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3

REFLECTIONS ON USING A COMMUNITY-LED RESEARCH AND ACTION (CLRA) METHODOLOGY TO EXPLORE ALTERNATIVES IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Lise Woensdregt, Kibui Edwin Rwigi and Naomi van Stapele

Introduction

The official development aid (ODA) system increasingly includes community-based organizations (CBOs) in development arrangements. CBOs are community-led organizations founded and led by people who identify with a specific community.¹ Development discourse justifies the inclusion of CBOs by referring to their local embeddedness, connectedness, and legitimacy, all of which are widely considered critical for sustainable and successful development interventions (Skovdal et al., 2017). The relationships between Northern development actors and Southern CBOs and the meaningful inclusion of communities have become much-debated issues among critical academic researchers and development policymakers and practitioners (e.g. van Stapele et al., 2018). Moreover, despite attempts to include community voices, in practice, Northern actors continue to be in the lead, and CBOs remain at the bottom end of the hierarchy. This shows the urgent need for changing the roles of Northern actors vis-à-vis Southern communities and has led to increased recognition of the importance of using community-centred and decolonizing development approaches and research methodologies (e.g. Zavala, 2013). This chapter seeks to contribute to this emerging field of work by situating its findings within larger discussions of collaborative knowledge production and social justice research.

The chapter introduces community-led research and action (CLRA) as a practical alternative for researchers that supports communities to reclaim the lead in international development. CLRA is a dialogic method used in collaborative and community-driven research. Building on participatory action research (PAR) principles, CLRA has the potential to contribute to a reimagining of the role communities can play in the ODA system. The CLRA work that inspired this chapter was part of a larger research project that interrogated how power is

distributed within aid chains in the ODA system. Our focus was on CBOs, and we were keen to understand the everyday dynamics and practices of CBOs and the ‘communities’ in which they are embedded. More specifically, our analysis draws on a one-year CLRA project carried out in collaboration with two CBOs in Nairobi – a CBO led by male sex workers (MSWs) and a social justice CBO that focuses predominantly on police violence and economic justice in a ‘ghetto’ (their term).

Below, we first position CLRA within decolonial and participatory traditions in development planning and discourses. Then, while reflecting on our case studies in Nairobi, we discuss the CLRA approach in more detail, including the possibilities and constraints of this method in terms of contributing to durable change in everyday lived realities on the ground, as well as in the ODA system more generally. Our main question is as follows: what are the opportunities and challenges for a CLRA design in planned development? By answering this question, we contribute to the understanding of the complexities of meaningfully and ethically including the voices of ‘communities’ in development arrangements and to grasping what is needed for CLRA to support communities to reclaim the lead.

Decolonizing planned development through CLRA

CLRA promotes a horizontal and dialogic approach in community-driven collaborative learning processes and draws on the strengths of ethnographic approaches to expand the understanding of dynamics between individual and collective practices to broader social arrangements. The CLRA methodology can contribute to the decolonization of research and practice in planned development. The contemporary ODA system, (re)produced through both subtle and overt self-perpetuating colonial arrangements (see e.g. Kothari, 2019; Pailey, 2019), strongly affects the inclusion and position of CBOs in development partnerships and other North–South configurations. As described in the introduction to this chapter, CBOs in development partnerships continue to be at the bottom of the hierarchy of partners, conceptualized as ‘local collaborators’ or on-the-ground community mobilizers. The CBOs in our research referred to the treatment of communities by international and national non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as ‘neo-colonialism’ (*ukoloni mamboleo* in Swahili). A staff member of a CBO participating in our project described the dynamics of CBO–NGO interactions as follows:

The problem is they [NGOs] have big salaries and take up all the budget, but they can’t do the work on the ground. So, we are partners on paper, but we are also sub-grantees. We don’t have the power to change that. That is why we say we are their donkeys. That is why we say they colonize us. We know and they know we would never even have gotten the proposal by the EU if their name was not on it, even if it was our idea and it concerns our

lives. We are dying and we need change, and we can only work on this by being abused by them [partner NGOs]. That is the real problem. We can't get big proposals as CBOs. We try a lot, but it is really difficult.

[Youth CBO staff member, February 2020]

This quote illustrates how CBOs struggle to be included meaningfully and ethically in North–South partnerships. CBO representatives expressed the need to liberate research, activism, and development from neo-colonial bondage.

CLRA is used with the aim of changing neo-colonial relationships between 'Norths' and 'Souths', between development practitioners and communities, and among researchers. It draws inspiration from approaches used in PAR. PAR, which can be traced to anti-colonial movements in Africa, Latin America, and elsewhere (Kapoor, 2009; Mbembe, 2001; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015), is designed to amplify demands and critiques from the 'margins' (hooks, 2000) and the 'bottom' (Matsuda, 1987) and to elaborate alternative possibilities for justice (Zavala, 2013). In the context of planned development, PAR aims to honour the perspectives, voices, and interests of the communities being studied to improve (access to) sustainable and inclusive development (Borda, 2006). In theory, PAR aims to be transformative and encourages ownership of the research and action process. However, despite the promises of community ownership in PAR rhetoric, other authors have pointed to the risks of tokenism and of PAR programmes ending up being perfunctory (e.g. Gardner & Lewis, 2015). Hence, in an attempt to further disrupt neo-colonial structures and prevent the co-optation and tokenism of communities, CLRA builds on PAR, taking it a step further by being fully community led. This community-led nature leads to a 'participatory worldview' and moves away from dominant tenets in PAR that accentuate the objective of 'including voices' of marginalized communities. While PAR often responds to a particular problem or need, the CLRA process is open-ended and iterative, changing with community discussions. This means that, in CLRA, research questions and subjects arise from communities examining their shared realities and co-creating meaning in the context of everyday lived realities. CLRA's community-led nature thus provides a means to re-evaluate power differences among relevant (development) actors and offers an alternative to traditional methods of knowledge production (Mignolo, 2003) and concomitant action. This concerns not only action as part of the research but also as emerging as part of the research process – CLRA can generate long-lasting influence among involved communities after the research activity ends. Finally, CLRA does not move from a university or an NGO to a community and back, as is the case with many PAR projects. Instead, CLRA moves within and through the community, with the university or NGO functioning as a mere facilitator. This facilitating role is delineated by the terms of the community and may only be practised to build an infrastructure that can facilitate freeing up the exchange of ideas, resources, and tools for the greater democratization of knowledge (James & Gordon, 2008).

Below, we describe how we implemented CLRA in the context of two CBOs in Nairobi. While we envision CLRA as a legitimate effort in decolonizing the ODA system, reconfiguring power, and doing things differently, the resources for this project flowed through a Dutch university, and we were held accountable by a Dutch funding agency. Consequently, even though the research proposal was written collaboratively by the academics and the CBOs, the main applicant was still a university based in the North, with the CBOs as co-applicants. Nonetheless, the CBOs did receive and manage their portion of the funding, with an almost equal amount given to the main applicant and the co-applicants, and we all established a structure of mutual accountability, both in the research process and outputs and in financial records. Alongside our somewhat inadequate attempts to be fully equal partners, obstructed by funding structures and ensuing demands, this chapter was developed solely by the academic researchers involved. The CBOs took the lead on certain reports and other project outputs they found more directly relevant to their work and chose not to work on academic articles. Although many reasons informed this decision, which can be partly attributed to differences in academic and community priorities, it does illustrate an interesting boundary we encountered to CLRA being fully community-led.

CLRA in practice: how we did it – an inclusive consortium, research teams, and methodology

In 2018, we implemented a CLRA project with two CBOs in Nairobi, Kenya. Before implementation, to promote co-ownership, we built an inclusive research consortium consisting of academic researchers and the CBOs. The consortium was a site of multiple intersectional points around notions of race, gender and sexuality, social and economic class, and culture. The project's reflexively constituted consortium members were keen to foreground the narratives of marginalized communities represented in the consortium. To further promote CBO leadership, the CBOs independently managed funds in line with assigned consortium roles and tasks. This facilitated the CBOs to monitor and manage the boundaries of the academic researchers' work as facilitators in the CLRA project. The resulting praxis increasingly shaped our collective critical inquiry that made use of all our individual and combined expertise on equal terms, while the ultimate power remained located with the two CBOs.

Regarding the makeup of the two research teams, each of the two CBOs selected and employed ten community researchers (CRs) to participate in the CLRA process. The CRs were selected on the basis of community membership and CBO affiliation. None of the CRs in either team had any formal research training when they came into the project. Hence, in facilitating the project, we assisted 'from behind' by supporting the CRs to create, synthesize, and mobilize knowledge. This also included supporting the CRs with writing and research and co-moderating weekly analysis discussion sessions. In terms of the actual implementation, we conducted the CLRA research process for a period of eight

months (April to December 2018). Every Thursday (sex workers) and Friday (youth), one of the teams met at the office of the CBO with which they were affiliated. In these meetings, we started with four weeks of building research skills and trust and getting to know each other. Thereafter, the research process consisted of two parts: (1) data collection and (2) data analysis and dissemination. The first of these parts lasted five months, during which each team of CRs met and collected a wealth of data describing different aspects of community life through the eyes of fellow community members. The CRs kept personal journals in which they recorded their reflections on their everyday activities and experiences. They collected ethnographic data by recording observations in their communities, and they each conducted at least two interviews with fellow MSWs or youths living in the ghettos. Each week, the CRs' data collection revolved around previously designed research questions they developed during the weekly collaborative analysis sessions as they delved deeper and deeper into the issues affecting their life-worlds. While discussing the CRs' weekly journals and interview outcomes, the facilitators recorded emerging themes. Towards the end of each session, the CRs would pick one theme or topic they desired to explore further in the coming week. They would then collaboratively formulate new research questions each week. The MSW team discussed topics including public stigma and discrimination, government-led key population policies, community activism and advocacy, mental health among MSWs, and economic empowerment. The youths team covered topics such as police brutality and extrajudicial killings, youth (un)employment, access to basic services, engaging 'hard-to-reach' youths, peace building, and political violence.

The second part of the research process, which lasted three months, focused on a secondary cycle of data analyses through writing and storytelling. Each CR interacted intimately with their personally collected data and, with the guidance of the facilitators, learned how to code their data. From these codes, the CRs formulated *fununu*² statements or research propositions. These propositions were written down on sticky notes, posted on a wall, and rearranged to create a 'mind map'. Then, working in pairs, the CRs were assigned new emergent themes and tasked with writing about them. For the story-writing phase, each CR worked with datasets consisting of the collective data from the whole group of CRs, which provided another collaborative dimension to the writing process. During this phase, the CRs also read their written stories to each other in an exercise we called 'community peer review'. During this exercise, the CRs engaged in critical and constructive feedback in a process that both validated their findings and built on their writing. At the end of this second research phase, the two teams produced 17 community research chapters (see Ghetto Foundation, 2019; Healthy Options for Young Men on AIDS/STI [HOYMAS], 2019). Moreover, the CRs presented the results of their research to the board members of their respective CBOs, to their communities, and during a formal book presentation. This book presentation was conducted at the British Institute of Eastern Africa in Nairobi, and all sorts of relevant stakeholders related to the CBOs were invited,

including partner CBOs, NGOs, government officials, and academics. In the remainder of the chapter, we reflect on several of the CLRA project outcomes and, on the basis of our experiences, describe how CLRA may function as a catalyst for durable change.

CLRA project outcomes

Co-creation of knowledge and centring community-identified priorities

The outcomes of the CLRA process generated rich and detailed data of the kind that are often left unregistered with other research methods and that generally remain invisible in the academic literature on (male) sex workers and youth living in the ghettos. For instance, despite being involved in international development partnerships since its founding in 2009, the MSW CBO had largely participated only in quantitative research projects and interventions focusing on the management of HIV and sexually transmitted infections, with community members serving as the key subjects of interest – the ‘key populations’ (see Woensdregt & Nencel, 2022a). The CRs found out from the CLRA process that, while they (and their communities at large) appreciated the health-oriented programmes CBOs provided, these programmes did not always meet their most immediate or pressing desires and needs. The more hidden aspects of their everyday lived realities, including gender-based violence and economic insecurities, remained largely unaddressed. Through the research, the CRs were able to identify these gaps in current programmes for MSWs, and they unearthed mental health as a root cause of many physical health problems among sex workers. They felt that, if mental health issues are left unaddressed, it will render futile other initiatives focusing on sexually transmitted infections and HIV prevention.

CLRA provides opportunities for long-term action

We learned that CLRA could also be a tool for critical reflection for assessing the sustainability and scalability of development interventions. Our CLRA outcomes illustrate that sustainability in the context of CLRA is a process that leads to a number of actions generating several new events and processes that all have specific potentially transformative effects that, in turn, also result in subsequent steps, and so on. For instance, one of the CRs from the ghetto, inspired by his research work, started a radio programme with his CLRA colleagues. This led to the founding of a new youth group that grew into a formal organization that now collaborates with influential Northern actors in the ODA system. Other CRs from the ghetto used the skills they had learned through this project to start an informal mentor programme engaging younger members of their community in research and action. They now form a wide pool of active researchers supporting CBOs in the ghetto with research and research outputs. When we were

writing the research proposal for this work, we could never have predicted such outcomes, which illustrates how CLRA requires flexibility and open-endedness in terms of (sustainable) outcomes. Rethinking programme sustainability indicates the need to focus on the research process more than a rigid continuation of specific pre-set project activities. Sustainability, then, becomes a lens to look at how CLRA leads, in this case, to a specific form of agency which may contribute to increased critical consciousness and engender particular community initiatives far into the future. As these emerging forms of sustainability cannot be observed right away, in terms of either the change or the content, this requires a broader frame of project activities and their specific goals. Ultimately, allowing a broader frame of this kind opens a window of opportunity for people-centred/driven and contextualized transformative activities that follow the rhythm of community members' everyday lives and for leaving space for surprises in terms of both knowledge creation and long-term outcomes.

Capacities of participating CBOs

Compared with other development programmes, the CLRA process builds community capacities in different, and potentially more useful, ways. The CLRA research outcomes, combined with the outcomes of participant observations in the two CBOs and interviews with staff members, suggest that development programmes often use CBO members as mere 'bodies' requested to participate in meetings and trainings to fulfil programmatic indicators. Members of the two CBOs explained that NGOs and research institutions often invite them to capacity-building workshops. These workshops tend to focus on health education, safe sex practices and sex worker rights – in the case of MSWs, and data collection and documentation of police killings and sexual violence – in the case of ghetto youths. Community members explained that these training modules do not always meet community members' needs and aspirations. Moreover, we observed that such trainings generally fail to build skills community members can use outside the planned development context.

We observed that CLRA builds grassroots research experience beyond programmatic needs. Through the CLRA process, the CRs were trained in interviewing, writing, and presentation skills. Although it remains unclear whether training on these skills is more useful than other capacity building in the context of planned development, as noted above, this did provide CRs with the necessary skills to participate in other research projects in the CBO/NGO sector. Moreover, we observed that the CRs gained critical consciousness through the CLRA process in terms of their lives (e.g. realizing that they are more than sex workers or 'thugs') and their capabilities beyond planned development programmes. They became aware that their experiences and stories matter and that they are capable of action. During their collaborative sessions, the CRs often contrasted CLRA with what they termed 'NGO-driven research' and described the CLRA

process to each other as an empowering experience, as illustrated by the following comment:

The [CLRA] research, it taught us what we know, and how much we know, and it also showed us what we can do. We can do research, we can write reports, and we can make decisions. We have voices that we can share and make heard. We can initiate our development projects for change and teach NGOs on what we really need and how we want to work together – or not work together at all. This is what we do, also in our justice work, we suffer from police violence, so it's our story to tell. But we can only tell it in our way, our language. They need to learn to listen.

[Youth CBO CR, November 2018]

Speaking to each other, many CRs described the CLRA process as providing them with critical awareness overall and specifically about their societal position and opportunities and about more powerful actors in the ODA system. The CBO leaders wrote down these reflections during the process but only shared them with us after the project had ended when they asked us to evaluate the project with them. Moreover, the research process provided the CRs with access to otherwise inaccessible (intellectual) spaces. For example, the formal book presentation introduced above took place in the garden of a research institute in Nairobi. For most of the CRs, this was their first time to present their work. Many of them came to the venue dressed up and visibly enjoyed the presentations and informal festive gathering afterwards.

Challenges and weaknesses

Although the CLRA showed potential in terms of doing things differently and communities reclaiming the lead, the method did not come without challenges and weaknesses. The CLRA process is intense and time consuming and demands commitments from all parties. Throughout the process, the MSW CBO, which is firmly embedded in the ODA system, was at times preoccupied with the managerial demands of their other projects. The CBO management teams fully supported the CLRA project, but the demands of the ODA system affected management's possibilities for involvement. Moreover, the CRs employed by this CBO were frequently required to do CBO duties (e.g. hosting visitors or attending NGO meetings), which understandably hampered their ability to complete their CLRA research. Using CLRA requires researchers, CBOs, and other people involved to reflect and critically consider the time available and necessitates that CBOs provide the necessary space and time for CRs to do their work.

The power differences between us as academic researchers and the CBO staff, as well as between the CBO staff and members at times kept the CLRA process from being fully community-led. Although the CBOs never made explicit the

power differences bestowed on us through the structures in which we operate, we noticed that, ultimately, the decision-making power continued to be with us. Relatedly, existing CBO structures and decision-making power also influenced the topics the CRs could and could not discuss. As described above, the CLRA process encourages CRs to interrogate the nature of their reality collaboratively and critically; in the context of our project, this included reflections on the impact of various programmes the CBOs run. In our experience, however, hegemonic power relations within CBOs impacted the extent to which the CRs could engage in such reflection. For instance, during one of the weekly CLRA sessions, the CRs considered how to improve the CBO's interactions with police officers and other law enforcement workers. Through their activities, both CBOs in this study are keen to cultivate a trusting and cordial working relationship with law enforcement and public administration officers. During the CLRA session, the CRs reflected on a sensitization³ outreach activity that had been conducted on the previous Saturday at a notoriously corrupt police precinct in the northeast of the city. Although the CRs considered the outreach strategy to be in line with the overall CBO programmatic objectives and to serve as a critical entry point for community-police relations, they felt that CBO activities should aim to engage law enforcement more deeply, going beyond routine outreach exercises. We invited the team to describe and interrogate the activity in light of our past discussions. We agreed that the CRs would design their own police sensitization strategies to feed into the CBO's ongoing re-strategizing processes. However, this exercise was interpreted as an unwelcome critique of the CBO in question. Things took a sharp turn in the days following this CLRA session and resulted in a clash among the CRs and between the CRs and the CBO management. In hindsight, we realize that, as facilitators, we failed to intervene when the CRs said they would 'interrogate' or 'investigate' (fairly innocuous research lingo) the CBO's activities with the police. To the CBO staff and members, the use of these words made it seem as if the CRs, as part of the CLRA process, were intent on digging up dirt on the CBO in the way investigative journalists seek to uncover scandals. This was understandably interpreted as a critique of the CBO and its activities and required us to convince the involved CRs and CBO staff members that the process had a different intention. We talked at length with everyone involved, first separately and then collectively, using locally relevant principles of conflict resolution that we were familiar with from having worked with the CBO for years. It took time to listen to everyone and build a collective understanding of the underlying problem of mistrust, and we also facilitated the discussion on how to rebuild trust. While everyone involved acknowledged that rebuilding trust takes time, they also decided unanimously to commit to the process and continue with the research in this spirit. We also learned to tread even more carefully and to be even more attuned to the perceptions of the CRs and to the internal dynamics of the partnering CBOs.

Another challenge arose when deciding on the layout of the book developed by the CRs. Despite adhering as academic researchers to the ideals of engaged

scholarship, accompanying research, and co-creation, for the layout of the popular book that was designed as an outcome of the CLRA process and that was supposed to function as a community tool for dissemination, we failed to leave the final decision making to the CBOs. We considered it a nice idea to create a double-sided book, including the content of the gay sex worker-led CBO on one side and that of the youth CBO on the other. Although we were aware of potential tensions between the CRs from the MSW CBO and those from the youth CBO, we failed to account for youths in the ghettos not wanting to be associated with homosexuality. Because their book included content on gay men and homosexuality, the youth CBO was initially hesitant to disseminate this valuable end product.

The open-ended approach that our CLRA project adopted proved to be a very useful explorative and interpretive process that built rich collective profiles of the MSWs and ghetto youth and their lived experiences. This open-ended approach did a great deal to promote participatory and community-driven knowledge production. We also observed individual action (e.g. starting small businesses, pursuing new community-oriented research opportunities, founding new CBOs, and taking up community leadership roles) and collective action (e.g. the adoption of new advocacy strategies concerning LGBTQ rights, police brutality and extrajudicial killings of ghetto youths, CBO-initiated savings and investment support groups, and collaborations with other like-minded CBOs and individuals across the city) emerging from the two teams of CRs and our partner CBOs. This offers an opportunity and basis for subsequent research and intervention projects with the express purpose of showing the extent to which sustainable action and long-term impact can be attributed to CLRA in various contexts.

Conclusion: the potential of CLRA as a method for communities to reclaim the lead

In this chapter, we introduced CLRA as an experimental methodological approach that can be used to support communities to ‘reclaim the lead’ in the ODA system. We hope we have shown that CLRA can contribute to making international development efforts more inclusive, effective, and relevant by providing an understanding of the everyday lived realities of community members and generating action long after the project period ends.

In describing CLRA as a form of community ethnography, we have shown how CLRA builds on PAR, taking the approach one step further, as communities are in the lead. We have demonstrated the feasibility of the method, showing that it is capable of generating knowledge about the lived experiences of community members, building research and other practical skills, and generating action beyond mere programmatic goals. We have shown CLRA to be a democratic tool, able to generate a shift in focus from planned development goals towards the goals of the people whose lived realities are at stake.

However, as explained above, CLRA does not come without challenges and weaknesses. In reflecting on our experiences with CLRA, we described the power differences among us as academic researchers, CBOs, and communities and discussed how these kept the CLRA process from being community-led throughout. Nonetheless, although the shift in ownership that CLRA promotes does not eliminate hegemonic power, it flattens traditional hierarchies between academic and community researchers. Supporting CRs to take control of the research and action agenda and facilitating their active involvement and leadership in the research design, implementation, and dissemination reinforces the idea of inclusive and community-centred research. We have shown that this process can be empowering and emancipatory for marginalized groups, who often remain unheard. The CLRA approach is relatively unexplored in previous work; to further develop this approach, our reflections emphasize the importance of flexibility, open-endedness, and continued reflections from researchers, academics, and other actors involved at different levels of the ODA system.

In sum, we argue that CLRA offers a practical alternative by ‘doing differently’ in international development. CLRA has the potential to reverse certain power dynamics, especially around knowledge production and learning, within the field of development cooperation, as well as in academia. Future work should continue to explore the implementation of CLRA in development practice. Our experiences with CLRA in the context of planned development are among the first to be documented. Future work can explore how CLRA works in different contexts and among different communities to interrogate whether the approaches and outcomes seen in other groups and communities as part of this process are similar or unique. The process we have described here was implemented in a context in which sufficient time and resources were available. Future work could seek to understand how CLRA works in contexts where such resources are in shorter supply. Moreover, future work could seek to understand how CLRA works in the context of planned development approaches – for instance, in the design and implementation of a development partnership. To ensure community ownership and leadership, it is crucial that, when CLRA is used in development arrangements, communities – rather than NGOs – have ownership of the allocated (financial) resources. In thinking about future CLRA implementation, we would like to emphasize that, instead of requiring CLRA to adapt to existing (development) systems and approaches, development practitioners will need to adapt to CLRA.

Notes

- 1 Being aware of multiple conceptual flaws and connotations in understanding ‘communities’ (see e.g. Cornwall & Eade, 2010; Gardner & Lewis, 2015), when considering CBOs as well as community-led research and action, we understand ‘communities’ to mean a group of people with specific interests, often in a shared spatial or identity context. We apply ‘community’ as an everyday concept (Vijayakumar, 2017) and recognize that it emerges in distinct ways.

- 2 *Fununu* is a Swahili word that loosely translates to ‘the word on the street’ or ‘alleged account’. We used this concept to help CRs formulate research propositions.
- 3 See Woensdregt & Nencel (2022b) for more information on the police sensitization method used by this CBO.

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