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Sowing seeds of a farmers' movement? NGOs, farmers and agricultural policy advocacy in Museveni's Uganda

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Abstract

Agrarian social movements that call for more just and sustainable agricultural policies are emerging in many parts of the world, but in other place this tendency is less evident. In many African countries recent decades have seen a proliferation of donor-funded NGOs, and as dominant civil society actors these organizations are problematic. Nonetheless they constitute an important part of 'actually existing civil society'. This paper analyzes the rationales, strategies and experiences of Ugandan civil society actors engaged both in the national policy arena and with mobilization at the farmer level, looking particularly closely at ongoing efforts in the Rwenzori region of western Uganda. NGOs are moving from service delivery to advocacy, and more recently from advocacy *for* farmers towards supporting advocacy *by* farmers. Although both processes face serious challenges – some caused by the current political environment, others internal to the organizational form – we argue that NGO should seek to play this dual role, and can do so only collectively. While the argument that NGOs should prioritize supporting farmer-based associations is well-founded, it is important to bear in mind that this distinction is not always straightforward, and that under current conditions NGOs still have an important role to play in protecting farmers' interests in decisive policy debates. As mobilization at farmer level grows stronger, NGOs can also help provide farmers with desirable and achievable alternatives in regards to agricultural development.

1 Introduction and aim

Policies that protect and promote the interests of smallholder farmers in sub-Saharan Africa are of key importance for economic and social justice. Firstly, smallholder farmers make up a large proportion of the rural poor in many countries, and are particularly exposed to growing problems related to environmental change and pressure on land [1]. Failing to address the needs of smallholder farmers thereby affect already marginalized groups. Secondly, the past century has shown that “*implementing policies that increase agricultural productivity among smallholders is a particularly promising strategy to achieve pro-poor growth*”, but also that there are “*major political challenges to adopting this strategy*” [2, p. 1442]. This is not only the fault of governments; for example, structural adjustment programs imposed by international financial institutions had a devastating effect on agriculture in many countries, and especially on smallholders [3]. Governments are nonetheless central in shaping the conditions under which smallholders live and farm. One mechanism for bringing about policy change is pressure from civil society, and within the contemporary development literature this is often lauded as key to democratic and inclusive development [4]. According to Guzmán and Martínez-Alier [5], there is a worldwide emergence of new types of social movements that call for agricultural policy reform on both socio-economic and environmental grounds. But there are also concerns that contemporary ‘*rural grassroots opposition is recast overoptimistically*’ because they seek to *resist* rather than *control* the state [6]. There are signs that civil society actors like non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and farmers associations are playing an increasingly active political role in many African countries, but there is need for better understanding of when and how they can shape policy outcomes [2].

In Uganda, agriculture is by many believed to be ‘*the single most important source of both growth and poverty reduction*’ [7]. However, in recent years the policy environment has disfavored small farmers [8, 9]. Meanwhile, indications that civil society is growing stronger when it comes to policy advocacy are coinciding with increasing government hostility towards dissenting voices [10, 11]. As a problematic but nonetheless prevalent type of civil society actor, NGOs can play a dual role in bringing about policy changes that favor smallholder farmers; directly (by initiating and influencing policy processes) and indirectly (by facilitating emergence of farmer-led advocacy). The study takes an ‘insider’ perspective by interacting with civil society organizations of different kinds and at different levels, who aspire to play one or both of these two roles. We seek to understand their *rationale* for this, what *strategies* they use, how they experience their *possibilities* to contribute to change both at government and grassroots level, and factors that *limit* these possibilities.

After justifying and elaborating on the above starting point using literature on civil society, NGOs and agricultural development, we explore it empirically through analysis of material generated during three periods of fieldwork in Uganda (around four months in total) between 2015 and 2017. The empirical material is organized into two main sections; the first is focused on national level NGOs and their advocacy work; the second on interaction between farmers and NGOs from local to national level. Methods included semi-structured interviews, informal talks, focus groups, participatory workshops, participant observation at meetings

and trainings, and review of organizational documentation (e.g. strategic plans, meeting minutes, project proposals) and media reports. The material was then analyzed thematically, and is presented in a synthesized form alongside quotes, when deemed of value to the reader. Due to the potential sensitivity of some issues, participants are kept anonymous and quotes are generally not attributed to specific organizations.

2 Theoretical starting points: What to expect from 'civil society'?

2.1 Civil society and development

Within the growing critical debate around contemporary agrarian change, views may differ desirable pathways look like but it is generally agreed that neoliberal policies that allow corporate interests to steer agricultural change must be challenged, and that an active state is necessary [12, 13]. But states facing severe economic constraints are particularly susceptible to 'capture' by other interests, such as securing development aid and attracting foreign investment, which can run counter to those of poor farmers [14]. Many look to different forms of developments within *civil society*, especially *social movements* [15, 16], but to understand what can be expected from civil society actors and under what conditions, it is necessary to first clarify the term's meaning and usage.

The concept of civil society has a long history which has produced many competing understandings. Today, it is often broadly conceptualized as *'the whole of humanity left over once government and for-profit firms are excised, covering all those organizations that fill in the spaces between the family and the State and the market'* [17, p. 1]. Looking at how the term is applied, Mercer [18] distinguishes between two major schools of thought. A liberal understanding has dominated development discourse and the literature referred to as 'civil society theory', which understands civil society as *'the ensemble of associations which exist outside of, and in opposition to, the state'* [19p. 747]. As such it becomes innately good; a counterweight to the state (and private economic interests) driven by altruistic concerns for common public interests, and thereby a social sphere that should be privileged [20, 21]. The critical perspective treats civil society as a more problematic sphere, one of competing interests, because it both shapes and is shaped by wider economic and political forces [18, 22]. In practice, civil society actors can be more or less oriented towards influencing the state and/or the economy, they can foster progressive ideas but also conservative or fundamentalist ones, and they differ in terms of resources and influence [23]. Civil society as such has no inherent qualities in relation to societal goals like democracy and development.

Because of its roots in European thinkers' analyses of Western societies, some scholars argue that civil society as a concept has limited relevance in other contexts, especially Africa. Depictions of civil society in African countries as 'weak' because it does not resemble Western counterparts, for example, are seen as symptomatic [18]. Indeed, 'prescriptive universalist' applications have sometimes simply transferred Western models of civil society, presenting this as the missing key to Africa's political development in an ahistorical manner [24]. However, completely dismissing the term fails to recognize its ambiguity. The problem, Mohan [22] suggests, may not be that civil society is a Western idea but that its

recent ‘re-remembering’ within development discourse has been a selective, (neo)liberal one. Understandings that refer more broadly to negotiations between states, markets and citizens make way for middle roads between universalism and Western exceptionalism [25], by allowing the concept to be adapted to different types of organizations, activities, motivations, and state relations [26]. Another argument in support of the concept as relevant analytical category is the fact that it was used by colonial administrations as an organizing principle, and is now part of discourse and practice within Africa [25]. Along this logic, Mamdani [27] calls for analysis of ‘actually existing civil society’.

2.2 NGOs as civil society actors

In the 1990s, Whaites [4] argues, civil society within the development context became ‘grabbed’ by NGOs. Donors’ growing interest in NGOs was spurred by several factors; perceived failure of state-led approaches, growing centrality of conditionality and ‘good governance’ in development aid, and the belief that civil society plays a central role in fostering sustainable democracy [4, 28]. NGOs were seen as offering comparative advantage in service delivery thanks to innovativeness, flexibility and strong grassroots linkages [28]. As key points of contact with civil society at large, or even the ‘organizational embodiment’ of civil society, they were also seen as key for political reform [29]. As NGOs got painted as ‘heroic’ organizations trying to do good under difficult conditions [30], insufficient consideration was given to whether they are inherently bound to strengthen the state and/or broader civil society. A common critique against NGOs today is the tendency towards ‘filling gaps’ in state service provision (often created or widened by structural adjustment). In the long term, this can undermine rather than build up state capacity [31]. Donor dependence, project orientation and professionalization can lead to depoliticization and weakening of local ties, as NGOs become accountable to donors rather than members and short-term outcomes take precedence over long-term transformation [32].

Today it is more widely acknowledged that NGOs do not equal civil society. Banks, Hulme [32] write that when it comes to objectives like empowerment and transformation, it is important to distinguish between NGOs and membership-based organizations (MBOs) that have a different relationship with the politics of development. These include for example political or religious institutions, trade unions, cooperatives, self-help groups and social movements. For MBOs to develop in accordance with citizens’ concerns and interests, NGOs and donors may need to ‘step back’ [33] but can still play a meaningful role, by supporting the elaboration of development alternatives that can be taken forward by marginalized groups independently [34]. For this, they need to *‘situate themselves to work in support of MBOs in their efforts to act as a countervailing power to more powerful actors’* [32, p. 709].

2.3 Agricultural change, NGOs and farmers

Throughout history there have been numerous peasant movements around the world, and they have sometimes constituted important political forces. For example, according to Birner and Resnick [2], peasant mobilization is part of the explanation for why the Green Revolution was launched in Asia and not in Africa. And yet, Desmarais [35] found in 2002 that the ‘new social movements’ literature overlooked agrarian activism, treating peasants as *‘remnants of a distant past*

with little to contribute to current analysis of collective action'. Studies of peasants, meanwhile, tended to focus more on questions of identity than on their role as economic and political actors. The past twenty years show that rural social movements still can play a significant role in societal change, both nationally and internationally, and the transnational coalition La Via Campesina (LVC) is commonly cited as evidence [35-37]. Brass [6] however offers a critical perspective, arguing that the dominant construction of civil society *'replicates the historical project not of the left but of conservatism and neoliberalism, and as such is politically disempowering for peasants and workers'* by celebrating micro-level grassroots agency, decentralization and identity. NGOs, and the donor-propelled shift in responsibilities towards them, are at the center of this argument.

Holt-Gimenez et al. [38] argue in regards to agrarian advocacy that an important task is to understand and alter the interactions between farmer-led organizations and NGOs/NGO-based networks. Their different political and institutional origins can lead to a divergence in objectives, and create competitive or even adversarial relationships. Organizations of smallholder farmers and other marginalized rural groups (such as LVC) have for example tended to engage with 'agricultural alternatives' in a more political manner than NGOs [15] which tend to be more susceptible to apolitical, technocratic approaches [39]. In the arena of sustainable agriculture in Africa, NGOs have struggled to see themselves as *'part of a much bigger movement which is about change at all levels of society'* [40]. Ironically, their achievements in supporting farmer networks for knowledge-sharing has sometimes reinforced the focus on local level practices rather than change in political and economic institutions [38]. Lack of a 'culture' of engagement and debate at farmer level has also made it challenging to translate such networks into NGO-independent associations. NGOs' funding structures are partly to blame, but also insufficient understanding of how social movements come about. On basis of these shortcomings, some scholars conclude that it is time for agricultural NGOs to take more of a back-seat – not cease to engage, but focus more on the relationship with farmers' organizations [41]. This resembles calls for NGOs to 'step back' heard within the broader debate on civil society and development [33].

Going into the case of Uganda and eventually the empirical material, we do not assume that civil society plays a pre-determined role in social or agricultural transformation, and the same goes for specific actors within. Donor-funded NGOs are problematic in many ways, but are nonetheless prominent in many countries of the global South. There are two major ways that NGOs can seek to shape policy in the interest of farmers; one is of course to speak on behalf of farmers in various arenas. The other is to support formation and strengthening of farmers associations of different kinds, which independently can direct claims at decision makers. Organizations may not do one or the other but are likely to be found at different points of a spectrum, and many scholars today are urging them to move towards the latter.

3 Uganda: Historical legacy and recent developments

In the colonial period, Ugandan civil society was characterized by informal community associations engaged in anti-poverty activities like infrastructure improvements and credit schemes, and missionary-based organizations delivering social programs in marginalized rural areas [42]. After gaining independence from Britain in 1962, Uganda experienced several repressive regimes, violent conflicts

and economic collapse, during which ethnicity was politicized [43] and civil society was in some scholars' view 'largely decimated' [44]. Others argue that difficult socio-economic conditions caused a proliferation of new types of informal associations like lending schemes, burial societies and parent-teachers associations, eventually coupled with an increasing number of externally funded CSOs [42]. These different readings seem rooted in different conceptualizations of civil society, but what is clear is that civil society was significantly transformed.

The National Resistance Movement (NRM) led by Yoweri Museveni took power in 1986 and promised a new political era characterized by participatory democracy and decentralization. The NRM soon began aggressive economic liberalization via a policy package developed by the IMF and the World Bank [43]. This occurred under a 'no-party' political system, argued to be necessary on basis of sectarianism, which was kept in place until 2005 when a multi-party system was introduced [45]. As of 2017 the NRM still remains in power, although increasingly under criticism for using undemocratic means, particularly surrounding the latest election in 2016. Compared to previous regimes, NRM regime has certainly enabled and allowed for more societal political engagement but with many limitations, such as heavy-handed encouragement of 'pro-Movement' politics at the local level and repressive measures against rallies, demonstrations and civil society assemblies [43].

In the early 2000s, scholars often described civil society in Uganda with terms like 'weak' and 'compliant' [46, 47]. A major reason was dominance of donor-dependent NGOs, and their service delivery orientation. The improvement in stability after 1986 coincided with donors' growing interest in civil society in general and NGOs in particular, and Uganda experienced a surge in number of NGOs. According to Dicklitch and Lwanga [43], historical and structural legacies '*created a culture of political apathy and fear amongst the general population*' reinforced by continued regime repression and donors' implicit acceptance of human rights transgressions. By 2000 there were over 4,000 registered NGOs, mostly performing 'gap-filling' roles. In recent years however, it has been suggested that civil society is growing 'stronger' in the sense that more organizations make efforts to shape public policy also on sensitive issues [11, 48]. Muhumuza [42] argues that this began already in the 1990s, when CSOs started moving from only 'supplementing' the government to taking on more responsibilities including political activism. One reason for more political ambitions is the way that the state has formally partnered with CSOs in a range of social programs related to their 'poverty eradication' agenda, both at central and local levels. However, the state is highly selective when it comes to which organizations they partner with, generally avoiding those engaged in activism and preferring those with strong donor relations, thus encouraging a *particular* form of political ambitions [42].

During the past ten years there have been growing concerns regarding the political climate in Uganda. Freedom House classifies Uganda as 'not free' since 2015, citing intensifying '*restrictions on and abuses against the opposition and civil society*' [11]. The legal space for civil society has gradually narrowed since 2006, when the *NGOs Registration (Amendment) Act* required NGOs to register, annually renew permits, and declare their funding [49]. The *2016 Non-Governmental Organizations Act* further increased the government's power over NGOs. They now need approval at district level in all areas where they want to

operate, and a newly established national bureau has significant powers including the ability to revoke permits [49]. Within civil society, many believe that the government is threatened by the growing number of civil society organizations engaged in advocacy and governance [50]. This growth is occurring within the context of declining support for the regime, leading to lower tolerance for divergent views. Beyond stricter *control*, there have been attempts at *co-optation* by sponsoring or initiating government-friendly CSOs – for example, aggressive campaigning for formalization of savings and credit cooperative societies [42].

4 Advocacy for farmers: NGOs in the national policy arena

4.1. Advocating agricultural policy change – who, how, why?

We begin the empirical part of this paper by briefly presenting the national level organizations included in the study, their general advocacy approach, and perceptions of recent trends in civil society.

- **Uganda National Farmers Federation (UNFFE)** is Uganda's oldest national level farmer organization and consists of district farmers' associations and commodity-specific farmers' associations, representing around 10,000 farmers (most of them smallholders, but also medium- and large-scale farmers). As such they are a farmer-based CSO that, among other things, engages in policy advocacy. However, UNFFE is mainly donor-funded. In advocacy, they focus primarily on farmers' access to key services like access to finance, extension services, irrigation and fertilizers, and control of the seed market due to problems with counterfeits.
- **Eastern and Southern Africa Small Scale Farmers Forum (ESAFF)** established a Ugandan secretariat in 2010, and the organization now consists of farmer groups in 30 districts (in total over 10,000 farmers). ESAFF is in the process of joining La Via Campesina (LVC), motivated by strong status of LVC in the international arena. ESAFF views its main focus as being their members' (farmer groups) capabilities in advocacy work, but also engages as a lobbying organization at national level on issues like GMOs and land rights. Like UNFFE, ESAFF gets some funding through small member fees but is mainly donor-funded.
- **Participatory Ecological Land Use Management (PELUM)** Uganda is part of the regional PELUM network (operating in 12 African countries). Founded in 1995, their original focus was training farmers in sustainable agricultural practices, thus in a sense 'supplementing' the government in terms of agricultural extension and research. Since around 2000 they have increasingly moved towards also doing advocacy and lobbying. Current priority areas include protection of indigenous seed systems, extension policy and land rights. As a network of smaller CSOs (a few of them farmers' associations) PELUM also offer support (such as training) for member organizations in 'capacity building' for advocacy at farmer level.
- **Caritas Uganda** dates back to 1970 and is part of the Catholic church's international relief and development organization. As opposed to the others it is not exclusively focused on food/agriculture, but within this area they engage in policy advocacy on issues like land tenure security, GMOs and extension policy. They also have 'capacity building' programs focused on advocacy for their 19 local offices at diocese level.

- **National Organic Agriculture Movement of Uganda (NOGAMU)** is an umbrella organization of farmers (individuals or associations), processors, exporters and NGOs involved in organic agriculture founded in 2001. Since 2004 they have been actively lobbying for a 'national organic agriculture policy' to recognize organic agriculture as a 'development option', thus making it easier to mobilize state resources in support of this sub-sector which they argue would be beneficial for smallholder farmers.
- **Food Rights Alliance (FRA)** is a coalition (and a registered NGO in itself) of national level NGOs with a common interest in issues related to 'sustainable agriculture and food security'. FRA has been operating in its current form since around 2014 but has roots back to 1999. As opposed to the others, FRA is exclusively focused on shaping policy, directly and through enhancing member organizations' capacities in policy analysis and advocacy.

All organizations, except for FRA, thus to some extent work both with NGO-led advocacy and seek to encourage farmer-based advocacy. What should be noted though is that 'farmer-based' is not a clear-cut label. UNFFE and ESAFF arguably are, but they are still donor-dependent NGOs. The extent to which they are actually farmer driven thus depends on a range of internal factors.

Two policy issues – higher budgetary allocations and extension policy reforms – are shared by all organizations, and are seemingly uncontroversial. Beyond these, there is some divergence. Some differences reflect efforts at coordination; for example, one interviewee recognized land rights as crucial but argued that other organizations are taking the lead. Others reflect divergent views; the *Biotechnology and Biosafety Bill* debated since 2012 the primary example, where especially UNFFE takes a different stance (see 4.4).

Although this sample of organizations is not necessarily representative (indeed they were contacted because they reported being engaged in advocacy) there is some evidence of a general shift in how NGOs are engaging with agricultural development. For PELUM, advocacy has become more important over time due to members struggling with issues that PELUM could not address. The only way forward, she said, was to *'to amplify their voices and make sure they are heard'*. She saw a similar evolution amongst many NGOs, believing that many are hitting similar 'snags' (barriers which require policy change). Another interviewee echoed this view;

'It was purely service delivery.. but they did that for ages and nothing changed, so now we need to take up advocacy, and the government has started listening. [...] there are some policies that we have really halted for some time, and at least once they are held, people's awareness is increasing. And our role is to see the masses fighting for themselves, not us fighting for them'

Caritas recently decided to make 'advocacy capacity' of their network a priority in the coming years, and explained that they increasingly feel that CSOs should not merely 'supplement' but must *'work with the government to make sure they do what they should be doing'*. While most pointed to having realized the limits of 'gap filling', some added that advocacy is increasingly becoming a donor requirement. An ESAFF representative explained that they formed partly because UNFFE left an 'advocacy gap' by focusing mostly on service delivery, but that their

attention to advocacy seemed to have grown after a large donor sought partners some years back and specifically inquired about experience in advocacy.

4.2 Space to engage

When asked about their relationship with the government, and their opportunities to participate in shaping public policy, NGOs generally started by painting a rather optimistic picture. Many have managed to establish good working relationships with various ministries, and regularly get invited to forums like 'annual sector review meetings'. The choice of who gets invited into policy processes is believed to be based on which organizations are doing relevant, practical work close to farmers (e.g. extension and other kinds of service delivery) and fulfill basic requirements like being registered, financially transparent, having competent staff, etc. The government is also interested in '*how much politics is involved*'. Using an approach to advocacy that is 'collaborative' or 'non-confrontational' (and actively communicating the image of being 'in the same side' as the government) is a widely shared strategy. Part of this is to acknowledge the government's good intentions and to offer alternative solutions, rather than only criticize:

'I think civil society actors are now beginning to realize that the confrontational approach won't take you too far. And the fact that we're here to bridge a gap, you can't bridge when you are quarreling with your neighbor all the time. [...] you have to be really strategic the way that you position yourself, in the way that you engage. We are always coming to recognize what they are doing, and then we can offer options. What the government doesn't want is for you to always ridicule the interventions they are doing and not giving them options'

An underlying belief, seen in several interviews, is that ignorance and lack of interest amongst policy makers is more commonly at the root of flawed policies, more so than 'bad' intentions (even if corruption certainly exists).

The collaborative approach, however, has its limits. Several organizations have experienced attempts to obstruct their activities in relation to advocacy on biotechnology and land rights. This has taken the form of letters from the government threatening with deregistration on basis of '*hindering government programs*'. After engaging in a case of alleged land-grabbing, one organization noticed being observed from a vehicle parked outside the office gates for several weeks, which they interpreted as an attempt at intimidation. In light of this climate, NGOs view it as particularly important to back up claims with strong evidence, to carefully fulfil legal requirements (registration, financial transparency, police approvals etc.), to involve farmers and build their critique on the basis of existing laws, policies and commitments. As a precaution against negative repercussions, organizations above all collaborate;

'Especially when you envisage that government has interest in a bill, when you are against it you move in a bandwagon to avoid being seen as someone who is leading the rest, because the government can choose to frustrate you as an individual. So when you are moving as a group like twenty organizations, every letter you write you all sign. It becomes very hard to single out someone and begin to fight you'

Finally, it can be noted that even when NGOs successfully influence policy makers, getting to the point of actual implementation can be challenging because the costs of policy development has been partly shifted towards civil society actors. An example is the Organic Agriculture Policy, which primarily NOGAMU has been advocating for since 2004. The policy was approved in 2012, but required additional documentation (an impact assessment and an implementation strategy). NOGAMU had to hire a consultant for these tasks which has caused substantial delays, and with every delay there can be *'a new set of technocrats'* who might question the policy.

4.3 Making allies

Building relationship with different actors is a key theme when it comes to strategies for effective advocacy, and for overcoming some of the challenges presented.

Within civil society. The NGOs interviewed had strong links with each other, and cooperate in advocacy work in various ways. On some issues, cooperation has been formalized into organizations such as Uganda NGO Forum, the Civil Society Budget Advocacy Group (CSBAG) and Food Rights Alliance (FRA). There are also informal forms of cooperation, such as online databases and communication platforms for mobilizing each other for campaigns and meetings, and as already mentioned this is of particular importance when dealing with contentious issues. UNFFE is a particularly important ally for other NGOs; because of their strong links with the government *'you will be on the right side of government'* by aligning with them. But these links are also believed to sometimes get in the way;

‘There are things they cannot comment on, like issues that insinuate divergence from the government, they don't take part in such. They will be called out, say hey you guys what are you doing, but for us we are free to speak out. We work with them on some of the issues... you also have to collaborate, they are near someone we want [...] but I know that they have to really be careful’

With the state. Allies are also sought within the state, which many emphasized is not monolithic. There are differences between different bodies and between individuals, and an important part of advocacy is interacting with individual state officials. This has been seen in the context of the Biotechnology bill; many believe that this bill would already been passed unless NGOs had targeted particular members of parliament who were willing to listen to their concerns, and then in turn requested further discussions and investigations.

With donors. All the NGOs interviewed are heavily dependent on foreign donors, thus there are obvious reasons to believe that they are under pressure to adjust to donors' interest in advocacy as in other activities. Interviewees did not experience that donors explicitly influence their advocacy work, but influence can operate at many levels; donors presumably seek to fund organizations with compatible views (among these six, donors were as varied as USAID and the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation). As mentioned, advocacy in general has become increasingly important to donors in recent years, but the way that funding is provided has not necessarily been adapted. Advocacy is expensive, slow, and has highly uncertain outcomes. Short-term funding that shifts with donors' priorities can result in piecemeal efforts, which many viewed as very problematic.

Coordination of efforts in coalitions like FRA can ameliorate the problem, but only partly:

‘Since it's a consortium, if this organization runs out of budget this one might have, so we do fundraise within the alliance also, that's how we find a way around it. Otherwise it is right that before you get to step b from a, the funding has expired. How do you carry on to campaign? It is not easy but that is our way of managing it’

Donor relations can be both a burden and an asset when it comes to state relations. On the one hand, donor influence is a way for the government to delegitimize NGOs, and they have to make an effort to portray themselves as ‘indigenous’ voices despite donor-dependence;

‘You have to explain to them, the people who fund our work believe that indigenous people have a right [...] What they fund is what has been made in Uganda, these are the laws, everyone has a voice, we have freedom of expression, so if someone gives me money to express myself it's not their opinion they are just helping me to say what I think’

On the other hand, it can be useful to have support from influential donors;

‘We were advised that whenever we can have the donor communities that consistently subscribe to organic work in Uganda, they can write to our ministry and pledge their commitment to supporting organic activities so it can quicken the process’

With farmers. We mention above that presenting strong links to the farmer level is particularly important in the context of contentious issues, but this is also believed to be key for legitimacy in general (beyond of course being essential for knowing what actually *is* in the interest of farmers). One way is to work with farmer-based NGOs like ESAFF and UNFFE, but it can also be important to involve individual farmers and farmer groups in campaigns;

‘If I went to the parliament and said you know the farmers are marginalized, they will shun us and say someone is paying you. You know? But if a farmer leaves their village dressed in their way and they come and say you know what, we have this problem, how can the government help us, or what you gave us was not enough. They are listened to, because those are the voters’

Involving farmers in this manner requires that certain kinds of capacities are developed at farmer level, something we return to in section 5.

4.4 Two contrasting examples: Biotechnology and ‘Operation Wealth Creation’

Before moving onto the second part of the empirical material, we will briefly present two concrete examples of issues that illustrate the thorny and sometimes political environment that NGOs must try to navigate.

The Biotechnology and Biosafety bill has been a high priority for many of these organizations in recent years. While the others are largely united, UNFFE have

chosen to *'move alone'*, arguing that that this is because they seek stay 'objective' as opposed act on fear (an NGOs not part of this research became strongly criticized in media for making unsubstantiated claims about GMOs causing cancer). According to an article in the government owned newspaper in March 2017, UNFFE urged the government to quickly pass the bill because farmers urgently need disease resistant planting material. The other NGOs meanwhile made similar arguments about the importance of facts, but expressed doubts about the objectivity of research institutes due to the sources of funding. Their critique centers around economic effects on smallholder farmers. Environmental and health impacts are more difficult to bring into advocacy since the science is ambiguous and/or poorly understood. What is noteworthy, though, is their strategy of not advocating against GMOs as such, but for strong regulation in regards to accountability (if negative effects occur) and transparency. It is not seen as realistic to oppose the introduction of GMOs because of the government's strong position, so they focus on ensuring that people can make informed decisions about what they grow and eat. This means for example labeling, and requiring that farmers are well informed about consequences (e.g. contracts, property rights, input requirements). Furthermore, an important issue is protection of the organic sector (against loss of markets due to contamination risks). The strategy is clearly a compromise for some organizations;

'It's not that we are counteracting the bill per se but we've identified gaps in the bill and we're trying to make proposals that should be included within the bill for it to be a hundred percent inclusive'

Q: 'So you're not necessarily completely opposed to the idea of GM?'

'Oh we are opposed to GM, but in a scary way it's a national priority, it becomes very hard for you to try to oppose if it's a government agenda, so the best you can do is to ensure that the legislation is friendly to both sectors [conventional and organic]'

The Biotechnology bill is thereby a difficult advocacy challenge for NGOs, but they *have* at least participated in the policy process and shaped public debate. The 'Operation Wealth Creation' program offers an important contrast. OWC was introduced as part of the extension system relaunch in 2014 and put army officers in charge of a new system for delivery of agricultural inputs, after some weeks of training in agriculture. Many problems have been reported, especially untimely delivery of inputs, and politicized selection of beneficiaries. Performance aside, the development and introduction of OWC was a highly opaque process;

'It was more or less a decree, I should say, from the president.. because at that time I think they disbanded NAADS and decided that NAADS is not working, then the army can come in to help them with distribution of seed. But NAADS was more than distribution of seed'

'Operation Wealth Creation... I think the sickness in our government is that they plan things and take them to the people. Operation Wealth Creation is headed by the brother to the president, and I happened to attend a joint agricultural sector review meeting [...] and he was chairing a session. The way they work, I've yet to understand it, but I know that they do business.. and most of those things are private, though they appear public'

None of the NGOs interviewed had any input on OWC, and the fact that it was introduced when the presidential election campaign began made it especially difficult to raise critical concerns. Not only did the political atmosphere discourage dissent in general; OWC was perceived as highly political in the sense of being designed to generate votes and cause intimidation.

5 Advocacy by farmers: NGOs as catalysts for farmer mobilization

5.1 'Building capacity' – but what capacity?

The predominant manner that NGOs speak of the task of strengthening broader civil society is to 'build advocacy capacity'. Below we unpack this notion, starting with what 'capacities' are perceived to be in need of 'building' before moving onto the question of how this is/should be approached.

A premise of farmers' advocacy is *institutional arrangements* that allow farmers to identify and pursue common interests. At the most basic level, this means facilitating collective action in general through formation and strengthening of local farmer groups initially focused on other activities than advocacy like savings and credit, knowledge sharing, labor pooling and access to extension. Mostly, this occurs spontaneously without support from NGOs. It is when these are to evolve into more complex forms of associations, like marketing associations and cooperatives, that support from NGO is often needed to explore options and facilitate the process. Furthermore, some NGOs are trying to develop larger, explicitly advocacy-oriented structures in the form of regional 'advocacy platforms' to enable different farmer associations to communicate and coordinate actions. Others, however, perceive this as premature (see section 5.2).

Another aspect of capacity building is *framing* of farmers' identities and their relationship with leaders. Farmers' advocacy is felt to be hampered by lack of 'esteem' needed to approach leaders with claims. There is concern about 'dependency' tendencies and excessive respect for leaders, and the effects of past experiences;

'First of all they have to know that they have a right to be heard, and that leaders are there to serve them. Because if you've been to the rural areas, those guys almost worship their chairman.. the person is like god. So because of that many of them get oppressed and feel they cannot speak up because this is someone who everyone is respecting and how can I say no to his suggestion when I live here?'

'The district government shuns them away, because they are told 'for who are you doing this, in what capacity, have you become policemen, are you watching us, are you spying on us'.. they tend to run away because nobody has told them it is your right'

As alluded to here, many point to the 'rights-based approach' (which includes framing farmers and leaders as rights-holders and duty-bearers) as important to address these problems.

Finally, there are certain kinds of *knowledge* perceived as lacking. The question of rights is not only about framing; farmers often lack knowledge about their civil and political rights, and commitments made regarding resources and services.

Furthermore, knowledge is needed about existing policies and laws which set the terms of engagement and provide a baseline for advocating change. Often, farmers do not know where this information can be accessed, and literacy and language barriers cause further challenges (official information is often written in English). Finally, knowledge is needed on how to *do* advocacy in practice – including procedures for identifying common issues, knowing what actors to address in what situation, selecting between methods of engagement, ability to present convincing arguments, and assessing risks.

5.2 Creating structures or spurring action?

Two (partly conflicting) philosophies could be discerned regarding how NGOs should approach the objective of farmer mobilization. The first is the idea that NGOs must understand and strengthen the fundamental conditions of mobilization; basically, continued improvement of livelihoods via both production practices and marketing, combined with encouragement of the institutional arrangements mentioned above. As long as farmers cooperate, especially economically, they will eventually identify and pursue common interests in the form of advocacy. The other view is more interventionist; institutional arrangements are necessary for farmer advocacy to emerge but it may take a very long time, especially in situations where farmers have never experienced positive outcomes from interaction with leaders. NGOs should actively spur farmers to identify and pursue issues and purposively create forums for this – an assumption being that once farmers see results from making claims (however small), they will be more likely do so in the future. After a meeting between NGOs in the Rwenzori region and their common donor, where one topic was ‘farmer movement building’, a participant reflected:

‘I notice that we are still struggling with the concept of farmer movement because some people say it should be a forum where farmers come and they.. I hold a different perspective. I’ve been trying to read up on farmer movements in Latin America where you find one farmer group comprising of so many farmers and these farmers have power. You will find they have caused policy change and other things. So for me, I feel if the group can build a critical mass that still falls within the farmer movement building rather than focus only at the platform’

The two approaches of course do not have to be mutually exclusive, and evidence so far suggests some validity in both. Farmer groups that have been encouraged to pursue an issue, such as a road improvement, have tended to do so again after seeing that it can yield results. But the most large-scale mobilization in recent years, a campaign against DDT spraying led by organic cocoa producers, was not followed by further advocacy from the groups involved. The protesters achieved their goals, but some were arrested and there were reports of violent treatment. Presumably this had an effect on eagerness to mobilize, but it may also be that on this particular occasion, the threat to farmers’ livelihoods was so obvious and severe so that mobilization occurred despite relatively low capacity. Either way, the relationship between past occurrences and future propensity is clearly not simple. The question is perhaps not whether NGOs should deliberately encourage advocacy but in what situations this is appropriate, and how it can be combined with a more ‘organic’ approach to mobilization.

Another lesson from the DDT campaign in regards to this is that NGOs can play an important role in supporting farmer mobilization *as it emerges*. This requires close attention to what is happening at the farmer level, and be prepared to offer support in terms of information on the issue at hand, communication between participants, advice on strategies, and potentially financial support for things like transportation and printed material. The DDT issue was politically sensitive, but NGOs did not face significant repercussions for their involvement and an important reason is believed to be that the campaign was (and apparently perceived as) farmer-led.

5.3 Key concerns at grassroots level

We end by presenting three additional themes,

Being 'political'. A key concern for actors engaging with the question of farmer mobilization and advocacy is the risk of being perceived as 'political'. Naturally, making claims about rights, responsibilities, use of resources etc. is inherently political, but this concern must be understood within the particular Ugandan context. Being political is associated with taking a stance for or against the government, and in the context of the Rwenzori region this is particularly sensitive because of a history of anti-government rebel groups, and enduring tensions between the government and the Ruwenzururu kingdom that covers part of the region.

Involving local leaders. An important question when NGOs engage at the local levels is how to relate to local leaders. There is an impetus to 'go through' local leaders and involve them in the process in order to avoid stirring conflicts and raising suspicions about being 'political'. In practice this means being careful about first establishing contacts with leaders at different levels and inform them about their objectives and activities, before interacting with communities. Leaders are then often invited to activities. A benefit of this is that spaces are created for farmers and decision makers to interact. Farmers get opportunities to raise concerns, receive information and establish closer relationships with leaders, which can reduce barriers to interaction. Some problems, of course, are not so easily overcome. There have been situations where leaders have attended meetings with the obvious intent to intimidate participants, or used meetings as an opportunity to present themselves in a positive light rather than listen to farmers. There can also be the opposite problem in the sense of difficulties getting officials to participate – especially when there are local political tensions. NGOs thereby need to be able to actively facilitate the interaction between farmers and officials, and assess whether interaction is actually desirable. Bringing farmers and leaders together does not guarantee constructive dialogue, and could reinforce negative perceptions.

Intersecting social identities. Smallholder farmers make up a heterogeneous category, with individuals of different gender, religion, ethnicity, socio-economic status, political affiliation, etc. These can be associated with conflicting interests, barriers to cooperation, and marginalization of certain groups. Exactly how this plays out is context-specific; in this study, tribal tensions and gender divisions were the most clearly problematic. There had been recent resurfacing of conflicts between different groups in the Rwenzori region when fieldwork was conducted both in 2016 and 2017, so consequences for advocacy-oriented initiatives were

easily observed. For example, there had been instances where NGOs have invited groups for meetings, but only groups belonging to the majority tribe in the particular location attended. On other occasions, officials did not attend meetings (held specifically to provide opportunities for interaction between farmers and officials) because recent episodes of violence created an extremely tense situation. While clearly a significant threat to the notion of a 'farmer movement', agriculture-oriented NGOs typically referred to other organizations working explicitly with issues of peace and reconciliation when asked about how to deal with it. This suggests that there is a need for coordination between civil society actors working on the (seemingly rather distinct) issues of agriculture and peacebuilding in areas like the Rwenzori region, not least since tensions are often related to conflicts over land. The second division, gender, is more generalizable to Uganda as a whole. Gender is clearly 'mainstreamed' in Ugandan civil society, and many organizations emphasized the need to work specifically with gender in relation to advocacy. There are important forms of discrimination against women in regards to agriculture (especially land rights), and traditional gender roles and perceptions can make it more difficult for women to participate in advocacy. Most NGOs are clearly aware that gender matters in advocacy, but do not always know how to meaningfully approach gender issues at farmer level. In the study, very different approaches could be observed; from elaborate strategies for confronting gender perceptions at household and community level, to instances where women were 'included' in a tokenist fashion.

6 Concluding discussion

This paper has explored the experiences of Ugandan civil society organizations involved in doing advocacy for, and encouraging advocacy of, smallholder farmers. We have focused on questions about their conditions for doing so, rather than trying to assess what *kind* of change they seem to contribute to more substantively. This concluding section nonetheless ends by reflecting on the question of outcomes, after we have worked our way through the most important insights.

It is commonly argued today that NGOs must move from advocacy on behalf of marginalized groups towards strengthening these groups' abilities to advocate for themselves. This view was clearly reflected among the participants of this study, and to some extent in their organizations' activities, even if it is a rather nascent process. Their rationale is in great part instrumental, in the sense that the government is more likely to listen to farmers than to NGOs, and are not as easy to control. The question they struggle with is not whether they should do this but how to best go about it. We will return to this process, but first turn to NGOs as advocates.

Also here, our findings suggest that a shift has been taking place. NGOs in the field of agriculture are still 'supplementing' the state, but many also try to influence it (this doesn't mean all NGOs do, and says little of the outcomes, but we do not seek to make any grand claims regarding the general 'strength' of civil society). This appears to be a consequence of both NGOs and their donors gradually realizing the limits of 'gap-filling'. But Ugandan NGOs operate in a peculiar political environment. On the one hand they systematically get invited into

(some) policy processes – provided that they are seen as competent and not too ‘political’. On the other hand they need to be very careful when moving outside the boundaries of that invited space. Not only can they lose the privilege of participation, they also risk repression. The organizations in this study have seemingly accepted that they need to be ‘collaborative’ and not ‘confrontational’ with what they see as a largely benevolent (if slow and sometimes ignorant) state. But it is a balancing act, because the state is also susceptible to influence from actors perceived as less benevolent. The political situation clearly does sometimes hamper NGOs – some shy away from sensitive issues, others engage but with modified positions, even if they have developed strategies to shield them from the most severe repercussions. Donor relations, too, require a balancing act. On the one hand, with an ‘extroverted’ state that highly prioritizes attracting external funding [51], being backed by donors can be useful. On the other hand, donor-dependence is particularly problematic in advocacy work because of the discontinuity in funding, and the risk of being delegitimized when taking an unpopular stance (and the risk of actually *being* donor driven, but this study was not designed to capture that). The one positive aspect of the latter is that it creates strong incentives to stay connected to the farmer level, thus countering one of the most important weaknesses of NGOs [28].

These challenges, even if partly mitigated, support the argument that NGOs should focus their attention at ‘broader’ civil society. Still, it is important not to be too quick to discard NGOs’ advocacy on behalf of farmers. Regardless of what NGOs do, ‘building capacity’ (to use their own terminology) is a slow process, and policy issues on the agenda today could have significant and partly irreversible consequences, making alternatives much less achievable in the future. Further, something not explored here is that ‘top-down’ policies can shape conditions for ‘bottom-up’ pressure. For example, a cooperative policy is under development that will shape the ongoing re-emergence of agricultural cooperatives (only one organization, PELUM, mentioned working on this issue by collaborating with Uganda Cooperative Alliance). In the short and medium term, NGOs – for all their challenges and shortcomings – play an important role in resisting the combined impacts of neoliberal policies and growing interest in Africa’s ‘vast untapped agricultural potential’ from corporations, donors and ‘philanthrocapitalists’ [52].

When it comes to NGOs’ efforts in terms of encouraging farmer mobilization, then, there are a couple of points to be made. Firstly, when arguing for the importance of farmer-based organizations (and membership-based organizations generally), it is important to remember that the distinction between MBO and NGO can be quite blurry. In Uganda, the largest farmer-based organization is no less dependent on foreign donors than other NGOs, and furthermore it is tangled up with the state. Secondly, while there seem to be fairly widely held views amongst NGOs on what is lacking at farmer level in regard to mobilization, the role of NGOs in addressing it is less clear. Our findings suggest, perhaps expectedly, that they have multiple roles; understanding and contributing to fundamental capacities and forms of collective arrangements, facilitating initiatives as they emerge, and directly encouraging claim-making. Different situations call for different focus, which places high demands on NGOs in terms of flexibility, sensitivity to the local context, and close reading of the political situation at all levels (which can change quickly). This in turn requires collaboration between organizations despite being ‘competitors’ for funding, and

donors expressing a growing interest in advocacy have a responsibility to promote this.

Finally, moving forward it is important to pay attention to the relationship is between the *process* of farmer mobilization, and its *outcome*. Local level farmer mobilization has thus far centered on claims for facilitating and or protecting smallholder farmers' commercial activities (e.g. road improvements, anti-DDT). This is hardly surprising, but a reminder not to assume that farmer mobilization has pre-determined outcomes, such as alternative forms of agriculture. Certain outcomes may necessitate broad mobilization, without mobilization *guaranteeing* those outcomes. UNFFE's stance on GMOs is illustrative; of course, their position could simply be attributed to government influence. But it is also thinkable that devastating pest crop losses do seem like a more serious threat by many farmers than the consequences of GMOs. Perhaps one of the most important role for NGOs, then, alongside 'capacity building' is to ensure that desirable and feasible alternatives are visible at the farmer level. NGOs cannot start farmer movements and even less determine their outcome, but they can in small ways assist their emergence, and help ensure that there are options available for consideration.

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