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Communities of practice in competitive settings: exploring the role of associations of market traders in marketplaces in Lagos, Nigeria

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Marketplaces provide employment and economic integration for large segments of the West African population. Often crowded and diverse marketplaces can be conflict flashpoints because they bring together large numbers of people from different ethnic groups together to compete for livelihoods. Despite the potential for marketplaces to become a locus of conflict, widespread of tacit enforcement of rules and regulations established by a variety of trader associations and groups have facilitated effective means of cooperation and collaboration among traders. The paper employs a Community of Practice approach to explore the role that one particular set of relationships – market trader associations, play in promoting collaboration in what is an otherwise competitive arena of trade. The paper explores the function of these associations as crucial connectors for fostering knowledge sharing, trust and joint working in marketplaces that are predominantly associated with competition and intense reliance on personalised networks. Drawing on examples from studies of market trader associations in markets in Lagos, Nigeria, during 2010-2012, the paper considers how the unconscious and sometimes tacit experiences of local groups, networks and communities can enliven and broaden how Communities of Practice are deployed as tools in development.

Keywords: community of practice, competition, market traders, associations, market places, Nigeria

Introduction

A community of practice primarily refers to groups of professionals who through their interest in specific issues can unite, learn together and develop innovative know-how to advance practice as a result of their on-going interaction (Wenger et al., 2002). Communities of practice (CoPs henceforth) have been promoted as a new paradigm for development in their ability to promote joint learning, enhance knowledge (re)production and build capacities among practitioners involved in influencing development initiatives (Cummings and van Zee, 2005).

Through the socialisation that takes place in CoPs, participants are able to develop and sustain 'mutual engagement', on an appropriate 'joint enterprise', and create a common or 'shared

repertoire' of documents, stories and other artefacts to advance and improve professional practice (Wenger et al., 2002). Effective CoPs promote knowledge sharing, advance lifelong learning and allow participants develop professional identities associated with that practice through ongoing interaction with like-minded peers. In sustaining ongoing interaction as well as communicating how practice is to be advanced to a variety of stakeholders, CoPs may use a variety of mechanisms including traditional face-to-face meetings, radio programmes, paper publications and the internet; the latter being especially crucial in the case of distributed communities.

By promoting elements of participatory knowledge building and negotiation, CoPs have featured as a particularly attractive tool for promoting inclusive networks in development projects. In particular, CoPs have become a useful heuristic tool for bridging knowledge divides where a lot of boundary work may be required to broker acceptable knowledge amongst diverse stakeholders who may differ on the best outcomes for development projects. According to the US Agency of International Development (USAID, 2014) CoPs may therefore refer to:

> *Informal groups (organized around specific Agency functions, roles or topics such as Programme Planning and Strategic Planning, Contracting Officers, Gender) of USAID practitioners able to share the knowledge and expertise needed to more effectively perform their jobs.*

CoPs can become a container of local competence where groups of practitioners can harness, debate and resolve information and skills and as well manage the collective knowledge relevant to a project at hand. Examples of such CoPs include Global Alliance for Nursing and Midwifery Communities of Practice (GANM) a global network initiated by the World Health Organization, Development through Dialogue (Dgroup) an online network for groups and communities interested in international development and knowledge Management for Development (KM4Dev) (Pant, 2009).

Attempts to conceptualise CoPs in development contexts, however commonly tend to deteriorate into an exercise of reifying relational constructs of learning and sharing into concrete forms and defining functional groups whilst downplaying attention to practice. This happens at the risk of ignoring the role CoPs may play as metaphorical and relational constructs about the variety of ways of knowing that exist in a variety of informal learning situations. As Duguid puts it 'most citations have focused on community and ignored practice. Yet it is practice that makes the community of practice, the social locus in which a practice is sustained and reproduced overtime, and a distinct type of community. Practice is thus critical to community of practice analysis' (Duguid, 2005: 109). A focus on practice turns attention to those aspects of human life that are hidden, tacit, inarticulate and inexpressible but are

nonetheless present in everyday interaction and doings (Rouse, 2007); features that are often all but ignored in modern interpretations of CoPs.

It is suggested that rather than focusing on self-contained units, the emphasis on CoPs should be about highlighting relationships that facilitate different forms of learning and knowledge sharing between members of groups and project teams within and across organizations. Common applications of CoP models as knowledge sharing communities in international development are frequently initiated by international organisations, donors, academics groups, NGOs and other civil organisations (Pant, 2009). Emphasis however on what is shared may often only concentrate on the explicitly outlined as project outcomes, terms of references, statistical data, rather than tacit rules and unspoken knowledge of local contexts such as gossip, folklore and oral traditions. Attempts made to limit the designation of CoPs to groups and networks sharing knowledge and expertise often rarely acknowledge the varied contested ways that knowing in the local context shape what becomes acceptable knowledge.

The invisibility of the tacit has important implications for contextualising CoPs in development projects, especially where the relevant knowledge base may exist in tacit and codified ways of knowing deeply rooted in the everyday lives and histories of the local communities and which may be difficult to articulate and share. And although tacit knowledge can be known, such knowledge it is often internalised in the unconscious mind and difficult to articulate because it is exercised without the performer being able to easily and fully account for their cognitive basis (Grabher and Ibert, 2014). Despite the emphasis on bridging knowledge divides within and outside the domains of the organisations in which CoPs are established, the majority of examples often leave unexplored how the shared repertoire of practice that emerges builds on the sometimes tacit knowledge base of local communities.

Often, local communities and people who know the social, cultural and political realities of their everyday life are only described at the receiving end of dissemination activities with a limited understanding of their tacit knowledge contribution to the project outcomes. Johnson (2007) acknowledges that because participation is a key concept in the development of CoPs that it is important to explore their nature as participatory and inclusive knowledge networks. This would mean including the engagement of groups and 'communities' in order to achieve better actions and interventions with better development outcomes. However, examples of truly inclusive CoPs that incorporate heterogeneous networks and involve the different ways of knowing from a variety of stakeholders ranging from large international organizations to the local communities remain challenging.

If CoPs in development are to be more about encouraging practices of greater inclusion and coherence (Johnson, 2007), it is important to acknowledge that knowledge goes beyond its production, exchange, regulation and application by expert groups within any one or more

organizations. An acceptable and holistic knowledge network involves layers of public and private stakeholders – individuals, groups and organizations as well as networks and systems (Pant, 2009). CoPs in development must address the problem of incorporating contested local histories and experiences of local communities which may possess a subjective sphere of reality and not feature consciously as neatly ordered tools for intentional development (Cowen and Shenton, 1996). The challenge is how to make such subjective realities more visible and highlight the tacit, contested and pervasive nature of knowledge.

In attempting to address this challenge, the paper explores how market trader associations as knowledge brokers for the many diverse traders competing in markets, can be embraced as a fruitful way to embrace CoPs that have at the heart of practice - the collective knowledge of local actors as a tool of for advancing practice. In acknowledging the important role that market trader associations play in bridging divides between competing trader groups and allowing trade to thrive with minimal conflict, the discussion outlines the lessons that can be learnt from considering how the collective tacit-know can become a tool for development.

Marketplaces: developing communities of practice in competitive work settings

For a long time, marketplace trading in African towns and cities was viewed predominantly as an informal activity. In recent years it increasingly has come to be seen as a highly legitimised activity in the face of lacking formal opportunities or options (Tripp, 2001). Structural adjustment programmes, increasing urbanisation challenges and the growing unemployment that followed intense rural urban migration in many West African cities has meant that market traders have borne the major brunt of reduced economic growth. West African marketplaces overall continue to support ethnic integration, urban female entrepreneurship and sustain urban food systems and manufacturing sectors. And overall, they present a symbolic public space in urban areas because they play a key role in helping to forge society by bringing different traders together in a competitive but harmonious way (Ikioda, 2013)

The diversity and large numbers of traders in marketplaces coupled with the desire for traders to compete to outdo colleagues has been acknowledged as a possible catalyst in fuelling conflict and tension (Porter et al., 2010). It has been noted by Storr (2008) that the competitive attributes of market traders and their self-employment activities can destroy practices that are communal and thus diminish the value accorded to social ties and collective action. Yet, large numbers of traders, despite these tensions arising from complex network of varied socio-cultural practices, highly mobile personal networks and a lack of strong formal institutional structures, are able to conduct business collectively for the most part.

Other studies of African marketplaces note that despite the tendency to have imperfect information and a widespread tacit enforcement of rules, deep rooted relationships that breed friendship, trust and other associational character in marketplaces are fairly common. Studies in Ghanaian markets have shown that far from being dominated by individualistic and personal networks, traders have learnt to display various ways of engaging in coordinated effort. These include developing and promoting genuine friendships and alliances, caring for children of neighbouring traders, looking after each other's stalls and sharing food (Clark, 1994).

Fafchamps and Minten (1999) in their study of marketplaces in Madagascar note the presence of communal agreements, systems of shared languages, mutual ways of interacting and an implicit understanding of what is acceptable seems to feature as part of what appears be a characteristics of the wide scale tacit enforcement of rules in marketplaces. Lyons and Snoxell (2005) also studied relationships between traders in the Kenyata and Westlands Craft market is Nairobi, Kenya and concluded that despite the intensely competitive environment of marketplaces, traders still formed complex networks of interdependence and friendships with one another. These relationships varied from those vital for accessing credit, borrowing and lending money to one another, to relationships for guarding stalls and others purely for exchanging information on trading-related matters.

In focusing on the structures permitting these relationships, Lyon (2003) has noted the benefits that trader associations in markets in Kumasi, Sunyani, Techiman, Central Region and Accra in Ghana play in promoting collective engagement and interaction among traders. The role of these associations, he suggests include but are not limited to promoting the socialisation of economic activity, ensuring welfare rights of traders, settling disputes, controlling prices and regulating demand and supply. Other studies have shown that these associations whether at the commodity or market-wide level, help to bridge the boundaries between traders in ethnically volatile market places and in so doing reduce sites of ethnic conflict (Porter et al., 2010). These associations when explored closely benefit from interpretations as CoPs that act to bridge the divide that might exist among traders by permitting the effective movement of information, the development of interpersonal relationships between traders and mitigation of risks. But more importantly, their ability to function effectively without any unwritten procedures, rules or constitutions makes them an interesting example setting out CoPs can exist as and through the tacitly enforced practices of local groups. The remainder of the discussion in this paper explores how associations of market traders perform this role of CoPs in marketplaces in Lagos, Nigeria.

Context for the discussion

Empirical data from fieldwork in marketplaces in Lagos, Nigeria was conducted by the author as part of a PhD research in 2010 and a subsequent fieldwork study in Lagos markets in 2012 as part of a consultancy project on marketplace infrastructure. Underlying the fieldwork was a desire to explore how CoPs existed as a varied set of relations among traders, their activities around buying and selling, their relationships with customers, transporters, wholesalers and other diverse networks and actors involved in sustaining market trade. Observation of market routines, photo-elicitation of market activities and interviews with traders and market association leaders in the Alaba-Suru Market, Lagos as well as secondary data from literature on studies of marketplaces are used. In employing this data, the narrative draws attention to how a CoP, while not explicitly reified by members who constitute it, can function as a potent collective tacit force for collaboration and joined up working in the advancement of the everyday lives of traders.

Market trader associations as communities of practice

The city of Lagos which is the leading port-city and economic hub of Nigeria has over 400 marketplaces with over a million traders conducting business within them. The city's marketplaces have increasingly become a particular marker of capitalism, having long functioned as a central site and symbol emerging within the entrepreneurial free market urban economy. The first associations of market traders came into being originally by a state market association edict which allowed over 150 market women's organizations (women tended to dominate trade at the time) to be registered and regulated on the basis of commodity traded in local government areas to maintain peace, order and cleanliness (Lawal, 2004). These associations were organised and registered according to specific commodity groups, such as textile, foodstuff, provisions, herbs, haberdashery, beer and soft drinks, meat, hardware and electronics and motor parts among others (Fourchard and Olukoju, 2007). But overtime these single product associations evolved to include traders who handled a wide range of products and services in the same market (Shepherd, 2005).

In his detailed study of urban institutions in Lagos, Olukoju (2005) highlighted how these market associations with their strong leadership played a crucial role by sharing information about pricing, ensuring the welfare of traders and facilitating dispute resolutions. Ikioda's (2012) study on the Alaba-Suru Market Lagos, observed a well-developed market association leadership structure that also comprised of the leaders of each of the fifty-two single-commodity associations in the market (Ikioda, 2012). The association acts as a formidable economic and political network between all traders in the market as well as liaising with similar associations in other markets at local government and state levels. This includes having representation at the local government level wide market associations as well as the very important state-wide chapter association, headed by a " Iyaloja" of Lagos and the President General of the Market Men and Women of Nigeria (Olukoju, 2005).

Market associations, despite their unwritten rules, ensure that traders regularly interact through face to face monthly meetings to share ideas about what works, report and sanction deviant traders and collectively discuss ways to regulate pricing and promote unity. Through regular monthly meetings and interactions between all commodity group representatives and the association's leaderships, debates and discussion about infrastructure development, deterring opportunistic behaviour and curbing other militant forms of collective actions occur. Indirectly these associations also work to standardise the practices of multiple traders in the market by helping to promote competitive advantage and curtail unchecked domineering practices (Ikioda, 2012). In addition, the market association has over the years developed various standards for regulating pricing, settling disputes, outlawing underselling, regulating methods and means of attracting customers. These well established procedures have been documented in similar studies in other markets in Lagos as a means by which market trader associations have been able to enforce tacit regulations despite limited formal institutions (Olukoju, 2005).

Membership is compulsory for all traders, who pay a compulsory subscription fee that enables the association to fund the payment of cleaners and security organisations to maintain hygienic standards, orderliness and calm in the marketplace. Ikioda (2012) observed that market trader association in the Alaba-Suru Market had a sanitary committee that ensured that the market was cleaned especially on Thursdays; the weekly sanitation day for markets in Lagos. There was also a security committee outsourced to local vigilante groups whose job it was to make daily rounds to ensure that all traders had closed for the day and left the market at the designated closing time and also ensured that all shops were properly locked. The market trader associations also played an important role in conflict prevention and management in an ethnically plural trading community and also supported traders in case of emergencies; death, accidents and weddings.

As trader-led groups recognised by the state and operating via unwritten tacit constitutions, market trader associations have developed established procedures for sustaining a mutual engagement among traders. They do this by playing a vital role in resolving disputes among traders so that enforcement agencies, such as the police, are rarely invited to settle disputes between traders. Common disputes settled could include unfair price hikes or reduction among traders, conducting trade with being appropriately registered to do so with the association, underselling to gain unnecessary advantage over other traders and theft (Ikioda, 2012). Ikpurokpo (2005) based on his work on fish traders associations in the Ogbe-Ijoh market in Warri, Southern Nigeria also notes that the case of police mediating and settling disputes between traders in marketplaces are also most unheard of. In this light he notes that

> *Where there is conflict among members of a union, this is settled by the executive committee, which normally imposes a fine. Where the executive committee is*

> *unable to settle the dispute, the Chairman becomes the final arbiter. It is not usual to invite the police, even in cases of theft.* (Ikporukpo, 2005: 15).

By acting as informal knowledge networks, these associations are able to bring traders who specialise in the sale of similar different goods together; giving them a stronger, united and louder voice. By promoting and ensuring collective cooperation, collective fight for rights and allowing groups of trader to increase their share of the market by bonding together, these networks provide an example of how collective effort, although highly tacit in nature, can become a force for collective change and action. Given the important role that market trader associations play in linking diverse groups of traders that abound in the market and their ability to douse escalate conflictual competitive tendencies, Ariyo et al. (2001) suggest that the absence of such associations in the past may have been the cause of violent conflicts in certain markets in Northern Nigeria. The ability of these associations, as containers of local competence for regulating trade etiquettes and sanctioning defaulters in the absence of formally written rules, makes them effective CoPs in settings where extreme competition can potentially become a hindrance to livelihoods for many.

Whose knowledge is acceptable in the community?

Despite the appeal that CoPs guided by wide enforcement of the local community's tacit rules might have in promoting collective engagement, there are instances capable of both closing and opening up the potential to have a real conversation about what makes a difference to local communities. This is because there are power struggles about what is acceptable knowledge and non-knowledge and whether members participate at the core, marginal or peripheral positions in the relationships underlying collaborative effort (Wenger, 2008). In this regard, framing market trader associations as CoPs, the issue of whether or not such associations are truly representative of local knowledge, communities and groups also remains problematic. Shepherd (2005) in an FAO study of market trader associations has shown that the extent to which these associations are democratic and fully representative of the wishes of their members are questionable. Olukoju's study of market associations in Lagos notes that leaders and members of these associations may reap immense "political patronage in the form of government contracts and other largesse as a compensation for their incorporation into the prevailing political order" (Olukoju 2005: 11). This can be a particular challenge for the direction of outcomes that such a CoP might advance.

In a study undertaken by Ikioda (2012) with a group of footwear and traders interviewed in the course of fieldwork in Northern Nigeria about regulating everyday trade practices, a group of traders interviewed expressed concern in the inability of the market's association to stem the tide of cheap imports and textiles into the market. This situation was adjudged by traders to be threatening the sustainability of locally produced textiles and footwear. Some traders were particularly unhappy that the market association's leadership was increasingly politically

manipulated and not considerate of the welfare of its traders, with many cases of bribery and misuse of the association's titles for political motives, highlighted.

Lyon (2003) in following notes that despite the collective actions and associational character of traders' relationships, there are always possibilities that there are free riders whose actions may not follow the group's objective. When such motives override popular discourse, the role of these local groups as CoPs may become highly questionable. The wider challenge is one of power struggles about how certain individuals within such communities use their own knowledge to usurp others, such that particular knowledge always is deemed as acceptable knowledge. Important challenges about whose knowledge is legitimate, questions of leadership, how best to negotiate individual know-how and curtail free-riding in these rather informal CoPs remain to be answered.

Despite these lapses, market associations are a vital way to see how CoPs as bottom-up relationships managed and promoted by communities can and should be recognised as capable of being proactive forces for promoting collaboration among traders. Those who promote the development of CoPs may do well to recognise the existing and sometimes tacit and sometimes informal relationships of collective local competence that organises people's everyday lives and that are already galvanising and promoting real local change rather than re-inventing the wheel by creating new functional groupings dominated by the explicit know-how of technocrats.

Conclusions

Communities of practice have become prominent tools for promoting innovation and knowledge sharing among like-minded peers. CoPs are depicted by relationships that are characterised by mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire as emanating from the joined up effort of a community's effort to devise strategic ways of working together. Many CoPs defined in this way are often formal top-down constructs commonly devised to bring like-minded professional together to interact regularly to inform what an acceptable outcome is. The problem with this designation is that it leaves unconsidered other aspects of the knowledge and tacit forms of competence held by participants who are not 'members' of the CoP but whose knowledge nevertheless is relevant to practice in the local contexts. It is in this light that Gee (2005) notes that "if we start with the notion of a community we cannot go any further until we have defined who is in and who is not, since otherwise we cannot identify the community, yet it is often the issues of participation, membership and boundaries that are problematic in the first place" (Gee, 2005:215).

This paper has highlighted how informal relationships of collective local competence that organises people's everyday lives and that are already galvanising and promoting real local

change can become examples of effective CoPs. By setting out the work that market associations as formidable local institutions have achieved in marketplaces as Lagos, the discussion has portrayed how CoP models might be applied more broadly to recognise the important work that informal local groups can make in promoting collaboration, cooperation and joined up working. The system of associational life in the marketplace presents an ideal setting to explore what role CoPs might play in facilitating collaboration in a setting where diverse and competing aspirations of large groups need to be managed in other ensure joint working and minimising conflict.

Market associations are a vital way to see how CoPs as bottom-up relationships managed and promoted by local communities and groups can and should be recognised as capable of being proactive forces for promoting collaboration among traders. There is further scope to explore how these market trader associations support more distributed forms of engagement not only for traders, but also for farmers, distributors and wholesalers involved in market trade via the support of mobile phone communication. Work by Muto and Yamano (2009) among Uganda traders has shown how mobile phone coverage has helped to increase participation and interaction between buyers and farmers and buyers in remote areas. There is scope to explore the important role that mobile communication is playing in creating more inclusive communities and distributed communities for groups who would not normally be included in knowledge networks due to geographic distance. Those who promote the development of CoPs may do well to recognise the existing and sometimes tacit and sometimes informal relationships of collective local competence that organises people's everyday lives and that are already galvanising and promoting real local change rather than re-inventing the wheel by creating new functional grouping dominated by the explicit knowledge of technocrats.

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