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Abstract:

There is a growing realisation that to better understand and intervene in the interconnected political, cultural and psycho-social dynamics that constitute the contexts for these current global challenges requires transdisciplinary and intersectoral approaches; approaches that include and value diverse perspectives and pay particular attention to the perspectives and experiences of those who are the most vulnerable and those who are currently excluded from the knowledge creation processes. This article discusses the learning gained from an inter-disciplinary and inter-institutional project entitled Transformative Engagement Network (TEN).

Introduction

Moving towards ecologically sustainable and socially just development in a time of great environmental and social change challenges dominant values and goals, as well as current practices in development (Pelling, O'Brien & Matyas, 2015: 126).

In this article academic staff discuss the learning gained from an inter-disciplinary and inter-institutional¹ project entitled *Transformative Engagement Network* (TEN). Developmental assistance to developing countries over the last five decades has largely been based on imposed project theories and concepts. Hence post-project success rates and sustainability have been low. The primary aim of TEN was to position smallholder farming communities who experience poverty, climate change, hunger and food insecurity as key contributors to debates and policies on global poverty and climate change. In doing so, TEN set out to transform how universities, government and non-government agencies engage with smallholder farmers in Malawi and Zambia. The article describes the thinking that informed the project, how the project was implemented and findings regarding the impacts of TEN to date.

The thinking that informed the TEN Project

It is widely accepted that climate change poses complex challenges that cannot be resolved within conventional scientific approaches or within mainstream development practices (Pelling, O'Brien & Matyas, 2015). The International Commission on Climate Change and Development (2009) and the United Nations Development Programme indicate that knowledge about adapting to climate change and food security is failing to reach those who need it most. National development plans and reports in Malawi (2017) and Zambia (2016) identify rural smallholder communities as the most vulnerable to the expected impacts of climate change and global food production. These same communities tend to be under-represented in decision-making processes. As a result, their capacity to contribute their knowledge is severely curtailed.

There is a growing realisation that to better understand and intervene in the interconnected political, cultural and psycho-social dynamics that constitute the contexts for these current global challenges, requires transdisciplinary and intersectoral approaches; approaches that include and value diverse perspectives and pay particular attention to the perspectives and experiences of those who are the most vulnerable and

¹ The four partners were: Maynooth University, Ireland, Mzuzu University, Malawi, Mulungushi University and the Zambian Open University, Zambia

are currently excluded from the knowledge creation processes. ‘Expert knowledge has a role. But it is not at the top of a hierarchy of knowledge; rather it is one of a number of ways of knowing, all of which are vital to the knowledge creation process.’ (Ryan and Murphy, 2018, p72)

The TEN Project sought to create the conditions that would make it possible to include those who are ‘outside’ the academy in creating knowledge, and model an academically rigorous transdisciplinary learning and research experience.

TEN involved (i) academics from four universities from a range of disciplines including adult and community education, agriculture, biology, climate change, forestry, geography, sociology, and soil science; (ii) members of rural smallholder communities; (iii) government and non-government staff working with these smallholder communities; and (iv) policy makers in Ireland, Malawi and Zambia. The goal was to initiate exchanges of knowledge and expertise between universities, rural communities, the agencies and organisations that work with these communities, and between national and international bodies concerned with climate change and, in doing so, to work together to shift the locus of control in policy-making and setting research priorities towards smallholder communities.

Combining western socio-scientific knowledge of universities with the lived knowledge of smallholder farmers, who are among the world’s most excluded, was a major challenge as these different types of knowledge are not easy bed-fellows. Communities are likely to favour ways of knowing the world that privilege holism and connectedness, while universities privilege discipline-specific empirical research. TEN’s goal was to explore the possibilities of a philosophical meeting of these different positions, mainly through an adjustment on the part of the universities to a more contextualized understanding of the world, so that as solutions are sought to the challenges of climate change, the knowledge of local communities and cultures can be drawn on to inform decision-making at national and global levels.

This fundamental aspect of the TEN approach was underpinned by a radical adult education commitment to questioning taken-for-granted cultural norms, values, socio-economic structures and the assumptions that define knowledge:

Adult and community education must play a role in revealing how epistemological colonisation operates and contributes to global inequality, in disrupting it, in demonstrating how epistemological diversity can contribute to global cohesion and in working alongside those who have the capacity to engage with communities whose knowledge has been ignored in academic circles. (Ryan and Murphy 2018, p84)

Also core to TEN was community education's emphasis on the importance of learning together from practice in the contexts in which we live, and exploring how to look beyond the boundaries of what exists towards new ways of engaging that value ethical, equitable, sustainable and resilient ways to live (Ryan and Murphy, 2018).

What we did

TEN was funded by the Irish Aid and Higher Education and Research Institutes Programme for Strategic Cooperation (2012-2015) and was designed and implemented by an interdisciplinary team in each of the four partner universities.

The anchor activity for TEN was the interdisciplinary Masters in Transformative Community Development. It was jointly developed and awarded by the four partner universities. All students enrolled were already working directly with smallholder farmers. They came from a variety of government ministries (including agriculture, education, health, home affairs, community development, chiefs' affairs, engineering, religion, forestry) and international or local NGOs (in areas such as risk, disaster and relief, agriculture and forestry, education, broadcasting, environmental & resilience, programme support). They were selected with attention to their potential to act as 'connectors' and 'agents of change' through which we could engage with those cultural, economic and governance institutions that had the potential to prevent or enable transformation. Thirty-five students successfully completed the joint Masters in

Transformative Community Development in 2015. The programme included blended, work-based and reflexive learning, group work, peer-learning, community-informed research and fieldwork. Our approaches to teaching recognised the centrality of critical reflection, developing cognition rather than only the transfer of information, problem-posing and problem-based learning and, most importantly, horizontal relationships between students, teachers and smallholder farmers, so that each recognised the other as both a learner and an educator.

Work with communities was spearheaded by the African University partners, each of whom identified a Community of Practice (CoP) comprising i) smallholder farmers that are threatened by climate change and lack food security, and ii) agencies and professionals working with these communities on those threats. Each University had an existing relationship with these communities, a relationship through which trust had already been built up with significant groups within the community, including traditional rulers, community leaders and government officials, extension workers and other community groups. Collaborating with each CoP ensured that the learning, engagement and research undertaken within the Masters would be grounded in the lived experiences of CoP members, and could be used by and be useful for communities in the future. An initial baseline study of socio-cultural, political, agricultural and geographical data was compiled. Students engaged with these communities of practice throughout the Masters programmes, and worked with the communities and with their academic supervisors to identify research topics of relevance to the transformative aims of TEN (included studies of food security, agricultural practices, indigenous knowledge, adaptive strategies, religion, health, gender dynamics, and traditional leadership).

To ensure engagement at policy level, a series of forums was initiated. A Local Consultative Forum (LCF) was established at each CoP to provide community-led guidance to TEN, to influence the direction of TEN and to assist in communication between the University and the community. Additionally, a review was undertaken of existing linkages to other universities, professional bodies, policy-makers and legislators, government ministries, local and international non-government

organisation (NGOs) and aid agencies. Based on these reviews, National Consultative Forums (NCFs) were established in Malawi and Zambia, in one case linking into an existing network and in the other establishing a new network for the purposes of this project. The members were national policy and decision makers who provided advice. An International Consultative Forum (ICF) was established to provide wider linkage to the global community in the area of climate change and global poverty. The local, national and international forums were informed by the TEN Project in a series of meetings and presentations of the Masters students' research findings.

Learning from TEN

In this section we draw on a series of evaluations undertaken during and after the TEN project and involving the key stakeholders.

The students of the TEN Masters programme spoke of the importance of developing a transformative multidisciplinary approach which was grounded in their work with communities. They described how their interaction with communities was the most transformative element for them:

when we went to survey our community of practice and I compared the concepts we learned on climate change and its negative effects on the rural communities, especially the smallholder farmer, I immediately had an idea of the real challenges that the smallholder farmers were going to experience or were experiencing.

Students noted that learning with their colleagues throughout the workshops and shared activities in the Masters were also important in shifting their thinking about community development:

Before, I used to think that community development means thinking for communities, their problems/needs and finding solutions for these. My approach to working with them was more of pressing on them what I had read

and believed. The opportunity to reflect critically on my approach through discussion groups with other staff and students on this Masters has given me new thinking to community development, new approaches and new processes of engaging communities meaningfully for more sustainable change.

In an evaluation conducted after graduation, graduates indicated that their employers and co-workers have been keen to learn about the methodologies and ethos of transformative community development: some had run training workshops and participated in radio broadcasts. They also mentioned the significance of the Masters programme for their own careers, recounting how they had received promotions related to their TEN experiences, engaged in further education and established new initiatives based on the participative community methods.

Members of the CoP expressed overwhelming support for having TEN research students working with their communities and wanted placements to continue. They felt that they had taught the students a great deal - 'residents in my village demonstrated to the students their capacity to survive in a dust bowl'. TEN students echoed how 'it was amazing to learn how much knowledge and experiences the local people had. This... contradict[ed] my previous understanding about the top down approach of extension service delivery in the agricultural sector.' For example, a TEN student described learning about ...

.... a coping strategy employed by a widow who cannot afford scientific methods we would usually advise. She resorted to using a mubanga tree which is in her compound whose leaves are very good and act as manure and she has been using them to apply in her field and this has increased her crop yield.

During the research, village elders described how traditional knowledge and taboos are significant; for example they have enabled the preservation of tree species important in spiritual rituals. These particular species play an important role in moisture retention for crop production during drought periods and in deforested environments. However,

more intensive agriculture methods alongside changing beliefs and non-adherence to taboos, had resulted in increased rates of deforestation (Murphy et al. 2015).

In turn, community members highlighted their learning from the students in relation to the effects of climate change for their communities and broader adaptive possibilities. In the evaluation at the end of the funded research, they noted two significant benefits of the TEN Masters students' research: i) that research was conducted in and gave recognition to the experiences of those living in extremely remote areas, ii) research captured the complex intersection of cultural, social and economic practices at work in the communities, bringing new realisations and questioning of existing practices within the communities. For example, the implications of the complex intersection of gender, food, education and property rights including restrictions on women growing or eating certain foods, girls staying away from school when menstruating and women not having the right to own land. This complexity is also evident in use of language, with university staff emphasising how...

... climate change from the local community perspective is different from our scientific understanding by differentiating between seasonal, weather or climate definitions. It simply means 'change of weather', e.g in Chewa tribe they would say 'ku sintha kwa nyengo'; in Bemba of Northern Zambia 'imichele' etc these definitions locally encompass weather, seasons and indeed climate.

Community members also highlighted the issue of restricted flows of knowledge about research in scientific and academic circles; they wanted research information to be freely available to Government and NGOs. They wanted ownership of research data gathered in their communities so as to allow their communities to play an active role in deciding what is needed. They identified areas where they would like further research to be conducted, including the gendered experiences of climate change among smallholder rural communities and the correlation between educational attainment and capacity/willingness to change practices.

The academic staff of the partner universities felt that the TEN Masters had brought key teaching and community engagement aspects to the fore. Their learning from working across institutions and disciplines has given them valuable experience that was recognised by their universities through the appointment of TEN team members to university committees developing postgraduate programmes and civic engagement. The African universities also used the structures and capacities developed in this Masters to develop other programmes.

University staff also highlighted the challenges they faced in communicating across and between different academic, policy and community audiences. All academic staff noted that collaborating across disciplines and with external partners was challenging in a higher education context where individual scholarship and disciplinary specialism is rewarded. The level of collaboration and dynamic engagement involved in research like TEN is not necessarily recognised in academic career progression or work conditions.

Within the participating universities, the TEN processes entailed extensive cooperation and innovative developments across support services (exams, registration, Bursars office, library, IT services, conferring, graduate studies), many of which had never worked at this level of collaboration. It needed a high level of support and engagement from senior officers in the partner universities on an ongoing basis. Similarly, strong and ongoing levels of engagement with other key stakeholders in Government offices and NGOs was key to continued success of this interdisciplinary and collaborative work.

Conclusion

TEN highlights how we must draw on the capacities and resources of communities to respond to the urgent demands of complex global challenges. The TEN project is one example of an attempt to use our existing resources and knowledge in universities to work in a more equitable way that is premised on the experiences and needs of communities, including (i) a recognition of the importance of combining experiential learning within communities with academic learning; (ii) the need to begin from and

stay with the priorities of the most vulnerable when engaging in local, national and international policy-making; (iii) a realisation that global problems such as poverty, migration and climate change transcend boundaries and require joint responses from a range of stakeholders, many of whom know little of the others' world or knowledge; and (iv) a realisation that inter-disciplinary research and collaboration is required to respond to these global problems.

The goals of social justice and sustainable development, and the recognition of the potential for change inherent in group and experiential learning are essential. As Freire's *Pedagogy of Hope* reminds us, looking beyond the boundaries of what exists, towards new and more resilient approaches to living is reliant on our capacity to imagine and to hope.

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