

# Informal Learning for Citizenship Building in Shared Struggles for Rights: Cases of Political Solidarity Between Colombian and Spanish Organisations

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Published online: 20 May 2015

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**Abstract** Dominant discourses and practices in international cooperation have been characterised by depoliticisation and unequal power relationships. However, a number of more transformative experiences of cooperation also exist, where joint work between Northern and Southern social organisations is linked with a more political perspective. These kinds of experiences can be considered processes of informal learning in social action: through shared actions, strategies and frameworks and through interaction between organisations, institutions and the grassroots, informal and multidimensional learning processes occur in the people and organisations engaged. The study approaches four cases of networks that have linked Spanish and Colombian organisations which promote advocacy and social mobilisation for the defence of human rights in Colombia. The results show that people engaged in the cases experience intense learning processes that are relevant for the construction of solidarities and a radical global citizenship, but that these processes are also replete with limitations, tensions and challenges.

**Résumé** Les discours dominants et les pratiques dans le domaine de coopération internationale ont été caractérisés par la dépoliticisation et des rapports de force

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inégaux. Toutefois, un certain nombre d'expériences de coopération plus transformatrices existent également, au cours desquelles un travail commun entre les organisations sociales du Nord et du Sud est associé à un point de vue plus politique. Ces expériences peuvent être considérées comme des processus informels d'apprentissage en action sociale: grâce à des actions, des stratégies et des cadres communs et grâce à l'interaction entre les organisations, les institutions et les populations locales, des processus d'apprentissage informels et multidimensionnels apparaissent parmi les personnes et les organisations engagées. Cette étude aborde quatre exemples de réseaux qui ont associé des organisations espagnoles et colombiennes promouvant la sensibilisation et la mobilisation sociale pour la défense des droits de l'homme en Colombie. Les résultats montrent que les personnes engagées dans ces exemples connaissent des processus d'apprentissage intenses pertinents pour la construction de solidarités et d'une citoyenneté mondiale radicale, mais aussi que ces processus sont remplis de limites, de tensions et de défis.

**Zusammenfassung** Die vorherrschenden Diskussionen und Praktiken in der internationalen Zusammenarbeit zeichnen sich seit einiger Zeit durch eine Entpolitisierung und ungleiche Machtbeziehungen aus. Allerdings gibt es auch eine Reihe von transformativeren Erfahrungen bei der Zusammenarbeit, wo die Kooperation zwischen nördlichen und südlichen sozialen Organisationen mit einer politischeren Perspektive in Verbindung steht. Solche Erfahrungen können als Prozesse informalen Lernens im Rahmen sozialen Handelns betrachtet werden: Gemeinsames Handeln, gemeinsame Strategien und Systeme sowie die Wechselbeziehung zwischen Organisationen, Institutionen und Basisbewegungen führen bei den involvierten Personen und Organisationen zu informalen und multidimensionalen Lernprozessen. Die Studie betrachtet vier Netzwerke, die spanische und kolumbianische Organisationen zusammengeführt haben, welche sich für die Interessenvertretung und soziale Mobilisierung für die Verteidigung von Menschenrechten in Kolumbien einsetzen. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass die involvierten Personen intensive Lernprozesse durchmachen, die für den Aufbau von Solidarität und einer radikalen globalen Bürgerschaft relevant sind, jedoch auch durch zahlreiche Einschränkungen, Spannungen und Probleme geprägt sind.

**Resumen** Los discursos y las prácticas dominantes en la cooperación internacional se han caracterizado por la despolitización y por relaciones de poder desiguales. Sin embargo, existen también un número de experiencias de cooperación más transformadoras, en las que el trabajo conjunto entre organizaciones sociales del norte y del sur está vinculado a una perspectiva más política. Estos tipos de experiencias pueden ser considerados procesos de aprendizaje informal en acción social: mediante acciones, estrategias y marcos compartidos y mediante la interacción entre organizaciones, instituciones y las bases, se producen procesos de aprendizaje informales y multidimensionales en las personas y organizadas implicadas. El estudio aborda cuatro casos de redes que han vinculado a organizaciones españolas y colombianas que promueven la defensa y la movilización social para la defensa de los derechos humanos en Colombia. Los resultados muestran que las

personas implicadas en los casos experimentan procesos de aprendizaje intensos que son relevantes para la construcción de solidaridades y una ciudadanía global radical, pero que dichos procesos también están repletos de limitaciones, tensiones y desafíos.

**Keywords** Social organisations · International cooperation · Politics · Informal learning · Global citizenship

## Introduction

Even though aid is unavoidably political (Carothers and De Gramont 2013), a discourse based on the idea that development and cooperation are purely technical and managerial issues has been widely accepted in recent decades (Wallace et al. 2007). Debates on development have become depoliticised and what has been called managerialism has become the dominant approach (Mowles et al. 2008). Notwithstanding, donors continue to use aid with political purposes and its actions, although supposedly apolitical, have had profound political impacts in recipient countries and territories.

As part of this process of managerialisation, new ideas inspired by market and private sector rationale have become central: efficacy, efficiency, impacts, products and clients of development, etc. (Dart 2004; Giri and van Ufford 2003). Non-Governmental Development Organisations (NGDOs) and other social actors have adopted these ideas, becoming project implementers. In this process, some of them may have lost the more openly political profiles they had in the past (Choudry and Shrage 2011). They may also have become part of a model of cooperation that promotes the managerialisation of local organisations, sustains the status quo and reproduces unequal power relationships (Dar and Cooke 2008; Mawdsley et al. 2002).

As a number of studies show, this process has also occurred in Spanish NGDOs (Revilla 2002; Gómez Gil 2005). However, it is possible to find a number of experiences of relationships between Northern and Southern social organisations that obtain funds from the aid system, but which work from a more transformative and openly political perspective—that is, placing the political dimension of their work at the centre, and openly addressing political economy and power issues. Organisations share common ideas on the changes they pursue, and try to build trusting, long-term political alliances for social transformation. International relationships between organisations with these features have been defined as “political solidarities” (Bringel et al. 2008)—the term that will be used most in this paper—“radical partnerships” (McGee 2010) or “transformative cooperation” (Fernández et al. 2013).

We will argue that these kinds of experiences are valuable as long as they are building what could be called a “global radical citizenship”, a transnational civil society that articulates transformative political discourses and actions for the expansion of rights (Heater 2004), highlighting the unequal power relations and political economy issues of control of resources in neo-liberal globalisation that

underlie human rights violations. The construction of this civil society can transpire through the informal, emergent and contextual learning processes that emerge in people and organisations that work together (Holst 2002), as new discourses, values, attitudes, knowledge and skills develop through relationships. The building of political solidarities can thus be considered a process of learning in social action with a powerful emancipatory potential (Foley 1999). Learning emerges from and also promotes action, as there is a dialectical and iterative relation between both processes (Foley 1999).

In the paper, four case studies of experiences of political solidarity are analysed. These cases link Spanish and Colombian organisations that have worked together on political actions, such as lobbying, raising public awareness, social mobilisation, etc., in the defence and construction of human rights in Colombia, and have received funding from Spanish public donors.

The aim is to identify the key features that have shaped the learning processes experienced by the people and organisations engaged in them. We will also identify the kind of learning they claim to have experienced, and the tensions and contradictions these learning processes in social action encounter.

We have adopted an interpretative approach and an essentially qualitative methodological perspective. The results of the study are based on the analysis of 39 semi-structured interviews with people involved in the cases, together with the analysis of secondary data.

In the next section, we approach the key theoretical ideas that have been presented: political solidarity, global radical citizenship and learning in social action. On the basis of these ideas we explain, in “[Analytical framework and Methods used](#)” sections, the analytical framework and the methods used to gather information. “[Context and Case studies](#)” sections present the cases within the contexts of the Colombian and Spanish aid system. “[Analysis and discussion](#)” section presents a discussion of the results, structured around the key ideas presented in the framework. Finally, we present some concluding remarks and some preliminary reflections on the theoretical and practical implications of our study.

We believe our work addresses a gap and represents a contribution in two respects. Firstly, it tries to explore a certain kind of (more consciously and openly politicised) relationship between social organisations in international cooperation, a kind of relationship that is frequently obscured and has been little explored. Secondly, it tries to appraise and understand these relationships as informal learning processes in social action. Even though there is a broad literature on learning and capacity building in international cooperation (e.g. Clarke and Oswald 2010), there is no specific research on relationships in international cooperation as informal learning processes in social action. This approach on learning has been used to analyse various forms of activism (e.g. Gouin 2009; Hall 2009; Choudry 2009; Ollis 2011), highlighting certain aspects of processes of individual and collective change that can be extremely relevant in understanding relationships in international cooperation.

## Concepts and Assumptions

### International Cooperation as Political Solidarity

It is possible to set out the characteristics of a different kind of international cooperation that may be being practised by some individuals, NGOs and other social organisations in the North, which support processes of radical social change driven by social organisations and movements in the South. Drawing on the contributions of various authors, we can identify some features of this kind of cooperation, which can be called “political solidarity” (Bringel et al. 2008).

This practice of aid links organisations that share common political and ethical principles, frameworks, ideas on social change, and how to achieve it (Pearce 2010; Fernández et al. 2013). It brings together actors from very different backgrounds, but which sympathise with similar political ideas (Bringel et al. 2008). Often, it links Northern social organisations with social movements in the South that articulate political, social and epistemological alternatives to current development models (Fernández et al. 2013), based on market logic, growth, economic modernisation and the adoption of liberal-democratic institutions. From this perspective, development is seen as a political praxis based on solidarity and mutual recognition (Bringel et al. 2008).

We can say that this kind of cooperation is openly political because organisations highlight political economy issues and try to analyse, unveil and confront structural and institutional factors that form the bases of situations of oppression and impoverishment (Gulrajani 2010; Fernández et al. 2013). Consequently, together these organisations build political objectives, strategies and actions, which are constantly revised and negotiated (Mowles et al. 2008; Eyben 2013). It implies working with flexibility, navigating complexity and adapting to changing political contexts together (Mowles et al. 2008). This kind of relationship is based on trust and political engagement (Eyben 2006), and it also implies confronting the unequal power relationships that may arise between actors in these alliances.

To approach these kinds of alliances implies assuming a specific ontological perspective, which has been called “relational” (Eyben 2008). This approach is far from the dominant essentialist perspective in development studies, which assumes that stakeholders have immutable, knowable identities and agendas from which they interact and negotiate with other actors. Conversely, from a relational perspective, we consider that stakeholders not only shape, but are also continually being shaped and transformed by the relationships they maintain (Eyben 2008).

### Global Radical Citizenship

As we will see below, these ideas on relationships are linked with the concept of global citizenship. Discussions on this concept can help us to better approach the features of the relationships of solidarity mentioned. Moreover, from a more normative perspective, the kinds of relationships described could be considered, as

are relevant as long as they involve the construction of global citizenship. We will now explore the discussions on the concept in order to develop these affirmations.

Some authors reject the validity of the idea of global citizenship, for various reasons. For some, global citizenship is a meaningless idea, as the essence of citizenship is the relationship with the State, and there is no “global State” (Heater 2004); moreover, the idea could undermine the legitimacy of nation states, and the importance of channelling demands at this level (Schattle 2008). Other authors argue that participation and deliberation can only genuinely take place at the local and community level (Schattle 2008).

However, we can answer this scepticism by drawing on other perspectives. Theoretically, the idea of global citizenship does not undermine the role of the State, but goes beyond a statist view to see citizenship in terms of solidarity, and to see one’s rights and duties also in relationship to non-State institutions and actors (e.g. corporations) (Gaventa and Tandon 2010). Normatively, the idea has been recognised as being crucial in overcoming global governance deficits and developing new forms of global accountability (Gaventa and Tandon 2010). Empirically, some authors state that global citizenship is an existing practice of global networking of social organisations seeking global change, combining local and global struggles (Choudry et al. 2012).

In order to connect these elements with the ideas on the practice of cooperation described earlier, we propose a more concrete characterisation of global citizenship. Drawing on the conceptualisation of “radical citizenship” by Hickey and Mohan (2005), and other scholars, we propose the idea of “global radical citizenship”. From this perspective, citizenship would be a political project of social transformation, led by the people in order to expand or defend existing rights, or create new ones (Isin and Wood 1999), through the construction of global solidarities, the opening of new possibilities of exercise of citizenship at the global level and the transformation of identities in emancipatory processes (Schattle 2008). These actions require a set of attributes (knowledge, values, attitudes, skills, etc.) that are also constitutive of citizenship (Merrifield 2002).

These ideas call for the alignment of struggles and resistances confronting various forms of oppression (Houtart 2001). It calls for a “bottom-up globalisation”, which confronts the dominant neo-liberal capitalist globalisation based on accumulation and the commodification of every aspect of life (Heron 2008). This alternative is based on the needs, experiences and aspirations of peoples (Boni and Taylor 2011). The role of subordinated and oppressed groups is central, as they may produce alternative societal projects and new forms of citizenship and democracy (Hickey and Mohan 2005).

We can mention examples of these alternative models built at the local level, but with global relevance. Recent works have theoretically and empirically explored examples in Latin America, as food sovereignty (see, for example, Altieri and Toledo 2011), *Buen Vivir* (see, for example, Villalba 2013 and Giovannini 2015, which show the Ecuadorian and Mexican cases), or popular economy (Bauwens and Lemaitre 2014). These perspectives are very different and plural, but all point as issues as the empowerment of grassroots organisations, community control of

resources, restoring local self-reliance, de-commodification of life, or conservation of natural diversity.

### Learning in Social Action

As has been indicated, relationships in international cooperation can be understood as learning processes of citizenship building. Learning in social action has received very limited attention from studies on education (Choudry et al. 2012). However, we can draw on a strand of criticism of adult education, embodied by authors like Foley, Holst or Hall, which analyses the process of informal learning and recognises its importance.

Processes of learning in social action have been described as emergent, informal, non-planned, tacit and incidental, which have to be unveiled in order to be understood (Foley 2004). This learning takes place through relationships, in permanent and dynamic processes, embedded in particular contexts, where social, political, economic and cultural factors are at play (Margaret 2010), as well as power relations (Pettit 2010). Although this is also true in formal learning, these aspects are of particular importance in informal learning, given that there is no control or planning, and that power dynamics are even less visible. This learning process can reproduce the *status quo* and the hegemony of ruling groups, or have an “empowering and emancipatory effect that helps to overcome oppression in society” (Steinklammer 2012:24).

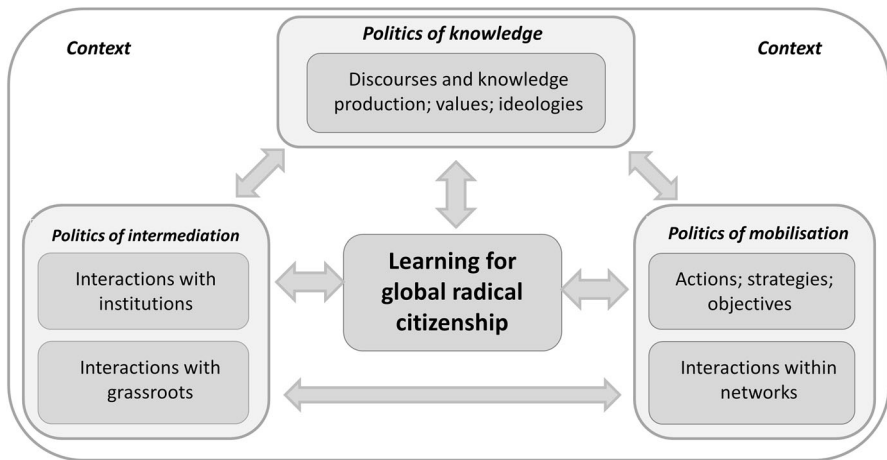
Social organisations of citizens involved in democratic action for social change are key spaces for learning in social action (Foley 1999; Holst 2002). Through their participation in social movements, individuals and collectives learn new skills and forms of thinking (Holst 2002, p. 87), and create new forms of knowledge (Choudry 2009).

The kinds of learning that emerge in social action can be very diverse: technical (how to perform a certain task), political (how people have power and use it), social, cultural, etc. (Foley 2004). The new knowledge acquired in these learning processes can be “expert” or “non-expert”—i.e. specialised, compartmentalised and standardised knowledge, or contextual and embedded (Kapoor and Choudry 2010). It may also be considered that informal learning processes have an intellectual, experiential and emotional dimension (Pettit 2010).

### Analytical Framework

In this section, drawing on the work of Gaventa and Tandon (2010) and Foley (1999), we propose a framework to collect, link and operationalise the ideas indicated above, to approach the learning processes for citizenship building in our case studies.

Following Gaventa and Tandon (2010), three key factors can be identified when approaching collective action processes in the building of citizenship. Firstly, the “micropolitics of mobilisation”, a category that includes questions such on the strategies, tactics, resources and interactions within the action networks at different



**Fig. 1** Learning processes for global citizenship building in the social action of networks. Source: Self-elaboration, based on Gaventa and Tandon (2010) and Foley (1999)

scales (from local to global) that are at play. Secondly, the “micropolitics of intermediation”, which refer to the nature of the mediation between the networks and other grassroots<sup>1</sup> and social organisations, and between networks and public institutions. These include issues of interlocution, representation, legitimacy, accountability, etc. Thirdly, the “micropolitics of knowledge”, a category that encompasses issues such as how knowledge is produced and how it shapes interactions and decision-making processes, the dynamics of resistance of alternative knowledge within dominant frameworks, the appropriation and reconfiguration of discourses in the movement between local and global levels, etc.

Furthermore, Foley (1999) proposes an analytical framework for addressing learning in social action with some similarities to Gaventa and Tandon’s approach. For him, approaching these processes implies considering, on the one hand, questions of “macropolitics”, changes in political economy and how they connect with changes in forms of mobilisation, actions and ideas; and on the other hand, questions of “micropolitics”, interactions between actors, and how discursive practices are at work in them.

On the basis of these contributions, we propose an original framework, with three key categories inspired by Gaventa and Tandon (2010). These categories are interconnected and refer to the drivers modelling the process of “learning for global radical citizenship”, the central category in the model (see Fig. 1).

In the category of “politics of mobilisation” we consider the subcategories of “objectives, strategies and actions” and “interactions within the structures”, which entail questions such as the nature, mechanisms and spaces of relationships within

<sup>1</sup> We consider “grassroots” as organisations with an engaged social base, founded on certain issues or identities, and with participative organisational structures. This makes them different from NGOs and other organisations which lack a social base, are composed of a few members, are usually professionalised, and mobilise funding (Diani 1992).



the networks. In the category of “intermediation”, a differentiation can be proposed between “interactions with public institutions”, and “interactions with grassroots organisations”. The category of “knowledge” involves questions linked to the production of discourses, knowledge, values or ideology.

The category of “learning for global radical citizenship” encompasses all the different kinds of learning that emerge in peoples and organisations in social actions, from the instrumental to the political, private to public, individual to collective, from skills and values to attitudes, etc. The links and interactions between the categories are complex and multidimensional, and they all take place in a particular context. This learning is modelled by interactions between stakeholders in the mobilisation networks; by dialogue and conflict with institutions; by interaction with grassroots organisations and intermediation between them and institutions; and by the “politics of knowledge”, i.e. how the discourses, values, and ideologies of these different stakeholders operate and model the learning taking place.

## Methods Used

The study is based in a total of 39 semi-structured interviews (32 individual and 7 group interviews), carried out between January and July 2013, with people engaged in organisations in the networks under analysis. Between 6 and 15 interviews were conducted for each case analysed. We tried to balance the number of interviews with people belonging to Spanish and to Colombian organisations (25 and 14, respectively). Furthermore, people with different levels of responsibility in the cases were interviewed, ranging from people with a central coordinating role, to people who only participated sporadically.

The primary information obtained was supplemented by secondary information, essentially documents produced by the organisations themselves: websites, reports, booklets, leaflets and audiovisual material developed for disseminating experiences; project formulation documents; internal and external evaluations of projects; public statements, manifestos, public condemnation, letters addressed to institutions, etc.

From an interpretivist perspective, we tried to capture the meanings and interpretations that people gave to the experience (Corbetta 2003), specifically, how they experienced the learning process and what the drivers and the results may have been. For information processing, a qualitative content analysis was performed on the interviews and secondary documentation, based on the predefined categories in the analytical framework. In this analysis, these categories were refined and new subcategories obtained. From these categories and subcategories, discussion was organised around the common themes and trends, differences and tensions that were identified. Triangulation of the information, both within and between methods (Mikkelsen 2005) was performed, comparing information obtained with the same methods applied to the different cases (e.g. semi-structured individual interviews), and with different methods for the same case (e.g. individual and collective interviews).

## Context

### The Armed Conflict in Colombia

Colombia has endured an armed conflict for more than 45 years, between security forces, paramilitary groups and guerrillas. In only the past 20 years, more than 70,000 people have been killed, and more than three million displaced (AI 2014).<sup>2</sup>

Kaldor (2001) defines some features of the conflict from the 90 s, when it intensified and degraded: violation of human rights at an enormous scale, mainly affecting the civil population; undermining of state legitimacy and monopoly on force; privatisation of the armed forces, essentially through paramilitarism; blurring and dilution of frontiers between war and organised crime; territorial control of armed actors searching for the control of population and resources.

The degradation of the conflict coincides with the implementation of the neo-liberal model in the country, based on the production of commodities for foreign markets. For example, the rapid expansion, beginning in the 90 s, of some agro-industrial crops—such as African palm—over vast areas was associated with an increase in paramilitary groups, displacement of local farmers, massacres and concentration of land in these same areas (Osorio and Villegas 2010). In the new century, the process continued with the mining boom: more than 80 % of violent displacements and other human rights violations took part in mining regions (Massé and Camargo 2012).

The effects of the conflict have been particularly dramatic for some social groups: women, who are affected by several kinds of sexual violence (Mesa de trabajo Mujer y Conflicto Armado 2011); indigenous peoples and the Afro-Colombian population, as they inhabit strategic areas; trade unionists and human rights activists in general (AI 2014). Armed groups have heavily persecuted people and social organisations, as they challenge their territorial control. Furthermore, the state has often criminalised social movements and organisations, frequently labelling them as subversive. Some organisations have been weakened by all these attacks, whereas others, focused on demands for peace, have emerged in recent years. In fact, most of the Colombian movements have reoriented or realigned their discourses, objectives and actions to the building of peace and the protection of human rights. Moreover, these movements have connected demands of peace and human rights with the need for structural changes (Ibarra 2007), such as the need for agrarian reform, changes in production and labour relations, the full respect of the complete autonomy of indigenous peoples, etc.

### Spanish Aid and the Conflict

The existence of the armed conflict has modelled the discourses and strategies of Spanish aid in Colombia, as has been the case for most donors. For Spanish aid,

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<sup>2</sup> In 2012, the Colombian government and the FARC, the main guerrilla group in the country, publicly recognised that they were in the process of negotiating towards the end of the armed confrontation, which is still active.

Colombia is of primary importance due to the conflict, even though it is a middle-income country (see AECID 2004, 2008). In fact, the country has traditionally been amongst the main recipients of aid, even following the huge budget cuts—up to 60 %—after 2010 (AECID 2012).

The sectorial priorities are also modelled by the existence of the conflict, as well as the social groups considered of principal attention: indigenous peoples, peasants, Afro-Colombians, and victims of the conflict in general (AECID 2005, 2010).

A key instrument for channelling the funds has been the financing of Spanish NGOs working with Colombian local organisations—around 50 % of the total amount of funds. As a result, significant resources have been available for Spanish NGOs working in Colombia with organisations from the mentioned groups. However, they also experienced hefty cuts from 2010.

As could be said in any other context, Spanish cooperation in Colombia may be contributing to the demobilisation and depoliticisation of local organisations (Dar and Cooke 2008). However, we will see how it may also be true that a number of Colombian organisations have, through the Spanish organisations, found a way to access resources, international support and find a legitimacy—denied by their state—without renouncing their political agendas of peace and social transformation.

## Case Studies

The study approaches four cases of experiences of international cooperation that have linked different Spanish and Colombian social organisations (NGDOs, local NGOs, unions, human rights and grassroots organisations, etc.) in joint political work on the defence and expansion of rights in Colombia. These cannot be considered typical or representative cases of Spanish non-governmental international cooperation. However, they can be considered cases of “political solidarity”, as it was conceptualised earlier. We used a purposive sampling strategy, which means we tried to find cases relevant for our research questions and theoretical framework to help us generate rich information on our issue, as well as analytical generalisations, but not statistical generalisations or representativeness (Curtis et al. 2000).

We used homogenous purposive sampling; a sampling where units share key traits: (1) The four networks carry out various political actions: lobbying Spanish institutions, organising demonstrations, public awareness, supporting Colombian organisations to find new allies, etc. (2) Relationships between organisations have been extant for at least 4 years, and continue. (3) These processes have been supported by funds coming from various Spanish public donors.

The four case studies are briefly described below:

- Asturian Programme for the Protection of Victims of Human Rights Violations in Colombia (*Programa Asturiano de Protección de Víctimas de Violaciones de los Derechos Humanos en Colombia*). Launched in 2001, this is formally an institutional programme of the Regional Government of

Asturias (a small region in the north of Spain with a population of 1,000,000). The Government is the main funder of the initiative, but the Programme was proposed, and is coordinated and implemented, by the NGDO *Soldepaz-Pachakutik*, together with a support committee, composed of nine Asturian social organisations of various profiles (NGDOs, NGOs, trade unions, human rights organisations). It also has a Selection Committee in Colombia, which was initially formed by the Central Union of Workers of Colombia (*Central Unitaria de Trabajadores de Colombia*, CUT), which has been joined by four Colombian human rights organisations. The Selection Committee selects between five and nine human rights defenders (unionists, students, peasant or indigenous leaders, etc., from grassroots organisations, which propose them for nomination), who are persecuted by violent groups. Once selected, they are hosted in Asturias for a period of 6 months. During their stay, guests are not only protected, but also carry out a number of awareness-raising and advocacy actions (at local, regional, national and European levels), create new contacts and links between their home organisations and Spanish organisations that can support them, and provide and receive training. Additionally, the Programme organises a Verification Committee, a group of Spanish members of social organisations, policy-makers and public workers, which makes annual visits to different regions and communities in Colombia—usually the home regions of the persons who were hosted in Asturias—to perform an analysis of the situation of human rights by performing interviews, meetings, etc. Following this, a report is drawn up, which provides the basis for advocacy actions. Moreover, organisations taking part in the Programme continually monitor and denounce violations of human rights in Colombia. *Soldepaz* supervises the day-to-day management, although organisations in the Support Committee help in tasks such as organising meetings of Colombians with institutions and organisations, or providing personal support to guests. The Support Committee meets two or three times a year to take key decisions, and a yearly meeting is held in Colombia between members of this committee and the Selection Committee. Additionally, online communication is frequent.

- Coordination Bureau for the Human Rights of Women and for Peace in Colombia (*Mesa por los Derechos Humanos de las Mujeres y la Paz en Colombia*). Formed in 2007, it is led by the NGDO *Atelier*, which runs the day-to-day work, and has integrated between 8 and 15 Spanish organisations (trade unions, NGDOs, university institutes, feminist organisations) and between 5 and 9 Colombian organisations (NGOs and grassroots women's organisations)—the number of which varies depending on the period. It has its headquarters and celebrates periodic face-to-face meetings in Valencia. Some members of Colombian organisations in the Mesa live in Spain due to political or personal reasons, which makes the participation of these organisations easier. Online contact is frequent, as well as meetings in other parts of Spain and Colombia. The network performs a number of awareness-raising and advocacy actions on the issue of the rights of women in Colombia: lobbying actions made towards regional and national parliaments to denounce the

- situation and force them to take a public stand on the issue; producing and distributing documentaries and making photo exhibitions; conducting international meetings and seminars; positioning the issue in the mass media; the creation of an Observatory to produce information on women rights violations, etc. The Mesa has received funding from the Spanish national aid agency and the Valencian aid agency.
- Campaign of support for the Minga of Social and Community Resistance (*Apoyo a la Minga de Resistencia Social y Comunitaria*). In this process, the Coordination for the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (*Coordinación por los Derechos de los Pueblos Indígenas*—CODPI, an alliance which brings together five Spanish NGDOs and NGOs) and the Observatory for the Autonomy and Rights of Indigenous Peoples (*Observatorio por la Autonomía y los Derechos de los Pueblos Indígenas*, ADPI, a network of three organisations and several independent individuals) have supported the Minga. The Minga is an intense social mobilisation process that began in 2004, associating the most important Colombian indigenous organisations, as well as other grassroots organisations, to defend their rights through mass marches and other forms of political pressure towards the Colombian State. COPDI and ADPI have been supporting this process since 2010, bringing international attention and support to the actions of the Minga through various activities: making the process visible in the media; making demands on the Spanish State regarding the rights of indigenous peoples (for example, denouncing alleged violations of human rights by Spanish companies); helping indigenous leaders to build alliances in Spain or providing them with the guidance and financial and political support to participate in international human rights forums, such as the European Court of Human Rights. Besides permanent online communication between CODPI and ADPI and indigenous organisations (mainly with the Indigenous Council of the Cauca, the *Consejo Regional Indígena del Cauca*, CRIC) frequent face-to-face meetings take place both in Spain and Colombia when possible, and organisation members travel frequently to maintain contact, for advocacy actions, etc.
  - Support by the NGDO Initiatives for International Cooperation for Development (*Iniciativas para la Cooperación Internacional al Desarrollo*, ICID) to women's organisations in the Cauca. Since 2005, ICID has carried out projects with the local NGO Open Workshop (*Taller Abierto*) and several small women's grassroots organisations in the Cauca, aimed at supporting the organisational processes of women displaced by war. They do so through awareness-raising and training programmes, facilitating the coordination and logistics for meetings, providing legal assistance, etc. Furthermore, all these organisations have conducted advocacy actions directed at the Spanish aid agency and the Spanish Foreign Ministry, to demand a response to threats made by armed groups towards women's organisations. The relationship is maintained by permanent online contact, and a yearly 2-week visit to Cauca of one member of the TA.

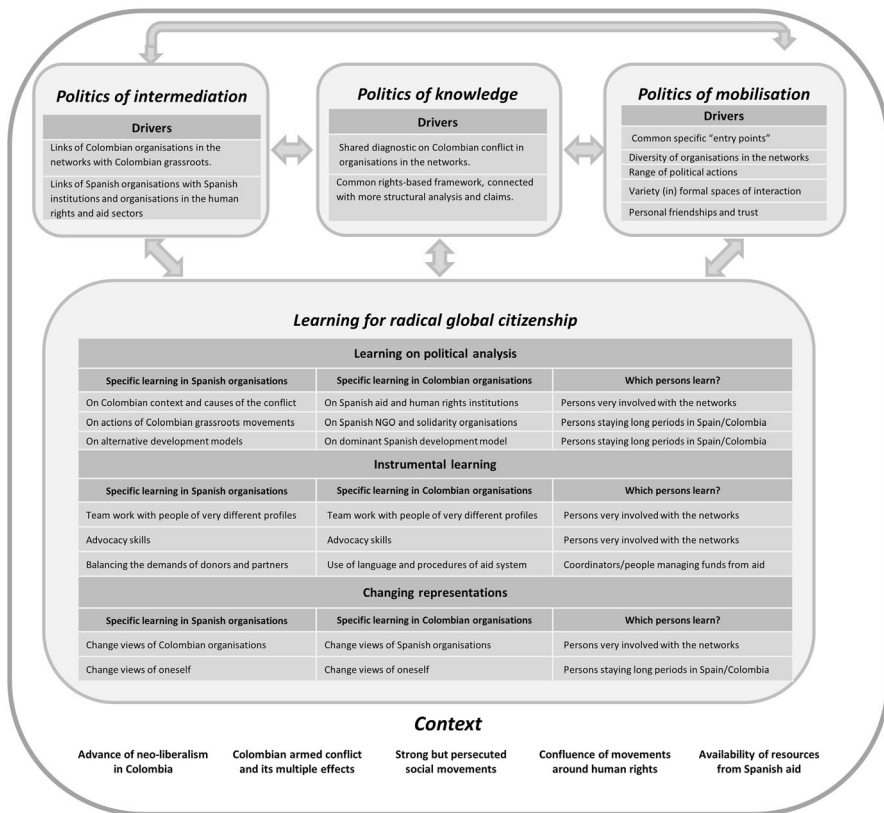
## Analysis and Discussion

### Which Drivers Modelled Learning Processes in Political Solidarity Experiences?

We now identify the key elements regarding the politics of mobilisation, intermediation and knowledge in the case studies, which seem to have modelled the learning processes for radical global citizenship building (see Fig. 2 at the end of “Which learning for global radical citizenship emerged and in whom?” section for a summary).

#### The Politics of Mobilisation

Regarding the objectives and strategies of mobilisation, we find that in all the cases there is a objective that serves as an “entry point”: hosting threatened Colombian activists, defending women’s rights, supporting a specific social mobilisation



**Fig. 2** Learning processes for global citizenship building in process under analysis. Source: Self-elaboration

process. However, a broad series of political actions are developed around these specific objectives (lobbying, awareness raising, etc.). Furthermore, all the cases try to associate a large number of organisations of varying profiles, even though they do not usually work together (for ideological reasons or for past misunderstandings or conflicts), to establish long-term alliances, and to create widespread movements: “the important thing is to build a wide solidarity movement [with Colombia] in Asturias, even gathering together organisations which usually do not work together, but this is precisely what makes us strong” (Spanish member of the Asturian Programme). This enables rich learning processes, given the multiplicity and complexity of interactions. Moreover, these processes are long-term oriented, as they do not depend on specific projects.

Regarding the politics of interaction between organisations in the networks, we find that almost all respondents, and numerous documents on the cases, emphasise the attempts made to establish equal and democratic relationships. “We found that we can only work with development NGOs from a horizontal relationship, to build on the bases of respect and solidarity. It is not possible to do that in every case, but it is with them [ICID]” (member of *Taller Abierto*).

To accomplish this, networks generate models and protocols for communication, information and decision making to facilitate horizontal relationships, e.g. conducting periodic and frequent face-to-face meetings for debate; permanent online communication; decision-making mechanisms by consensus, etc.

In all cases, there is a Spanish person or organisation that plays the role of coordinator, centralising much of the more bureaucratic and management work, freeing up other persons and organisations in the network so they can focus on political action. The level of commitment of people and organisations in the networks are highly variable: However, just a limited number of organisations in each network participate more intensely, and no more than two or three people from each organisation are really engaged. As we will see below, this limits the scope of learning.

Alongside the formal channels for communication, interviewees highlighted the importance of informal meetings and conversations, and of sharing moments of relaxation, fun or daily life, which take place mainly during long trips to Spain/Colombia. They are considered as powerful emotional drivers for creating good relationships and thus for learning. For example, a Spanish member of the Support Committee of the Asturian Programme said:

“Do you know when I began to share more things [with Colombians hosted in Asturias]? One day we had nothing to do because everyone in the city was on vacation, and we were talking after accompanying them to the cinema [...] It is in these situations that you can break down some barriers, and you develop a different and more interesting relation, to get to know them”.

For his part, a guest of the Programme states: “The generosity of people sharing their dinner, taking you to a demonstration, buying you a beer [...] all these personal things are key in the experience in Asturias”.

Close personal friendships seem also to be central when organisations begin to work together and for these processes to have continuity, especially during conflicts

within the networks. This seems to be fundamental when operating in sensitive, complex and shifting political contexts such as that of Colombia, which demands relationships of great trust.

### *The Politics of Knowledge, Discourses and Ideologies*

Political affinity is indicated in all cases as a key driver in building relationships. Shared discourses and ideologies allow mutual understanding and trust, and facilitate open political debate. A member of *Taller Abierto* states: “We have to have a common political perspective [...] To share general purposes, beyond specific projects”. This involves having or building common views on issues such as the causes of the conflict -all cases consider that it derives from the social, political, and economic impacts of the advance of neo-liberalism; the role of popular movements considered in the discourses of all experiences analysed as key actors in the construction of peace and alternative development models; views on the responsibility of the Colombian State, other states (such as the Spanish) and other actors (mainly transnational companies) in the conflict; or the role of international cooperation. For example, a member of the Asturian Programme explains

“The idea is to gather a big number of organisations. It is not a problem, if they have different ideologies and history. On the contrary, it makes us stronger!. The important thing is to gather organisations that share common positions on key issues regarding, for example, the State or social movements”.

In a document by the Programme, discourses on these issues can be found:

“[...] the conflict in Colombia has its bases in a system which produces exclusion, in a State which is not fulfilling its duties but, on the contrary, is exerting violence [...] Social movements (syndicalists, peasants, women, indigenous peoples, students, etc.) have the historical responsibility of joining their forces to build a project to overcome the war and build a peace based on democracy, justice, freedom, sovereignty, distribution of wealth, participation, and in the accomplishment of human rights. [...] International cooperation has to respect grassroots processes and the bottom-up construction of social power” (PA, 2010).

Discussion on politics is, in fact, a key issue in the everyday relationships. For example, the coordinator of the Mesa states “every meeting begins with an update on the political situation in Colombia”.

### *The Politics of Intermediation*

Regarding the interactions of the networks with institutions, they are frequent with Spanish central and regional development aid agencies and with other Spanish or institutions regarding human rights. Meetings are made with political representatives, political parties, civil servants, etc. Spanish organisations attempt, whenever possible, to make the members of the Colombian organisations interact directly with



institutions. In all cases, they try to seek out specific persons within them who are more responsive to the demands, and with whom they can foster a relationship of mutual understanding. However, in most of our cases, officials are solely interested in purely humanitarian issues on the situation of Colombia, being less interested, even suspicious of, the more overtly political claims or denunciations made by organisations. In any case, the complex navigation within the institutional panorama is recognised as a key driver for practical learning for advocacy and project management by most of the interviewees.

Regarding relations with grassroots organisations, they are present in the networks both directly (unionists, women's and indigenous organisations, etc.) and indirectly, through the presence of Colombian NGOs with close links to grassroots organisations. Most interviewees mention contact with grassroots organisations as a powerful driving force behind learning. For them, these relations connect the networks with local processes of resistance and with the perspectives, demands and alternatives arising from the “bottom-up”, challenging institutions and public opinion. However, the presence of Spanish grassroots organisations in the networks is much more limited. Moreover, in the cases where these types of organisations were involved, they usually concern more structured and professionalised organisations (such as large trade unions). There is much less contact with informal movements, like the 15-M or “Indignants” movement—the Spanish predecessor of the “Occupy” movement—which was frequently mentioned and highly respected by respondents), a fact that is seen as a major limitation by several interviewees.

On the other hand, it seems that grassroots organisations, more focused on local work than on international networks, do not play a leading role in the cases analysed, where leadership is often assumed by NGDOs and NGOs.

### **Which Learning for Global Radical Citizenship Emerged and in Whom?**

Different kinds of learning relevant for the construction of a global radical citizenship emerged in the people and organisations involved in the cases. Amongst these, we can highlight the following (see Fig. 2 at the end of the section).

#### *Learning for Political Analysis*

Members of the Spanish organisations, especially those who have held more responsibility in the cases under study, state that they have had a valuable learning experience in terms of their capacity to make a general analysis of the Colombian political context, of the causes and effects of the Colombian conflict, and of the changing political situation in the country. Spanish who have spent more time in Colombia usually mention the learning of the reality and actions of the Colombian organisations in their struggles. Some profess to have become familiar with the contents, meaning and practice of alternative development models arising in movements in Latin America, such as that of “Buen Vivir”. They refer to issues as the breaking of duality with nature, spirituality, or the centrality of the community from a social, political, economic, or ritual perspective, issues which are also identified in the literature (Villalba 2013).

For example, intense learning occurs during the long visits to Colombia of people from the Verification or Selection Committees. They live closely with people from partner organisations during the stay. With the intermediation of their partners, the Spanish can visit small communities and meet grassroots organisations, discussing with them on a foundation of confidence, affinity and respect.

The same could be said about people of the Mesa, ICID, CODPI and ADPI in their visits. For example, a person from ADPI speaks of the politics of knowledge and mobilisation in his experience when he was invited by the CRIC to share and understand the process of the Minga in indigenous communities in the Cauca for 3 months:

“Our stay coincided with the indigenous uprising in July 2012, which continued the process that had begun a year earlier, the Minga. ADPI was inspired by this process, we have learned from the proposals of indigenous peoples to end the war. [...] These proposals centre around the idea of Buen Vivir, the Sumak Kawsay, and have to do with community economy, with the relation with Mother Earth, with alternative ways of exchanging goods and services, of social and political organisation [...] This stay strongly helped us to work on and take a position on what war is, what peace is, how to end with the war and achieve peace. [...] It was very important to share this mobilisation there, which also has a strong spiritual dimension, staying side by side with them, in their own territory”.

For their part, members of the Colombian organisations show more limited and specific political learning: most of them state that they have learnt about the Spanish aid system and Spanish and European institutions in relation to human rights, as well as about the organisations within these sectors, thanks to the mediation work of the Spanish organisations. This is the case of guests on the Asturian Programme, or of people from indigenous or women’s organisations supported by CODPI or from organisations in the Mesa who travel to Spain to develop advocacy actions, for example. However, it seems that Colombians learn about Spanish social movements and local struggles to a lesser extent, as this is not usually a priority in their visits. On the other hand, Colombians who stayed for a longer time in Spain, like the guests of the Asturian Programme, seem to develop deeper reflections on the Spanish socio-political reality. These usually refer to the irresponsible model of development. As an example, one guest explains

“There are also negative issues that you see there [Spain], and which we wouldn’t like to have here [his home community in Colombia]: consumerism, people getting into enormous debts, wanting to have everything, no matter how much energy or oil you consume. No, we have not been struggling for 50 years to end up in the situation you have now! [...]”.

All this learning is relevant in terms of the construction of a global radical citizenship, as it has to do with unveiling the logics and effects of neo-liberal globalisation, with connecting struggles, and with learning from and the needs, aspirations and alternative societal projects of oppressed groups.

### *Instrumental Learning*

Members of the organisations who were more engaged in the cases also emphasise the acquisition of instrumental skills. Spanish organisations mention, on the one hand, advocacy skills: identify and interact with key people within institutions, produce messages with impact in the mass media, etc.; on the other hand, they mention project management skills, such as learning to combine the rigid bureaucratic requirements of funders with the complex realities and demands of the Colombian organisations with which they work.

Colombian organisations also highlight advocacy and project management. Guests of the Asturian Programme, and Colombians from the CRIC and organisations of the Mesa indicate how they developed skills for advocacy towards Spanish institutions thanks to the support and mediation of the Spanish organisations: “They gave us total freedom in what we could say, but supported us all the time, telling us about the interlocutor we were meeting, the kind of register to be used, etc.” (member of CRIC). Colombians also mention that they learn how to combine the different agendas and perspectives of Colombian organisations in the networks, in order to create a clear common message. “To gather together for common advocacy actions, without any disputes among Colombians [...] this has been a huge lesson [...] this unity of action which has created a stronger capacity for advocacy” (Spanish member of the Asturian Programme).

Furthermore, some Colombians who have entered in contact with the procedures and language of Spanish aid system mention the importance of learning on these issues—useful in gaining access to and managing aid funds. A person from *Taller Abierto* emphasises this aspect: “For us, working with projects and the language of the Spanish system was not a problem [...] On the contrary, it is helpful! [...] Projects do not distort our political purposes, but help us to advance them”.

Both Spanish and Colombian organisations also emphasised learning to work in a coordinated and reasonably democratic way in networks that bring together groups of very different organisational and ideological profiles. They highlight how interaction and mobilisation has developed key attitudes and values: respecting the autonomy of other organisations, flexibility, tolerance, openness to dialogue, working by consensus and accepting dissent, etc. For example, one member of an organisation from the Mesa said:

“The dialogue between the organisations is very good, very interesting [...] I believe that we listen to each other in the network. There is a lot of respect, even if there is a lot of diversity [...] some organisations are more strongly feminist, while others are more strictly focused on gender equality [...] Well, I believe that the existence of the Mesa has been a very good exercise of pluralism and democracy”.

This learning can be considered relevant for the construction of global radical citizenship, as it concerns the development of skills, attitudes and values for building solidarities, and for the defence of rights and the construction of alternative political projects using the existing institutions and available resources.

### *Representations and Identities*

Another critical issue identified is the transformation that occurs in individuals and groups in relation to the representation of “the other”. Firstly, it seems that Spanish organisations have progressed in terms of considering Colombian activists and organisations, not as mere “victims” of a conflict, but as key political actors in the transformation of Colombia—and in global transformation. However, for some of the Colombians interviewed, the view of the Colombians as victims perseveres in some Spanish organisations or, conversely, there is a certain “romanticisation” of Colombian activism. Likewise, Colombians have deepened in their views of the Spanish organisations as political allies, abandoning previous considerations of them as mere “donors”. This is the perspective of *Taller Abierto* on ICID, as one of its members stated:

“After reflecting on all this [their relationship with NGOs], our perspective changes, and we now believe that the relationship is not just about money. We propose a more political relationship, based on dialogue and solidarity. This is now the framework for our relationships”.

These transformations in representations have to do with one’s vision of oneself and of personal attitudes and choices. Again, the politics of interaction play a key role, as this learning is recognised particularly by people who have been involved with the experiences under analysis for a long time, or who had long and intense experiences of sharing, like the Colombians hosted in Spain or Spaniards staying in Colombia for a long period.

Colombians mention issues such as, during their time in Spain and in their relationships with Spanish people, confronting personal attitudes such as sexism. The Spanish mention issues such as confronting their own personal attitudes, like consumerism, or reflections on their personal activism and engagement. For example, an Asturian trade unionist who spent some weeks in Colombia recalls: “When you meet the hosts, you reflect on your personal political engagement [...] Here there is a more individualist activism, while there [Colombia] the collective is at the forefront. It makes you reflect on your role, and you want to increase your engagement”.

### **Challenges, Tensions and Contradictions in the Learning Processes**

We have identified key issues regarding the drivers and the contents of learning when building political solidarities. However, these processes are not without difficulties, tensions and contradictions, amongst which we identify the following.

Firstly, the concentration of learning. The processes analysed are complex, involve a large number of actors and interactions, etc. This causes a very high quantity of diverse and interconnected learning to emerge, but which is concentrated in a very limited number of already highly trained people who are very engaged. The cases face the tension of trying to be effective and efficient, whilst promoting participation and a more extensive learning for global radical citizenship. The

challenge is to promote greater participation within each organisation, as well as greater participation between organisations.

Secondly, there is an imbalance in learning between professionalised organisations and grassroots organisations. This is particularly true in the case of Spanish organisations, which are absent or play a secondary role in almost all cases. The challenge is to give more prominence to grassroots organisations—which play a key role in the construction of a global radical citizenship—but without overloading them.

A third question concerns the imbalance and differences in learning between organisations from the North and the South. For example, the Spanish learn more about the Colombian political context or about Colombian social movements, whereas the Colombians' learning is generally more limited to knowledge of the international cooperation system and how to “use” it strategically. The Spanish learn more about the paradigms and the alternative approaches emerging from the South, whilst Colombians acquire less knowledge about grassroots resistance and alternatives in the Spanish context. This could be a potentially contradictory situation in a type of relationship that, according to our conceptualisation of global citizenship and to the respondents themselves, aspires to be horizontal, and in which alternatives and struggles are shared.

A fourth tension worth mentioning concerns the role of personal friendships. We have seen that friendship and personal trust play a fundamental role in learning. Strengthening relationships between specific individuals may strengthen networks and relationships between organisations. However, these relationships can depend exclusively on purely personal friendships and affinities. A similar situation may be occurring regarding public institutions. The challenge is to use friendship as a driver of learning in the construction of citizenship, but not to make organisational relations exclusively dependent on personal ones.

A final key issue deals with an even broader debate—the role of public funding in these processes. Much of the richness and diversity of the learning that emerges in people and organisations would not have been possible without funds provided by the aid system, as they facilitated a big diversity of actions and interactions. However, the cases have dealt with rigid bureaucracies, with variability and unpredictability and great reductions in accessing public funds. The study also indicates the need for an aid model more oriented to enable exchange and learning between organisations.

## Concluding Remarks

Some features of a more political and transformative approach to cooperation have been identified. They challenge current approaches to aid and call for a more openly political, horizontal, “bottom-up” and citizenship-building-oriented cooperation. As has been shown, some of these features seem to be powerful drivers for informal learning: democratic relationships; the construction of broad, inclusive and long-term political alliances; the construction of critical common positions linked to

grassroots ones; the relevance of the affective and emotional dimension of relationships, etc.

We found how these drivers may have encouraged learning on a variety of aspects relevant for the construction of a radical global civil society, in individuals and organisations engaged in the case studies, and which have to do with political, instrumental or identity issues. However, these learning processes face a number of tensions and contradictions: for example, they can be concentrated in a few people and organisations, usually NGOs, be unequal between people from the North and the South, or dependent on personal friendships.

These findings are relevant for the work of organisations seeking to build transnational political solidarity. How should the challenges presented be addressed? Organisations should examine issues of participation within and between organisations, deepen their links with grassroots organisations, and transform the (usually hidden) unequal power relations in their own networks, possibly sustained by the concentration of responsibilities, information and relationships in a few people and organisations.

Regarding the implications of this work for other actors, further questions emerge: can the cases analysed serve as an inspiration for other cases of cooperation—for example, those which operate in a less politicised context and with a less mature civil society than that of Colombia? If donors can recognise the value of a kind of cooperation based on political solidarity and its relevance as a learning process for citizenship building, which specific policies should be articulated in order to promote it?

Finally, the paper highlights the need for additional exploration of some theoretical issues. The proposed framework allowed us to appreciate the emancipatory potential and the overall working of informal learning processes in relations of international cooperation. However, it fails to capture the full complexity of these learning dynamics—for example, the dynamics between individual and collective learning processes, or the interaction between intellectual, experiential, and emotional-affective forms of learning. These questions could be addressed in future research.

**Acknowledgments** This study forms part of the research project ‘La movilización social como dimensión estratégica de la educación para el desarrollo’, funded in 2011 by the Spanish Agency of International Cooperation (AECID) in its call for research projects in development studies (11-CAP2-0995). We want to thank the persons and organisations that were interviewed, for their help and interest. We also acknowledge the support and advice of Rosemay McGee, as well as the very useful comments of the reviewers.

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