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Editorial

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Development agencies, as well as advocacy or activist organisations that focus on development issues, face the problem of how to codify their experience in such a way that it can inform their own (and others') future efforts, and help them to assess when and how to 'scale-up', but without assuming that what works in one situation is likely work quite so well in another. It is all too easy to fall into trap of selling as 'best practice' something that worked precisely because it was grounded in and responsive to local conditions (Feek 2005). Similarly, a campaign coalition might make common cause around a particular set of goals, but without the various partners necessarily sharing or even wholly agreeing with each other's overall agendas. Selective or functional partnership may be manageable as long as all parties understand and respect their differences and resist the temptation to force the relationship further than it can go. (See Ellis 2004 and Williams 2005 for useful examples of the sensitive negotiation that is required in order to avoid damaging misunderstandings.) Part of the problem lies in properly identifying the ingredients of what, in retrospect, was judged successful, and recognising that success might very well have been due more to wider contextual factors than to anything inherent in the relationship itself. Selection is of the essence here, since a welter of empirical detail risks losing any transferable learning points, and thus failing to draw out anything of real value to others.

The current focus on being 'evidence based' is obviously better than being recklessly ad hoc, provided it doesn't lead to excessive timidity. But however thoroughly planned an intervention or advocacy programme, when it comes to evaluating the outcomes, attribution needs to be tempered with a strong dose of institutional self-effacement: as Chris Roche reminds us, '... in real life, a combination of several factors is likely to have caused any observed change' (Roche 1999:32). And ironically, in the broader scheme of things, economic structural adjustment and neo-liberal policies that have in turn caused or intensified so many intractable problems in the South, were based rather more on ideology than on evidence. Worse still, when the reality refused to match the orthodoxy, the solution was to double the dose and, in the case of some of the transition economies, to supplement it with a course of 'shock therapy'. Paradoxically, some advocacy organisations, which are by definition partisan, were provoked into producing the kind of empirical findings that may have helped to turn the tide.[1]

Several of the contributions to this issue grapple with the problem of how to define practices that are both flexible but principled, and with how to evaluate the results without missing the broader picture—missing the wood for the trees—or overlooking the unexpected. Four of these involve the inter-relationship between research and practice. In the context of natural resource management (NRM) in Latin America, **Simon E. Carter** and **Bruce Currie-Alder** look at scaling up local innovations, understanding why these work in specific contexts, and

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reflecting on their relevance in other geographical and social settings. Apart from stressing the importance of context, participation, learning, and dissemination, the authors also identify some of the key bottlenecks as being due to failings in the relationships, such as the lack of open communication and the mutual recognition among stakeholders of each other's rights, responsibilities, and roles. **Janet Seeley** and **Iqbal Alam Khan** describe the methodology followed in a collaborative research project in Bangladesh between PROSHIKA, a large national NGO, and DFID. This sought both to learn about poor people's livelihoods and to train the NGO research team in qualitative methods. The authors record their success in feeding directly into policy formulation and into designing interventions aimed to help the poorest people in Bangladesh. **Douglas L. Murray**, **Laura T. Raynolds**, and **Peter L. Taylor** report on their own detailed research across a number of small, fair-trade coffee-producer cooperatives in Mexico and Central America, and draw out some of the tensions between incorporating more poor farmers and maintaining a focus on social justice and environmental sustainability. The strategic challenge is whether to focus on penetrating the conventional market, or to represent an alternative to the neo-liberal paradigm.

With examples from their work in South Africa, **Neil Andersson** and **Melissa Roche** describe a standardised approach to combining epidemiological and experiential evidence as a means of understanding gender relations at the community level, to inform policies that address changing needs. Since gender is a factor in analysing risk and resilience the approach is designed both to identify data to advocate in favour of women, and to promote an enabling environment for equitable development, challenging the gendered patterns of economic marginalisation. Arguing that most corporate-sector interest in issues relating to gender-power relations has focused on the impact of their activities on local communities, **Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt** looks at the experience of women employees in a privately run colliery in Indonesia and identifies some of the questions to be addressed in order to 'mainstream' women in this traditionally male sector. **Maretha de Waal** also suggests a framework for evaluating development interventions from a gender-mainstreaming perspective, with a view to integrating gender perspectives in every phase of the project cycle.

Decentralisation from central to local or municipal government has been a key feature of the current wave of democratic reform in Latin America.[2] In their study of three municipalities in Ecuador, **James R. Keese** and **Marco Freire Argudo** explore new opportunities for cooperation with NGOs, where the latter bring their local-level experience and can help newly-empowered municipal authorities with planning and capacity building. On the other hand, municipalities offer NGOs a degree of legitimacy and local accountability, as well as greater outreach and the means to maintain this beyond the NGO's own funding period. Following the peace accords in Mozambique, there was an urgent need both to build the country's economic and social fabric after a prolonged war, and to disarm the population at large. The scale of the challenge, and the wish to consolidate the peace process, justified the need for contributions from a range of quarters. **Frank James Tester** describes a Canadian-funded project designed to combine both aspects by encouraging people to trade arms for development tools, a variation on the Biblical injunction to beat swords into ploughshares. While this succeeded in decommissioning a number of weapons, and very much captured the international imagination, it proved difficult to relate the production of art to the overall initiative. However, by the same token that success is not replicable in any literal or straightforward sense, so the fact that a good idea 'failed' in one setting does not imply that there is nothing positive to learn from that experience, or indeed that it might not have worked better in different circumstances, or even with a different personality mix. Certainly, to return to the opening discussion, it might not only be better to have tried and failed than not to have tried at all, but also the lessons to be drawn from partial success will probably be more honestly critical of the limitations of a given initiative than will full-blown ‘success stories’ – and far less likely to turn into questionable ‘blueprints’ for replication elsewhere.

Notes

1. Although recent research suggests that the conversion of the IMF and World Bank ‘from ideology-based policy influence to evidence-based policy advice’ has been long on rhetoric but short on practice (Hayes 2005).
2. *Development in Practice* 14(6), published in November 2004, was a special issue dedicated to this topic.

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