I. INTRODUCTION:

This study addressed the following question: what are NGOs doing to make themselves more responsive to the long-term interests of the communities they serve? While NGOs are the main development actors in many local communities in the global south, doubt and criticisms have arisen as to their legitimacy as civil society actors representing the people they serve and their ability to deliver on the objectives for which they exist. There are many studies that reveal the negative implications of the role of NGOs in community development and the obstacles they face to legitimacy and effectiveness. However, they remain the bearers of great financial resources and great hope in the poverty alleviation mission of international development. Because of the important role they hold in the international development agenda and the influence they have in local spheres, the on-the-ground practices of NGOs deserve a closer look. Given the doubts that have emerged, how do NGOs themselves see their purpose and what are they doing to respond to the challenges they face? Through interviews with NGO directors in Mozambique, this study will draw out the web in which NGOs operate from their own perspective, and establish what NGOs are doing to better meet community needs. Their representations of the environment they operate in and the agency they use to improve their performance will highlight options and opportunities
at the national and sub-national levels to make space for more effective and sustainable community development interventions.

**DEFINING COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT NGOs:**

The NGOs assessed in this study are community development NGOs. Community development NGOs are understood here as organizations working in the global south that operate in relatively peaceful settings focusing on development (intermingled with relief) at the local level addressing needs across multiple sectors (water, health, etc.). This group does not include NGOs that operate at multiple levels (national and sub-national) simultaneously on singular technical areas. Nor does it include advocacy NGOs or coalitions whose main agenda is to influence specific policies.

Community development NGOs tend to access resources, frame community issues, and conduct interventions at the local level. They do these things in relation to, if not in cooperation with, other local entities that make up the public, private and civil society sectors. However, the distinctions and divisions between these spheres are blurred (Srinivas 2009).

The term community development is most commonly associated with northern planning studies where it connotes planning around physical space, financial investment or the environment. Even in studies of the global south, the term can carry the connotation of northern-driven, centralized, or colonial (in historical accounts) strategies for social or physical change. Despite these unrelated associations, the term
Community development was applied in this study as there was no other descriptor for NGOs that operate across multiple sectors at the local level.

**THE RISE OF NGOs:**

The international interest in alleviating poverty that ramped up in the 1950s and ushered in NGOs as development actors in the 1980s, is associated with the independence and decolonization movements in Africa and Asia, attempts to modernize agricultural societies, the war on poverty launched in the global north (Campfens 1997, all three points), the success of the post WWII Marshal Plan for economic development in Europe (Escobar 1995), and cold war efforts to win the favor of unaligned countries (Escobar 1995). Originally, official aid from the global north supplied direct budget support to foreign governments on the premise that macro-economic inputs would stimulate economic growth at the national level and, in turn, alleviate poverty among individuals.

In the 1980s, despite failing to meet expectations, loans to governments were not abandoned but rather accompanied by increasing structural adjustment requirements, including the scaling back of public spending by loan recipient governments that is associated with neoliberal economic policies (Mathie and Cunningham 2003). In Latin America the cutback of public spending left a gap in basic services for the poor once provided for by the government. In many parts of Africa, where colonial systems, civil wars, and transition systems were ending, the slate was clean for the emergence of new systems to address public needs.
The rise of structural adjustment and decrease of public spending in the global south was accompanied by a reframing of long term needs of the local poor as unique problems, decoupled from macroeconomic growth, and solvable outside the public sector. Official donors dramatically increased financing to NGOs for poverty alleviation generating an explosion in the numbers of organizations in relief and development (Craig 2007, Campfens 1997, Edwards and Hulme 1996, Chambers 2004). A preference for NGOs was consistent with the post-cold-war New Policy Agenda that arose in the 1990s with a renewed focus on efficiency. This new approach to poverty alleviation carried assumptions that non-governmental entities were more efficient than the government (Edwards and Hulme 1996, Lewis 2002). As representations and world views of relief and development NGOs became part of a global mainstream (Lewis and Opoku-Mensah 2006), they benefited from the normative assumptions that they were more trustworthy and accountable than governments (Ebrahim 2009).

In their first twenty years as development actors, NGOs were given “golden child” or “magic bullet” status in development; there was a real hope that they would make a significant dent in global poverty (Lewis and Opoku-Mansah 2006 p.666). Today, academics, general critics, and paradoxically even official donors (northern governments), no longer see NGOs as the ultimate saviors (ibid.). In the global south, NGOs do not carry the same positive image they do in the mainstream global north. In their study in Uganda in 2004, Barr, Fafchamps and Owens found that people in many sectors did not believe that NGOs take the public interest to heart (2004).
**PARTICIPATION:**

NGOs’ role in community development is justified in part by the beliefs that participation is the best means for alleviating poverty and that NGOs are best at managing participation. In the 1990s, the term “participation” became ubiquitous in documents and policies across the international community (Dorsner 2004, Chambers 2004, Cooke and Kothari 2001). The gap between participation rhetoric and practice was addressed in community development literature as of the 1970s, but with increasing attention in the 1990s as the concept of participation entered the mainstream.

To conceptualize the different levels of participation possible, VeneKlasen and Miller developed the ladder below (building from previous ladders created by others).

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-Mobilization</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interactive Participation</td>
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<td>Functional Participation</td>
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<td>Participation for Material Incentives</td>
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<td>Participation by Consultations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Passive Participation</td>
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<td>Token Participation or Manipulation</td>
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VeneKlasen and Miller (2002)

The distinctions among various levels of participation are intended to highlight for planners and practitioners that it is important to know what type of participation is
being applied and to make sure that it is the most appropriate type given the aims of a particular initiative.

However, because participation is often simply accepted as positive, without distinction for what form it takes or what its aims are, it can be employed in ways that are detrimental rather than helpful for community members. Cooke and Kothari, in their 2001 book Participation: The New Tyranny? argue that while external agents such as NGOs claim to resolve power imbalances among local actors, their participatory interventions can “simplify the nature of power” and “encourage a reassertion of power and social control only by certain individuals and groups” (page 142). The authors also claim that the ways people are brought into development in the name of participation can “dis-empower them to challenge the prevailing hierarchies” (page 143). These considerations highlight the need to look more closely at participation in development initiatives, regardless of the identity of the lead actor, be it government or NGO.

**NGO EFFECTIVENESS:**

The literature that praises NGOs tends to be biased by conflicts of interest between researchers and the organizations under study and also tends to lack contextual analysis to explain the reasons for particular successes. (Lewis and Opoku-Mensah 2006). There is much more literature devoted to critical views of NGOs. Criticism in the literature generally falls across three dimensions: 1) accountability (Edwards and Hulme 1996), 2) “corporatization and professionalization” (Lewis and Opoku-Mensah 2006, p.668) and 3) “post-colonial power and morality” (Lewis and Opoku-Mensah 2006, p.668) or
“knowledge-ethics-power” (Srivinas 2009). These three areas, simply referred to from here forward as accountability, professionalization, and power, will be addressed in order.

Accountability for NGOs can be divided into four intersecting elements, upward (accountability to donors), downward (accountability to clients), internal (accountability to mission, boards, and for individual staff members to supervisors, etc.), and lateral (accountability to peer organizations). The most pronounced issue in the literature is the struggle between upward accountability pressures (to donors) and downward accountability (to clients’ interests) (Edwards and Hulme 2006). Because there is greater pressure felt from donors than from clients, who have no real accountability since NGOs are not member organizations (Ebrahim 2009), NGOs tend to conform more to donor demands than community interests.

Broadly, the professional nature of international development has meant that NGOs and their workers have become contractors to a professional industry rather than agents of change (Edwards and Hulme 1996). The specific ways in which professionalism impacts NGOs’ responsiveness to community interests will be discussed in more detail in the analysis.

Part of the power critique deals with language. It assumes that knowledge is not neutral (Srivinas 2008) and therefore deserves close attention as to how it is created and used. In this vein it is claimed that terms such as NGO, development, civil society, participation and empowerment are conjured and employed by powerful actors to maintain power. Indeed, the power of NGOs and the manipulation of their international
image has been found to weaken rather than strengthen enduring institutions of governance as well as grassroots development efforts. The grassroots identity that represents NGOs as stepping stones to the creation of civil society in Africa (Bellucci 2002) has been challenged in nations of the global south including Mozambique. Because the NGO form of civil society did not emerge from voluntary social interests and has no popular base, it is often indistinguishable from the state in practice (Costy 1995). As such, civil society, in these contexts, neither represents the will of the citizens nor provides a counter balance to state power. The tendency of NGOs, especially foreign managed or foreign funded NGOs to be state-like and not civil society-like in practice is part of the reasoning behind the association between international development and colonial structures in which foreign governments and private companies assumed political and social authority over local communities. Additionally, that the previous mission was to “civilize” local people, and the new agenda is about “civil” society, explains a great deal of confusion and resistance to the current model in Africa (Lewis 2002). Ultimately, these issues tend to restrict, rather than promote, possibilities for the emergence of leadership around problem solving from within local communities.

**MOZAMBIQUE:**

This study was carried out in Mozambique because it is a favored location for international NGOs. Already in 1995, an estimated 180 international NGOs and donors were operating in Mozambique along with 120 national NGOs (Costy 1995). In the
1990s alone, it is estimated that eight billion dollars of foreign aid were spent in Mozambique, a significant portion funneled through NGOs, making it one the world’s most aid-dependent countries (Bellucci 2002).

Portuguese colonial rule ended in 1975 after a protracted war of independence. The period that followed was marked by a civil war that was fueled in part by external interests (South Africa’s apartheid government). The economic dysfunctional post-independence socialist system added to the strain of the war for the people of Mozambique. In the mid-1980s, NGOs were invited in to help respond to the needs of the poor (Thomas 1992). In 1987, the government relaxed its socialist policies and accepted a loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Thomas 1992) accompanied by structural adjustment aimed at cutting public spending. Public health spending, for example, was cut in half from 1980 to 1990 (Pfieffer 2003). In 1990 a new constitution was drafted ushering in a multi-party system and in 1992 the civil war ended, opening the country more fully to neo-liberalism and market ideology and the deepening of the presence of foreign NGOs.

Mozambique’s current population is around twenty million. Its biggest development challenges include poor transportation infrastructure (destroyed in the civil war or left in disrepair since the end of Portuguese rule), weak health care systems (it has one of the lowest doctor to population ratios in the world), and vulnerability to flood and drought. Still, Mozambique is often heralded as a model for Africa because of its consistent economic growth and semi-regular changes in leadership (if not political party).
II. METHODOLOGY:

This is a qualitative study based on in depth semi-structured key informant interviews. It conforms to the University of Minnesota’s Institutional Review Board, approval was granted on June 15th of 2009. Key informants are national directors and national program directors. The final sample of directors is comprised six directors from international NGOs, three of which are faith-based, and directors from four national organizations, one of which is faith-based. In addition to the ten interviews with NGO directors, I also interviewed a representative from USAID, the Peace Corps and the UNDP, respectively, to supplement my understanding of the development environment.

In order to identify the key informants I would interview, I used a list of organizations in Mozambique available on the internet to researchers and development practitioners interested in the Millennium Development Goals. I selected organizations that could possibly be conducting community development and searched the organizations’ websites for more information about their objectives and approaches. Based on this information, I deselected twenty-two organizations that were not engaged in community development, and contacted them. Several of those organizations were unreachable, but ten directors responded positively to requests for interviews and kept their appointments. The reasons given for declining interviews included “the director is on vacation for one month,” and “we are very busy because we have vacancies in our highest positions.”
I conducted the interviews using a semi-structured interview format. Responses in interviews were kept anonymous. Interviews lasted around one hour and were conducted in the language the respondent was most comfortable with, either English or Portuguese. I interviewed the directors in their offices, except for one that I telephoned. I took extensive notes on my laptop during the conversations. Within several hours of each interview, I edited the interview log.

Content areas in the interview included approaches to community development and participation, and barriers and facilitators to achieving the goals of the organizations. Specific questions included the following: *It is known that some NGOs struggle between following the will of donors and carrying out what is in the best long-term interest of the community. Can you share your experience? If it has been an issue, how have you addressed it?*; *It is known that some NGOs struggle to align staff interests with community interests and best practices. Can you share your experience with this? If it has been an issue, how have you addressed it?*; *Do you experience other barriers to community development?*; *What are facilitators to community development?*

I asked all of the interviewees the same basic questions and, as is standard in qualitative methodology, as new content areas emerged, those were probed further in subsequent interviews. The following analysis is based on a review of the content of the ten interviews organized with atlas.ti qualitative data analysis software.
III. ANALYSIS:

APPROACHES TO COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT:

The range of answers provided on the meaning and purpose of community development can be roughly divided into four categories: 1) poverty and power; 2) community autonomy; 3) capacity building; and 4) meeting basic needs. The definitions reveal the diversity in the philosophies of development and perceptions of purpose that NGOs grapple with. Without overplaying the relationship between definitions offered on the spot and the core ethos or broadly internalized practices of an organization, I will compare four ways of defining community development. By providing insight into how NGO directors imagine their organizations adding value to communities, these renderings become a launching point to evaluate NGO intentions on their own, as well as the compromises they make in the path to their expressed ideals.

One director said you have to fill the stomach and the mind at the same time. Another definition began: “Lots of times, people think we develop the people. The person develops themselves [sic]. We remove the obstacles.” Those who responded that community development is about providing for basic needs might be criticized by those who would say that service delivery does not alter the socio-political relationships that play a role in poverty. Bebbington, Hickey and Mitlin, for example, claim in their book *Can NGO’s Make Difference?*, that NGOs are apt to adopt “technocratic” rather than “transformational” approaches because of their close association with the international development industry, and that this approach reduces their relevance as agents of change (2008). The only directors that produced this definition were national...
NGOs. However, unlike the Bebbington, Hickey, Mitlin book suggests, these NGOs were concerned with a long term empowerment agenda. In fact, based on other responses they seemed equally or in some cases more rooted in long term change through community ownership of interventions than others.

The fact that international NGOs were less likely to mention service delivery is more likely due to their reluctance to signal “technocratic” modes than the existence of a deeper commitment to “transformation.” This is posited because international NGOs may be more sensitive to the discourse taking place in the global north (that down plays the value of “technocratic” interventions). Indeed, basic needs can be redrawn as congruous with Amartya Sen’s definition of development as laid out in Development as Freedom which shows that development depends on means that enable a person to participate with meaning and dignity in the social sphere of their community (1999).

The poverty/power definition offered said that “poverty is the result of unequal power. People aren’t poor, they are made poor.” Following that it was said that community development is when “people themselves participate in the whole process of local government, development of policy, distribution of resources, seeing to their well being, and implementing equality… and all are included.” This response respects the role of local government while privileging the role of the people in government decision-making. By placing great importance on participation in existing community institutions, rather than in NGO efforts, the NGO is pushed into the background to act as facilitator.
This approach might be seen as responding well to long term community needs by giving credence to long term institutions and strengthening their relationships with community members. But to do so effectively, the NGO would have to be very conscious of, and willing to address, the impact of its own presence on the local balance of power, and not see itself as natural or neutral. It should also be careful not to be callous toward helping communities materially which may be necessary to ensure participation. An NGO, for example, that helps to form a parent teacher association (PTA) by putting field agents on the ground to animate the community, should not be unwilling to help them finance a roof to cover a school that the PTA managed to build through their own time and resources. Overall, the power/poverty definition combined with an appreciation for local government, as long as it is truly adaptable to specific community needs, points to a greater achievement of long term community interests relative to other approaches offered.

The “autonomy” responses claimed (as did the power definition) that the involvement of the community in problem-solving is critical to community development, but they made no mention of the state. It was unclear whether these responses perceive community development as ensuring participation in initiatives carried-out either by any actor, or if the NGOs see themselves as the main development actors and give primacy to communities in relation to their own work. These definitions were provided by the three international religious organizations.

Finally, the “capacity building” definition focused on community development as a means for helping a community address its own problems. One of these responses
referred specifically to increasing the community’s ability to “defend rights on a higher level,” alluding, presumably, to state responsibility. Another explained community development as building the capacity “to make appropriate decisions around one’s individual life and community life” and another as “helping the community reach a level where they can solve their own problems and find resources outside...” On its own, this frame leaves unanswered the question of how a community or individuals with improved capacity pursues resolution to their problems. Would they, once enabled, seek problem solving through participation in local government, through policy reform, through community managed self-help projects, or through greater influence over NGO initiatives? While capacity building is a popular approach, and has potential if employed appropriately, on its own, it does not highlight the short term and long term roles of the actors involved in development and therefore may be used to justify a wide variety of interventions with varying effects on target communities, some of which may not be productive (for example building the capacity of local people to demand resources from government bodies that are ill-equipped to provide them).

The definitions provided draw out the ideals that NGOs strive for but also reveal the complicated nature of the roles and purposes of NGO interventions in community development and their potential impacts on other local actors and short term and long term development goals. While an overall assessment of the ideals themselves has been provided, how they translate in reality can only be understood through greater knowledge of how NGOs implement their activities and with consideration for the constraints they experience, and the technology they employ in practice. The analysis
below will address these elements, looking first at the tools employed in their “participatory” implementation, and then the constraints they face as organizations.

**PARTICIPATION:**

Participation was a very common answer to the question “how do you achieve community development?” Indeed the use of the term participation is ubiquitous in development (Dosner 2004, Chambers 2004, Cooke and Kothari 2001). In response to the follow-up question “how do you achieve participation in your work?,” it was said in more than one instance that NGO workers convince communities that their ideas are wrong and that they should accept the way of the NGO. This seemed inconsistent with the spirit of participation. However, it is possible that those NGOs are effectively providing new ways for communities to increase agricultural productivity (for example) in ways that respect and empower community members through long term relationships.

Several NGOs mentioned using PRA or Participatory Rural Analysis among other tools. PRA, which was criticized explicitly by Cooke and Kothari, is a set of tools used for facilitating a gathering of community members to describe community life and capture community perspectives (2001). Cooke and Kothari claim that PRA promotes a performance by communities to be captured as “local knowledge;” justifies pre-determined agendas; benefits practitioners more than participants; masks power; and give practitioners power over knowledge production (2001). The fact that this tool is still in use despite the fact that it has been found to run counter to community interests
shows that, at least in the area of participation, NGOs have not been very responsive to external criticism. There are several possibilities to explain this. Either criticism is not reaching them, their work is path dependent and immutable despite a recognized need for change, or they are ambivalent to criticism which they may perceive as ill-informed or unrealistic.

Another tool mentioned was a handbook adapted for training members of local development committees. Those committees are recognized by the government and their role in governance is written into law, although they have not been established, trained or supported in all locations. The creation and employment of the training manual shows a great deal of adaptability and respect for recognized local structures on the part of the NGO that mentioned it. That same NGO also reported selecting communities to work with based on where it believed the government was likely to recognize its work and adopt its practices for engaging local people in development initiatives. This finding offered further support that the NGO concerned operated more consistently with the long term community interests of the community, by considering sustainability and the role of the government in their work and by focusing their resources at a very local level. One other participation tool mentioned was a community scorecard to facilitate a community in evaluating itself (but notably leaving out a component for evaluating the work of the NGO).

The automatic framing of participation as positive even by respondents that had a difficult time answering the question “how do you achieve participation?” is consistent with the literature that dissects participation to find its value. With NGOs in charge, the
quality of participation efforts can be highly affected by organizational constraints that cause the value of well designed tools or conscientious facilitators to be diluted in the implementation process. Mathie and Cunningham acknowledged the disconnect between participation best practices in abstraction and the ability to harness them within an organizational process. In teaching participation, they directed their training efforts at managers currently positioned within NGOs (instead of students in planning or development fields). When the NGO managers were asked to “tell a story of community-driven development,” they became aware of the gap between their own organizations’ rhetoric and practices because they were unable to offer examples (2003). Through the training Mathie and Cunningham developed a strong argument for “Asset Based Community Development” as a means for institutionalizing meaningful participation in community development (ibid.). Otherwise known as ABCD, the approach builds on a community’s positive resources rather than by immediately applying outside resources to frame and solve its problems. ABCD is scattered through literature on alternative development, but has gained little traction. Neither ABCD nor similar methods were mentioned by any of the respondents.

The idea that participation may not always represent opportunities to reduce poverty is supported by the literature that says that non-participation may be a rational choice for less advantaged community members. Some community members reasonably calculate that their benefit from an intervention is less than the cost of participation (in lost time) (Dorsner 2004). Also, it was also found that bottom-up participation can be hindered by the minimal resources devoted to it, relative to top-
down initiatives (Francis and James 2003). Lastly, participation efforts may be more costly or inefficient relative to the benefits it generates (Irvin and Stansbury 2004), but may still have value beyond a project’s technical output (Heinrich and Lopez 2009).

It seems that participation efforts are highly variable depending on the resources dedicated to them, the general approaches in which they are applied, and the tools used in the process. However, even the most well designed and well intended efforts at engaging communities in problem solving may be diluted by barriers to effectiveness experienced at the organizational level. Those intervening factors are explored below.

**BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVENESS:**

Donors:

Many of the barriers to effectiveness expressed in the interviews reflected problems with the donors including: 1) confusion about the purposes of development from various donors; 2) donor pressure for short time frames; 3) unethical conduct among donors; 4) donors funding only projects; 5) donor pressure to operate along unique sectors; and 6) project design pressures from donors. Other barriers included 7) lack of staff capacity; 8) interagency staff poaching; 9) illiteracy in the communities; 10) government relations; and 11) transportation difficulties. First the donor related barriers will be drawn-out, followed by an exploration of the other issues.

Half of the NGOs in the study received a majority of their funds from official, bilateral donors. The others were funded through a combination of private donations, foundations, ecumenical partners, and multilateral donors. In one case, a young
organization was almost entirely funded through a sub-grant from a parent International NGO. Another accepted private sector subcontracting in addition to official aid.

Donor confusion was expressed through the statement “some donors want to give things while others see it as the state’s role to provide goods and services.” The complaint of short project timeframe was raised frequently. This is consistent with the critical literature arguing that donor preferences for short, pressured, project cycles force NGOs to operate on a project by project basis which hampers long term, engaged community development (Bellucci 2002). Directors said they experienced strain from donors increasingly funding only projects and not general costs. One organization that insisted on doing “long term development” said that they cannot do as much as they would like to because most donors do not want to fund their approach. It was also said that donors want projects to last one or two years which is not enough time to make a measurable impact.

Interviewees reported that because the donors themselves want to take credit for what happens with the money they spend, they pressure organizations to apply money directly to projects, like subcontractors. One director said “we are getting squeezed” referring to a 7% overhead restriction attached to funding coming from a multilateral donor. Another said “donors do not want to fund us, but increasingly just our projects. We have no core budget to keep us going.” He added, we would like to have a “more reciprocally beneficial relationship” with donors. It was also said that a donor would have already skimmed off “over-head” before the money reached
Mozambique. So although some of the money would be used on “overhead” in country, it was not supposed to be used that way, it should theoretically all go to direct implementation. This trend means that NGOs should have very low overhead rates or program ratios. Unfortunately, it is very difficult to find out just how much these budget restrictions strain NGO budgets because there is no standardized accounting system for this in Mozambique (as you find with US non-profits). The program ratios reported by directors ranged from 7% to 47%. This range cannot be explained by different spending habits, but rather by differences in how it is measured. Unfortunately, the current room for NGOs to make spending and reporting decisions autonomously and not transparently, hampers prudent and ethical resource allocation.

Respondents also shared two claims of unethical conduct occurring from within donor agencies. In one case, the director said that a representative was pushing a certain agenda on a project for personal recognition, even though the NGO tried to explain that it was not in the best interest of the community. In another case, the director of a national NGO claimed that a representative called him to ask for a payment in return for giving his project a positive recommendation. He suspected this might not be uncommon.

Another major difficulty raised was the tendency of donors to confer funds for sector-specific projects rather than supporting holistic or integrated community development practice. This barrier has not been raised in the literature to my knowledge. Several NGOs complained that too much funding is directed at AIDS at the expense of other needs. One director claimed that AIDS funding is spent on workshops
and that the same funding directed at malaria could save many more lives. One director claimed that the inequitable focus on particular sectors has caused groups to lose clarity around their own vision in the pursuit of funding.

The pressure to adjust a project according to donor preferences was brought up by some, while others said they simply do exactly what donors ask. One international NGO felt pressure from donors to “scale-up,” and to move to regions where the NGO did not have an established relationship. That NGO felt it had to compromise a project even after initial agreement with the donor. They felt threatened that future projects would not be approved if they did not comply, or if they were ineffective or inefficient. No other agency implied punitive action or fear of punitive action from past or current donors, but those who relied on bilateral donors did admit to conforming to donor demands. Two NGO directors claimed that they always comply with all donor demands, one saying that the donor has “rights” and that a donor is like a “parent giving money to his child.” Another director said that if a donor wants something “we try to integrate it.” One director admitted that some decisions they “had to make” harmed their work. These responses support previous evidence that donor compliance with preferences encourage a disregard for local conceptions of development (DeHart 2009).

Taken together, these donor related issues negatively affect the quality of NGO work in the community in multiple ways. These findings are consistent with the claim in the literature that the tools that NGOs employ are suited for the needs of donors and run counter to effective (by client standards) project implementation (Abrahams 2008, Biggs and Neame in E&H 2006, Srinivas 2009). The combination of short-term projects
and project-restricted funding weigh quite heavily on efforts to do sustainable, engaging development that is responsive to communities’ needs and interests.

One director claimed that these constraints meant that donors did not fund participatory analysis. It was also said in the interviews that funding constraints inhibit post-project contacts which are important to ensuring lasting impacts. Without long term projects, or general funding for use between projects, NGOs have a difficult time achieving results consistent with the statement that “the most effective development as that which is owned by the community” (from a response to definition question).

Two other directors said that donors operate without a community vision and as a result there is no community level management of activities that should continue after the NGO intervention terminates. One also said that donors do not support the institutions in communities that have a role in development. This statement is consistent with the argument that professionalized development disadvantages local agents who may be better suited (than their larger more professional counterparts) to address the same development issues (Srivinas 2008).

Returning to the accountability struggle, or the competition between accountability to donors and accountability to communities, one director explicitly stated that there is “lots of focus on donor accountability, not on community accountability.” Most NGOs admitted that they measure their own success against project outcomes, which are determined by donors, but do not evaluate their broader impact in communities or ask community members to evaluate them. The vast majority of NGOs said that they only look at base-line to end-line project comparisons to assess impact. Others mentioned
that they began using annual strategic plans over the past several years. These were faith-based NGOs with more flexible (not bilateral) donors.

Also, although the directors did not infer that they are only accountable to donors for spending (and not impact), the literature suggests that this is the case. The literature claims that financially focused accountability encourages NGOs to focus on spending money, rather than on pursuing effective community development (Najam 2002). The donors’ focus on financial accountability may be due to the difficulty of assessing impact (Barr, Fafchamps and Owens), but is also likely encouraged by the desire among donors themselves to take credit for what was financed by reporting how much they spent on particular problems (as communicated in an interview in this study).

The impact of financial rather than impact focused upward accountability is the creation of opportunistic NGOs and for-profit behavior among NGOs (Bar, Fafchamps and Owens 2004) as well as a neglect for consideration of practices that align with community interests as explained above. Also, by directing resources at NGOs who are pressured to act and spend quickly in sub-contractor like relationships has a weakening impact on the capabilities of government bodies (Thomas 1992).

Essentially, donor preferences and norms have a tendency to push international development interventions off course from the long term interests of poor communities by supporting larger, more “professionalized” organizations that are more distant and disconnected from local institutions, by supporting sector-based rather than holistic community engagement, by pushing NGOs to spend rapidly on project implementation
while restricting funding for sustained operation and relationship building, and by neglecting the issue of accountability to communities.

Peer NGOs:

Fellow NGOs were also identified as a cause of organizational challenges. Without prompting from the interview questions, directors expressed criticisms of peer organizations. It was said that NGOs do not think strategically and that NGOs are not located where their resources match the need, but according to historical and political reasons. This fits the previous studies reporting that NGOs have patchy geography due to a lack of over-site that might align NGO interventions with needy areas (Edwards and Hulme 1996). It was also said that NGOs are not very responsive to invitations from peers to enter communities where they are needed, and that they lack coordination around the mechanisms they use such as subsidies for activists. Inter-organizational poaching of staff was another complaint aimed at peer NGOs. Additionally, one director of a national NGO claimed to suffer from a bad reputation created by other national NGOs.

Communities, Target Populations:

Interviewees also raised difficulties regarding the low levels of literacy, education, and civic culture among community members and tended to see the community as the source of misunderstandings around the intentions and nature of projects. These statements do not line up with any preconceived notion the mainstream carries about
NGOs as adding value in communities based on the realities they encounter. Really, problems such as low levels of education should not be framed as constraints as they are part of the reality development issues that NGOs are meant to improve upon. The suggestion offered here is that the development agenda and its goals are generated based on idealized versions of reality because the agenda-setters are highly influenced by ingrained global north contexts. This suggestion raises a large question as to the overall model of NGO driven development. If NGO goals and practices are unrealistic for the communities they work with, they are unlikely to achieve the community ownership over problem solving and development that they claim to exist for.

**Staff:**

In other expressions of constraints, directors complained that staff members were not of the “capacity” the NGOs desired and that staff retention was a major problem. Although the literature did address the issues arising from staff professionalization, it did not discuss the converse constraint, from the NGO perspective, of low staff capacity. Several directors said that unmet salary expectations (NGO jobs are assumed to pay very well) reduce staff motivation and contribute to high turnover. It was also said that a worker who shows promise will be lost quickly to another organization, and that staff want to leave when they are expected to work in isolated places. Some NGOs responded to these challenges by staying closer to high density areas (where the need for community development initiatives is usually lower), others by hiring people in local communities to implement projects.
I posed a question directly to the directors about potential conflicts between the interests of staff members themselves and the needs of the community. One director agreed that this is a problem lamenting that staff do not have the right “love” for community work. There were several mentions of staff misconduct in the community.

Another internal problem that came up frequently was low staff education and low staff capacity for critical thinking, strategic thinking and innovation. In one case, an NGO that was changing its implementation mode from direct to partnership-based had difficulty convincing its workers to work in a new manner.

**Government:**

The national government of Mozambique was mentioned as both a facilitator and a constraint on development. These responses related to national and district levels of levels of government. It was said that the government is not transparent, does not care about communities, and can be corrupt. It was also said that the government’s openness, decentralization, and community governance laws are facilitators of development.

**Transportation:**

Most directors reported poor transportation infrastructure and transportation costs. Infrastructure was not perceived as an issue that NGOs could or should address with the understanding that major road repair projects are a state responsibility. Transportation costs were reported as high because NGOs have to physically retrieve and deliver community members to meetings and many people are so poor that they do not even have bicycles. Also, the cost associated with ferrying NGO staff back and forth
from the field or keeping them overnight in remote places was considered burdensome.

A faith-based NGO director responded to these constraints by increasing their commitment to distant areas where other NGOs were unlikely to reach. This required placing more staff in isolated field posts for longer periods of time. Other directors admitted that they serve the places that are most accessible.

FACILITATORS:

The facilitators that directors identified included the level of peace in Mozambique, the goodwill of its people, the spirit of dialogue and consensus, and the spirit of volunteerism. Also, the fact that donors continue to have an interest in funding development in Mozambique is an asset that directors acknowledge.

NGO AGENCY:

The directors showed agency in addressing their self-reported challenges on several occasions, but not of a level that indicates any significant momentum for reform. One director said that he advocates for longer projects to combat donor preferences for short time frames. Another director reported more concretely that his organization is working with an official donor to set up a community vision model that would look at capacity building in phases and require a commitment to long term solutions. In response to the lack of support for non-project related activities, one director said that his organization is strategic in finding ways to visit communities between projects such as using administrative funds from other projects or unrestricted funds. Another
director presented the idea of dedicating 5% of a project budget to post-project follow-up, but his NGO was not pursuing this idea. Another suggestion was to set up district-based development centers staffed with experts supplied externally, unattached with particular NGO projects, to make space for all players to engage in coordination and planning of activities.

In response to staff capacity challenges, one NGO expended resources on quarterly evaluations and the development of individual three month plans. To increase awareness among staff of the value of donor money and its intended purpose, an NGO canceled office birthday parties and encouraged staff to continue such activities through a social fund instead. They also organized a collection for an orphanage to increase the staff’s self-identification with social problems. Another organization said that they were improving their staff’s own monitoring and evaluation skills so they would have a better understanding of what is “going on culturally.” To improve staff performance another NGO established a provision against preaching on behalf of one’s political party and a zero tolerance policy for abusing donor funds. Another created mechanisms to assist victims of sexual abuse regardless of whether the perpetrator was from the community or from the NGO.

In response to an understanding that NGO work is not sustainable, but must be infused into local institutions, one organization experimented with implementing a water project through the district government authorities, placing donor funds directly into government accounts. This director reported that it was not easy to work in this way, but well worth the cost.
In response to the problem of coordination and harmonization among NGOs, one NGO dedicated efforts to mapping where NGOs are working and potentially creating a forum for NGOs to share ideas for mutual and networked improvement. The ideas shared in that interview had the most appeal for expanding on NGO agency to improve the quality of community development work. However, that NGO was not representative but unique in its capacity and will to undertake peer engagement. Significant change would require external pressure infused into the operating environment in which NGOs respond to incentives and accept compromise on the path to community development.

Several directors said that they were trying to harmonize their sector-based departments, and in fact some had reduced their number of departments by combining intervention areas. These aimed at making specific interventions more holistic in scope. Some were also adopting a more partnership based implementation mode to do more capacity building for local actors through their projects.

CONCLUSION:

NGO directors are aware of the short-comings of their organizations’ work and are quick to recognize contributing factors. This may be a positive sign for reform in NGO driven community development. However, translation of the acknowledgement of problems into real change contends with path dependency, low levels of incentives for change, and correspondingly low levels of will to change.
As mentioned previously, there is little indication of an end to NGOs as they continue to adapt and conform to the interests of the international community. However, the increasing “squeeze” on general funding for organizations that is consistent with the increasingly goal-oriented, project-based model of aid, may ultimately discourage NGOs from their efforts to signal representativeness and transformation and simply accept their role as independent subcontractors or middlemen for externally framed problems and solutions. This shift should not spur great regret as the recent model, despite generating a positive image for NGOs in mainstream of the global north, had already proved inadequate at connecting NGOs with their target communities.

If consensus eventually develops that the NGOs are no longer needed as mediators and middleman between donors and target communities, it is expected that local institutions would play a bigger role in addressing community concerns. At the same time, private sector actors and new agents of transnational social change such as social enterprises are also likely to occupy greater space in development. In the absence of NGOs as stable actors with long standing (if problematic) relationships in local spaces and carriers of organizational history and lesson-learned, new models will require greater coordination and knowledge capturing. Indeed, new models cannot be automatically expected to respect and work with local capacity and assets especially since they are generated from trends developed primarily in the global north, and by no means in response to local concerns or voices.
Those NGOs that maintain a core desire to represent and collaborate with community members and local institutions will continue to require alternative primarily faith-based funders who are open to bottom-up feedback. However, because alternative funding is more suited to smaller organizations, it comes with a trade-off in scale. And selection of alternative funding over bi-lateral and multi-lateral funding also comes with a trade-off for mainstream status.

To improve NGO practices within the current model, networked-based solutions may offer some promise. As Alnoor Ebrahim claims, accountability to community development’s beneficiaries is non-existent because NGOs are not membership-based organizations (2009), the findings of this study suggest that on the ground effectiveness must be raised as a primary goal if NGO driven community development is to have a greater and more sustainable impact. Based on the current accountability landscape in which critical stakeholders are absent, Ebrahim suggests network-based solutions in which multiple organizations and partners create standards for themselves and alter the external pressures they face in favor of a better direction (2009).

One possibility for network solutions would be advocacy coalitions among NGOs to push back on donors and help them understand what is required to perform engaged, impactful and sustainable community development. As one NGO is already engaged in conversations to encourage a donor to appreciate and support what is needed for long term community needs (the community vision model mentioned above), it seems that there is room for NGOs to work together to advocate to donors. The central issues for advocacy would be longer project time frames, less sector-specific funding, and greater
general funding for non-project activities such as relationship building, community
listening and follow-up.

Through strengthening a network to share information about organizational
practices, NGOs might also be able to standardize their measurement of restricted and
unrestricted funding and administrative-to-program cost ratios for greater peer
accountability. They could also share their varied experiences and practices in working
with the local development committees. Facilitation of this exchange could benefit from
an inclusion of asset-based rather than problem based and project based development
strategies.

Network-based solutions are not without precedent in Mozambique. James Pfeiffer
has reported that health sector NGOs in Mozambique came together in 2000 after
realizing that many of their mechanisms and interventions were harming rather than
helping public health care (2003). However, the code of conduct they signed signaled
some progress around concerns among peers, but did not end “growing disquiet among
concerned field workers, donors, and host nations” (Pfeiffer 2003, p. 737). Peer
coordination could help direct advocacy at key donor groups, improve peer
accountability around financial accounting and representation systems, and increase
consistency around work with local development councils, and begin larger
conversations about the appropriateness of the current model for undertaking
community development.

If better performance is not sufficient incentive for NGOs to come together, greater
incentives can be created by other actors in the development web such as development
agencies like USAID, DFID, and others who are not only donors but development advisors with a more distant and longer term perspectives on development issues. These agencies need to simultaneously increase their expectations of quality NGO work and support mechanism that are conducive to generating sustainable impacts in local communities.

Even within the ideal delineated above, improvements in current mode of NGO-driven community development may not meet optimal answers to community development in the global south. Potentially better alternative models include establishing and supporting neutral community development offices at the district or local levels to serve as gateways for external actors and meeting houses for collaborative and competing local interests to engage in debate and planning.

This study did not reveal mechanisms to hold community development initiatives accountable to communities. The path to increasing voices from the community in development decision-making and policy is, as yet unclear, but might gain more insight from future studies that acquire the local perspectives from community members regarding NGOs and development visions.
References:


