Living with paradox in international development: An extended case study of an international NGO

Helen Wadham, Cathy Urquhart and Richard Warren

Abstract

International Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) combine practical and advocacy efforts to address global challenges like poverty and climate change. However, NGOs are embedded within the same global system they seek to challenge. This article explore the tensions this raises from the vantage point of one particular organisation (Concern Universal). Drawing on a paradox perspective, we find that despite the structural constraints, NGO actors and the poor people they work alongside are active and well-informed participants in the development process. However, a focus on the communicative labour of NGOs uncovers the power relations at play in that work. Nonetheless, our paper challenges ideas about development as 'us versus them.' Rather, by focusing our analysis on the relationships between NGO actors and multiple others, we show how the organisation is effectively constituted by these and other relationships.

Keywords Contradiction, development, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), paradox, partnership

Introduction

This article explores how Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) manage the contradictions that are inherent to the capitalist system in general, and the development process in particular. From Marx and Engels onwards, writers have recognised that capitalism's contradictions do not prove fatal, because they are accompanied by the expansionary tendencies of that same system. However, even as capitalism has engulfed industrial and emerging societies alike, its advances are negotiated and resisted at local level through radical action by communities and those who work with them (Hesketh, 2016). For example, in his discussion of Turkish NGOs and their relationship with European donors, Ketola (2016) suggests nonprofits retain significant agency, despite the power differentials involved. Wrangel (2017) suggests poor people themselves assert a similar autonomy: Although constrained by their lack of capacity to 'conceive of or act towards a different future,' they are nonetheless 'hopeful' rather than passive or despairing (2017: 875).

NGOs engage in in practical efforts with communities to help them negotiate their on-the-ground challenges, then leverage this experience into a wider 'communicative' role, by calling on government, business and the wider public to help change the underlying conditions that give rise to the challenges in question (Edwards and Hulme, 2013). NGO

work is inherently contradictory. Even as they provide practical solutions and challenge the global system that gives rise to poverty, conflict and suffering, the dependence of NGOs upon financial and other support from national governments, multilateral institutions, and corporations, renders them complicit in that same system (Lewis and Opoku-Mensah, 2006; Nair, 2013; Tvedt, 2006). That is, NGOs are constituted within a contingent field of economic, political and social relations (Dempsey, 2012). However, there is a gap in our understanding of how NGO actors – in practice – balance the inherent tensions this creates. To address this gap, we examine how one particular NGO (Concern Universal) negotiates the paradoxes inherent within international development work. Specifically, we draw on paradox theory to explore how NGOs both contest and compound the underlying structural causes of the challenges they seek to address.

Paradox is a dynamic relationship between 'contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time' (Smith and Lewis, 2011: 386). The organisation is understood not as a social unit, but rather as a 'relational whole formed through connecting and reconnecting elements that seem contradictory' (Putnam and Fairhurst, 2015: 385). We therefore heed Dempsey's (2009; 2012) call to focus on both the on-the-ground and communicative aspects of NGO work. Our analysis uses the extended case method (Burawoy, 1998) to bring together micro and macro levels of analysis. That is, we show how CU actors balance on-the-ground and communicative

roles with communities and other stakeholders in their pursuit of both short-term and long-term aims. By applying a paradox perspective, our paper makes three contributions to our understanding of international development work. Firstly, a paradox perspective shows how tensions accommodated at one level can re-emerge at another. Despite the structural constraints, communities and NGOs nonetheless take an active role in co-constructing their understanding of and approach to the challenges they encounter. Secondly, a paradox perspective usefully highlights the power relations that permeate the relationship between the NGO and communities, revealing how – at best – particular approaches work for particular people at particular times. Thirdly, a paradox perspective sheds light on the organic way in which NGO actors come together with diverse stakeholders, highlighting how this creates tensions but also blurs boundaries between the people and organisations involved.

The next section considers the complex and contested nature of NGOs, and the usefulness of drawing on both communicative and paradox perspectives to understand these complexities. We then draw these ideas together in our theoretical framework, which allows us to explore how NGO actors employ on-the-ground and communicative labour with diverse stakeholders to understand and manage paradox. We also explain how the extended case methodology enabled us to explore this process at both micro and macro

levels of the studied NGO. We then present our findings and relate these to the literature, before proposing our conclusions and suggestions for further research.

NGO Work as Contested and Contradictory

Complex or 'wicked' problems like climate change, social injustice and HIV/AIDS bring together diverse actors (Conklin, 2005). The role of NGOs in this context is both material and symbolic. They provide practical, often local assistance to help people deal with the consequences of these problems. They also advocate for social justice at a global level to help address their underlying causes (Banks et al., 2015). However, NGOs cannot be studied in isolation. Rather, organisational processes and patterns of actions and discourses shape the wider context in which they operate and vice versa (Fejerskov et al., 2016). That is, NGOs are embedded within those same political and economic structures that they critique (Ganesh et al. 2005; Ganesh and Zoller, 2012; Lewis and Opoku-Mensah, 2006). Seckinelgin (2006) suggests that as NGOs become more deeply entwined within the international development system, so their links with local institutions and communities – so crucial to their existence and legitimacy – become disarticulated. A discourse of difference emerges, with the 'other' abstracted and reified in negative terms (Ybema et al., 2012). This in turn exacerbates the powerlessness of the poor communities they claim to represent, compounding material deprivation with symbolic marginalisation (Dempsey, 2009; Dutta, 2011). In particular, their role within the global aid architecture

potentially renders NGOs more accountable to donors than to communities or other stakeholders (Banks et al., 2015). The availability of overseas donor funding can lead NGOs to abandon efforts to secure change, as they no longer have to rely on the support of local communities (Jalili, 2013). Consequently, Dempsey (2009; 2012) calls for greater focus on the issues of power that permeate NGO relations vis-à-vis different groups. She says this requires in turn greater focus on the 'communicative labour' of NGOs, namely the way they collect evidence and develop images of social problems, assign praise and blame, and give voice to groups with limited access to the public sphere.

NGOs carry out grassroots projects with communities, while also advocating for social justice with donors who can potentially fund those projects. Consequently, tensions are a defining, ontological feature of such organisations and their relationships with others (Frumkin, 2002). For example, Dar (2014) suggests NGO actors adopt multiple roles as they attempt to comply with donor demands, while simultaneously demonstrating their accountability to non-Western stakeholders. By managing such contradictions, NGOs can adapt to external change, and (often unintentionally) build up their networks (Schemeil, 2013). Consequently, Balboa (2013) suggests NGOs have become powerful global players, 'masterfully manoeuvring' on the international stage (2013: 274). However, in so doing, they may have neglected the local and bridging capacities needed to operate successfully at local and national level, as suggested by Jalili (2013) and Banks et al.

(2015) above. We can see from this brief review that NGO work is characterised by tensions, such as those that emerge between the on-the-ground and communicative labour undertaken by such organisations. Sharma and Bansal (2017) therefore suggest the potential usefulness of paradox theory – well-established in the field of organisational studies – as a useful perspective from which to explore the work of NGOs.

Why paradox?

We will briefly discuss four key aspects of the paradox perspective, as identified by Schad (2017) and explain how they might help us better understand the work of NGOs. Firstly, the *origin* of paradox lies in the human condition itself (Schad, 2017). It emerges as a central theme in classical music, art, philosophy, literature and all forms of human organisation (Clegg et al., 2002). Paradoxes provoke thought and spark curiosity, opening up new ways of theorising everything from Bible stories and Bach cantatas to organisational strategy (Schad 2017). Quinn and Cameron define paradox as 'the simultaneous presence of contradictory, even mutually exclusive elements' (1988, 2). While it is a naturally occurring characteristic of organisations, it nonetheless merits a critical approach (Trethewey and Ashcraft, 2004). Its usefulness in exploring structural inequalities like gender, for example, have led to calls for more use of a paradox perspective on problems like climate change, poverty and the digital divide (see for example Schad and Bansal, 2018; Smith et al., 2017). In exploring the role of NGOs

in addressing those challenges, then, the paper aims to extend the existing work on paradox to a wider range of organisational settings.

A second aspect concerns the nature of paradox as a *concept*. All organisations face multiple, competing demands. However, they only form paradoxes where they are mutually constituted (Iivonen, 2018; Schad et al., 2016). Smith and Lewis (2011) employ the metaphor of yin/yang: Elements such as financial and social objectives, for example, can be at once oppositional to each other but they are also synergistic and interrelated *within a wider system*. Paradox can be found across differing levels of analysis, among individuals, dyads, project teams, and organisations (Smith and Lewis, 2011). Even as we focus on the organisational level, therefore, we should be mindful of these other groupings. A paradox perspective enables us to both 'zoom out' to bring the entire system into view and 'zoom in' to uncover the complex interactions and dominant processes encountered as NGOs and others address the complex problems mentioned above (Schad and Bansal, 2018). Consequently, we use the extended case method (Burawoy 1998) to bring together micro and macro levels of analysis.

Thirdly, there are diverse *responses* to paradox. Individuals or organisations may try to differentiate or split the paradoxical elements, such as when a multinational is going through tough times, and prioritises financial imperatives over their corporate social responsibilities to particular stakeholders (Jay, 2013). An alternative strategy is that of

integration, where the company would seek to simultaneously accommodate both poles – financial and social – by finding synergies and linkages (Smith, 2014). Smith and Lewis (2011) highlight how organisations might alternate between these responses, via 'dynamic equilibrium.' Nonetheless, paradoxes become a facet of organisational reality only once they are seen and addressed by organisational members (Mason, 2016). Not all paradoxes are salient and visible (Schad and Bansal, 2018). Rather, some are 'performed into existence' through ongoing interactions between participants within and beyond the organisation (Cooren et al, 2013; Hoffmann, 2018; Putnam et al., 2016). Our paper therefore heeds the call of Clegg et al. (2002) and Cooren et al (2011) to adopt an intersubjective (or 'communication-as-constitutive' - CCO) perspective, which shifts the focus from individuals, to the relationships between them. Our paper therefore applies the lens of paradox not only to the practical but also the communicative aspects of NGO work (see also Dempsey, 2009; 2012).

Finally, the process of development brings a *temporal* perspective to the study of paradox. Over time, paradoxes create a reinforcing cycle, either vicious or virtuous (Schad, 2017). Well-managed, continuous efforts to meet multiple divergent demands can lead to peak performance in the present that enables long-term sustainability in the future (Smith and Lewis, 2011). From a more critical perspective, paradox might be imagined alternatively as a deflating balloon: Tensions accommodated at one level can

re-emerge at another (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Schad and Bansal, 2018). This resonates with our understanding of NGOs, which are characterised by multiple accountabilities that Edwards (2000) colourfully likens to a medieval torture rack pulling organisational actors in multiple directions. In exploring how these paradoxical tensions play out over time, again the communicative approach alluded to above is helpful. As such, we respond to Dempsey's (2007) call to reflect on the uses and limits of stakeholder voice in the experience of tension.

Our composite theoretical framework brings a paradox perspective together with stakeholder- and communication-centred perspectives that we think can be useful in four ways. Firstly, NGOs are key actors in addressing complex problems that are characterised by dynamics that expose multiple tensions across a wide range of stakeholders. Paradox is a promising but underutilised perspective for exploring the causes of and solutions to these problems. Secondly, in order to understand this wider context (or the 'larger system' within which interrelated paradoxes are played out), our combination of paradox, stakeholder and communicative perspectives enable us to examine both the macro environment and the micro-level interactions that shape it. Thirdly, in doing so, we can focus not only on the salient tensions that are 'seen' and acknowledged by participants themselves, but also on the latent tensions that emerge through the communicative and interactional events that constitute the day-to-day

reality of organisational life. Finally, given the complex accountabilities of NGOs, they provide an ideal context in which to examine the use and limits of stakeholder voices in understanding and managing paradox.

Using the Extended Case Method to Understand Paradox at Concern Universal

The above review suggests paradoxes emerge within day-to-day interactions and we should therefore focus on the relationships between various actors. The relationships between NGO actors and others beyond the organisation centre on both the organisation's on-the-ground efforts and its 'big picture' ambitions to challenge the underlying conditions that render those practical efforts necessary. Drawing on Habermas (1987), we separate these out. On-the-ground efforts represent a form of 'strategic action,' in which people pursue short-term practical ends, engaging in minimal dialogue for instrumental reasons alone. By contrast, CU's advocacy work is more akin to 'communicative action,' in which people attempt to build their mutual understanding of the underlying challenges that face them, engaging in rational and transparent dialogue in order to do so. By examining each of our three ethnographic vignettes from these two perspectives, we generate a multi-layered analysis of NGO work, in which participants' own voices are heard throughout. By definition, paradoxes are embedded within a larger system. Therefore, we also needed to establish a link between the global development system and our chosen research setting. The extended case method enables us to make such a link, by applying macro-level theory to a

particular micro-level case via three steps, outlined below (Burawoy 1998; Wadham & Warren 2014).

The first step in the extended case method is to 'identify an appropriate theory and case.' Concern Universal (CU)[1] supports people's efforts to improve their lives via practical actions focused on food security, health, access to rights and other areas. Two characteristics make this a compelling study for the present research. Firstly, the organisation has a strongly stakeholder-led approach, delivering projects alongside 60 local and international partners. This approach is common among international NGOs, suggesting that some of the conclusions emerging from our study may be generalisable to other organisations across the sector. However, CU's particular way of working with business is less typical. CU places business – meaning everything from community-based microenterprises through regional and national companies to multinationals – at the heart of its development efforts. Its engagement with big business is perhaps especially noteworthy. Many NGOs tend towards either collaborative or adversarial approaches (Baur and Schmitz, 2012; Idemudia, 2017). However, CU combines both, helping large companies like Tetley or The Cooperative Group deliver on their CSR commitments, while privately and publicly challenging them to do more. This makes CU an interesting 'revelatory' case (Yin, 2012). That is, it highlights how potential tensions between the NGO's 'social justice' and 'business' personas might surface within organisational talk.

A second characteristic that renders CU especially interesting is the way in which leadership (i.e. as well as labour) is shared across different countries and communities. Like many NGOs, CU recruits extensively from within local communities: About 95 percent of CU's 675 staff are recruited in The Gambia and other country programmes, compared to 55 percent at Oxfam and 45 percent at Christian Aid, for example. Across the global aid sector, then, local staff decide how they will work and with whom. While this often results in distinctive and relatively autonomous country programmes, the ability of local staff to impact the organisation as a whole is often limited, as leadership tends to be concentrated among head office staff, who tend to come from Europe or North America, rather than NGO countries of operation (Roth, 2015). Within CU, by contrast, decision-making and functional expertise is devolved. For example, the Strategic Coordination Group (senior management team) is comprised of people from different country programmes. Similarly, organisational strategy is developed via a bottom-up participatory process in which staff, partners and communities come together at the local and country level to share ideas about CU's potential future activities. These are then passed onto to a Policy Advisory Committee. This is better described as a periodic, informal meeting of people from across different parts and levels of the organisation, who combine the country programmes' ideas into a coherent organisational strategy for the next three years.

The second step in the extended case method is to 'collect data from daily life and identify any anomalies.' Ethnographic fieldwork was carried out by the first author over 13 months in 2007-8. Three vignettes, recorded during a visit to CU's largest country programme in The Gambia, provide our story with its trajectory. These are complemented by other data drawn from across the fieldwork period, including observing and talking to people about their day-to-day work within CU, conversations with business, NGO and political actors at multiple levels, and more public forms of engagement at conferences and forums. This 'insider' approach enabled the first author to become socialised into this particular organisation: The tacit knowledge gained – particularly where it challenges our chosen theory – is then reframed as theoretical insight (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007). It is this third step – 'rebuild the theory to accommodate any anomalies' – which effectively brings together micro and macro levels of analysis. Before we attempt to rebuild our theoretical framework in the discussion, we will first present our findings.

Managing Paradox at Concern Universal (CU)

This section describes and analyses three embedded vignettes of the case study of Concern Universal (CU), which show how tensions are managed in practice. In this section, we endeavour to balance a rich picture of each setting, while demonstrating the instrumental and communicative tensions within.

Vignette 1: Chemen: Managing organisational tensions at local and global levels

Dotted with salt crystals, the dusty fields near Chemen are criss-crossed by hand-made dykes. Lamin, office manager of CU Gambia, says these fragile ridges of earth, gravel and grass are the only thing holding back the encroaching seawater. Increasingly erratic rainfall and wind erosion threaten the already precarious livelihoods that people scrape from the soil. The visitors – a farmer from the West Midlands, and a former environmental advisor to the UK government – are being shown around by Lamin and representatives from two local partner organisations. They are here to help local communities identify further ways to protect their farms and improve their income.

'Stop here!' Lamin calls out. 'I've never seen so many of these plants in one place,' he explains, as we take a closer look. A drought-resistant shrub that grows wild in West Africa and Asia, jatropha makes good hedging, as it is unpalatable to animals and improves soil quality. In India, communities hand-process jatropha nuts: The oil is used to power lamps, while the pulp provides fuel for stoves. The owner of this plot, Abdoulaye, grows casaba and peanuts (Photo 1). The jatropha hedge originally replaced a battered barbed-wire fence around his ten-acre plot, but he has subsequently made money by selling the nuts. He doesn't know the buyer's name, what he does with the nuts, or whether he sources more elsewhere. But Abdoulaye has now planted several neat rows of jatropha on the other side of the road. By the time we arrive back at the car, he is

discussing costs, yields and sowing distances with Lamin and the others. He expresses interest in joining a pilot project, through which eight local farmers will each plant 2.5 acres of jatropha. Their efforts will be studied and measured, with the aim of scaling up in future.

On-the-ground perspective. This story illustrates how people from CU and its partners provide practical advice and support to communities. Lamin tells people unfamiliar with jatropha that it can help them address environmental challenges. It is an effective barrier, keeping cattle and wild animals off farmer's crops, it stabilises arid soil, and its falling leaves enrich the surrounding area. However, Lamin and his colleagues also want to know about communities' own knowledge of jatropha. Chatting to Abdoulaye and his neighbours, we find that they already process wild-grown jatropha nuts into oil for candles, soap and antiseptic. Another resident, Isa, does all his cooking with jatropha, using a simple press, jerrycan and camping stove. In this case, CU is not introducing a new idea but helping communities consolidate and share their existing knowledge and experience. CU's role here is to help people make effective – and potentially profitable – use of an already familiar option: Lamin's colleagues advise on 'intercropping' the shrub with sorghum or peanuts. They share photos of Isa's set-up to encourage people to process more jatropha themselves and create a marketable product, rather leaving excess nuts on the shrub or selling them all onto intermediaries.

Communicative perspective. In practical terms, jatropha can help people improve their soil, fuel their homes, and generate additional income. But even small-scale commercial cultivation potentially undermines the sustainability of those same communities, since diverting land to biofuel production can indirectly increase food prices and distort local markets (Gamborg et al., 2012). It also increases people's vulnerability to wider market forces. Many farmers are already familiar with the heady highs and devastating lows of international trade since Gambia has long been a supplier of peanuts to regional and global markets. The complex impact of biofuel production on poor communities arises during a forum on climate change, as captured in the following exchange between the Country Director of CU and one of the neighbours mentioned above:

> John: The Gambia's probably…30 percent self-sufficient in food. It is buying the rest in. How do the farmers get access to that money they need to buy the rest of the food? … If you can diversify your cash crop base [by growing jatropha] you may have that extra.
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> Isa: Prices are going up …Even if we give [people] a cash crop [they] are not going to be able to buy much food. Growing biofuels is a way to improve soil so you can grow more food…but food comes first!

The discussion continues, but there is no attempt to 'resolve' the issue. Shortly after, the Gambian government bans the commercial production of jatropha. CU continues its conversations with farmers and – significantly – with the government's 'agricultural extension workers' based in rural communities. At the heart of all encounters – with community members, partners, funders and local government officials – is a recognition that such tensions are inevitable within international development work.

Vignette 2: Njawara; Managing conflicting community priorities

Yaya shows us around his two-acre plot in the late afternoon sunshine (Photo 2). A handful of his neighbours are still working, drawing water or bending over weeds. Yaya sniffs occasionally. He's not well, and has spent most of the day in bed. As we walk between neat rows of cabbages, peppers and cassava, he says in previous seasons he would have been working however sick he was:

> 'We had no fence and if I didn't come, stray animals would come into the garden and destroy everything.'

The allotment is now surrounded by a chain-link fence, and the goats and cattle trespass elsewhere. Yaya bought the fence with a community loan, after graduating from the Njawara Agricultural Training Centre (NATC), which partners with CU. Now in his early

thirties, Yaya inherited this land from his father. Gesturing towards the horizon, he says he and his family now farm another larger patch of land, and have enough to eat all year. They sell any excess produce, enabling Yaya to pay his children's school fees. Unlike some neighbours who struggle to make a living from their land, Yaya would like his kids to become farmers like him.

On-the-ground perspective. CU and its partners have provided Yaya with hands-on training, and the all-important loan for his fence. But they have also helped him build a mutual support network with fellow farmers. NATC graduates have formed a cooperative, pooling their knowledge of different crops and channelling contributions into microloans. As a result, they now supply Gambia is Good (GIG), an initiative between CU, UK-based horticultural company Haygrove, and local partners including the NATC. GIG is a pro-poor marketing initiative, which helps smallholders become suppliers to the potentially lucrative tourist market. It translates the needs of hotels, restaurants and supermarkets into detailed production plans, and provides growers with access to specially selected seed varieties. Farmers like Yaya now produce about 100 tonnes of vegetables over the tourist season. This translates into about £80 000 of sales diverted away from expensive foreign suppliers towards local producers, who now hold a 65% market share. For Yaya, this means he can save for an irrigation system, has food in the cupboard and can take the occasional day off.

CU has effectively used its relationships with business and development actors to contest the conditions of poverty in which Yaya and his neighbours find themselves. GIG enables individual smallholders to compete with commercial operations on quality and price, thereby providing them with access to a wider market for their vegetables. CU effectively mediates the relationship between 'big' business and 'small' suppliers like Yaya, helping them transform from struggling subsistence farmers into effective actors within the local and global market for food. However, if the Gambian tourism industry falters, local producers may find themselves without a market.

Communicative perspective. Farmers themselves understand CU's double-edged role. At an evening meeting, GIG farmers happily reflect that they no longer experience a 'hungry season,' when crops from the previous year would run out before the new harvest was ready to be brought in. But a little later, the president of Yaya's cooperative turns to an issue that has clearly been raised before:

> 'What about all the tomatoes and vegetables that GIG doesn't want? Why can't CU take a stand at Serrakunda market [in the capital Banjul] and help us to sell it that way?'

Farmers are particularly unhappy that GIG will occasionally send out imported products rather than accept local produce that does not meet strict quality standards. From this perspective, CU is embracing the invisible hand of the market by prioritising the expectations of its commercial customers over the needs of farmers. But CU also contests this same system, refusing to prioritise profitability over development objectives by encouraging everyone in the community rather than just the 'best' farmers to join GIG.

Consequently, GIG is seen as one example of how CU might help 'build a movement' for change beyond the local level via its advocacy and fundraising work with business, government and NGO actors. The aim is to facilitate a fundamental shift in the way people think about development challenges and how they might be met. However, this is recognised as a source of tension within the organisation. A senior member of the organisation acknowledges that 'going public' about CU's work with big business needs particularly careful handling:

> 'We need something up front that makes it clear that…we're aware that the vision we're putting forward comes from within a particular paradigm, a particular understanding of how business can contribute to development. But that we know there are other paradigms out there.'

Vignette 3 – Fajara: How relationships determine what the organisation is

It is Saturday morning. Having waved off their UK visitors, about a dozen members of CU Gambia have come into the office to reflect on the visit and the ideas it has raised about CU's work with business in particular. Regional manager Andrew starts off by reflecting on CU's experience with a large multinational that had part-funded a recent CU project:

> 'We're clear about the way we want to work with business. It's a collaborative relationship. We'd hope... to have an influence on their thinking although we know that isn't always possible. With [that company] the engagement was almost zero when we went back and tried to have some kind of influence over them.'

This sparks an extended debate about whether people in CU should continue to pursue – and accept funding from – companies that do not want any further engagement. Country director John says CU should ultimately defer to the people it exists to serve:

> 'Who's making the decision about whether we should work with that business or not?...We might think we should say we don't like what a particular company is doing in Africa but we also have to ask what do communities say?'

On-the-ground perspective. CU's relationships with business and others impact upon its strategic and operational choices. Its work on 'sustainable livelihoods' has been a key plank of its recent growth: In The Gambia, GIG is one element of a wider 'livelihoods' programme, through which CU provides practical and/or financial support to enable people to make the most of their own resources. Similarly, in Malawi, CU runs the largest rural microfinance initiative in the country. Its work with business is also reflected in its marketing to potential donors. For example, CU's strategy document talks about 'effective programmes,' 'financial stability' and 'brand, value and balance.' For some, this use of business language is not especially significant, but others – including a member of the Gambia team – question the focus on business and the way this is used to communicate the work of the organisation:

> 'That's just a small part of the work we do. And it doesn't give people a clear idea of the day-to-day work that we're actually doing with people and communities on the ground.'

This concern perhaps reflects awareness that its relationships – in this case with business actors – render fragile the very identity of the organisation. It is also a good example of how individual actors in an NGO might surface and negotiate contradictions.

Communicative perspective. In the story above, John's final comment – about asking communities what they think – succinctly highlights how CU's relationships shape what the organisation *does* but also what it *is*. Organisational boundaries are effectively under constant negotiation. Relationships with partners like St. Joseph's Family Farm in the Gambia, and the Dhaka Ahsania Mission in Bangladesh, predate the relevant country programmes. CU has evolved organically in response to the priorities of these and other partners and communities (Photo 3). This is captured by a UK-based member of the team:

> 'If we were to say we'll focus on the [poorest] countries…we might potentially have to phase out work in other countries…But we have a strong commitment to the people who run these programmes and the communities we work with…It's a fundamental part of the…organisation, [that] sense of loyalty to what's already there.'

Given that building relationships is a long-term process, CU's institutional links may prove vulnerable to changes in personnel. For example, staff in The Gambia reported that the unexpected death of the director of St. Joseph's Family Farm hindered the development of the pilot jatropha project. In addition, there is a risk that dialogue with business or others might become an end in itself, as the same participant articulates in an email responding to an early draft of the research:

> ‘There is a risk that we can be happy thinking we’ve done a good job of influencing, and the business can be happy thinking they’ve done a good job of talking to us and demonstrating goodwill, but it’s still possible that no real change will result. [There is a] risk of complicity between NGO and business in a process of dialogue that may not result in any real change.’

CU attempts to mitigate against this via a set of clearly articulated organisational values and policies like its partnership handbook and ethical funding policy. Nonetheless, in a decentralised organisation, which engages with diverse communities and multiple stakeholders, people do not seek some kind of resolution to the inevitable tensions that arise. Rather, what CU is and what it does are understood to be under constant negotiation, albeit within the boundaries set by its values and policies.

In summary, the vignettes presented here reveal three inter-related paradoxes underlying NGO work. Talking to Abdoulaye in Chemen about his plans to plant more jatropha bushes, it becomes clear that short-term actions by NGOs and the people they work need balancing against long-term sustainable development. Similarly, the success that Yaya and his neighbours in Njawara have had in supplying local hotels through GIG has clearly opened them up to the caprices of local and global markets even as it reduces their vulnerability to the vagaries of the seasons. Finally, conversations around the table in

Fajara highlight the challenges of balancing grassroots work with one particular group of stakeholders against attempting to advocate for change among a much more diverse audience. Table 1 summarises our analysis of the vignettes, along with the discussion and conclusions that follow below.

Understanding the Contradictions at CU

The three vignettes presented in the previous section used an on-the-ground (instrumental) and communicative perspective respectively to show how one particular NGO engages with the paradoxes they encounter as they engage with diverse stakeholders locally and beyond. We will now discuss the implications of these findings to our understanding of international development work more broadly.

Our first vignette focuses on the production of the cash crop jatropha. As a biofuel, jatropha highlights a fundamental paradox. In the short term, farmers benefit from increased income. In the long term, by giving land over to the production of a non-food crop, they may be jeopardising the future supply of food for themselves and the wider community (Gamborg et al., 2012). Our analysis reveals that farmers and others are aware of this tension. Abdoulaye explains how the hedging runs around the edge of his plot, protecting rather than displacing his valuable food crops. The role of the NGO here is to share the experience of Abdoulaye more widely, enabling other farmers to benefit. CU

then takes what they have all learnt to inform policy-level discussions about biofuels in the Gambia and elsewhere, such as at the climate change forum discussed above. To use Dempsey's (2009; 2012) terminology, CU is giving a voice to groups with limited access to the public sphere. In this way, our particular case – which provides an unusually well-defined 'business' persona combined with a particularly bottom-up approach to development – highlights the issues of power that Dempsey finds missing in much of the debate to date. On the one hand, we find people using their own knowledge to challenge the material and symbolic marginalisation identified by Dempsey (2009) and Dutta (2011). Communities already have a significant knowledge of the uses and morphology of jatropha. They perhaps also demonstrate some understanding of its geopolitics: Abdoulaye reveals in passing that his grandfather cultivated the shrub after seeing it used in India, where he was stationed with the British Army. Likewise he speculates about the role and ambitions of his mystery buyer. Consequently, a picture emerges of Abdoulaye and his neighbours as active participants and a source of knowledge in this particular debate, rather than passive recipients of external wisdom from NGOs and others. In effect, they are seeking to conceive of and act towards a different future (Wrangel, 2017). While, our vignette paints a more optimistic picture than that of Wrangel, it also highlights the limits of this agency. To the dismay of farmers like Abdoulaye, the Gambian government has moved to outlaw even small-scale commercial production of jatropha. Again, a paradox lens suggests a more nuanced understanding of this particular turn of events. On

one level, we can see the government 'resolving' the tension by prioritising national long-term interests over the short-term interests of individual farmers. But this story also illustrates how accommodating tensions at one level can lead to their reappearance at another (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Schad and Bansal, 2018). In response, the NGO finds itself helping farmers navigate new tensions generated by alternative sources of income.

The second vignette showed tensions around CU's local produce scheme, Gambia is Good. GIG helps farmers move from subsistence to commercial horticulture by supplying high-quality vegetables to local hotels. From a paradox perspective, the NGO supports farmers in building their income and protecting themselves against seasonal variations. But in so doing, it opens them up to the fluctuations of local and global markets. Schad and Bansal's (2018) emphasis on the potential of paradox theory to 'zoom in' and 'zoom out' is helpful here. By 'zooming in,' it shows us that on-the-ground actions are constrained without communicative engagement: For example, we hear a group of farmers enthusiastically describe how CU has helped them to make more money, even as they complain that GIG will not accept lower quality produce like over-ripe tomatoes. If we 'zoom out' from this same story, a paradox perspective reveals issues of power. Just as Trethewey and Ashcraft (2011) see paradox as a way to foreground gender relations, so it also reveals power relations between the NGO and communities (and beyond). Farmers blame GIG for not helping them, but CU people in turn point to their inability to

challenge the rules of the market. To adopt Ketola's (2016) terminology, they are 'differentiating' themselves from an agenda imposed upon NGOs and communities alike by more powerful development actors. In this way, the uncomfortable late-night conversation that unfolds illustrates the extent to which communication can be agonistic rather than consensus-seeking (Burchell and Cook, 2013; Ganesh and Zoller, 2012), as NGO actors accept but do not attempt to resolve the tension identified by farmers. However, even as CU actors acknowledge their constrained position within a wider network (Lewis and Opoku-Mensah, 2006; McKague et al, 2015; Seckinelgin, 2006), they show some ability to expand and challenge that network. They refuse to prioritise only the most 'effective' farmers. Similarly, their communicative labour focuses on sharing experiences of GIG not only with potential members but with a much wider audience. Their suggestion that doing so might inspire others to advocate for and implement change is to some extent borne out by GIG's appearance in UK government reports and the World Business and Development Awards, for example. Again, our case provides an interesting complement to the existing research as CU deliberately attempts to articulate and engage with the challenges of balancing commercial and development objectives at different levels.

The final vignette, set in CU's office in Fajara, picks up on these tensions between the NGO's grassroots and advocacy work. The underlying paradox here is that its advocacy

work raises CU's profile and potential influence to effect change within wider global networks, but it also takes time and people away from the organisation's core work with communities. As such, the paradox perspective is indeed useful in exploring how CU employs both on-the-ground and communicative labour to address complex problems. Participants acknowledge that both on-the-ground and communicative action are necessary. Dialogue without action is rendered vulnerable to changes in personnel, and over time can become a potentially sterile end in itself. Conversely, with business in particular, participants are clearly uncomfortable about action that is not accompanied by dialogue, as in the case of the 'no strings attached' donation by a multinational company. Participants reflect on how they might deal with a similar situation in future. Although CU actors are clearly comfortable 'living with' paradox, in this case a resolution is attempted: John says CU's yardstick should be what communities would say: 'They would probably say take the money!' he says. However, this touchstone does not altogether reassure those who believe closer working relationships with business (and other 'non-traditional' partners) may fundamentally change the organisation and take it further away from communities. This finds an echo in the literature e.g. Seckinelgin (2006) and Jalili (2013) for example. If we use Wicks et al.'s (1994) analysis, CU's stakeholders have indeed been constitutive or integral to the organisation's basic identity: The spread of country programmes, for example, clearly represents an organic response to CU's relationships with particular people and organisations. The reservations

expressed by some members of the organisation suggest that building more bridges to the business community will likely have some kind of organic impact on the organisation itself. The responsiveness of CU to its stakeholders – communities, partners, donors and now business – ensures its continued relevance. However it also mitigates against consistency across country and programmes and – more significantly – means that what the organisations *is* lies at least partly in the hands of people beyond the boundaries of the organisation itself. CU's devolved leadership structure means that participants themselves are very aware of the influence that individual actors – internal and external – can exercise over the continued evolution of the organisation.

Conclusions

This paper combines a paradox perspective with a focus on stakeholders and ideas about the constitutive role of communication in organisations to explore the tensions involved in the international development process from the vantage point of one particular NGO, Concern Universal. Specifically, we have used three vignettes to show how the NGO engages in both on-the-ground and communicative labour as it works through a range of paradoxes. In so doing, the organisation pursues short-term solutions to complex problems, but also endeavours to engage a broader cross-section of people in a long-term discussion about alternative versions of the future in a quest for social justice. Our study shows how CU manages to hold a space that contains contradictory discourses across

multiple communities and actors. As such, our findings concur with Ketola's (2016) suggestion that NGOs appropriate different strategies at different times in order to pursue the structural and political changes needed to get greater equity for poor communities on the ground. Further, we suggest that CU – with its unusually bottom-up approach to development, in which most staff come from within local communities and influence the overall strategy of the organisation – embodies a way of working that mitigates against the danger of a totalising approach to development that sees communities as passive recipients of development (Hesketh 2016, Escobar 2001).

We believe that our paper makes three contributions, each of which suggests the need for further research. Firstly, by applying a paradox approach to both the on-the-ground and communicative work of an NGO with a particular focus on building links between communities and local/global markets, it adds to existing research showing that poor people are active agents in their own development, despite the structural constraints that surround them. Specifically, we have highlighted how both NGO actors and the people they work with are aware of the tensions that exist between the short-term and long-term interests of communities but their voices are not being heard. Our discussion of jatropha, for example, showed that poor people themselves are a source of extensive knowledge and experience, but this is being overlooked by policymakers as they make decisions that impact upon them. Future research could usefully examine this nexus in more detail: For

example, how receptive are policymakers to 'folk' knowledge alongside that of 'experts'? What mechanisms are in place to acquire such knowledge or to learn from communities more broadly?

Secondly, international development emerges as a patchwork of solutions to complex problems. Here we have examined CU's market-focused approaches in particular: While many NGOs engage in work to improve people's livelihoods at a local level, CU is unusual in placing 'business' in its widest sense at the heart of both its local on-the-ground work and its international advocacy efforts. A paradox perspective reveals that NGO actors are aware that their approach to working with business raises particular tensions and that it embodies a particular paradigm or view of the world that is not universally shared. For example, GIG works for some people, some of the time, under certain conditions. It was also notable that the passage of time – the banning of jatropha in the Gambia being one example – meant that tension resolved at one level would simply emerge at another. More research is needed into the impact of such approaches over time, and the conditions that might be required to ensure they improve people's lives as much as possible.

Finally, our focus on relationships rather than individual actors enables us to add to existing literature challenging the idea of development as 'us' vs. 'them.' Specifically,

our research addresses Balboa's (2013) call for more focus on the bridging role played by NGOs across their local and national networks. Many CU staff come from within the communities they work with. While this is not unusual in itself, the extent to which those staff can influence others within and beyond the organisation – owing to its unusually devolved leadership and governance structures – is more noteworthy. That is, CU's people perhaps have an uncommonly multi-layered awareness of paradoxes such as the tension between CU's grassroots and advocacy work. One implication of our study for the NGO sector more widely, then, is that by sharing organisational decision-making more widely – especially by including people hired from within countries of operation – NGOs might better understand and manage the paradoxes they encounter. Participants in our study understand that they must either integrate paradoxical elements in their work or alternate between them. This raises the need for further research into how paradox unfolds at the level of the participant: How do individual actors within development networks balance their multiple/conflicting roles?

It is our hope that our study has contributed to the international development literature by highlighting the usefulness of a paradox lens to understanding the on-the-ground and communicative labour of one particular NGO as it engages with poor communities and other stakeholders in addressing apparently intractable problems

On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

[1] Concern Universal changed its name to United Purpose in 2016, after merging with two other UK-based organisations. Names of individual participants have been changed.

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