few examples of research on poorly resourced universities that examines how universities engender the processes of learning

cities. Hence the question: can the UNESCO guide lines assist in the assessment of whether poor universities in SSA can indeed steer CE for a LC? Below is a description of the research methods.

A THREE PRONGED RESEARCH APPROACH

This research project explored the lived experiences of faculty members in their performance of CE in Mzuzu City in the northern region of Malawi.[1] It aimed at investigating how faculty members at Mzuzu University understood CE as a LC. Titchen and Hobson (2011, 121–122) refer to this approach as direct phenomenology – "the study of lived human phenomena within the every-day social contexts in which the phenomena occur, form the perspective of those who experience them". The phenomena were CE that tends to move towards a LC. The experiencers of the phenomena were faculty at one public institution called Mzuzu University. The institution was selected because it is fairly new, having been found by the government in 1999, and has strategic influence as the only university in Mzuzu City. The reality that CE has multiple stakeholders meant that it was possible to include the views of other stakeholders such as the community members and students. However, the study was mainly aimed at understanding faculty's perspectives as drivers of the process of CE.

To answer the set question, I developed a three pronged research approach. The first prong was to review literature on university CE at local and international levels. This search enabled me to gather substantive information on LC and CE and the place of underprivileged universities. The search also led to the discovery of a framework on LC that was developed by UNESCO UIL (2015a). Preece's (2017) linking of CE and LCs enabled my project to be anchored in this set of literature. The second involved conducting observations of and informal participation in the community outreach activities of the department's projects in the community to observe how the university engaged with the communities in the city. The third and final prong of the research methods focused on conducting in-depth interviews with faculty and staff at the institution to gain subjective insider perspectives (Van Manen 1990) regarding the handling of CE projects, aims of such projects and the impact that these endeavors were expected to have on the development of communities. The details of the 16 participants involved in the in-depth interviews are provided below. Although the other two prongs of the study methods were instrumental in conceptualizing and framing this article, I draw more evidence from the interviews to answer the questions: (i) Can a poorly resourced university bolster a LC via CE? and (ii) What are faculty understandings of this process?

LIST OF INTERVIEWED PARTICIPANTS

University Admiration

1. University Registrar
2. Library Management: Senior lecturer and Children's Librarian

Deans of faculties and student affairs

1. Education
2. Environmental sciences
3. Information Science and communications
4. Health Science, Nursing and Midwifery
5. Tourism and Hospitality Management
6. Students Affairs

Heads of Departments

1. Department Education and Teaching Sciences
2. Physics Department
3. Forestry Department
4. Geography Department
5. Department Water Resources Management

Senior Lecturers and Lecturers

1. Senior Lecturer in Education
2. Senior Lecturer in Physics
3. Lecturer in Nursing and Midwifery

Titchen and Hobson (2011) posit that phenomena such as CE can be researched by exploring human knowing through accessing how people make meaning of the actions and the social reality. As a result, my questions asked faculty members to reflect on and talk about their subjective experiences of the phenomena (CE) during the interviews, and provide practices and actions about the CE as guided by Van Manen (1990) in an attempt to unpack faculty actions and understandings. The analysis of data was therefore aimed at making sense of the perspective of the faculty on CE and how these fit into the framework created by UNESCO in order to gain shared intersubjective meanings among participants in comparison to a developed framework established by independent actors. Titchen and Hobson (2011, 125) state that what one aims to

understand in phenomenology is rational understanding of the participant – vierstehen "finding out what a participant means in his/her action, in contrast to the meaning this action may have for someone else (including a neutral observer)". In the final analysis, I took a systematic look at the observations of CE activities and perspectives from faculty interviews by juxtaposing them with the UNESCO (2014b) framework for LC. This was important to generate the general types of subjective constructs and purpose of CE as mentioned and practiced by faculty members, and how these aligned or did not align with the proposed framework.

In the section that follows I discuss findings and provide evidence based on faculty perspectives on the phenomenon of CE.

FINDINGS

Understanding the faculty's perspectives of CE as a LC: An adhocracy approach?

An analysis of the faculty's understanding of CE as a LC is presented in three parts. These are: how faculty understood CE as, (1) mobilization of resources, (2) a drive for learning communities, and (3) as the development of work place skills and extension of learning technologies. Titchen and Hobson (2011, 127) suggest that interpretation of evidence in a direct phenomenological study aims to re-present the participants' own understandings and subjective meaning in context in order to create a "typification" or "abstract ideal-type". "Typification" describes and interprets the way participants made sense of a situation or a construct (CE). The analysis was, however, complicated because UNESCO's (2014b) description of LC is not clear about who takes the central role. Does this always have to be a political entity? Can it be a university, business, or civil society? Or this does not matter. In addition, Preece's (2017) discussion on CE as LC is equally not clear except that she suggests that universities in Africa tend to take a driving role within the LC initiatives. This perspective was very central in guiding my interpretation of the way faculty members at Mzuzu University described their understanding of CE.

Faculty perspective 1: typification of an ad-hoc CE as mobilization of resources

Mzuzu University was established by a consultative forum that included the government and non-governmental organizations. The forum also sought ways in which the university could work with key stakeholders in the city as part of a collective approach to the city's development needs. The university's faculty, however, pointed out that there is no one central line of operation in Malawi. The faculty's perspectives exhibited CE as an adhocracy – a flexible,

adaptable and informal form of organizational approach that is defined by a lack of formal structures (Bennis 1969). Nonetheless, the need to mobilize resources compelled the faculty to draw from CE as a platform for bringing together resources that would set up CE as a LC as noted in the two extracts below:

> "Broadly speaking, the government puts conditions for operations, but the specifics of what to do, how to do it remain within the universities, and within the universities, it remains with each faculty. The mobilization of resources in terms of time, space, money and human resources requires a clear articulation of what the university and the city need to do." (Head of Department Education).

> "We have not done much to explicitly institute a central office or state what CE should entail, however, from community outreach, service learning and others like that, individual faculty and faculty members have interpreted CE to what is convenient and applicable to their work within the city and the region." (Senior Lecturer Physics Department).

The faculty articulated that there is a lack of national framework for CE and on how universities could contribute to city and regional development. Despite this, all deans of faculties and heads of departments understood CE as a process for mobilizing resources. This mobilization of resources was both inward for the university and outward for the communities as the dean of environmental sciences expressed:

> "What we do is that we write a proposal to donors to ask for support. So what we do is that we do studies and we develop prototypes and as we are doing these studies we directly go to the communities." (Dean of Environmental Sciences).

Apart from the lack of a framework, the faculty members understood CE within the city and beyond as a challenging task owing to the reality that the institution struggles financially, has to contend with mobilizing resources from external donors and their attendant conditions on how to use the funding, and the reality that the responsibility of solving some city problems lies elsewhere. In response similar to the deans' and heads of departments', a Lecturer in Nursing and Midwifery articulated that:

> "Mobilization of resources for CE is a challenge because donors have specific interests. They fund things that align with their interests. This makes CE a challenging task especially for poor universities that depend on external sources of funds because sometimes we are expected to solve problems that are beyond our capacity."

The above response indicates that some faculty members expressed these views as a way to avoid what Bridges (2008, 461) calls "educationalization" – a situation where educators and educational institutions are pressured to take it upon themselves to solve all socioeconomic and

political problems by governments, donors and other sectors when in actual fact the responsibility for solving such problems lies elsewhere.

Yang (2012) suggests that it is hard to obtain the necessary multi-sectoral consensus for coordinated development in a situation marked by insufficient groundwork and failure to ensuring "conceptual clarity" of what a LC means for a particular context. The faculty at Mzuzu University, however, tended to portray a different understanding of CE as LC. The head of physics department expressed this cogently:

> "CE can also refer to the mobilization of various kinds of resources for example, knowledge…In Malawi, the bulk of financial support for public universities comes from government; this tends to affect us financially. For example, if the sitting leadership is favorable to us, then we are secure, but if they are not, then we have problems. And this means that in our CE, we have to partly be playing a political game." (Head of Department Physics).

The above response means that although there is no conceptual clarity on how universities can work with the city, the faculty adapted their mobilization of resources in accordance with the political conditions existing at a given time.

In addition, the faculty members understood CE as seeking to meet the demands of the city no matter how vulnerable and uncoordinated these actions would be. This view was shared across deans, and it was presented in ways that suggested that Mzuzu University drove development in the city because it was a demand driven university. The Dean of Students Affairs noted that:

> "Our university is demand driven. We have introduced programs based on the needs of the city, and we implement academic programs, courses and community projects based on this demand. With this knowledge and information, we then mobilize resources to carry out such endeavors. The caveat with that is that when our operations are that open ended, we might lose focus and fail to accomplish our mandate because some of the things that the community might need might not be feasible with our minimal resources."

What one senses, from a direct phenomenological point of view as suggested by Titchen and Hobson (2011), is that the faculty clearly notes that CE means driving a city towards learning, yet for this to happen, especially for a financially constrained institution, the academe has to be ready to engage and mobilize resources even though the framework for doing so is not clear or does not exist. The fuzziness and openness of CE was thus presented as a potential for local and international collaborations driven by the university CE and a city towards learning as postulated by the University Registrar:

> "We also have collaborations with other local and international universities and institutions to

draw from their expertise and resources. Thus, we learn from them, they also learn from us. We exist in a state of learning and sharing information. Knowledge and information, you will realize, is the biggest resource for universities, and CE makes this possible."

The faculty also highlighted a number of challenges with regard to funding and CE operational systems. The faculty noted, in its responses on the opportunities for mobilizing resources for and through CE, acknowledged that there was a lack of a system of operation. However, their ontological interpretations of CE tended to present this operation of CE as a given and not an inimitable obstacle that blocks their actions as the quote below shows:

"We have problems with finances at the university, and this is mainly because we don't really have a central office that can help departments and faculty to dive into research, outreach and service to the community. We have only had ad-hoc and individualized approaches." (Dean of Nursing and Midwifery.

Finally, Samoff, and Bidemi (2004) highlight the problem of continued dependence on external funding that is faced by most financially struggling universities in Africa. This observation is reflected in the faculty's description of their CE as a process for mobilizing resources was always presented from a careful position as noted in the way they highlighted both the potential and limitation that the university has in meeting the needs of the city. For a financially dependent institution, driving a LC and meeting its needs without one particular framework or approach for promoting learning and development, comes as a necessary means of maintaining relevance and promoting learning in the city as confirmed in the perspectives shown in the following section. What is not clear is whether this CE perpetuates dependency or rather contributes to mitigating it.

Faculty perspectives 2: CE as a LC: typifications of families and community learning

At the core of CE as LC is a mutually beneficial learning collaboration between government, private sector, civil society and universities (Etzkowitz 2008; Furco 2010). Another common theme that typified how faculty understanding of CE, apart from the mobilization of resources was the use of ad-hoc projects aimed at learning with and for communities. The theme was expressed as follows:

"We teach ecotourism, we work with the rural areas to engage in pro-poor tourism so that the money that comes through tourism can also enter the pockets of the poor people. We encourage communities to create ways to attract visitors so that they don't just end up spending money in hotels only." (Dean of Tourism and Hospitality Management).

This collaborative learning was discussed as important for the empowerment of communities and the institutions and the faculty who undertook these projects. The faculty pointed out further that there is huge space for the university to promote learning in the communities as suggested in the following perspective from the Head of Department Education and Teaching Sciences:

> "The Center for Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning instituted courses for chiefs and community leaders around the city from inception in 1999. The university has potential to do more, for example, through working with the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Health to deal with issues of HIV and AIDS in the city."

The identification of specific typification of CE as LC is important is critical. Of further significance in the faculty's understanding of their work, is the interaction between the limitations of the approach used by the faculty and the opportunities that drive CE. That is, what can be interpreted as a weakness and constraining factor on the part of the university and faculty – such as not having a common link with the city and the community – can become an enabling and agency creating factor for the faculty, departments, individual faculty members who decide to deal with the problems and in develop learning connections in the city. The Dean of Tourism and Hospitality Management confirms this in the statement that:

> "The university needs to do a multidisciplinary research on Mzuzu city, for example; the origins of Mzuzu, what are the potentials in terms of tourism that Mzuzu can offer, what are the problems in health and sanitation in the city, these ideas can be given to the city council. The city council can use these ideas for planning and informed decision making and seeking for financial assistance elsewhere. These we have already tried to put in place in our department."

An analysis of the interactions between the city, university and the people shows the way in which the existence of poverty and the limited resources in the city influence the need for a LC. The city's socio-economic and infrastructural challenges also impact the university. The university faculty, just as the communities they work with, experience continuous intermittent water and power supply and regular increases in the prices of commodities. The problem of technology and infrastructure in Malawian universities is well known (Mambo, Meky, Tanaka and Salmi 2016). The faculty understood CE and described projects aimed at alleviating these problems, though in ad-hoc ways, which contributed to their own learning and wellbeing as well as that of the community. The response cited below expresses how the interaction between the financial and political volatility, where university faculty operated, created a positive impetus for the university to establish learning with and for communities:

> "The government has tried to introduce and support people to use energy saver bulbs in various locations in the city. For us as the physics department, we feel there is a need to support this city wide initiative by engaging in studies and production of knowledge that people can use. We have created a way to understand the different costs for ordinary light builds and energy saver builds for electricity users to see the difference. This way we are contributing to better energy use in the city." (Head of Physics Department).

In addition, the University administrators and faculty placed caveats on these opportunities noting that such work is a constant iterative process that has learners as the central figures and changes as a result of various factors. This observation is noted in the Dean of Students Affairs' response that:

> "While our students can do a lot of positive things in the communities, sometimes they are also in the forefront bringing about negative things. This affects the image of the university out there. When the students are good, our image is positive, when the students bring bad learning out there, then our image is negative."

Finally, faculty members' objective of maintaining a positive learning image with the city led to the discussion on numerous projects, directly involving students, which their departments and individual members conducted in CE. An example of a university CE project seeking to promote a LC that is environmentally secure and empowers the people is outlined below.

An example of a typical CE in LC project[2]

The project focuses on two areas Choma, an area located 16 km to the east of Mzuzu University and Chigwere, further east of Choma, both among the major sources of charcoal for Mzuzu city. The charcoal business has left the areas deforested and the reliance on firewood is contributing to the carbon dioxide emission into the atmosphere. The Choma-Chigwere area is rich with dairy farmers with the farms producing a lot of waste in the form of cow dung (on average a well fed cow can produce between 8–10 kg of dung per day). Cow dung is good raw material for biogas production which can be used for heating, cooking and lighting; hence, it is an important impetus for CE and learning in the city. As a result, the Department of Energy Studies initiated a collaborative project with the David Livingstone Fund through the Malawi British High Commission and the community members of the area. The purpose of the project was to contribute to the reduction of carbon dioxide and methane emissions into the atmosphere through the promotion of biogas use. A total of 11 biogas plants have been constructed and are operational and this has resulted in the project saving 31 tons of firewood and reducing carbon dioxide emissions. The operational biogas plants resulted in both the relieving of women from

time spent fetching firewood and in assisting to save 26 tons of fuel woods per annum. This project brings together various stakeholders and actors, international donors, university faculty and students, the city government and many more to steer the protection of the environment and improve peoples' lives within the city.

The following section examines the way in which the faculty included the improvement of work place skills and extending learning technologies as part of the function of CE in LC.

Faculty perspectives 3: Typification of CE for work place skills and extension of learning technologies

Human development scholars (Walker 2012; Nussbaum 2006) encourage universities to promote human development values, social justice and foster democratic citizenship. A consensus is reached among universities to contribute to the development of critical and relevant skills and for human capital for the local economy. Similarly, Preece (2017) and UNESCO (2014a) highlight LC as having skills development and extended learning technologies. What is missing in these discussions is how poorly resourced institutions can promote human development even within the context of an inherent limited capacities. The external and self-imposed criticisms leveled against financially struggling universities in Africa has meant that the faculty's understanding of CE tended to typify promotion of work place skills and an extension of learning technologies. The two excerpts below confirm the ways in which the faculty understood CE as a LC that bolsters work skills:

> "We work hand in hand with the Northern Region Water Board, a water supplying entity in the city. We have a mutual relationship where we invite them to come and teach our students in areas where we feel they have a lot of expertise. We also work together to deal with solutions and technologies for water supply in the city." (Senior Lecturer Physics).

> "Our programs in the environmental sciences are directly aimed at having impact on the people regionally and nationally. In our work, we do three things: first, community awareness, second, we do demonstrations in terms of new technology that can change peoples' lives, and thirdly, we do development projects. We showcase these in our communities; at times we also have people [who] come [to] seek our services around the city." (Dean Environmental Science).

The above two quotations reveal a similar sense of how individual faculties, departments and faculty members understood CE as way to promote work skills for faculty, students and communities through collaboration with the industry sector. We also sense the decentralized and uncoordinated approach to CE. There were more examples that show how the faculty perceived CE as a necessary link to the promotion of community wide learning. For instance, one faculty member from the Library and Communication Science Department described an

invisible but very functional chain that links universities, communities, industries, civil society and families. The faculty member suggested that information technology is a skeleton that joins all sectors together. In addition, the second most significant understanding expressed by the majority of faculty participants was the importance of CE in promoting life-long learning through open and distance learning (ODL). A Senior Lecturer and Children's Librarian stated that:

"We know that in our case we still have a long way to go to develop reliable sources of energy and internet for communication and information sharing. But as a financially limited university, we see the importance of bringing knowledge to the door steps of the people. This is why we have expansion of the ODL mode through establishment of World Bank-financed satellite centers in Karonga, Lilongwe, Balaka and Mulanje all linked to the main hub at MZUNI."

Access to the universities is still limited and expensive for the majority of people. Thus, it was not surprising that the faculty understood CE as way to extend various learning technologies and advance accessible as well as affordable learning in the city. In addition, deans and heads of departments were more likely to mention how infrastructural development at the university would promote learning technologies in the city in affordable ways as opposed to training people outside the country:

"We are the only public university in Malawi and here in the city with degree level training on tourism and hospitality management (THM). With the World Bank-financed THM Skills Development Centre, we will attain full international accreditation of the Faculty's programs. What this means is that we will bring modern approaches and contribute to internationalizing tourism standards in the city and the nation." (Dean Tourism and Hospitality Management).

Indeed faculty understood CE as a partial panacea to the city's learning needs and that the use of technology could extend the university to the confines of the city and beyond. What faculty reported in their perspectives can be supported and collaborated with information on the university website and internal documents that highlight various CE efforts. The table below highlights and summarizes some of the project areas that enhance engagement for a LC.[3] These projects are reflected in the theory of change figure 1.

Table 1: Summary of CE projects

CE in the LC	Faculty/department /individual	Analysis of aims for LC
Launch of MZUNI's 2016–2020 Strategic Plan Development of a Gender Policy funded by the UNDP.	Whole university	Strategic plan developed in line with the needs of the city and region to develop target key areas of needs for the institution and the communities.
Transformative Community Development, Water and Sanitation, Biogas Research Project, Fisheries	Faculty, department and individual level initiatives.	Extending learning technologies. Mobilization of resources, promoting learning in families and communities,

| CE in the LC	Faculty/department /individual	Analysis of aims for LC
and Aquaculture Projects, and Sustainable Forest Management Projects.		and improving work related skills. Infrastructure development.
MZUNI Children's Library where street children learn to read and write and learners from neighboring primary schools access educational resources.	Library	Promoting learning in communities.
Production of a film called Alufeyo, which highlighted the impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic on university going students, launched and screened on MBCTV.[4]	Department and individual level.	Promoting learning in communities.
Mzuzu University Theatre Action Group staged first Chichewa production of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* at the Lake of Stars Festival.	Department level	Promoting learning, entertainment, pleasure and leisure learning.
THM students participated in the organization and production of the 2016 Lake of Stars Festival as part of MZUNI's skills development-oriented partnership with the Festival.	Faculty level	Collaborations on the process of celebratory events. Work skills development.
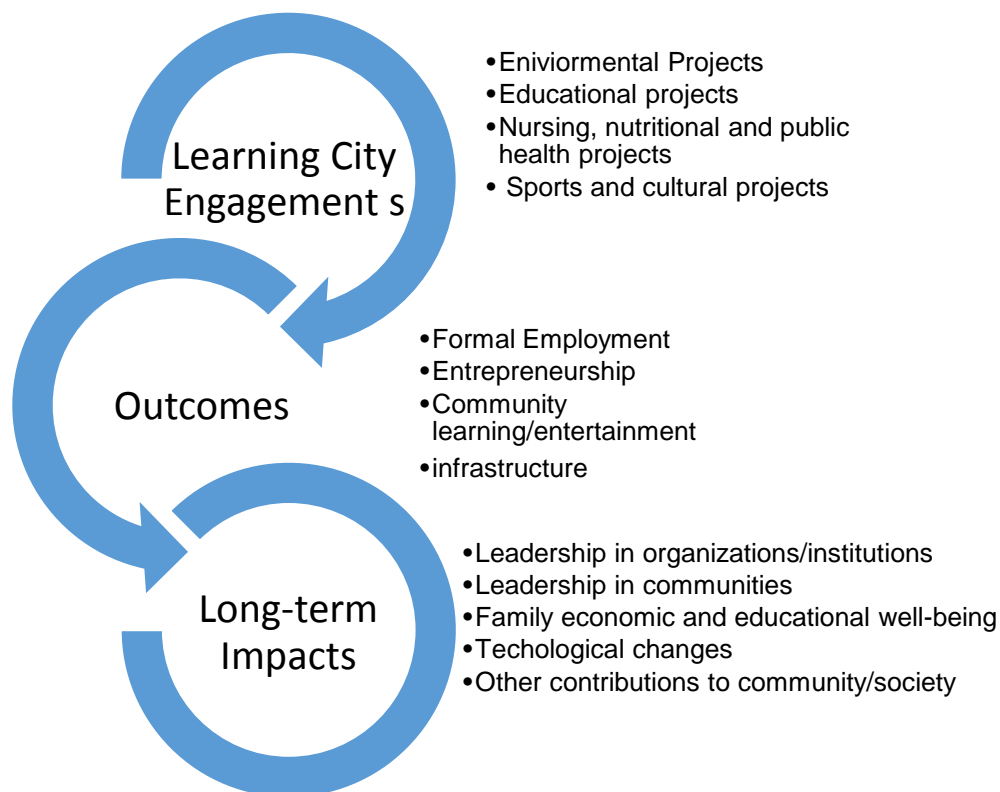
Figure 1: CE and LC theory of change

DISCUSSION: ADHOCRACY CE IN A LC

The faculty perspectives were also analyzed in line with the UNESCO model and principles of a LC. A number of questions were considered here and these are: with limited resources and coordination, can a university bolster a LC initiative? Are there characteristics that would

support the potentialities of a LC? What is present and what is missing? The following discussion therefore, focuses on the findings in relation to the six UNESCO principles for instituting a LC as way to highlight potentialities and limitations.

1. **Develop a plan for becoming a LC**

   The UNESCO UIL (2015a) indicates that the first principle relates to developing a plan. As indicated in Table 1, Mzuzu University considers their strength in CE through the developed strategic plan. What the strategic plan does is to establish goals and a vision of the university. While the strategic plan does not institute a bureaucratic structure for making Mzuzu University the driver of a LC, it does, however, explicitly state the need to strengthen its CE initiative as a way of increasing its impact and service provision to the city and beyond. In this regard, Mzuzu University is strategically placed to move forward with the LC initiative by building on the already existing strategic plan as opposed to waiting to develop a comprehensive and interlinked CE and LC plan. As the faculty pointed out, CE would rather take place in an ad-hoc manner.

2. **Create a coordinated structure involving all stakeholders**

   The second UNESCO UIL (2015a) guideline in the development and bolstering of a LC is the creation of a coordinated structure for all concerned stakeholders. This is a significant but challenging operation. The evidence from the faculty interviews and some of the already existing projects shows that Mzuzu University does not have a defined bureaucratized structure of stakeholders that develop and implement various projects in the city and beyond. As a public university instituted under the Act of Parliament, the institution has a huge potential to utilize its links with both local and national governments to facilitate the already existing operations and bolster the LC agenda. A huge potential exists in this area as well, but it is not enough to engage with the challenge of the sustainable LC.

3. **Initiate and maintain the process with celebratory events**

   Mzuzu University is located in a city that is fondly called the Green City because of its green vegetation. The university itself is popularly called the Green University. This symbolism can be a powerful tool that the university can draw from in maintaining a process of celebratory events. The faculty has earmarked particular days of the calendar and focusses on specific celebratory days, such as commencement days and opening days. The faculty also highlight that in their work they have "open and demonstration days"

where the university comes directly in collaboration with the communities. It is ultimately important for a university in LC is to consider everyday as a CE day where all events are conceptualized with the benefit from and for the learning of city.

4. Make sure that learning is accessible to all citizens

The UNESCO UIL (2015a) also suggests that for a LC to thrive, it has to endeavor to make sure that learning is accessible to all citizens. Economically struggling institutions, such as Mzuzu University, as expressed by faculty members, face limitations towards this goal. The faculty members however understood CE at the institution as a process that attempts to reach these goals. As highlighted, faculty members were of the view that ODL can ensure learning for all. The development of a gender plan denoted efforts towards a parity that makes learning accessible for all. In all cases, the faculty systematically pointed out that whether there are formal structures or not for doing this, there is always need to do more to improve access to learning for all.

5. Establish a monitoring and evaluation process

In the most recent World Bank assessment of the HE sector in Malawi, Mambo, Meky, Tanaka and Salmi (2016) suggested that the performance of the Malawian HE system is mixed. The need for assessment of success is crucial to advancing CE in LC. The faculty tended to highlight internal assessment, which is supported by Bennis' (1969, 223) observation that "professional specialists like *faculty members* [emphasis is mine] can hardly be called organization people because they seemingly derive their rewards from inward standards of excellence, from their professional societies, from the intrinsic satisfaction of their standards, and not from their bosses". Indeed there was a conspicuous lack of a central area of assessment and evaluation of CE at Mzuzu University. Evaluation is important for addressing both faculty and student performances and driving the monitoring of the on-going development and learning. The key question is, how much of the job gets done by the formal structures, celebratory events and culture, and how much can be done by the informal power and authority of sub-cultures and individual personalities in a situation where people are the process and themselves the standard of success? Accordingly considered, an open and flexible approach can enable poorly resourced universities to: (a) identify results that the organization wishes it could get but is not getting (b) isolate which elements of the organization's structures, systems, and culture are derailing the desired results, and (c) characterize the root causes of patterns of ineffective performance in the CE culture such as tacit assumptions, beliefs and values.

6. **Ensure sustainable funding**

Finally, the UNESCO sees sustainable funding as another important factor in driving LC. The faculty understood CE in LC as a process for the mobilization of resources – human and otherwise. The faculty members were also aware that funding is replete with politics, power play and struggles. The problem of resources and leadership is highlighted across the literature on university vis-à-vis city engagements globally (Goddard and Vallance 2011a; Grobbelaar and De Wet 2016). What is evident nonetheless for such an institution is that the faculty realized that this is an issue that they have to constantly work with. The faculty members have to work hard to meet the interests of external funders and carefully dance to the political tunes of the day. A place of strength for this university is the ad-hoc and openness of the CE process which positions them as innovative, creative and crafty in the search for and maintenance of funding.

CONCLUSION: EQUIFINALITY IN CE FOR A LC?

This article considered whether the understanding and practice of CE, by the faculty at a poorly resourced university in SSA, tends to bolster a LC. The article started with the conceptualization of the function of a university in regional development and CE. The UNESCO standards for LC were assessed to determine whether local actors' understanding of their CE within limited resources and absent bureaucratic structures bolsters a LC. The nature of understanding of the meanings given to phenomena such as CE as LC affects the ways researchers and actors – both local and international – undertake their work and interpret what they find. Issues of frameworks or policies are expensive and very hard to define and sustain. They sometimes bring about unnecessary red-tape. Kenway (1990) recommended that it is productive to think of policies and frameworks in terms of process which involves agreements, disagreements, political, economic, and social arrangements that are replete with power differentials and yet not stable. An examination of the actors in poorly resourced universities' understandings bout CE as a LC parallel to internationally developed guidelines, lead to an easy dismissal of the faculty members' actions as nonexistent or worst still failures. Poorly resourced universities have huge potential to contribute to the development of a city by using ad-hoc approaches in CE as was demonstrated by the evidence at one university in Malawi. A coronary for education reviewers who compare systems in different contexts is to not always focus on a single criterion for actions that tend to operate under well-defined bureaucracy.

For poorly resourced universities, it is important to focus on what Katz and Kahn (1978) in their analysis of organizations called the principle of equifinality – the idea that organizations

can achieve the same or similar results by using a variety of different processes. For example, CE can achieve the same results by using different inputs or by using different processes with the same inputs. Equifinality suggests that there is no one right way to accomplish important results in an organization. In contrast, closed systems have one right way to do things. That is, a person working in a heavily bureaucratic organization must finish the necessary procedures regardless of how useful the intended result will be for the organization. The concept of equifinality might substantiate why ad-hoc systems as practiced by the faculty at Mzuzu University might still lead or bolster a LC via CE. As actors, we ought to keep this in mind when adopting various solution-based best practices, diagnostic models and assessment tools.

Thus, to close on the inquiry of the study – can economically struggling universities in SSA bolster a LC? The answer to this question as evident in other research for example, Hassink, (2005) is to certain extent yes! Drawing from the faculty understandings, the absence of a central system that drives CE does not mean that universities cannot steer a LC. Actors working in similar institutions in Africa can learn from the faculty in Malawi on how to mobilize resources, bring learning to communities and extend learning technologies despite the many existing obstacles. To paraphrase Bennis (1969), bureaucracy ought not to be mistaken for efficiency, for in the absence of centralized systems; adhocracy can operate and bring the same intended results in an organization.

NOTES

1. For facts on Malawi check CIA Fact Book: https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/mi.html

2. The university website offers this as one of the examples of their CE and LC efforts. See details on http://www.mzuni.ac.mw/chomachigwere.html

3. In addition to faculty description, details of these projects were highlighted on the university website: http://www.mzuni.ac.mw/downloads/congregation%20specialreport.pdf

4. Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation Television (MBCTV) is national media company combining radio and television.

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