**Expanding collective agency in rural indigenous communities in Guatemala: a case for *El Almanario* approach**

**Jordi Peris, Sarai Fariñas, Estela López and Alejandra Boni**

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**Abstract**

The notion of agency has received increasing attention in development planning and development processes and is considered an essential aspect of Human Development as conceived through the capability approach. In addition, there is a growing trend to consider agency not from the perspective of the individual agent, but emphasising its collective dimension. Within this framework, this article aims to explore how collective capabilities and agency are being expanded in rural indigenous Guatemala through small community-led development projects supported by United Nations Global Environment Fund. To this end, an analytical framework is defined from the capability approach perspective on the grounds of the idea of collective capability. The article draws on research in indigenous communities in Western Guatemala, currently being supported by the Small Grants Programme, funded by the Global Environment Fund and administred by United Nation Development Programme. These interventions have been implemented following *El Almanario* approach, an innovative approach aimed at empowering communities in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of their own projects.

**Agency in development planning**

The notion of agency has received increasing attention in development planning and development processes (Long, 2001; Safier, 2002; Healey, 2006; Garikipati and Olsen, 2008; Mdee, 2008) and is considered an essential aspect of Human Development as it has been conceived through the capability approach (Sen, 1985; 1999; Alkire, 2007; Alkire and Deneulin, 2010). In addition, there is a growing trend to consider agency not from the perspective of the individual agent, but emphasising its collective dimensión (Sztompka, 1996; Cleaver, 2007; De Herdt and Bastiansen, 2008).

Within the framework of development processes, agency is understood as ‘the capacity of any social actor to act […] according to their internal composition and history and their external relations’ (Garikipati and Olsen, 2008, 329) or, in Sen’s (1985, 206) terms ‘what a person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important’*.* Consequently, ‘people who enjoy high levels of agency are engaged in actions that are congruent with their values’ (Alkire, 2007, 3) and this becomes an essential aspect in the effective realisation of human development and human capabilities.

In this regard, Dreze and Sen’s (1989, quoted in Ibrahim and Alkire, 2007, 384) claim that ‘it is … essential to see the public not merely as “the patient” whose well-being commands attention, but also as “the agent” whose actions can transform society’.

There is, however, some controversy over the notion of agency, especially over the way it relates to social structure. Giddens (1984) considers agency and structure to be inseparable and mutually constitutive so that structure is not a set of abstract forms but is reproduced, materialised and changed precisely through specific action by actors, which in turn it modulates and restricts. Archer (2003) looks beyond this duality and considers agency and structure to be analytically and ontologically different, which enables her to unravel their reciprocal influences. According to Archer (2003), agency of social actors is enabled and restricted by structures which take on emerging properties in the form of distributive patterns, roles, organisations, institutions, cultural norms, theories and doctrines (Mdee, 2008). In turn, these patterns are conditioned by the agency of social actors, which opens the possibility to social change because ‘creative agents are sometimes able to overcome constraints and generate transformational change’ (Cleaver, 2007, 227).

From this perspective, authors such as Long (2001) and Healey (2006) use Giddens’ conceptualisation as the basis for emphasising agency as the central concern of development planning. Therefore, planning is understood as a socially constructed process which is built on the patterns of interaction between the agency of social actors (Long, 2001, 25). In consequence, development planning is considered a process of meaning creation and sense-making, rather than a mere implementation of a previously specified plan. During the process, ‘active agency interacts with constraining structures... that operate in routinised and taken-for-granted ways’ (Healey, 2006, 35), modulating and limiting the real framework of options for people’s actions. Consequently, the development planning process becomes a collective reasoning process where conscious reflexivity is essential to challenge power ‘by changing the rules, changing the flow of resources and, most significantly, changing the way we think about things’ (Healey, 2006, 47–49).

Furthermore, from the capabilities approach there is also growing interest in development planning (Alkire, 2002; Frediani, 2007) with a specific focus on the issue of agency (Múñiz and Gasper, 2009). This article attempts to approach precisely that intersection between planning, agency and the capability approach in a specific case of rural areas in Guatemala with the underpinning purpose of contributing to development planning theory.

**Collective agency**

In the framework of the capability approach, the notion of agency is subject to certain tensions because, despite Sen’s acknowledgement that it is ‘inescapably qualified and Expanding collective agency in rural indigenous communities in Guatemala 85 constrained by a social context’ (Sen, 1999, xi–xii), there is still controversy over the notion of collective agency. In fact, various authors criticise the individualism of the approach for being unable to fully capture interactions between agency and structure. In contrast, they reaffirm the ‘social embeddedness of individuals’ (Ibrahim, 2006, 403), claim ‘to place understanding of agency in wider contexts and frameworks’ (Cleaver, 2007, 225) and criticise an excessively narrow conception of the subject (Ballet et al., 2007).

In particular, De Herdt and Bastiansen (2008) elaborate a relational vision of human development by drawing on Sen’s consideration of freedom as both ‘the primary end and the principal mean of development’ (Sen, 1999, 36). This leads him to state two reasons for considering freedom as the essential reference for development processes: (1) the *evaluative* reason as the assessment of whether freedoms of people have been enhanced, and (2) the *effectiveness* reason, as the role of free agency in the achievement of development (Sen, 1999, 4).

According to De Herdt and Bastiansen (2008), the evaluative function of freedom is coherently focused on individuals as a consequence of the ethical individualism of the capability approach defended by Robeyns (2003). However, when it comes to dealing with the agency role of the individual as participant in economic, social and political actions (Sen, 1999, 19), then we have to take seriously the importance of collective action in social change and acknowledge that, ‘individual agency can only become part of the “means” of development when we explicitly take into account the way in which this individual agency is connected with others’ (De Herdt and

Bastiansen, 2008, 344).

Or, in Evans’s words,

Gaining the freedom to do the things that we have reasons to value is rarely something we can accomplish as individuals. For those already sufficiently privileged to enjoy a full range of capabilities, collective action may seem superfluous to capability, but for the less privileged attaining development as freedom requires collective action. Organized collectivities […] provide an arena for formulating shared values and preferences, and instruments for pursuing them, even in the face of powerful opposition. (2002, 56).

*Collective agency*

On these grounds, Ibrahim (2006) proposes a definition of collective capability as the newly generated capabilities ‘that individuals can gain… by virtue of their engagement in a collective action or their membership in a social network that helps them achieve the lives they value’ (Ibrahim, 2006, 404). Therefore, it is not a matter of aggregating individual capabilities, but of the emergence of new ones that would have never been achieved by the individual alone.

In addition, by engaging in collective action people have the opportunity to join 86 Jordi Peris, Sarai Fariñas, Estela López and Alejandra Boni peers and develop different sorts of interactions, which are not just a source of ‘utility’ but ‘central to the development of our identities, values and goals. They are fundamental in our efforts to figure out what we have reasons to value’ (Evans, 2002, 57). Consequently, collective agency is ‘not only instrumentally valuable for generating new capabilities, but also intrinsically important in shaping and pursuing the individual’s perception of the good’ (Ibrahim, 2006, 405).

*Awareness of being an agent and critical reflection*

Ibrahim’s definition is important because it establishes that collective agency affects individuals’ decisions in two ways: first, it affects individual perceptions of what is considered to be good; second, it determines the capacity and power to carry out action in order to achieve it. But provided that structural power is partly anchored in our imaginaries, beliefs and assumptions, critical reflexivity and Freire’s conscious awareness of being an agent become relevant in the framework of collective action and development planning, as ‘people would have the potential to challenge power if they could get sufficient understanding to reflect on their conditions of existence and see their “structured oppression” for what it was’ (Healey, 2006, 46)*.* According to Chambers and Petit (2004), conscious reflexivity on our assumptions and modes of thinking carries transformative power.

In this regard, deliberation and reflective dialogue become core elements for developing agency because ‘not just any behaviour that an agent “emits” is an agency achievement’ (Crocker, 2008, 11). There must be a certain reflection and conscious deliberation of the reasons and values upholding agency: ‘what is needed is not merely freedom and power to act, but also freedom and power to question and reassess the prevailing norms and values’ (Dreze and Sen, 2002, 258, cited in Crocker, 2008, 11).

*Responsibility towards others*

Ballet et al. (2007) propose to broaden Sen’s concept of agency by considering responsibility as a constitutive characteristic of the person at the same level as freedom. This has important consequences as it generates a distinction between weak and *strong agency*. While *weak agency* would refer solely to developing individual goals and capabilities, *strong agency* would include the exercise of responsibility towards others’ capabilities and society as a whole (Ballet et al*.*, 2007). Agency becomes strong agency when it aims to expand freedom of others within a network of social interactions where commitment and responsibility take place.

Finally, in order to discuss how collective agency incorporates responsibility and thus contributes to the expansion of others’ capabilities, it is important to assess to what extent each particular collective action is founded on human development Expanding collective agency in rural indigenous communities in Guatemala 87 principles – such as equity, diversity or participation – both at internal level and as they relate to other individuals and collectives (Alkire and Deneulin, 2009). As has been underlined from the capability approach perspective (Nussbaum, 2000; Alkire, 2002), gender issues are a major theme in this regard.

**El Almanario**

Research was carried out on the basis of a case study of indigenous communities in Western Guatemala, currently being supported by the Small Grants Programme (SGP) of the United Nations Global Environment Fund (UN-GEF). Interventions have been implemented following *El Almanario[[1]](#footnote-1)* approach, an innovative approach aimed at empowering communities in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of their own projects. Amongst other issues, projects in these communities included installation of domestic solar panels, reforestation with native species and improved stoves.

Although *El Almanario* is the name of the physical tool for the implementation of SGP projects, we discuss it here from a broader perspective by considering it as an approach which includes specific values and attitudes, a particular philosophy of work, a concrete methodology including context-adapted tools and an organizational setup. *El Almanario* approach was created by SGP Guatemala which operates following UN-GEF premises[[2]](#footnote-2). UN-GEF finances over 100 SGPs around the world, providing funding for community initiatives which address global environmental problems.

The origin of the programme in Guatemala goes back to 1997. Since then, SGP-Guatemala strategically locates its actions and selects Community Based Organisations[[3]](#footnote-3) (CBO) to work with on the basis of criteria such as environmental issues, levels of poverty, gender exclusion and low educational levels. On that basis, SGP-Guatemala works with CBOs from rural communities of ethnic Mayas, particularly Mames, Sipacapenses and Quiches.

The programme in Guatemala is managed through annual calls for 20 projects which receive approximately US$ 20,000 per project each year. The creation of *El Almanario* approach in this context was motivated by the intention to eliminate non-governmental organistions (NGOs) as intermediaries[[4]](#footnote-4) in the management of small donations, as well as reorienting the role of experts in the planning process in order to let the CBO acquire a leading role.

Following this premise, an instrument had to be created to support the new methodological approach. *El Almanario* consists of two 26-page notebooks, each measuring 56 × 43 cm. The first notebook enables identification of environmental issues as the basis for defining the most suitable type of intervention to tackle. Additionally, it allows identification and revelation of the tasks and times involved in executing the project. The community as a whole then uses the second notebook to cost the community contributions and resources requested from the SGP for each month of the project.

The main characteristics of *El Almanario* are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1 Main characteristics of *El Almanario* notebook**

This format, adapted to the reading and writing skills of the local population, is the starting point that motivates its basic principle: community participation at all stages of the project. This participation is enabled by the fact that the CBO manages its own project by defining its own goals and the specific steps to reach them. In this context, the CBO is fully trusted to manage the subsidy funds, as they are horizontally accountable for the execution of project activities and for how the funds are being spent, with a shared responsibility amongst community members for success or failure.

Influencing gender inequality is one of the main concerns of *El Almanario* approach, specifically through organisational aspects which SGP specifies as a condition of funding. For this purpose, a female member of the community has to be selected by the community itself in order to carry out the leading role of the project. This role is called ‘*la promotora*’[[5]](#footnote-5) and her function is to facilitate the diagnostic and participation of community members and to monitor schedules and resources in coordination with the Management Committee[[6]](#footnote-6), which is democratically elected by the CBO from among its members. In order to fulfil her duties, ‘*la promotora*’ receives a mandatory training course for developing skills and learning the underpinning principles of the approach.

The underpinning philosophy of *El Almanario* emphasises learning as an end in itself. It involves three different levels. First, training courses are offered to the communities whose contents are defined by the communities themselves. Second, ‘learning from others’ is encouraged by focusing on sharing community knowledge. Third, ‘learning by doing’ occurs as they manage their own projects in order to reach the goals they have reasons to value.

**The research**

From an interpretive research paradigm (Corbetta, 2003), research was carried out with fifteen rural communities in Guatemala from four different departments: Sololá, Quatzaltenango, Totonicapán and San Marcos. Through qualitative research techniques, an attempt was made to access the viewpoint of the actors involved to understand the meaning and importance attached to the issues raised (Vallés, 1996). The absence of previous research work and bibliography on *El Almanario* led us focus on primary information provided by people involved in the process at different levels. That way we tried to triangulate different perceptions from different communities, different positions and different degrees of involvement and responsibility.

The research process was carried out in a flexible way by accommodating issues that emerged during the research process itself. Starting from the idea of collective agency some analytical categories were formulated in order to provide guidance, and afterwards reformulated in order to better capture the discussions held during the fieldwork.

The criteria for selecting the communities for the research were defined through participatory observations carried out while supporting the activities for the 10-year systematisation of SGP work in Guatemala. Through this collaboration, an initial contact with communities took place and a schedule of regular visits was established, including attendance at CBO meetings. That period was essential for defining the individual and group research techniques to tackle the issue to be researched. Seven communities in total were involved in this participatory observation process and the following criteria were defined to select the fifteen final CBOs participating in the current research:[[7]](#footnote-7) (1) extensive and consolidated use of *El Almanario* methodology in order to assess learning consequences in the long run; 2) sampling the different stages of *El Almanario* projects’ life cycle; (3) experience with other methodologies in order to compare and contrast experiences; and (4) diversity in ethnicity as a source of variability and heterogeneity.

Two of the authors of this article carried out the fieldwork during a total period of eight months as members of the SGP team. In order to gather and systematically analyse the evidence of how *El Almanario* contributes to reinforce collective agency in communities being worked with, the following research techniques were used.

First, a documentary analysis of the case study projects was carried out, including general documentation on SGP and *El Almanario* as well as planning, monitoring and evaluation documents of specific projects.

Second, participatory workshops[[8]](#footnote-8) were conducted to gather the point of view of community members involved in the CBOs carrying out the projects. Being aware of issues of power and positionality, the workshops were inspired by Participatory Rural Appraisal in order to create a safe space where people felt comfortable to express their visions and feelings without coercion and deception. However, although we strove to minimise its impact, it would be unrealistic not to acknowledge power relations within community, as well as between researchers and community, particularly considering the former are two white university educated women coming from the institution which funded the projects. For that reason, in the discussion we try to confront the fact that, to some extent, participants were likely to give answers that the SGP would like to hear as a funding institution. In addition, 22 semi-structured interviews were held with community members, including a *promotora* and a man from each of 11 communities.

Third, and in parallel to the workshops, six semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals holding different roles and positions in *El Almanario* process. They were selected as providers of valuable and relevant reflections and points of view to contrast the vision from communities. They included experts and technical staff from SGP such as: the programme manager, one trainer from a community, three members of the National Management Comitee[[9]](#footnote-9) including a former *promotora*, and one member of UNIFEM Guatemala.

The following section discusses the research findings. However, transferability to other contexts must be cautiously assessed by analysing specificities of each different case. It is particularly important to acknowledge that the research focused on indigenous communities in Guatemala with important and distinctive characteristics in terms of identity.

**Expanding collective and strong agency through *El Almanario* approach**

In this section we discuss the extent to which *El Almanario* approach contributes to reinforcing collective agency in communities. The analysis is broken down into the elements presented in the theoretical section of this article. First, we analyse the expansion of what is being called collective agency, then we examine the awareness of being an agent, and finally we discuss responsibility towards others as a core element of a strong agency.

*Expanding collective agency*

In line with Ibrahim’s (2006) proposal, findings suggest that *El Almanario* creates the conditions for developing new capabilities as result of collective action when groups working as a CBO with SGP break out of a culture of dependency on aid and begin to see themselves as actors of change.

Before developing *El Almanario*, SGP interventions were designed and implemented through different NGOs around Guatemala that acted as intermediaries with communities. However, SGP internal assessments tended to highlight not only low levels of involvement of community members, but also a lack of ownership of projects and a high level of expenditure devoted to NGOs operating costs. According to the programme manager, people did not see the project as a whole but just small pieces of it, particularly the ones linked to receiving tangible products (tools, seeds, etc.). Consequently, learning processes in terms of planning, self-organisation or management of resources such as money, time or effort were absent, as the intermediary NGO dealt with that. As emphasised by a trainer of promotoras, NGOs were focused on reaching results, but not on changing people’s way of doing things.

This perception was also emphasised at the workshops: ‘The work with SGP is direct; with a consultant it is not the same because he uses to mislead us on the way. Now we are learning how to work’ (Caserío Cerro Sibinal); and: ‘Before the SGP, an engineer was in charge of filling in the documents; but to my mind, is better to work on our owns’ (Aldea Quecá).

Instead, *El Almanario* considers community members as the main protagonists of the process, and focuses on developing their capabilities to carry out the whole Project cycle on their own, from diagnosis and planning to monitoring and evaluation. Every single part of the project is carried out by communities and therefore, community members are conceived of as autonomous entities being able to shape their own future by working together towards goals that would have been impossible to reach through individual effort. Through these processes community members realise that collective strength requires self-organisation to promote changes that affect their lives, as the following quote exemplifies: ‘On its own, it wouldn’t get done. It wouldn’t be successful. The project can get done if we work together... with SGP we learned how to work properly... Now we’re more united than we were at the beginning. And we know that things can get done’ (Caserío El Rincón); or: ‘At the beginning we were not organised, we needed more knowledge. With SGP we learned and improved’ (Aldea Tojcheche).

The only exception to this was mentioned at Aldea Vásquez, where it was pointed out that someone from outside the community was required to compensate for their limited reading and writing skills. The justification for that is that the CBO in Aldea Vásquez was just starting to work with *El Almanario* and has a strong link with AFEDOG,[[10]](#footnote-10) an intermediary NGO. Although much good work has been done on other issues such as gender, organisation strengthening seems to be weak.

Through self-organisation, collective work seems to be successful in the rest of the studied CBOs. They feel they have gained experience and, consequently, they feel better prepared to face new projects in the future. Therefore, new horizons in the universe of the ‘want to be or to do’ appear because the barrier of ‘we can’t’ is broken down to give way to ‘we did it and now we want more’. This reinforces the idea that collective agency is not only valuable from the instrumental point of view but it is intrinsically important (Evans, 2002; Ibrahim, 2006), because of the learning process which takes place during the project cycle. This changes peoples’ perception of needs, strengths, identities and values, as illustrated as follows:

When people first have a SGP project, they don’t really know exactly what they want or what they need or what would be good for them. But when people, who have never had a project, carry one out... then what happens in the end is that they know very well what they want. … The process itself taught them what they needed to reinforce. (Programme manager).

In agreement with that, it is possible to state that *El Almanario* and its self-organising measures encourage communities to reflect on the best course of action to follow: ‘We meet every 8 days and what we decide there is followed by the whole group’ (Aldea Quecá). However, this reflection is complemented with the fact that *El Almanario* methodology forces community members to solve many practical problems linked to implementation such as delays in the delivery of funds (Colonia Belén. Aldea Tojcheche), bargaining for supplies (Caserío Molino Viejo and three more), or simply opening a bank account. The shared perception is that ‘We have learnt to work in group. The works progress better now and with less effort’ (Cantón Pié de la Cuesta).

Once the project is approved, people in the communities are the only ones in charge of managing it. The experts’ role is confined to providing training courses on different topics in order to let the community work by itself. As mentioned in the workshops, training courses combine theory and practice with a strong focus on problem solving (Aldea Xepiacul).This is important as ‘learning by doing’ is enabled involving redefining the horizons of what people are able to do, and this process leads them to face challenges which were not even perceived as a problem before. When a community acknowledges a challenge and is allowed to walk towards what they have reasons to value, then new capabilities emerge, as well as new acknowledgments of the ‘want to do’:

Well now I’m happy because it’s something I learnt that I didn’t even dream could be done. I didn’t even dream about having panels and installing them. No, we didn’t think, but now I feel happy because it is another job, another piece of knowledge. (Caserío El Rincón).

The format of *El Almanario*[[11]](#footnote-11) instrument together with the organisational aspects defined by SGP and its demands (such as filling in the content of the project in a participatory way by everyone in the community, men and women) facilitates the pooling of ideas and proposals which emerge from the community as a result of the presentation of the projects. To this end, the mandatory training course for *promotoras* is essential in order to enable them to create spaces for discussion and intra-community debate to assess what they want to do and define the contents of the project. This was clearly emphasised during the research:

One day, we were at it from 8 in the morning until we finished. Everyone had to give an idea. Because there are 30 heads and we all think differently. So one of us made a comment and we talked about it to fill in [*el Almanario*]... (Aldea Poj)

Although we did not directly observe the filling in of the notebook, a part of our observational tasks consisted of carrying out follow-up field visits during *El Almanario* filling in period, and further work with *promotoras* on the revision of the notebooks once they had been prepared. It allowed us to gather some feedback on the process. Although some problems appear in specific CBOs in the form of low involvement, lack of commitment and internal conflicts between groups, a relevant participatory and inclusive practice was usually noted by the researchers and pointed out by *promotoras*, with the support of the mandatory minutes that CBO have to draw up after their periodical meetings including the approval and signature of attendees. However, further research would be required in order to understand power dynamics within these spaces as, according to our observation, important imbalances in communication skills and leadership existed.

The training courses for CBO members are a core element of *El Almanario* to address this challenge of fostering participation within communities. Courses focus on matters related to self-esteem, gender, environment, administration and finance and technical issues for implementation (such as installation of solar panels). As different voices tended to highlight in both interviews and workshops, this acquired knowledge is a key issue to enable their participation in *El Almanario* projects. Additionally, and due to its direct link with implementation activities, it contributes to a collective ‘learning by doing’ process that modulates their perception of reality and consequently, the issues they have reasons to value, as the following quote shows:

They know that SGP only works on environmental issues, and within the focal áreas of the UN-GEF we’re working with, waste management is not included. And most of the communities we work with have obvious problems with rubbish. And it’s as though they don’t realise... It’s as though the rubbish wasn’t there... But regularly, after the SGP process, they are concerned about more things. And many groups usually say ‘Seño,[[12]](#footnote-12) look at all this rubbish here. Can’t we do something about it?’ Whereas before, they weren’t bothered about the rubbish, they didn’t even see it. (Programme manager)

This constitutes an essential element of Ibrahim’s (2006) idea of collective agency as intrinsically important in shaping individuals’ perception of the good. In this regard, and according to our observations, the experience with *El Almanario* entails a variation in preferences of communities as a consequence of their joint action focused on improving local conditions and environment. The following quote illustrates a perception which seems to be shared by the different people involved in the research:

Now we are starting to see things we never saw before... Now we have new ideas, we see the world differently... The joint work and SGP’s belief that we can do it changes your outlook... (Caserío El Rincón)

According to the workshops carried out in the different communities, *El Almanario* has meant an important milestone in the history of the studied CBOs, particularly due to its self-organising requirements that motivates them to continue working and learning as a group.

*Awareness of being an agent*

Awareness of being an agent and self-esteem to bring about change is one of the key contributions of *El Almanario* to enhance collective agency of people involved in SGP projects. A large part of the long term impact consists of slowly developing peoples’skills and capabilities, while also promoting changes in attitudes and beliefs that favour a perspective oriented at self-perception as a social actor who is able to change his/her surrounding reality. As stated by the programme manager, the key issue is that community members are required to face tasks that they had never done before, as a way of demonstrating that they are capable of carrying them out:

They begin to feel good about themselves, because they start to see results... And they say ‘Wow, I did that project and it was approved! So it can be done!’ And many people at the close of the projects say ‘We never thought we would be able to open a bank account but we did. We thought we would never get the authorisation, but we did. Then we thought it would be impossible to design a project, but we did and it was approved. And we did it all ourselves and here it is. (Programme manager)

This ability to carry out an action implies that what people have reasons to be or to do is accompanied by a real possibility of orienting those preferences to action. That way, *El Almanario* puts the protagonists of change in a situation where they realise that what they have reasons to value can be achieved. When they see that SGP trusts their ability and that means changing reality towards what they value, people feel strong and with a basis of self-esteem which makes them walk towards change.

In my opinion, the fact that they have to make decisions on their own, that they have to carry out the whole project and that they are in charge of everything … gives them the experience of realising that they can do it without any external body … that they do not need anybody to go there and tell them what they have to do. This is the most fundamental change for people. (Trainer of *promotoras*)

In addition, networking with neighbouring communities is encouraged in order to extend collective action and influence broader aspects linked to other local processes. As was highlighted in workshops, there were different experiences of communities organising themselves after carrying out *El Almanario* projects to confront external institutions, both public and private, and defend their collective interests. On one hand, for instance, Sipacapa communities self-organised to ask the municipality for the construction of a bridge to facilitate children’s access to school. On the other, they made an agreement to jointly buy the solar panels in the capital city in order to better bargain for lowering costs. As it was repeatedly expressed in workshops: ‘now we are able to work with other institutions because we are incorporating what we learnt with SGP’ (Workshop\_Aldea Quecá, the idea was repeated in five other CBOs).

An example of that occurred at Sibinal, where a group of women from Cantón Pié de la Cuesta, Cantón Tohamán and Cerro Sibinal in Aldea Quecá gained a weekly programme on a community radio station. The women presenters talked about issues such as organic agriculture, soil conservation, gender issues, or how to access a SGP project. In addition, advocacy with women from other communities led the municipality to create a municipal office for women.

We can intuit based on the following reasoning, that going outside the community to ask for what ‘they have reasons to value’ gives them greater strength to change.

We are strong because we feel happy... because we achieve... After suffering, you feel good when you achieve something. Because you can look what we have achieved by working together... And this gives us strength as a community... We are no longer afraid to go outside the community to ask for what we want. (Caserío El Rincón)

However, this engagement with local processes has a certain degree of spontaneity and is not an inherent part of *El Almanario* planning process. In fact, *El Almanario* is not aimed at influencing public policies and neither the methodology nor the tool incorporates an analysis of the institutions or the public policies on the topic of intervention. Apart from local community networks, there is no effort placed on engaging national or international networks of any kind which could support the processes. All of this reduces the scope for change of the projects carried out through *El Almanario* approach, and could be assessed as a limitation to its contribution to the expansion of collective agency in communities.

*Responsibility towards the community*

All the above has a clear relation to the idea of responsibility towards the collective in line with what Ballet et al. (2007) define as strong agency, oriented towards developing capabilities of others. Given that the indigenous context shapes social structures from a very clear perspective of community, it should be added that *El Almanario* approach promotes this responsibility towards the group on the basis that members of the group are responsible for project success or failure. This means that the struggle to manage each phase of project consolidates the foundations of strong agency even further, as the following quote illustrates:

The communities have to organise themselves. We give them management methodology and so they …, who already have a lot of solidarity and support each other when there are problems … so now we teach them to do that with specific planning. (El Almanario trainer)

It can be appreciated that *El Almanario* makes the community meet around the notebook, provide ideas for the group, discuss and agree options and visually see how the common effort can lead them towards what they value, fostering responsibility towards the collective. This idea was emphasised both at workshops and interviews like the following one from a community where only 17 solar panels had been installed out of the 24 households involved in the project:

we have learned with the project that we are all one ... and when there are people without a panel, we all fight because they are also entitled to their panel ... And if they don’t have one, and we do, we have a responsibility towards them ... Those of us who do have one, must offer the benefits of the panel to those who haven’t got one yet. (Caserío El Rincón)[[13]](#footnote-13)

However, these strong claims about community have to be interrogated critically in order to clarify to what extent responses reflect an expected answer from SGP as funding organisation. In fact, it could be argued that they may hide imbalances in distribution of resources as a consequence of inequalities in terms of power, leadership or communication skills.

Although our research is methodologically limited in terms of reaching conclusive results on topics that operate outside the sphere of external observation such as intracommunity power relations, there are some remarks that can be made.

According to *El Almanario* methodology, CBO members select themselves through a process in which SGP does not take part. Once they apply for a project they are asked to formalise the association through: (1) legalisation, (2) opening a bank account and (3) selecting a Management Board with at least three women. In addition, two women with basic reading and writing skills are selected to attend training and become *promotoras*.[[14]](#footnote-14) This is presented by SGP as a key decision, as the whole project will depend on their performance. Consequently, *promotoras* tend to be selected by communities amongst women that already have certain communication and organising skills, although it is not always the case. As highlighted by the programme manager the most valuable trait of women attending training is their willingness to learn: ‘the most important is attitude, we have overcome language, shyness and literacy barriers…but never attitude ones’ (programme manager). SGP encourages women to overcome victimhood attitudes and becomes truly demanding concerning their duties during training sessions as a requirement to carry on with the project.

Consequently, group dynamics for CBO formation is outside SGP’s sphere of direct influence. Without doubt, conflicts arise in communities while projects arebeing defined and implemented. Through attendance at CBO meetings and day-today living in communities, the researchers observed problems manifesting themselves in different ways such as direct claims by specific persons, strong silences by people (particularly women) in CBO meetings or refusals to share *El Almanario* notebook with certain groups. According to the programme manager the most recurring problems are lack of communication, power relations within the group, manipulation of women to be formal members of the Management Board and lack of real commitment to the project.

*El Almanario* tackles these issues through a set of measures which includes progressive training courses on organisation, management, self-esteem and gender issues as a way of sensitising and providing community members with the abilities to fill in *El Almanario* in a participatory and horizontal way.

Focusing on how gender inequalities are faced, our research shows that important contributions to women’s participation and access to decision making spaces have been reached, as confirmed through interviews and workshops from different CBOs such as the ones from Cantón Tohamán, Aldea Xepiacul, Aldea Vásquez, Aleda Quecá or Caserío El Rincón. Particularly, in Caserío Molino Viejo women’s participation in management and decision-making was defined as a right. According to that, women’s participation is recognised now as something valuable for communities. However, *El Almanario* does not seem to have produced a change in gender role distribution, especially concerning the reproductive role. It is very rare that men or women recognise that a part of the domestic burden has been transferred to the former.

At a more visible level, communities face the issue of responsibility in different ways. In some cases, like Caserío Molino Viejo, surveillance committees have been created to monitor the activities of *la promotora* and the Management Board in order to hold them accountable to the community. Additionally, SGP carries out a monitoring and evaluation process to assess to what extent resources and tangible products (such as solar panels, heaters or seeds) are being distributed as planned and define corrective measures otherwise.

Finally, there are two additional considerations in relation to how *El Almanario* incorporates responsibility towards others. On the one hand, due to the environmental bias of SGP, responsibility is also conceived as intergenerational and benefits are expected to be long lasting by envisaging their responsibility towards future generations:

Ten to fifteen years from now this will be better, the trees will be tall. Better for our children, grandchildren, great grandchildren ... It is for them, not for us ... (*Promotora*)

On the other hand, SGP’s philosophy enables people who have already developed a project, to become actively involved in the training courses for other communities. It grants a certain power to carry out an action to support other communities’ processes by becoming the expert who through *El Almanario* contributes with his/her knowledge and previous experience.

**Conclusions**

The capability approach offers the conceptual and theoretical elements for analysing agency in relation to planning processes in development interventions. However, this requires going beyond the view of agency as something individual and understanding it from a collective perspective as many contributors of the capability approach are emphasising, as well as including the idea of agency oriented not only at expanding its own capabilities but also the capabilities of others. From this conceptual framework, *El Almanario* as approach and methodology for the design and implementation of rural development projects has some important innovations which orient it towards the promotion of agency in individuals and communities in developing their own projects, by breaking away from the culture of aid dependency.

The disappearance of intermediary NGOs and the philosophy and format of *El Almanario* itself, which forces communities to work together from the outset in the conception, design, planning, monitoring and assessment of the projects, contributes to their success. In this way, the community does not participate in SGP projects; rather, SGP projects participate in the life of community. And by doing so, contribute towards developing collective agency, not only because new capabilities appear out of the collective work on the project, but also because the process itself contributes to modulate and qualify what they have reasons to value, especially in issues concerning environment, as the core element in SGP work, and gender, as a key transversal axis.

Furthermore, *El Almanario* puts the protagonists in a situation where they realice that what they value can be achieved, and so they become aware that they are agents of change, thereby increasing their self-esteem and real power to carry out actions directed at generating the changes that they have reason to value. When they see that SGP trust their ability and that this means they can change reality, people feel strong and have a basis for self-esteem which makes them walk towards that change. In addition, by encouraging networking with neighbouring communities, the collective action is extended to influence broader aspects linked to other local processes.

Thus, the fact that each phase of the project is managed by community, making it responsible for both success and failure, enables *El Almanario* approach to consolidate a strong agency based on responsibility towards others. *El Almanario*, and its accompanying methodology, forces the community to meet around the notebook, provide ideas for the group, discuss and agree options and visually see how the common effort can lead them towards what they value, fostering responsibility towards community as a whole.

Consequently, *El Almanario* creates the conditions for breaking out of a culture of aid by slowly developing people’s skills and capabilities while also promoting changes in attitudes and beliefs that favour a perspective oriented at self-perception as a social actor who is able to influence change. This is an essential aspect of its long term impact. Beyond the available funds of the project, community self-organisation is strengthened so to confront external institutions in defence of their collective interests.

In that sense, *El Almanario* builds on the philosophy of Participatory Rural Appraisal as it is aimed to enable people to analyse and express the realities of their lives and conditions, to plan themselves what action to take, and to monitor and evaluate the results. However, the originality of *El Almanario* lies in the fact that it has been developed to confront practical problems in project implementation through some specificities, such as the emphasis on strengthening community self-organisation, the notebook as a context-adapted tool, or the fact that the main facilitator of the process must be a woman from the community itself.

Some limitations of the study have to be pointed out as significant issues have not been analysed in sufficient breadth and depth due to methodological restrictions. Particularly, intra-community power relations concerning collective decision making around *El Almanario* as well as intra-family gender relations would require additional in-depth study. Both circumstances operate outside the sphere of external observation and, therefore, their discussion is beyond the aim of this research. As emphasised during the article, agency not only entails freedom and power to act, but also freedom and power to question and reassess prevailing norms and values. In that sense, gender relations would be a privileged space to explore how *El Almanario* contributes to expand agency by confronting prevailing assumptions on gender issues. Consequently, further research would be required at intra-community and intra-family level in order to increase consistency of the results at that level.

Finally, transferability of the approach to other contexts has to be assessed carefully. Through qualitative research we have gained some insight on how *El Almanario* contributes to indigenous communities’ development processes in Guatemala. However, our results are strongly linked to the specificities of the context and to the particular actors that have created, developed and experienced *El Almanario* in response to certain problems and with specific aims. Therefore, it would be extremely naïve to reduce the discussion to how to use the notebook in other projects. On the contrary, the potentiality of *El Almanario* lies in considering it as an approach which includes specific values and attitudes, a particular philosophy of work, a concrete methodology including context-adapted tools and an organisational setup.

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1. In Spanish, *Almanario* is the abbreviation for almanaque (calendar) and calendario (schedule). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. UN-GEF was created in 1991 as an international instrument to implement Agenda 21. Its action programme emerged in 1992 at the Río de Janeiro Summit. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Community Based Organisations: organised groups from indigenous rural communities in priority regions, who go to the official annual SGP announcement with the intention of obtaining funding in their communities for environmental projects. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. SGP-Guatemala noticed certain ‘interference’ from some experts in community diagnostics in addition to the inefficiency caused by the use of a significant amount of funding to maintain NGO structures. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The promoter (female). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This committee exercises the duties of representation (president and members), control of funds (treasurer and president) and accountability to the community, small-scale decision-making without consulting the community, the search and selection of local companies to supply the consumables for the project and take the minutes of the community meetings. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. CBO1: Aldea Xepiacul. Santa Catarina Ixtahuacán. Sololá. CBO2: Finca Alianza. El Palmar. Quetzaltenango. CBO3: Aldea Vasquez. Otonicapán. CBO4: Caserío Molino Viejo. Comitancillo. San Marcos. CBO5: Colonia Belén. Aldea Tojcheche. Tacaná. San Marcos. CBO6: Aldea Quecá. Sipacapa. San Marcos. CBO7: Cantón La Nueva Jerusalem. Tacaná. San Marcos. CBO8: Cantón Pie de la Cuesta. Sibinal. San Marcos. CBO9: Cantón Tohamán. Sibinal. San Marcos. CBO10: Caserío Cerro Sibinal. Aldea Quecá. Sipacapa. San Marcos. CBO11: Caserío El Rincón. Sipacapa. San Marcos. CBO12: Aldea Chual. Sipacapa. San Marcos. CBO13: Plan Grande. Sipacapa. San Marcos. CBO14: Aldea Poj. Sipacapa. San Marcos. CBO15: Caserío La Vega. Sipacapa. San Marcos. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The workshops carried out were inspired in Participatory Rural Appraisal. In each one of the first ten CBOs a focus group with women was held and two mixed participatory workshops were carried out: (1) ‘Clock of activities disintegrated by sex’; and (2) ‘Historic reconstruction of the community’. In the last five CBOs (plus CBO6) the following workshops were performed: (1) ‘Let’s get to know each other better’ (extracting information on the socio/economic characteristics of the group); (2) ‘Historic reconstruction of the community’; (3) ‘Present, past and future’ (corresponding to ‘before SGP’, ‘now you’ve been through the process’ and ‘future expectations’); (4) ‘Clock of activities disintegrated by sex’; and (5) Map of the community. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. National Management Committee: Establishes the selection criteria for the projects presented during the anual call for proposals and evaluates them. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Asociación Femenina para el Desarrollo del Occidente de Guatemala (Women’s Organisation for the Development of Western Guatemala). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Especially its large size, to promote being filled in by the community by generating discussion around it. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Seño* is an affectionate Spanish expression meaning lady. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Afterwards, the CBO had to face problems related to funding delivery delays and increases in the price of solar panels. However, at project closure all the panels were instilled. Meanwhile, households with available solar panel provided light to the rest. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Promotoras* receive a regular payment of 700 quetzales per month (around US$90). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)