

IDS Working Paper 185

Researching social policy

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Summary

The 1990s saw a remarkable change in the rhetoric of international donor and lender agencies. The “magic of the market” paradigm of the previous decade gave way to a “balanced” strategy in which the state had a crucial role to play. The primacy of economic growth gave way to an emphasis on “poverty reduction”, with poverty being defined not simply in income terms but as a “multidimensional” construct, also covering low levels of education and health, vulnerability and powerlessness. To address this broad agenda, agencies turned to experts on “social development”, often providing a welcome boost to their own previously somewhat marginalised social development teams. This concern with social issues and social context led to a greatly expanded demand for new methodologies and methods which could provide improved “knowledge” and “understanding” of social processes. A battery of “toolkits”, “manuals” and “sourcebooks” were produced, each of which promised not only to meet this demand but to do so quickly, efficiently and often in partnership with local people. This Working Paper reviews some of the main methodological approaches to emerge from this period, reflecting on both their ambitious objectives and somewhat more prosaic limitations.

Contents

	Summary	iii
1	Introduction	1
	1.1 Changing donor attitudes and aims	1
	1.2 Social development	4
2	Information requirements and accountability	5
	2.1 The Logical Framework Approach	5
	2.2 Social assessment	7
	2.3 Stakeholder analysis	9
3	Quantitative methodology and social development	11
	3.1 Quality of quantitative data	11
	3.2 Underplaying limitations on data quality	12
	3.3 Cross-sectional analysis	12
4	Participatory methodologies	14
	4.1 Participatory appraisal	16
	4.2 Participatory policy research	18
	4.3 From needs to rights	21
5	Conclusion	23
	References	24

Everything is simpler than you think and at the same time more complex than you imagine.

(Johann Wolfgang von Goethe)

1 Introduction

Over the last decade there have been significant shifts in the ways in which social policy issues have come to be researched, with the growing emphasis amongst development agencies on the use of participatory approaches and the adoption and integration of attempts to gain more interpretive insights into issues that were once the preserve of positivist quantitative research. At the same time, the popularisation of Logical Framework Analysis and other such tools – including gender analysis frameworks of various kinds – has changed the interface between research, planning and action, blurring old boundaries and posing new challenges and possibilities. The origins of this paper lie in discussions within the DfID-funded Social Policy Programme of the Institute of Development Studies. One aim of this programme was to develop new approaches to “Social Policy Analysis”, with particular reference to the role of such analysis in the identification and implementation of development programmes and projects. Setting our analysis of approaches to researching social policy against a backdrop of changing donor discourses, we reflect on shifts in thinking and practice and explore their implications for policy and practice. We go on to consider both the range of activities that agencies classify under the heading of “Social Policy Analysis” and the related approaches and methods adopted for measurement and analysis, focusing in particular on the extent to which stated concerns and procedures play an effective role in terms of decision-making and action.

1.1 Changing donor attitudes and aims

Over the last decade of the twentieth century, there was an apparent major paradigm shift within the donor community. A previous emphasis on the failures of government and the pursuit of market solutions was gradually moderated in the 1990s with an acknowledgment of the importance of striking a balance between market-driven provision of social goods and services and the maintenance of basic social services for the poor. Both markets and government interventions in markets were seen as having “strengths and limits”. There was an explicit recognition that governments had an important (though preferably not dominant) role to play in the provision of social services – including education, health and social security – where markets were seen as either failing to deliver or giving rise to major equity concerns. This led to an emphasis on “good governance”, with a particular focus on the need for institutions that could effectively implement “good” policies (World Bank 1997). Typically, a “twin-track” approach to service delivery was adopted, targeting both measures to enhance the accountability and responsiveness of government agencies and to shift their role from provision to financing and regulation.

The 1980s had seen substantial increases in the channelling of social sector funding through non-statutory organisations, primarily NGOs (Hulme and Edwards 1997). Supplementing, and in some cases bypassing, relatively ineffective public institutions, NGO providers were portrayed as closer to the people

and more responsive to their concerns: ‘more participatory, less bureaucratic, more flexible, more cost-effective, with an ability to reach poor and disadvantaged people’ (Robinson and White 1997: 4). Both international and national NGOs were perceived as having a role to play not only in achieving cost-effective delivery of social services, but also in providing welfare to those outside the reach of markets (Fowler 1988). They were increasingly supported by donors as a means to deliver services to poor communities or to poor households (Girishankar 1999; Howell 2000).

However, while some NGOs created “islands of success” that made a real difference to the lot of the poorest within their targeted communities, there was a growing recognition that more systemic solutions were needed to enhance the overall impact of social policy interventions (Norton and Bird 1998). Alternatives that enhanced government capacity and responsiveness were actively sought. One outcome was the emergence of a wide variety of “Sector-Wide Approaches (SWAs)”, which were promoted as a way of broadening and deepening partnerships between donors, government and the private sector in the pursuit of effective and coherent policy towards sectoral resource allocation (Cassels 1997). Donors and lenders were increasingly co-funding, and in practice co-managing, social services in many of the poorest countries, setting up various forms of “partnership” agreement with governments. There was a dramatic growth in the employment of donor-funded “Social Funds”, which provided financial support in response to “community demand” for infrastructure or services. Social fund projects were often implemented by NGOs or private firms, sometimes with limited regard to the aims and activities of the relevant sectoral ministries. This bewildering array of donor mechanisms have left in their wake a profusion of social service providers operating in a complex terrain of welfare pluralism (Bloom and Standing 2001).

At the same time, renewed attention to public sector institutions, particularly those involved in service provision widened spaces for public participation in delivery and, less commonly, in system design (Cornwall and Gaventa 2001). The World Bank’s 1997 World Development Report (WDR) advocated a state reform process which included broad-based consultation over key policy directions and direct participation of user groups in the design, implementation and monitoring of local public goods and services. It also emphasised processes that could build greater public accountability, from enhancing the efficiency of accountable local institutions to procedures and incentives for building accountability and competition (1997: 129–30).

This focus on public sector institutions lead to a number of agencies, including DFID and UNDP, joining up their thinking on “good governance” and participation to emphasise the obligations of governments to fulfil, as well as protect and respect, fundamental human rights (see DFID 2000; UNDP 2000). In general, social and economic rights moved increasingly onto the development agenda as the pendulum shifted back to concerns that had preoccupied the architects of the basic needs approach of the 1970s (Ferguson 1999; Cornwall 2000). The view that development was not, in principle, synonymous with economic growth again came to dominate the international development discourse. The 1998 agreement on ‘Core Indicators for the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC)’ (OECD 1998), for example, demoted GNP per capita to the status of ‘other selected indicators of development’,

giving centre stage to poverty, gender, social development, environmental sustainability and the ‘qualitative factors’ of participation, democratisation, governance and rights.

DAC core indicators 1998

Economic well-being

- Reduce extreme poverty by half

Social development

- Universal primary education
- Eliminate gender disparity in education (2005)
- Reduce infant and child mortality by two-thirds
- Reduce maternal mortality by three-fourths
- Universal access to reproductive health services

Environmental sustainability and regeneration

- Implementation of a national strategy for sustainable development in every country by 2005; so as to reverse trends in the loss of environmental resources by 2015

Qualitative factors

- Participatory development
- Democratisation
- Good governance
- Human rights

Source: OECD DAC (1998).

Over recent years, attention has increasingly focused on the various “dimensions of poverty”, with the development of “Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers” (PRSPs). In theory, donors are to become supporting “partners” in anti-poverty programmes developed “in-country” and rooted in national processes of policy dialogue and accountability. These are to be comprehensive, both sector-wise and in their effort to coordinate the full range of available national and international resources. Their effectiveness is to be assessed by jointly agreed performance or “outcome-oriented” indicators. Section 4.2 of this paper discusses social policy aspects of PRSPs in greater detail.

The mid- to late 1990s also witnessed the apparent rise and rise of “social development”. Terms such as participation, gender-sensitive, empowerment, voice, ownership, social exclusion and social capital became common currency, in some cases to the extent that they lost much of their original meaning. As the poverty agenda began to dominate donor agencies, the World Development Report 2000/2001 advocated a poverty reduction strategy which allied many of the driving concepts in social development to a relatively unchanged macro-economic agenda (IBRD 2000; see Brock *et al.* 2001). Peppered with the legitimating “voices of the poor”, this report gave a new prominence to “empowerment”, into which “participation” and “social capital” were now to be subsumed, as the motor of development.

1.2 Social development

In the 1980s, social development advisers within international aid agencies had served more or less a damage limitation role, assigned the task of ameliorating or explaining the negative effects on the most vulnerable of the “necessary but painful” development interventions required for macro-economic adjustment. Growth in enthusiasm for the involvement of intended beneficiaries in the design and implementation of development programmes gave social development a new role, and a new face. The approaches that Michael Cernea had argued and advocated for in his *Putting People First* (1983, republished in 1991) and through his subsequent influence from within the World Bank (the “Bank”), began to be used more widely and gain greater credibility. “Social assessment” (discussed in more detail in Section 2 of this paper) emerged as an approach, using the methods of ‘social and cultural anthropology, sociology, human geography and political science’ to ‘underpin a people-centred approach to sustainable development’ (Eyben 1998). Social Assessments became an essential ingredient of every new project or programme appraisal within the UK Department for International Development (DFID). Within the Bank, Beneficiary Assessment (Salmen 1995), which involved anthropologists taking up short-term residence in project or programme sites and carrying out participant observation, began to be used to inform the design and planning of interventions.

In addition to the concern with social issues within projects in general, the poverty agenda led to a major shift of donor funding towards projects directly focusing on social service provision and away from the large-scale capital projects such as roads, dams and power generation that dominated expenditures in the not too distant past. Drawing on a decade of experimentation with ‘projects with people’ (Oakley *et al.* 1991), which had demonstrated the benefits of involving beneficiaries in such social sector projects, efforts were made within donor agencies to institutionalise participation. Guidelines, taskforces, manuals and statements on stakeholder and “customer” participation proliferated over the mid-1990s.

The phenomenal growth in popularity of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), described in Section 4, provided agencies with a way of “doing participation” that fitted their requirements in ways none of the other participatory approaches on offer could. Shortly after the appointment of President Wolfensohn, the Bank established a “Social Development Task Force”. A learning group on participation was established in 1991, funded and supported in kind by key bilaterals, including the Swedes, the British and the Dutch. This was followed by a formal policy statement on participation in 1994 and a *Participation Sourcebook* in 1995 (World Bank 1996). This latter included an early discussion within the Bank of the value of “stakeholder analysis”, which has become one of the principal new social development tools (see Section 2.3 for a more detailed discussion), and embraced the concept of “social capital”. Perhaps most significant in terms of substantive materials on “doing participation”, the Social Development Department for the UK Overseas Development Administration produced a *Technical Note on Enhancing Stakeholder Participation in Aid Activities* in 1995.

2 Information requirements and accountability

There will be no attempt here to discuss the rationale for changes in donor strategies or the relative effectiveness of the various approaches, though it seems clear that the debate is still very much open (e.g. Ratcliffe and Macrae 1999; Tandler 1999). The aim, rather, is to draw attention to the associated information requirements, in terms of project and programme appraisal, monitoring and evaluation, and to point out that the combination of changes outlined above raises severe methodological challenges which are surprisingly seldom addressed. To give just one obvious example, the cost of establishing reasonably reliable information systems to monitor the implementation of a large scale capital project will typically represent a tiny proportion of the overall cost of that project. Achieving a similar level of reliability for, say, a programme of activities designed to provide access to basic health care for poor households through budgetary support to primary services, might well imply costs which would consume the majority of the programme funds. Targeting such households and monitoring their morbidity and health care seeking behaviour, the quality of services they obtain from a wide variety of providers and their associated expenditures in terms of both cash and time would be a formidable undertaking. In practice, it will not be seriously attempted. Whatever claims may be made at the design phase of such programmes, the reality will usually be that minimal systems are put in place with the aim of ensuring the donors primary requirement for financial probity. Effectiveness will be judged on a range of crude proxy indicators such as facility utilisation and simplistic measures of client satisfaction.

In many areas of social policy a wide gap has opened up between the realistic possibilities for information gathering, analysis and interpretation and the “virtual reality” of stipulated monitoring and evaluation procedures as identified in project and programme documents. This virtual reality postulates a situation in which donors, government agencies and possibly community organisations have a much greater capacity to generate, manage and use information than is in fact the case. There is a considerable dilemma for donors in having to accept either that otherwise attractive programmes should be abandoned simply because they are likely to prove impossible to monitor effectively, or that they have to accept, and justify, a substantially lower level of accountability in terms of assessing the effective use of the resources provided. Such an acceptance would clearly run counter to the trend towards greater accountability which, though its originated in the market-oriented 1980s, has since been pursued with undiminished vigour. This trend is perhaps best reflected in the Logical Frame Approach (LFA) which has now become an unavoidable adjunct to the design of projects, programmes and, more recently, NGO activities and academic research on development.

2.1 The Logical Framework Approach

The 1990s saw the fall of the last remaining major aid agency to resist the onward march of the LFA. SIDA gave way in 1993 under pressure from the Swedish government to adopt a management-by-objectives approach. This mirrored a decision by DFID (then ODA) in the mid-1980s that the LFA represented their least-worst option, given the widespread introduction of performance indicators in the UK public sector (Cracknell 1984). The LFA was introduced as a management tool, designed to increase

accountability and central control of development projects and programmes by imposing 'hierarchically ordered and quantified objectives (Gasper 1997). Those objectives are often explicitly expressed as targets, for example, '70 per cent of children immunised' or '90 per cent of girl children attending school'. It is usually seen, particularly by the recipients of funds, as a mechanism whereby donors monitor project and programme cost-effectiveness. However, it is useful to remember that the LFA and associated "Objectively Verifiable Indicators (OVIs)", that are designed to facilitate monitoring and evaluation, may also be required by donors themselves in order to justify their expenditures, and ultimately to argue for level or expanded budget allocations in future years.

Donor agencies are often seen by their clients as all powerful institutions with unlimited financial resources. In practice they also have to justify their aims and activities to their funders, be they government finance ministries, boards of governors or parliamentary/congressional committees, many of whose members may be resistant to, or completely unaware of, the shifting preoccupations of the development community. And *those* funders are clearly very hard to impress. The 1990s may have been an exciting period in terms of development theories and concepts but in terms of financial support there was little relief from the declines of the 1980s. All major donors reduced aid relative to their GNP between 1991 and 1997 (World Bank 1998), and total DAC aid declined by one-third.

Indeed, given the continuing pressure on aid funding and assuming that the current rhetoric about "ownership" and "participation" is genuine, it would seem that some donors may be adopting a potentially high risk strategy in terms of their own constituency. If the conceptual shift to the language of civil society organisations and partnership, and the practical shift to partnership and social funds were really to allow other actors to have a substantial influence on the aid agenda, this would appear to make the attainment of donor agency performance objectives much less certain. Are the trends towards both a greater emphasis on social development and a higher level of accountability in conflict? Some would prefer to say that it raises interesting new questions as to the meaning of "accountability" (Cornwall *et al.* 2000).

Criticism of the LFA has largely centred on its alleged rigidity in the context of what may well be a rapidly changing social and economic situation, and for what is often characterised as a narrow and simplistic approach to development projects which such target-setting might seem to imply. Some agencies, particularly DFID, have responded by moving to so-called "process" Log Frames, which can be modified during project or programme implementation, and encouraging the use of qualitative indicators, for example evidence that community meetings have been held or local planning documents prepared. Gasper (1997) suggests that social development staff in DFID (then ODA) have been effective in turning the LFA to their advantage. 'The assumptions column in particular gives social analysts a legitimised, bureaucratised, officially compulsory channel by which to question others and present their own insights'. INTRAC (1994) is positively effusive, describing the LFA as assisting to promote a 'genuinely local dynamic of learning, exchange and organisation which could lead to a process of people driven development'. A warning note is sounded by work on the changing nature of UK-based NGOs as their activities have become, under the influence of funding pressures, more closely allied to donor strategies

and accountability requirements (Wallace *et al.* 1997; see also Hulme and Edwards 1997). This suggests that the routine use of LFA as part of “the new professionalism” demanded by funders may be reducing NGO commitment to participation, institutional capacity-building and gender-equity. Even so, many of the NGOs studied also appeared to accept that there were valid arguments for improved monitoring of the cost-effectiveness of their activities.

The main concern here is that the ordered world of the logical framework, which may indeed be extremely useful for the limited task of clarifying inputs, outputs, objectives and aspirations, should not be confused with the much more complex, highly politicised and extremely fluid environment which characterises many social development programmes. In the former, the definition of valid, cost-effective and reliable OVI may appear relatively straightforward. Sources of data may be “limited”, technical capacity may need “strengthening”, relationships between indicator and underlying variable of concern may be “tentative”, but such problems can usually be overcome by introducing additional project information systems, improving existing record-keeping procedures and the ubiquitous “training”. In the real world, information quality depends crucially on the genuine commitment of individuals and/or the existence of effective supervisory procedures.

The poorest households are usually not to be found living in areas which have highly effective, efficient and committed local governments or community organisations. Presented with the opportunity of taking part in a funded programme, such organisations will usually be very willing to agree to any proposed information generating or related training activities. They will happily take part in “participatory” exercises to “collaboratively” design information systems that meet the funder’s requirements. However, experience suggests that such enthusiasm will typically not be long sustained in the absence of a long-term commitment in terms of substantial external support and supervision. Typically, particularly in regions where the majority of the poor live, the basic data required for effective monitoring and evaluation of a social sector programme will be regarded as at best of no value and at worst threatening, if they could potentially be used to identify either failure to perform designated tasks or illicit or corrupt behaviour. Countering such attitudes, or establishing systems that can generate reliable information in spite of them, may be a more challenging task than that involved in the implementation of the substantive programme components.

The model of the world reflected in the logical framework for a project or programme is derived from procedures that will almost certainly include the activity referred to above as “Social Assessment”. The relationship between that model and “the real world” will thus depend in large part on the methodologies employed to undertake that assessment and the skill with which they are applied. These issues are addressed in the next section.

2.2 Social assessment

The need to analyse social factors that may influence a project continues throughout the entire life of that project. However, most agencies see social assessment as making its most important contribution in the design phase. “The most crucial of these stages occurs during the preparation of the feasibility study. If the

feasibility study consultants *thoroughly examine all relevant social dimensions*, it is relatively easy for Bank staff . . . to incorporate social dimensions into the project and thereby help ensure a high quality of project design' (ADB 1994).

Donor agency expectations for social assessments, be they at the stage of design, appraisal or implementation, appear extremely high, and a wide range of expertise is demanded of those who undertake them. Assessments are expected to involve aspects of disciplines which include anthropology, sociology, political science, and human geography. They are intended to promote an understanding of 'how people and groups understand, order and value their social relationships and systems of social organisation' and the 'complex, contextual nature of local social issues' (DFID 1995a: 4). They should draw out 'the implications of change from the perspectives of the people involved in the process' and convert the 'understanding of complex social reality into appropriate conclusions and recommendations suitable for action'. To add to the daunting nature of the task, 'There is no blueprint for a social annex, due to great variation in the social contexts which attends DFID's projects and programmes' (DFID 1998).

While the theory of social assessment may seem to demand multi-disciplinary teams of exceptionally gifted individuals working over an extended period, the reality is usually somewhat more prosaic. Even for reasonably large social development projects, the resources available for the design phase, of which social assessment is only one component, probably imply that it will at best be undertaken by one or two reasonably competent and experienced people over the course of a two to three week visit to the project area. The relatively brief time typically allocated to the activity brings to mind the long established adage in development circles that a visit of one week allows the production of a monograph, one month a short paper but it takes a year to learn that one knows nothing. The risk of assuming, particularly if contracted to do so, that one really understands the "complex, contextual nature of local social issues" within a few weeks may be hard to avoid. These difficulties may be compounded if the intended beneficiaries of the programme collude in the process, as might reasonably be expected, encouraging the perception of a version of reality favourable to implementation. Indeed, the implicit positivist paradigm which seems to underlie the social assessment process as described by donor agencies, apparently assuming that the assessment will not distort the social reality which it seeks to comprehend, seems curiously at odds with accepted social research methodology.

As might be expected, given the diversity of disciplines deemed relevant to the activity, the methods advocated for conducting social assessments are highly eclectic. They cover a range from sample surveys through a wide variety of qualitative methods, with an emphasis on in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, to rapid appraisal and participatory exercises. It seems probable that many agencies would regard the key requirement for the task as being general intelligence and experience. The suggestion in a recent book by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz (2000), that a major strength of that discipline was an absence of clearly specified research methods might well find favour. One particular method stands out as apparently central to the process, partly because of its direct links to the LFA, that of stakeholder analysis.

2.3 Stakeholder analysis

The World Bank first used the concept of stakeholder in 1993 and discussed stakeholder analysis in the Participation Sourcebook. In DFID, stakeholder analysis has been mainly confined to discussions of the social analysis of projects. “Stakeholder” is a term of such exceptional vagueness that it became evident early on that almost anyone could be accommodated within this category. Distinguishing “primary” from other stakeholders – those whose lives were directly affected by a project, intended beneficiaries – was a critical move, initially made by social development advisers in the Bank and thereafter taken up by DFID and other agencies.

Under one influential definition (MacArthur 1997a), stakeholder analysis involves six basic procedures:

<i>Step 1</i>	Define the higher objectives of the project (LFA goal and purposes).
<i>Step 2</i>	List all primary stakeholders: intended beneficiaries.
	List all secondary stakeholders: other parties involved in the delivery of the project.
	List all external stakeholders: other interested parties including government departments and other donors
<i>Step 3</i>	Determine the “stakes” of the different groups, both positive and negative.
<i>Step 4</i>	For each stakeholder decide: the importance of taking account of their interests in meeting project objectives their capacity to influence the direction and outcomes of the project
<i>Step 5</i>	Assess if changes in project design are required: to achieve objectives in relation to primary stakeholders to take account of the indifferent or negative influences of important parties.
<i>Step 6</i>	Consider which stakeholder interests should be allowed for during different stages of the project and how this can be done.

In this form, stakeholder analysis thus consists primarily of developing a checklist of all those who have some involvement or other interest in the project or programme, together with an assessment of the nature and degree of that interest and the potential they have to influence the project outcomes. It is linked to the LFA in three respects: LFA goal and purpose objectives are used to determine the stakeholders; LFA goal and purpose indicators should reflect the different primary stakeholders; and stakeholder assessments may affect the LFA assumptions column. It is also closely linked to the participation agenda now adopted by most agencies. Different groups of stakeholder are seen as having specific roles in participatory activities relating to different stages of the project cycle, for example identification, planning, implementation and monitoring and evaluation.

Clearly, stakeholder analysis might be regarded as simply the formalisation of procedures that a good social analyst would undertake as a matter of course. However, codification, checklists and step-by-step

protocols often have an important role to play in increasing the quality of social research. They can improve both the consistency and transparency of fieldwork, and ensure that the field researcher who is simply competent, as opposed to inspired, can still deliver the required product. The simple requirement of being forced to consider explicitly the ‘interests, characteristics and circumstances’ (MacArthur 1997b) of all those involved, directly or indirectly in project-related activities, is in itself a useful discipline and one which may lead to new insights into potential constraints or opportunities.

The process will necessarily be somewhat simplistic in its view of the “complex reality” described above. As with any other modelling exercise, the aim will be to capture the essential features of that reality in as parsimonious a fashion as possible. In practice the balance is hard to determine. The DFID guidance notes (DFID 1995b), for example, suggest that primary stakeholders, those ultimately affected by the project, should be classified by gender, social or income class, and occupational or service user groups. As a minimum, this would determine eight primary stakeholder categories. However, when confronting a real target population, any conscientious attempt to ascribe interests to such broad categories will usually appear highly unsatisfactory. It may be impossible to avoid further breakdowns by such variables as age, location, household size, etc. A similar situation arises with secondary stakeholders, those involved in project delivery. In a rural primary health care project, for example, a multiplicity of public and private providers in different types of facility, with different levels of seniority, working in peri-urban or isolated rural areas may need to be identified to conduct a realistic assessment of interests and influence. It is clearly very easy to generate what might still seem to be a basic list of stakeholders which is far longer than one could reasonably attempt to analyse.

An additional layer of complexity, not currently addressed by stakeholder analysis, arises because projects and programmes not only create stakeholders but opportunities for alliances between stakeholders. To give a simple example, control over drug stocks allocated to participating villages in a recent project was divided between the head of the district health committee and the local facility nurse, with the aim of ensuring financial probity. Within the framework of the project, the village committee head was seen as representing the interests of the beneficiaries, and was expected to play a supervisory role over the provider. In some villages, however, it was clear to these individuals that by joining forces they gained complete control over the principal project resource. From the project perspective, this was simple corruption. From the perspective of the individuals, their roles as defined by the project were clearly in conflict with their roles as defined by themselves: poor rural individuals attempting to feed their families by taking advantage of such an obvious opportunity.

From the above, a cautious attitude might be seen as appropriate in terms of the possibilities for conducting a detailed, reasonably comprehensive and robust stakeholder analysis with the resources and time typically allocated to this aspect of project and programme design. At the very least it should be regarded as a “work-in-progress”, to be routinely updated as new evidence and situations emerge. There remains the issue as to who should conduct the exercise. As indicated above, within the World Bank stakeholder analysis was developed as part of a broader context of moves towards a participatory approach to development. Can stakeholder analysis be undertaken in a participatory manner? The DFID

guidelines of 1995 seem doubtful on this issue 'stakeholder analysis involves sensitive and undiplomatic information. Many interests are covert, and agendas are partially hidden. In many situations there will be few benefits in trying to uncover such agendas in public'. Such a position clearly places great reliance on those few individuals, perhaps external consultants, who are empowered to conduct the analysis. It might seem appropriate to question the extent to which they are capable, within the constraints of the assessment process, of uncovering the "sensitive and undiplomatic information", exposing the "covert interests" and determining the "hidden agendas" of a large number and variety of stakeholder groups, when they cannot possibly encounter more than a tiny sample of individual members. More provocatively, it raises the question as to who should apply these investigative techniques to one of the key secondary stakeholders – the donor agency.

3 Quantitative methodology and social development

Contrary to popular belief and perhaps intention, experience suggests that much of the effective information for programme and project design, implementation and evaluation will be derived using what can broadly be described as qualitative methods, often of an informal character. These may cover a wide range of activities including the (very) rapid appraisal methods typically associated with short term consultancy visits, document reviews, sociological or anthropological studies and participatory exercises. Quantitative methodology will in general play a supporting role, but will often be seen as providing key statistical estimates and indicative models of relationships, usually in the form of tabulations, graphs and the occasional simple regression. Here also, there appears to be a worrying tendency to overestimate the reliability and robustness of such information and to accept at face value the validity of relationships that may be extremely tenuous. Three particular concerns are considered here.

3.1 Quality of quantitative data

In many countries it is not unusual to find that basic data on social sectors either does not exist or is of such poor quality as to be unusable. In the area of education, for example, not only may there be no current, reliable information on the number of pupils in schools, but the number of teachers and even the number of schools may be highly speculative. Health information is typically even worse. Morbidity data, even for the most common causes of sickness such as malaria, diarrhoea and respiratory disease, are typically only available from infrequent household surveys and based on estimates derived from self-reported symptoms. On a recent visit by one of the authors to a state ministry of health, the latest notifiable disease statistics available were for 1993 and so obviously flawed that they were clearly not worth the effort of analysis. Even for the public sector, reliable utilisation data is generally only available at hospital level and there is almost no useful information on the activities of private sector providers, usually the main source of care for the poor.

The problems extends to demographic data, where key estimates such as the size of sub-national populations and age/sex compositions are both uncertain and subject to large variation over time. This is

particularly the case in poorer areas, where migration patterns may strongly reflect the relative income earning opportunities for different sections of the population. Many “per capita” social indicators, for example morbidity, mortality, enrolment and benefit take-up rates, which play a key role in many social development projects, are sensitive to such uncertainties.

An additional complicating factor is that data quality is typically inversely related to social need. In general, poorer countries, and poorer regions within countries, tend to have both higher levels of need and greater difficulty in establishing and maintaining reliable data systems, the latter reflecting a combination of lack of resources, low administrative capacity and corruption. Social sector projects and programmes which specifically address poverty issues, particularly if they are intended to benefit the poorest population groups, are thus particularly liable to encounter the greatest difficulty in deriving the information required for effective monitoring and evaluation.

3.2 Underplaying limitations on data quality

The second, though obviously related, concern is that limitations on data quality are typically greatly underplayed. Once indicators have been selected as being the most appropriate for the task in hand there are clearly strong incentives to make assumptions as to the possibilities for measuring them, especially if those assumptions cannot be readily challenged. To give one interesting current example, there has been a high level of frustration among analysts for many years that the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), which provide the most valuable source of information on fertility and mortality for many of the poorest countries, contain no explicit data on household income or expenditure. Recently (Gwatkin 2000), this frustration appears to have been overcome with the publication of detailed income quintile breakdowns of DHS estimates. The income disaggregation is based on a surrogate indicator, derived by applying the multivariate analytical technique of principle components to a series of DHS variables relating to household ownership of some 60–70 assets. Given that the countries involved have no alternative sources of data on this issue, it is perfectly possible that the new estimates will be used as background information to future projects or programmes. Do they reflect the actual situation? A generally agreed response to this question may take many years to emerge. There will certainly be a vigorous debate on the technical issues relating to the derivation of the indicator but if this follows the usual pattern of such debates it will not be resolved. Empirical studies will undoubtedly be undertaken, some of which will reinforce and some contradict the original findings. Meanwhile the estimates will almost certainly steadily infiltrate the development literature and acquire the status of “facts”.

3.3 Cross-sectional analysis

The third concern relates to what appears to be a common trend followed by debates involving the quantitative analysis of social policy issues, that is, the drawing out of causal relationships from cross-sectional analysis. This can perhaps be illustrated by reference to the current, ongoing, discussion on the question set out in an IMF paper as ‘Does higher government spending buy better results in education and health care?’ (Gupta 1999). The starting point for such debates is typically a cross-sectional analysis,

usually employing some variant of the regression model, with social outcomes in a selection of countries correlated against a hypothesised determining variable, in this case a measure of public spending. Using such an approach Filmer and Pritchett (1997) conclude that ‘the impact of public spending on health is quite small . . . independent variation in public spending explains less than one seventh of 1 per cent of the observed differences in mortality across countries . . . actual public spending per child death averted is \$50,000–100,000’.

The force of such statements is evident and reinforced by the fact that the final comment is expressed explicitly in cost-effectiveness terms, as might be expected in a programme or project context. Can they be taken at face value? Do they imply that programmes which encourage governments to increase their health care expenditures are a waste of time? Many have certainly used the paper as evidence to draw the latter conclusion. As with the previous example, there are many technical arguments which could be entered into concerning the validity of the findings, though it is clear that great care and expertise were applied to the study: the public spending data used in the exercise, for example, are not readily available for many of the countries considered and the study is based on an earlier exercise that generated plausible estimates; the precise form of the equations estimated and the other explanatory variables included can certainly be questioned; in interpreting the findings, it should be noted that the phrases “independent variation” and “explains” are strictly technical terms which do not readily translate into policy statements; and moving from cross-sectional correlations to causal relationships should always be regarded as a step to be taken only with the greatest caution.

However, such discussions seem to miss the main point. The findings are now in the public domain and have been widely quoted. They have found particular favour among those individuals who have no capacity to assess the technical quality of the study, but are predisposed to draw the above conclusions as to the ineffectiveness of public services. The terms of the debate have been set down and later contributions (e.g. Filmer, Hammer and Pritchett 1997; Enemark and Schleimann 1999) which explore the underlying issues in ways which may be much more relevant in terms of public policy, become to some extent simply elaborations on the central theme.

This is not to raise objections to this type of modelling exercise as such. One function of social policy research is to explore the relationships between key policy variables. The estimation of regression models using cross-sectional data is one, perfectly legitimate if relatively simplistic, approach to this task. The issue is that such models often seem to gain a status within the social policy arena which far exceeds that which is warranted, presumably because they appear to provide simple answers to apparently simple but important questions. In practice, because of their high level of abstraction, they are usually of limited value in terms of the much more difficult task of designing social provision models that will work in a messy political environment.

4 Participatory methodologies

Underlying much of the earlier discussion of changing donor approaches is what has become the core agenda of “participatory development”, defined by the DAC to be a desired objective in its own right. Less than a decade ago, advocates of participation struggled to persuade sceptical mainstream development agencies of the merits of a participatory approach. These days, participatory methodologies are routinely used and have come to be an expected, if not even required, part of development practice. Whereas in the past those implementing projects were exhorted to provide “hard evidence” of performance, usually in the form of quantitative indicators derived from statistical analysis of administrative data or sample surveys, donors are now equally likely to demand participatory studies undertaken in collaboration with intended beneficiaries.

In terms of instruments for social policy assessment and analysis, the 1990s saw the adoption across a spectrum of development agencies and organisations of what might at first sight appear contradictory, rather than complementary, approaches. The growing acceptability of social development and enthusiasm for beneficiary and stakeholder participation led to many agencies beginning to take more open-ended, participatory approaches on board and to recognise some of the social complexities of development in practice (see Cernea 1991; Francis 2001). Participatory approaches began to be used to provide complementary qualitative data for poverty analysis and (although to a very marginal extent) for monitoring and evaluating social projects and programmes (Rudvist and Woodford-Berger 1996; Estrella *et al.* 2001). The “scaling up” and “scaling out” (Gaventa 1998) of participatory approaches has taken place in a context where the use of instruments like the logical framework that would at first sight appear inimical to such an approach gained greater prominence in project planning and evaluation.

At the same time, a growing thirst for information spurred the collection of vast amounts of quantitative data, especially in contexts where existing data was thin or non-existent. Arguments for “combined methods” and for the potential complementarities between qualitative and quantitative data began to be made by economists as well as social development specialists (White and Carvalho 1997). Indeed, one particularly interesting proposal by Booth *et al.* (1998) suggested abandoning the traditional and problematic distinction between “qualitative” and “quantitative” in favour of the terms “contextual” and “non-contextual”. Within their framework information is distinguished according to whether it requires interpretation within its “social, economic and cultural context,” or is “untainted by the particularities of the context in which it is collected.”. For example, the observation that households below the income poverty line in a given country tend to have high dependency ratios would be an example of the latter; complaints that a corrupt local official was disrupting access to health services, of the former. In purely practical terms, stressing the importance of “context” may prove useful in advocating the value of participatory techniques in poverty assessment and monitoring. It appears to be a concept that is readily accessible to senior policy makers who are uneasy with the quantitative/qualitative dichotomy. It also appears to have a natural affinity with the tendency to focus on geographical locality as a key element in poverty monitoring and the associated increasing interest in geographical information systems.

Interesting tensions and complementarities clearly exist between participatory, quantitative and qualitative methodologies. However, there remains much to be done to harmonise different approaches and evolve new methodological alternatives. Participatory methodologies are commonly equated with – and indeed regarded as an acceptable substitute for or shoddy replacement for – qualitative enquiry. Participatory researchers may not only generate quantifiable data, they may elect to use the instruments conventionally associated with quantitative research precisely because of the advantages they might offer in providing information on the issues that concern them. What makes research “participatory” is less the kinds of methods that are used than the methodology, the overarching epistemological and ethical framework, which guides their use (Cornwall *et al.* 1993). The key distinction should be the degree of control and involvement that participants have in determining the scope and themes of enquiry, in generating data, in analysis and in the generation of recommendations or solutions (see Park 1993; Gaventa 1993; Cornwall and Jewkes 1995). Many of the forms of enquiry currently described as “participatory” involve informants only in the generation of information. Under so broad a definition activities such as taking blood could be described as “participatory” because the subject needs to volunteer their arm!

Methodological purism may have no place in the pragmatics of development aid but the growing use of the label “participatory” merits some closer examination, if only because many agencies have used the associated “cosmetic rhetoric” (Cernea 1991) to their advantage. It is important to remember that the battle for acceptability waged by advocates of the use of participatory approaches was not simply with those who argued that the data they generated was too “subjective”, “impressionistic” and lacking in “rigour”. Anthropologists and sociologists, those who had previously borne the brunt of similar critiques, were equally fierce critics (see, for example, Richards 1995; Biggs 1995). The ascendance of social development over the course of the 1990s corresponds, to some degree, with the use that social development professionals were able to make of the participation agenda in redefining their role. Under the umbrella of “participatory approaches”, methods that applied anthropologists had used for decades gained a credibility and purchase they would possibly never have attained as the privileged preserve of a marginal group of professionals and academics. Yet at the same time, the analytic skills required for their effective use were (and remain) woefully lacking (Guijt and Braden 1999).

Participatory methodologies have a long history in development, stretching back to the colonial era. Associated with popular education and social movements, with conscientisation and collective action, many of these approaches remain marginal, framed and used within alternative development discourses (see, for example, Fals-Borda and Rahman 1991; Rahman 1995; Tandon 1996). The popularisation of “participation” and the associated quest for ways of implementing donor and lender professions of participatory intent sparked new interest in some of the precepts of these approaches, particularly their emphasis on developing tools for self-reliance. Stripped of elements associated with longer-term processes of structural change, particularly those with an ideological flavour too strong for donor agencies’ palates, Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) is one approach that has gained ground and spawned a generation of hybrids, such as Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPAs). These approaches are accordingly given the

bulk of our attention here. The next section explores some of their dimensions, before going on to explore the productive possibilities that other, lesser-known participatory approaches might offer social policy assessment and analysis, particularly in more recent shifts in focus from needs to rights.

4.1 Participatory appraisal

Gaining favour with development agencies on the basis of pragmatic arguments about effectiveness and efficiency, as much as those of principle, PRA has come in some quarters to be equated with “doing participation”. Since the early 1990s, hundreds of thousands of people have been exposed to PRA in various forms; and in some parts of the world there is barely a district that has not been “PRA-ed” by some organisation or other. It has been widely used as a substitute for social assessment, portrayed as a means of widening ownership of the identification of problems, opportunities and solutions, and of democratising the process of determining priorities for intervention.

PRA has its origins in similar impulses to social assessment: the desire to capture social complexities that prevailing technocratic approaches failed to take into account and to bring the perspectives of beneficiaries into the frame. Influenced by applied anthropology, agro-ecosystems analysis, the rapid diagnostic surveys of farming systems research and some of the principles of participatory research, PRA offered development agencies an expedient substitute to lengthy, costly surveys (Chambers 1992). As well as providing tools for rapid and cost-effective information gathering, its use of techniques for collective interpretation and analysis encouraged consensus building through which “community priorities” could be quickly defined and fed into action. As it became evident that some were being excluded from this apparently collective processes (see Mosse 1995), attempts were made to modify the approach to allow the voices and needs of more marginal actors to be raised (Welbourn 1991; Guijt 1995). Its capacity to involve ‘the poor and marginalised, including women’, whom development agencies were so desperate to reach and whose perspectives were so often disregarded by policy-makers, providers and planners, gave it a special cachet.

The tremendous diversity of interpretations, applications and versions of PRA makes it ever more difficult to pin down exactly what “doing PRA” could or should entail.¹ The open-endedness of training approaches and the tendency of its pioneers to eschew manuals or guidelines facilitated the development of a tremendous diversity of interpretations and practices. In the process, distinctive styles of participatory assessment have emerged, which differ in kind rather than simply in degree: all may be called “PRA” but there may be precious few family resemblances between them. Even characteristics that many associated with PRA, such as the use of visualisation methods, may be lacking in some applications. Indeed, some practitioners regard PRA less as a series of techniques or discrete events, and more as a “way of life” (Pratt 2001). Some of these differences have arisen out of the influence of the particular approach taken by particular individuals or organisations and the relative weight they have given to innovation and

¹ IDS’ *Pathways to Participation* project explored meanings and practices of participation in different country contexts, illustrating the panoply of possibilities of which “PRA” is now an umbrella term (see Pratt 2001; Cornwall *et al.* 2001; Holmes 2001).

adaptation, on the one hand, and systematisation on the other. Others take their shape from the fossilisation of earlier forms of participatory assessment and their propagation as stylised artefacts that have not changed to accommodate new thinking, methods or practices. Difficulties of actually pinning down what precisely a “participatory assessment” might involve makes questions about the impact of participatory approaches on development outcomes (as opposed to development practices) very difficult to ask or answer (see Cornwall and Pratt 2003).

What is actually done when a “participatory appraisal” is carried out is a matter of individual and organisational preference. For some, the key ingredients are still those that were articulated by the originators of Rapid Rural Appraisal and that gave it a rigour lost with the ‘use your own best judgement’ school of PRA. These include the formulation of checklists, working in small interdisciplinary teams, the use of visualisation techniques that enable informants to produce and analyse their own information, some defined sampling procedures, data and informant triangulation, and collective verification. This kind of approach might be used in a social policy analysis to generate a rapid census of vulnerable people, drawing on community members’ knowledge, or to map available services and explore issues of access, preference and cost.

For others, the principal aims of carrying out a PRA exercise lie less in generating information and more in transforming attitudes and behaviour. This places the accent on learning to listen, shifting prejudices about the knowledge and capabilities of the people for whom development intervention is intended and building capacity for responsiveness and empathy. This might include walking with people through an urban slum hearing about the issues that affect them, or sitting with people in the places they gather listening to their stories and sharing experiences. Of course, the two can go together; it is well recognised in qualitative research that the quality of information depends on the quality of rapport, as it is in participatory research that the co-creation of knowledge requires an empathic, egalitarian stance from facilitators (Reason 1998). But in practice, there are tensions and trade-offs that leave PRA practitioners of all hues open to the varying charges of being “extractive”, having the “wrong attitude and behaviour” or being “unsystematic” (Pratt 2001; Cornwall *et al.* 2001).

The remarkable success that was achieved in winning support for PRA has in some respects created a considerable dilemma for those who originated, nurtured and promoted it. On the one hand, concern at the widespread abuse of the label and the proliferation of “bad practice” has continued to grow (Absalom *et al.* 1995; Cornwall and Pratt 2003). Popular methods have been selectively adopted and the term “participatory” used to provide moral authenticity to a preferred stance on social development issues, often with what appears to be no real understanding/concern for the methodology or underlying paradigm. On the other, attempts to improve the quality of practice are fraught with dilemmas. “Laying down the law” as to how participatory activities should be undertaken, or requiring that they should only be carried out by those “certified” by a recognised “expert group” might be interpreted as following precisely the professionalisation route which the originators of the approach specifically attempted to avoid (Chambers 1997). Tensions and trade-offs between rapidity, rigour and responsiveness continue to

present significant challenges for the use of participatory appraisal methodologies. These challenges emerge in sharp relief in adaptations of PRA for participatory policy research.

4.2 Participatory policy research

. . . international targets have only a tenuous connection to the real world of national planning and resource allocation. These activities need to be guided by quite a different epistemology, one that recognises the richness, diversity and complexity of real-world situations and builds on the knowledge, insights and ideas of poor people themselves. There are narratives to be reported about poverty and food insecurity that will bear very little relation to the narratives implied by international targets.

(Maxwell 1999: 103–4)

In terms of what is now regarded as the primary development objective, poverty reduction, both the World Bank and DFID have been prime movers in the now widespread use of Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPAs) precisely for their perceived benefits in providing the perspective that Maxwell advocates. Donors encourage the use of PPAs by developing partner countries as ‘an instrument for including the perspectives of poor people in the analysis of poverty and the formulation of strategies to reduce it’ (World Bank 1996). They are seen as having potential influence on the allocation of resources between sectors, areas and social groups; access, quality and relevance of services for poor people; and regulatory frameworks (informal sector, land, housing tenure, etc.). PPAs are presented as a conduit for the poor to communicate their needs and wants directly to policy makers (Robb 1999); a way in which the powerful get to hear the “voices of the poor” (Narayan *et al.* 2000). They are in many respects emblematic of the embrace of things “participatory” by donors and lenders.

PPAs are a particularly interesting example of the potentials and pitfalls of donor/lender adoption of “participatory approaches”. Originating in the early 1990s, they were initially little more than rapid multi-site social assessments that used a very conventional repertoire of social research methods: participant observation, semi-structured interviews and focus groups. What made PPAs “participatory” at this stage was simply that they involved some form of interaction with poor people in the places where they lived. It was not until 1993 that PRA methods were added to the mixture. A key insight from early PPAs was the significance of the “side-effects” of the involvement of a wide range of stakeholders. Norton and Stephens (1995) argue that this not only improves understanding, but promotes wider ownership of solutions and can work to build capacity for poverty analysis and policy design. They contend:

By any measure, a national strategy for poverty reduction must reflect as far as possible a consensus based on extensive dialogue between a wide range of primary and institutional stakeholders within the country itself concerning the nature of poverty and the type of actions which will most effectively

improve the situation. This recognises that the concept of poverty embodies general cultural values about entitlement and need which are a significant element of a country's national culture. Outsiders can engage in this process, but ultimately the momentum must reside within the society itself.

(Norton and Stephens 1995: 26)

By the late 1990s, "second generation" PPAs sought to shape this "ownership" through engagement with national government and civil society. Teams began to include local government officials, service providers and other "street-level bureaucrats", seeking to involve not only those making policy on paper but those shaping policy-as-practice (see UNDP 1998). This led to further trade-offs and tensions in recruiting teams, conducting fieldwork and preparing reports. The UNDP Shinyanga PPA, for example, was held to have produced "findings" that parroted existing development narratives, projecting them onto "the poor" (Yashine-Arroyo 1998).

There has been a recent explosion of PPAs, with the explicit requirement for "participation" in the development of PRSPs. While they vary considerably, there has been a growing sophistication in the design of PPA processes. The emphasis has shifted from generating information directed at policy-makers in one-shot consultative exercises towards opening new policy spaces, using the leverage of a highly visible process backed by significant supranational actors to provide opportunities for new policy stories and networks to emerge (Brock *et al.* 2001). This has been accompanied by a discourse on "combined methods" that seeks to assert the validity of participatory techniques as acceptable complements to orthodox head count approaches rather than just providing local colour (see White and Carvalho 1997; Booth *et al.* 1998). However, McGee (1998) highlights the danger that a rush to legitimate participatory techniques within the frame of reference set by conventional poverty assessment may serve to counteract, or even reverse, methodological advances made in developing a more transformatory approach to poverty assessment.

One interesting contradiction emerges in the naturalistic positivism that defines the epistemological basis of PPAs, with findings being presented as if they constituted the unmediated voices and versions of poor people. Airbrushing the facilitator, the architects of the methodology, the mediators and packagers of the findings out of the frame, this representation may serve to lend credence to an approach that is otherwise all too amenable to being labelled "subjective" and "impressionistic". Yet in doing so, the credibility of PPAs is seriously undermined, both as a form of qualitative enquiry and as participatory research. Whitehead and Lockwood contend, 'the strong moral emphasis on accessing the voices of the poor, and the subsequent focus of methods and tools in participatory approaches, side-steps questions about validity and reliability (familiar from debates within qualitative methods) about the role of data collectors themselves' (1999: 540). The presentation of findings as unmediated, decontextualised "voices" demonstrates just how far distant PPAs are from what many would recognise as genuine participatory research, in which knowledge is regarded as a co-created artefact and the relationship between the researcher and researched is in itself a focus of transformatory practice (see Gaventa 1993; Tandon 1996; Reason 1998).

There is much to be said for the potential use of PPAs as a means of democratising the process of poverty assessment and reframing poverty. But regarding PPAs not as a neutral means of informing otherwise ignorant policy-makers about what poor people really want or need, but as a political technology lends a rather different perspective (see Brock *et al.* 2001). As Francis notes, with the Bank's appropriation of "participatory" discourses and practices, 'the vocabulary of dissent, pilfered by the keepers of Washington's wardrobe, is subverted and regurgitated in a discourse of obfuscation' (2001: 86). Given the contested and above all political nature of policies on social policy, what is perhaps most striking about representations of PPAs is how good-naturedly consensual the process of arriving at policy priorities is made to seem. Take, for example, Narayan's description:

A PPA is an iterative, participatory research process that seeks to understand poverty from the perspective of a range of stakeholders, and to involve them directly in planning follow-up action. The most important stakeholders involved in the research process are poor men and poor women. PPAs also include decision makers from all levels of government, civil society and the local elite, thereby uncovering different interests and perspectives and increasing local capacity and commitment to follow-up action (2000: 15).

Such a perspective sidesteps the more complex politics of policy-making in practice, from the framing of agendas to the colonisation of policy spaces by powerful policy actors and their networks (see Keeley and Scoones 1999). The image evoked is of a transparent and rational process. People say what they think. Everyone gives their views and is heard. Everyone has a position on the policy under discussion. Working together in harmony, across enormous power differentials, solutions are found to which everyone can agree. The striking political naiveté of this approach may be one of the potent elements of PPAs, simply because it gives rise to the creation of political space - which may in turn create new political opportunities for the most powerful actors, including the aid agencies. When it comes to transforming social policy discourse and seeking more equitable alternatives, much depends on who enters these spaces and what use they make of them in other processes (see Cornwall and Gaventa 2001).

As participatory researchers have shown, enabling local people to access and use information in order to seek changes in policy can be as much an oppositional as a consensual exercise, incurring in some cases violent and repressive reactions. In rural Tennessee, for example, a participatory research process enabled rural people to make their own enquiries about a local landfill when people in their community started falling sick. Battling against a government cover-up of toxic waste dumping, local people mobilised, learning and using technical language about chemicals and symptoms to press for action, drawing on their new-found knowledge to contest official claims that their contaminated water was safe. No one wanted to listen to their voices; no-one was going to ask them about their knowledge. They needed to shout to be heard, and use their own resources to find out for themselves, in the face of government complicity with commercial interests (Juliet Merrifield, pers. comm.).

It is in such cases that the gap between development agencies' appropriations of "participatory research" and the versions described by writers such as Tandon (1996), Gaventa (1993) and Reason (1998) is perhaps most evident. World-Bank style "participatory research" appears to involve substituting questionnaires with the templates for PRA diagrams and asking people to fill in the blanks, capturing their "voices" as they speak. Participatory researchers from non-mainstream traditions start in a different place, with a different kind of process: stimulating critical consciousness so they can situate and deconstruct dominant discourses, examining root causes rather than symptoms, and building the political capabilities of the marginalised (Fals-Borda and Rahman 1991). If the proponents of "participatory policy research" in the development mainstream were to revisit their disregard of the fundamental building blocks of participatory research, it might indeed provide a better fit with current rhetoric about empowerment, rights and voice.

4.3 From needs to rights

Participatory appraisals and assessments have been used primarily for the identification of *needs*, generally within frames set by prevailing discourses and categories. Just as "the poor", "women", "children" bound and define categories of people, discourses on "poverty", "welfare", "health" circumscribe the kinds of remedies that might be prescribed. Despite their claims to open-endedness, participatory appraisals and assessments are often used within a frame of reference that limits the possibility of imagining, let alone voicing, alternatives. The "Community Action Plans" or lists of priorities that emerge from participatory appraisals all too often mimic existing development solutions. And what the "voices of the poor" say seem to hold remarkable parallels with the kinds of policy stories currently in favour by many donor agencies. Thinking out of the box requires new approaches, new entry points: ones that offer better prospects for bridging the yawning gap between rhetoric and practice.

As discussed above, participatory approaches to social policy have come to place a greater emphasis on reaching providers and street level bureaucrats by involving them in processes of enquiry or deliberation (see, for example, Dhangara *et al.* 2000). Advocates claim that this serves both to enrich their understanding and to enhance their capacity to respond (see Goetz and Gaventa 2001). However, while "good governance" discourses acknowledge some of the structural constraints to public sector effectiveness, mainstream participation discourses have tended to emphasise the agency of the individual and processes that change attitudes and behaviour (see Brown 1997; Chambers 1997). The focus has been, almost exclusively, on the interface between public servants and their clients, especially the poor, with a rhetorical emphasis on 'their knowledge, their analysis, their solutions'. Surprisingly little explicit attention has been paid to the constraints that public servants need to surmount if they are to do their job effectively.

Some of the "side-effects" of the use of participatory approaches with and by "street-level" public servants suggest that they might also benefit from having their voices heard, and that they have an important role to play in co-creating as well as facilitating workable solutions. New alliances and partnerships between clients, bureaucrats and providers can be built through the use of participatory

processes in this way (see, for example, Dhungana *et al.* 2000). Participatory approaches might be used with “vertical slices” through a health care delivery system to build new bridges and understandings. They may also be used with a particular group of providers to enable them to recognise their own knowledge and agency, so as to more effectively enable those they work with to realise their rights. Khanna *et al.* (2002), for example, describe how giving a group of auxiliary nurse midwives the chance to learn with and about their clients made important difference to the quality of their work, building the possibilities of transformation in service delivery from below. Using such methods may enable providers to analyse critically their own situations and their own room for manoeuvre. A group of Brazilian social workers, using the techniques of Legislative Theatre to portray an everyday incident in which a social worker tries to mediate on behalf of a group of street children, realised that they had a great deal more agency than they had believed. By playing and replaying the scene, looking for interventions, coming up against policy roadblocks and bureaucratic barriers, they tested tactics and explored possibilities.²

While participation rhetoric emphasises *mutual* learning, the exchanges that take place between the objects of participatory appraisals or assessments and those who are enlisted in listening to them are typically very one-sided. Rarely are “poor people” given any access to the wealth of information that well-meaning development professionals have about policies and how they work in practice, or about the rights they may have and how best to realise them. Just taking part in PRAs or PPAs is sometimes presented as “empowering”, yet rarely are people equipped with the tools to conduct their *own* research on the institutions that affect their lives. Cheryl Overs (pers. comm.) reports the reaction of a group of sex workers to a PRA-style needs assessment. The sex workers argued that they knew enough about themselves and their needs. What they really needed to know was how the various agencies involved in working with sex workers related to each other, and how to negotiate their way through the maze of bureaucracy to access benefits and services. Shifting from needs to rights required them to have access to the formal and informal information needed to make the most of their entitlements.

Making the most of what participatory approaches have to offer social policy calls, however, for more than better processes, or more enabling techniques. While much could be done to work with people’s sense of entitlement, to build confidence and critical consciousness, enabling people to articulate and claim their rights also calls for statutory guarantees, and for enabling policy and legal frameworks and institutions. The contexts in which the most progressive use of participatory approaches have been possible are also those where constitutional rights to participation and legislative provision for participatory institutions have made it possible for citizens to participate more actively in making and shaping social policy. As Gaventa (2002) suggests, what is needed now is to build and strengthen a new architecture of citizenship and democratic practice that supports transformative and inclusive citizen participation.

² This example is taken from a workshop session facilitated by Barbara Santos of the Centre of the Theatre of the Oppressed at *Mudança da Cena*, a conference on citizenship, human rights and theatre held in Recife, Brazil in September 2000.

5 Conclusion

This paper has focused very much on the possible problems and limitations of existing methodologies and methods. There is of course another side. As indicated, social development issues are now taken much more seriously within donor agencies, sometimes in spite of the tensions this approach may create with *their* funders. There are active debates on the LFA and stakeholder analysis, on social assessment and the use of participatory approaches, within both the academic and donor communities. A welcome wave of critical engagement with participatory approaches, and the flood of innovation with methodological pluralism, whether in terms of work on using participatory approaches to generate numbers or in their use for rights-based assessments and for making sense of and transforming power relations, opens up a whole new area for experimentation that has much to offer social policy analysis. At the same time, debates about the extent to which procedures such as the Logical Framework stultify or enable good development practice and about the need for approaches that foster reflexivity the same time as providing information hold the possibility for shifting the frame through which “Social Policy Analysis” might be viewed (see Groves and Hinton, forthcoming). The influence of these debates on the design and implementation of policies, programmes and projects is manifold. One thing seems to be sure: there is little likelihood that the cavalier attitudes often adopted in the past towards intended project beneficiaries will re-emerge. And while there is still a long way to go, the gains that have been made point to exciting times ahead.

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