

Global radical citizenship and informal  
learning in NGDOs relationships.  
Towards a more political view of  
development aid.



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# Abstract

We depart from criticism towards current depoliticized and managerial discourses and practices in the development sector, which had also been assumed by non-governmental development organizations (NGDOs). These managerial approaches would not be challenging structural problems of inequality and Human Rights violation, and would be strengthening unequal power relationships in aid, between northern and southern organizations.

However, we also find a number of alternative and more transformative experiences and forms of international cooperation: It is the case of some alliances between grassroots movements and organizations in the Global South that are confronting hegemonic development models, and certain progressive NGDOs and other social organizations in the Global North. Their approach to international cooperation is essentially and consciously political: These alliances prioritize advocacy and social mobilization, and are based in political engagement, solidarity, responsibility and common values and goals of social transformation.

We can approach these relations of cooperation from the perspective of development education, as informal processes of learning arise in them. Through participation, accountability, the building of trust, reflection and dialogue, multidimensional and complex learning processes emerge –at individual and collective level-, with political, ethical, cultural and civic dimensions.

In our study, we also discuss the idea that these learning processes have an emancipatory potential, as long as they may be contributing to the construction of what we call a “radical global citizenship”. This can be defined as an active and politically engaged citizenship, which confronts hegemonic neo-liberal models, build transnational solidarities, values diversity and alternative epistemologies, connects struggles at local, national and global levels, and creates a cosmopolitan vision.

The structure of the paper is the following one: we begin with the explanation of our theoretical framework that develops and connects these ideas on political relationships in aid, informal learning in social action, and global radical citizenship. From this framework, we approach five cases that can be considered as experiences of political relationships in aid. These are experiences of alliances between grassroots and social organizations in Colombia (women movements and indigenous movements, local NGOs, unions and Human Rights organizations) and NGDOs and

other solidarity organizations in Spain, that promote together advocacy and social mobilization for the defence of Human Rights in Colombia.

We will explore what has emerged in terms of learning, in individuals and groups engaged in the experiences, for global radical citizenship building. Also, we explore how these learning processes are modelled by relations within the alliances and with other stakeholders, by discourses and ideas, and by the broader context.

We will find that these experiences have promoted the construction of a global citizenship in very different ways. However, they are also processes full of tensions and challenges, particularly if they want to engage more people and have a broader impact for global radical citizenship building.

## Keywords

Political relationships; aid; development education; informal learning; global citizenship.

## 1. Introduction

The relation between official development assistance (ODA) and politics is not new. As Carothers y De Gramont (2013) remarked, ODA is and has always been unavoidably political since the beginning of the international cooperation system. Donors have used aid with political purposes and its actions, although supposedly apolitical, have had deep political impacts in recipient countries and territories. Nevertheless, a discourse based on the idea that development and cooperation are purely technical and managerial issues (Ferguson, 1990), has become dominant in the aid system in recent decades. The debate on development and aid has thus become depoliticised, and what has been called managerialism has become the dominant approach (Mowles et al., 2008).

As part of this process of managerialisation, new ideas inspired by the market and private sector rationale have become central in the field of development and aid: efficacy and efficiency, impacts, products and clients of development, etc. (Quarles van Ufford y Giri, 2003; Parker, 2002; Dart, 2004). Non-Governmental Development Organisations (NGDOs) and other social actors have adopted these ideas, and become project implementors and public service providers. In this process, some of them may have lost the more political profiles they had in the past (Choudry and Shragge, 2011). They also may have become collaborators in a model of cooperation that, far from promoting social transformation, sustains the status quo, reproduces unequal power relationships between Northern and Southern actors, and promotes the silent global imposition of a liberal, Western model of society (Dar and Cooke, 2008; Mawdsley et al., 2002).

The same process has also taken place in the Spanish context. Some studies have approached the fact that Spanish NGDOs have been developing and proclaiming a new, supposedly apolitical profile (Revilla, 2002; Gómez Gil, 2005), focusing on their role as public service providers (Serrano and Revilla, 2002).

However, it is also possible to find a number of experiences of relationships between Northern and Southern social organisations that are within the aid system, and obtain funds from it, but which work from a more transformative and consciously political perspective of aid. Some NGDOs and other organisations support social movements and organisations in the South with radical ideas on social change (Pearce, 2010). Various authors have referred to a kind of cooperation with these features with terms as “political solidarity” (Briegel et al., 2008) -the term that will be

mostly used in this paper-, “international solidarity” (Pearce, 2010), “transformative cooperation” (Fernández et al., 2013), or “radical partnerships” in aid (McGee, 2010).

It can be argued that these kinds of experiences of international cooperation are valuable as long as they are building what could be called a “global radical citizenship”. This notion of citizenship refers to the construction of a transnational civil society that articulates transformative political discourses and actions, a transnational political project that aims at the expansion and achievement of rights (Heater, 2002).

It could also be considered that the construction of this civil society can take place through the learning processes that emerge in people and organisations that work together within the aid system, as new discourses, values, attitudes, knowledge and skills arise through these relationships. The building of political solidarities can thus be considered a process of learning in social action (Foley, 1999). These learning processes are mainly informal, emergent, contextual, and complex (Holst, 2002; Ortega, 2007), and can have a powerful emancipatory potential (Foley, 1999).

In the paper we approach five case studies of experiences of political solidarity. These are cases that have linked Spanish and Colombian organisations that have worked together in political actions, such as lobbying, raising public awareness, social mobilisation, etc., in the defence and construction of Human Rights (HR) in Colombia, and that have received the support of funds from the aid system, originating from Spanish public donors.

The aim of the paper is to identify the key features that have modelled the learning processes experienced by the people and organisations engaged in these cases. We will also identify the kinds of learning that these people and organisations profess to have experienced, and the tensions and contradictions that these learning processes in social action face.

We have adopted an interpretative approach and an essentially qualitative methodological perspective. The results of the study are based on the analysis of 46 semi-structured interviews with people involved in the cases, together with the analysis of secondary data.

In the next section, we will approach the key theoretical ideas that have been presented: political solidarity, global radical citizenship and learning in social action. On the basis of these ideas, we explain the analytical framework that was used in the analysis of data, as well as the methods used to gather primary and secondary information. Section 6 presents a discussion of the results,

structured around the key ideas presented in the framework. Finally, we present some concluding remarks and some preliminary reflections on the theoretical and practical implications of our study.

We consider that our work may be a contribution in two senses. In the first place, it tries to explore a certain kind of, more consciously politicised, relationship between social organisations in international cooperation, a kind of relationships which is frequently obscured and has been little explored. In the second place, it tries to valorise and understand these kinds of relationship as informal learning processes in social action. Even though there is a broad literature on learning and capacity building in international cooperation (see, for example, Taylor et al., 2009; Clarke y Oswald, 2010), there is no research on relationships in aid as informal learning processes in social action. This approach on informal learning has been used to analyse various forms of activism (see, for example, Gouin, 2009; Hall, 2009; Choudry, 2009; Hall and Turray, 2006; Kim 2011), which provide results that point towards the potential of this approach in understanding relationships in aid.

## **2. Concepts and assumptions**

### ***International cooperation as political solidarity***

It is possible to set out the characteristics of a different kind of international cooperation, that may be being practised by some individuals, NGOs and other social organisations in the North, which support processes of radical social change driven by social organisations and movements in the South. Drawing on the contributions of different authors, we can identify some features that this kind of cooperation, which can be called “political solidarity” (Briegel et al., 2008), has:

This practice of aid links organisations that share common political and ethical principles, frameworks and ideas on social change and how to achieve it (Pearce, 2010; Fernández et al., 2013). It brings together actors from very different backgrounds, but that sympathise with similar political ideas (Bringer et al., 2008). Often, it links Northern social organisations with social movements in the South that are articulating political, social and epistemological alternatives to current development models (Fernández et al., 2013).

Another feature of this kind of more specifically political cooperation would be that organisations try to analyse, unveil and confront structural and institutional factors that form the basis of the

situations of oppression and impoverishment (Gulrajani, 2010; Fernández et al., 2013). Consequently, together these organisations build political objectives, strategies and actions, which are constantly revised and negotiated (Mowles, 2008; Eyben, 2013). It implies working with flexibility, navigating complexity and adapting to changing political contexts together (Mowles et al., 2008). This kind of relationship is based on trust and political engagement (Eyben, 2006), and it also implies confronting the unequal power relationships that can arise between actors in this kind of alliances.

To approach this kind of alliances implies assuming a certain ontological perspective which has been called “relational” (Eyben, 2008): far from the essentialist perspective dominant in development studies, a relational approach assumes that actors are not immutable, but are continually being shaped and transformed by the relationships they maintain (Eyben, 2008).

### ***Global radical citizenship***

All these ideas on the meaning and implications of a certain kind of relationship in aid between Northern and Southern organisations lead us to the idea of global citizenship. Moreover, it could be considered that this kind of relationship is relevant as long as it involves the construction of citizenship, amongst the people and organisations concerned.

Some authors reject the validity or relevance of the idea of global citizenship, for a big variety of reasons: for example, some may consider that the idea of global citizenship can undermine the legitimacy of nation states and the importance of channelling demands at this level (Schattle, 2008); some others argue that participation and deliberation can only genuinely take place at the local and community level (Schattle, 2008), etc. However, it is possible to begin from some other perspectives, which normatively consider global citizenship as the process of building global solidarity (Ellison, 1997), as a transnational political project that aims at the expansion and accomplishment of rights (Heater, 2002), the creation of new forms of exercising citizenship at the global level, and the transformation of identities through emancipatory processes (Schattle, 2008).

These elements seem to be directly connected with the political practice of aid described earlier. In order to delve into these connections, the meaning of global citizenship can be refined by drawing on the conceptualisation of “radical citizenship” by Hickey and Mohan (2005). This idea of citizenship tries to go beyond liberal conceptions, which are often exclusively centred on the vision of citizenship as legal status, the set of rights and duties recognised by the State, and in

restricted forms of participation, such as the right to elect representatives. Instead, from a radical perspective, citizenship is seen as a practice: the actions and struggles made by the people in order to expand or defend existing rights, or create new ones (Isin y Wood, 1994:4). At the same time, citizenship is seen as the set of attributes (knowledge, values, attitudes, skills, etc.) that people have and develop in order to exert this kind of citizenship and promote social transformation (Merrifield, 2002).

This conception of citizenship does not necessarily renounce at the role played by the State as the duty-holder towards citizens' recognised rights, but radical citizenship would be an essentially "bottom-up" process, constructed in organised struggles (Hickey y Mohan, 2005). It points at the convergence of struggles in different territories that confront the different forms of oppression that individuals and collectives face (Houtart, 2001).

In the global dimension, these ideas on radical citizenship point towards the construction of a "bottom-up globalisation" that can confront the dominant global political-economic model, and that promote an autonomous political project (Boni y Taylor, 2010). In the field of aid and development, these ideas connect with the ones proposed by Bringer et al., (2008): in the interactions between peoples and aid organisations, new collective subjectivities emerge, about who they are, what they want to do, and how they can the contribute to changing the world around them. It entails the "democratisation of development", seen as a political praxis based on solidarity and mutual recognition (Bringel et al., 2008).

### ***Learning in social action***

As has been indicated, relationships in aid can be understood as citizenship building learning processes. From this point of departure, it is relevant to go into the literature that, from different academic disciplines (social movements, adult education, development education, etc.), has examined the relevance of learning processes in social action.

From the field of adult education, the importance of learning in action has been recognised as a process of informal and incidental learning (Holst, 2002). The field of development education has also recognised the relevance of informal and non-planned learning processes in the construction of citizenship (Ortega, 2007). This learning process can be emancipatory, as long as social action can lead to changes in peoples and organisations that confront unequal power relations in society (Foley, 2001).



On the basis of these ideas, we consider processes of learning in social action as transformative processes that are emergent, informal, non-planned, tacit and incidental, that are embedded in the actions of the social world, and that have to be unveiled in order to understand them (Foley, 2004). This learning takes place through relationships, in permanent and dynamic processes, embedded in particular contexts, where social, political, economic, social and cultural factors are at play (Margaret, 2010), as well as power relationships (Pettit, 2010). Learning emerging in individuals and collectives in this way can reproduce the status quo and the hegemony of ruling groups, or have an “empowering and emancipatory effect that helps to overcome oppression in society” (Steinklammer, 2012:24).

Social organisations as spaces for citizens and democratic action for social change are relevant and key spaces for learning in social action (Gaventa and Barret, 2010; Foley, 1999; Holst 2002). Through their participation in social movements, individuals and collectives learn new skills and forms of thinking (Holst, 2002:87), and create new forms of knowledge (Choudry, 2009). Learning through the engagement in social struggles can transform power inequalities, but it is also a contradictory process, in which unequal power relationships can be reproduced (Foley, 1999).

The kinds of learning that emerge in social action can be very diverse: technical (how to perform a certain task), political (how people have power and use it), social, cultural, etc. (Foley, 2004). New knowledge that is acquired in these learning processes can be “expert” or “non-expert” knowledge that emerge from the practice itself, as social actors can create new theory and knowledge through their actions (Kapoor and Choudry, 2010).

To approach these learning processes entails understanding the complex connections between the political and economic context in which social mobilisation arises, the micropolitics of the relationships that are established, the ideologies and discourses at play, and the learning that emerges (Foley, 1999). Moreover, it involves a consideration that learning takes place through processes that are intellectual, but also experiential and emotional (Pettit, 2010).

### **3. Analytical framework: how learning processes are modelled in development aid relationships.**

Drawing on the work of Gaventa and Tandon (2010) and Foley (1999), we can propose a framework that allows for the collecting, linking and operationalising of the ideas indicated above, in order to approach the learning processes in social action of our case studies.

On the one hand, following Gaventa and Tandon (2010), three key factors can be identified when approaching collective action processes in the building of citizenship: in the first place, the “micropolitics of mobilisation”, a category that includes questions as strategies, tactics, resources and interactions within the action networks at the different scales (from local to global) that are at play. Secondly, the “micropolitics of intermediation”, a category that refers to the nature of the mediation between the different actors in the networks of collective action, between each of them and with grassroots organisations, and between these actors and the authorities and public institutions. These include issues of interlocution, representation, legitimacy, accountability, etc. Thirdly, the “micropolitics of knowledge”, a category that encompasses the role of knowledge in the processes of mobilisation and mediation; how knowledge is produced and how it shapes the interactions, reproducing or challenging power relationships. It also covers the spaces and processes of production of discourses, the framing of issues, and questions of ideology (Gaventa y Tandon, 2010).

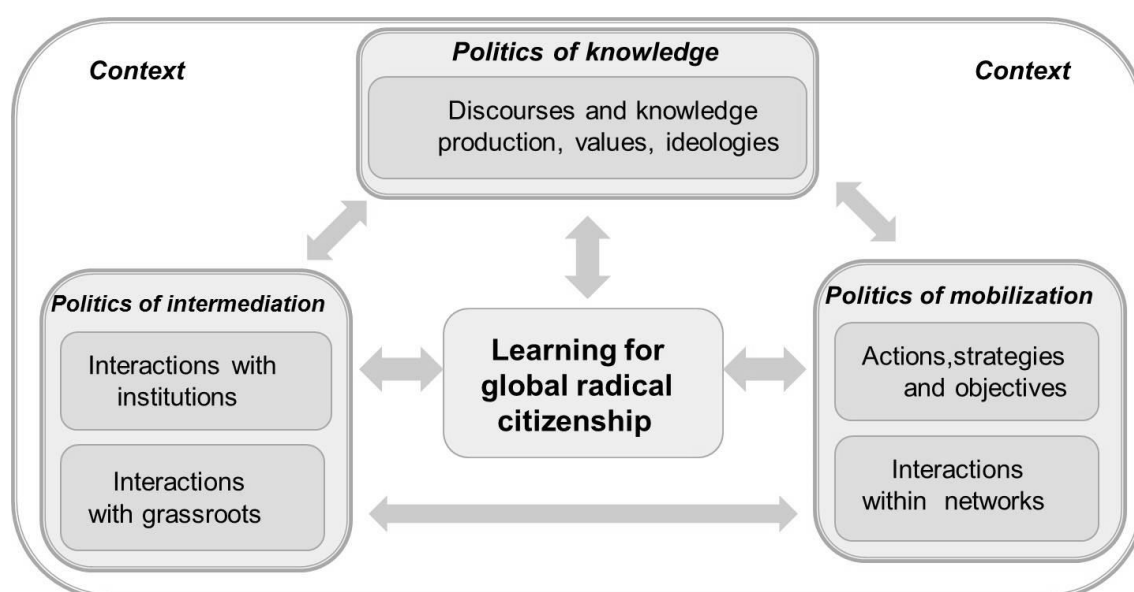
On the other hand, Foley (1999) proposes an analytical framework for addressing learning in social action, with some similarities to Gaventa and Tandon’s approach. For him, approaching these processes implies considering questions of “macropolitics”: changes in political economy and how they connect with changes in forms of mobilisation, action and changes in consciousness; together with questions of “micropolitics”: interactions between actors, and the analysis of discursive practices.

On the basis of these contributions, an original framework can be proposed, with three key categories, inspired by those proposed by Gaventa and Tandon (2010), which are connected between them, and feature the central category of “learning for global radical citizenship”.

In the sphere of “mobilisation” we consider the subcategories of “objectives, strategies and actions” and “interactions within the structures”, which entails questions such as the nature, mechanisms and spaces of relationships within the organisations in the mobilisation structures. In the category of “intermediation”, a differentiation can be proposed between “interactions with institutions”, meaning public institutions and the different levels, from the local to the global, and “interactions with grassroots organisation”. The category of “knowledge” involves questions

linked to the production of discourses and knowledge, values or ideology that have been mentioned.

The category of “learning for global radical citizenship” encompass all the different kinds of learnings that emerge in peoples and organisations in social actions, from the ethical to the political, individual to collective, from skills and values to attitudes, etc. The links and interactions between the different categories are complex and multidimensional, and they all take place in a particular context, where political economy issues have to be considered.



Source: Self-elaboration, based on Gaventa and Tandon (2010) and Foley (1999).

#### 4. Case studies

As mentioned, the study approaches four case studies of experiences of international cooperation that have linked Spanish and Colombian organisations in the joint political work in the defence and creation of rights in Colombia. We made a purposive selection of case studies, considering that we wanted to address cases that could be considered of “political solidarity”.

The cases have the following common features that facilitate comparison: 1) In each case, networks of Spanish and Colombian organisations from different backgrounds work together (NGDOs, local NGOs, unions, HR organisations, grassroots organisations, etc), and certain formal

and informal mechanisms and spaces for planning and acting together are defined. 2) These organisations carry out various political actions together: lobbying Spanish institutions and making public denouncements, by preparing reports on the HR situation in Colombia, demonstrations, raising awareness, meetings, workshops, etc. on HR in Colombia; helping Colombians to find new allies in Europe and access international HR forums, etc. 3) These networks often act as democratic mediators between grassroots and community organisations and public institutions or other powerful actors. 4) Relationships between Spanish and Colombian organisations in the cases have been in existence for at least four years, and continue. 5) Processes have been supported by funds coming from various Spanish public donors.

The five case studies are briefly described below:

- Asturian Protection Programme for Victims of Human Rights Violations in Colombia (*Programa Asturiano de Protección de Víctimas de Violaciones de los Derechos Humanos en Colombia*). This is formally an institutional programme of the Regional Government of Asturias but it was proposed, and is coordinated and implemented, by the NGDO 'Soldepaz - Pachakutik', with the support of a committee of nine Asturian organisations (composed of NGDOs, trade unions, human rights organisations and solidarity committees, amongst others). It works with a Selection Committee in Colombia, initially formed by the Central Union of Workers of Colombia ('Central Unitaria de Trabajadores de Colombia', CUT), which has been joined by four Colombian HR organisations. The Programme shelters human rights defenders at risk, in Asturias, for a period of six months. The people given refuge are chosen by the Selection Committee. During their stay in Asturias, they carry out a number of awareness-raising and advocacy actions (at local, regional, national and European levels) on HR violations in Colombia, create new contacts between their home organisation and Spanish organisations, and provide and receive training. Additionally, a Verification Committee created by the Programme, composed of members of social organisations and Spanish policy-makers and public workers, visits different regions and communities in Colombia annually to perform a verification of HR. Following this a report is drawn up, which provides the basis for advocacy actions. The Programme continually carries out actions to denounce HR violations and promote advocacy. It was formed in 2001.

- Basque Protection Programme for Defenders of Human Rights (*Programa Vasco de Protección a Defensores y Defensoras de DDHH*). Similar to the previous case, the Basque Programme was created under the auspices of the Basque Government, and coordinated by the 'Kolektiba Colombia' (which encompasses five NGOs and NGDOs from the Basque Country).

Unlike the Asturian Programme, the Basque Programme Selection Committee is composed of members from Spanish institutions (Basque Government departments, universities, and Basque peace and HR organisations). Their relations with Colombian organisations are made through the local counterparts of the organisations of the 'Kolektiba' who perform cooperation projects. The type of actions performed, including the verification visit, are very similar to those of the Asturian Programme. It was formed in 2011.

- Committee for Human Rights of Women and Peace in Colombia (*Mesa por los Derechos Humanos de las Mujeres y la Paz en Colombia*). This network is coordinated by the NGDO 'Atelier'. Over the years it has incorporated between 8 and 15 Spanish organisations (trade unions, NGDOs, university institutes, feminist organisations) and 5 to 9 Colombian organisations (NGDOs and grassroots women's organisations) –the number varied depending on the period-. They carry out awareness-raising and advocacy actions on the issue of the HR of women in Colombia. Of particular note are the lobbying actions made towards regional and national parliaments to take a stance on the issue, the production and distribution of documentaries, conducting international meetings, positioning the issue in the mass media, etc. It was formed in 2007 and has received funding from Spanish Aid Agency and the Valencian aid agency.

- Support for the Minga of Social and Community Resistance (*Apoyo a la Minga de Resistencia Social y Comunitaria*). This is the process by which the Coordination for the Rights of Indigenous Peoples ('Coordinación por los Derechos de los Pueblos Indígenas', CODPI, which brings together 5 Spanish NGDOs and NGOs) and the Centre for the Autonomy and Rights of Indigenous Peoples ('Observatorio por la Autonomía y los Derechos de los Pueblos Indígenas', ADPI) have sustained the intense social mobilisation process of the Minga. The Minga began in 2004 as a process of the main indigenous organisations in Colombia converging to defend their rights, through marches and other forms of political pressure towards the Colombian state. The ADPI and COPDI have been supporting this process since 2010, bringing attention to the actions of the Minga movement, mainly through social media, raising awareness, making demands on the Spanish State (following presumed violations of HR by Spanish companies) for the rights of indigenous peoples of Colombia, helping indigenous leaders to build alliances in Spain (with other NGOs, trade unions, HR organisations, universities, etc.), increase their presence in international HR forums, etc.

- Support by the NGDO, 'Initiatives for International Cooperation for Development' (*Iniciativas para la Cooperación Internacional al Desarrollo*, ICID) for the local NGO, 'Open

Workshop' (*Taller Abierto*, TA). ICID has carried out projects with TA for improving the organisational processes of Cauca women displaced by war. Furthermore, these organisations have conducted advocacy actions directed at the Spanish Aid Agency and the Spanish Foreign Ministry, to demand a response to threats made towards women's organisations. The relationship began in 2005.

## **5. Obtaining and processing information.**

For this study, a total of 46 semi-structured interviews were carried out (37 individual and 9 group interviews) with people linked to the experiences in the case studies, between January and July 2013. Between 6 and 15 interviews were conducted for each case analysed. We have also tried to create a balance between the number of interviews with Spanish organisations and those with Colombian organisations (29 and 17, respectively). Furthermore, we tried to interview people with different levels of responsibility in the cases, ranging from people with a central coordinating role to people who have only participated sporadically.

The primary information obtained was supplemented by secondary information, essentially documents produced by the organisations themselves: websites, reports, booklets, leaflets and audiovisual material developed for disseminating experiences; project formulation documents; internal and external evaluations of projects; public statements, manifestos, denouncements, letters addressed to institutions, etc.

From an interpretivist perspective, we tried to capture the meanings and interpretations that people gave to the experience (Corbetta, 2003), specifically, how they experienced the learning process, and what the drivers and the results may have been. For information processing, a qualitative content analysis was performed on the interviews and secondary documentation, based on predefined categories in the analytical framework. In this analysis, these categories were refined and new subcategories obtained. From these categories and subcategories, discussion was organised around the common themes and trends, differences and tensions that were identified.

We sought to triangulate the information "within-method" (Mikkelsen, 2005), by recording in our interviews the varying perspectives of a given process from people of different places and

backgrounds, and “between-method”, by triangulating information from primary and secondary sources.

## **6. Analysis and discussion**

### ***Which features of political solidarity relationships model learning processes?***

In this section, we identify the characteristics of the processes of constructing political solidarity that, in the experience of the people, are relevant for understanding how learning processes were modelled.

#### *Objectives and Strategies:*

In all the cases, there is a particular central objective that serves as an “entry point” or reference point: the temporary sheltering in Spain of threatened members of Colombian social organisations, the raising of awareness of the situation of the HR of women in Colombia, or support for a specific social mobilisation process in Colombia. Around this specific objective, a whole series of political actions are developed (lobbying, awareness raising, denunciation, networking, etc.). This generates far-reaching and complex processes with a strong political content around a specific issue.

Furthermore, all the cases feature an implicit common objective: the creation of widespread solidarity movements with Colombia in Spain. Therefore, almost all these experiences try to bring together a large number of organisations of varying profiles (NGDOs, NGOs, trade unions, grassroots organisations, etc.). In some cases it also concerns organisations that do not normally work together, or even mistrust each other, but that find a common issue to work together on the topic of HR situation in Colombia. Although this diversity may eventually lead to tensions, it also appears to be a strong driver of learning through the exchange. An attempt is made to build permanent alliances, not dependent on a specific project, so that they can become open, long-term learning processes.

It may also be noted that, together with long-term objectives, the experiences try to respond to individual situations (e.g. in response to a specific murder, or an act by a transnational company). In this way, they seek to combine long-term processes with urgent action, which may create

difficulties, but also facilitates learning by placing operational, short-term issues in conjunction with broader political discussions, considerations and objectives.

#### *Relationships between organisations:*

Almost all respondents, and numerous documents on the cases, emphasise the attempts made to establish equal relationships between the organisations. To do so, they try to generate models and protocols for communication, information and decision making to facilitate horizontal relationships, e.g. conducting periodic face-to-face meetings to debate and make decisions, open to all the organisations in the networks; permanent online communication to share information and create discussion; decision-making mechanisms by consensus, etc.

In all cases, there is a Spanish person or organisation that plays the role of “coordinator”. They are also accountable to the public donors of funded projects. They centralise much of the more bureaucratic work, freeing up other organisations so they can focus on political action. Depending on the case, the level of commitment from the other organisations in the networks is highly variable. Generally speaking, there are a limited number of organisations with more or less continuous participation in the actions, and a greater number of organisations with reduced participation.

Alongside the formal spaces and relationship channels (both face-to-face and online), many of the interviewees highlighted the importance of informal meetings, casual conversation, coexistence and everyday social contact between members of organisations (e.g. when being given refuge in Spain, or in Spanish trips to Colombia), as central elements in building relationships, identifying these as powerful drivers of learning.

Regarding this issue, we can also highlight the central importance of building close friendships and personal relationships. In some cases, these relationships have made it easier for organisations to begin working together, and for the processes to have continuity. They play a particularly important role in times of crisis and conflict within the networks, facilitate ongoing dialogue and communication, and appear to be fundamental when operating in sensitive, complex and shifting political contexts, as is the case in Colombia, which require relationships of great trust in order to work together.

#### *Knowledge, discourse and ideology*



Political affinity is indicated in all cases as a key driver in building relationships. It generates mutual understanding and trust, common registers, facilitates open political debate, etc. In our cases, this affinity involves having or building common views on key issues such as: the causes of the conflict in Colombia, where all cases consider that the Colombian conflict is based on problems of a social, political, and economic nature, deriving from the advance of neo-liberalism; ideas for alternatives, placing popular movements (syndicalist, peasants, women, indigenous peoples, students, etc.) as key actors in the construction of alternative development models and promoting peace; views on the direct responsibility of the Colombian State, other states (such as the Spanish) and other actors (mainly transnational companies) in the conflict in Colombia; the role of international cooperation, which should support popular movements. All cases share the belief in connecting the struggles and building solidarity between grassroots movements in Colombia and Spain, in opposition to the neo-liberal model and its consequences.

#### *Mediation with institutions.*

Given the nature of the actions carried out during the experiences, a number of opportunities for interaction with the Spanish public institutions are generated, both with State and regional development cooperation agencies, and with various institutions that may have some relevancy in regard to HR compliance in Colombia. In the experiences, meetings are made with political representatives, political parties, civil servants, etc., at various levels of government. Although responsibility for creating dialogue concerning the experience frequently falls to Spanish organisations, it is attempted, whenever possible, that the members of the Colombian organisations interact directly with the Spanish institutions. In all cases, they try to seek out specific people within the institutions, who are more responsive to the demands, with whom they can foster a relationship of trust and mutual understanding.

Interviewees considered the general attitude of the institutions towards the organisations and their claims to vary from receptivity to distrust or disinterest. Institutions frequently seem to show interest in the purely “humanitarian” dimension of the cases (such as the protection of life), and less interest or suspicion towards more overtly political claims, or to denunciations against other actors, such as companies and governments. Thus, organisations are often forced to navigate between the depoliticised, bureaucratic discourse and requirements of the institutions, whilst trying to promote a more critical, political discourse and action. It is a complex situation, but one that can also promote learning.

#### *Mediation with grassroots organisations.*

In all the cases analysed, there was a significant presence of Colombian grassroots organisations: either directly present in the networks, or through the presence of local Colombian NGOs closely linked to the grassroots organisations. In general, the perspective displayed by respondents, and collected in some documents, is that their actions prioritise gathering the demands, views and claims of these organisations that are, in fact, considered as the source of legitimacy and meaning of their actions. Also, contact with grassroots organisations could be considered a powerful driving force behind learning, by connecting the networks with the processes of resistance and alternatives arising from the “bottom-up”.

However, it could be said that grassroots organisations do not play a leading role in several of the cases analysed, whose leaderships are often assumed by NGDOs and NGOs. Furthermore, Colombian grassroots organisations, more focused on local work than on international networks, often have trouble following the work patterns in the networks we have analysed, which limits their active participation.

On the other hand, based on the cases studied, the presence of Spanish organisations is even more limited. Moreover, in those cases where these types of organisations were involved, they usually concern more structured and professionalised organisations (such as trade unions). There is much less contact with informal movements (as the 15-M or ‘indignants’ movement, which was frequently mentioned and is very respected among the persons interviewed), a fact that is seen as a major limitation by several interviewees.

### ***Which learning emerges and in whom?***

In the analysis, we have identified that, through the relationships involved in the complex processes of building political solidarity, different kinds of learning emerge in the people and organisations involved. Amongst these we can highlight the following:

Learning for political analysis: members of the Spanish organisations, especially those who have held more responsibility in the cases under study, state that they have had a valuable learning experience, in terms of their capacity to make a general analysis of the Colombian political context, of the causes and effects of the Colombian conflict, and the changing political situation in the country. They also value the knowledge of the reality and actions of the Colombian organisations in their struggles. For their part, members of the Colombian organisations state

that, most of all, they have learnt about the solidarity movement in Spain, the NGDO sector and the workings of the aid system (essentially, how to operate within it and achieve funding). Those Colombians most involved in advocacy actions also learnt about the institutions of the Spanish State in relation to HR and, to a lesser extent, local organisations and social movements and their struggles to demand rights.

Learning about new development models: through exchanges between members of organisations, particularly during their stays in Spain and Colombia, relevant reflections on development models occur in both Colombian and Spanish individuals. The former, in their contact with the Spanish context, appear to have made interesting analyses on the virtues and contradictions of the Spanish welfare state model: for example, the Colombians identify the paradoxes of a model which allows free expression but finds other forms of repression, or ensures public services, but has a consumerist and commodified society as its base. Furthermore, members of Spanish organisations seem to have become familiar with the contents, meaning and practice of alternative development models arising in movements in Latin America, such as that of 'Buen Vivir', or the notion of the 'right to territory' from an indigenous perspective. During the exchange, other meanings and implications become connected that, in both North and South, feature emerging concepts and alternatives at a global level, such as the concept of Food Sovereignty.

Learning about working approaches: in the case studies, the organisations often employ certain concepts and common approaches in the field of cooperation, often strategically, as this terminology is required by funders: gender-based approach, human rights-based approach, sustainable development, etc. Although these are usually concepts that have been constructed within the field of cooperation and development itself, in the cases under study it is possible to observe interesting learning processes to adapt, define and give new meaning to these concepts in particular contexts, based on the worldviews and political positions of the grassroots organisations. For example, the idea of sustainable development is, in some cases, manifested in an anti-productivist perspective.

Instrumental learning: Members of the organisations also emphasise the acquisition of instrumental skills. In the case of the Spanish organisations, these are mostly concerned, firstly, with advocacy skills (identify and interact with key people within institutions, produce messages with high impact in the mass media or social media, etc.); secondly, with project management, learning to combine the rigid bureaucratic requirements of funders with the complex and

changing realities and demands of the Colombian groups with which they work. For the Colombian organisations, several interviewees also emphasised learning about advocacy with Spanish institutions and learning to apply for, plan and manage projects funded by Spanish institutions. Both Spanish and Colombian organisations also emphasised learning to work in a coordinated and reasonably democratic way in networks that bring together groups of very different organisational and ideological profiles.

Ethical learning: most members of the organisations emphasised learning to work together, through behaviour based on values such as respect for autonomy, flexibility, tolerance, openness to dialogue, working by consensus and accepting dissent, etc.

Learning about symbolism and representations of “the other”: another critical issue identified by many of the interviewees, and identifiable in the documents, is the transformation that occurs in individuals and groups in relation to the representation of “the other”. On the one hand, it seems that Spanish organisations have progressed in terms of considering Colombian activists and organisations, not as mere “victims” of a conflict, but as key political actors in the transformation of Colombia. However, it is worth mentioning that, for some of the Colombians interviewed, the view of the Colombians as victims perseveres in some Spanish organisations or, conversely, there is a certain “romanticisation” of the activism of Colombian organisations. On the other hand, Colombians have deepened in their views of the Spanish organisations as political allies, in some cases even recognising them as political actors playing a central role in transforming their territory in Spain, compared to the previous viewpoints of some organisations, which would have considered them as mere “donors”.

Learning on the private-personal sphere: participation in the case studies is experienced as transformative for a large number of the people involved, also on issues that relate to the areas of personal attitudes, perceptions and choices. Several people mentioned that, through participation, they have confronted their own attitudes on consumerism and sexism, have learned to better manage emotions such as fear, anger or frustration, have deepened in their personal commitment as activists, have improved in their ability to adapt to different contexts, have improved their self-esteem, etc. These types of learning processes have mainly occurred in people who have had more space to share and create close relationships with people from the other country, or when they have visited the country of their allies more often or for longer periods of time.

***Challenges, tensions and contradictions in learning processes in political solidarities.***

In the case studies, we have identified some of the key issues in building political solidarities, as well as the learning that emerges. However, these processes are not without difficulties, tensions and contradictions, amongst which we can identify the following:

Firstly, we could mention the problem of the possible concentration of learning. As we have seen, the processes analysed are complex: there are a large number of actors involved, the information exchanged is abundant, the contexts in which they operate are very complex and shifting, etc. This causes a very high number of diverse and interconnected learnings to emerge, but which are concentrated in a very limited number of already highly trained people who are at the centre of these processes. The cases face the challenge of trying to be effective and efficient, whilst promoting participation. The challenge is to promote, on the one hand, greater participation within each organisation, as usually only one or just a few people from each organisation participate effectively in the work; and, on the other hand, the participation between organisations, because often much of the work falls to NGOs or other professionalised organisations in the networks, rather than grassroots organisations, who often delegate responsibilities, which produces less intense learning in its members.

A second issue, related to the previous one, has to do with the tension between learning on the individual level and learning on the collective/institutional level. Although some of the learning mentioned above occurs at the level of the whole organisation, much learning seems to occur on a purely individual level. It becomes a challenge, therefore, to make learning produce changes in the organizational culture, not just in individuals, in a way that the retention of learning is not solely dependent on certain people remaining within the organisations.

A similar situation occurs in the public institutions with which the organisations in the case studies interact. We have seen that a political strategy of the organisations and networks is to seek and create collaboration with key people within the institutions. However, although specific individuals in the institutions learn and change through these interactions, there is a risk that the relationships with these institutions end up depending on specific individuals, and learning and changes are not actually produced in the institutions themselves.

A third tension worth mentioning concerns the role of personal friendships in learning. We have seen that friendship, endearment and personal trust play a fundamental role as a means of promoting learning of a political nature. Nevertheless, tension arises between strengthening

relationships between specific individuals as a means of strengthening networks and relationships amongst organisations, and the risk of making these processes and relationships between organisations dependent on purely personal friendships and affinities.

In fourth place, it is possible to identify a tension related to political positions. It concerns the difficult balance between adopting a unifying and 'low political profile' discourse and more defined critical positions and discourses. In the cases studied, the organisations sometimes choose to look for discourses with a common consensus, which can bring together a great number of organisations of very different profiles, and are acceptable to the institutions and the public. However, in looking for a unifying position, the discourse created can be too shallow and ambiguous, not very critical and easily exposed to cooptation. In this way, it is possible to miss a learning opportunity through more critical debates, at the heart of the network and with external actors. Conversely, discourses with a more specifically defined political positions that are more critical and 'politically incorrect' (for example, openly anti-capitalist positions, or those which explicitly hold certain public actors or companies accountable for human rights violations), can facilitate critical learning, but may not be acceptable for certain organisations, preventing the possibility of generating broader alliances, or garnering the support of institutions or the public.

A fifth question concerns the imbalance in learning between organisations from the North and the South. In the cases, we have identified that important lessons are produced in both Spanish and Colombian people and organisations. However, there are differences in learning between them. For example, in the Spanish, more learning is produced about the general political context in Colombia, or Colombian social movements, whilst the Colombians' learning is generally more limited to knowledge of aid system and how to 'use' it. The Spanish learn more about the paradigms and the alternative approaches emerging from the South, whilst Colombians acquire less knowledge about alternative paradigms and resistance in the Spanish context. This could be a potentially contradictory situation in a type of relationships that, according to the respondents themselves, aspires to be "bidirectional", horizontal, and in which alternatives and struggles are shared.

Another tension derived from another kind of imbalance in learning is that which occurs between professionalised organisations and grassroots organisations. It has already been noted that more learning takes place in professionalised organisations than in grassroots organisations in the networks analysed. This is particularly true in the case of Spanish organisations because learning takes place almost exclusively in NGOs or professionalised organisations, with little learning

produced in Spanish grassroots organisations and social movements, which are absent or play a secondary role in almost all cases. As several respondents state, there is a challenge to include Spanish social movements in the networks.

A final key issue deals with an even broader debate: the role of public funding in these processes. It seems clear that much of the richness and diversity of the learning that emerges in people and organisations would not have been possible without the existence of public funds provided by the aid system. Furthermore, based on the interviews, it seems that the organisations in our cases have acted independently and without major limitations on their actions, apart from the difficulties and rigid bureaucracy involved in managing funds. However, something they are exposed to is the variability and unpredictability in accessing public funds and, in recent years, the large reduction in these funds. The challenge is to propose a model of cooperation and relations that do not necessarily renounce public financing, but seek to use it as a driver for the formation of citizenship through learning, without these processes and relationships depending, ultimately, on the existence of this funding.

## **7. Concluding remarks**

In terms of findings, some features of a more political and transformative approach to cooperation have been identified in the study. Some of these features, which can be considered as characteristics of this kind of cooperation as opposed to a managerial approach, seem to be powerful drivers for informal learning: e.g., the construction of broad, inclusive and long term political alliances; the construction of political and critical common positions, linked to grassroots ones; the relevance of the affective and emotional issues in the relationships, etc.

We found how these drivers may have facilitated the emergence of different learnings in individuals and organisations engaged in the case studies: from ethical to political learning, from the individual to the collective, from skills to values, etc. However, the learning processes we encountered face a number of tensions and contradictions: a great number of different learnings can emerge, but they can be concentrated in a few people and organisations, they can take place exclusively at the individual level, or be unequal between individuals and organisations from the North and the South.

The findings direct us to a number of new issues on which to focus further work relevant to organisations seeking to build political solidarity. For example: how to address the challenges presented to organisations in order that their relations produce more profound learning in a greater number of individuals and groups? Probably organisations must delve into issues of participation within and between organisations, their links with the grassroots organisations, and continue to transform the, usually hidden, unequal power relations in their own networks. Regarding the implications of this work for other actors, other questions emerge. Can the cases analysed act as an inspiration for other cases of cooperation -for example, those promoted by NGOs immersed in the dominant discourses and practices, or which operate in a less politicised context and with a less mature civil society than that of Colombia?. If donors could recognise the value of this kind of more overtly political cooperation and its relevance as a learning process, which policies should be articulated in order to promote it?

Finally, we find that the article has identified the need to further explore some theoretical issues. We believe that the proposed theoretical perspective has allowed us to appreciate the emancipatory potential of informal learning processes in certain relations of cooperation, but we understand that it fails to capture the full complexity of these learning dynamics. For example, the dynamics between individual and collective learning processes, or the interaction between intellectual, experiential, and emotional-affective forms of learning. These are issues about which a rich theoretical development exists, which could be connected to the issues explored in this work in further research.

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