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HOW THE ELITE CAPTURE CRITIQUE IS USED TO LEGITIMISE TOP-DOWN CONTROL OF DEVELOPMENT RESOURCES

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Introduction

Community-Driven Development (CDD) and other bottom-up approaches empower poor communities with control over project resources (Dongier et al., 2003), but they are criticised for their vulnerability to elite capture (Jean-Philippe Platteau, 2004). Elite capture largely refers to the phenomena of local

elites leveraging superior political and economic status to usurp the benefits of community development and decentralisation programmes that transfer control over public goods to lower-level governance structures (Bardhan & Mookherjee, 2006; Dasgupta & Beard, 2007; Kusumawati & Visser, 2016; J-P. Platteau & Abraham, 2002). Lower-level governance structures are widely assumed to be more susceptible to elite capture because of greater opportunities for collusion (Bardhan & Mookherjee, 2005; Dutta, 2009).

Some critical authors note, however, that development interventions can be understood in terms of political and normative struggles that determine resource flows and socially constructed notions of development (Long, 2003, p. 41). The elite capture debate is a site of one of these struggles—development institutions are reluctant to relinquish control over the conditions in which development projects are implemented (Bornstein et al., 2006, pp. 4–8; Chambers, 2010), and development researchers explicitly employ the elite capture critique to legitimise top-down control over development resources (Classen et al., 2008; D'Exelle, 2009; Fox, 2020; Kusumawati & Visser, 2016; Lawson, 2011; Mansuri & Rao, 2003; Jean-Philippe Platteau, 2004; J-P. Platteau & Abraham, 2002; Ward et al., 2018; Sam Wong, 2010).

According to Bourdieu, our worldviews emerge from historical struggles over symbolic and material power and lead us to experience arbitrary social power relations as justified and even necessary (Pierre Bourdieu, 1977, pp. 80–82). Symbolic power imposes classification systems that legitimise structures of domination (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; p. 13), and it thereby operates on our pre-reflective ‘commonsense’ understanding of the world: ‘below the level of calculation and even consciousness’ one falls into acceptance of arbitrary power relations without taking into account the coincidence between our dispositions and position (Pierre Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 128). Bourdieu’s thinking appears relevant because our *disposition* toward the elite capture critique frequently aligns with our *position* in the power struggle. Development researchers and practitioners identify elite capture as the central problem in bottom-up development approaches (Casey, 2018; Duchoslav, 2013; Fox, 2020), while the participants of development projects see many of these alleged instances of elite capture as unproblematic or even pro-social behaviour (Beath et al., 2011; Conning & Kevane, 2002; Khatun et al., 2015; Kita, 2019; Mawomo, 2019, p. 340; Jean-Philippe Platteau, 2004, 2009; Rao & Ibáñez, 2005).

In this chapter, we investigate the pertinence and use of the notion of elite capture. This is a fraught exercise because we are vulnerable to reaffirming symbols and entrenched power relations when we consider issues of empowerment and capture, as we tend to see them within frameworks that legitimise the existing relations of domination. For example, when development institutions capture development resources and decision-making powers, it’s generally considered a necessity of good project management, but when local elites capture them, it’s often considered to be ‘pernicious’ graft that aggravates oppressive social hierarchies (Andersson et al., 2018; Jean-Philippe Platteau, 2004). On the

other side of the elite capture debate, the project participants' acceptance of elite capture could also emerge from the internalisation of symbolic power that legitimises arbitrary power relations within the villages. Bourdieu's reflexive approach challenges us to be aware of how symbolic power has shaped the pre-reflective framework of our thinking.

To appreciate the pertinence of the elite capture critique, we investigate the origin and form of the concept and debate in development practice and science, being cognisant of the historical struggle over material and symbolic power as elaborated by Bourdieu. Besides this general historical analysis of the elite capture critique, we also highlight issues forwarded in the literature that show flaws of the mainstream conceptualisation, which needs to be considered for a more nuanced and context-specific analysis. Our contribution to the debate is to show how the problematisation of elite capture in the mainstream development discourse is a form of symbolic power that legitimises arbitrary power relations between international development institutions and rural communities in the Global South.

How elite capture is understood and used

The emergence of the concept of elite capture

Throughout its evolution, the elite capture critique has functioned as a form of symbolic power that legitimises centralised forms of governance over rural areas. Bardhan and Mookherjee (2000) peg the origins of the elite capture critique to Federalist Paper No.10—the USA's founding fathers wrote the Federalist Papers to lobby for the adoption of a national constitution (Miller, 1988). The notion of elite capture later emerged in the Global South when the colonialists used it to justify their policies of extracting wealth from agricultural producers in the Global South (Li, 2007, p. 35; Spurr, 1993, p. 77). The centralised authority's struggle against local elites appeared again in the post-colonial states. Boone's (1998) comparative analysis of local institutions in Senegal, Cote d'Ivoire, and Ghana shows how post-colonial institutions were shaped by the national government's struggle with rural elites to capture the agricultural surplus generated by small farmers, in order to nurture the development of urban/industrial sectors of the economy. Boone (2003) and le Meur (1999) argue that for nascent central governments the underlying goal of 'rural development' was to extract agricultural surplus. The decentralisation debate (from 1985 to the present day) is also characterised by this same struggle over rural surplus between the government and local elites (Boone, 2003).

The concern about elite capture appeared in international development when Holdcroft (1978) wrote about its emergence in community development in the 1950s. The elite capture critique rose to prominence in development studies as a response to the decentralisation debate and bottom-up development approaches; see Figures 5.1 and 5.2. Argawal (2001), Guijt and Shah (1998), and Kothari (2001) laid the groundwork by criticising proponents of community

FIGURE 5.1 Scopus searches show how the term ‘elite capture’ rises in usage compared to ‘Community-Driven Development’ and ‘Decentralisation,’ eventually overtaking both of them

FIGURE 5.2 Google Scholar search results. Differences correspond to Google Scholar’s wider (at times more eclectic) coverage than both Web of Science and Scopus. By including grey literature and technical documents, Google Scholar can be more representative of debates which involve both scientific and policy communities

empowerment for their tendency to uncritically celebrate the ‘local community’ without considering entrenched local power relations. Platteau ‘set the tone’ of the elite capture critique (Kusumawati & Visser, 2016, p. 304) when he argued that ‘personalised relationships in tribal societies’ lead to community imperfections, inequality, and elite capture (Jean-Philippe Platteau, 2004; J-P. Platteau & Abraham, 2002, p. 111). Numerous scholars since (D’Exelle, 2009; Iversen et al., 2006; Labonte, 2012; Ribot, 2004; Williams et al., 2003; Sam Wong, 2010) have underscored the elite capture critique. However, other research on CDD and decentralisation shows how the act of devolving power to communities can undermine elite capture (Blair, 2000; Dufhues et al., 2015; Fritzen, 2007), but it takes marginalised groups longer to mobilise and gain control over resources devolved to communities (J. F. Lund & Saito-Jensen, 2013; Manor,

1999, p. 48). Some scholars make the distinction between elite capture (elite's usurping undue portions of project benefits for personal gain) and elite control (elite's controlling decision-making processes potentially for everyone's benefit) (Dasgupta & Beard, 2007; Fritzen, 2007; Lucas, 2016; Musgrave & Wong, 2016; Rao & Ibáñez, 2005; Saguin, 2018). These studies demonstrate cases of elites controlling CDD resources in equitable and pro-poor manners. Finally, of the five existing meta-analyses of CDD programmes, four conclude that elite capture is generally not a problem (Casey, 2018; Everatt & Gwagwa, 2005; Kumar et al., 2005; Susan Wong, 2012) and the fifth finds that elite capture in CDD is context specific (Mansuri & Rao, 2003).

In the late 20th century, development theory largely characterised local elites as impediments to economic development and social change (Mitra, 1991). The elite capture critique perpetuates this ethos by focusing on the negative aspects of local elites while disregarding their pro-social functions (Kusumawati & Visser, 2016). Development professionals tell countless stories of elite capture while the research shows mixed results (Duchoslav, 2013).

A major challenge in development is the constant effort of powerful actors throughout the aid chain to capture resources that are intended for the world's poor (Wenar, 2006). Development's focus on upward accountability (Bornstein et al., 2006) has made accountability a powerful weapon that development actors strategically use to delegitimise their competitors in the struggle for resources (Thomas et al., 2008). The use of the elite capture critique emerged in mainstream development, despite more nuanced research studies and mixed results because it serves the interests of higher-level structures. Throughout its evolution—in American federalism, colonialism, post-colonial state formation, decentralisation, and now development—the elite capture critique has been inseparable from the economic and political power it serves.

The narrow framing of elite capture in the development arena

A literature review on the use of the term 'elite capture' reveals an interesting trend—the term is mostly used in reference to local elites in the Global South (see Figure 5.3). By explicitly employing the elite capture critique to legitimise top-down control over development resources, development researchers and practitioners implicitly argue that elite capture in decentralisation and CDD is worse than the capture that occurs when national elites or development institutions maintain top-down control over development resources. However, the evidence to support this claim does not exist.

Regarding national-level elites ('corruption'), Bardhan and Mookherjee (1999) developed a theoretical model to compare elite capture and national-level corruption, and found that capture is too context specific to support generalisable results. Bardhan and Mookherjee (2005, p. 40) subsequently conducted a literature review and concluded that the effects of decentralisation on elite capture and national corruption are too complex for summarisation yet 'tend to indicate

Type of conclusions about Elite Capture from the first 100 journal articles in a Scopus search of “Elite Capture”

FIGURE 5.3 A Scopus search of ‘elite capture’ (no time period constraints) produces articles that are largely about lower-level governance structures in the Global South.¹

that the problems of local capture within communities have not been excessive and have been dominated by beneficial effects on targeting across communities.’

Regarding NGO and donor capture (also known as ‘lodging’) (Harsh et al., 2010), the elite capture critique simply ignores the capture and control of resources at these higher levels. Looking at Figure 5.3, how can we conclude that local elites in the Global South are *more* likely to control and capture resources than NGOs and donors, when they are excluded from the elite capture debate? We found only two case studies that look into the matter. Both studies show that elite capture in devolved development projects is small compared to targeting errors and misallocation in top-down projects, and neither compared elite capture to NGO/donor capture (Alatas et al., 2019; Galasso & Ravallion, 2005).

The narrow framing of elite capture in CDD evaluates it in a vacuum without taking into account higher levels of control and capture in the top-down organisation of development projects, in which the local communities are routinely excluded from control over development resources and disempowered (Khadka, 2009, p. 231; Pfeiffer, 2003; Power et al., 2002; Townsend et al., 2002). Bornstein et al. (2006, pp. 4–8) and Chambers (2010) point out that the prioritisation of upward accountability (and the concomitant use of logical frameworks, verifiable indicators, and results-based management) leads NGOs to strictly control

the conditions in which projects are implemented and create a disempowering effect among the target populations. NGO projects tend to arrive at rural villages as a fixed package of activities and if-then clauses (within a Theory of Change) that claim to account for the communities' context, behaviours, and motivations. Large donors currently tend to require proposals to be organised according to an overarching Theory of Change that resource-intensive Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) processes validate via a predictive Results Framework. These practices conceive of the farmers as deterministic 'things' that will conform to the project's predictions, rendering the farmers passive in their own development (Chambers, 2010). This mode of practice is designed to reveal rapid and easily observed results (Boulding, 2009), while the less visible, empowerment-related goals of development initiatives, like self-determination, community initiative, and a self-reliant capacity to thrive, are neglected (Power et al., 2002).

The question isn't whether community-driven approaches face challenges with elite control and capture (they do). The question is whether elite capture in community-driven approaches is more or less disempowering than the current top-down model dominating international development, but the elite capture critique ignores capture by NGOs and donors.

The elite capture critique also fails to consider global inequality. Zooming out and taking a brief look at inequality and the elite at the global level, one finds a global Gini Coefficient ranging from 0.61 to 0.71 (Hillebrand, 2009; UNDP, 2010), with eight people controlling as much wealth as half of humanity (Hardoon, 2017). Stand up from your desk and seek out both the leader and a groundskeeper at your institution and inquire into their respective remuneration—claiming that elites capture more resources than non-elites is tautological. So why is the development community so preoccupied with elite capture in rural communities in the Global South, where the intra-village Gini Coefficient can be as low as 0.14 (Arcand & Wagner, 2016)?

The elite capture critique effectively frames 'capture' on local elites in the Global South and leads us to ignore capture that occurs in NGOs/donors and also global inequality. This is how the symbolic power of the elite capture critique operates on our pre-reflective thinking—it frames the boundaries of a classification around a disempowered group. Thus, symbolic power imposes classification systems that legitimise structures of domination.

Elite capture is context specific: A review of rural West African elites and their responsibilities

The proclivity and capacity of local elites to capture resources in CDD or government decentralisation is highly dependent on the context (Bardhan & Mookherjee, 2000; Smoke, 2003). Our analysis is focused on local elite living in Labor-Constrained Agricultural Systems in West Africa (LCASWA) to demonstrate a context where the broad strokes of the elite capture critique appear less relevant.

The financial means of the village elite in LCASWA are categorically different from Western notions of the elite. Dryland agricultural production in West Africa is characterised by high levels of uncertainty and low levels of possible capital accumulation (Long, 2003, p. 102). In Sahelian West Africa, agro-pastoralists have an unpredictable and short window of time to grow as much food as possible. Based on the last 70 years of climate data, the probability of a very good year is 12%, a good year is 28%, a normal year is 43%, a mediocre year is 17%, and a catastrophic year is 14% (Aune, 2011). The agro-pastoralists' proclivity for early-maturing varieties, despite their lower yield capacity in good rainfall years, is indicative of the prevailing agricultural strategy in a harsh and unpredictable environment: they are more interested in hedging against risk than maximising production.

To cope with the unpredictable environment, the majority of rural Africans inhabit cultures that apply social pressure on anyone with a surplus (especially the local elite) to share their wealth with poor friends and family (Alby & Auriol, 2010; Bergh, 2004; Kazianga, 2006; Jean-Philippe Platteau, 2006). Bernard et al. (2008) frame this social pressure as a crucial safety net for the above-mentioned risks associated with dryland agricultural production in West Africa. Households that fall into financial crisis often sell livestock as a source of emergency cash, but for those who are too poor to own livestock, their true safety net is their participation in the extended family (Bulte et al., 2018, p. 67). As a result, economic differentiation is more focused on staving off poverty than accumulation (C. Lund & Benjaminsen, 2001, p. 300). Wealth distribution in rural West Africa is characterised by relative equality (Saul, 1983). A measure of intra-community inequality in 177 villages in Senegal revealed Gini Coefficients at a mere 0.14 to 0.18, 'indicating that at the village level the households are equally poor' (Arcand & Wagner, 2016, p. 109).

Village elite in LCASWA are less able to entrench their position of wealth because the primary constraint in agriculture is labour, not land (Bulte et al., 2018, p. 61; Hussein & Nelson, 1998). In land-constrained agricultural systems, village elites can entrench their position via the acquisition of land. Research from land-constrained systems has confirmed that unequal land holdings play an important role in the prevalence of elite capture (Bardhan & Mookherjee, 2003; Galasso & Ravallion, 2005; Pan & Christiaensen, 2012). In labour-constrained systems, however, the competition over labour has a greater impact on productivity and wealth (Binswanger & McIntire, 1987; Bulte et al., 2018, pp. 60–61; Saul, 1983). The quantity of labour a household can access is highly dynamic—households grow and contract, members shift in and out of working age, and other members emigrate to urban areas. Shifting quantities of labour, combined with low levels of possible capital accumulation in dryland agriculture, create unstable and ambiguous class structures (Berry, 1993, p. 184; Long, 2003, p. 102). Nevertheless, outsiders from the Global North have a history of projecting rigidity onto fluid class structures in traditional Sub-Saharan systems (Berry, 1993, p. 25). The under-appreciation of rural class fluidity is not endemic

to LACSWA—it has been widely observed in rural India too, despite the caste system (Powis, 2007).

The elite capture critique characterises the rural non-elite in the Global South as powerless vis-à-vis the local elite (Labonte, 2012; Jean-Philippe Platteau, 2004; Williams et al., 2003; Sam Wong, 2013). However, some scholars show the various accountability mechanisms that non-elites uphold to ensure just leadership (Arnall et al., 2013; Scott, 1985), and still others argue that local elites have little room for manoeuvre in the struggle for influence and depend on the non-elites for support (C. Lund & Benjaminsen, 2001, p. 95; J. F. Lund & Saito-Jensen, 2013; Musgrave & Wong, 2016). In this same vein, Pitcher et al. (2009) point out that the stability of ‘personalised leadership’ depends on reciprocity and mutual respect. Thus, where Platteau (2002) sees an immediate cause of elite capture, Pitcher et al. see a functioning accountability mechanism grounded in personal interaction. ‘Scholarly debates over participatory development rarely explicitly address [this] core dimension of accountability: countervailing power’ (Fox, 2020, p. 2). Including countervailing power dynamics in participatory development studies would provide a more nuanced picture.

Elite capture in perspective: Including higher-level capture in the elite capture critique

The elite capture critique is not capable of processing the various ways that resources and decision-making powers in a multimillion-dollar grant are captured by numerous kinds of elites before it reaches the intended project participants.

While a thorough comparison of the disempowering effects of top-down development and elite capture is beyond the scope of this article, a brief review of resource capture by local elites and NGOs is possible. Unfortunately, detailed information of NGO capture in a typical top-down project is unavailable because NGOs routinely recategorise administrative costs as programmatic costs to hide their overheads (Walsh & Lenihan, 2006). Conversations with NGO staff reveal that staff salaries, administrative costs, equipment for the NGOs (computers, cars, etc.), and air travel typically comprise at least 50% of project budgets, and some studies show that NGO and donor capture can be as high as 60–90% (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012, p. 452; Harsh et al., 2010), but a more concrete benchmark is necessary for our purposes. NGOs implementing CDD projects provide a straightforward means of measuring NGO capture: the NGO’s total project budget minus the amount issued to the communities as block grants (*NGO budget–block grants=NGO capture*).²

The elite capture critique has enabled/justified NGOs to implement intensive community trainings to ensure broad participation in resource allocation (Casey, 2018; Fritzen, 2007; Lawson, 2011). This heavy-handed approach to CDD, coupled with resource-intensive M&E practices and other NGO lodging leads to high levels of capture. Casey’s (2011) evaluation of the *GoBifo*, a CDD project in Liberia, showed that the implementing NGO spent 30% of the budget on social

facilitation (to prevent elite capture), 23% on NGO operating costs, and 47% was devolved to the communities in the form of grants. Casey et al. (2012) showed that local elites captured minimal levels of the grants. Thus, the non-elites of the GoBifo communities gained access to almost half of the grant. *Tuungane 1*, another large-sale CDD program with heavy NGO involvement, allocated 43% of the £30 million budget to the communities in the form of block grants and 57% went to the implementing NGO's operating/facilitation costs. The project discovered only £21,251 of locally-misappropriated funds throughout the £13 million in block grants—a fraction of 1% was captured by the local elite in this heavy-handed approach to CDD (IRC & CARE, 2012). Humphreys (2012) conducted a follow-up study to the *Tuungane* project. Using a random sampling of *Tuungane* and control villages, Humphrey's research team issued \$1,000 to each community for a development project of their choosing. In the follow-up study, the research team did not conduct community meetings to promote inclusivity and transparency. They found that an average of 15% of the grant (in both *Tuungane 1* and control villages) was not accounted for, thus insinuating the level of elite capture. Thus, NGO implementing *Tuungane* captured 57%, while the local elites captured 15%.

Discussion

Researchers' normativities and worldviews projected into the elite capture critique

According to Bourdieu, 'scientists exercise symbolic power by shaping the categories through which agents perceive the social world; indeed, the potential symbolic effects of scientific theories are all the greater because science claims to speak in the name of the universal (i.e. of reason) and to be neutral and impartial with respect to social struggles' (Cronin, 1996, p. 76). However, social scientists are prone to projecting their own worldview onto the social practices that they research (Pierre Bourdieu, 1980, pp. 29–41, 1989, p. 42). For example, Platteau (2004, p. 27) explains the project participants' lack of concern for elite capture by arguing that they lack the reflective capacity to see beyond 'the logic of clientelistic politics characteristic of the African continent.' However, perhaps it is development researchers who struggle to see beyond their worldview when analysing foreign groups. After all, it appears that researchers and the people living in LCASWA villages each arrive at distinct conclusions about elite capture, which align with their own experiences of social stratification and the concomitant pro- or anti-social conceptions of the elite.

While much of the elite capture research uses qualitative surveys that consider the community members' perspectives, a lot of the elite capture research still relies on quantitative proxies for capture that are devised by the researchers. These proxies typically calculate elite capture by adding up the resources that benefit the local elite versus those directly benefiting the poor, or by attempting

to account for all the community's project expenditures and subtracting that from the amount of the community grant (on the assumption the elite captured the missing portion). These simple accounting exercises fail to account for the interlocking complexities of local tradition, legitimacy, and pro-social service delivery by the local leadership (Takasaki, 2011b), nor do they account for cultural norms and traditions of allocation and mutual care that could be disrupted by perfectly equal allocations (Kita, 2019). The simple accounting measures are also prone to reifying researchers' unacknowledged normative assumptions that are not necessarily shared by the people they study. For example, although some research measures elite capture via the selection of public goods that favour elites (Nath, 2014), other studies measure it by the proportion of community expenditure on private goods targeting the poorest people versus public good projects (Araujo et al., 2008; Darmawan, 2014; Darmawan & Klasen, 2013). This method subjects the target communities to the researchers' normative judgment that only the community's poorest people should benefit from development. When community leaders decide that their community would be better served by a public goods project that targets everyone, their actions were classified as elite capture. Kusumawati and Visser (2016, p. 305) argue that elite capture 'studies remain too much driven by a northern, hegemonic view and expatriate concern with the institutional norm of a Weberian transparent, democratic, and inclusive, but narrowly defined financial accountability.'

The elite capture critique requires a reflexive approach

Bourdieu's reflexive approach enabled us to look at the history and emergence of the elite capture critique, serving the interests of central authorities in American federalism, colonialism, post-colonial state formation, decentralisation, just as it now serves top-down development institutions in the struggle over development resources. In mainstream development, the elite capture critique is explicitly used (as a form of symbolic power) to legitimise top-down approaches and conceal the arbitrary relations of dominance between development institutions and local communities. This symbolic power operates on our pre-reflective understanding of top-down development by framing capture exclusively around the local elites, and researchers seem prone to easily align their research, rather than critically question this perspective. Consequently, the elite capture critique is apt to misunderstand the functions, roles, and capacities of local elite, as our LCASWA case study showed.

Notes

- 1 The category of Local Level refers to capture by village/community elites or local/regional government actors, and the category of National Level refers to capture by national government actors and the elites in their orbit. The Developing Countries column is not a product of our classification. The authors of these articles wrote about the placeless local elite of 'developing countries'—Escobar (1995, p. 53) argued that a

major effect of the development discourse is the erasure of the complexity and diversity of developing country populations. The Global South column includes research about 'Eastern and Southern Africa', Ghana, Cambodia, Indonesia, Bangladesh, and North Korea. Of the four articles that fell into the category of National-Level elite capture in the Global North, two were about elite capture in all countries (Morck et al., 2011; Oberlack et al., 2016), one was about 19th century Russia (Finkel, 2015), and the final one was about energy politics in New Zealand (MacArthur and Matthewman, 2018). The one article about local elite capture in Western Europe was about Swedish democracy in the early 1900s (Hinnerich and Pettersson-Lidbom, 2014). Only two articles were discarded from the review: Maryudi's (2018) article about wood furniture firms in Indonesia and Deolalikar's (2002) article about the clients of subsidised hospitals in Vietnam. These two articles did not fit into our local-national dichotomy. See the appendix for Scopus' list of the 100 most highly cited articles on 'elite capture'.

- 2 However, this method fails to include capture even higher up the aid chain, in (government and private) donor institutions.

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Appendix

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