



Enterprise as socially situated in a rural poor fishing community



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ABSTRACT

We examine enterprise processes in a poor rural fishing village in Ghana, having become interested in why poverty persists in spite of considerable industry. Our case study uses the village as the unit for analysis because it offered a conceptually interesting place that is relatively economically, socially and spatially isolated. Most entrepreneurship theory failed to explain our observations about the absence of development. Accordingly, our socialised perspective looked at the social and spatial processes that configured enterprise. Our study allowed us to recognise that fishing and the associated processing and sales had developed as socially organised to enable a livelihood for many, rather than entrepreneurial benefits for a few. The socially situated nature of rural enterprise in Ocansey Kope is “mutual” and interdependent, and not individualistic in the western sense. Enterprise is individually enacted; but how business is conducted is hedged by social obligations, responsibilities and entitlements. The apparently economic “systems” of production, the buying and selling, lending and borrowing within the village can also be understood, and better explained, as social processes.

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1. Introduction

We are interested in understanding the commercial activities of a small rural fishing community in their social context. We consider their socially situated business practices to establish the nature of their style of entrepreneurship, development and how it creates welfare. Our theoretical problem is that entrepreneurship is often construed as a universal “solution” for rural development, but the prevailing conceptualisation privileges individualistic and economic aspects to the detriment of the socially embedded characteristics of enterprise (Anderson, 2015). We argue that by examining the economic and social relationship that shape community, the role of rural localities (Halfacree, 2007) becomes clearer and recognise that social environments shape what people do (Dodd et al., 2013). We address what Trettin and Welter (2011) described as the need for studies on localized everyday life to gain a better understanding of the interrelation between social processes and commercial activities. Turgo (2016) emphasises the importance of social practices in what Kuivanen et al. (2016) describe as a “relational approach”, one identifying relationships

in context. Chamlee-Wright (1997) argues the mainstreams of economic enquiry offer few connections between cultural processes and economic development. Indeed, Takyi-Asiedu (1993) suggests that in many economic accounts, local cultures are overlooked. Place, and attachment to place, is also neglected (Veelen and Hagggett, 2016).

Moreover, the dominant view incorporates a number of assumptions about the nature and practices of entrepreneurship which may, or may not, hold good in different, less developed, contexts (Lindsay, 2005; West et al., 2008). Indeed, the individualistic theory of poverty comes from American values of individualism -the Horatio Alger myth that any individual can succeed by hard work, and that motivation and persistence are all that are required to achieve success (Smith and Anderson, 2004), seems improbable in this context. Moreover, Naudé (2009) points out how, despite the importance attributed to enterprise for economic development, little of the entrepreneurship development literature even refers to the development economics literature. He concludes that the literature about the role of entrepreneurship has been largely confined to advanced economies. As Bruton et al. (2008:1) put it, “entrepreneurship research can still be critiqued as almost exclusively focused on North American and European research sites.” Worse still, “most social science research generally, and recent entrepreneurship research in particular, have been generated in the U.S. and Western Europe (e.g. Great Britain and

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Scandinavia). Thus its transferability to contexts where the task and psychic environments may be vastly different remains in question” (Thomas and Mueller, 2000:289). Accordingly, our understanding may be similarly constrained. Because the socio-economic context of a poor African village is so markedly different from most western contexts, we should not expect to find that western accounts of enterprise have comprehensive explanatory power (Dana and Dana, 2005; Harbi and Anderson, 2010). Moreover, unlike more developed countries (Sønvisen, 2014) fishing remains closely tied to place and is characterised by local relationships. We thus argue that examining the situated practices may develop theory that explains how local contexts inform what arises. The paper offers an alternative, contextualised approach to understanding enterprise. It contributes by demonstrating how place is a rural nexus, where the spatial, the social and the economic intertwine and interact. Consequently we believe that context matters.

We employ a case study approach to capture how livelihoods are produced and reproduced in this rural maritime village in Ghana. The paper contributes to our appreciation of the socially and spatially embedded practices of enterprise and hence broadens our understanding of entrepreneurship for rural development. We achieve this by examining business practices in a context that is less well known and less well examined by entrepreneurship scholars. Our analysis shows that the type of enterprise in Ocansey Kope, our fishing community, is qualitatively different from much western entrepreneurship. It is shaped and constricted by the social organisation of business, especially by the nature of social obligations that are woven into the social fabric of the village. We note how poverty limits enterprise, but not simply as a resource constraint. Poverty is a condition that is mutually experienced and business practices have emerged that ameliorate the worst effects of poverty. Enterprise in the village is not individualistic economic maximisation, or even optimisation, in any conventional sense. Rather it is about subsistence, security, sustainability and communal survival within this rural place. Consequently we argue that the “customary” conceptualisation of entrepreneurship is based on assumptions that appear less appropriate in a context of underdevelopment. The westernised conception of entrepreneurship requires review to recognise the determining nature of circumstances experienced in place. Indeed, without taking account of the particularities of the socio-economic context, the promise of entrepreneurship as a panacea for economic distress is less likely to be delivered.

2. Fishing communities in Ghana

Atta-Mills et al. (2004) note that Ghana was once a major fishing nation, but artisanal catches have reduced in volume and value. Marquette et al. (2002) explain that small scale fishery activity accounts for the majority of fish catches in Africa and provide about one quarter of the intake of protein. Fish takes up 16.4 per cent of food budgets (Mensah and Antwi, 2002). Fish thus plays an important national role, yet Payne (2000) notes that the marine artisanal fishery remains one of the poorest sectors. Fishing communities have low incomes, about two thirds of national per capita income and have less income stability because of wide seasonal fluctuations; such that fishing communities are amongst the poorest in Ghana (Bortei-Doku, 2000). Nonetheless, Marquette et al. (2002) argue that fishing is not only a subsistence activity, but is a business within an international marketing system. This view is similar to Dana's (1995) who distinguishes between hunting and fishing for one's own needs as subsistence and fishing for products to sell as entrepreneurship. Although fishing has an important economic role, it appears to be socially and economically marginalised.

In Ocansey Kope, our research site, fishermen use dugout canoes. Double ended, they are hewn from a single log of the *wawa* tree and vary from 3 to 18 m long. Small canoes are powered by oar or sail, some larger canoes have 40hp outboard motors. Crew numbers vary from 4 to more than 20. Structural adjustments begun in the 1990s have made fuel and equipment more available, but also more expensive (Mensah and Antwi, 2002). Although some fish stocks have been reduced by over fishing, ample stocks of other fish (seabream and triggerfish) exist. However, these require new equipment which many fishermen cannot afford. Some fishermen migrate seasonally (Marquette et al., 2002). As well as income, this strategy allows them to save by avoiding the social and economic obligations that normally prevent savings.

There have been some innovations in fishing techniques such as outboard motors and better nets. Walker (2002) explains how Ghana's Fisheries Department has focused on improving fishing gear, but little effort has been made to strengthen fish processing or marketing. The fishing system remains directed by long established socio-cultural practices. The fishing units often involve kin and there is a clear gender division of labour with men fishing and women as fishmongers, processing and trading the fish. Walker (2002:390) suggests that women have served as “capitalists, entrepreneurs and innovators” throughout the development of the fishing sector.

3. Ocansey Kope as a place and as a research context

In aggregated statistical terms, Ghana has experienced economic growth since 2000; the average gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate of 7.2 per cent compares well with the Sub-Saharan African average rate of 5.7 per cent (IMF, 2012). However, growth is spatially uneven. Whilst the Ghana Living Standard Survey (GLSS6) reported an overall decline in poverty of 7.5 per cent in 2006–2013, rural coastal communities experienced a 3.1 per cent increase. Moreover, households heads engaged in agricultural or fishing are likely to be the poorest in Ghana (GLSS6 report). Symes et al. (2015) note how fishing in general is contracting, and poor rural fishing villages appear caught up in poverty and resistant to improving trends. Our case study of Ocansey Kope, located in the Ga Dangme East District of Greater Accra, is an example of persistent poverty in place. Relatively socially, spatially and economically isolated, it provides us with an opportunity to observe how commerce and social life co-exist and to establish how the intertwined processes shape practices and outcomes.

Ocansey Kope has a population of 1,546, a 5.8 per cent increase since 2000 (Ghana Statistical Services, 2013) and has 314 households whose houses are built with mud or wattle and roofed with thatch or corrugated iron. The extent of illiteracy compares very unfavourably with the regional literacy. The 2000 census notes 42.9 per cent had never attended a school whilst only 3 per cent of the population has any vocational or technical education. The village has electricity and telecommunications facilities, but potable water is a major problem. The main occupation is small scale marine fishing mostly in dugout canoes with outboard motors. Men fish and the women are fishmongers, but during the off-peak fishing season both grow vegetables for consumption and income.

Ocansey Kope offers a stimulating context to examine rural business practices as an “exemplary case” of underdevelopment. The village is poor, in contrast to western models of enterprise which are often grounded in prosperity. The residents use simple technologies, in contrast to much entrepreneurial research's concern with high technology. The village is close knit socially, but relatively isolated from other places. Consequently localised social and economic relationships take on significance (Mudege et al., 2015). People appear concerned with “getting by”, rather than

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