"A child, a tree": Challenges in building collaborative relations in a community research project in a Kenyan context

Beth Maina Ahlberg
Skaraborg Institute for Research and Development, Skövde, Sweden; Department of Women's and Children's Health, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden

Faith Maina
Department of Curriculum Studies and Teacher Education, Texas Tech University, USA

Anne Kubai
Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden

Wanjiku Khamasi
Dedan Kimathi University of Technology, Nyeri, Kenya

Marianne Ekman
Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm, Sweden

Cristina Lundqvist-Persson
Skaraborg Institute for Research and Development, Skövde, Sweden; Department of Psychology, Lund University, Lund, Sweden

Abstract

This paper highlights the potential for basing participatory action research on priorities identified by communities. The case builds on a research project by the Social Science Medicine Africa Network (Soma-net) focusing on AIDS prevention among school youth in Kajiado in Kenya during 2003–2006. It became clear from that study just how complex it is to promote open communication on issues of sexuality considered critical for sexual health promotion. Towards the end of that study a spin-off in the form of a concept "a child, a tree" or tree planting evolved and the research thereafter continued

Corresponding author:
Beth Maina Ahlberg, Uppsala University, Drottninggatan 4, Uppsala SE-751 85, Sweden.
Email: beth.ahlberg@vgregion.se

as a partnership between the school community and the researchers. The focus then was on understanding how health promotion could be integrated into other aspects of community life. The concept and tree planting when implemented created a sense of ownership among the pupils largely because they were placed at the centre of the development activities. The story illuminates the nature of change developing in the course of the project, but also the challenges and complexity of creating and maintaining collaborative relations in the face of cultural and gender power dynamics and interventions imposed from outside the community.

Keywords
Health promotion, collaborative relations, communicative action, community initiative, social innovation, sexuality

Introduction and background

After nearly four years conducting research on prevention of HIV and AIDS, it became clear to us as researchers, just how complex it is to promote open communication on issues of sexuality across gender and generational boundaries in the study community. This paper describes the research project that builds on the study by the Social Science Medicine Africa Network (Soma-net) in Kenya in 2003–2006 (Pertet, 2006). The aim then was prevention of AIDS among school youth in Kajiado County. Two findings from that study have shaped how we have continued with research in partnership with the school community. The first concerns the challenges still evident in AIDS prevention in the Kenyan context where after years of prevention interventions, silence, denial and stigma have continued or unfolded in forms described by Nangendo, Sebudde, and Nalwadda (2006) in Uganda and by Kiragu, Muli, Mugambi, and Odongo (2006) in Kenya. The second is how knowledge on cultural practices and traditions relevant for AIDS prevention was generated when the researchers used participatory and dialogic approaches that support communication to help participants reach some agreement on how to resolve the practical problem in their situation. When used, the participatory approaches enabled the school community comprised of mothers and fathers, teachers and pupils to discuss some cultural practices which, though relevant for health promotion, had not featured in AIDS education campaigns (Pertet, 2006). Tensions however developed and the men refused to continue participating in the joint discussions, arguing that they had been intimidated by the women. The women had unexpectedly articulated by dramatizing during one of the discussions, how men found to have sexually abused children were punished. Somewhere during the conversation, one woman spontaneously made a shrieking sound and suddenly other women from the audience rushed to the scene and performed what looked like a mock disciplining of one of the women. It appears that this public display and articulation of how women collectively meted justice in case of sexual abuse embarrassed the men. This ended the possibility for further discussion on how they could

facilitate more open communication with young people on matters of sexuality. We can argue here that the case we describe can be seen or understood from the theoretical perspective of communicative action and related opening of communicative space, first developed by Habermas (1984, 1996), but later articulated by action researchers (Gayá & Reason, 2009; Godin et al., 2007; Kemmis, 2006; Kemmis, & MacTaggart, 2005). Communicative action allows participants to consciously and deliberately reach intersubjective agreement as the basis for mutual understanding about what to do in their particular practical situation. In the case we describe, the possibility for reaching consensus and mutual understanding diminished when the men decided not to continue participating in the joint discussions.

In addition to the gender-related tension, the external donor funding time-frame came to an end about the same time, but a spin-off in the form of a concept ''a child, a tree'' evolved as a community initiative. The research thereafter continued as a partnership between the school community and the researchers remaining from the Soma-net team (first and fourth authors BMA and WK). The focus then was on exploring and understanding how health promotion could be integrated into other aspects of community life. The concept was in other words conceptualised as important for enhancing communication, collaboration, learning together and contributing to social practice in ways described by Kemmis (2006) and Reason (1999).

The paper thus hopes to make a contribution to the discussion on health promotion from a community development perspective. The critical question is how working from priorities identified by the community could help move to a more integrated and holistic view of health. In other words, could working from such a perspective promote integration of health promotion including sexuality which seems to have been silenced by the dominant AIDS prevention interventions? The case however also illustrates the complexity of creating and maintaining collaborative relationships and partnerships in the face of opposing views and interventions imposed from outside the community. This notwithstanding, the case also highlights the nature of change developing in the course of the project once the community members themselves established the agenda.

In light of the above, we hope to contribute to the discussion of how dynamics of power structured around culture, gender, resources and expert knowledge may challenge the opening of communicative spaces to allow those involved to achieve mutual understanding and consensus about what to do (Kemmis & MacTaggart, 2005). Before elaborating on the way the research developed, we first address from a critical perspective as highlighted by Israel, Schulz, Parker, and Becker (1998) and Lemmy and Sá (2012), the nature of AIDS prevention interventions and the various discourses around participatory approaches.

AIDS prevention discourse and practice

The prevention of AIDS has for long been dominated by biomedical and behavioral approaches. It was reasoned that giving information on risk factors would enable individuals make rational decisions and change sexual behaviors exposing

them to the risk of infection (Lupton, 1993). Instead of seeing sexuality as a complex, socially constructed and central part of human life influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, historical, religious and spiritual factors and identities (Richardson, 2000), it was seen as a health problem. It therefore fell into the realm of institutional planning, universalized and top-down interventions, common in development discourse and practice (Escobar, 1992, 1995; Esteva & Prakash, 1998; Fals, 2000; Sachs, 1992). This resulted in people becoming increasingly aware of the risk factors, but did not change sexual behaviors that expose them to the risk of infection (Airhihenbuwa, Ford, & Iwelunmor, 2014; Arinola & Adekunjo, 2012; Campbell, 2003; Gakahu & Kaguta, 2011; Mhlauli, 2011). In addition, the biomedical and behavioral focus resulted in marginalizing other knowledge systems and alienated people from or made them ambivalent about their own knowledge and practices (Ahlberg, Kamau, Maina, & Kulane, 2009; Chilisa, 2005). Furthermore, the focus silenced and stigmatized sexuality, thereby reducing people's capacities to deal with sexuality (Ahlberg & Kulane, 2011; Ainslie, 2002; Duffy, 2005; Messer, 2004). According to studies in mining areas in Southern Africa, (Campbell and Williams, 1999) devotion to biomedical or behavioral prevention obscured the social and developmental dimensions of HIV-transmission.

As a critique of this biomedical and behavioral model, participatory approaches are increasingly used. What is commonly known as community involvement has been recognized as critical in empowering communities to take control of their health whether in prevention, support or care in the case of HIV and AIDS (Campbell, 2003; Campbell & Cornish, 2010; Campbell, Gibbs, Maimane, Nair, & Sibiya, 2009). However, collaboration with communities may, as Campbell and Cornish (2010) argue, not always succeed especially if attention is not given to the social context including, material, symbolic or worldviews in the particular society. Others, for example Cornwall and Brock (2005) and Leal (2007), have noted how communities are often called upon to offer themselves, their labour or other resources in the name of participation, in programmes often designed by development agents. Kapoor (2005) similarly argues strongly how within the development discourse and practice, the concept of participatory development has been embraced by development agencies, but rather than being inclusive and bottom-up, the concept merely reconfigures power and value systems, remaining exclusionary. Cooke and Kothari (2001) have described this uncritical embrace of participation as tyranny. Minkler (2004) furthermore notes how outside researchers engaged in community-based participatory research are confronted with thorny ethical challenges such as achieving a true community driven agenda. Others point at the complexity of inquiring within the living system which according to Wadsworth (2011) is fluid and open to new challenges as it adapts into new forms when using the collaborative cyclical movement for understanding and explaining 'how things are' (or have been) and the pathways to 'how things could instead be', but also why the wanted change may not take place. Reason (1999, 2006) similarly emphasizes the challenge of the emergent nature of co-operative inquiry. This paper presents a

case highlighting the potential for basing participatory action research on priorities identified by communities within their own environment. At the same time, it is a story illuminating the challenges of building collaborative inquiry or realising a community driven agenda, even when the inquiry is based on priorities identified by the community.

Building collaborative research on the new concept

The paper describes a research project that departed from a spin-off in the form of a concept "a child, a tree." The concept as indicated above evolved towards the end of the Soma-net study which had focused on prevention of HIV and AIDS. Naserian Primary School, one of the schools in the study requested support in tree planting and the question then was why the school needed outsiders to plant trees. After some reflection with the school community, it became evident that the school had indeed made efforts to plant trees, but as it was explained, the planted trees did not survive due to lack of water or were destroyed by both livestock and wild animals. Pastoralism is the main livelihood in the area. In addition, the area is adjacent to the Nairobi National Park meaning that there are large numbers of domestic and wild animals (National Coordinating Agency for Population and Development, 2005). This does not imply that the Maasai people do not care about trees or have no knowledge of the environment. Instead, by asking for help to safeguard the planted trees, the school was addressing the tensions arising when different types of livelihoods or land use (tourism, grazing, agricultural farming, schools and other institutions) contest for space as described by Campbell, Gichohi, Mwangi, and Chege (2000) and Ntiati (2002) about this particular area. The land tenure changes introduced by governments from the colonial to the present period have not just reduced the grazing land (Kimani & Pickard, 1998). They have also undermined the value of traditional natural resource management (Ntiati, 2002) with devastating consequences on the environment.

Nonetheless, after extended critical reflection on the request, the school community (teachers, parent representatives and pupils) and the two researchers from the Soma-net team mentioned above agreed, on sharing responsibilities so that planted trees would be protected. Each child would be responsible for planting and caring for a tree until it was out of danger. Other resources necessary to support the trees and to ease the burden on the pupils would be sourced from within and outside the school. In time, the concept "a child, a tree" or tree planting with pupils taking a central role started making sense as an appropriate platform to continue engaging with the community, not as outside researchers, but as part of planning research and development activities with the school community. Thus, rather than focusing on a single issue of health as had been the case with the Soma-net study, health would be part of other aspects of community life. It is in this context that the tree started assuming another character and the research therefore focused on investigating how we could use the concept and the tree planting activity to broaden the collaboration beyond the school community and to create spaces

for dialogue that would enable those involved to reach mutual understanding and consensus about what to do in the particular situation.

Tree planting was launched at the Naserian School in October 2006 in a two-day ceremony. During the first day, participation of parents, the local government administration and other local professionals was greater than it had been in previous reflection sessions when AIDS was the focus. The channels for inviting people to the launching event were the same as those used during the Soma-net research, but this time the call was not just for health promotion. It also included tree planting. In total about 200 people participated. Men, who had earlier boycotted the AIDS reflective meetings (Pertet, 2006) returned and participated in the launch. The event moreover attracted teachers and some pupils from neighbouring schools. Attempts were made to link the relevance of tree planting to health promotion, but the people clearly expressed other uses for trees. When the teachers from neighbouring schools spoke, they expressed the wish to have their schools included in the tree planting aspect of the project. An elderly man and a member of the Naserian school board, whose son had been a teacher in the School but had died of AIDS, emphasised the need for openness on AIDS in the following way: "...this thing is no joke. It kills .... we need to openly talk with the youth."

The teachers who had been part of the AIDS project and the researchers too emphasised the need for openness, but most participants focused on the value of trees for improving the area without much link to health. After the discussion, food prepared in the school kitchen was served and trees were planted together with the children. The ceremony ended with the head teacher summarizing the events of the day and what would be done the following day when only parents would participate. Parents were enthusiastic about participating, but when they arrived the following day, they were not particularly keen to participate in discussion together as had been the case the previous day. Instead, men and women sat in separate groups at different corners of the compound and the teachers and researchers decided to work with them in their gender segregated groups. Parents and pupils were thus asked to reflect by writing or drawing a picture about the meaning and relevance of trees for them. Parents who could not read or write were helped by pupils to write or draw a picture as a method of expressing themselves. In this case, gender power dynamics seemed to close any possibility for dialogue even when using the new concept.

The written essays were read and discussed by the teachers and members of the research team. The essays together with the drawings indicated that trees were considered important as sources of timber, firewood, shade and shelter (also for animals), oxygen, herbal medicine and food, and for preventing soil erosion, attracting rain, and making the place beautiful. The pupils however mentioned the relevance of trees in relation to their health as the following written narratives indicate:

> *Taking care of trees is just like taking care of our bodies (boy 15 years).*

Another wrote:

Someone suffering from AIDS can be taken care of like a young tree (girl 15 years)

Yet another wrote:

Trees are important in our health and our environment …. they help us to know our bodies because when we use our bodies carelessly we can get many diseases like HIV/ AIDS …. (Girl 14 years)

Thus, except for the pupils, there was little mention of health promotion. Instead, those participating expressed more concern over the social, economic and environmental meaning of trees.

This notwithstanding, the children continued to plant, water and care for the trees. The school received some modest financial support from a Swedish organisation (Varbergs Zonta Club) to fence the school compound. After fencing, the head teacher sent the following message to the researchers in an e-mail: "Each child a tree project has picked up well after the fencing …. The trees are now doing well despite the shortage of water …."

In January 2008, two members of the research team (FM and WK both trained in pedagogy) had a discussion with five teachers including the head teacher, to explore their views of the progress. They also had informal talks with the pupils on their involvement in tree planting. The main observation then was the pride and enthusiasm in pupils who had started seeing themselves as actors in their environment rather than passive recipients of what nature bestows upon them as the following quotes indicate:

We are hoping to plant more trees in our school Naserian Primary. We will name it Naserian Green Forest Primary School …. (Boy 16 years)

Another said:

…. we have planted many types of trees as they are also part of our environment and should be taken care of … Most …. have three or four trees each and we are hoping to plant more and more to make our environment beautiful …. (Boy 15 years)

Yet another reported:

Naserian Primary school is hoping to plant more trees with the help of parents from this area and many other people from many countries …. (Boy 15 years)

The entire research team has not visited the school together as they are dispersed in different continents. Nonetheless, contacts between the researchers and the school community have been maintained through visits by one or two researchers at a

time. Interaction during these visits is mostly with all the pupils, teachers and parents representatives. In addition, emails and telephone communication have been used as the following email from the head teacher to the last author in this paper (CLP) indicates: "…. The project is going on well please find…pictures of the trees….planted last year. If possible…. We want to target 2000 seedlings around the whole compound…"

Although not being there together as researchers has limited continuous interaction that creates deeper mutual understanding among participants, the visits by one or two researchers over time and email and telephone communication have created a feeling of being present and trustful relationships have developed.

The water situation has however remained critical implying that the tree planting initiative alone was not sufficient to allow the school community and the researchers to continue with the various cycles of participatory action research as described by Kemmis and McTaggart (2005), Bodorkós and Pataki (2009), and Wadsworth (2011). The following section thus tells the story of searching for water, and highlights the dilemmas encountered when financial support was secured and the implications for building collaborative relations.

Water a critical resource

Water is a critical resource in this research project in two ways. First, it is scarce and second, the identified priority by the school community was tree planting that requires water. The school depends on rain water stored in tanks, a community borehole which breaks more often than not and a nearby open water hole which is also the source of water for animals.

This critical water situation became more evident in March 2013, when 86 pupils contracted typhoid after drinking water from the open water hole. The research team had approached many donors for support without much success, but in 2010 a major donor in USA agreed to fund the project. The second author (FM), working in a university from USA, was the main applicant for the funds. However, instead of financing us directly, we were invited to be in partnership with an international NGO working in the area and supported by the same donor. This introduced not just a new actor, but more significantly, it created the burden of having to inform and convince the new partner about our collaborative approach and at the same time negotiate for the funds under its control.

In preparation for improving the water situation, an engineer had earlier been consulted by the school for technical advice and had recommended three options, including, additional water tanks, a bore-hole in the school compound and a water pan or small dam in a nearby swamp to collect water from surface flow during rainy seasons. The pan was considered as the long term solution for the water situation and as the area around the pan was considered as an appropriate public space, where meetings with community members could be organised, the pan was thus designed to include, a shallow protected well for use by the surrounding community with the possibility to pump drinking water to the school tanks.

Latrine construction was also included in the design and a separate trough for animals was to be constructed to reduce water contamination.

In a meeting between two members of the research team (BMA and WK), the engineer, teachers, parents' representatives and the local person in charge of the NGO, attempts were made to reflect on how to organise a dialogue conference with broad participation of the community including local government leadership and professionals. For the researchers, this would constitute a space and a moment to engage the community in reflecting on, and defining their vision of, development as well as planning activities to achieve the vision collaboratively (Kemmis & MacTaggart, 2005; Shotter & Gustavsen, 1999). The NGO was however not keen on this or on building the more permanent water source. An email from the local person in-charge to FM, the main applicant for funding stated: "We need to start…. At this point we will not….engage in the other components….in your proposal. However, should we find partners….interested….we will certainly inform you and see how we can all work together…."

Instead, the partner provided four additional water tanks with a capacity of 10,000 liters each and engaged an expert to install the tanks without consulting the school community. Additionally, they proposed a new activity in the form of *"hay production and sale"* by establishing a pasture management or what they called *"holistic management"* demonstration centre at the school with a proposal for community outreach. In another email to FM, the partner justified this as follow:

> *The school could increase its income generation from pasture sales while students and community members would learn and practice pasture management and planned grazing at their homes…. the school is located in a grass land ecosystem and therefore improved pasture management is more sustainable than tree planting….*

Subsequently, the partner purchased a hay baler and constructed a shed in the school compound for storing hay. In a report sent to the school the partner argued:

> *Since this area is prone to frequent and recurrent droughts, stored hay will….benefit the school with….selling of hay and….baling lessons for teachers and pupils…. These initiatives not only support grass management but also preserve wildlife while contributing positively to the local community as a drought mitigation learning center…. The project strongly supports the objective of preserving Africa's wildlife and wild lands for future generations while meeting the donor agency's objectives…. protecting and preserving biodiversity….while improving livelihoods of communities.*

The four plastic water tanks were installed, but due to poor workmanship, no water was harvested when it rained until the school incurred further expenses in replacing the poorly fitted plastic gutters. Neither did the hay shed withstand the strong winds in the area. The black plastic material was ripped off and this

ended as the type of institutional planning and development project where communities are just given development aid with little consultation or involvement (Ramalingam, 2013), and seemed to represent a clear case of what is reported by Powell and Seddon (1997) and Veltmeyer (2005) about NGOs being more concerned about advancing the donor's agenda than genuinely helping communities to improve their situation. Besides wasting material resources, this was also challenging emotionally because of time loss and the possibility of not maintaining the trust we as researchers had built with the school community. The teachers too expressed their despair and anger during a meeting in the following way:

> We are very angry and feel like removing the board they have fixed at the gate advertising what they have done for Naserian Primary School.

After reading a draft of this article:

> We told him in the face that the school could do without the project....the parents too were very angry.

In response, the researchers, in consultation with the teachers and the school board wrote a report to the donor regarding the status of the project. A team was sent to monitor the progress of the project and although the donor did not respond to the researchers or the school community directly, the response from the NGO was hostile with threats of barring the researchers from coming to the area. The water situation thus remained unresolved after the ongoing tensions with the NGO and its idea of development.

The researchers then approached a number of other external organisations still hoping to secure a more permanent water solution but with little success. The latest of these is the International Swedish School AB, after a group of staff members visited the School while in Kenya on another mission in April 2012. They offered to buy 150 seedlings and to use funds raised by pupils in two schools in Sweden to buy water until the planted trees were out of danger. In January 2013, another group of 30 pupils visited the School and jointly planted trees. During the occasion, a local politician brought a large tank of water. In October 2013, a third group visited the school but this time, they did not plant trees. In a telephone conversation the head teacher explained:

> We did not want to disappoint ourselves by planting trees when the water is still so scarce.

The telephone conversation was elaborated in the following email:

> The reason why we did not plant trees....was....lack of water to sustain the trees. ...
> The donation of ksh 120 000 (US $1500) from well-wishers in Sweden was used to buy

water that sustained pupils in the boarding wing for three months. Part of it was also used for the treatment of the 86 students infected with typhoid...

Buying water for watering trees while there was no clean drinking water was according, to the head teacher unethical especially as the pupils had been infected with typhoid. Moreover, the process of buying water was described as cumbersome and expensive:

Buying water is not easy....it is costly and also far. Parents tried this until they gave up. That's why we settled on fetching water from the open well.

In spite of the long search for water with little success, there still are some very interesting developments from this collaborative effort.

Changing environment, child learning and development

Results can be seen in the individual child, the school as a learning arena, and at the community level. Also evident is how change in one area can trigger ripples in community life. In the following section we present the nature of development which also illustrates the fluid and emergent nature when inquiring within the living system collaboratively as mentioned earlier (Reason, 1999; Wadsworth, 2011).

According to the pupils and teachers, over 200 trees had been planted by the beginning of 2008 and by the end of 2013 600 trees had been planted although with the critical water situation described above, many planted trees dried up. Moreover, some trees planted earlier grew fast, but not being indigenous to this area, some were attacked from the roots by termites. This notwithstanding, the children as indicated earlier expressed a strong sense of ownership and pride with work around the trees that also provided them with space outside the classroom for learning.

The trees according to the teachers enabled the children to grasp concepts in the ecosystem especially because the ecology also started changing. This was evident from the hoards of birds which found sanctuary in the new trees, prompting the science teacher to establish a wildlife club as he explained:

....to help the children better understand the ecosystem and learn how they can change it.

The children too had learned the art of recycling, as indicated below:

.... each child is given a small amount of water each day .... for all her/his needs. It is now common to see them bring their washing close to the tree to water it as they clean themselves.

Tree planting has led to other activities that potentially help pupils realise the potential for such an activity. As a predominantly arid environment that barely

supports food production, one teacher in a small group discussion reported the following with consensus from other teachers:

> ….by interspersing a bean crop with the trees we harvested beans enough to feed the children for a whole term in 2009…

What is significant here is the symbolic meaning of seeing the potential for food production in this environment. Another teacher elaborated:

> ….even though this activity is still very limited because of the insufficient water, the pupils are learning that they can indeed change the environment.

Although not initially planned, food production became an integrated activity with the result that the school could feed the children with ease and more children were able to attend school that term. The tree was indeed assuming the symbol of life for the school, with the children developing a strong sense of ownership as one pupil expressed:

> We want to make our school beautiful and every child to get a tree. We also want to make our school a forest (girl 15 years).

On the academic side, the school was described as having moved from the bottom of the academic ladder, in the Kenya Primary Examination (KPE) in 2004, to the top position in Isinya Division where the school is located and, since 2011, to have scored a second place in the entire Kajiado County comprised of seven divisions. This means more pupils including girls join government sponsored secondary schools than any other school in the area. This is phenomenal given the competitive nature of this national examination. While the academic improvement cannot be directly assigned to the research, it can nonetheless be understood as part of a stimulating environment that has put pupils at the centre of the development activities. More significantly for this project, the school performance appears to have created ripples in persuading parents to re-evaluate cultural practices namely female genital mutilation and early marriage where young girls are married out soon after initiation mostly to elderly men who can afford to pay substantial bride price to the girls' parents. The teachers explained this change during a meeting: "When mothers noted that all children, including girls pass the national examination and join government sponsored secondary schools they started ….to discuss among themselves how to stop female genital cutting and early marriage for their girls."

Yet another spin-off of what Heron and Reason (2001) call research "with" rather than "on or about" people can lead to was the opening of a communicative space to address another cultural taboo. Realising that a member of the research team (CLP) was a clinical psychologist with competence in child development, the head teacher introduced during a meeting with teachers the issue of children with

disabilities during her second visit in 2010. There were already three intellectually challenged children from one family whom the school had managed to integrate by assigning them the tasks they performed best. The psychologist was requested to examine the three children, but also other children with disabilities should parents present them. The teachers explained that it was a tradition: "….to hide or even kill children with disabilities because it was believed, disability in children is a punishment from God and is a major source of stigma."

When word went round, eleven children with different forms of disabilities were brought to the school and were assessed in the presence of the parent who accompanied the child, a teacher and a local social worker who had been invited by the school for this assessment. The assessment opened with a short discussion on views and beliefs about disabilities after which, parents were given the chance to tell more about the child. Various ways of obtaining functional aids were then discussed for example, attaching a special education wing within the Naserian School as well as contacting a health clinic for audiometric testing.

The community took the opportunity when it arose to break the silence on this cultural taboo. The fact that the teachers raised this as another problem area suggests how long engagement with the people can enhance trustful relations and open communicative spaces allowing them to converse even over taboo subjects.

Discussion and conclusions

This paper has illuminated the potential for innovation and change in a research project building on an unexpected spin-off from a previous research project formulated and mostly implemented by researchers. The paper too highlights the challenges encountered when building collaborative relations in contexts of deprivation, where resources needed are externally sourced from actors with multiple perspectives of what they are able to see and are willing to bring into the collaboration. The shortcomings of being dependent on external funding and related institutional development planning became evident, firstly when Soma-net could not use emerging cultural knowledge to continue with the action research cycles because the donor funding time frame ended. Research activities nonetheless continued through the spin-off of the concept "a child, a tree" as a community initiative.

However, even when following the evolving concept, the challenges of institutional development planning were similarly experienced because the critical material resource was beyond the community reach. The material situation is mentioned by Campbell and Cornish (2010) as an important factor enhancing or inhibiting development of collaborative relations. The demand by a financing agency for the researchers and the school community to partner with an international NGO already funded by the same donor and working in the same area, introduced the rhythm of work of NGOs in ways described by Veltmeyer (2005). According to Veltmeyer, rather than assisting poor communities to access society's productive resources, NGOs mostly assist them to "build on their social capital."

The introduction of hay production and sale by the NGO, rather than support-
ing tree planting which was the priority of the school community seems to have
been based on this logic. This, in addition to the poor workmanship, became
stressful for the school community and the researchers. Paradoxically, this
seemed to trigger the opening of a communicative space for the researchers, tea-
chers and parents to question and reflect on what was going on. The nature of
development during this case seems nevertheless to point at the complexity of
building collaborative relations even when basing development on community
priorities. In this case, health promotion which had been a starting point seemed
to be of less concern within the context of the community initiative. Instead, as
became clear from the launching ceremony, and the later presentation of the taboo
subject of disabilities among children, the school community appeared to view
health promotion in their context in much broader terms. Moreover, the gender
segregation displayed by the parents during the launching ceremony may indicate
how gender power dynamics can complicate the building of collaborative relations.
It seems however in this particular case that the idea of integrating health promo-
tion including issues of sexuality perhaps needed more critical self-questioning
on the part of the researchers, particularly given that a similar incident had
occurred in the earlier study on prevention of HIV and AIDS and was indeed
one of the motivations for the researchers to follow community initiatives.
It is nevertheless in this context of multiple perspectives and competing world
views that the argument by Wadsworth (2011), on how collaborative human
inquiry for living systems opens different challenges associated with the need
to reflect and negotiate with those involved in the inquiry, makes sense for the
case we described here. Similarly, the argument by Reason (1999, 2006) that
inquiry groups hold different tendencies as the inquiry progresses was evident in
this research as well.

This notwithstanding, the lessons so far provide some indication of what can be
expected when using an "innovating" or concept driven development especially
when such a concept is based on contextual realities. In other words, this project
could be conceptualised as a search for innovative ways for organising research and
development activities by creating spaces for dialogue to enable those involved to
learn and together contribute to social practice (Gayá & Reason, 2009). This entails
changing mind-sets or being prepared to change as was the case at the end of Soma-
Net study in order to facilitate what Enquist (1997) and Ekman, Ahlberg, and
Huzzard (2004) describe as systems innovation. This is a move from what Sachs
(1992) describes as expert-based development where service experts and profes-
sionals work vertically, oblivious of each other and consequently burden the com-
munities they expect to serve.

In conclusion, the potential benefit and challenges entailed in collaboratively
inquiring within the living system are evident in this project. The material
resources, cultural and gender power dynamics are critical and play an important
role in enhancing or inhibiting collaborative relations necessary to realise the com-
munity agenda. Equally important is the need for researchers to consistently ask

themselves critical questions about and reflect on their role and on how to continue negotiating with those involved in the partnership.

Acknowledgements

Funding

References

Ahlberg, B. M., & Kulane, A. (2011). Sexual and reproductive health and rights. In S. Tamale (Ed.), *African sexualities: A reader*. Oxford, England: Pambazuka Press.

Ahlberg, B. M., Kamau, A., Maina, F., & Kulane, A. (2009). Multiple discourses on sexuality: Implications for translating sexual wellness concept into action strategies in a Kenyan context. *African Sociological Review*, *13*(1), 105–123.

Ainslie, D. C. (2002). AIDS and sex: Is warning a moral obligation?. *Health Care Analysis*, *10*, 49–66.

Airhihenbuwa, C. O., Ford, C. L., & Iwelunmor, J. I. (2014). Why culture matters in health interventions: Lessons from HIV/AIDS stigma and NCDs. *Health Education and Behavior*, *41*(1), 78–84.

Arinola, A. A., & Adekunjo, O. A. (2012). Analysis of HIV/AIDS information awareness and effectiveness among artisans in Ogbomoso, Oyo State, Nigeria. *Library Philosophy and Practice*. ISSN 1522-0222. Available at: http://unllib.unl.edu/LPP/

Bodorkós, B., & Pataki, G. (2009). Local communities empowered to plan? Applying PAR to establish democratic communicative spaces for sustainable rural development. *Action Research*, *7*(3), 313–334.

Campbell, C., & Williams, B. (1999). Beyond the biomedical and behavioural: Towards an integrated approach to HIV prevention in the Southern African mining industry. *Social Science & Medicine*, *48*(11), 1625–1639.

Campbell, C. (2003). *'Letting them die': Why HIV/AIDS prevention programmes fail*. Oxford, England: James Currey in association with The International African Institute.

Campbell, C., Gibbs, A., Maimane, S., Nair, Y., & Sibiya, Z.(2009). *Youth participation in the fight against AIDS in South Africa: From policy to practiceJournal of Youth Studies*, *12*(1), 93–109.

Campbell, C., & Cornish, F. (2010). Towards a 'fourth generation' of approaches to HIV/AIDS management: Creating contexts for effective community mobilization. *AIDS Care*, *22*, 1569–1579.

Campbell, D. J., Gichohi, H., Mwangi, A., & Chege, L. (2000). Land use conflict in Kajiado District, Kenya. *Land Use Policy*, *17*, 337–348.

Chilisa, B. (2005). Educational research within postcolonial Africa: A critique of HIV/AIDS research in Botswana. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *18*(6), 659–684.

Cooke, B., & Kothari, U. (Eds.). (2001). *Participation: The new tyranny?* London/New York: Zed Books.

Cornwall, A., & Brock, K. (2005). What do buzzwords do for development policy? A critical look at 'participation', 'empowerment' and 'poverty reduction'. *Third World Quarterly*, *26*(7), 1043–1060.

Duffy, L. (2005). Suffering, shame, and silence: The stigma of HIV/AIDS. *Journal of the Association of Nurses in AIDS Care*, *16*(1), 13–20.

Ekman, P. M., Ahlberg, B., & Huzzard, T. (2004). Planning from without or developing from within? Collaboration across the frontiers of health care. In W. Fricke, & P. Totterdill (Eds.), *Regional development processes as the context for action research*. Amsterdam, The Netherlands: John Benjamin.

Enquist, C. (1997). *Systems of innovation, technologies, institutions and organisations*. London, England: Printer Publishers.

Escobar, A. (1992). Imagining a post-development era? Critical thoughts, development and social movement. *Social Text*, *31*(32), 20–56.

Escobar, A. (1995). *Encountering development: The making and unmaking of the third world*. NJ: Princeton University Press.

Esteva, G., & Prakash, M. S. (1998). Beyond development, what?. *Development in Practice*, *8*(3), 280–296.

Fals, B. O. (2000). People space Times in global processes: The response of the local. *Journal of World Systems Research*, *3*, 624–634.

Gakahu, N., & Kaguta, R. J. N. (2011). Communicating HIV & AIDS among students in Kenya's institutions of higher learning: A challenge for the 21st century. *Journal of Economics and Sustainable Development*, *2*(4), 171–174.

Gayá, P. W., & Reason, P. (2009). Initiating action research: Challenges and paradoxes of opening communicative space. *Action Research*, *7*(3), 243–262.

Godin, P., Davies, J., Heyman, B., Reynolds, L., Simpson, A.Floyd, M. (2007). Opening communicative space: A Habermasian understanding of a user-led participatory research project. *Journal of Forensic Psychiatry & Psychology*, *18*(4), 452–469.

Habermas, J. (1984). *Theory of communicative action, vol. 1: Reason and the rationalization of society*. Boston, MA: Beacon.

Habermas, J. (1996). *Between facts and norms*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Heron, J., & Reason, P. (2001). The practice of co-operative inquiry: Research 'with' rather than 'on' people. In P. Reason, & H. Bradbury (Eds.), *Handbook of action research*. London, England: Sage.

Israel, B. A., Schulz, A. J., Parker, E. A., & Becker, A. B. (1998). Review of community-based research: Assessing partnership approaches to improve public health. *Annual Review of Public Health*, *19*, 173–202.

Kapoor, I. (2005). Participatory development, complicity and desire. *Third World Quarterly*, *26*(8), 1203–1220.

Kemmis, S., & McTaggart, R. (2005). Participatory action research: Communicative action in the public sphere. In N. Denzin, & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Kemmis, S. (2006). Participatory action research and the public sphere. *Education Action Research*, *14*(4), 459–476.

Kimani, K., & Pickard, J. (1998). Recent trends and implications of group ranch subdivision and fragmentation in Kajiado District, Kenya. *The Geographical Journal*, *164*(2), 202–213.

Kiragu, S. W., Mulli, A. K., Mugambi, J. K., & Odongo, R. O. (2006). Persuaders with many messages: Implication for HIV and AIDS prevention in Kenyan youth. In A. Pertet (Ed.), *Re-thinking research and intervention approaches that aim at preventing HIV infection among the youth*. Nairobi, Kenya: The Regal Press Kenya Ltd.

Leal, P. A. (2007). Participation: The ascendancy of a buzzword in the neo-liberal era. *Development in Practice*, *17*(4–5), 539–547.

Lemmy, M. A., & Sá, C. (2012). Complexity science: Towards an alternative approach to understanding the use of academic research. *Evidence & Policy*, *8*(4), 473–494.

Lupton, D. (1993). Risk as moral danger: The social and political functions of risk discourse in public health. *International Journal of Health Services*, *23*(3), 425–435.

Messer, D. E. (2004). *Breaking the conspiracy of silence: Christian churches and the global AIDS crisis*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

Mhlauli, M. B. (2011). Teaching controversial issues in primary schools in Botswana: Reality or illusion?. *British Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, *2*(2), 143–156.

Minkler, M. (2004). Ethical challenges for the ''outside'' researcher in community-based participatory research. *Health Education Behavior*, *31*, 684–697.

Nangendo, F., Sebudde, S., & Nalwadda, R. (2006). Coping by normalizing: Implication for HIV and AIDS prevention in young people from the Rakai District, Uganda. In A. Pertet (Ed.), *Re-thinking research and intervention approaches that aim at preventing HIV infection among the youth*. Nairobi, Kenya: The Regal Press Kenya Ltd.

National Coordinating Agency for Population and Development. (2005). *KAJIADO district strategic plan 2005–2010 for implementation of the national population policy for sustainable development*. Nairobi, Kenya: Government Press.

Ntiati, P. (2002). *Group ranches subdivision study in Loitikitok Division of Kajiado District in Kenya – The land use change, impacts and dynamics*. Nairobi, Kenya: International Livestock Research Institute (LUCID'S Working Paper Number 7).

Pertet, A. (Ed.). (2006). *Re-thinking research and intervention approaches that aim at preventing HIV infection among the youth*. Nairobi, Kenya: The Regal Press Kenya Ltd.

Powell, M., & Seddon, D. (1997). NGOs & the development industry. *Review of African Political Economy*, *71*, 3–10.

Ramalingam, B. (2013). *Aid on the edge of chaos*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

Reason, P. (1999). Integrating action and reflection through co-operative inquiry. *Management Learning*, *30*(2), 207–226.

Reason, P. (2006). Choice and quality in action research. *Journal of Management Learning*, *15*(2), 187–203.

Richardson, D. (2000). Constructing sexual citizenship: Theorizing sexual rights. *Critical Social Policy*, *20*(1), 105–135.

Sachs, W. (Ed.). (1992). *The development dictionary: A guide to knowledge as power*. London/ New Jersey: Zed Books.

Shotter, J., & Gustavsen, B. (1999). *The role of "dialogue conferences" in the development of the "learning regions": Doing "from within" our lives together what we cannot do apart.* Stockholm, Sweden: Centre for Advanced Studies in Leadership, Stockholm School of Economics.

Wadsworth, Y. (2011). *Building in research and evaluation: Human inquiry for living systems*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.

Veltmeyer, H. (2005). Democratic governance and participatory development: The role of development NGOs. *The Whitehead Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations, Summer/Fall, 2009*, 89–109.

Author biographies

Beth Maina Ahlberg holds a PhD in Sociology and is Professor of International Health at the University of Uppsala and has previously worked as a senior researcher at the Department of Public Health Sciences, Karolinska Institute, Stockholm. She currently coordinates research at the Skaraborg Institute for Research and Development, a local research foundation with mandate to promote research capacity within health care in Skaraborg County, Sweden. She has worked extensively in countries in eastern and southern Africa and in Sweden on issues of sexual and reproductive health, gender, migration and health as well as community mobilization for health improvement and development. She has special interest in methodological issues particularly the applications of participatory and dialogic methodologies in research and development.

Faith Maina is a Professor of Educational Research and Foundations in the Department of Curriculum Studies and Teacher Education – Curriculum and Instruction at Texas Tech University. She has worked in the same capacity at the State University of New York Oswego for 15 years where she jointly held an administrative position as the director of McNair Program. She has also been a visiting professor at the University of Northern British Columbia, Prince George, and a sessional instructor at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada. In addition, she has worked as a Literature and English teacher at Mugoiri Girls High school in Murang'a, Kenya. She holds a Ph.D. from the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada, Master's degree from Trent University in Ontario, Canada and a Bachelor's of Education degree from Kenyatta University, Nairobi, Kenya. She is a 2011–2012 Fulbright Scholar.

Anne Kubai is Associate Professor of World Christianity and Inter-religious Studies. Currently, she is a researcher at the Faculty of Theology, Uppsala University. Previously, she has worked as research director for Life & Peace Institute, Uppsala; and also as a senior social scientist at the Division of International Health Care Research, Department of Public Health Sciences at

Karolinska Institutet, Stockholm. Her research interests include religion and community relations; migration and human trafficking; conflict, gender and mass violence; reconciliation and social reconstruction in post-conflict societies.

Wanjiku Khamasi is Associate Professor in the Family and Consumer Science Education and currently the Registrar Academic Affairs, Dedan Kimathi University of Technology-Kenya. Wanjiku's research interests include: higher education, teacher education, gender, participatory research methodologies, refugee studies, peace education, sexuality studies, cultural practices and gender based violence.

Marianne Ekman is a Professor at the Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm. She holds a PhD in Organizational Psychology. She has been engaged in long-term action research and national workplace development programmes since the early eighties in both Sweden and Norway. This work has focused on work organization, participation and workplace development in private enterprises, in the school system and in the health care sector. Her main field is participative methods and strategies for development-based dialogue, including dialogue conferences, network building, the design of development organization, self-organization and knowledge creation. Her recent work has been oriented towards the link between organizational development in a context of regional development and development coalitions in working life.

Cristina Lundqvist-Persson is a holder of PhD in Psychology and is an Associate Professor in psychology at the Department of Psychology, Lund University, Sweden. She is a Psychologist, Psychotherapist and Clinical Specialist. She currently works as a research leader at the Skaraborg Institute for Research and Development, Skövde, Sweden. She is involved in different national and international inter-disciplinary research projects. Her main research interests are child development, somatic and mental health, psychotherapy for children, adolescents and adults. She has worked for many years as a clinician at a department of paediatrics. Besides her clinical work she has worked as a facilitator, teacher and supervisor for many professional groups and teams in different health care organisations.