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Beyond elite bargains: building democracy from below in Uganda

Sophie King[1] and Sam Hickey[2]

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[1] IDPM, The University of Manchester

Email correspondence: sophie.king@manchester.ac.uk

[2] IDPM, The University of Manchester

Email correspondence: sam.hickey@manchester.ac.uk

Abstract

New theories of how democratic development is likely to emerge within developing countries obscure the effects of popular agency, and of ideas, offering an incomplete view of such historical processes and exaggerating the extent to which a particular sequencing of change is required. Insights from the experiences of non-governmental and cooperative organisations in rural Uganda, an unpromising context for the flourishing of democratic development, suggest that certain strategies can achieve meaningful (if limited) forms of progress, particularly where they focus on challenging power relations, developing synergies between civil and political society, and generating ideas that reshape perceptions of subordinate groups.

Keywords: Uganda, sub-Saharan Africa, democratic development, structural transformation, civil society, cooperatives

Acknowledgements

Introduction

Despite the widespread adoption of democratic institutions and increased economic growth in much of sub-Saharan Africa, the progress of democratisation and development remains heavily constrained by the persistence of neopatrimonial political systems and agrarian economies. In addition to undermining initial hopes within international development that getting the prices and institutions right would suffice, this has encouraged greater recognition of the historical contingency of development trajectories and the determinate role played by politics and the balance of power between contending social groups. The new theories prompted by these shifts include North, Walliss and Weingast's (2009, NWW hereafter) work on how countries transition from 'limited access' to 'open access' orders, and the work of Mushtaq Khan (2010) on 'political settlements', which attempt to theorise the conditions conducive to greater political and economic inclusion within the world's least developed countries by employing macro-level historical analysis and drawing attention to the influence of intra-elite relations on institutional change. These accounts, which mark a significant advance on earlier institutionalist analyses (North, 1990, for example) that tended to underplay the significance of conflict and power relations in shaping change, have proved increasingly influential. However, we argue that such approaches offer a powerful but also partial reading of what democratic development involves, and of the historical processes that underpin it. Alternative readings place greater emphasis on the role of agency as well as structure, including in the form of organised subordinate classes as well as elites (Sandbrook, Edelman, Heller and Teichman, 2007), and on the broader character of state-society relations rather than simply inter-elite bargaining (Evans and Heller, 2012; Tilly, 2007). Others have questioned the assertion that capitalist transition is a pre-requisite for democratisation, calling this the 'sequencing fallacy' (Carothers 2007), and showing that democratic institutions can be gradually crafted, even in the absence of structural transformation (Corbridge, Williams, Srivasta and Véron, 2005).

This paper works through these differing perspectives on how democratic development might emerge in low-income countries by examining attempts by two civil society organisations to foster greater political and economic inclusion among smallholders in Western Uganda.[1] With a predominantly agrarian economy and a regime that has been characterised as semi-authoritarian and neopatrimonial, but which has nonetheless secured sustained growth and poverty reduction, Uganda provides a useful context for examining the challenges of democratic development in late developing countries. The findings suggest that although the structural limitations to achieving democratic development in such contexts remain powerful, certain civil society forms and strategies can help promote processes of democratic development at local levels, particularly when these are led by local producer groups. This affirms Sandbrook et al.'s (2007) focus on the role of smallholder farmers as significant

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[1] The paper adopts Sandbrook et al.'s social democratic perspective, which conceives of democratisation in terms of the 'redistribution of domestic political power and a more substantive democracy' (Sandbrook et al., 2007: 61).

players in shaping the conditions that may underpin social democratic change in the global periphery, and also the emphasis on the incremental changes enabled by building strong relations across civil and political society (Corbridge et al., 2005; Evans and Heller 2012). In addition, it offers a useful corrective to the elitist, methodologically nationalist, and overly structural accounts of the new mainstream thinking.

The paper first discusses these competing theoretical perspectives on the drivers of political and economic inclusion in late developing countries and then examines these themes within the Ugandan context. The experiences of the two case study organisations are then analysed in relation to the role of popular agency, ideas, and elite-smallholder relations in promoting greater political and economic inclusion, before the conclusion returns to the wider debates.

Democratisation and inclusion in agrarian societies

The recent flourishing of new theories to explain the long-run drivers of economic and political development marks a critical departure from the new institutionalist school of thinking, from both insiders (NWW, 2009) and critics (Khan, 2010). NWW (2009) adopt a historical institutional perspective to try and identify conditions supportive of transitions from 'limited' to 'open access' orders. Limited access societies operate on the basis of personal relationships between a minority elite, members of which form a dominant coalition through which special privileges are granted to loyal groups. These privileges constitute 'limited access' to organisations, assets and activities of value – entities which generate rents. In this analysis, the distribution of rents is the means through which a dominant coalition maintains control and avoids violent challenge. Elites will generally resist the extension of access, as this makes it difficult for them to secure power through rent-distribution. According to NWW, transition from limited to open access orders involves elites recognising the benefits of formalising their relations. The application of rule of law reduces their transaction costs in dealing with one another and is enabling of mutual trust and dependency, which in turn fosters greater rent-creation. In turn, this results in 'perpetually lived organisations' – organisations that live beyond the life of their individual members and which operate according to formal rules, contracts and enforcement mechanisms. When this is combined with consolidated political control over the military and there is no longer a need to maintain alliances with military factions, elites have greater incentives to open up their system of institutionalised impersonal organisations and relations to wider groups in pursuit of further rent creation. In this analysis, therefore, democratisation follows on from the opening up of economic opportunities to a wider group and the process is driven by elites.

Whilst critics have broadly accepted key elements of NWW's account and welcomed their use of earlier efforts to track this (including the comparative historical work of Barrington Moore and Charles Tilly), several problems are also apparent. Bates (2010) points out that NWW remain overly structuralist in their account of historical change, and lack a sense of how either agency or ideas shape these processes.

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Theorists of very different political stripes will also struggle with NWW's rational-actor account of how democratisation unfolds (e.g. Diamond 2010), particularly the emphasis placed on elite political activity and pacts over social and structural factors (Cammack 1990). These tendencies reflect Gray's (2013) observation that NWW remain wedded to a neoclassical reading of historical change, and thus to 'the basic hierarchy of institutional forms that was at the heart of the good governance agenda', namely economic and political liberalism. In doing so, 'the theory serves to strip the progressive and transformatory potential out of politics by … ignoring non-elite struggles' (Gray, 2013: 13).

Some of these problems are addressed in Khan's (2010) work on 'political settlements'. Khan's account of the long-run drivers of development emphasises the importance of inter-elite relationships and institutional change, but his political economy approach also highlights the significance of capitalist transition. Khan describes a political settlement as *'a combination of power and institutions that is mutually compatible and also sustainable in terms of economic and political viability'* (2010: 4), whereby the institutional distribution of resources within a society matches the distribution of power, and sufficient rent-generation is occurring to ensure the settlement can sustain itself over time. His analysis focuses on the nature of capitalists and their relationship to political elites. He notes that where the productive sector is small, clientelist systems tend to dominate, through which ruling elites distribute benefits to clients in exchange for loyalty. Transitions from clientelist to capitalist forms of political settlement are therefore a question not only of institutional change deriving from new agreements between elites, but also processes of structural transformation which shift the balance from the informal to the formal economy and generate autonomous economic actors whose productivity is no longer reliant on rent-seeking relationships with the state. Khan also eschews a significant role for ideas in shaping historical processes of change, other than as a purely instrumental means of gaining legitimacy for the ruling coalitions or regime survival. However, he goes further than NWW in identifying the agential forms at the heart of such processes, focusing in particular on the role that political organisations play in offering different coalitions a means of reshaping the rules of the game, and recognising that anti-colonial and social movements have played important roles in shaping the character of political settlements in many countries. Other associational forms of 'civil society' are given short shrift: political subjectivity is limited to clientelist forms rather than citizenship, and the mobilisation of lower level factions is held to reduce the coherence and capacity of the ruling coalition by subjecting it to too many demands.

These new mainstream accounts stand in contrast to alternative readings of the historical processes leading to democratic development, which include a stronger role for organised subordinate classes in relation to more structural processes. A key contribution here is Sandbrook et al.'s (2007) study of how social democracy has emerged in the 'global periphery'. Their account acknowledges that structural forms of politics and political economy are critical to establishing the conditions through which social democracy can emerge, including 'a relatively coherent and effective

state with some autonomy from dominant classes' (Sandbrook et al., 2007: 31); and is in full agreement with Khan that capitalist transition is essential to the transformation of clientelist agrarian societies (Sandbrook et al., 2007: 30). However, in contrast to NWW, and to a lesser extent Khan, Sandbrook et al. specify the particular agential forms that have historically been able to exploit the 'configuration of socio-political opportunities' presented at moments of capitalist transition, which alter the field of power relations that have historically constrained subordinate groups. Going back further than the leftist political parties which ultimately formed the welfare regimes associated with social democracy in both North and South, Sandbrook et al. (2007: 31) argue that 'a major element is the configuration of class forces deriving from capitalist development', and particularly the weakening of landed classes in favour of middle and working classes. This finding that 'agrarian class relations, and in particular the role of independent peasants, are particularly important in moulding social-democratic outcomes', is an important contribution, which goes beyond both the elitist work of NWW and the classic work of Barrington Moore in identifying a 'fourth path to modernity…one in which a period of commercialization is marked by the consolidation of a market-oriented smallholding rural class' (Sandbrook et al., 2007: 180). The commercialisation of agriculture is critical here, as it helps create small farmers and peasant proprietors who are exposed to – and therefore have a stake in socialising – market risk, both through collective organisation and putting pressure on the state to provide the collective goods required to enable their productivity and protect their interests (Sandbrook et al., 2007: 198).

This form of mobilisation, along with further shifts in class configurations, helps foster the emergence of particular social actors (parties, movements, leaders), able to seek governmental power and develop state-level responses. Ideas as well as organisational forms are critical here, whereby 'a precondition for social democracy is the existence of a party that can articulate a coherent vision of social transformation' (Sandbrook et al., 2007: 205). The possibility of such organisational and discursive forms of politics emerging is in turn dependent on civil society, not in a de Tocquevillian associational sense, but from the more politicised perspective of a public sphere within which subordinate groups can 'organise and demand political and social rights', enhancing the likelihood that 'distributional conflicts would be peacefully mediated' (Sandbrook et al., 2007: 208).

For Sandbrook et al. (2007: 32), this means that,

> To nurture the capacity of subordinate classes and groups to be politically engaged, and to encourage policy-based and deliberative forms of demand making, and to press for localized initiatives of popular empowerment will advance the political project.

This opens up the importance of undertaking active efforts to promote democracy that include civil society, even where structural conditions are not propitious, through

the gradual crafting of democratic capabilities and institutions (Carothers, 2007).[2] This does not point towards an unproblematic renewal for the often apolitical and romantic tendencies associated with promoting liberal forms of civil society in the global South (Chatterjee 2004), but a more politically informed effort which chooses its targets and strategies in line with the prevailing political economy conditions in specific contexts, particularly in relation to supporting the organisational capacities of subordinate classes (often smallholders) and their alliances.

Sandbrook et al.'s argument (2007: 184) that horizontally-linked civil society structures are important mediators of 'distributional conflicts' chimes with Evans and Heller's (2012) observation that the state-society relations most conducive to the contemporary emergence of developmental states in the South have changed, having less to do with the inter-elite and state-business relations lauded by NWW and Khan and more to do with synergistic relations between civil and political society:

> Close ties with industrial elites are no longer sufficient and may be counter-productive. Diversely structured networks that create effective ties to a broad cross-section of civil society become essential and democratic deepening appears to have become a key feature of success. (Evans and Heller, 2012: 2).

This paper now explores the salience of these somewhat overlapping, but also contending, approaches through examining the role of civil society organisations in promoting democratic development in the generally unpromising context of Uganda.

The context for building democracy from below in Uganda

There is little evidence to suggest that Uganda has achieved the structural conditions identified above as providing the basis for achieving democratic development. Uganda represents a 'weak dominant party' type of political settlement (Khan 2010), whereby state-society relations remain dominated by a neopatrimonial logic, public organisations are heavily personalised and lack the capacity or commitment to deliver development in a universal manner, and where there is little prospect of democratic change (Kjaer, 2015). Uganda has achieved impressive rates of both growth and poverty reduction over the past two decades, and since coming to power in 1986, the National Resistance Movement can also claim to have brought stability to a country that had previously experienced over a decade of instability and civil conflict, albeit at a much slower rate in the northern regions of the country. However, the country remains a long way from addressing the more difficult developmental tasks of reducing inequality, delivering high-quality social services and achieving structural transformation, and its democratic project has (as Khan 2010 might predict) floundered both against these political economy failures and the neopatrimonial

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[2] It is also worth noting here that citizens in developing countries may see the intrinsic worth in promoting democratic institutions, whether macro-theory says the country can support it or not. Although democratisation clearly remains an ongoing and deeply problematic project in Africa, and developing countries more broadly, it cannot be wished away.

tendencies of the government (Golooba-Mutebi and Hickey 2013). In terms of structural transformation, over 70 percent of the workforce remains in the agricultural sector and Uganda remains heavily dependent on primary commodities and lacks a diversified economic base on which to move forward (Haussmann, Cunningham, Matovu, Osire and Wyett, 2014). This has left the Ugandan economy in a heavily informalised state, and unable to generate the level of revenue required for the executive to maintain the buy-in of powerful groups in society through formal budgetary processes. As a result, and with official tax revenue flat lining at around 13 percent of GDP for the past decade, the government remains reliant on patronage-based forms of redistribution to maintain stability (Haussmann et al., 2014). Kjaer (2015) suggests that the current political settlement generates few incentives for elites to invest in the kinds of long-term policy actions and institution building required to promote structural transformation. Developmental state-business relations have yet to emerge, with pro-regime capitalists consciously nurtured by the government, and business relations dominated by collusion with political elites (Golooba-Mutebi and Hickey, 2013).

Of particular importance to us here is the weak character of the SME sector, as this includes the smallholder agricultural groups identified by Sandbrook et al. (2007) as significant in imposing the pressures required to move states towards democratic development. In the case of Uganda, which has a long history of cooperative production (Okello, 2013), the collective capacities of smallholders have been weakened not only by economic liberalisation and the failure of government to promote the forms of agricultural modernisation and land reform required to start transforming agrarian class relations, but also by deliberate efforts to undermine the emergence of autonomous forms of agency. A customary land tenure system continues to predominate in much of rural Uganda, despite a 1998 Land Act which required those with customary claims to apply for a freehold title. Without land titles, farmers are vulnerable to land-grabbing by political and economic elites, and women are particularly vulnerable to claims by family members within a patrilineal inheritance system. Ainembabazi (2007) finds that land ownership increased among wealthier classes but declined among middle income groups and the poor between 1993 and 2002.

The economic and political power of smallholders has been undermined by successive regimes, with colonial governors branding cooperatives subversive and denying them legal recognition. The co-operative sector won the right to register and a degree of operational autonomy in the 1950s, and by the early 1960s the sector had begun to thrive (Okello, 2013), accumulating significant bargaining power (Bunker, 1983). However, this hard-won autonomy (Okello, 2013: 6) was undermined over the 1960s as state administrators gained increasing control over co-operative production, turning most export-focused cooperatives into state-run monopolies. Increasing co-optation, mismanagement and repression reached its peak under the Amin era, when the loss of assets and income associated with his 'economic war', and falling prices of critical cash crops, precipitated the collapse of many co-operatives during the late 1970s and the 1980s civil war. By the time the NRM came

to power, the co-operative sector was therefore unprepared for the introduction of economic liberalisation in the 1990s, which skewed the field towards large-scale and multi-national businesses and left many small-scale farmers vulnerable to exploitation by intermediary traders (Brett, 1998; Okello, 2013).

In 2002, the NRM ostensibly changed tactics and began promoting the co-operative movement under the Plan for the Modernisation of Agriculture, within which a National Agricultural Advisory Service (NAADS) was supposed to provide development advice and agricultural inputs to farmer groups. However, in line with both NWW and Khan's analyses, NAADS has increasingly become a tool for rent distribution and co-optation, particularly during the 2006 and 2011 elections, when the NAADS secretariat was brought under the auspices of the Office of the President and NAADS was extended to include a wider group of farmers in rent distribution (Kjaer and Therkildsen, 2013).

These neopatrimonial tendencies towards repression and co-optation are apparent throughout civil and political society in Uganda. Despite the return of multi-party democracy to Uganda in 2005, experts refer to the country as 'semi-authoritarian' with reference to the high degree of power invested in the presidency and limited political space allowed to autonomous civil and political actors (Tripp 2010). The initial promise of the NRM was to establish participatory forms of democracy through a decentralised system of governance which would accord genuine decision-making and resource mobilisation powers to the grassroots (Regan, 1998). However, this project had largely run aground by the late 1990s, and by the mid-2000s, the capacity of local government to act as a vehicle of either democratisation or service delivery had been further undermined by the policy of 'districtisation', which saw the number of districts double from 56 to 112 in response to a mixture of local ethno-territorial demands and electioneering (Green, 2008). Uganda's decentralised system does offer opportunities for grassroots participation, such as bottom-up planning processes beginning at the village council level, or conferences for debating local government budgets, but these forms of consultation are not binding (Tilly, 2007), and the capacity of local governments to deliver services effectively and accountably is undermined by the fact that resource allocation remains highly centralised, investment in human resource development remains low, and widespread rent-seeking undermines district local government distribution processes (Green, 2008; King, 2015). These tendencies further underpin the longer-standing failure in Uganda, as elsewhere in Africa, to detribalise the state in rural areas, with decentralisation instead further strengthening traditional and patron-client forms of rule, rather than citizen-based forms of agency and governance (Mamdani 1996).

Development NGOs have not significantly filled the gap left by government in terms of building organisational capacity among smallholders, constrained as they are by 'erratic development interventions with donor-dependent project circles, heavily steered by logical frameworks as opposed to people's needs and aspirations' (Okello, 2013: 9). The early signs that certain indigenous organisations, particularly the women's movement, would challenge patronage forms of politics were eroded

over the 1990s (Tripp, 2001), and the space for more politicised civil society approaches has become even more restricted since the return of multi-partyism in 2005 increased incentives for government to repress dissenting voices as 'oppositional' (Hickey, 2013). The violent suppression of riots on the streets of Kampala in 2008 and 2009 in response to the global food and energy crisis and conflicts between Museveni and the Bagandan traditional kingdom, and the ominous increased presence of the military during the 2011 election period, reminded activists that the regime is prepared to use force against opponents (Kasfir, 2012). Recent splits within the NRM itself, repeated unrest in Kampala, and an increasingly vocal media suggest that cracks are nevertheless emerging within Museveni's hold on power (Kasfir, 2012).

The Rwenzori sub-region of Western Uganda is strongly characterised by many of these tendencies within the national polity and political economy. The sub-region's economy is based mostly around agriculture (including large tea and coffee estates) and livestock, levels of poverty and population growth are above the national average,[3] and it has been the site of repeated ethnic conflict, most prominently between the Tooro and Rwenzururu kingdoms in the 1960s (Mamdani, 1996). The main conflict ended in the 1970s, with the granting of Kasese and Bundibugyo district administrations to the Bakonzo and Bamba of the Rwenzori mountains and lowlands, although tensions continue to simmer, with an outbreak of ethnically driven violence as recently as 2014. Regional CSOs frequently have majority ethnic staff bases and tensions between Batooro- and Bakonzo-staffed organisations, combined with increasing competition for resources, threaten civil society collaboration.

Methodology

The two organisations investigated here are not intended to be representative of African civil society as a whole, but operate rather as 'theoretical exemplars' (Yin, 2003) of the role that popular agency may play in promoting democratic development. Fieldwork with the professionalised research and development NGO (RD) was conducted by the first author during three visits, of 12 months in total, between 2009 and 2011. Data generation included a review of internal documentation, 40 semi-structured focus group discussions (FGDs) and 123 semi-structured interviews with a range of state, civil society and political actors at multiple levels of organisational operation, and 48 sets of notes made during semi-structured observation of organisational practice. Fieldwork with Bukonzo Joint Co-operative Union (BJCU) – a community-led micro-finance and coffee marketing co-operative – took place over the course of three visits, of four weeks in total, between January and July 2011. Here, 16 semi-structured interviews were conducted with the coordinator, trainers, existing and former members of the board and co-operative, village, parish and sub-county councillors, one sub-county chief, and a donor representative. Five FGDs were conducted with members of the training team, and with two sets of male and female members who had and had not experienced positive changes in

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[3] Based on census projections.

household gender relations; semi-structured observations of two member group meetings and an Annual General Meeting (AGM) were also undertaken.

Building democracy from below in the Rwenzori sub-region

Our case study findings are presented in response to the overarching themes identified above: firstly, in terms of the extent to which these two very different civil society forms have fostered more effective economic and political organisation among smallholders; and secondly, in relation to their ability to shape the attitudes and behaviour of sub-national elites. We make particular reference to their ability to articulate and promote alternative value systems or visions of development, cultivate a more inclusive and deliberative public sphere within which the interests of previously marginalised actors might gain expression, and foster synergistic relations between civil and political elites or between elite and subordinate groups.

A research and development NGO (RD): objectives and approaches

RD was founded as a research institute in 1996 by a charismatic graduate passionate about peace-building and community empowerment in Rwenzori. It soon moved into implementing donor-funded projects. Its official vision has continually evolved, but can be summarised as fostering greater economic, social and political inclusion within existing structures and processes, rather than systemic change. It has a hierarchical structure, led by a director and five senior managers, alongside a reflexive organisational culture that includes weekly and annual staff reflections. In 2010, it had a budget of approximately GBP £702,000 from ten international donors and 28 members of staff. RD's core donor was (until very recently) a Dutch co-financing agency, which has been supportive of experimentation and action learning, particularly at regional level. In 2011, the founder director left the organisation to become an NRM MP, provoking some accusations of co-optation. This paper examines three of RD's strategies developed between 2002 and 2011: the provision of rights and governance training and sub-county dialogues; support to rural producer and savings groups; and the convening of new deliberative spaces for regional elites. RD's community-level work is delivered in partnership with teams of trained community activists called Community Process Facilitators (CPFs).

To increase the effectiveness of local development planning process and primary health and education services, RD trains village residents, health centre and primary school management committees (MCs), and councillors and civil servants from village up to sub-county level, in formal policy and legislation about rights and governance. Sub-county level dialogues also bring together civil servants and workers, local councillors and MCs for collective problem solving. Staff and CPFs use pictorial participatory action learning tools for training which RD developed in partnership with a British consultant in 2002.

RD attempts socio-economic empowerment among farmers through savings and credit and sustainable production training, grant or asset-giving, and organisational development advice. Staff initially began training 'model farmers' to support the

development of small producer groups in their own communities and some became CPFs. Later, staff and CPFs began organising savings and producer groups into associations for collective storage and marketing of their produce or for micro-finance. In 2007, RD also developed a micro-enterprise project for those in extreme poverty as people unable to participate in groups. By 2011, RD estimated they had worked with over 500 farmer groups across the region.

RD has engaged in regional civil society development by building capacity of community-based organisations and fledgling advocacy NGOs, linking them to international donors, and convening regional reflections for CSOs on how to 'make development work'. In 2012, a series of reflections culminated in many regional civil society organisations adopting a 'regional development framework', which was a set of guiding principles for making development interventions people-centred, backed by a donor basket fund.

RD also facilitates reflection among the sub-region's cultural, political and civil society leaders about how to improve development outcomes by convening annual leadership retreats, which include plenary discussions about priorities, challenges and opportunities and create space for informal discussion and networking. A regional think tank, aimed at locally generated research evidence in support of better state and civil society development planning, is operationalised by RD and a local university, who convene regional stakeholder forums for locally embedded activists, CSO workers, political leaders, and civil servants, to identify research priorities, deliberate findings and plan action using household-level data. By 2012, operational teams had completed four research studies. A regional leaders group, comprising all the district council chairpersons and two local MPs, is tasked with ensuring that development plans build on priorities identified through think tank research and the leadership retreats. An MPs' forum is supposed to maintain links to the leaders' group and think tank, in order to promote regional interests in parliament, thus establishing a bridge between civil and political society (Corbridge et al., 2005).

A micro-finance and coffee marketing co-operative: objectives and approaches

Bukonzo Joint Co-operative Union (BJCU) is a microfinance co-operative and coffee marketing society. It was set up as an association of 11 savings groups in 1999 by a local participant in the Uganda Change Agents Association's first residential training in Frierian mobilisation, who began organising within his own clan. BJCU aims to improve 'the standard of living by enabling people to realize their potential and become active partners in the social, economic and political development of Bukonzo County, the Rwenzori region and Uganda at large'. The membership is 85 percent women and predominantly smallholder farmers growing organic hand-picked coffee in the foothills of the Rwenzori mountains. It has a democratic and participatory structure and ethos. Each savings group has representation on a Parish Coordinating Committee (PCC), which links to the board. In active parishes, groups have associated into Primary Co-operatives, who connect to both these coordinating

committees and the board. Board members rotate every two years, so that as many members as possible gain experience of leadership.

By 2011, BJCU comprised 3,887 individuals, participating in 201 registered member groups. Many are also members or clients of the coffee marketing association, established in 2005 in response to a fluctuating market and exploitative middle-men, which now exports coffee to a buyer in London. Adding clients and members together, BJCU has over 5,000 local stakeholders, including six full-time staff, six training officers, and 42 'training volunteers'. In 2010, it had a loan disbursement of just under 1.9 billion shillings,[4] and that year the marketing society collected 300,988kg coffee, with a market loan value of 1.27 billion shillings.[5] This paper analyses their strategies for, firstly, community mobilisation and empowerment and, secondly, influencing local governance and resource allocation.

BJCU mobilises smallholders into village-level savings groups through household-to-household conscientisation and group formation. A small training team teaches groups about improved farming methods, and financial and group management, while also monitoring and documenting savings and training inputs and outcomes, and communicating with the staff team and board. Between 2004 and 2007, a British consultant supported members to develop, first, a pictorial participatory action learning system, and then, a gender action learning system (GALS), aimed at overcoming both literacy-based and gender-based inequalities that could undermine trust and accountability dynamics in the household and within the savings groups. Groups and households use GALS to discuss how gender relations shape household income and group savings, and to account for their savings. The training team use the tools to carry out organisation-wide participatory impact assessments. Oxfam Novib has supported the documentation of GALS as BJCU's core operational methodology for good practice sharing in Uganda and internationally.

In terms of influencing local governance and resource allocation, trainers have encouraged savings group members to participate in village meetings and attend sub-county budget conferences. Members, staff and trainers have attempted to build relationships with state officials, particularly within NAADS at district and sub-county level. This has not resulted in new relationships or benefits for members. BJCU have increasingly adopted an alternative strategy of mobilising the membership to co-finance political processes and development projects or to circumvent local decision-making processes by generating political leverage beyond the local level.

Cultivating popular agency and representation

RD's attempts to enhance the quality of local services and the political influence of smallholders through good governance training has not catalysed popular agency for engagement with participatory governance mechanisms. Parents and service users were reluctant to challenge teachers or health workers, who they perceive as their

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[4] Approximately GBP £618,000 (1 January 2010 rates).
[5] Approximately GBP £413,000 (1 January 2010 rates).

social superiors, and village residents did not question the absence, infrequency or ineffectiveness of village planning meetings. RD's work to increase household income among farmers, and especially women, through training and grants in support of co-operative savings, production and marketing, has generated mixed results. Staff reported low levels of ownership among members, leading to poor enforcement of monitoring and accountability mechanisms and mismanagement. Farmers under economic pressure sell their produce individually, undermining the collective bargaining power of associations, and this has a knock-on effect on loan capital within partnered micro-finance associations. Women's participation and leadership within groups has remained tokenistic, with men dominating decision making.

RD achieved more positive gains in one remote sub-county by helping to establish a community-based support NGO governed by local farmers. Here, farmers reported increased household income in response to group trainings, leading to socio-economic mobility and, in turn, the assumption of wider community and political leadership positions. There were six cases of group members encouraging a leader to participate in local councils and, where necessary, campaigning to get them elected, while people also felt that RD's push for the inclusion of women had contributed to incremental shifts in gender roles, such as women selling cash crops at local markets and engaging in political campaigning. State-farmer relations were also shifting. Farmers had refused to display NAADS signposts in front of plantations they developed without state assistance, and leaders of the local support NGO refused to sell coffee seedlings to NAADS officials, who were planning to offload them onto local farmers in the dry season. In 2002, RD also helped to establish a new regional network of model farmers (including some CPFs), who now assist other households and farmer groups with enterprise development and broker links with larger, urban-based NGOs. Trainers within this organisation, and RD-trained CPFs, are also now channelling the interests and experiences of smallholder farmers into the regional deliberative processes underpinning both the regional development framework and the think tank stakeholder forums, signifying the emergence of new patterns of popular representation (Williams, 2004).

BJCU community mobilisation has cultivated a strong savings culture within member households and improved farming practices, leading to better quality coffee, higher levels of production, better financial management and therefore increased household income and socio-economic mobility. Changes to gender relations in some households in response to GALS-based training means women are beginning to benefit more tangibly. An impact assessment of GALS training between 2007 and 2010 suggests that, out of 291 people sensitised about the benefits of joint land ownership, 61 households now have joint land certificates from their village council and 25 have registered customary joint land agreements. Of 1,096 participants in action learning about co-operation in the household and 'in the garden', men are beginning to take responsibility for a few roles, like collecting firewood, in 449 households; and in 366 households men and women are sharing most or all responsibilities. Male participants explained how the training helped them to see how

they themselves and the whole household lose out if women cannot participate in decision making, groups and meetings.

Farmers linked to the marketing association report having a direct buyer for their produce, with a price they can trust. Members of savings groups and the microfinance association explain that the pictorial methodology means everyone can understand how money is being accounted for and used, irrespective of literacy. Socio-economic mobility is triggering the assumption of leadership positions: a member of the training team had gone on to become a sub-county councillor; two out of five members of the sub-county land committee were BJCU members; and another member had gained a seat on the sub-county farmers' forum, but then resigned in protest at the corruption of other representatives.

Beyond this, the coordinator felt that invitations to participate in budget conferences or other decision-making fora were often tokenistic and that their co-financing initiatives had generated more tangible outcomes for popular representation and inclusive development. When theft of ripe beans and mixing high and poor quality beans to bulk up produce was undermining local coffee prices, members mobilised to finance council meetings from village up to district levels; this enabled a bye-law to be developed, introducing stiff penalties for these misdeeds. It was later discovered, however, that the law had never been tabled at the district council, linked to rumours of corruption and stolen funds.

In a second example, the BJCU leadership circumvented a sub-county development plan in which the local government had decided to invest Belgian government funding into a potato-growing project, rather than rural electrification to support coffee processing. This was the more popular proposition among local farmers and there were rumours that the potato project was favoured because it would provide an easier source of rents for local government officials. With the backing of the membership, the coordinator negotiated directly with the Belgian government, who sent representatives to look at BJCU coffee production and marketing work, and then applied pressure on the sub-county to change their plans. BJCU were successful in changing the development plan and bringing electricity to the sub-county by mobilising the membership to finance the political process and approximately 10 percent of the overall cost of the project that was needed in addition to the Belgian government funding (a total of 57 million shillings[6]).

As an isolated strategy, RD's rights and governance training has not reshaped the socio-economic and political-economic power relations perpetuating neopatrimonial politics in the sub-region and therefore has not been able to shift attitudes and behaviour. RD had more success in reshaping socio-economic relations through promoting the economic strategies and organisational capacities of smallholders, particularly in the remote rural sub-county where – as in the case of BJCU – there was a strong drive for self-help in the absence of state and NGO support. This area

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[6] Approximately GBP £18.500 (1 January 2011 rates).

has also been historically sparsely populated and then experienced reasonably conflict-free inward migration from a mix of ethnic groups creating a more conducive environment for co-operation. In the case of BJCU, organisational solidarity has arisen out of a strong sense of common identity, on the basis of ethnicity (originally building up from within one clan), gender, livelihood, and the experience of both geographical and ethnic marginalisation as Bakonjo with a local history of exploitative indirect rule and violent conflict. Having a locally embedded support structure was also critical to the positive outcomes achieved for popular agency and representation in both these cases. Neopatrimonial politics and corruption were undermining the extent to which popular representation could influence governance outcomes within the formal planning system, but, building on their solidaristic critical mass, BJCU have been able to develop alternative strategies, based on self-help and social mobilisation, for advancing their interests – leading to positive outcomes like rural electrification. The resignation of a BJCU member from a formal representative committee also suggests that the values underpinning the organising practices of this organisation have the potential to encourage more value-driven political leadership in other arenas in the future.

Critical to BJCU's success in catalysing and sustaining both socio-economic and political change has been an explicit focus on promoting economic empowerment amongst subordinate groups (driven forward significantly by their targeting of household gender relations); and challenging the unequal local power relations which have historically constrained their agency, which has in turn provided a platform for building their political capabilities. This strategic approach reflects wider findings concerning the conditions under which participation can be transformatory (Hickey and Mohan, 2005) and resonates closely with Sandbrook et al.'s (2007) emphasis on the reconfiguration of power relations concerning smallholders. Other important factors here are the sustained input of the British consultant who supported them in developing their approach, who is also highly committed both to community-led change and to social and gender justice, and in turn Oxfam Novib's provision of financial support for developing GALS and sharing good practice.

RD has had less success in directly fostering solidaristic popular organisations and federations, because many of these have formed in response to donor funding and externally defined agendas. Both RD's rights and governance and farmer group interventions have also been developed in response to donor perspectives that envisage the challenge of democratisation or capitalist transition in terms of technical and infrastructural deficits, rather than problems of power relations and politics. This highlights a wider problem with the inclusive liberal 'poverty reduction' agenda, in which poverty is understood as the residue of market failure, rather than in terms of unequal societal relations – as Tilly (1998) elucidates, for example in his analysis of 'categorical inequality'. In contrast to RD's donor dependency, BJCU's core business has remained financially and strategically autonomous, with salaries paid out of a percentage of loan interest and share dividends, and donor finance accepted only for very particular purposes, such as cash transfers and small enterprise training for the poorest.

Perhaps the most significant development within RD's combination of strategies in relation to popular representation and elite commitment to greater inclusion has been to bring model farmers and CPFs into regional agenda-setting processes as the 'voice' of smallholder interests and experiences. The ability to bring grassroots concerns into different levels and scales of deliberation and decision-making has long been recognised as critical to substantive democratisation and pro-poor change (Mitlin and Bebbington, 2006). While these are only incremental steps in that direction, they demonstrate the potential for elite civil society forms to mediate the gap between popular actors and civil and political elites in contexts like Uganda's. RD has cultivated the potential for these socio-economic intermediaries to expand their existing formal and informal roles in ways that might better link up grassroots communities to regional decision-making processes. Beyond this – and in the absence of significant levels of organisation and solidarity among smallholders in the region – think tank research, which attempts to generate a deeper understanding about household poverty dynamics, is RD and its (former) core donor's main surrogate strategy for effective popular representation in pursuit of a more inclusive regional development trajectory.

Fostering developmental ideas and relations?

RD's sub-county dialogues target the 'intermediate' classes that Khan (2010: 54) identifies as having a significant mobilising role within clientelist political settlements and are incrementally building their capacity to govern local services effectively, while also providing space for state-society interactions (Evans and Heller, 2012). Teachers and health workers, MC members, and councillors reported increased understanding about their respective responsibilities for ensuring quality health and education, had altered their behaviour and approach and felt academic performance had improved in schools because of this good practice sharing. In 2008, a series of dialogues led to the passing of a sub-county education bill aimed at more effective enforcement of sanctions in response to the problem of school drop-outs, and dialogues had also triggered a public apology and improved staff behaviour in a district health centre.

The leadership retreats have fostered more positive relationships between civil, state and political elites, leading to greater inclusion in local planning and budget processes and increased receptivity to planning in response to locally generated research by civil society actors. A critical outcome has been a rapprochement between the leaders of the Rwenzururu and Tooro kingdoms and certain NRM and opposition MPs. The MPs' forum successfully mobilised a regional caucus of MPs to secure 500 million shillings[7] a year for three years for the new regional university that was to be a critical partner in the think tank initiative. Through the think tank regional

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[7] Approximately GBP £137,000.

stakeholder forums, RD have catalysed a process whereby state, civil society, politicians and farmers are all engaging in analysing locally generated data and planning action in response. Their investment in this process, and commitment to pursuing particular action points, suggest a strong commitment to improved development outcomes and more inclusive forms of governance.

One participant felt that the think tank was the most significant regional process RD had catalyzed, because it was 'really making people reflect' together about how to make development work for local people. This is supported by observational data from a follow-up meeting, where participants took their analysis beyond the discourse of the lazy peasant that predominates among many elite groups in Uganda (see Hickey, 2005, for example) towards a much stronger focus on socio-cultural constraints shaping falling banana production. There has also been increasing reflection about socio-cultural constraints within deliberations about the code of practice underpinning the regional framework, and these came out strongly during the 2011 leadership retreat. A critical constraint voiced by local government participants in think tank fora, however, was the centralised character of most local government resource allocation leaving local civil servants with little room for manoeuvre in response to research findings and analysis. Nonetheless, both the retreats and think tank deliberations have begun to increase the number and quality of horizontal relationships across district administrations and leaderships, which over the long term have the potential to incrementally counterbalance the strength of vertical patron-client ties (Mitlin, 2014).

BJCU presents a contemporary exemplar of Sandbrook et al.'s (2007) argument that organised smallholders have the capacity to drive inclusive development. Their co-financing of political processes has ensured that state resources are used to meet the interests of local farmers. BJCU's model of community organising has also catalysed widespread social mobilisation across the parishes where they have primary co-operatives, including the emergence of a new immunisation centre, school and nursery, either run or financed by members. The increase in non-state services combined with increased household income means more parents can afford to send their children to school and is resulting, according to one sub-county chairperson, in better educational outcomes in the area, hence building human capabilities in support of more equitable development in future.

The BJCU coordinator and trainers have also fostered commitment among faith and clan leaders towards the transformation of gender norms by cultivating strong relationships with these traditional and cultural figureheads, sensitising them about their vision and approach, and gaining their support in terms of advocating for highly controversial issues like joint land ownership. In terms of business elites, BCJU have attracted large Kampala-based businesses to buy direct from the marketing association by building a reputation for efficiency, trustworthiness and high quality coffee achieving better terms of market inclusion for local producers.

Donors, politicians and civil society leaders all recognise that RD's ability to foster elite commitment to its own agenda is strongly linked to the value-driven regional vision of the founding director and other leaders. This director carefully cultivated a national and then international profile for RD as an innovative and value-driven organisation which attracted donor funding and enabled them to build what is, in one national actor's opinion, the most vibrant regional civil society in the country, including locally embedded support structures for farmer groups and associations. Leaders have also been adept at recognising political opportunities and relationship cultivation, including with transnational actors. These characteristics and skills have been critical to building the convening power necessary to bring together such a breadth of – in some cases historically hostile – actors, and to fostering the partnership-oriented donor relations that have enabled extensive experimentation and periods of iterative critical reflection. RD has also played the card of 'mutual need' effectively (Patel and Mitlin, 2009: 119) in creating the new forms of civil-political synergy described above which resonate with Evans and Heller's (2012) call for greater state embeddedness within civil society and the public sphere. Through the leadership retreats and fora and regional stakeholder forums, RD offers state and political actors information and relationships that might enable them to bring resources to their local area or enhance their performance. Experiences in the Rwenzori call into question Khan's (2010) assertion that organised lower level factions undermine state capacity by subjecting it to too many demands. In this case, where civil society, governmental and traditional leaders are coming together in the interests of catalysing more effective and sustainable local development processes, stronger regional identity and organisation (were this to be sustained over the longer run) would seem to work in the interests of economic development.

RD has exploited a highly educated elite staff-base by building on both socio-cultural ties across the (therefore somewhat imaginary) civil/political divide and strong relations between party cadres across civil and political society. RD has also capitalised on the comparatively strong central government representation in the region by mobilising four Ministers to attend the retreats in as many years, because they are also local MPs. Some observers feel RD has become too close to the NRM to maintain an autonomous vision, but others feel the former director is pursuing change from within, and suggest that RD has trodden a necessarily careful line between critique and collaboration, given the effective dissolution of a more openly critical partner organisation. The fact that the founding director is now playing an active role in the reconvened MPs forum and has been outspoken about state corruption in parliament suggests that momentum for progressive civil-political co-operation in the region may be sustained, and adds further weight to arguments in the civil society literature suggesting that elite-led organisations like RD act as incubators of progressive political leadership (Ndegwa, 1996, is one example).

BJCU has struggled to achieve influence through direct attempts at relationship building, with state officials lacking the class-based ties so critical in the case of RD. Instead, they have generated respect among local political, traditional and religious elites on the basis of having built a successful model for community empowerment

and economic development, and political influence based on critical mass. Indeed, as the micro-finance association has grown, many local leaders have joined and particularly – as a predominantly female membership – the wives of local officials and politicians. While they have not nor could be expected to transform the neopatrimonial culture of governance (particularly at district level), by building a solidaristic popular force based on principles of trust and accountability, and grounded in strong common identity and interest, they are incrementally changing norms about leadership and governance among members within the organisation. This may – as Williams (2004), among others, suggests – have important longer-term effects on the kinds of leaders people will support more widely.

Case study conclusions

In Western Uganda, processes of agricultural commercialisation have yet to reach a stage whereby smallholders have been able to accumulate sufficient autonomy to free themselves from clientelist relations with either dominant landholders or local political elites. Decentralisation has tended to support somewhat regressive processes of state formation, in terms of deepening patronage, re-empowering ethno-territorial politics and fragmenting state capacity. However, these case studies demonstrate that both elite and popular civil society forms have been able to catalyse economic and political empowerment and shifts in elite attitudes and behaviour. Economic empowerment – particularly in remote areas with strong drives for self-help, and where locally embedded support structures are in place – has enabled subordinate actors to gain greater political agency. The BJCU case suggests that smallholders that can organise into solidaristic, transparent and accountable representative structures, identify a viable market opportunity, and maintain autonomy from state and donor agendas, have significant potential to advance the political interests of rural citizens. RD's experiences suggest that, in contrast to Chatterjee's (2004) discounting of elite civil society forms as agents of the poor, such organisations may have important roles to play at sub-national levels, both as brokers of communicative channels between grassroots farmer organisations and national politicians, and as convenors of alternative dialogic spaces able to reshape elite perceptions of development and the role of citizens within developmental processes.

Wider conclusions

Debates about the conditions under which states become developmental and democratic diverge around whether economic transformation is a precondition for democratisation and whether subordinate groups gain greater political and economic inclusion within societies as a result of shifting intra-elite relations and incentives, or in response to organised popular pressure. Mainstream analyses of the influence that structural conditions have over conditions for democratic development to emerge suggest that patronage will continue to be the default for a long time to come. The case of Uganda, and our specific case of attempts to promote democratic development within the Rwenzori sub-region, provides some support for NWW

(2009) and Khan's (2010) suggestion that new elite bargains and capitalist transition are critical to the emergence of developmental and democratic forms of politics. However, it resonates more clearly with Sandbrook et al.'s (2007) more holistic account, which suggests that the extent to which new class configurations generate more inclusive development trajectories is dependent upon the presence of progressive ideas, leaders and civil or political intermediaries that can support 'subordinate classes' to form effective organisations and representative channels. Smallholder farmers have yet to comprise a political constituency in Uganda and the NRM's combination of patrimonialism and authoritarianism has prevented the emergence of an effective opposition force capable of developing a strong party infrastructure at the grassroots (Tripp, 2010).

These civil society-led processes contain many of the elements of progress that Sandbrook et al. (2007) identify as critical for promoting 'social democracy in the global periphery'. As such, they represent something of a microcosm of this wider process, particularly in terms of linking processes of economic empowerment to the strengthening of popular democratic capabilities, challenging the unequal power relations that constrain the political agency of subordinate groups, and promoting alternative ideas around governance and development amongst elite actors. Although the gains made in this sub-region remain heavily constrained by the fact that the underlying structural conditions associated with democratic development, namely state formation and structural transformation, have yet to emerge in fuller form, such case studies offer a useful reminder that the long-run politics of social change is likely to involve a role for popular as well as elite actors, ideas as well as rational self-interest, and with some role for the solidarity of transnationalism.

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