Leveling the playing field for inclusive territorial development:
Going beyond technical solutions

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Introduction

We begin this text by clarifying what we mean by territory. In our long journey, which began about twenty years ago while working on land and natural resources for the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), we understood territories as areas of continuous interaction between humans and nature. We could therefore consider the less anthropized territories (e.g. ecological reserves and pristine areas) as well as areas more affected and managed by humans which have reduced the flow of nature to a minimum (as witnessed in urban areas). Since the transformative power of humans has always been much greater than that of nature (in the short term), we decided to primarily focus on the diverse way in which people mold, shape and transform a natural ecosystem into an anthropized one.

Other schools of thought have favoured the clear demarcations of the perimeter boundaries found for these territorial spaces. While some following traditional trends of 1970s planning based on the political administrative delimitation, others followed more nature-based trends (such as those used by experts involved in watershed management and land use planning, both of which we still find today).

By choosing to take a more people-centered focus, we also decided not to worry about the spatial definition and instead concentrate more on understanding the motivations found in the diversity of actors, their goals and their visions. In this way, we moved away from the historical concerns of FAO, which aimed to propose a better use of natural resources of those territories; initially only for productive purposes and later also for environmental "sustainability".

It was no small difference, in fact, over the years this difference has grown, and we will try to explain why in the following pages.

The ideal "plan"

Whoever was involved in "planning", whether for agricultural use or resource management, had a sole objective in mind: a final product (the "plan") that once it was put into action would have positively answered the initial questions (e.g. what to and what not to produce in a certain place, how to better manage a forest, etc.). Under that vision, the "experts" were those coming from abroad, with their diploma and scientific language that naturally created a divide with the players in the field.

By bringing our attention to human, or rather, people and their interactions, we have completely overturned the previous logic. According to us, it is not possible to arrive at an ideal plan because it is people themselves, in their interactions, who continuously make and unmake that territory. It is

their presence, their unending dynamics and their anthropizing effect that explains the passage from "space"[1] to "territory"[2]. In territories, as we define them, we can observe their dynamics, study their origins and their geographical and historical evolutions. However, we can hardly predict their future evolution.

Obviously, there are variations with respect/non-respect of a possible ideal plan. In countries with strong, present and legitimate institutions, people are likely to follow what is dictated (even though they may disagree in their private lives). Different is the case of those countries where institutions are weak and/or with doubtful legitimacy. In those cases, which are the majority of countries of the global South, the distance between an ideal plan and the reality on the ground is immense.

Since this is our field of work, we have chosen to focus our reflections on these realities, often clashing with those who tend to re-propose schemes in the global South that, due to the lack of institutional substance, different historical roots, values and culture, cannot take root.

Traditionally, FAO dealt with agricultural or, at most, rural areas where it carried out its work as specialized technical assistance, leaving urban spaces to other agencies. Our vision, on the contrary, following the dynamics of the actors, led us to consider how the territory could not be arbitrarily divided into rural and urban, since most of the actors interacted with both (perhaps producing in one - the agricultural, to sell their products in the other - the urban).

"The territory of the actors and the actors of the territory". This was the slogan used right from the beginning, to tell of the reciprocity of the relationships between the two. This slogan also concealed another reality that different actors may have different spheres of action, local, regional and/or national, so there was not "one" territory, instead there were "some" territories. Depending on what the initial point (or problem) of entry is, the territory(ies) can change, so we must see them as "moving target(s)", which is why more than being interested in their delimitation, we are interested in the ongoing social dynamics.

The diversity of the actors was, and remains, the key point. They can be few or many, but above all they are different and have different goals and visions in mind. In other words: different ontologies might be at stake. Interactions are therefore not always easy. For those who have followed our work up to this point, it will not be difficult to imagine the next step. The actors are not only different, but hold different levels of power, and this enters fully into the definition of territorial dynamics.

Power, manipulation and participation

We are not saying anything particularly original by highlighting the importance of participation and inclusion. The initial good intentions of those that promoted participatory approaches in the early days were at the same time skewed into fitting premeditated objectives, and over time, they took a more manipulative manner. The current reality is that at different levels of engagement we find a

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[1] Spatial planning or territorial planning is a practice that aims to establish, for a given territory, the objectives of development and harmonious location of people, their activities, equipment and means of communication. Pierre Merlin, Françoise Choay, Dictionnaire de l'urbanisme et de l'aménagement, PUF, October 2010

[2] The participatory and negotiated territorial approach favors a consensual decision-making process that involves all the actors in the territory in the search for solutions to development problems on the basis of socio-political considerations rather than purely technical or economic concerns. FAO, PNTD, 2005 http://www.fao.org/land-water/land/land-governance/land-resources-planning-toolbox/category/details/en/c/1043145/

very superficial experience often limited to ticking a participation box and taking a photo with the participants in the meetings or workshops. There is much less emphasis on the importance of the process, for instance what and how issues are discussed, the real margins of discussion and the pre-established results. It can also be a key moment to empower participants to argue for their own interests.

FAO was no exception to this passive or potentially manipulated participation (inadvertently or not) without ever criticizing it. From the 80s on, a People's Participation Programme was also implemented, proving the growing (and revolutionary) importance that was given to this issue at the beginning. The rupture produced by the introduction of "participation" started around the 1960s, when until that point, the instructive role that experts and government officials had was unquestionable. At most, experts were concerned with listening to what local actors had to say, but the latter had no power to influence the process. The pioneering work of Richard Chambers contributed greatly in breaking this pattern and advancing the reflection about different approaches to development[3] in allowing voices "from below" to be heard for the first time by those who directed and decided.

People have now learned to control and redirect participatory processes in order to bring them back into the same channel as the previous condescending dynamics did. Science helped the experts more than before, especially with the use of modern technology like geospatial information systems (GIS). Slowly we were limited to superficial changes, where local actors could be heard in large mass assemblies, and in the end, they were asked in a "participatory" meeting to validate the technical and political choices already made from above.

Even after many years of observing the existing local realities, which could have been enough to change the general opinion of the "experts", today many continue to propose methods that may be feasible for countries of the global North but have zero basis on the realities of the global South.

Our diverse working experiences led us to see the limits of the old way of doing things, in particular the progressive transformation of participation into manipulation. Hence the need to give a strong jolt to that way of working. For instance, the introduction of concrete proposals to ensure the centrality of actors became the cornerstone of the proposed approach. This was not easy because, unfortunately, after many years of that paternalistic model (generally led by experts from the global North) dynamics and expectations have been created. In many cases government personnel and local actors may prefer to be told "what to do" rather than take responsibility and become an active part of the analytical process.

An additional element in our proposal[4] was the different role (and profile) that the expert had to play. No longer the supreme source of unquestionable knowledge, but a facilitator of a dialogue between types of knowledge, recognizing that the actors of a territory all bring not only their interests, even if divergent, but also a historically constructed knowledge, which should be enhanced through inclusive mechanisms, no longer extractive, but dialogic in nature. This facilitator would be a professional figure to be invented, with the risk of undermining, in the eyes of local government officials, the mythical figure of the expert who "knows", and for which they are called and paid for. The expert elaborated the "plan" (e.g. the future of that territory), while the facilitator

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[3] Chambers, R., 1994. The Origins and Practice of Participatory Rural Appraisal, World Development, Vol.22, No. 7, 1994 https://entwicklungspolitik.uni-hohenheim.de/uploads/media/Day_4_-_Reading_text_8_02.pdf
[4] See GREENTD: https://www.fao.org/3/i6603e/i6603e.pdf

tries to bring together knowledge and interests, in order to further bring out, whenever possible, a consensus on what to do and in which direction to move towards.

From our point of view, as mentioned earlier, there is no obvious future direction for any territory. Territories change all the time, depending on the interactions of the actors. It therefore makes more sense to analyze the actors themselves. Understanding the actors means not only being interested in what they say, but also in what they do not say. For instance, the deep interests and the official positions and the margins of maneuver that exist with respect to their objectives. This is used to understand if it is possible to start the facilitation of dialogue and negotiation between the various actors, and possibly reach an agreement. Actors of a territory interact daily and, when their power asymmetries are not too strong, they find a way to come to an agreement among themselves, resorting to their culture, traditions and formal or informal institutions. In these cases, there is not much to do but to observe and learn. However, the reality is that these interactions are becoming increasingly problematic every day due to local or global factors such as global warming and increased drought, or the increased greed of northern countries for the natural resources of the South. However, they all have a common point of origin which is the growing power asymmetries that transform once-solvable disputes into violent (and often armed) conflicts.

Tackling the problem of power asymmetries means having to convince those who hold power to enter into a process that aims at going beyond mere "participation", and requires a discussion about the (unequal) distribution of power in order to eventually initiate a dynamic dialogue that levels the playing field.

There are many aspects that come into play and while the length of this text does not allow for an in-depth discussion, we must remember that the facilitator (individual or team) is fundamental, much more so than a football referee, because in an asymmetric negotiation there is no common rule book. Those who have the most power always manage to bend the rules in favour of their own interests. Therefore, the new figure we are thinking of, no longer the expert in planning, but the facilitator of processes, must bring with them a credibility that will convince all players to participate. This is not always sufficient, despite the possible assistance that comes from the reputation of the organization of which they are a part of. Hence the crucial importance of the work that happens in the sidelines. A facilitation team can put social pressure on the actors most reluctant to participate (usually the most powerful), so that they agree to sit at the table. In the Western world, this is one of the key functions of trade unions, while in the agrarian world, it is the peasant movements that could perform this task, separate from, but intimately linked to, those of the facilitator.

Another key factor in the asymmetry is the different professional capacities existing among the various actors to manage a negotiation process. While strong actors have at their disposal a body of experts to be mobilized at any time, weak actors such as landless farmers and indigenous communities suffer from a structural deficit, lacking these "expertise" completely. That is why it is necessary to put in place a support programme that strengthens the negotiating capacities of weak actors in order to make the process as equitable as possible.

As long as the problems concern local issues, with actors of fairly equal power, it was possible for the entire process of dialogue and negotiation to remain in the local sphere, between representatives of the various parties involved, with the support of the traditional authorities. As powerful actors from outside arrived to grab local resources, tensions increased and, inevitably,

asymmetrical territorial dynamics became conflicts. With the progressive availability (and price reduction) of weapons, the transition into violent conflicts was imminent.

Therefore, talking about territoriality without talking about conflicts becomes more difficult every day, and our choice to try and enter into this area of work is inevitable. The method is the one mentioned above: to get to know the actors, their territories and see if there are issues for which to establish a dialogue, margins of discussion to open a negotiation and, if all goes well, to reach an agreement. Dialogue, negotiation and concerted actions are therefore the key words. We must be aware that the processes may not be successful, because it is possible that the various actors do not want to establish a constructive dialogue and much less negotiate. Unlike traditional approaches, what we propose does not guarantee anything, there will not be a plan for the "development" of a territory if the actors do not want it.

However, we must focus on the issue of power. Today, the United Nations (UN), international development agencies or Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) are reluctant to deal with this aspect. Unfortunately, whether we like it or not, if we do not work to rebalance power, the end result will be an asymmetrical agreement that will not guarantee anything for the future, neither of the territory nor of the people.

The statement that actors with an interest in any territory have asymmetrical powers is a *cliché*. Surely, government representatives, however corrupt or incompetent, have more power than small farmers, herders or indigenous communities. A big businessperson, national or international, intent on grabbing a community's land always has more power than the entitled communities. So, the point is not to remind people of the obvious, but to see if and how action can be taken.

The times we have tried to understand, while speaking with colleagues and experts, why they preferred to avoid this topic, the answer generally revolved around the impossibility of radically changing the situation and therefore the futility of taking an interest in it. Decades of work on development cooperation far from the heart of the problem have certainly brought useful knowledge and interesting suggestions, but it is also partly responsible, in our opinion, for the reality of the global South that we can observe every day: the hoarding of resources by a few, the forced migration of millions[5], the growth of poverty[6] and increased corruption.

We therefore believe that the issue of power dynamics is central to any reflection on the theme of territorial development. Not because we think we are able to "solve" the problem, but because of the obvious need to begin to address these issues from (and with) those directly involved. Without an agreement between the parties involved, we will not get anywhere, and without a levelling of power in the field, we risk not even being able to start facilitating any discussion.

Carrying out a reflection of this kind means confronting those (more powerful) actors who have no interest in hearing about it. Yet, these are the exact same forces that are requesting our technical support (governments, donors, development agencies from the North, UN agencies and NGOs). We can obviously add the world of national and local institutions (formal or not) to that list, which often profit from these uneven power dynamics through the usual corrupt practices.

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[5] Over 82 million people according to UNHCR figures - https://www.unhcr.org/fr/apercu-statistique.html
[6] Nearly one in two people in the world live on less than $5.50 a day - https://blogs.worldbank.org/fr/opendata/pres-d-un-habitant-de-la-planete-sur-deux-vit-avec-moins-de-5-50-dollars-par-jour

Case Studies

The question as to what we can do and whether we should continue to let it be and avoid the real problem remains. In our long professional life, we have had the opportunity to come up against these problems and to succeed in making some (limited) progress. For the sake of simplicity, we will cite the cases of Mozambique and Angola, two countries where the intervention of our "Land" team has lasted for several years, with satisfactory results from local communities and some members of the governments that have mutually supported us.

In both cases, the basic problem was the lack of recognition of the customary rights of local communities with respect to their land. In the presence of "modernizing" efforts pushed by the Western economic and financial world, unwritten rights were worthless and above all did not attract any foreign investment to "develop" the country. Creating land administration systems on the Western model was, and remains, the dream of institutions such as the World Bank, which carries with it many UN agencies and Western donors. The practice of these interventions, as observed in dozens of countries, often leads to the exclusion of those with historical and authentic rights, but without a piece of paper to certify it.

Conflicts born from this ideological obligation have accompanied us in many countries, but at least in the two cases mentioned, we have succeeded, particularly in Mozambique, in having land policy and legislation changed. Further to that, our work also contributed to the formation of new generations of judges aware of the importance of safeguarding and respecting traditional rules with respect to land. It took two decades of work in Mozambique where, thanks to the credibility built, we managed to reduce (but not avoid) clashes with the government who found it easier to make agreements with financial institutions in exchange for new loans (debts) to show how modern they could become. The support of local universities, national experts (women and men), secular and religious NGOs, as well as a few donors, made it possible to maintain constant pressure over the years towards the direction of strengthening local knowledge and rights with respect to economic and financial power.

Paradoxically the most immediate and manifested result was that the number of local conflicts increased. What was seen as a problem for the senior management of our organization was actually a success for us. We finally moved from the previous silence, where power took what it needed and no one could say anything, to a situation where communities, aware of laws and constitutions, supported by NGOs and other specialists, began to resist and to make their cases known in the national and international press. This forced them to seek solutions, and hence our approach of dialogue and negotiation.

While this was perhaps only a drop in the ocean at least we have shown that it is not impossible. Years of work on the ground have allowed us to understand how fundamental alliance-building with other players is, especially when struggling in the same direction. It has also made us realise how difficult it is, given the permanent hostilities between the various agents of development to design and carry out work of this magnitude together.

Trust, credibility and reputation

One of the most complicated aspects of the territorial approach as we know it, involves the building of trust and credibility while keeping a good reputation with the various stakeholders, particularly weaker actors.

Trust ideally lies somewhere between extreme suspicion, which implies not believing anything and being suspicious of everything, and unlimited gullibility, which leads to abandoning one's critical sense and not questioning any of the other party's claims. Creating a climate of trust means structuring an environment so that a person's expectations of the behaviour of others are confirmed. Trust is therefore closely related to expectations of what others will do if put in certain situations. It is linked to the institutions and laws that each society uses as constraints that allow one to estimate what the behavior of others will be in a given system of rules, customs and punishments. Trust therefore has a strong sociocultural basis.

Credibility comes from belief. Again, a person, group or institution is credible if they can align various trustworthy outcomes over time. That is, they possess a "credibility capital" built up over the course of their history. Here, the emphasis is often on the consistency of the actor's words, actions, and outcomes. A person who says A, acts on B, and achieves C, will inevitably see their expendable credibility capital in the public space diminishes. We work on credibility to transform it into influence, understood simply as the art of making things possible, with the help of others[7], and with the aim of finding a *modus vivendi* between the various interests at stake, in the face of limited resources, that can be acceptable to all parties.

In our work on natural resources in situations of protracted crises, credibility must be seen as a process of continuous construction. We can think of it as a "shadow of the future," a long shadow that will affect the future relationship[8]. Being a subjective component, and relaying on how the mind is made in terms of memories, emotions, experiences and logical abilities, it is therefore difficult to make it measurable. Adding to this is the fact that one often operates in conflict or immediate post-conflict contexts, with limited factual information, and credibility becomes an element that can complement the limited experiential information that exists and positively (or negatively) influence the performance of the difficult task of facilitation.

Finally, reputation is a judgment about the value of a person, or an organization, by those who interact with it from different perspectives. Everyone constructs their own reputational history for different uses, and defends public space against those who have an interest in seeing it diminished. Reputation is important because it can produce an almost natural feeling of trust.

We must never forget that we, the "experts" of territoriality, come from outside, from other historical, political and cultural contexts and very often represent that part of the North in which local actors have, quite rightly, little trust. Therefore, our starting point is one of low credibility. To this we can add the reputation we carry with us, linked to the organization for which we are called to work. This is why the time dimension becomes a very important variable, and one that is difficult for those who finance development cooperation to understand, particularly when we enter the world of conflict or post-conflict. Answers and results are expected in a very short time, precisely when distrust is at its highest, so more time is needed to break the ice and open up to others. In addition to time, an ability to empathize with others in a way that helps the beginning of these complex processes is essential.

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[7] Owen, Jo. 2009. How to Influence: The Art of Making Things Happen, Pearson Education
[8] Axelrod, R. 1984. The evolution of cooperation, New York, Basic Book

An almost unique experience in this sense was carried out in Abyei[9], an area disputed by Sudan and South Sudan, due to the richness of the subsoil. The work started almost from scratch in 2016. The local communities being separated in two different countries by a UN military blockade, allowed us, thanks to a positive reputation earned by FAO through many previous technical projects, to create a climate of trust and credibility such that both communities agreed to sit down and peacefully negotiate their future. The main credit goes to the lead consultant of this project, one of the authors of this article, who has in his personal background those qualities that are not taught in schools or universities, but are fundamental to building trusting relationships with others. The intervention is still in progress, having taken on greater dimensions thanks to the support of donors, but it remains very much trivial given the transfer of the project leader to another very complicated area (Cox's Bazar to be precise, on the border between Bangladesh and Myanmar where almost one million Rohingya refugees currently reside). This is a perfect example of how fundamental the human component is in these processes, much more than the technical one, and thus more attention should be paid to the preparation of such personnel in the future.

Changes in mindset and perspectives take a long time for everyone. Moving too fast, for political or bureaucratic reasons, leads to the wrong type of interventions, with the negative effect of decreasing general credibility, further complicating the task for those who will come later.

Conclusions

The struggles to reduce power asymmetries are, by definition, never-ending. We could start by citing the necessary rebalancing of powers within the "productive-reproductive" sphere, or rather, any attempt for gender equality between women and men, a topic that is still struggling to be accepted even by "peasant" movements that call themselves progressive. We also have the informal rights of local communities, whether settled or nomadic, with respect to the formalities that the Western world wants to introduce at all costs in the name of "modernity". But we also have a problem of asymmetry (and credibility) between traditional local institutions and the formal institutions of the State, not to mention when it comes to playing in the global arena, where the weak governments of the South must always bow their heads before decisions taken in their name by more powerful countries and financial organizations.

This is to say that we must be aware of this complexity, but that this must not become an excuse for not acting, no matter how big or small our contribution may be. As our dear friend José "Pepe" Esquinas always said, "for those who think they are too small to have an impact, perhaps they have never slept with a mosquito in the room"[10] .

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[9] FAO, 2017. Linking community-based animal health services with natural resource conflict mitigation in the Abyei Administrative Area - http://www.fao.org/resilience/resources/resources-detail/en/c/1027166/
[10] https://rsr.bio/jose-esquinas-alcazar/