

Open Learning Communities under Construction - Are NGOs Contributing to the Process?

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I Open learning communities and the search for potential partners

The process of constructing open learning communities is about shifts in discourse on education, learning and development which challenge the appropriateness of conventional assumptions and practices underlying today's education systems. It questions the validity of current teaching methodologies as well as existing notions of the teacher to learner relationship and attempts to develop a new framework for looking at learning and development. The process of constructing open learning communities suggests moving away from forms of education which emphasize knowledge transmission towards a culture of learning.² The concept of open learning communities believes in the creative potential of human beings to interact and collectively reshape and reconstruct the world.

But where are the forces that influence new thinking in education and experiment with new practices? Looking at activities of community groups and non-governmental organizations involved in the fields of development and education there is some evidence that they have been among the first to question narrow and limiting educational frameworks and approaches. They have taken action and set up alternative education programs outside the formal system. They have worked with those learners who have either dropped out of the formal system or never had access to it in the first place - the majority of whom are women. They have been the advocates and practitioners of emancipatory learning, emphasizing learning as a process of 'conscientization' leading to an understanding of where *one's place in the world* is in relation to existing power structures.³ In the light of this an analysis of the ideological, practical and relational dynamics among the groups of NGOs involved in education and development may provide valuable insights to the question in how far these actors are involved in and contribute to the process of conceptualizing and putting into practice open learning communities.

Objective of the paper

The paper intends to identify those spaces where NGOs are pushing towards these shifts. Are NGOs involved in education actually a driving force in bringing about the shifts in educational discourse and practice and thereby inspiring the construction of open learning communities? Are they involved in reshaping our notions of education and learning? To what extent are they influencing new visions, practices and policies on learning? Can they be considered examples of learning communities? Above all the paper intends to stimulate and open the discussion around these questions and thereby contribute to conceptualizing open learning communities. Sharing ideas, linking insights and

¹ The views presented in this paper are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the United Nations Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization.

² The concept of open learning communities is an evolving concept which will be further defined in the course of this paper. UNESCO's *Learning Without Frontiers* Unit is particularly engaged in the process of constructing open learning communities. For a more extensive discussion on the concept see Jain, Manish (1996).

³ The concept which goes back to the writings of Paulo Freire (1972) shall be further discussed in the course of this paper.

experiences is a learning experience in itself and constitutes an important part of the process of collectively constructing open learning communities.

Structure of the paper

Part II will give some clarification on the NGOs under analysis. Part III will then define some notions of open learning communities and explore how their relation to the philosophy and practice of the NGOs involved in education. Part IV will discuss the question in how far the NGOs themselves can be considered examples of open learning communities. The last part will revisit the guiding question of the paper asking to what extent NGOs are pushing towards a shift in discourse and practice of education and development and developing questions and ideas around how and who contributes to the process of constructing open learning communities.

Methodology and Sources

Methodologically this paper will confront the approaches and underlying assumptions of a specific group of institutions in society involved in education and development with an evolving ideological framework about learning. While the paper is mainly a desk study using publications and documents on research carried out in the fields of education, development, international relations, social movements and NGOs, it also draws from the experiences of the author as assistant project coordinator to a UNESCO NGO Program on Literacy and Education for All. Within the framework of this program the author has over the past one and a half years regularly and closely interacted with NGOs involved in education and development.

II Education for All NGOs - Who are they?

The analytic value of the term non-governmental organizations is limited. EFA NGOs just like NGOs in general differ with regard to motivation, organizational structure and culture, hierarchical structure, areas and scope of action, status, size, historical and geo-political context, membership and - most importantly, with regard to political/ philosophical/ ideological orientation. Some are exclusively service-providers, others are voluntary organizations. Some are mainly intermediaries, others grassroots associations. Depending on the location of an NGO's headquarters, some are considered Northern NGOs (headquarters based in the North) and some Southern NGOs (headquarters based in the South); some are international in scope, others regional, national or local.⁴ This diversity can be found among NGOs involved in education and development just as for any other group of NGOs.⁵

Any labeling of a group runs the risk of undermining the diversity of its membership. Still, for strategic or other reasons, different groups may chose to regroup under a common label and draw attention to their shared ideas and goals. In the case of the NGOs involved in education and development, an important and unifying reference point in the recent history of education and development has been the Education for All initiative.

⁴A detailed study on the issue of classifying NGOs has been carried out by Mezzalama and Schumm (1993) which analyses and summarizes different kinds of existing categorizations from the perspective of international organizations; David Korten's (1990) *Getting to the 21st Century - Voluntary Action and the Global Agenda* approaches the issue of classification from a grassroots perspective; Michael Edwards and David Hulme's books (1992 and 1995) on questions of impact and accountability of NGOs also propose criteria to classify NGOs; finally the German speaking literature on new social movements and NGOs has discussed the issue within the context of social movement research (i.e. Rucht, Dieter (1996).

⁵ To my knowledge there does not yet exist a detailed and systematic study analyzing and classifying the spectrum of NGOs involved in education and development, particularly with regard to NGOs active at national and grassroots level.

This initiative goes back to the World Conference on Education for All, also referred to as the Jomtien Conference, in 1990 where NGOs for the first time were officially recognized by governments and international agencies as partners in the field of education and development. The main outcome of the Conference was the adoption of an action plan which committed UN agencies, member states and NGOs to consider Education for All the priority area for the ten years to come in order to make the right to education a reality for all.

The Jomtien Conference also had some unintended side effects which proved to be particularly important for the international NGO community. The Conference provided a space and an occasion for NGOs involved in education and development to either strengthen their existing networks or to create new NGO structures⁶. In light of the dynamics triggered among NGOs within the context of the World Conference on Education for All and the positive identification of many of them with the Education for All (EFA) Initiative, the NGOs considered in this paper shall be referred to as EFA NGOs.⁷

III Promoting change or tinkering with yesterday's solutions? - philosophy and practice of EFA NGOs

In order to analyze the innovative quality of EFA NGO philosophy and practice in shifting the thinking around development, education and learning, the concept of open learning communities needs to be further defined. While the process orientation of open learning communities counters the use of neat and precise definitions, it is possible to identify some notions which indicate the dynamic shift away from conventional notions around education and learning.

Some Notions of Open Learning Communities

The concept of open learning communities indicates shifts

- towards learning systems that are legitimized and defined by the communities concerned;
- towards learning as tapping and building on local knowledge;
- towards learning as a process of conscientization which involves discovering oneself and one's place in society;
- towards radical community participation;
- towards gender aware learning systems;
- towards inter-generational learning;

⁶ The Conference inspired the Collective Consultation of NGOs on Literacy, a UNESCO supported NGO program, to adopt Education for All as its central theme and changed its name to the Collective Consultation of NGOs on Literacy *and Education for All*. It also triggered the creation of a new structure called the Education for All Network which is an interagency network which connects about NGOs from local to international level.

⁷ This labeling does not intend to draw attention away from the criticism, especially expressed by NGOs, that governments and international agencies have since Jomtien continued and increased their investments in formal primary schooling while neglecting non-formal and particularly adult education.

- towards a focus on learning to learn;
- towards lifelong learning as a dynamic, inter-related process;
- towards learning as relationship-building;
- towards transcending the boundaries of formal, non-formal and informal education (beyond conventional institutionalized learning)
- towards making multiple connections and practicing principles of learning organizations;
- more to be added in the future ...

The EFA *Expanded Vision* - supporting notions of open learning communities?

The processes leading to and following Jomtien are an important point of reference for EFA NGOs. Therefore their potential influence in inspiring the construction of open learning communities shall be discussed below. The relations between the ideological dimensions of Jomtien, which are summarized in the Declaration on Education for All (1990), and the notions of open learning communities as identified above shall be explored.

When looking at the nature of the Declaration on Education for All we must bear in mind that it reflects a process of political compromise between the different stakeholders involved in education⁸. Most EFA NGOs, for example, identify strongly with Article 2 of the Jomtien Declaration which stresses the need for unconventional approaches to education:

"What is needed is an 'expanded vision' that surpasses present resource levels, institutional structures, curricula, and conventional delivery systems while building on the best of current practices." (World Declaration on Education for All, Article 2)

Most governments, on the other hand, tend to particularly quote Article 5 of the Declaration which clearly explains that formal primary schooling is and should continue to be the basis for education systems, while non-formal programs are supposed to be supplementary:

"The main delivery system for basic education of children outside the family is primary schooling.(...) . Supplementary alternative programs can help meet the basic learning needs of children with limited or no access to schooling, provided that they share the same standards of learning applied in schools ... "

I would argue that the main reference point for Jomtien at least with regard to learning systems for children is still the formal school system. Unconventional approaches are welcomed, but only as *supplementary mechanisms*, as mechanisms apart, mainly to be found in the non-formal sector. In contrast, the concept of open learning communities calls for the radical questioning of the dominant position of formal standardized systems. Ideas around open learning communities suggest a shift towards a society with diverse learning systems which cut across age and time.

⁸ These stakeholders include donor agencies, governments, international organizations and NGOs.

The concept of open learning communities is not about rejecting or promoting existing approaches as such, but about actively reflecting and reconstructing them, which may or may not lead to a rejection or acceptance of conventional notions around education and learning. An activity undertaken as part of the Education for All Initiative, e.g. an adult literacy program, may at the same time contribute to the construction of open learning communities. But the significance of this program will depend on the motivation and processes that lead to its set up and implementation.

The Jomtien Declaration considers education, above all, as a means to provide for and meet what is called a person's *basic learning needs*. These are said to comprise the need to acquire essential learning tools (such as literacy, oral expression, numeracy and problem solving) as well as learning content (such as knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes) required by human beings to be able to survive, to develop their full capacities,(...), and to continue learning. (see World Declaration on Education for All, Art. 1). The implicit focus is on the transmission of knowledge and skills rather than on supporting learning and understanding. Concepts of open learning communities dissociate themselves from the idea of knowledge transmission and advocate for learning as a social interactive creative process⁹ which releases human potential. Learning is perceived as a process of building relationships, giving meaning to the world, interrelating and constructing knowledge and entering into the world of meta-cognition¹⁰. The more functionalist notion of learning in the Education for All concept contrasts with the dynamic concept of learning within the context of open learning communities. The latter is more about facilitating and enabling processes rather than achieving definable results.

There are many references in the Jomtien Declaration which reflect the notion that the learners and their communities are first and foremost perceived as having 'deficits'. The focus is on them as *il-literates*, *not-life-skilled* and *not* knowing numeracy. In the context of open learning communities on the other hand, one starts from the assumption that there are in every learner and every community a multitude of knowledge systems and learning processes already operating which need to be tapped, nurtured and built upon. Learning is perceived as a process of linking the past, the present and the future. Both concepts talk about lifelong learning, but while in the context of Education for All the focus is on building on past knowledge, the thinking around open learning communities emphasizes continuous knowledge creation. While the first refers to a more linear, gradual and step by step process, where separate learning needs are met one after another to eventually provide the "foundation of lifelong learning" (World Declaration on Education for All Article 1.4), the construction of open learning communities suggests a concept of learning which refers to multidimensional interrelated process that can not be broken down into neatly definable learning chunks, but rather releases human potential and the ability to create knowledge¹¹.

The two concepts reflect the ideological traditions characterizing the educational and development discourse of their time. While the Education for All concept as portrayed in the Jomtien Declaration primarily reflects notions of modern rational thinking and its concern with technical and economic progress, equal rights, autonomy and individual self fulfillment, the concept of open learning communities reflects notions of post modernist thinking. Post modernist thinking does not contradict

⁹The German adjective "kulturschaffend" would be more precise in this context, but has no corresponding word in English. An example of someone who is "kulturschaffend" is a creative artist.

¹⁰These notions reflect the discourse on *learning to learn* which refers to learning about the learning process itself, which can be monitored by the learner as a metacognitive exercise. For a substantive reflection on the concept see Smith, R. M. (1990).

¹¹This understanding of lifelong learning is close to Lengrand's definition: "The learning presupposed in lifelong learning will allow each individual to continue to develop his or her physical, emotional, and intellectual potential, and will reveal the interrelatedness and the relativity of areas of knowledge and of human endeavors and perceptions." (Lengrand 1985)

modern thinking as such, but challenges the ways in which and on what grounds we perceive and organize the world including the underlying principles of the modernity paradigm.¹² It also reflects notions of theories about lifelong learning and "learning to learn", feminist discourse, pluralism and radical pedagogy which will be discussed within the context of the following chapter.

Ouane argues that many of the "new" ideas around education and learning, particularly the idea to shift towards integrated learning systems - i.e. overcoming the barriers of formal and non-formal education - are not only age old, but were also raised in Jomtien. Still, the follow-up process of the Conference has not been able to motivate a major shift to change the dominant education paradigm. Since Jomtien, the main educational discourse continues to represent the perspective of formal schooling.¹³

EFA NGOs in Action - a shift towards open learning communities?

The following analysis of NGO philosophy and practice will show in how far NGOs are shaping and moving towards the construction and practice of open learning communities. The notions of open learning communities as presented above will provide a useful analytic tool.

- ***towards learning systems that are legitimized and defined by the communities concerned***
⇒ **non-formal education programs, for or with the people?**

How do NGOs legitimize their interventions in a community? Do they base their decisions on the opinions of the community or reasons put forward by an external authority? Do they start from the potential or the deficits of a community? Most EFA NGOs are involved in adult literacy programs. The introduction of a literacy program is often legitimized by emphasizing the positive impact of literacy for development. The illiteracy of the people is defined as a deficit which has to be overcome. However, this approach has often caused problems in that the literacy trainers, when starting their project, discover that the illiterates may not necessarily connect with their vision of development and do not share the external view that they are suffering from a deficit. They may reject the program. Many EFA NGOs, when asked about their experiences in establishing literacy program, say that the hardest part of their work had been to get things started. *"When going to the villages we realized that we did not really understand the people and their culture. In the beginning we did not know how to communicate our ideas to them. Only after we had established relationships with the people could we start discussing the issue with them."* (Literacy trainer from an OIEC/UNESCO functional literacy project, 1997).

Traditionally the next step in implementing the literacy program is the establishment of closer relations with the people in the community to convince them of the need for literacy. This often works and the literacy program can finally be established and may or may not result in valuable learning experiences for the community concerned.

¹²While many attempts have been made to define the term postmodernism, Hutcheon's (1989) definition shall be used here to explain the concept: *"In many ways postmodernism ultimately manages to install and reinforce as much as undermine and subvert the conventions and presuppositions it appears to challenge. Nevertheless it seem reasonable to say that the post modernist initial concern is to de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life; to the point that those entities we unthinkingly experience as natural (they might even include capitalism, patriarchy, liberal humanism) are in fact cultural; made by us, not given to us."* (Hutcheon 1989). For a discussion on different aspects of postmodernism see Engelmann (1993),

¹³ Adama Ouane is a Senior Program Specialist in UNESCO's Literacy and Adult Education Section and Coordinator of the *NGO Program on Literacy and Education for All*. He has been involved in the Jomtien processes and particularly reviewed the situation of Education for All in Africa (Ouane et Gazza 1996).

However, the concept of open learning communities, suggests a slightly different approach. Rather than confronting a community with a fixed idea, the NGO would interact with the community to understand and raise awareness of existing communication structures and knowledge systems. The people themselves - with the assistance of the NGO - would engage in a continuous process of interaction and reflection on what development and learning means in their specific context to create their learning environment. This process may or may not imply the setting up of a literacy program or other kinds of formal and/or non-formal programs. If it does, the meaning of these programs for the lives of the people will probably be different than a literacy program that was introduced by an external authority. The following statement by the literacy trainer cited above supports this observation: *"I want to say one thing. Never develop an idea for a project without the people in the community concerned."*

>From the perspective of open learning communities, the introduction of any learning event in a community has to be legitimized by the community and should build on existing knowledge systems, communication structures and local institutions rather than be externally defined. While a stimulus for joint reflection on learning can come from the outside, it is the concerned community which should be actively involved in constructing its learning environment. As one of the EFA NGO members interviewed said, "Community ownership evolves, it is not bestowed, granted or given by default" (World Education, 1997).

- ***towards learning as tapping and building on local knowledge***
⇒ **EFA NGOs contributing to new methodologies of action research**

Many EFA NGOs have been actively involved in developing and applying methodological tools to identify and reconstruct local knowledge systems and interactive learning structures. Maps, calendars, matrices, diagrams and other techniques have been used to raise awareness of the social dynamics of a community. One of the latest examples of a new methodological approach is the REFLECT Method developed by Action Aid (Archer & Cottingham 1996). In a REFLECT program there are no literacy textbooks, no pre-printed materials. The communities themselves develop their own learning materials that represent local dynamics, systematize the existing knowledge of learners and promote the analysis of local issues. The graphics become a permanent record for the community which can help it to further plan and negotiate its own development. With reference to Freire, the method aims at promoting active dialogue and empowerment in the community. It further draws on the construction and application of participatory rural appraisal.¹⁴ These methodologies represent an important contribution to putting into practice notions of open learning communities and support a shift towards learning as tapping and building on local knowledge.

- ***towards learning as a process of conscientisation and discovering oneself and one's place in society***
⇒ **EFA NGOs and Literacy - applying principles of consciousness raising**

The above notion of open learning communities reflects the ideas of radical pedagogy, which was particularly inspired by Paulo Freire's writings (Freire 1972; Brown 1994; Chambers 1983, Claessen /Van Wesemael-Smit, 1992). He saw learning and particularly literacy as a process of understanding and constructing one's self, one's roles in society and one's place in the world. From the perspective of the socially oppressed he intended to assist learners in *"perceiving the reality of oppression, not as*

¹⁴ For more detailed information on the REFLECT method and its ideological references see Archer and Cottingham (1996).

a closed world form which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform” (Freire 1972: 24). Freire coined the term *conscientisation* which refers to processes of perceiving and understanding social, political and economic contradictions and taking action against oppressive structures.

Many EFA NGO literacy programs have applied Freire’s idea of generative themes and words. In this approach, a facilitator - ideally together with the community - identifies themes which are most central in the lives of the learners. These themes are discussed and put into writing with and gradually by the learners. Through the process of reading and writing the learners gain a distance from their day-to-day lives and re-discover and re-construct the world and their places in it.

Open learning communities, just as radical pedagogy, is about conscientisation. Only if people are conscious of who they are, how they relate to others and what roles they play in society, can they actively participate in constructing open learning communities. The experience of EFA NGOs with these kinds of processes is very valuable to the construction of open learning communities. Now the challenge remains to link this practice to other practices related to open learning communities.

- ***towards community participation***

⇒ **problematizing participation in community schools**

It is hard to find any EFA NGO which would reject the importance of community participation in community development. But what do EFA NGOs mean when they use the term participation? Are they talking about community mobilization, consultation or true participation?

Different national NGOs and international NGOs, particularly Save the Children, have become involved in setting up community schools.¹⁵ A closer look at the participatory aspect of these initiatives reveals that in these projects participation focuses on aspects of school financing, management and the recruitment of teachers from the community.¹⁶ Sometimes communities are also involved in decision-making on content and methodology, but in most cases it seems that the official school curriculum is used as the main reference point for curriculum development, though adapted to the community context. Methodological and pedagogical issues are rarely developed with the community, which means that the potential value of local learning and indigenous knowledge systems remains largely untapped. Community participation is not practiced as a principle to facilitate the process of building a learning community, but is rather used as a tool to build an alternative school system for those who have no access to formal schooling. The ultimate role often tends to be the mainstreaming of children into formal schooling rather than building a community which allows its members to engage in collaborative interactive and inter-generational lifelong learning. In interviews with members of NGOs in Burkina Faso and Mali who are involved in community school projects these issues were raised. The NGOs indicated their interest to engage in collective thinking on how more wide ranging participation can be stimulated.

⇒ **highlighting participation in community education**

Community education approaches have a lot to contribute to the discourse on community participation. Several EFA NGOs follow approaches which fall under the broad category of

¹⁵Since Jomtien a lot of funding has gone into community schools projects. In trying to achieve the goal set at Jomtien to provide Basic Education for All by the year 2000, community schools are considered a cost-effective way to increase access to formal schooling and finally mainstream the students benefiting from these programs into the formal system.

¹⁶UNESCO’s *Learning Without Frontiers* Unit and the *NGO Program on Literacy and Education for All* are collaboratively involved in a project on *Transforming Community Schools into Open Learning Communities* in the context of which research is being conducted on the issues raised in this paragraph.

community education. The International Community Education Association (ICEA) with its regional branches all over the world has been playing a key role in further researching and developing the concept. According to the ICEA, community education involves a holistic approach which supports learning in, with and for the community. The objective is to enable the community to solve social, cultural, technological, economic and ecological problems and thereby foster integrated development. Freire's technique of identifying generative themes is used to define the problems of the communities. Community education tries to provide an answer to specific weaknesses of institutions and curricula in the formal system.¹⁷ Examples of community education practice comprise a great variety of activities ranging from projects on alternative tourism with out-of school youth, theater projects with the homeless, deforestation projects, cross-community interaction programs in areas of conflict or income-generating activities. Most of the community education programs seem to focus on one particular group which are referred to as the marginalized and aim at creating spaces for them within the larger community.

In an interview with the African branch of ICEA, the regional director emphasized that there is a need to gain a clearer understanding of what individual NGOs are actually doing in their community education projects. These insights would help to evaluate to what extent these projects contribute to shifts in conventional ways of thinking around learning and development. She said that in Africa there is a need to build a shared vision on community education by collectively reflecting on existing practices. More in-depth analysis is needed to draw conclusions on the potential driving force of community education for constructing individual and shared visions on open learning communities.¹⁸

- *towards gender aware learning systems*
⇒ **From Women's Education Programs to Cross Gender Programs**

In the context of open learning communities, gender aware learning systems would be systems that consciously reflect and build on the gender dynamics in a community. The relationships between women and men and the different roles they play in their communities would be analyzed by the community concerned to identify in how far gender specific knowledge and ways of learning exist and why. Some EFA NGOs already move in this direction by integrating gender as one of the themes in their literacy programs (Medel-Anonuevo 1991 and 1995). The learners individually and collectively gain a new understanding about their roles and place in the community in relation to the other sex. This process is the beginning of reconstructing and redefining gender relations.

Since most societies today are characterized by patriarchal structures, gender awareness training which forms part of many adult education programs, has become an important tool for women's empowerment¹⁹. All too often though, the programs focus exclusively on women and do not lead to interaction between the two sexes. The concept of open learning communities suggests to involve both women and men in reflecting on existing gender dynamics. More research needs to be done on how this joint reflection can be facilitated.

¹⁷ For a more elaborate discussion on the concept of community education see Zimmer (1991; 1995).

¹⁸ UNESCO's *Learning Without Frontiers Unit* and the *NGO Program on Literacy and Education for All* have started a process of collective reflection on the potential contribution of community education theories and practices in inspiring the construction and a shared vision of open learning communities.

¹⁹ "Empowerment of women is understood as a process in which women experience and acquire knowledge, tools and techniques in order to change their lives and societies. In this process the transformation of existing power structures is crucial". (Claessen, J./Van Wesemael-Smit, L. 1992: 6)

Gender conscientisation is particularly interesting in the context of open learning communities, since it provides a tool to reveal what kind of gender specific learning processes, knowledge and learning systems can be found in a learning community and how these can be accounted for and built upon.

A deeper analysis of what specific women's education programs carried out by EFA NGOs, can contribute to the construction of open learning communities, has yet to be done.

- ***towards inter-generational learning systems***
⇒ **Community Education Centers and Family Literacy**

This is an area in which EFA NGOs are experimenting. They have observed that the introduction of formal schooling for the children in a community often results in disconnecting the children from the parents (i.e. Save the Children in Burkina Faso). In creating community education centers with specific activities for parents, they try to narrow the growing gap between children and their parents. Family literacy programs present another attempt of NGOs to promote inter-generational learning. Children and parents organize learning as an interactive process (UNESCO 1995).

The concept of open learning communities would take the notion of inter-generational learning a step further and interpret it as a process of re-discovering and re-establishing inter-generational community dynamics to strengthen dialoguing between and among the different generations.

- ***towards a focus on learning to learn***
⇒ **Boithuto, Seliba Sa - Center for Self-Study Community Education**

While EFA NGOs do emphasize the importance of "learning to learn", it is hard to find research which examines NGO activity in this field in more depth. However one example is the *Boithuto, Seliba Sa - Center for Self-Study* is a project that was developed as an attempt to respond to the question of how the responsibility for learning can be given back to the learner. A wide variety of learners from different age groups come to the Center whenever and how often they want. The Center provides a space where people can

- *decide for themselves, what to learn, how to learn, when to learn and when they have learned enough;*
- *find learning materials and tutorial support, to plan their learning path, to guide them to resources and to help them when they are stuck; and*
- *work in a conducive atmosphere, for which they feel ownership and are responsible* (Mathot 1996).

- ***towards transcending the boundaries of formal, non-formal and informal education***

Linking formal and non-formal education has been a major issue for EFA NGOs. Many argue that the formal system could benefit from the methods and experiences of the non-formal sector which they consider to be more flexible and dynamic in responding to the learning needs of a rapidly changing world.

The metaphor often heard to illustrate the relation between the two is that of a bridge. The use of the term bridge indicates that while some connections can be made, the autonomy of the two systems is not questioned. If for example a non-formal program is successful in preparing a learner to finally enter the formal system, the term bridging is used. Open learning communities would take the notion a

step further. Rather than using the metaphor of a bridge the concept would suggest multiple connections between the systems which would constitute a new structure or a new whole. A synergy would replace the parallel existing systems.

Summing up

The discussion above serves to illustrate that several innovations and new approaches in the fields of literacy, adult education and community education, as carried out by EFA NGOs, show affiliations with some notions of open learning communities. These affiliations highlight the important potential of EFA NGOs as partners in participating in the process of building individual and joint visions of open learning communities. However the above mentioned notion of moving *towards transcending the boundaries of formal, non-formal and informal education*, which would indicate a radical shift from conventional towards holistic and integrated approaches to learning, does not seem to be put into practice. Most EFA NGOs define their role as complementary to that of the government and the formal system. According to this logic, a radical shift beyond the existence of three separate systems does not seem urgent. Though the Jomtien declaration calls for surpassing present institutional structures and delivery systems, the Jomtien process does not seem to have been able to motivate this radical shift.

IV EFA NGOs making connections, opening up and moving towards a world wide web of learning communities

"To create a learning community, different organizations make linkages and form a web of organizations for the common cause to "create a learning environment by learning together and from each other."

(Longworth, Norman and De Geest, Lieve (ed.) 1995: 55).

⇒towards making multiple connections and practicing principles of learning organizations

Making linkages and establishing partnerships among themselves and with other partners involved in the EFA initiative is an ongoing concern for EFA NGOs. Collaborative structures and networks can be found at the national, regional and international levels. But what is the nature and the purpose of these collaborative structures? What have the experiences been so far and what obstacles have been encountered? Are they examples of communities which learn with and from another and contribute to constructing a world wide web of learning? The following section will discuss the dynamics of EFA NGO structures, particularly the Collective Consultation for NGOs on Literacy and Education for All. The intention is to explore in how far the existing networks can be considered examples of open learning communities and, as such, partners in further contributing to the process of developing shared visions and practices of open learning communities.

The Collective Consultation of NGOs on Literacy and Education for All - Professionalizing the Field²⁰:

"Thirteen years after its establishment, the 'CC' (Collective Consultation of NGOs on Literacy and Education for All) as its members call it, has a number of important accomplishments to its credit, accomplishments

²⁰The following information on the Collective Consultation of NGOs on Literacy and Education for All are based on two contributions by the Collective Consultation's former President, David Kahler (World Education, Boston 1996,1997). For a more detailed historical account of the Collective Consultation, see Chambon-Fontaine (1993) and (1995).

which show that the CC has moved beyond its consultative status into a full fledged professional institution.” (Kahler (1997), Vice President of World Education and former President of the CC).

The Collective Consultation of NGOs on Literacy and Education for All (CC) is composed of about 80 NGOs (international and regional as well as some dynamic national and regional networks) involved in activities in the fields of education and development, particularly in literacy, adult and community education. Whereas it was organized in 1984 as a forum to be consulted by UNESCO, it has over the years expanded its scope of activities to include joint advocacy and operational activities, particularly in the field of professional development and capacity building.

The Collective Consultation of today provides:

- an intellectual and physical space for the professional development of its members - and UNESCO - through information exchange, debate and reflection on issues related to lifelong learning and development²¹;
- a forum for joint advocacy to influence policy formulation on issues related to lifelong learning , particularly at international level²²;
- documentation of its experiences and publications on issues around literacy and lifelong learning;
- assistance to its members in all aspects of (joint) project design, planning, implementation and evaluation in the field of lifelong learning and capacity building for grassroots NGOs²³;
- a forum to put joint thinking into practice and to create ways and means of establishing new partnerships.

By creating an environment for ongoing collaborative and continuous learning through the sharing of experiences as well as joint action and reflection the CC does exhibit characteristics of a learning community. The community is open in that its members open themselves and their organizations to interact with others and show an interest in broadening their scope of activities, their approaches and ideas. The structure is fairly loose and is principally open to new members. Through its activities which range from workshops with grassroots NGOs to advocacy at the international level, the CC tries to link the local with the global and thereby contributes to a world wide web of learning communities.

Still, from the perspective of open learning communities the analysis has to go deeper. The fact that the CC, according to its former president, has become a ‘professionalized institution’ (see quote above) creating a space for learning, does not forcibly imply that it is conducive to promoting the ideas of open learning communities as discussed in the previous section. The concern of the CC with professionalisation of its members and institutional capacity building for grassroots NGOs can be interpreted in different ways. Some researchers and activists have criticized the rapid expansion and professionalisation of NGOs and linked it to the increasing donor support given to their activities over the past fifteen years. Edwards and Hulme (1992) for example observe a shift from ”task-orientation” to ”role orientation” linked with the ”danger” that professionalism subordinates commitment. As expansion occurs, it is argued, changes in culture, structure and accountability may accumulate and

²¹Meetings are held in Paris one year with a regional meeting following the next year. Each meeting focuses on a specific theme with members preparing papers, making presentations, organizing panel discussions and round table presentations. Themes have included education and the environment; International Literacy Year; education and women; basic education for the marginalized; the Jomtien Conference on Education for All; Adult Learning for the 21st Century and the Rights of the Child, Education and Development.

²²To give one example, the Collective Consultation is developing a joint NGO statement on Adult Learning for the 21st Century to be presented to the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education in July 1997.

²³UNESCO and members of the Collective Consultation have implemented projects in Haiti (ATD Fourth World), Senegal (International Catholic Education Office), and in Mindanao, Philippines (World Education) which were discussed and revised within the framework of the Collective consultation and submitted for funding through UNESCO. Capacity building for grassroots NGOs included on literacy program implementation at the grassroots for West African NGOs and one in Indonesia on education and the environment. Funding has now been found to carry out national level capacity building activities in 10 Least Developed Countries.

change the organization from a voluntary organization, based upon the pursuit of a developmental mission and trying to shape events, to a public service contractor oriented towards servicing needs as defined by donors and national governments. Korten (1990) has provided examples of NGOs foundering with expansion and, in particular, has charted the evolution of some NGOs from "path-breaking crusaders" on a forbidden topic to "an expensive and lethargic international bureaucracy." (Korten, 1990: 126).

With regard to CC NGOs, a systematic survey would still have to be conducted to explore this hypothesis. From my experience, I would argue that a different factor is more influential in determining how role- or task-oriented an NGO is. It refers to how NGO members see their role within the broader context of education and development as well as in relation to the mission of their organization. If they know where they want to go and are able to define what the contribution of their organization in that process is, there will be less of a danger for them to be donor-driven. Professionalization in this sense would mean developing more professional self-confidence and integrity on the part of the NGO in negotiations and communication with communities, governments, funding agencies and international organizations. It should not prevent NGOs from, but encourage them to question the current practices in education by trying to 'see' and 'do' things differently and experiment with innovative ideas. Going beyond the status quo is a major concern of open learning communities, particularly in view of the rapid changes in the world today and the manifold crisis we are witnessing. If the CC wants to be innovative it may be worthwhile to take some time and collectively reflect on what development means to the individual members and in how far that responds to their approach to learning.

The value of the capacity building activities carried out within the framework of the Collective Consultation for the process of constructing and putting into practice individual and shared visions of learning and development will depend on the nature and content of the activities. It will be desirable to tap and build on the unique qualities and experiences of each NGO involved in order to nurture the diversity there is, while at the same time linking it with experiences of others as well as with latest insights gained in areas of concern to open learning communities, such as learning to learn, the use of traditional and modern technology, gender analysis, local knowledge systems and communication patterns, linguistic and cultural diversity and others.

Concerning government and NGO relations, the CC repeatedly stated that with regard to education it sees its role as complementary to government activity.²⁴ In doing so, CC members are not primarily concerned with challenging the existence of separate educational institutions - i.e. formal and non-formal systems, for different age or social groups - in an attempt to shift towards integrated learning systems. Rather their dialogue with governments evolves around the issue of how the NGOs can complement government activities. Whether this kind of cooperation is conducive to the development of open learning communities depends much on the quality of the relationship which varies greatly from country to country. Several NGOs explained that close cooperation with the Government in the field of non-formal education has often led to a situation where the NGO was expected to adapt its approach to the educational objectives of the governments rather than to its own priorities. When discussing a program on community schools for example, many governments tend to see their primary function in preparing children to enter the formal system, while some NGOs tend to argue that they should first and foremost contribute to integrated community development and prevent migration. In

²⁴The issue of complementary roles was discussed at the 1996 Seminar of the Collective Consultation of NGOs on Literacy and Education for All where participants drafted a statement for the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education. The CC members emphasize that the provision of education is first and foremost the responsibility of the governments (s. Draft of the Hamburg NGO Platform on Adult Learning for the 21st Century, 1996).

this case the compromise would not be conducive to further constructing open learning communities which puts the community interests first.

On the other hand, according to some members of the Collective Consultation, close cooperation with governments has also led to mutual learning processes. One such example is Senegal where the government is involving NGOs with experience in non-formal education programs in formulating the country's plan for girls and women's education and in teacher training activities. In order to evaluate the impact of government-NGO relationships, their substance and quality has to be carefully assessed. One example of a comprehensive study on government-NGO relations in basic education was carried out in Pakistan (UNDP-UNESCO 1997). Without being able to elaborate on the findings in any detail here, the results show that generalizations are difficult to make within one country. Relations vary according to region and often according to the absence or existence of functioning personal relations between an NGO member and a government. More research is needed to assess the implications and value of government-NGO relations for the construction of learning systems conducive to integrated development.

In conclusion, I would argue that the CC has already contributed to the construction of open learning communities by forming their own learning community. However, if the Collective Consultation is to contribute consciously towards developing joint visions on open learning communities, its members will have to show an interest in discussing and relating the ideas around open learning communities to their philosophy, their work and their perception as learning organizations.²⁵ In the near future the CC is planning to work on several issues which are relevant to the construction of open learning communities such as to "broaden the horizons of its members by focusing on community learning, alternative schooling structures, community development, local research and South to North knowledge and method transfer." (Kahler 1997). The CC is also planning to strengthen the partnership with dynamic regional/national NGO networks which will further expand and intensify world wide web of learning among NGOs, including both the South and the North.

The EFA NGO Network Participating in a World Web of Learning

The Education for All Network was established a few months after the World Conference on Education for All in 1990 calling on all partners to join their efforts to achieve the goal of Education for All by the year 2000. To establish a mechanism which would ensure NGO involvement in the process, NGOs initiated an interagency network of NGOs, United Nations agencies, universities and other education related institutions and networks committed to promoting Education for All. The network was to focus its activities at national and regional levels to assist and encourage NGOs to actively participate in the EFA follow up. Thus far, four regional networks have been established with NGO membership. While the national NGO networks are showing increasing interest in the field of professional capacity building related to literacy and lifelong learning, the originally focused on expanding management capacities. The assumption was that strengthened institutional and management skills would have a beneficial impact on development policies and wider political processes. Edwards and Hulme (1992) argue that the main emphasis for NGOs involved in such efforts is usually held to be the "process" involved in supporting local initiative rather than "content." Discussions with national representatives of some national EFA Networks have shown that closer links with the CC and its focus on content and professionalisation of the field are considered desirable.

²⁵For an example of a comprehensive organizational analysis of an international NGO - World Education - see Brown, Covey and Hoben (1986). Korten has developed an NGO Self Assessment Tool which provides a set of criteria which can be used by NGOs to determine where they stand in their approach and role. The assessment attempts to bring out whether an NGO is primarily a humanitarian assistance agency which he defines as services to alleviate human sufferings or a development catalyst engaged in temporary interventions aimed at bringing about permanent systemic changes that remove the causes of suffering. (Korten, 1990).

This co-operation would at the same time benefit the CC, since the network's structure with its strong national links, may further strengthen the grassroots perspective in CC activities.

The members of the EFA Network and the CC are also linked to other networks which are influential in defining and putting into practice ideas and concepts which fall under the broad category of non-formal education. Two examples of networks linked with the CC which focus on adult learning and community education are the International Council on Adult Education (ICAE) and the International Community Education Association (ICEA) which emphasize their ideological links with ideas of radical pedagogy as discussed above²⁶. As long as these networks do not compete, but rather connect and collaborate, they can be considered important potential partners in thinking and further conceptualizing open learning communities. They can play a crucial role in supporting a shift towards new ways of looking at learning and development, but also in putting the concept into practice.²⁷

"Discourses are not just about what can be said and thought, but also about who can speak, when, where, why and with what authority." (Foucault 1981).

Inspiring the process of constructing individual and shared visions of open learning communities is about getting as many people involved as possible. The process calls for open communication structures which need the support of a world wide web of learning.

V Inspiring the Process of Constructing Open Learning Communities with EFA NGOs - Conclusion and Outlook

This paper tried to make a contribution to the joint reflection on the question of who the driving forces are that motivate shifts in thinking and practice on development, education and learning. It chose to analyze EFA NGOs as a potential inspiring force and confronted their philosophy and practice with some notions indicating the shifts toward the dynamic process of constructing open learning communities, making a continuous effort to rethink roles, philosophies and practices in learning and development. Do the findings support the assumption that EFA NGOs are contributing to the process of constructing open learning communities?

Several areas of activities were identified where EFA NGOs engage in practices going beyond conventional educational approaches, particularly in the fields of literacy, adult and community education. They open their programs to different age groups, experiment with approaches which are more context specific, take into account and support cultural and linguistic diversity, and they link learning to other areas such as health, income-generation or agriculture. By designing context specific programs they try to meet the learners where they are and develop the learning materials accordingly. Many have recognized the political dimension of education and draw heavily from Freire's ideas of radical pedagogy. Several have gained experiences in facilitating community participation and are concerned about the reconstruction of local knowledge systems. In doing so, the programs are geared towards facilitating processes of empowerment on the part of the learners and their communities. All these activities indicate the potential to promote the construction of open learning communities in that they try to move towards a culture of active learning rather than one centered around knowledge transmission. However, in many cases the practices focus on one specific group in a community or one isolated 'problem' neglecting the concern of open learning communities to tap and build on a

²⁶Since the 80s, the ICAE - founded in 1972 - has tried to deliberately strengthen links between the adult education movement and other movements (1980s) and sees adult education as a service to these movements (Hall 1995).

²⁷In fact, ICEA has already become actively engaged in further conceptualizing the idea of open learning communities and is currently working on a resource paper on key concept related to the community learning; this will be made available on internet.

community's potential, knowledge systems, communication patterns and learning processes in a comprehensive manner, nurturing the growing of the whole rather than only its individual parts.

The paper also demonstrated that EFA NGOs as a whole have so far not been able to profoundly tackle one of the issues that lie at the heart of a shift in thinking and practice of education, learning and development: the notion of transcending barriers of separate systems such as formal, non-formal and informal. Most EFA NGOs tend to stay and act in non-formal education and experiment within that protected space. Some examples of attempts to link the separate systems of formal and non-formal education were identified, but they do not indicate a major shift towards contributing to the construction of a holistic and interlinked system. Similarly, joint policy statements made by EFA NGOs at international level are modest in advocating the transcendence of existing separate systems; rather they emphasize their complementarity. They also emphasize the complementarity of NGO and government roles in education with the former being the main actor in the non-formal sphere and the latter in the formal which, as the paper discussed, depending on the quality and degree of trust on both sides can be both conducive to, but sometimes also hindering the process towards constructing open learning communities. The chances and limitations of NGO activity and their critical and innovative potential was discussed within the context of their growing role as implementing agencies for governments and donors. In how far vested interest rather than commitment lead an NGO's activities is a question that each NGO and indeed all actors involved in education, have to continuously asked themselves.

The absence of a major shift towards new systems of learning also indicates that the Jomtien process as a whole has not been able to motivate the kind of critical reflection needed to arrive at new ways of looking at what is being done in education and development today and go beyond current practice. The mainstream discourse around learning still reflects the perspective of formal schooling, even though the Jomtien Declaration called for 'surpassing present institutional structures and conventional delivery systems.'

The paper also discussed NGO networking and their attempts to link their organizations and activities and engage in collaborative reflection and action to further develop the quality of their involvement in education. These efforts are in support of the concern of open learning communities to create shared visions of lifelong learning. The overall impact of these growing world wide webs of learning on the construction of open learning communities will largely depend on the interest of their members to consider issues critical to promoting shifts in conventional discourse and practice on education and development.

Acknowledging the contributions already made by EFA NGOs, what are the challenges that need to be addressed, if they wish to become more involved in the process of constructing open learning communities? What kinds of questions have to be asked in order to motivate EFA NGOs to move beyond where they are now and support them in facilitating shifts in thinking around learning and development?

- Many of the innovative ideas of EFA NGOs go back to the 1970s and 1980s. In view of the rapidly changing world of the 1990s, the complex crisis of leadership, institutions and meaning as well as new insights we have gained about how we learn, EFA NGOs may want to take some time to jointly reconsider their understanding of development and how it relates to learning. This reflection would be part of the process of sharing individual and joint visions around learning and development.

But how can this process of collective reflection be facilitated? The structures that already exist among EFA NGOs such as the Collective Consultation and several other networks as discussed in part IV of this paper seem to provide the adequate spaces for this further thinking to take place. Innovative and participatory tools and methodologies such as simulation games have to be further developed for this purpose to move from sharing information to knowledge creation.

- The existing networks may also consider opening their spaces of joint reflection to other actors involved in learning and development including official authorities. If NGOs wish to transcend conventional discourse and practice in education on a broader scale, this dialogue which is already happening in some cases, is important in a process of moving toward shared visions among all those involved in education and development.
- The different networks or learning communities of EFA NGOs are constantly struggling to represent the diversity of NGOs involved in education, including grassroots movements and associations. There are still many NGOs excluded from the collective thinking process, which reinforces ruptures between the local and the global discussion rather than linkages. Joint capacity building activities provide one opportunity to inspire collective thinking and action, but what other tools and structures can be used or developed to engage the diversity of NGOs in the process of creating visions of open learning communities?
- Many grassroots movements or NGOs are experimenting with different ways of learning, but their experiences remain largely unknown. The flow of information from the grassroots to the national and international levels or from the periphery to the center is often blocked. The starting point of information highways is currently the geographic or intellectual North. What can be done to promote South-North and South-South dialogue and assist grassroots NGOs in sharing their experiences with others?
- Much remains to be explored about the relations between current NGO practices in the field of women's education on the one hand and gender approaches on the other. Exploring these relations may also contribute to further conceptualizing open learning communities.

While EFA NGOs can to some extent be considered to be among those inspiring the process of constructing open learning communities, what other partners support shifts in the thinking and practice around learning and development? Considering the concern of open learning communities with reconstructing and redefining the world and experimenting with new ways of seeing, learning and living, such individuals and groups that have shaped or been inspired by post-modern thinking (see section III) come to mind. Certain branches within the diverse spectrum of feminist groups radically question the world as it is, have collectively constructed new ways of living and are putting them into practice. The same is true for branches of the environmentalist movement. Are they engaged in the construction of open learning communities?

There are also those who are leading lives at the margins of mainstream society some of whom have developed creative ways of survival and living. In how far can their experiences inform the construction of open learning communities?

Lifelong learning has in recent years become a growing concern of the private sector and the world of management. The transformation of companies into learning organizations seems to be one of the keys to a company's success. What can their experiences and discourse contribute to the process of constructing open learning communities, particularly at the organizational level of those involved in education?

The discussion above shows that the driving force behind the process of constructing open learning communities will not be found in one organization, one government, one NGO, one community or one group. It will benefit from the contributions of all those who have creative ideas, are willing to experiment with new ways of thinking, learning and living and interested to connect with others involved in the process. Still, committed organizations can accelerate the process by providing spaces, tools and practices for joint reflection and action around the issues of concern.

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