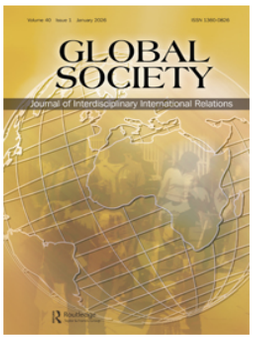

Global Society

ISSN: 1360-0826 (Print) 1469-798X (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cgsj20

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To cite this article: Karembe F. Ahimbisibwe, Kellen Aganyira, Dianah Nampijja, Constance Mudondo & Stella Achen (2026) Rhythms of Learning in NGO-Supported Village Associations in Western Uganda, Global Society, 40:1, 1-18, DOI: 10.1080/13600826.2025.2464580

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13600826.2025.2464580

Published online: 18 Feb 2025.

GLOBAL SOCIETY
2026, VOL. 40, NO. 1, 1–18
https://doi.org/10.1080/13600826.2025.2464580

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Rhythms of Learning in NGO-Supported Village Associations in Western Uganda

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how a non-governmental organisation (NGO) facilitates patterns of learning, unlearning, and relearning and, in so doing, strengthens people's livelihoods in rural Uganda. We conceptualise how NGO-supported village associations become avenues for learning trajectories that potentially "free" citizens from perpetual poverty. Based on qualitative data collected from members of village associations in western Uganda, we illustrate how a local NGO facilitates learning new knowledge, unlearning prevailing habits and practices, and relearning for gradual self and community improvement. Drawing on Alhadeff-Jones's (2017; 2019; 2020) conceptualisation of rhythms of time and space and emancipation, we coin the term "rhythms of learning" to analyse how marginalised citizens collectively – and incrementally – learn to improve their livelihoods under the aegis of an NGO. This analysis provides insights to development practitioners on how to promote incremental learning and change in illiberal settings where radical transformation of power structures is circumstantially difficult.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 7 April 2024
Accepted 3 February 2025

KEYWORDS
Village associations; emancipation; NGOs; western Uganda; rhythms of learning

Introduction

Asked about what they had learned from their engagement with a local non-governmental organisation (NGO), members of village associations in western Uganda, frequently told the first author that "our brains opened"; "we are no longer the same"; and "something in us changed". These claims were made in the context of 15-year-old relationship community members had enjoyed with the Community Volunteer Initiative for Development (COVOID), a local NGO fostering grassroots development in Rubirizi district of western Uganda. Such statements of collective self-awareness and change invite us to interrogate patterns of learning in people's everyday encounters with NGOs that operate in constrained settings of the global South, on the one hand, and to explore what rural people consider to be the contribution of NGOs in their everyday lives, on

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the other. In this article, we deploy the term "rhythms of learning" to explore how "the mundane, the everyday but also the repetitive" (Lefebvre 1994/2013, ix) interactions between an NGO and members of village associations shape the way people in a specific location "perceive the world, act in certain routines, and relate to [the] environment" (Awad 2021, 86). We understand "rhythms of learning" as the patterned ensemble of practices that community members go through to acquire new knowledge, abandon old habits, and persistently search for sustained improvement of their livelihoods.

In this article, we explore the experiences of two rural villages regarding the kinds of learning and changes realised in their interaction with the NGO in western Uganda. As such we do not adopt a critical approach that studies of this nature often use to interrogate what kind of contribution NGOs can make to challenge poverty and marginalisation in asymmetrical settings (eg., Rahman 2006; Sakue-Collins 2020). Rather, we illuminate how an NGO seen as a significant part of the people's daily routines, triggers learning rhythms and potentially enables the poor to improve their livelihood gradually. Thus, our study is an empirical contribution to the corpus of scholarship and debates regarding the kinds of citizen agency and transformation that NGOs can promote in constrained settings of the global South (see., Ahimbisibwe 2022b; Holma, Kontinen, and Blanken-Webb 2018; Howard 2024; King 2015). We contribute to these studies by highlighting the rhythmic learning among poor citizens living in (but also trying to escape) multifaceted poverty in the global South.

There is currently insufficient empirical research on what and how communities learn while participating in NGO programmes in developing countries. Instead, researchers have tended to focus more on "how NGOs learn to change the way they do things" (Makuwira 2023, 56) when they engage with their beneficiaries as they wrestle with complex institutional, contextual, and legitimacy demands (Kontinen and Ndidde 2023; 2020). This article attempts to address this lacuna by focusing on how the routines of NGOs' development interventions promote everyday learning rhythms through the spaces of village associations in rural Uganda. We argue that NGOs working with and through village associations in given time–space contexts can enable community members to learn new ideas, unlearn some of the prevailing practices, and relearn those things that improve their well-being. We view NGO livelihood interventions as critical avenues for everyday encounters where ordinary citizens undergo learning rhythms that potentially "emancipate" them from patterns of poverty in specific contexts of Uganda.

According to Kontinen (2007, 3), development NGOs play multiple roles as "distributors of development aid", "service deliverers", "implementers of development projects" and, "active promoters of social change through advocacy work." These roles position NGOs as crucial promoters of learning and change in marginal communities. Hence, NGOs' presence, interventions, and public messages can introduce new ideas and innovations that disrupt community habits and routines (Holma, Kontinen, and Blanken-Webb 2018), enabling such communities to "unlearn and learn in ways that may support progressive social change" (McLean and Montes de Oca Barrera 2024, 70). Moreover, Banks, Hulme, and Edwards claim that the NGOs' "grassroots linkages and close proximity to beneficiaries" enable them to design programmes "in a bottom-up manner reflecting local contexts, needs, and realities" (2015, 710) of their target audience. We situate our conceptualisation in this literature and argue that NGOs that have well-established ties with communities can foster rhythms of learning that have the potential to "emancipate" participants from pervasive poverty. Subsequently, we define learning as

a rhythm embedded in and influenced by everyday (dis)encounters with knowledge, practices, and skills that potentially – and incrementally – enhance poor citizens' agency to improve their living conditions. NGOs, we claim, can tap into everyday community life and introduce rhythms that trigger members into collective learning and gradual change.

The rest of the article proceeds as follows. First, we draw on rhythmanalyis theory to conceptualise learning as potentially "emancipatory" in specific time–space settings. Next, we contextualise NGO-supported learning in our case NGO and explain the data collection and analysis process. This is followed by findings on learning, unlearning, and relearning. Finally, we reflect on the "emancipatory" potential of NGO-supported learning in a specific time and space.

Rhythmanalysis: conceptualising everyday learning in development NGOs

The theory of rhythmanalysis was first propounded by Lefebvre (1994/2013) to study how everyday life had become a monotonous and repetitive routine in a capitalist and industrial society. Lefebvre's rhythmanalysis is considered to be "his most significant contribution to Marxism especially in its elaboration of the new forms of alienation colonizing daily experience in the post-World War II modernization of French capitalism" (Maycroft 2001, 117). In so doing, his analysis shifted from the Marxist focus on the historical and macro class struggle to "the minutiae of everyday life" as a new "field of knowledge … with practical consequences" (Lefebvre 1994/2013, viii). Accordingly, Lefebvre argues that everyday life can be experienced as either emancipatory or alienating in a specific space and time leading to a choice of which one becomes "necessary and absolute, … essential and authentic" (Lefebvre and Régulier 1985, 75) and which to either incorporate or resist (Awad 2021). This way, the repetitive and monotonous everyday rhythms help develop the ability "to detach oneself from familiar experiences and discriminate configurations of changes that display specific patterns, periodicities, and variations" (Alhadeff-Jones 2023, 31).

Although the rhythmanalysis theory has been applied to diverse academic studies, in this article we draw on the work of Alhadeff-Jones (2017; 2019; 2020) regarding time–space and emancipation rhythms as conceptual lenses to analyse the dynamics of collective learning experienced by citizens participating in NGO interventions in rural settings of Uganda. Inspired by Lefebvre's ideas, Alhadeff-Jones (2017; 2019; 2020) conceptualised time–space and emancipation in adult education to provide important insights into learning and empowerment. To him, adult education "does not occur through a single space or time" (2019, 178). Like a fabric made of different threads, he argues, education happens in diverse places that may include home, school, church, and neighbourhoods and can manifest different habits and paces such as family habits, village routines, and responses to seasonal changes. These places and paces, he suggests, are undergoing constant change and influencing people's life decisions in the process. Consequently, he maintains, "every day, throughout their existence, people have to learn to adjust, coordinate and move through environments that keep evolving" and which constitute "who we are, as much as … define how we evolve and what we become" (2019, 178).

A similar view is shared by Mels (2004, 16), who argues that in their everyday living, people "repeatedly couple and uncouple their paths with other people's paths, institutions, technologies, and physical surroundings" which enables them "to make sense

of and give value to, our lives" (Awad 2021, 86). To understand the kinds of learning and modifications that different conditions place on resource-constrained communities, it is crucial to look at the macro – and micro-level challenges they encounter and the contingencies they need to secure survival at a specific time and place. For example, the prevailing global level precarity related to global poverty, widening inequality, climate change (Samman et al. 2018), and resurging authoritarianism (Howard 2024; Tapscott 2021) directly impact the material resources and life people can respectively draw on and live at the locale. A village-level analysis of this nature, we suggest, has "considerable importance in pointing to the paths" by which global and national trends and conditions "affect the lives of citizens" (Mulder 2021, 121).

Secondly, Alhadeff-Jones (2017; 2020) expounds on the notion of emancipation. He suggests that throughout their life, human beings undergo heterogeneous experiences and rhythms that may be "linear, circular, quantitative, qualitative, fast, slow, internal, external, fixed, flowing, reversible and irreversible" (2020, 123). These experiences are also contradictory, antagonistic, complementary, disordered, and evolving in space and time to constrain individual and collective harmony. Emancipation, therefore, lies in the ability of individuals to organise and make meaning of these experiences that may cause dependency and produce alienating moments and "'arrhythmic' behaviours" (2017, 167) during interaction with others and the environment. Accordingly, he defines emancipation as the "capacity to extract oneself from moments experienced as alienating because of their totalizing dimensions" (2017, 206), such as those that may deny people the ability to live better. To this end, emancipatory education is not necessarily conceived from the view of radical overthrow and transformation of oppressive structures by the oppressed people (Freire 2000).

Rather, it is seen "as an organizing process through which one learns to relate what constitutes the fragments and discontinuities of one's own life" (Alhadeff-Jones 2017, 136) which as our case shows, may relate to poverty and the absence of a state support system in rural areas of Uganda. In such situations, "the emancipatory aim of adult education would require the capacity to take charge of the temporal conditions through which meanings emerge in everyday life" (Alhadeff-Jones 2020, 123). These may be "expressed through discursive (ways of speaking), embodied (ways of moving), and social activities (habits, rituals)" (Alhadeff-Jones 2023, 26) which, in the process, "play a central role in the reproduction of what constitutes the dominant features of a society (modes of production, values, norms, and artifacts) at a given time" (Alhadeff-Jones 2017, 163). By reflecting on such ritualised norms and behaviour patterns, ordinary citizens can learn, envision and work towards achieving the life they aspire to live (Kontinen and Ahimbisibwe 2024).

Therefore, if we consider the role of NGOs in grassroots development as promoting diverse experiences and rhythms in people's ways of communicating, feeling, and interacting, we suggest that the rhythmanalysis approach proposed by Alhadeff-Jones is a useful framework. It can be argued that in situations where NGOs promote livelihood improvements rather than focus on "abstract notions of social accountability and human rights" (Holma, Kontinen, and Blanken-Webb 2018, 226), they can be harbingers of collective learning and incremental change and even act as spaces for expressing peasants' voices to power from below (King 2015). After all, as several scholars have argued in repressive settings, such forms of localised citizen agency are what NGOs can mobilise and promote safely in illiberal settings (Howard 2024; King 2015; Ahimbisibwe, Ndidde, and Kontinen 2020). This form of "emancipation" has the potential to introduce a new agency that

affords citizens a relatively decent life against the challenges of multidimensional poverty that affect different regions of Uganda (UNDP 2022). Thus, in this article, we find Alhadeff-Jones' rhythmic analysis of time and space and emancipation helpful in conceptualising learning patterns that NGOs can support in specific contexts of Uganda.

Context of NGO work in Uganda: COVOID and grassroots development

Like the rest of the global South, Uganda has witnessed a sharp rise in NGO work that covers almost all sectors of society with complex typologies, functions and governance regimes (De Coninck and Larok 2021; Makara 2003). Records show that the number of NGOs in Uganda has grown from 280 in 1986. This number rose to the current 14,000 in 2019 (Ministry of Internal Affairs 2020) but sharply declined to 5021 by 2023 (Daily Monitor 2024). Although reasons for this trend could be diverse, this sharp decline has coincided with the deepening repression of dissent that has seen a brutal crump down on civil society activists and members of the political opposition in Museveni's Uganda (The Economist 2021; Friesinger 2021; Daily Monitor 2021b; 2021a). As such, the Museveni regime has tightened the noose on the operations of advocacy NGOs by instituting a punitive legal and bureaucratic framework to regulate the sector. For example, several advocacy NGOs have had their offices broken into by unknown gunmen (Uganda Radio Network 2022), while others have been deregistered and suspended (Reuters 2021; Deutsche Welle 2021). Moreover, on account of state hostility meted out on the advocacy and democracy-promoting NGOs, a significant portion of the NGO movement has focused on service delivery (Katusiimeh 2004; Ahimbisibwe 2022b). Thus, many NGOs, including COVOID, in the case of this study, often position themselves as development partners of the Ugandan state to mobilise citizens in the fight against poverty.

Established in 2003 as a community-based organisation and registered as an NGO in 2010, COVOID is headquartered in the rural Rubirizi district of western Uganda. COVOID is a typical grassroots organisation working with "impoverished communities" to enhance their capacity to "build sustainable alternatives to their challenging life conditions" (Martínez and Rafael 2008, 341). Started by a native who also resides in the community, the NGO employs some of the residents of the area where it is located. Moreover, since its inception, the NGO has implemented a series of grassroots livelihood interventions in microfinance, gender, health, education, and climate change reduction (COVOID n.d.). These interventions are implemented through the modus operandi of village associations that COVOID helped to establish or supports through training. The associations include burial and savings associations and rotational farming groups. The NGO's documents show how these associations have been key in several programmes to skill out-of-school girls, address teenage pregnancies and gender-based violence, improve agriculture, and market agricultural products (COVOID 2016, 2019), the localisation of some of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through the Korean village-based development model, *Saemaul Undong*[1] (COVOID 2016), as well as several interventions in smallholder farming. Thus, COVOID's history, location, and multiple grassroots initiatives have embedded it into the community's everyday social architecture and ethos.

[1]For details see related publications on the *Saemaul Undong* model (Ahimbisibwe and Kontinen 2021; Kontinen and Ahimbisibwe 2024)

Materials and methods

This paper is drawn from a larger study exploring the experiences of learning to be a citizen in the rural settings of Uganda and Tanzania. In Uganda, the study site was the rural district of Rubirizi, found in the western part of the country, where COVOID works with grassroots associations to promote different interventions. Therefore, the analysis in this article is based on the experiences of the residents of two villages purposively selected for this study. Methodologically, COVOID fitted our criteria of an NGO located in the community with over ten years of working with and living closest to the local population, not one that implements projects while remaining distantly located in urban areas. Data for this article is based on semi-structured interviews (n = 40) and focus group discussions (n = 4). These were conducted using participatory research techniques such as ladder of citizenship, historical timelines, informal conversations, and observations of community routines. Study participants were members of different village associations, and therefore, active participants in past and ongoing livelihood programmes implemented in the area by COVOID. Interactions with community members focused on their understanding of citizenship and the kinds of learning and change realised through their engagement with the NGO. This particular focus, we believe, could have impacted the views collected from the study participants and reported in this article.

We analysed data following the six-step thematic analysis procedure proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) – familiarisation, generation of codes and then, themes, reviewing, defining, and naming themes, and finally, writing the findings. In practical terms, the first step, *familiarisation* with the data, started during fieldwork and continued during data cleaning. The next step, *the generation of codes,* involved noting and writing down recurring themes and ideas in different data sets that specifically hinted at learning and improvement and self-help associations. Then, in consultation with coauthors, we searched for *themes*, initially classifying them as peer learning, change, and collective citizenship. The fourth and fifth steps focused on *reviewing and refining* the themes, during which we categorised them as acquiring new ideas and practices, abandoning old practices, and searching for sustained improvement. This led to the sixth and last step, where we agreed to write the findings under the main themes of learning, unlearning, and relearning, which we present in the section that follows as learning: acquisition of novel skills, knowledge, and awareness; unlearning: abandoning of old practices; and relearning: the endless search for improvement.

Results

In this section, we present the study findings and show how COVOID's presence and interventions introduced mutually reinforcing patterns of learning, unlearning, and relearning in the community.

Learning: acquisition of novel skills, knowledge and awareness

The study participants narrated how COVOID's livelihood interventions improved ways of relating to each other at family and community levels. This resulted from the NGO's repetitive messages that a) encouraged the community to work together to chase poverty

out of their homes and b) emphasised individual and collective responsibility rather than expecting the government to solve their daily livelihood and survival needs and challenges. In delivering these messages, the NGO drew on a combination of religious and cultural metaphors and circulating public narratives. These included among others, *nanyini mufu* (trans.: It is the responsibility of the kindred to touch the foulest part of the dead body), "God helps those who help themselves", "do not wait for government to help you" and "government helps those who are united". Such NGO preachings delivered what a community member described as "the hard truth that unless we take the personal initiative through village associations, our future and that of our offspring will remain opaque." Moreover, the messages were delivered during community training and re-echoed in different spaces of daily interaction.

The messages were further reinforced by the NGO's modus operandi of working with people in associations to leverage collective agency against poverty. A male participant narrated how COVOID public exhortations made it clear to the community that "unless we wake up and work hard, poverty will remain a permanent visitor in our community." During focus group discussions, community members hinted at how they realised that "poverty at the household level could only be meaningfully tackled through joint efforts so that no one is left behind." Additionally, a community facilitator narrated how during community training and engagements,

> We make it clear that people must not wait for [the] government to do development for them but rather start from their homes with the little they have … and that they should also form and join groups to further strengthen their efforts.

Thus, participants frequently cited the formation and/or joining of village savings and burial associations as one of the most important lessons they learned from the NGO. Different accounts reported how village savings associations functioned as sites for everyday learning and tackling shared challenges in the community. For example, the savings associations were said to have introduced and strengthened habits and practices of frugality, hard work, entrepreneurship, education of children, and income generation. Participants reported that as their incomes improved, they purchased more pieces of land and assets such as boda boda motorcycles, goats, pigs, and poultry, engaged in small-scale retail shops, and stocked building materials to erect new homes. One of the savings and burial associations established a business arm by buying tents and chairs for hire, and it also ran a catering business. A female participant who runs a small shop in the village observed that from COVOID, "we have learned a lot of things such as looking after livestock and building friendships and networks which are important for peer support and knowledge sharing".

In an interview with a female participant whom we found supervising the plastering of her recently constructed house in one of the studied villages, she narrated how the village groups had introduced new routines of learning in the community

> You see when you get involved with other people, you learn many things that make you a good citizen … We learn to work as a group. Often, we find time to hold conversations about issues of how we can develop, survive, and sustain ourselves. Yes … we sit together and deliberate about what is possible within our means … our collective vision and the different ways to achieve those visions and goals.

Minutes of the village meetings support the ideas of this participant. Records show that, in different village meetings held between 2016 and 2019, members deliberated and agreed on modalities to increase community vigilance and responsibility. Through the modalities set in the meetings, community members formulated by-laws to regulate drinking behaviour, agreed to jointly control the deadly banana wilt disease by cutting down affected gardens, suggested new community support mechanisms for the vulnerable and elderly, and resolved to penalise parents who refused to send children to school. More importantly, the detailed minute records show the sequence and pattern of agreements, disagreements, and harmonisation of ideas and positions among community members as they deliberated on prevailing and emerging community events over time.

In addition, participants reported improvements in their farming practices on their smallholder pieces of land which they attributed to the trainings received from community facilitators of COVOID. For example, community members revealed that "COVOID taught us to do backyard (vegetable) farming for nutritional and commercial purposes." The practice of backyard farming was observable in the community as most households visited during fieldwork maintained gardens of various sizes and different types of vegetables. Another noticeable practice was that each household kept a few domestic animals and birds that acted as quick remedy for cash.

More particularly, community members narrated how they acquired new knowledge and skills to improve banana growing. First, COVOID encouraged village mates to form rotational farming groups to lessen the often laborious work associated with banana growing. Second, in several community meetings, community members resolved to cut down all gardens affected by the deadly banana wilt disease to halt its spread across the village. Third, the NGO introduced to the community a new way of thinning, spacing and pruning banana gardens using the metaphor of *nyina-omuhara-omwijukuru* (transl: mother-daughter-granddaughter). This symbolism emphasised that each banana colony should, respectively, have three trees (the one with a flower/fruit, followed by one which is about to flower, and finally, a sucker).

Unlearning: gradual abandonment of old practices and habits

The views that COVOID "opened our eyes", "challenged and changed our thinking" and "showed us that poverty can be fought" indicate the possibility of unlearning previous habits and practices. Participants reported how undesirable habits of spendthrift-ness, domestic violence, laziness, drunkenness, jealousy, aloofness, and low self-esteem were slowly being abandoned. Old farming practices of unspaced and congested banana colonies were also visibly being replaced by well-spaced and thinned plantations in the households visited for this study. Unlearning, and consequently abandoning these habits and practices, was reported to be a gradual process involving reflection, peer learning, hard work, and cooperation. Milestones achieved by peers were reported to be the most inspiring in the community. A female participant narrated how the success of her peers challenged her to overcome laziness and procrastination.

> When COVOID came and introduced the savings culture, those who joined started to chase poverty out of their homes. They accumulated some money through saving together and gradually change their living conditions by educating children, building new homes,

> engaging in more economic activities, etc. This challenged and showed us that once one stops laziness and self-pity, one can improve their condition.

An elderly man corroborated this view by observing that

> For so long, we faced the problem of people being jealous of each other. You would find neighbours engaging in unnecessary squabbling and not cooperating on anything. There were always conflicts over allegations of witchcraft among neighbours … But since COVOID came and introduced all these interventions like *Saemaul Undong* and savings associations that taught us to work together, most of the problems related to negative jealousy and hatred have been lessened. And I think the livelihood transformation you see in this community owes to the lessened jealousy.

Participants frequently mentioned three (negative) habits that were unlearned and, therefore, gradually abandoned as spendthrift-ness *(okurir'eryo)*, toxic jealousy *(itima)* and laziness *(obunafu)*. From both NGO leaders and community members, wasteful expenditure was epitomised in the preference for expensive fish that affected households' income and capacity to spend on immediate and long-term needs and investments. One of the NGO staff told us how their messages are often framed around vernacular adages such as *obwavu mpologoma* (trans.: poverty is a lion) to emphasise that poverty, like a marauding lion, requires collective efforts to contain and suppress.

> So, when we started this NGO, we used to tell people that poverty and laziness are like a lion. No one can wrestle a lion alone. You need combined efforts to chase a lion that has attacked the village … If you wait for assistance from neighbouring villages, they may arrive when it is too late to save you (from the lion).

Thus, community members reported how such messages of cooperation, hard work, frugality, and joint planning at the household and community levels challenged them to rethink and adjust their previous routines and practices. Community members, for example, reported how practices of wastefulness and feelings of jealousy towards neighbours were unlearned through the increased sense of belonging and "working with others in associations to address our own concerns." Further, community members frequently mentioned how negative jealousy and toxic competition *(itima)* were gradually replaced by healthy peer competition and imitation (*ihato*) and spendthrift-ness by frugality. It was further claimed that the gradual abandonment of these practices helped households get the resources needed for children's education and medical care. It was also responsible for the visible trend of new, improved homes erected in the community.

Relearning: persistent search for improvement

Relearning, understood here as continued search, application, and amplification of the knowledge and best practices learned, is undertaken to sustain and multiply the benefits of acquired skills and awareness. Within the context of the studied communities, relearning was built on incremental changes realised when people acquired new skills and jettisoned some old practices and beliefs. For instance, during the study, it was frequently revealed how a person's proceeds from their first experience of saving money in groups would encourage them to continue saving and even increase their shares in the subsequent rounds in anticipation of more dividends. This trend was evident in other aspects of life, such as phased purchase and stocking of construction materials, reported

family incremental purchase of pieces of land and the growing practice of educating children. These aspirations introduced new routines and work ethos in the lives of the community members, as one of the participants narrated:

> I go to the savings group of the church every Monday. I have to go there. Then on Friday, we come to the village savings group, but we also first tend to our gardens, and prepare lunch before coming here to save. Another thing that makes me busy, is on Sunday I go to church, come back at 2 pm, prepare lunch and then (sometimes) go to visit some friends.

Relearning also manifested in continued reflection on and imagining a better future while yearning to be like the progressive neighbours and village mates. A female participant gave an account of how, despite, not being formally employed or educated, she was contented by her ability to educate her children up to university level. In her narration,

> I do not have a job, I am not educated, but my child is educated. I have one who completed two years ago at Makerere University. She already has a job. Remember I do not have a job in government where I earn a salary. But as women, we have to survive by applying many innovative skills and hard work. For example, when we join savings and farming rotational groups, we can work together, challenge and encourage each other to improve our homes and educate children.

There were several such accounts of community members being challenged and inspired to embrace hard work and continue searching for and applying different means that make them, their families, and the community better. For example, it was reported that when families improved their incomes, they shifted the children from the public education system to costly private schools that, in the Ugandan context, are considered to be of better quality. A male village leader shared the view that:

> You cannot afford to spend all the time doing nothing. When you are not going to the market to work, you can also go and be in your garden tilling the land. It means that you have to utilise that time and work hard and earn some money that can help you survive. You are not supposed to fold hands else poverty becomes your permanent visitor. When you have land, you can grow ground nuts and harvest like four or five sacks. You can grow cassava, and when cassava dries you find yourself with like 200 or 300 kilograms, and that money you can pay for the child in a better school.

Several cases of relearning could be seen in the community. There was a rotating farming group formed in 2018 and active during data collection. During research dissemination at the end of 2021, the same group was making wine out of bananas and had also formed a cooperative to improve the growing and marketing of the same crop. Other instances of relearning manifested in repetitive participation in community meetings, funeral wakes, and engaging in different entrepreneurial activities for income growth and diversification.

We end this section by providing context to the reported learning rhythms and change. Despite the optimism and enthusiasm evident among study participants, our observation showed that some instances of "arrhythmic" behaviours remained prevalent in the communities studied. First, some housing sites stagnated at different stages of construction revealing the sacrifices and difficulties poor households endured to complete such financially constraining projects. Second, several banana plantations remained unkempt with thickets of weeds and congested colonies. Third, the community-maintained roads often became slippery and impassable during the heavy rain season. Last,

during group discussions, some participants inadvertently murmured that toxic jealousy and other vices such as domestic violence, and drunkenness still existed. Some of these constraints illustrate the limits of community-based efforts in heralding transformative and sustainable learning rhythms in poverty-stricken settings.

Discussion

Our intention in this article was to illustrate empirically the rhythms of learning experienced by citizens when NGOs work with and introduce several ideas in the community in a particular context. In what follows, we reflect on the role and power of NGOs vis-a-vis other actors in community learning, the salience of time and space and the "emancipatory" nature of the kinds of rhythms of learning NGOs introduce in the community.

The power of NGOs in the rhythms of community development and learning

Development processes taking place in communities are usually undertaken by a confluence of multiple state and non-state actors For example, in two edited volumes focusing on everyday practices of citizenship in rural areas of East Africa, contributors have illustrated the different ways and sites through which NGOs promote incremental rather than transformative ways of learning and change in the authoritarian settings of Uganda and Tanzania (Holma and Kontinen 2020; 2022). Drawing on empirical data, contributors show how citizenship is exercised and strengthened through various informal non-state institutions and agencies of self-help associations, religious and cultural groups, and how NGOs support these local-level spaces for learning and incremental change. Of these multiple self-mobilised spaces, authors reported how NGO-supported village associations in rural Uganda were the most significant sites for everyday citizenship. Practices and notions of belonging, identity, and joint skills and knowledge for addressing common concerns of livelihoods' survival and incremental change happened in the village association spaces (see., Ahimbisibwe, Ndidde, and Kontinen 2020; Ndidde, Ahimbisibwe, and Kontinen 2020; Bananuka, Kontinen, and Holma 2022). Thus, in most rural areas, sites of everyday belonging and NGOs supporting these sites have become essential actors in enabling the poor to acquire modest skills and material resources for basic survival needs such as paying school fees and medical care (Vokes and Mills 2015; Ahimbisibwe 2022a).

Against this background, poor citizens in countries like Uganda are likely to resort to and find reprieve in NGO livelihood initiatives, even if these remain "projectised … scattered and prone to erasure" in the absence of a "functional state" (Ahimbisibwe 2022b, 108). Perhaps this explains why citizens participating in NGO initiatives often "spoke fondly of NGOs, their extension workers, and trainers" (Ahimbisibwe 2022b, 87) rather than local-level state actors, who for most of the time, are occasionally present (Jones 2009). Therefore, we can say that while, like any other NGO, COVOID has to work in and around complex power and legitimacy interests of different constituencies (Kontinen and Ndidde 2023), its status as a locally established NGO seemed to bring it closer to the community. In the context of findings reported in this study and based on our observations, the NGO's work did not appear to become "an exercise and reproduction of power which further marginalises ordinary people" (Makuwira 2018, 429) but

rather seemed to be relatively embedded in and entwined with the experiences of the ordinary people. For instance, from several participants' accounts, COVOID was described as "'the second Jesus Christ' and 'our liberator from poverty mire'" (Ahimbisibwe 2022b, 104). Taken together with participants' complaints about the uneven, inefficient, and poor quality of state service provision, these experiences give a sense of an NGO that had become an integral part of the community fabric and routines.

Rhythms of learning and change as "emancipatory" in constrained contexts

The above analysis leads us to reflect on the question of whether and in which ways NGOs and the rhythms of learning they promote in constrained contexts can be emancipatory. The role of associationalist grassroots groups as sites for collective learning and change that resonate with and improve people's material conditions has received attention in recent studies. Several studies done in different parts of Uganda have illustrated how village associations function as vehicles for learning economic citizenship (Ahimbisibwe and Ndidde 2022), strengthening community resilience amidst the adversity of poverty and death (Twesigye et al. 2019), addressing vulnerability in post-conflict areas (Malual and Mazur 2017) and building financial literacy and inclusion among the poor (Namawejje and Yawe 2024). Critical to these reported positive changes is the notion that village associations are hubs of "collaborative learning activities for members" (Ahimbisibwe and Ndidde 2022, 162) who collectively find ways of jointly addressing common problems and challenges.

From this viewpoint and drawing from Alhadeff-Jones' notion of emancipation, an argument can be made that for members who actively partake in NGO initiatives, "emancipation appears through the capacity to move out, transition or extract" (Alhadeff-Jones 2017, 214) themselves from moments and experiences of poverty and marginalisation. From a rhythmic perspective, the consistency of the repetition of NGO messages challenged community members to view the eradication of poverty as their responsibility. It follows that if the poor and marginalised people who have lived with and relentlessly battled against poverty are triggered to embed learning rhythms into everyday life to improve their well-being and enable them to learn, unlearn, and relearn as they meet basic needs and send children to school, there is a form of "emancipation" taking place at individual and collective levels. While this form of community empowerment may manifest as short-term and unsustainable, it relieves the poor of the pain caused by extreme poverty and gives them some hope for the future. To some, this could also be the foundation for long-term change (and transformation).

The salience of time and space in learning, unlearning, and relearning

Our analysis of rhythms of learning from the viewpoint of community members engaged in NGO activities that support peer learning and association has illustrated how rural people can collectively choose to abandon practices and values deemed to be incongruent with their current material demands and experiences. This change is slowly and gradually realised over time as people begin to interpret and question those experiences and dimensions of their everyday lives that they have always taken for granted (Alhadeff-Jones 2017; Holma, Kontinen, and Blanken-Webb 2018). Thus, when community

members claim that "something in us changed" or that "we are no longer the same" it may imply that they have been able to start "to alter, change and modify, but also challenge and put into question, the way rhythms are experienced and conceived" (Alhadeff-Jones 2017, 214) in their everyday spaces of belonging and interaction. These modifications are then seen in modest infrastructure and livelihood initiatives undertaken at the household level and the consequent community agency and spirit of association. At a time when the mantra of "leave no one behind" to achieve the global SDGs is challenged by multi-level crises (Samman et al. 2018), grassroots-based structures and remedies that are inclusive, egalitarian, and sustainable can provide some reprieve to the poor (Menon and Hartz-Karp 2019) even if deep-rooted structures that produce and reproduce poverty and inequality may remain largely unaddressed.

In making this argument, we agree with Makuwira (2018, 426) who observes that while there has been immense attention to analysing the broader macro-level dynamics that influence NGO work, "the multiplicity of NGOs working at the micro level has increased the need to understand the dynamics of empowerment from a social development perspective." We posit that rural communities like the ones we studied are in the constant and routine struggle to devise means of learning to liberate or emancipate themselves "from a state of dependency" (Alhadeff-Jones 2020, 124) and move out of pervasive poverty and its related challenges. Today, more than before, people in rural areas have to find physical and mental resources to feed, send children to school, nurse sick members, and contribute to social obligations as they also contend with a state that deliberately lowers "citizens' expectations of local authorities and the central state" (Tapscott 2021, 14). The rhythms of learning we discuss in this article respond to this unordered and improvisatory nature of community living which necessitates repetitive learning of survival knowledge and skills, unlearning of practices that are no longer helpful, and persistent relearning of things that are relevant to the prevailing time-spatial empowerment. Once this rhythm percolates and becomes a considerable part of the community routine and is harnessed into collective and mutual patterns of relations, good "habits, scripts, routines, or rituals [can be] reproduced in daily life" (Alhadeff-Jones 2023, 22) and continue to grow in villages.

Conclusions

In this article, we have illustrated how a local NGO embeds the community into rhythms of learning through village associations. Within the broader spectrum of pervasive poverty and the limited ability of the state to address it, the rhythms of learning can be said to contain elements of emancipation and transformation. Although the kind of emancipation here does not contain overly political undertones, as suggested by radical theorists, it seems persuasive to suggest that acquiring new knowledge and skills while simultaneously questioning and abandoning old habits and practices in a persistent search for an improved life is a form of emancipation. These rhythms are time and resource-bound and, in the context of communities studied, emancipatory insofar as they enable those actively engaged in NGO activities to free themselves from elements of helplessness caused by poverty. Moreover, community development cannot be approached in a bifurcated manner as an open and closed process with prefixed outcomes. Rather, it is "a much broader concept and practice" (McConnell and Lachapelle 2024, 333) that encompasses a wide range of actors, activities, and ideas (Jones 2009) in specific times and spaces. The process of community

development and escaping the perversity of poverty is a complex rhythm of everyday interaction among different actors at various levels. Thus, from this article, the significance of a local NGO in initiating and supporting learning for incremental change and emancipation from perversive poverty remains pivotal.

Secondly, the rhythms of learning presented in this article are attuned to building capacity and agency for material survival and piecemeal change at the locale. It is plausible to argue that grassroots development supported by NGOs can strengthen collective learning that deals with livelihood enhancement rather than a radical transformation of more entrenched structures and power configurations at a macro level. To this end, our article is a valuable addition to studies that have shown that marginalised citizens in developing countries experience some transformation through local resilience, sustainable innovations, and entrepreneurship (Derdabi and Dvouletỳ 2024), aggregation of personal and collective agency, and construction of alternative narratives (Howard 2024), and asset accumulation (Brockington and Noe 2021). Understanding this kind of incremental learning and change as emancipation from the shackles of poverty using the analysis we have provided is crucial for practitioners interested in lifting communities out of poverty through collective learning. Based on the analysis in this article, NGOs operating in conditions like the ones we studied can strengthen the local capacity by working in proximity with their beneficiaries to initiate routines of learning and change at a small scale.

Finally, we address the sustainability of the reported rhythms of learning and change in the contexts of the global South. The preponderance of village associations as linchpins for social change and continued learning cannot be overemphasised. Duly mobilised, village associations can aggregate community interests and weave them into somewhat broad common aspirations. It is possible to observe that NGOs that work with grassroots associations foster learning wherein "daily experiences become the curriculum; peers, the teacher; community, the school; farmers' gardens, the classrooms; daily hustles and challenges, the examination; and achievement, the certificate" (Ahimbisibwe 2022b, 93). Whereas this may appear as a rosy picture painted by community members of NGO interventions and, therefore, cast doubt on the sustainability of such learning, we suggest a more nuanced perspective on the kind of change possible in specific contexts. The reported NGO-community rhythms such as those related to constructing new more permanent homes and educating children have an element of irreversibility. Although we remain cautious that the learning and change patterns may be interrupted and, thus, remain temporary and prone to reversal by unprecedented crises and challenges, we are optimistic that some of the practical skills acquired can have a lasting impact on individuals and communities. Based on Toffler's (2006) argument that "the illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read or write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn", we are of the view that the reported learning rhythms such as those related to savings culture, frugality, hard work, income diversification among others, can, on a more localised scale, be a catalyst for community development in resource-constrained settings.

Limitations and potential areas for further research

The problem of generalisation and verification of the sustainability of the reported impact usually limits studies of this nature. We have thus presented findings from the

viewpoint of community members who had been active in the NGO programmes for a sustained time and in a specific district with context-specific socioeconomic and geographical features and the uniqueness of the Ugandan state. Their views could thus be mistaken to represent the entire community. Yet, we did not interview those who were not participating in the NGO activities to find out why they were not enthusiastic and what kinds of learning and change they were experiencing. We suggest that future research could focus on a) community members who do not join self-help groups nor participate in NGO interventions and b) the sustainability of some of the reported incremental change and learning.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This publication is part of a larger project that received funding from the Academy of Finland [grant numbers 316098 and 316100]. We also received support from the British Academy Community Skills Development Uganda project [grant number WW22\100190] at different stages of manuscript preparation.

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