

# Employing the Elite Capture Critique to Legitimize Top-Down Control of Development Resources

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## Abstract

“Elite capture” largely refers to local elites usurping the benefits of community development and decentralization programs in the Global South. Development interventions can be understood in terms of political and normative struggles that determine resource flows and our socially-constructed notions of development. As Bourdieu predicts, development actors’ *disposition* toward elite capture frequently aligns with their *position* in these struggles: development researchers and practitioners identify elite capture as a central problem with bottom-up development approaches and use the elite capture critique to legitimize top-down control of project resources, while the participants of development projects see many of these alleged instances of elite capture as unproblematic. We employ Bourdieu’s notions of reflexivity and symbolic power to investigate the history and use of competing conceptualizations of elite capture. We examine the narrow framing of the elite capture critique, and we evaluate the critique’s relevance to the roles and capacities of local elite in West African villages. Finally, we understand elite capture in terms of the larger context of powerful actors throughout the aid chain capturing development resources. Our findings suggest that the elite capture critique is a form of symbolic power that legitimizes arbitrary power relations between international development institutions and rural communities in the Global South.

## 1. Introduction

Community-Driven Development (CDD) and other bottom-up approaches are a genuine effort to empower poor communities with control over project resources (Dongier *et al.*, 2003), but they are criticized for their vulnerability to elite capture (Platteau, 2004). Elite capture largely refers to the phenomena of local elites leveraging superior political and economic status to usurp the benefits of community development and decentralization programs that transfer control over public goods to lower-level governance structures (Platteau and Abraham, 2002; Bardhan and Mookherjee, 2006; Dasgupta and Beard, 2007; Kusumawati and Visser, 2016). Lower-level governance structures are widely assumed to be more susceptible to elite capture because of greater opportunities for collusion (Bardhan and Mookherjee, 2005; Dutta, 2009).

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

According to Bourdieu, our worldviews emerge from historical struggles over symbolic and material power and lead us to experience arbitrary social power relations as justified and even necessary (Bourdieu, 1977, pp. 80–82). Symbolic power imposes classification systems that legitimize structures of domination (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; p. 13), and it thereby operates on our pre-reflective ‘commonsense’ understanding of the world: “below the level of calculation and even consciousness” one falls into acceptance of arbitrary power relations without taking into account the coincidence

between our dispositions and position (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 128). Bourdieu's thinking appears relevant because our *disposition* toward the elite capture critique frequently aligns with our *position* in the power struggle. Development researchers and practitioners identify elite capture as the central problem in bottom-up development approaches (Duchoslav, 2013; Casey, 2018; Fox, 2020), while the participants of development projects see many of these alleged instances of elite capture as unproblematic or even prosocial behavior (Conning and Kevane, 2002; Platteau, 2004, 2009; Rao and Ibáñez, 2005; Beath, Fotini and Enikolopov, 2011; Khatun *et al.*, 2015; Kita, 2019; Mawomo, 2019, p. 340).

In this chapter, we investigate the pertinence and use of the notion of elite capture. This is a fraught exercise because we are vulnerable to reaffirming symbols and entrenched power relations when we consider issues of empowerment and capture, as we tend to see them within frameworks that legitimize the existing relations of domination. For example, when development institutions capture development resources and decision-making powers, it's generally considered a necessity of good project management, but when local elites capture them, it's often considered to be "pernicious" graft that aggravates oppressive social hierarchies (Platteau, 2004; Andersson *et al.*, 2018). On the other side of the elite capture debate, the project participants' acceptance of elite capture could also emerge from the internalization of symbolic power that legitimizes arbitrary power relations within the villages. Bourdieu's reflexive approach challenges us to be aware of how symbolic power has shaped the pre-reflective framework of our thinking.

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

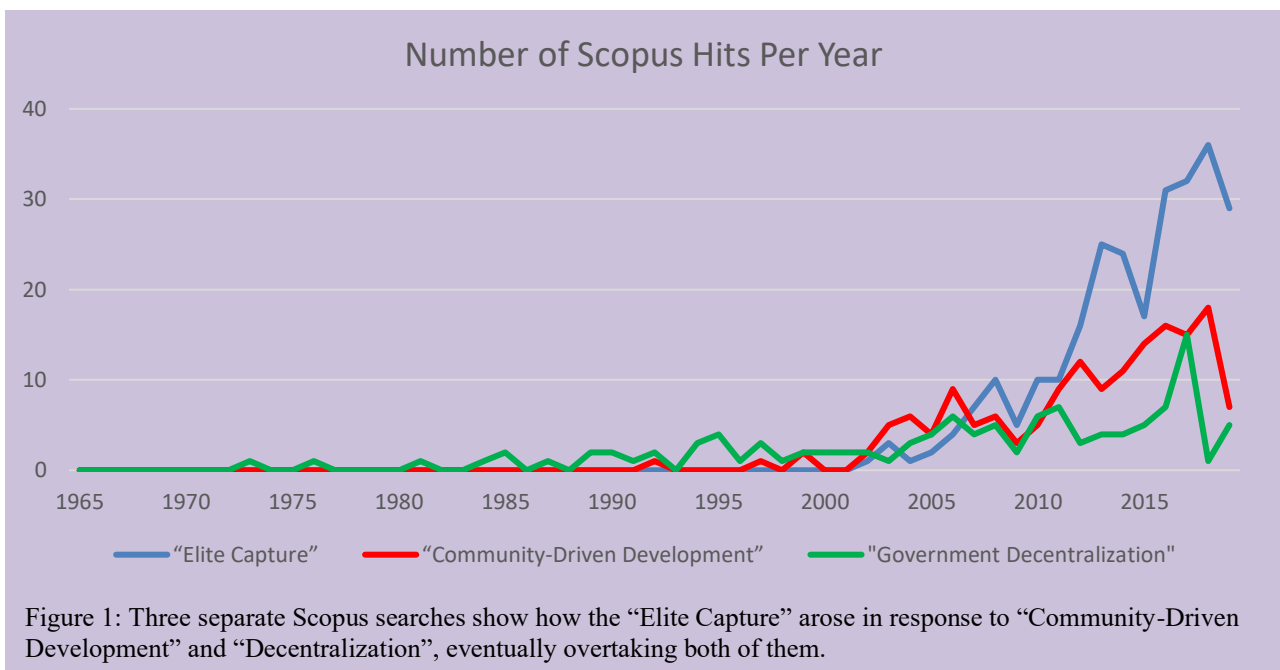
## **2. How Elite Capture is Understood and Used**

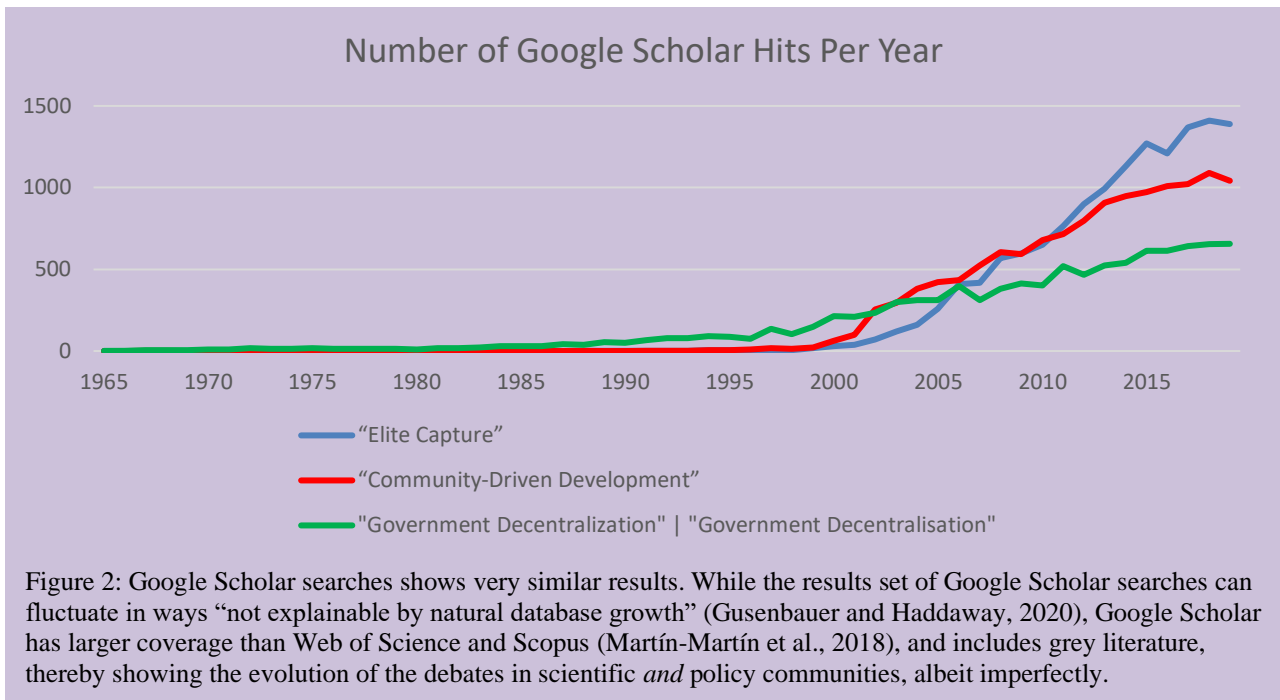
### 2.1 The Emergence of the Concept of Elite Capture

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

The concern for elite capture appeared in international development when Holdcroft (1978) wrote about its emergence in community development in the 1950's. The elite capture critique rose to

prominence in development studies as a response to the decentralization debate and bottom-up development approaches, see Figures 1 and 2. Argawal (2001), Guijt (1998), and Kothari (2001) laid the groundwork by criticizing proponents of community empowerment for their tendency to uncritically celebrate the ‘local community’ without considering entrenched local power relations. Platteau “set the tone” of the elite capture critique (Kusumawati and Visser, 2016, p. 304) when he argued that “personalised relationships in tribal societies” lead to community imperfections, inequality, and elite capture (Platteau and Abraham, 2002, p. 111; Platteau, 2004). Numerous scholars (Williams *et al.*, 2003; Ribot, 2004; Iversen *et al.*, 2006; D’Exelle, 2009; Wong, 2010; Labonte, 2012) have underscored the elite capture critique. However, other research on CDD and decentralization shows how the act of devolving power to communities can undermine elite capture (Blair, 2000; Fritzen, 2007; Dufhues, Theesfeld and Buchenrieder, 2015), but it takes marginalized groups longer to mobilize and gain control over resources devolved to communities (Manor, 1999, p. 48; Lund and Saito-Jensen, 2013). Some scholars make the distinction between elite capture (elite’s usurping undue portions of project benefits for personal gain) and elite control (elite’s controlling decision-making processes potentially for everyone’s benefit) (Rao and Ibáñez, 2005; Dasgupta and Beard, 2007; Fritzen, 2007; Lucas, 2016; Musgrave and Wong, 2016; Saguin, 2018). These studies demonstrate cases of elites controlling CDD resources in equitable and pro-poor manners. Finally, of the five existing meta-analyses of CDD programs, four conclude that elite capture is generally not a problem (Everatt and Gwagwa, 2005; Kumar *et al.*, 2005; Wong, 2012; Casey, 2018) and the fifth finds that elite capture in CDD is context specific (Mansuri and Rao, 2003).





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

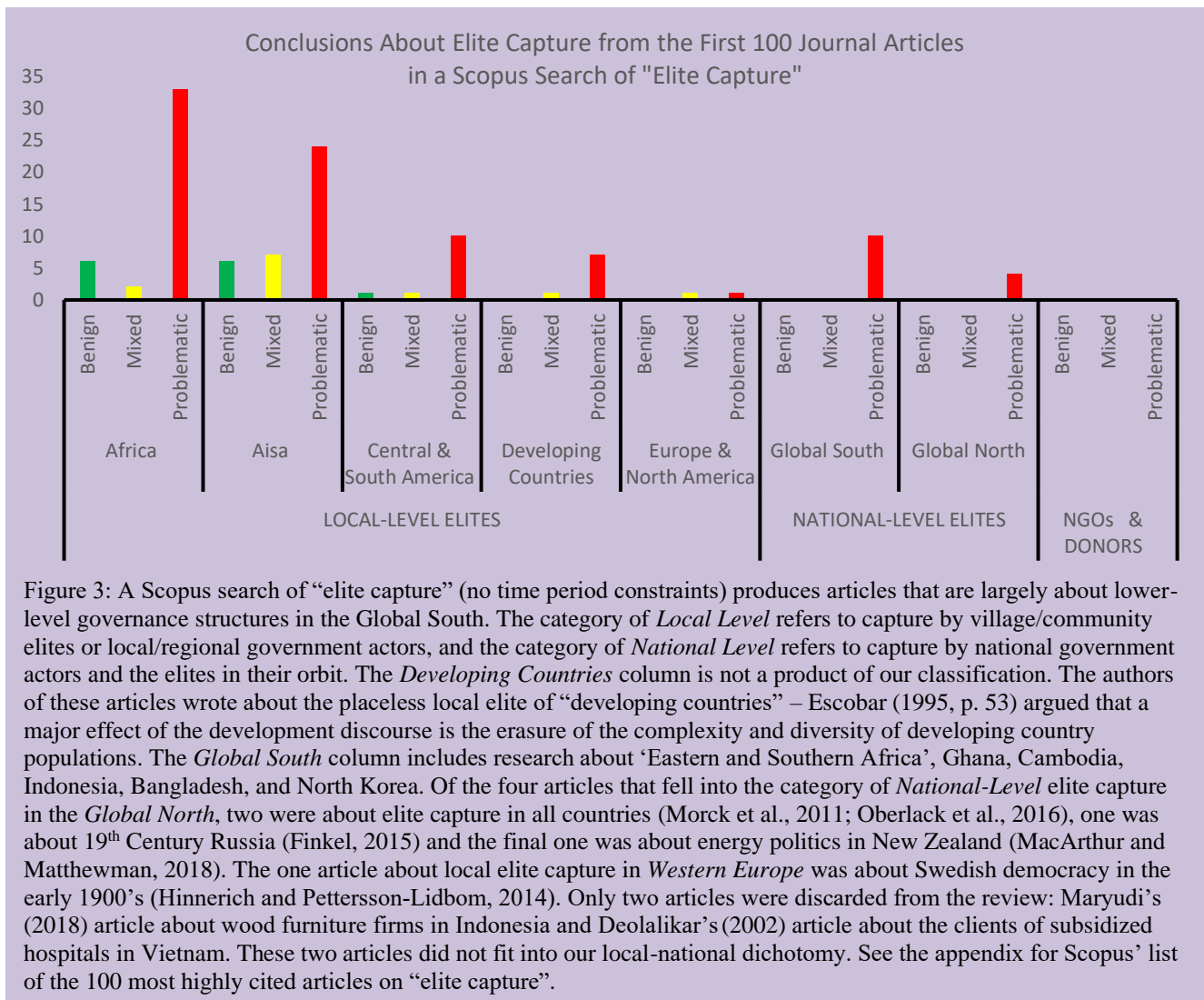
A major challenge in development is the constant effort of powerful actors throughout the aid chain to capture resources that are intended for the world’s poor (Wenar, 2006). Development’s focus on upward accountability (Bornstein, Wallace and Chapman, 2006) has made accountability a powerful weapon that development actors strategically use to delegitimize their competitors in the struggle for resources (Thomas, Chhetri and Hussaini, 2008). Much like the cynical articulation of local elite recurring through American federalism, colonialism, post-colonial state formation, and decentralization, the use of the elite capture critique emerged in mainstream development, despite more nuanced research studies and mixed results, because it serves the interests of higher-level structures.

## 2.2 The Narrow Framing of Elite Capture in the Development Arena

A literature review on the use of the term ‘elite capture’ reveals an interesting trend – the term is mostly used with regard to local elites in the Global South (see Figure 3). By explicitly employing the elite capture critique to legitimize top-down control over development resources, development researchers and practitioners are implicitly arguing that elite capture in decentralization and CDD is worse than the capture that occurs when national elites or development institutions maintain top-down control over development resources. However, the evidence to support these claims does not exist.

Regarding national level elites (“corruption”), Bardhan and Mookherjee (1999) developed a theoretical model to compare elite capture and national-level corruption, and found that capture is too context specific for any generalizable results. Bardhan and Mookherjee (2005, p. 40) subsequently conducted a literature review and concluded that the effects of decentralization on elite capture and national corruption are too complex for summarization yet “tend to indicate that the problems of local

capture within communities have not been excessive and have been dominated by beneficial effects on targeting across communities.”



Regarding NGO and donor capture (also known as “lodging”) (Harsh, Mbatia and Shrum, 2010), the elite capture critique simply ignores the capture and control of resources at these higher levels. Looking at Figure 3, how can we conclude that local elites in the Global South are *more* likely to control and capture resources than NGOs and donors, when they are excluded from the elite capture debate? We found only two case studies that look into the matter. Both studies show that elite capture in devolved development projects is small compared to targeting errors and misallocation in top-down projects, and neither compared elite capture to NGO/donor capture (Galasso and Ravallion, 2005; Alatas *et al.*, 2019).

The narrow framing of elite capture in CDD evaluates it in a vacuum without taking into account higher levels of control and capture in the top-down organization of development projects, in which the local communities are routinely excluded from control over development resources and disempowered (Power, Maury and Maury, 2002; Townsend, Porter and Mawdsley, 2002; Pfeiffer, 2003; Khadka, 2009, p. 231). Bornstein (2006, pp. 4–8) and Chambers (2010) point out that the prioritization of upward accountability (and the concomitant use of logical frameworks, verifiable indicators, and results-based management) leads NGOs to strictly control the conditions in which projects are implemented and create a disempowering effect among the target populations. NGO projects tend to arrive at rural villages as a fixed package of activities and if-then clauses (within a

Theory of Change) that claim to account for the farmers' context, behaviors, and motivations. Large donors currently tend to require proposals to be organized according to an overarching Theory of Change that well-paid Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) teams validate via a predictive Results Framework. These practices conceive of the farmers as deterministic "things" that will conform to the project's predictions, rendering the farmers passive in their own development (Chambers, 2010). This mode of practice is designed to reveal rapid and easily-observed results (Boulding, 2009), while the less visible, empowerment-related goals of development initiatives, like self-determination, community initiative, and a self-reliant capacity to thrive, are neglected (Power, Maury and Maury, 2002).

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

The elite capture critique also fails to consider global inequality. Zoom out and take a brief look at inequality and the elite at the global level and you will find a global Gini Coefficient of 0.61 to 0.71 (Hillebrand, 2009; UNDP, 2010), and eight humans controlling as much wealth as half of humanity (Hardoon, 2017). Stand up from your desk and seek out the leader and a grounds keeper at your institution and inquire into their remuneration – claiming that elites capture more resources than nonelites is tautological. So why is the development community so preoccupied with elite capture in rural communities in the Global South, where the intra-village Gini Coefficient can be as low as 0.14 (Arcand and Wagner, 2016)?

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

### 2.3 Elite Capture Is Context Specific; A Review of Rural West African Elite and their Responsibilities

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

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

To cope with the unpredictable environment, the majority of rural Africans inhabit cultures that apply social pressure on anyone with a surplus (especially the local elite) to share their wealth with poor friends and family (Bergh, 2004; Kazianga, 2006; Platteau, 2006; Alby and Auriol, 2010). Bernard (2008) frames this social pressure as a crucial safety net for the above-mentioned risks associated with dryland agricultural production in West Africa. Households that fall into financial crisis often sell

livestock as a source of emergency cash, but for those who are too poor to own livestock, their true safety net is their participation in the extended family (Bulte, Richards and Voors, 2018, p. 67). As a result, economic differentiation is more focused on staving off poverty than accumulation (Lund and Benjaminsen, 2001, p. 300). Wealth distribution in rural West Africa is characterized by relative equality (Saul, 1983). A measure of intra-community inequality in 177 villages in Senegal revealed Gini Coefficients at a mere 0.14 to 0.18 “indicating that at the village level the households are equally poor” (Arcand and Wagner, 2016, p. 109).

Village elite in LCASWA are less able to entrench their position of wealth because the primary constraint in agriculture is labor, not land (Hussein and Nelson, 1998; Bulte, Richards and Voors, 2018, p. 61). In land-constrained agricultural systems, village elite can entrench their position via the acquisition of land. Research from land-constrained systems has confirmed that unequal land holdings play an important role in the prevalence of elite capture (Bardhan and Mookherjee, 2003; Galasso and Ravallion, 2005; Pan and Christiaensen, 2012). In labor-constrained systems however, the competition over labor has a greater impact on productivity and wealth (Saul, 1983; Binswanger and McIntire, 1987; Bulte, Richards and Voors, 2018, pp. 60–61). The quantity of labor a household can access is highly dynamic – households grow and contract, members shift in and out of working age, other members emigrate to urban areas. Shifting quantities of labor, combined with low levels of possible capital accumulation in dryland agriculture, create unstable and ambiguous class structures (Berry, 1993, p. 184; Long, 2003, p. 102). Nevertheless, outsiders from the Global North have a history of projecting rigidity onto fluid class structures in traditional Sub-Saharan systems (Berry, 1993, p. 25). The underappreciation of rural class fluidity is not endemic to LACSWA – it has been widely observed in rural India too, despite the caste system (Powis, 2007).

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

#### 2.4 Elite Capture in Perspective: Including Higher-Level Capture in the Elite Capture Critique

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

While a thorough comparison of the disempowering effects of top-down development and elite capture are beyond the scope of this article, a brief review of resource capture by local elites and NGOs is possible. Unfortunately, detailed information of NGO capture in a typical top-down project is unavailable because NGOs routinely recategorize administrative costs as programmatic costs to hide their overhead (Walsh and Lenihan, 2006). Conversations with NGO staff reveal that staff salaries, administrative costs, equipment for the NGOs (computers, cars, etc.) and air travel typically comprise at least 50% of project budgets, and some studies show that NGO and donor capture can be as high as 60-90% (Harsh, Mbatia and Shrum, 2010; Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012, p. 452), but a more concrete benchmark is necessary for our purposes. NGOs implementing CDD projects provides

a more straightforward means of measuring NGO capture: the NGO's total project budget minus the amount issued to the communities as block grants (NGO budget – block grants = NGO capture).<sup>1</sup>

The elite capture critique has enabled/justified NGOs to implement intensive community trainings to ensure broad participation in resource allocation (Fritzen, 2007; Lawson, 2011; Casey, 2018). This heavy-handed approach to CDD, coupled with resource-intensive M&E practices and other NGO lodging leads to high levels of capture. Casey's (2011) evaluation of the GoBifo, a CDD project in Liberia, showed that the project implementer spent 30% of the budget on social facilitation (to prevent elite capture), 23% on NGO operating costs, and 47% was devolved to the communities in the form of grants. Casey (2012) showed that local elites captured minimal levels of the grants. Thus, the nonelites of the GoBifo communities gained access to almost half of the grant. Tuungane 1, another large-sale CDD program with heavy NGO involvement, allocated 43% of the £30 million budget to the communities in the form of block grants and 57% went to the implementing NGO's operating/facilitation costs. The project dutifully discovered only £21,251 of locally-misappropriated funds throughout the £13 million in block grants – a fraction of 1% was captured by the local elite in this heavy-handed approach to CDD (IRC and CARE, 2012). Humphreys (2012) conducted a follow-up study to the Tuungane project. Using a random sampling of Tuungane and control villages, Humphrey's research team issued \$1,000 to each community for a development project of their choosing. In this follow-up study, the research team did not conduct community meetings to promote inclusivity and transparency. They found that an average of 15% of the grant (in both Tuungane 1 and control villages) was not accounted for, thus insinuating the level of elite capture. Thus, NGO implementing Tuungane captured 57%, while the local elites captured 15%.

### 3. Discussion

#### 3.1 Researchers' Normativities and Worldviews Projected into the Elite Capture Critique

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

While much of the elite capture research uses qualitative surveys that consider the community members' perspectives, a lot of the elite capture research still relies on quantitative proxies for capture that are devised by the researchers. These proxies typically calculate elite capture by adding up the resources that benefit the local elite verses those directly benefiting the poor, or by attempting to account for all the community's project expenditures and subtracting that from the amount of the community grant (on the assumption the elite captured the missing portion). These simple accounting exercises fail to account for the interlocking complexities of local tradition, legitimacy, and pro-social service delivery by the local leadership (Takasaki, 2011a), nor do they account for cultural norms and traditions of allocation and mutual care that could be disrupted by perfectly equal allocations (Kita, 2019). The simple accounting measures are also prone to reifying researchers' unacknowledged

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<sup>1</sup> However, this method fails to include capture even higher up the aid chain, in (government and private) donor institutions.



normativities that are not necessarily shared by the people they study. For example, although some research measures elite capture via the selection of public goods that favor elites (Nath, 2014), other studies measure it by the proportion of community expenditure on private goods targeting the poorest people versus public good projects (Araujo *et al.*, 2008; Darmawan and Klasen, 2013; Darmawan, 2014). This method subjects the target communities to the researchers' normative judgement that only the community's poorest people should benefit from development. When community leaders decide that their community would be better served by a public goods project that targets everyone, their actions were classified as elite capture. Kusumawati and Visser (2016, p. 305) argue that elite capture "studies remain too much driven by a northern, hegemonic view and expatriate concern with the institutional norm of a Weberian transparent, democratic, and inclusive, but narrowly defined financial accountability."

### 3.2 The Elite Capture Critique Requires a Reflexive Approach

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

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## Appendix

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