Reading Freire's words: are Freire's ideas applicable to Southern NGOs?

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Summary

This paper responds both to the revival of interest in Paolo Freire's ideas and the comparatively little academic attention given to the applicability of Freirian thought to the activities of Southern Non-Governmental Organisations (SNGOs). It identifies the opportunities and challenges of applying Freire's ideas about community empowerment and participation to SNGOs' discourse and practice. Based on short case studies of three Freirian-oriented Brazilian NGOs, as well as on analysis of Freire's central thematic concerns in education (*conscientização*, *praxis* and dialogue), this paper identifies certain NGO management contradictions and tendencies that have so far received little attention in the literature. These are: (i) the ongoing tension between political and service delivery roles; (ii) the usefulness of Freire's ideas for SNGOs in contexts where 'class harmony' rather than 'class struggle' is emphasised; and (iii) whether there is an under-realised potential contribution that Freire's work can make to SNGOs. The paper concludes that SNGO theorists and practitioners need to be clear about the opportunities and challenges inherent to Freire's concepts if they are to be useful in this context. Only if wisely interpreted and translated, can the Freirian philosophy enable SNGOs to become successful and consistent learning organisations.[1]

Introduction

> I have to be reinvented and re-created according to the demands – pedagogical
> and political – of the specific situation (Freire 1997).

As an attempt to investigate the ways in which, and how successfully, Freire's
thought can be translated into the context of Southern Non-Governmental
Organisations' (SNGOs), this paper will examine the potentials and limitations of
applying Freire's ideas as a tool for SNGOs to enhance empowerment and
participation at the community level. Despite the differences among SNGOs around
the developing world, this study intends to carve out issues that might be relevant and
applicable generally, if translated into specific local settings.

The Brazilian educator Paulo Freire believed in the liberating potential of education.[2]
By employing visual aids based on local realities, Freire's work helped illiterate
people from marginalised communities to tell their personal histories and to access
their political rights. Freire's writings, particularly The Pedagogy of the Oppressed
(1970), set out clearly his ideas on conscientização (i.e. critical consciousness),
closely associated with 'a process of learning to perceive social, political and
economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of
reality' (ActionAid 1996, Thomas 1992).

Meanwhile, recent discussions on development – such as the claim that poverty is
not limited to an economic condition, but is also a condition of political powerlessness
– have led to a shift towards local 'participation' and 'empowerment', where 'the local'
becomes the site of development intervention. In this context, civil society
organisations, particularly SNGOs, have emerged as the vehicle through which
development objectives such as participation in development programme and
empowerment of poor people could be more easily achieved (Mohan and Stokke
2000).[3]

Responding to the universal appeal of his ideas, Freire frequently stressed that they
needed be actively reinvented according to the different contexts in which they were
to be used, and not merely 'followed'. He pointed out that 'one must read the world in
which words exist' (Freire 1997), meaning that it is necessary to evaluate the

limitations and the potentials, the historical and political forces of a particular world, before taking the possible next steps to action.

In fact, Freirian thought has been applied to a number of practical and theoretical contexts, such as liberation and social movements, academic disciplines such as anthropology, urban planning and gender, as well as in educational contexts in both the developed and developing worlds. However, little attention has been given to the way in which his ideas fit specifically to SNGOs' activities, despite a frequently 'taken for granted' relationship between Freirian thought and the participation and empowerment rhetoric often used by development NGOs.[4]

Despite the popularity of Freire's ideas among SNGO practitioners, there has hardly been any systematic effort to address systematically the conceptual and practical linkages between Freire and SNGOs. The majority of work identified for this research relates Freirian thought to broader 'development' and 'empowerment' debates andonly a few studies focus on a more direct relationship between Freire and SNGOs. However, this work tends to lack Southern-based organisational examples of how these relations take place at a more concrete or applicable level, and are usually limited to discussion of literacy programmes developed by large Northern NGOs (NNGOs) such as ActionAid's REFLECT programme.[5] Additionally, these studies do not go beyond Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed, and therefore overlook the subsequent evolution of his thinking in later works.

Despite Freire's popularity, such a gap in the literature renders his thought inaccessible to or misunderstood by many SNGOs, reinforcing among many practitioners Edwards' (1989:116-117) view that social development theory and research is of little practical utility for grassroots-based SNGOs. Hence, the broader motivation behind this paper is to try to demystify Freire's ideas within the SNGO context, providing practitioners with different facets of Freirian ideas and thus enabling them to consider Freirian approaches in a more informed way.

In order to keep such an analysis within the boundaries of the NGO setting, this paper will not systematically review the full extent of Freire's work, but will rather focus on three central thematic concerns in education relevant to the development practice of SNGOs: (i) the significance of critical awareness (conscientização) as imperative to

the process of learning, (ii) the unification of action and analysis (praxis), and (iii) the centrality of dialogue in the relationship between educators and students.

Freire, Development and Empowerment

Before looking at Freirian ideas through 'SNGO lenses', it is important to discuss Freire's legacy to the broader understanding of 'development' and 'empowerment' debates, given the crucial role of SNGOs in both processes.

Freire and Development

Gareau's (1986) study of the social science indigenisation movement in the Third World draws an interesting parallel between Freire's notion of *conscientização* and the creation of the dependency theory by Latin American sociologists, given their ideological identification with Marxism. Whilst the latter took place against the background of myths imposed upon Latin America because of its dependency on developed countries, the former discusses the difficulty that Third World illiterates have in escaping from the structures which produce oppression and dependency. 'The parallel is with the banker's approach to education, the 'lectures' from the North being deposits, passively accepted in the South, there to be memorised, preserved, and filed away' (Gareau 1986:180). Latin America thus suffered from what Freire calls a 'culture of silence'.[6]

According to Blackburn (2000), 'until the buzz-word *participatory* stepped into the spotlight, it was common to describe any bottom-up or grassroots approach as *Freirian*.' He argues further that Freire's concepts such as *conscientização* and 'dialogical education' remain widely used in development circles, particularly among the more progressive SNGOs and grassroots movements throughout Latin America, Africa and Asia. Cornwall (2000) characterises the alternative Freirian approach to development as 'people's self-development', where people themselves are involved in collective action and mobilisation intended to lead to self-reliant development and the capacity to negotiate on new terms with those with power, including the state.

Inspired by Freire's alternative approach, the Participatory Action Research (PAR) movement duly emerged (Cornwall 2000). This movement placed emphasis on living with the people and working to encourage critical analysis so as to enable people to articulate their own identities and concerns, and on mobilisation through collective action (Cornwall 2000, Edwards 1989:127-128). The use of problem-posing methods to enable oppressed and marginalised people to assert their identities challenged the authority of conventional development solutions.

Within the context of this alternative participatory development paradigm, NGOs are generally regarded as fostering processes of empowerment (Titi and Singh 1995). Increasing demands for development policies committed to inclusive and participatory democracy, socially appropriate development and gender equality are often seen to be the products of NGOs in their roles both as enablers of empowerment processes at the village level, and as empowered organisations themselves.

Conscientização and Empowerment

The key to understanding Freire's liberating education is his concept of *conscientização* (Blackburn 2000). *Conscientização* can be understood as the process in which humans become more aware of the sources of their oppression. Illiterate people, for example, may not have the intellectual confidence to think critically about their situation in the world. They may be unaware that the oppression (e.g. poverty, discrimination) they suffer is not a permanent fact, but results, rather, from the operation of unjust structures and mechanisms in society which, once understood, can be changed. *Conscientização*, then, is the process by which the capacity for critical thinking by the oppressed is enhanced (Freire 1970), being the first step in achieving 'empowerment'.

However, unless there is clear thinking about 'empowerment', it is not a concept by itself with the potential to be used creatively and effectively – both analytically and in practice – to facilitate social development (Rowlands 1997). For this reason, it is important to define 'empowerment' for Freire's ideas to enable a clearer linkage with the concept of *conscientização*.

Of the many authors who have looked at the concept of empowerment, none has yet produced a universal definition. As a result, although the concept has been widely discussed, it has remained considerably broad, multi-faceted and sometimes

controversial. Hulme and Turner (1997), for example, argue that empowerment can be understood as the NGOs' objective of redistributing power at the local level so that it can benefit the poor. Friedmann (1992), with his more specific threefold framework, defines empowerment as access to social power (productive wealth), political power (decision-making processes) and psychological power (self-confidence). The approach used by gender specialists sees struggles for empowerment as taking place in the home, the state and the workplace (Sen and Grown 1988).

For Afshar (1998), empowerment is a process which cannot be done *for* people, but which instead has to be experienced by people themselves. According to Johnson (1992), the empowerment process can be seen both as imperceptible changes in consciousness and identity while achieving particular goals (self-discovery), and also as an engagement in public action (collective identity). Additionally, Rowlands (1997) sees empowerment as 'the processes that lead people to perceive themselves as able and entitled to make decisions'.

Despite the wide range of concepts that try to define 'empowerment', for the purpose of this study it will be taken as a **consequence of liberatory learning expressed as collective action that has arisen from the self-discovery of power within the praxis in which co-learners are engaged.** The theoretical basis for this process is provided by Freire's concept of ***conscientização.***

Freire's Words

We can examine the origins and key determinants of the Freirian thought from a number of different angles, such as the philosophical assumptions underlying his ideas, or his own life experience in the harsh reality of the Brazilian Northeast. For Freire, the idea of development was never to be separated from that of practice (Carmen 1998:64).[7]

Freire approached the issue of education – and by implication human development – primarily from a philosophical angle (Blackburn 2000). At the centre of Freire's world-view is his belief that humans have an ontological vocation to become more fully human. Unlike animal consciousness – fundamentally ahistorical and atemporal –

human consciousness, in Freirian thinking, is first defined by its distinctive capacity for creative thinking and, hence, by its potential capacity to transform rather than merely adapt to reality (Freire 1970). This view can be seen partly as product of the Liberation Theology movement that has emerged in Latin America (Mayo 1999).[8] Unlike traditional forms of religion, which according to Freire are fatalist and serve to preserve the *status quo* (oppression explained in terms of 'God's will'), Liberation Theology emphasises the role of human agency in the permanent struggle against oppression and social injustice.

In addition, Freire's early practical work experience as Director of the Educational and Cultural Section of SESI (a body set up by the National Confederation of Industry) for eight years, enabled him to become aware of the differences among social classes while working with fishermen, peasants, and workers. This experience, which he saw as a 'founding time' (Freire 1992), led him to develop his thinking about progressive and dialogical education as a tool to promote political consciousness. According to this idea, the learners' culture increasingly becomes the basis of the learning process, as it can be frequently observed in the development discourse. Similarities such as this between Freire's ideas and the development or NGO context lead us to discuss the usefulness, as well as the shortcomings of Freire's thought for SNGOs in terms of key and inter-related issues found in most of his writings: *conscientização*, *praxis* and dialogue.

Conscientização

The term *conscientização* was originally used by radical Catholics in the 1960s and, according to Freire, rendered popular by Archbishop Helder Câmara. It is also a term that Freire stopped using after 1974, as he felt that it had been loosely used. Yet, he never lost the sense of its significance and worked to clarify it (Mayo 1999). Freire (1970) stresses that the oppressed may have internalised the oppressors' values and thus find themselves unable, or unwilling, to think critically about their situation in the world, and what actions are open to them to improve such a situation. Hence, *conscientização* is an on-going process where people are able to step back from and reflect on their own experience.

Praxis: theory (reflection) + practice (action)

In Freire's view, any separation of the two key elements in the *praxis* process (i.e. action and reflection) is either mindless activism or empty theorising (Freire 1970). The two elements are inextricably intertwined. More than an intellectual process, *conscientização* is a dialectical process, of which an equally important component is action. In *conscientização*, action leads to further reflection, and so on, in a dialectical path of increasing liberation. Freire saw both concepts as the two sides of the same coin. This liberating action-reflection dynamic, which both results from and feeds the *conscientização* process is what Freire calls *praxis* (Blackburn 2000):

> Human activity consists of action and reflection: it is *praxis*; it is a transformation of the world. And as praxis, it requires theory to illuminate it. Human activity is theory and practice; it is reflection and action. It cannot be reduced to either verbalism or activism. (Freire 1970)

Dialogue: mutual conscientização

> Only those who listen, speak. Those who do not listen, end up merely yelling, barking out the language while imposing their ideas. (Freire 1997)

Freire's concept of dialogue requires a lot of the educator who, rather than depositing 'superior knowledge' to be passively digested, memorised, and repeated, must engage in a genuine dialogue with the participants. Not only must the educator be prepared to respect the participants' knowledge as valuable as his own, but he must also be prepared to enter into the reality of the participants' lives (Blackburn 2000). Dialogue is thus not limited to the educator-participant relationship. It also takes place between participants and the world. "Reading the world and reading the word" (Freire 1992) is therefore integral to the content of problem-posing education.

Freire (1985) argues that teachers can learn a great deal from their students from the moment they transcend the often monotonous, arrogant, and elitist traditionalism where the teacher knows all and the student does not know anything. Thus, as Freire (1993) emphasises, the improvement in the quality of education implies educators' training towards critical consciousness and dialogue.

Usefulness of Freirian issues for SNGOs

Within the context of SNGOs, the three aspects discussed above have each attracted the attention of both theorists and practitioners. As Rahman (1995) observes, the idea of *conscientização* influenced the philosophical vision of many grassroots programmes working towards a development view, seen as the release of people's creativity. This view opposes the conventional notion of development, which considers economic growth as a measure of progress in the economy's ability to satisfy the consumption needs of the society, or as progress towards satisfaction of underprivileged people's basic needs.

This process towards *conscientização* helps to bring to the surface the historical forces in society that shape the social context and peoples' own way of thinking. Community group processes are increasingly finding empowerment in self-direction, and in having a voice in demanding citizen rights and social justice. In sum, the key 'to achieve critical consciousness is to engage in authentic transformation of reality in order, by humanising the reality, to humanise women and men' (Freire 1970).

As for the discussion on *praxis*, Freire (1997) argues that theory is always secondary and is only important when it is in the service of something larger. Over the years, projects have become essential steps along a community group process of action and reflection, and no longer an end in themselves. According to O'Gorman (1995), most of the popular alternatives of the past two to three decades have failed, largely because of a lack of coordination among the researchers (who make profound macro-economic and social diagnoses), the technical personnel (who prepare social and economic development projects), and the facilitators (who work with the projects) in the communities. Thus, alternatives must develop from multi-disciplinary research, merging the concerns and evaluations of the excluded with those of the professionals, linking popular education with development projects, and identifying micro-level conditions of production/work/living with structures sustained at a macro-level.

Hulme (1994) argues that Freire's notion of *praxis* can be observed in the increasingly blurred boundaries between academic research and NGO action. While academics are found advising NGOs, taking jobs with NGOs or setting up their own NGOs, some practitioners have oscillated between periods in the field and periods of study and reflection. Similarly, the notion of *praxis* enhances the understanding of

'participation', since people cannot have a voice or exercise the right to participate consciously in the socio-historical transformation of their society apart from the reflection-action process (Freire 1985).

As far as *dialogue* is concerned, in the context of popular education as the generator of people's own existential knowledge, facilitators have become sharers of a struggle for rights and social transformation, and co-learners with communities. 'It is the facilitator's responsibility to carry the community struggle to other levels of society – especially to project funders – consistently and coherently, without losing touch with the base community, in order to influence the wider transformation of society' (O'Gorman 1995). As members of SNGOs, they stand for civil society, becoming part of social movements, always redefining their own SNGO role in dynamic interrelationship with the excluded.

Within the concept of dialogue lies the importance of recognising popular knowledge. Sefa Dei (1995) reinforces this view by arguing that if the idea of development is to have any credibility at all we must speak to the social, spiritual, cultural, economic, political and cosmological needs and understandings of local peoples. What is needed is the legitimation of an indigenous knowledge base to break the conventional discourse on development. Perhaps facilitators interested in alternative knowledge systems and the liberating potential of transformatory learning can lead the way and create conducive environments for the introduction, interrogation, and validation of these systems in the development discourse.

Shortcomings of Freire's ideas for SNGOs

Criticism has always been an important dialogical element of Freire's work, be it hostile, ambiguous, ill-informed, constructive or even auto-critique (Kane 2001). Hence, it is important to examine the critique arisen from the development arena, specifically those concerning the notions of *conscientização, praxis* and dialogue. New methodologies of interaction inspired by the *conscientização* approach initially created waves of enthusiasm and hope, mainly amongst field workers engaged in grassroots activities (Rahnema 1992). In this context, the notion of empowerment was intended to provide development with a new source of legitimacy. Yet, in practice, there is little evidence to indicate that the participatory approach, as it evolved, did, as a rule, succeed in bringing about new forms of people's power.

Instead, with the growing popularity of mainstream participatory development, more radical thinking and action toward *empowerment* and *liberation* of the people is becoming marginalised and even being co-opted by development agencies (Rahman 1995). Hence, *conscientização* exercises have not always led, in practice, to the types of dialogical interaction persistently advocated by Freire. Further, although many SNGOs acknowledge the theoretical relevance of adopting a *conscientização* approach, it is perceived by some as a strategy which may be difficult to sustain in practice for two main reasons:

(i) The poor may be unwilling to invest efforts in dialogical processes with longer-term objectives

According to Hulme (1994), SNGOs claim to be able to address poverty through the processes of '*conscientização*', 'empowerment' and 'social transformation'. However, their day-to-day work provides evidence that the poor have considerable pressures on their time to meet more urgent needs. Hence, combining income generating and service delivery projects with consciousness-raising initiatives seems to respond to both short and long term objectives. But here lies the contradiction. Whilst income-generating activities and service delivery may improve poor people's lives in a sense, they may confuse consciousness-raising activities with profit maximisation, competition among the poor, reducing group solidarity and turning oppressed into oppressors within the same group (Hulme 1994). Moreover, it can remove the poor from the decision-making process as they become merely beneficiaries or 'objects'. This ambiguity leads us to question whether it is feasible to promote an agenda that reconciles SNGOs' political and service delivery roles.

(ii) Freirian-oriented approaches can be potentially threatening due to their political nature

From the mid-1970s onwards many Bangladeshi NGOs such as Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee and Gono Shahajjo Sangstha adopted Freire's notion of *conscientização* as the integral principle of organising the poor (Hashemi and Hassan 1999). Such SNGO participation in the transformation of local power structures was perceived by the state as subversive and challenging, leading the state to respond with violence, arrests and threats of revoking SNGO licences. As a response, SNGOs replaced their previous model of class struggle for a model of class harmony,

adopting a new paradigm in which donors are appeased, the state is not threatened and SNGOs gain legitimacy as development agents. Nonetheless, this has created a situation where old conscientising visions of radical transformations have given way to new donor-supported visions of making the prevailing system more accountable. In this context, the relevant question becomes the extent to which Freire's ideas are still relevant for SNGOs.

Blackburn (2000) also criticises two assumptions that underpin Freire's self-proclaimed ideological neutrality: (i) that the oppressed have no power and that an outsider (Freirian educator) possesses the magic bullet that will automatically empower them; and (ii) that the secret formula of *conscientização* is universally applicable, regardless of the cultural or religious context of the population that is perceived as oppressed. According to this view, the inappropriate imposition of a certain vision of power on people who may not perceive themselves as powerless or may not want to be empowered in the way that is being prescribed, is a problematic issue which Freire underestimates.

As for the importance of the interactions between action and reflection (*praxis*) in the SNGO context, Hulme (1994) points to the existing tension between development 'researchers' and 'practitioners', the latter accusing the former of having few theories that have practical value, as they are not fully aware of the real world where SNGOs operate.

In relation to dialogue, given the lack of Southern organisational examples found in the literature, the experience of NNGOs will serve as proxy to potential problems that SNGOs might face. For the REFLECT experience, dialogue proved to be extremely difficult to establish when teachers faced their role from the technical or methodological perspective, failing to link the learning experience to local development issues or social change. 'Learners feel ashamed, annoyed or simply bored. Many drop out and others struggle on but fail to learn because reading and writing is not meaningfully related to their lives' (ActionAid 1996). In Uganda, although higher and more vocal attendance at village meetings was reported, it was the facilitators who were taking up positions of responsibility rather than participants. As Blackburn (2000) argues, Freire failed to address the possibility that educators or facilitators may be unable (or even unwilling) to restrain the oppressor within them,

and may consequently misuse their position to manipulate those over which they (potentially) have so much power.

Additionally, external activists who have adopted Freire's ideas have been frequently accused of a tendency to manipulate the oppressed and to impose their own ideological frameworks (Rahnema 1992). One example is the hidden agenda behind the Summer School of Linguistics, a North American evangelical sect active in indigenous communities in Chiapas, Mexico. The organisation has launched Freirian literacy programmes using phonemic transcriptions of the various indigenous languages in the area. However, literacy classes are followed by Bible readings (in the local language), in which the educator (missionary) prescribes or 'deposits' a particular world-view to which the participants must accept. With such practices in mind, Rahnema (1992) questions the extent to which dialogical methods really succeed in halting the processes of domination, manipulation and colonisation of the mind.

The world of the SNGOs

This section presents brief case studies of three NGOs in Brazil, along with stakeholder perceptions of their educational approach to development work.

The emergence of local NGOs in Brazil

The notion of community-based development entered Brazil in the 1940s through a meeting of international organisations and national policy interested in the expansion of capitalism and modernisation in rural areas, inducing the people to incorporate the changes that were being dictated by the government. Thus, this orthodox view represented an uncritical ideological instrument that did not question or contest the existing power structures, but rather reproduced and strengthened them (O'Gorman 1995). In the 1960s, with the support of the Catholic Church through the Liberation Theology movement, development practitioners and theorists began to realise that it was not enough to overcome obstacles to economic development and to integrate the poor into a system that was simply benefiting the top of society. It was when concepts like Freire's *conscientização* strengthened community experiences, in their

reflection on their actions, leading grassroots groups and local NGOs to become aware of how they were being marginalised by socio-economic, political and cultural forces.

However, Freire's ideas were seen by the state as subversive during the military dictatorship in Brazil (1964-1984), turning out to be a 'taboo subject' within the local NGO context. This phenomenon led Brazilian NGOs to a similar trajectory of the Bangladeshi NGOs, namely that of orienting their activities towards a 'partnership approach', in collaboration with the state and the market, rather than against them.

SNGOs' political-pedagogical guidelines

Despite the tendency towards harmony among the different sectors described above, it seems that a number of SNGOs are attempting to reconcile this model with Freire's principles due to a revival of interest in his ideas arisen from the current 'empowerment' and 'participation' discourses. Interestingly, an analysis of the SNGOs' educational principles allowed me to identify conceptual similarities in their political-pedagogical proposals in terms of *conscientização*, dialogue and *praxis*.

Case 1: Centro Popular de Cultura e Desenvolvimento (CPCD), State of Minas Gerais

CPCD's (2001) educational activities are supported by three main principles:

- innovative methodology
- educators' training
- community participation

The organisation's **methodology** originated from the conviction that education can only happen collectively and that the generation of opportunities for the disadvantaged groups results in development. It seeks to (a) search innovative and creative forms of popular education and community-based sustainable development; (b) make use of the participants' popular knowledge as the raw material for their pedagogical activities; and (c) build up dialogue as a means of generating new educational practices. These objectives are implemented through their locally developed methodologies: *pedagogia da roda* (pedagogy of the circle), *pedagogia do brinquedo* (pedagogy of the toy) and *pedagogia do sabão* (pedagogy of the soap).

Since the collaboration of competent, committed and well-trained educators is indispensable for the success of CPCD's projects, **educators' training** is highly valued by the organisation. Through an on-going process of training and evaluation, educators are constantly encouraged to provoke social change, create new learning opportunities, and promote solidarity and citizenship. More importantly, projects' participants – children, youth, educators and community members – are not seen merely as beneficiaries or objects of CPCD's interest, but as subjects, actively engaged in all the projects' stages. This approach to **community participation** leads to participatory decision-making processes, projects' ownership and generation of new popular technologies.

Case 2: Comitê para Democratização da Informática (CDI), Rio de Janeiro

CDI operates in Rio de Janeiro. Through non-formal educational activities, CDI combines information technology and citizenship lessons, enabling participants to reflect about their own existence and position in society, while revisiting prejudices and adopting a critical attitude towards the world. According to CDI's political-pedagogical proposal (NIED 2001), an educational process in which knowledge (i.e. information technology skills) and the notion of citizenship are inter-related is crucial if *conscientização* is to be achieved.

The *Pedagogia de Projetos* (pedagogy of projects) was then developed as a pedagogical methodology that values the active participation of both educators and participants in the learning process, rendering them responsible for the development of projects as a group. Each project consists of learning a specific computer skill (e.g. Word, Excel, Power Point, Internet) through the design, development and implementation of a community project (e.g. solid waste management, unemployment). As part of this methodology, the educator is expected to participate in the entire educational process, rather than follow an imposed curriculum. The participants, too, are actively engaged in the projects, as the topics to be discussed are selected by the group according to their specific problems and interpretations of reality. As a result, each project is intended to be implemented at the community-level.

In sum, CDI's Pedagogy of Projects aims at four main goals while reconciling information technology and citizenship: **dialogue** between educators and participants, **knowledge about local realities**, **reflection** and **intervention**. Similarly to CPCD's view of education as a collective process, these objectives are only achieved through the collaboration among educators, participants, local organisations which host the courses and the broader community.

Case 3: Grupo Cultural Afro Reggae (GCAR), Rio de Janeiro

GCAR started from the practice, according to local needs, rather than from a concern to apply theoretical methodologies or 'discourses', given that its founding members did not come from the academic world (GCAR 2001). However, since 1998 the organisation has been engaged in a **reflection process** of its educational practice, and as a result it has published the guidelines to its educational practice, closely connected to principles of 'popular education'.

For GCAR, education is regarded as a permanent process, which is not limited to specific courses or formal school calendar. It should be context-based, referring to the participants' reality and their position in society within a context of economic inequalities and social exclusion. Hence, methodology must be coherent to people's needs, expectations and potentials, respecting local values and knowledge, and recognising local groups as actors of their own learning (GCAR 2001). Also, as a holistic approach in which both personal and social development are enhanced, the educational process must lead both to individual autonomy and collective social change.

In order to achieve this type of educational practice, GCAR's pedagogical experience is based on the following elements:

- Target group – **marginalised** slum dwellers in Rio de Janeiro (primary), and people from middle and upper classes involved in the NGO's work (secondary)
- **Dialogical relationship** between educators and participants
- Recognition of **popular knowledge**
- Education for **social transformation**
- Education based on the **practice**

The approaches employed by the three NGOs are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1:

A summary of the different methodologies used by the case study NGOs

COMMON FREIRE INSPIRED ISSUES FOUND IN THE THREE SNGOS VISITED	
Conscientização	• Reflection on the participants' position in society • Critical attitude towards the *status quo*
Dialogue	• Dialogical relationship between educators and participants • Respect for and use of local values and knowledge
Praxis	• Reflection followed by action

NGO Management: to follow Freire not following him

According to CDI's management, Freire's ideas have been present in their methodology from the very beginning, as their objective was to do something 'alternative' to a standard information technology school. By offering training, technical support and establishing links with local grassroots organisations, CDI's organisational goals of enhancing community self-esteem and income generation are being achieved through the establishment of self-managed Information Technology and Citizenship Schools. CDI's political-pedagogical proposal was developed with the external support from an academic research centre from the renowned UNICAMP (Campinas University). GCAR, too, developed its political-pedagogical guidelines with the support of a member of its Board who is a researcher and practitioner in the fields of popular education and social movements.

By contrast, CPCD's methodology seems to have been fully idealised by its founder-president, Tião Rocha, who defines himself as an anthropologist by academic background, popular educator by political choice and folklorist by necessity. According to him, all that CPCD does is to *'paulofreirear'* (in Portugese, transforming 'Paulo Freire' into a verb). Even CPCD's co-operative, where youth from 16 years old

onwards produce and commercialise local products, adopts the same political-pedagogical principles as the children's popular education projects. Despite the many visitors that they constantly receive, very few come from the academic sphere.

An interesting commonality identified in all three NGOs was the forceful statement that they do not follow Freire's methodology literally, but rather incorporate some Freirian issues to their 'own' methodology.

NGO Educators

According to a CPCD educator who used to teach in a primary school previously, to be a popular educator is a very different experience: 'In the project I am always trying to invent new things.' Regarding the training workshop she had recently taken part of, she said: 'I thought that they would teach us how to make games, but then they were the ones who asked us to invent them!'

Another CPCD educator in a rural village stressed that when her group started (four to six years old children) they did not know how to talk to each other, since they rarely have dialogue opportunities at home. The parents usually tell them what to do, frequently using violence. Now, in the 'morning circle', they come up with issues of their interest and discuss them as a group. For example, 'if a child tells the group that her chicken has laid an egg, the whole group visits the chicken and listens to the chicken's story'. She also asserted that the whole community participates in the project meetings, as even those who do not have children in the project eventually participate giving their personal contributions. For example, local storytellers or artists share their popular knowledge with the children, enabling them to discover parts of their own history.

It was also interesting to notice the educators' perception about the relationship between Freire's ideas and their day-to-day practice. As a CPCD project co-ordinator stated: 'when Tião mentions Paulo Freire during our training workshops, I ask him – who is Paulo Freire? – and he answers – Paulo Freire is what you are doing.' Another CPCD educator said that she knows how to do her work in practice, but that 'theory is with the co-ordination'. She also mentioned that some of her colleagues had been advised to read *Professora Sim Tia Não (1993)*, one of Freire's books written in the form of letters addressed to educators.

According to a GCAR co-ordinator and former participant, when he was a kid, his only entertainment was to run carrying a piece of wood, imitating the drug dealers carrying their guns. But today, he argues, the slum kids see in the Afro Reggae Cultural Centre better perspectives for having a proper life.

Formal School Teachers

At the formal school, those children and youth who participate in CPCD's popular education projects are immediately recognised by the teachers, as they usually behave differently from their colleagues. The fact that these students do not accept everything that is 'deposited' during the lessons, questioning and suggesting new ways of doing things, is perceived both as good and bad, since they challenge the existing structures. The more progressive teachers tend to consider them as good role models for their colleagues due to their creativity, self-confidence and freedom. However, the more conservative teachers tend to feel threatened, particularly because the children's unexpected attitudes demand much more flexibility and creativity from the educator, as students don't sit quietly and still anymore. For example, a typical complaint is that children go to the bathroom without asking for permission. 'Some teachers get angry because they realise that they will have to work harder' (personal communication, CPCD educator). For CPCD, such critiques are perceived as satisfactory, as the organisations' aim is precisely to promote such changes in the participants' behaviour.

Beneficiaries (mainly children and youth)

> What changed in my life is that now I enjoy hugging and kissing people, of which I felt embarrassed before (CPCD participant)

The children were already working in small groups when I arrived at one CPCD project. The first group was reading a story in a circle. The other, also in a circle, was inventing a song. And the third group was happily cleaning the kitchen. After finishing their activities, they all met in the big circle to evaluate the results and to welcome the visitors with curious questions such as 'What did you like most about us?', 'What are you here for?' or 'Are there animals where you live?'[9]

According to a GCAR participant, who is also an educator for smaller children, the NGO's work at the *Vigário Geral* slum represents the possibility of not entering the drug traffic, formerly the only income generating option for slum children and youth. Through their participation in GCAR projects, they have access to information, training and even to the formal school through partnerships between GCAR and both public and private schools. Not to mention those who become professional artists, as the participants of the Afro-Reggae Band, which has recently recorded its first CD.

CDI also has interesting cases of the benefits brought to participants of their information technology and citizenship schools. One CDI female participant, who used to be a domestic servant of a middle-class family, has been employed as administrative assistant of the family business as they realised that she had acquired computer skills.

Families

According to a mother of two CPCD participants with whom I accidentally met, the fact that her children spent half of the day at the project enabled her to work knowing that they were being 'well looked at'. Also, according to a CPCD co-ordinator, it is not uncommon to hear parents saying that since their child entered the project, all their family conflicts started being discussed and sorted out in 'the circle', like the children do in the project, 'just because this is the best way to do so' (CPCD participant).

Donors

Recently, CPCD went through a difficult situation with one of its donors, who attempted to re-conceptualise CPCD's work principles in order to fit them into one of their programmes. However, CPCD refused to accept such an imposition, leaving them to decide whether they still wished to have the NGO as a partner under CPCD's conditions. As a result, the donor accepted their conditions, adjusting its programmes according to CPCD's objectives and not the other way around.

Reading Freire's Words in the SNGOs' World

Reconciling 'conscientização' and service delivery

Authors such as O'Gorman (1995) and Hulme (1994) question whether it is feasible for NGOs to use a multi-faceted approach, encompassing goals of empowerment (*conscientização*) through self-help projects (service delivery), given the existing tension between the macro-level concern with more just socio-economic relationships and the micro-level communities' felt needs.

As stated previously, both types of activities can be inherently contradictory, for service delivery can result in 'anti-*conscientização*', while encouraging competition among beneficiaries for income generation or treating them merely as passive aid recipients (Hulme 1994). In addition, since NGOs depend on donors whose interest is in concrete, measurable and time-bound applications and outcomes, rather than in the open-endedness of community conscientising processes (O'Gorman 1995), they tend to concentrate their efforts on a centralised form of service delivery. Interestingly, however, one common feature observed in the three SNGOs visited was precisely that all carry out both service delivery and political-pedagogical activities simultaneously. And here I argue that such an approach carries both opportunities and challenges.

As observed during the field visits, service delivery is not organised in a top-down manner, as the income generating initiatives are self-managed, enhancing collective project ownership. Also, given that these activities are collective (e.g. CPCD's co-operative of regional products manufacturing; CDI's information technology and citizenship schools) competitiveness is not encouraged since the collective benefits depend on the individual success of each group member. In sum, conscientising and service delivery activities can be reconciled provided that action is designed and implemented according to the principles of *conscientização*. As Freire (1992) puts it, to assume that critical perception of reality implies its automatic transformation is naive idealism. Rather, *conscientização* is a dialectical process of which reflection and action are equally important.

However, the challenges highlighted by Hulme (1994) cannot be underestimated as they can be threatening for the NGOs' political-pedagogical goals. Unfortunately,

more subjective intra-community aspects such as competitiveness, jealousy and oppression among the oppressed could not be explored due to time limitations. Nevertheless, behind the amazing examples of participants who became role models at their communities such as the leader of the Afro Reggae Band, who became a professional artist, or CDI's participants who have been employed by renowned information technology corporations, competitiveness and sabotage can arise. Moreover, donors can exert pressure against long-term *conscientização* processes given their less visible and immediate outcomes. It is the NGO's role to minimise this kind of risk through a well-balanced approach to *conscientização* in addition to service delivery, giving both tangible and intangible benefits equal value.

Recontextualising Freire

According to Mayo (1999), Freire's approach can find fertile ground in a variety of contexts. Rather than a set of universal techniques, it requires sensitivity towards the issues of oppression that are specific to the socio-cultural context in question. In this respect, it is convenient to recall this paper's opening quotation, in which Freire warns that his ideas must be reinvented and cannot be transplanted. It is, then, a question of adapting the approach, rather than adopting it literally.

However, given the political nature of Freire's ideas, such an adaptation can represent a real challenge for SNGOs, as was the case for the Bangladeshi Freirian-oriented NGOs (Hashemi and Hassan 1999). Political confrontation between these SNGOs and the state induced them to move towards more mechanical service delivery based on the mainstream participatory development paradigm, relegating 'threatening' Freirian issues to the discourse level. Although this process has been named by the related literature as 'co-option' by the state and in some cases by development agencies, the mistake can lie on the SNGOs' 'reinvention' strategy.

If on the one hand Freire's writings are based on a political context where 'class struggle' prevailed, on the other, they must not be frozen over time, as history is an unfinished changing process. As Freire (1997) puts it:

   To reinvent Freire means to accept my proposal of viewing history as a possibility …This so-called Freirian educator, if he or she truly wants to understand me, must also go beyond reading *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. It seems to me that many

educators who claim to be Freirian are only referring to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which was published almost thirty years ago, as if that is the first and the last work that I wrote. My thinking has been evolving and I have been constantly learning from others throughout the world … The minute you freeze history, or ideas, you also eclipse the possibility of creativity and undermine the possibility of the development of a political project.

For example, the globalisation wave led today's technological advances and explanations to be condemned for their exclusionary nature, while they could be taken advantage of. According to Freire (1995), technological advances must be subordinated to other values, especially those of co-operation and human solidarity. The market should be subordinated to citizenship, and not the other way around. CDI's success lies precisely in using information technology as a means to achieve citizenship with the support of corporations and other national and international donors. CDI did not freeze the 'class struggle' paradigm, but rather went beyond it for the sake of social transformation.

The fact that the SNGOs visited are increasingly adopting a 'class harmony' paradigm does not necessarily entail their co-option by either the state or donors. Rather, it can be interpreted as a new way of achieving their goals of challenging the existing unequal social structures by 'co-opting' those in power (e.g. CPCD's negative attitude towards donor pressure), increasing their accountability upwards (state and private donors), while maintaining their accountability downwards (community where they operate). The challenge of being co-opted may turn into an opportunity of challenging the existing power structures by incorporating *conscientização* into less threatening approaches, rather than through direct confrontation. For example, working with children and youth, as the SNGOs visited do, can have a trickle-down effect at the household level, which in turn can influence people's attitudes towards themselves and the world, as was the case for CPCD. The challenge, then, is to wisely seize the opportunity of reinventing Freire in the present context of social alliances, or why not of 'dialogue' between the NGO, governmental and private sectors, rather than insisting on confrontation and class struggle.

Tension between Theoretical and Practical Relevance of Freire for SNGOs

Freire forcefully insisted on the importance of consistency between what is said and what is done, which relates to his discussions on *praxis*:

> Thought and study alone did not produce *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*; it is rooted in concrete situations and describes the reactions of labourers (peasant and urban) and of middle-class persons whom I have observed directly or indirectly during the course of my educative work (Freire 1970).

Since this paper is concerned with his own ideas applied to the SNGO context, it becomes of extreme importance to analyse the consistency between their theoretical and practical relevance for SNGOs.

A common critique to Freire's works is the inaccessibility of the language he uses. This critique refers particularly to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which arguably limits its usefulness for grassroots-based organisations both theoretically and practically. As a result, the adoption or rejection of Freire's thought rarely derives from a direct reading of his work, being more the result of an oral culture, where ideas are becoming ever more blurred in the process. However, this challenge hides an opportunity, namely that of going beyond *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, discovering Freire's later works where he adopts a more applied approach, not loosing the sense of complexity of his ideas.

Despite these difficulties, all three SNGOs found their own ways of accessing and translating Freire's ideas as the conceptual basis of their political-pedagogical guidelines, particularly in terms of *conscientização* and dialogue. While CDI and GCAR sought outside support to design their political-pedagogical principles, CPCD's originated from its founder-president's experience both as academic and practitioner in the education field. Although these SNGOs are regarded as 'good practices' in their respective fields, it must be said that some degree of inconsistency exists.

GCAR's practice-based action, for example, found in Freirian principles useful elements that helped the organisation evaluate its practice as successful, as the practice has matched the theory in many senses. However, it seems that the theory

(Freirian thought) has been used merely as a means to legitimate the success of GCAR's activities, rather than as a learning tool for future action. Although the organisation considers this practice without much theorising as a limitation still to be overcome, the prevalence of practice over the 'discourse' is regarded as the guarantee for GCAR's success: 'Discourse is not needed. The way the participants react, reorganise the group and divide activities are more important than any word' (GCAR 2001). Such a contradiction, I suspect, is a common result of SNGOs lack of access to Freire's thought in a more applied manner.

Another issue that has been widely discussed is the so-called 'pseudo-Freirian education', where the technique (e.g. literacy skills) prevails over the idea of political liberation given that teachers are just ordinary people, and not the ideal envisaged by Freire (Kane 2001). However, according to my experience with a number of CPCD's educators and staff members, although those people were in fact just ordinary people, they possessed many of the characteristics and skills that, perhaps unconsciously, are turning the projects' participants into full citizens. They are humble, proud of their local culture, and extremely well qualified through CPCD's on-going training workshops, which enables them to continually reflect upon their action in constructive ways. Some need to ride a horse or walk for hours under the hot sun of the *Vale do Jequitinhonha* in order to visit a school or a project. And instead of complaining about it, they come back enthusiastic about the fascinating sunset they saw on their way back (CPCD, personal communication).[10]

Final Reflections

Paulo Freire has provided an important conceptual tapestry for SNGOs' discourse and practice, particularly in a context where 'participation' and 'empowerment' are increasingly shaping the new development paradigm. Although Freire's ideas can be misused, their contribution may enable oppressed people, development practitioners and theorists to positively change their perception of and attitude towards life. As an attempt to enable helpful interpretations of Freire's thought for SNGOs, this paper's concern was to bring a constructive critical perspective of Freire's applicability to SNGOs, highlighting its opportunities and challenges. Key conclusions are summarised in Table 2.

NGO Management implications

The work of Paulo Freire has provided practitioners with a working praxis that can be interpreted at the grassroots level (Popple 2000:677). However, they need to be clear about what they can and want to achieve if Freire's concepts are to be useful. If wisely interpreted, the Freirian philosophy can enable SNGOs to become learning organisations, for which participation, empowerment, willingness to embrace change and the acknowledgement of grassroots experience are key principles (Britton 1998).

Thus, Freire's ideas can help SNGOs overcome learning disabilities such as dependence on external funding which do not prioritise learning, hierarchical structures run by traditional charismatic leadership and the mentality that learning and action are separate things (Britton 1998, Senge 1997). Further, the Freirian concepts discussed in this dissertation can enhance (i) the understanding and usage of 'empowerment' by SNGOs, as *conscientização* is seen as the conceptual basis for empowerment, the operational element of *praxis*, and (ii) SNGOs' strategic planning in terms of awareness of their own position and mission in the communities where they operate.

Policy implications

There is today a wide agreement about the importance of discovering and implementing a more equitable and ethical approach to development, rather than promoting its existing forms and models (O'Gorman 1995). In this sense, Freire's ideas offer SNGOs an opportunity to represent grassroots-level initiatives and interests at the policy level through pilot projects that might be too risky or challenging for governments at first. Given SNGOs' smaller-scale action, their role is about innovation and subsequent mainstreaming and multiplication, scaling up their good practices.[11] Otherwise, SNGO successes remain islands of excellence in a wider economic and institutional environment which is detrimental to disadvantaged groups. For instance, CPCD's methodology is being gradually adopted by public primary schools and nurseries as it proved to be successful at a smaller-scale.

Table 2: Summary of conclusions

	Conscientização	**Dialogue**	*Praxis*
Opportuni-ties	• Self-managed and sustainable initiatives • Enhanced understanding and use of 'empowerment'	• Alliances between the three sectors • Horizontal management structure • Equal participation of educators and participants • Project ownership	• Learning by reflecting upon action (virtuous cycle) • Enhanced use of 'participation' • Constructive relationship between researchers and practitioners • Discovery of Freire's later works
Challenges	• Co-option by the state and donors • Misinterpretation of Freire's ideas • Imbalance between conscientising and service delivery activities	• Political confrontation • Quality and frequency of educators' training • "Culture of silence"	• Lack of consistency between theory and practice • Inaccessibility of Freire's language • Exclusive focus on action.

In conclusion, it is clear that Freire's ideas are in a sense 'double-edged' for NGOs, since they are potentially either beneficial or harmful depending on the ways in which they are interpreted and implemented. This paper has raised a number of opportunities and challenges that must be taken into account by those SNGOs interested in enriching their discourse and practice through Freirian thought in consistent ways.

Appendix: Useful websites

The list of websites below might be useful for those interested in further information about the SNGOs mentioned in this work, as well as Paulo Freire and his legacy:

On the SNGOs discussed in this paper

- http://www.cpcd.org.br (*Centro Popular de Cultura e Desenvolvimento*)
- http://changemakers.net/journal/99november/walbran.cfm (CPCD)
- http://www.cdi.org.br (*Comitê para Democratização da Informática*)
- http://www.changemakers.net/journal/00may/hart.cfm (CDI)
- http://www.afroreggae.org.br (*Grupo Cultural Afro Reggae*)
- http://www.changemakers.net/journal/98july/mylan.cfm (GCAR)
- http://www.paulofreire.org (*Instituto Paulo Freire*)

On Paulo Freire

- http://www.perfectfit.org/CT/freire1.html
- http://www.infed.org/thinkers/et-freir.htm
- http://www.paulofreire.org

Freire inspired programmes

- http://www.learningforaction.cjb.net
- http://www.imagemagica.com.br

Notes

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2. For a thorough review of Paulo Freire's life and work, see Gadotti, M. (1994) *Reading Paulo Freire: his life and work.* Albany: State University of New York Press.

3. The present popularity of NGOs is not based on a systematic evaluation of project results but on the wide, though uncritical, acceptance of certain ideas and practices (Galjart 1995). However, this discussion goes beyond the scope of this study.

4. Note that 'NGO' refers both to NNGOs and SNGOs.

5. A new approach to adult literacy developed by the NNGO ActionAid, which fuses the theory of Paulo Freire and the practice of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA). REFLECT conceives literacy as something which people can use on their own terms to explore, develop and apply their existing knowledge or skills, serving as a catalyst for local development based on people's own agenda (ActionAid 1996).

6. 'In the culture of silence the masses are mute, that is, they are prohibited from creatively taking part in the transformations of their society and therefore prohibited from being. Even if they can occasionally read and write because they were "taught" in humanitarian – but not humanist – literacy campaigns, they are nevertheless alienated from the power responsible for their silence' (Freire 1985)

7. Freire was born in in 1921 in Recife, in the state of Pernambuco, one of the most impoverished regions in Brazil. Although born into a middle-class family, he came to experience hunger during his childhood, which impacted his later work.

8. During the twenty years of military repression in Brazil, the Church provided the space and support for the poor to come together, both to carry out small projects to improve their living conditions, and to discover how to analyse society.

9. An anthropologist who was carrying out an impact assessment work for CPCD, a member of CPCD staff and myself.

10. The Jequitinhonha Valley is one of Brazil's poorest regions, located in the northeast of Minas Gerais state, and one of the regions where CPCD operate.

11. An increase in the impact of grassroots organisations and their programs (Uvin 1995)

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