Beyond the comfort zone: some issues, questions, and challenges in thinking about development approaches and methods

Jo Rowlands

> *'If the only tool you have is a hammer, you tend to see every problem as a nail.'* Abraham Maslow
>
> *'Common sense is the collection of prejudices acquired by age eighteen.'* Albert Einstein (attributed)

Introduction

I have believed for many years that human beings are generally highly resourceful, intelligent, and creative. The more I have seen during my working life, which has given me opportunities to experience life in many parts of the globe and under many different circumstances, the more I have been reinforced in this belief. Unless their abilities have been badly interfered with, human beings are capable of evaluating and judging complex circumstances and acting on their conclusions – even where the range of actions available to them is limited by inequality and other circumstances. Any course of action is contextualised within culture and personal life trajectory – so people don't always act in the way that someone with a different story might expect. I recently had the opportunity to listen to a highly placed member of staff in the Ugandan Ministry of Finance talking about the choices made by poor people in Uganda in chopping down trees. She said that the Ministry used to believe that poor people did not act rationally (because they were destroying their own resource base), but that the more detailed picture which the staff were able to see as a result of their Participatory Poverty Assessment process showed that poor people act as rationally as it is practicable for them to do within problematic circumstances where it is impossible to look beyond the immediate needs of survival. She acknowledged that it was the policy makers' lack of understanding of the full reality and stark choices confronting poor people that was the problem. I am interested in finding approaches to development and methods with which to work that will enable us to free up that human resourcefulness, intelligence, and creativity in ways that bring the achievement of human rights and social justice closer to reality.

In this introductory essay, I will touch on many different aspects, perhaps thinking about approaches and methods not as 'science' but as 'art'. I want to challenge the notion that methodology is somehow neutral; to unpack some of the assumptions that lie behind development interventions; and to explore how power is embedded in everything that gets done. I am also concerned with the process by which priorities are identified and by whom, and concerned also with the elusive challenge of scaling up small progress. I shall take a particular look at participatory approaches, and touch on evaluation and learning. I want to throw many questions into the open: this is an essay that is full of questions. Many of the essays in this volume help to bring those questions back down to the ground again. I will not attempt to draw a complete picture, but I do want to add a degree of complexity which goes beyond what most accounts of particular approaches or methods allow for. I will delve as far into that complexity as space allows, but I shall not attempt to produce many tidy resolutions: readers will have to provide those for themselves, as far as they are able to.

Not neutral, not in isolation

'Approaches' can refer to a wide spectrum of things. They might be empowering, participatory, gender-equitable, people-centred, inclusionary. Or they might be the reverse of each of those: disempowering, top–down, male-biased, formulaic, exclusionary. Or, of course, they might be (and often are) a combination of these, whether intentionally or not. Any approach has behind it a set of values, beliefs, and attitudes that give it its flavour, set its tone. This is a fundamental point to be clear about: approaches to development are not neutral. If an approach has a transformative agenda, it is in a particular direction, towards a change in power relations or resource allocation. If the approach largely tends to maintain the *status quo*, in so doing it is supporting the maintenance of a particular set of power relations and resource allocations.

Approaches provide a rough guiding framework within which specific methods and techniques can be used. Methods, then, are the step-by-step specifics of how an approach is put into practice at the ‘coal face’, at the ‘kitchen sink’, on the ‘factory floor’, or in the ‘field’. Problems can arise when the method is not compatible with the values, beliefs, or attitudes on which the approach that is being used ultimately rests. In a top–down approach, the use of a method which encourages individuals to identify what they want to have happen, but in a context where their wishes will not be realised, can lead to frustration, disillusionment, and non-cooperation. Equally, in a participatory approach, a method which privileges some people’s participation over that of others, such as one that requires the ability to read, although not everyone can do so, will not achieve the participation intended.

Problems may also arise when the approach used and the methods employed *are* compatible, but the individuals using these methods are insufficiently skilled or insufficiently self-aware for them to be truly effective. Participatory and inclusionary approaches are particularly vulnerable to this difficulty. The intent may be there, but here the methods cannot be separated from who is using them: where they ‘sit’ in the power relations of the context, how aware they are of that, what their skills are as facilitators or enablers of the participation of others, how willing they are to step out of their own ‘comfort zone’, and so on.

Within any given approach, how do we choose the methods that we use? And what factors influence how we apply them? These choices are not always clear or conscious. If we are really honest about it, many of us probably often choose methods because they are familiar and draw on skills that we feel confident about; or because we perceive that the funders require them.[1] We therefore cannot extract the user from the equation. Methods may be quick to use, or cheap to use. We might choose them because they have been tried and tested: they have a track record which gives them credibility. We might choose them because they are not too disruptive of the *status quo* – or conversely because they *are*. We sometimes choose particular methods because we can’t think of anything else. The point is, how aware are we of what forms and informs our choices? And how transparent is this to anyone else? People trained in qualitative approaches within the social sciences learn that the quality of the research and its results can be deeply affected by the degree of awareness with which these kinds of issue are considered. Realistically, most ‘practitioners’ operate within constraints of time and resources that affect the choices we make; we also operate within political contexts that shape our choices.

As to the application of methods, there is the issue (mentioned earlier) of the level of skill with which they are used. There are other issues as well, including flexibility and the ability to adapt a given method according to responses and circumstances. And there are other potentially controversial elements: with how much commitment and/or passion is the method applied? Here we enter into the relationship between the individual(s) engaged in the activity and the nature of the subject material or the kind of change being addressed. I don't advocate the energy of passion as a necessary element for effective action: it depends hugely on the purpose and context of the activity. Undoubtedly there are some areas of undertaking where passion would be unhelpful or counter-productive, or could lead to errors of judgement and mistakes. There are other contexts, however, where commitment – as long-term dedication and passion, as energy and drive – contributes positively to the achievement of change, bringing capacity to confront obstacles and be resilient in the face of set-backs.

Assumptions

Approaches to development, and the methods that flow from them, are profoundly shaped by assumptions that are made about people. Inclusionary and participatory approaches have a firm foundation in an assumption that human beings have capacities and value and potential, and that for many, these are limited by being in a position of powerlessness, vulnerability, or material poverty. Gender-equitable approaches are based on assumptions that men and women have equally valid needs, potential capacities, and contributions. They look for ways to redress the power imbalances that usually favour men over women. These assumptions can mean that conflicts of interest have to be recognised and addressed. Assumptions are also made about processes, such as how change happens or how learning takes place. Assumptions are made about what can and cannot be done. All of these shape the nature of the approach and the choice of methods.

Where do these assumptions come from? Some are based on experience or sound research and evidence from elsewhere. Others are based on beliefs and values – some of which can be based on stereotypes and misinformation. There have been plenty of examples of this over the years. A classic assumption is that of availability of time – usually the time of women, but also of all poor people. How many projects have tripped up over this assumption, only to find that the women's labour is not available at the point when it is needed: they are too busy doing their own work? Maybe some people used to make the assumption that poor people are poor because they sit around doing nothing all day; or, just as inaccurate, that they are doing things with their time that have less value than the project activity. I would like to believe that these particular assumptions are no longer made. Assumptions about what is and is not possible are sometimes based on a careful situational analysis (which can be vulnerable to the oversight of a key factor), and on knowledge and beliefs about how learning and change happen. This can lead to inaccurate assessments of what can be achieved. My favourite example of this comes from a women's group whom I visited in the course of doing research in the state of Puebla in Mexico. I met the women some three years after the completion of a pig-rearing project. The pig idea had been a disaster: everything that could have gone wrong apparently did go wrong. The project had been closed down and judged a failure. Yet when I met the women, they were full of energy, ideas, and enthusiasm, and they had embarked on a different project of their own, had raised their own funds, and had begun to generate income from it. In talking the whole experience over, it was apparent that they had learned all sorts of things from the 'failed project' which were now standing them in good stead. Despite the 'failure', these women had developed confidence, and above all a sense of themselves as able to act in order to meet their own needs. With the passage of time, it was clear that the earlier project had been a resounding success – just not in raising pigs!

One of the columns in the matrix of the Logical Framework is labelled 'assumptions'. The tool as a whole has attracted much criticism over the years, but this seems to me to be one of its strengths: to have a tool which systematically encourages you to become aware of the assumptions being made throughout a planning process seems like an excellent idea.[2] The existence of an assumptions column, however, cannot provide a substitute for the awareness and understanding of assumptions that are needed in order to fill it in. That requires an openness of mind which the tool itself cannot provide. It also requires a willingness to revise the assumptions when they prove inaccurate and, on the part of institutions, a willingness not only to allow revisions but to welcome them as evidence of learning and experience.

Power

I cannot go much further in exploring the issues of development approaches and methods without stopping to explore the critical issue of power. All approaches to development have power embedded in them. The question is, what sorts of power do they encompass, who is powerful and who is not, and does that power help or hinder? It is well recognised that powerlessness is a central element of poverty; any focus on poverty, inequality, injustice, or exclusion involves power and power relations. But despite this acknowledgement, power is insidious and often remains invisible (or 'under the table', to borrow an image from VeneKlasen with Miller (2002)). Approaches that pay explicit attention to power relations, and acknowledge and address the power dynamics within which they operate, are more likely to contribute to change. But consideration of power also needs to be part of the solutions being sought and the methods through which this is done. We are not talking merely about 'power over' here. Approaches and methods are needed which reinforce and strengthen other forms of power that will contribute to lasting solutions through their enhancement – the power of people acting collectively to make change happen, and the power of people knowing and demanding their rights in ways that cannot be ignored.[3] Participatory and inclusionary approaches and methods can be a channel for positive changes in power relations – but even with those approaches, there is nothing automatic about it. I shall return to this later. What matters is that power needs to be recognised and addressed.

One way in which some approaches address power is to focus on particular arenas in which it shows itself. This has been seen in relation to gender, with many instances of gender and gender relations being put intentionally into the foreground and built into the methods so that the power issues cannot be ignored. There have also been many instances where gender issues have been present in the rhetoric, but in practice, when methods are applied, it has been possible for them to be deliberately or unwittingly ignored (Longwe 1997). It matters, therefore, to be deliberate in making the links between the theoretical approach and the implementation of that approach in 'real life' and not to be naive about the tendency of existing power relations to distort and divert the best-intentioned approach.

Who sets the agenda and priorities?

Power comes to the fore again when we consider where agendas for change come from. Who identifies and ultimately decides what is needed in a given context, or which/whose needs should be given priority over which/whose others? Local, national, and international political agendas shift and change all the time, and are constantly interpreted and acted upon by a wide range of actors. So much of what actually happens is shaped and influenced by political timetables and considerations: When is the election? Who needs to be able to show that they have achieved what kind of results? Whose political future is at stake? Budget allocations at each level shift accordingly. Approaches to development need to be able to work within this shifting power context, and to develop strategies for functioning within it. Analysis and understanding are important, since they affect people's view of what is 'possible' and therefore 'worth attempting'. Sometimes, because of the values and beliefs underlying an approach, the response has to be 'it looks impossible, but we're going to try to do it anyway'. This can be very effective! Jubilee 2000 certainly faced considerable criticism for having unrealistic goals which were too complex for the general public to understand when it started its campaign to 'drop the debt' for the poorest indebted countries. Yet it succeeded in mobilising considerable popular opinion in support of an economic agenda of considerable technical complexity. Despite not achieving everything that it had intended, Jubilee 2000 made significant and continuing impact, educating many thousands of 'ordinary people' about significant global issues in the process.

The formal political arena is only a part of the picture. Approaches need also to work with, through, and around informal political forces. This includes intra-household relations and power dynamics within communities. In particular, the fact that conflict is often an underlying issue is something that in turn has an impact upon the effectiveness of development work. Many approaches try to work around this; but how many are robust enough to allow or encourage that conflict to emerge and to be dealt with? How many development practitioners are highly skilled in conflict management and mediation?

The people who set priorities for change on behalf of others very often have good intentions, but do not always have sufficient information or the skills to interpret it accurately. It is, however, possible to play a supporting or even catalytic role without basing one's support on a particular specific outcome. This prioritises process over output, so that an overarching approach (such as empowerment or inclusion) can shape the work without imposing particular agendas in a predetermined way. This is more of a challenge for organisations working within inflexible objectives-focused systems – but I hope it is a challenge that we can rise to, rather than an excuse for continuing on the same path as before.

Who implements the agenda?

Much development work falters when the people entrusted with actually implementing change do not have 'ownership' of the task with which they are charged. So often, approaches and policies which have been carefully crafted do not lead to the changes intended, because key individuals did not have the commitment or the skills or the knowledge or the wish to see to it that change happens. They may have the wish but not the time, because (as is common in development contexts, whether NGO or government) they are working on a short fixed-term contract or are subject to relocation. They might be field staff who are already fully occupied but are expected somehow to find space for a new initiative. They might be activists who want change to happen but do not have the particular skills needed. Or they may be local government planners who have been given a set of policies from higher up that they are supposed to implement, but don't know enough about conditions on the ground to interpret the policy into realistic plans. Any approach would benefit from seeing that these individuals (or groups) are stakeholders in the undertaking, just as much as the supposed 'beneficiaries'. This is a perspective which could help to unblock some of the blockages that get in the way of many potentially positive development initiatives – as has been proposed recently in relation to gender mainstreaming (Howard 2002). If you take people out of a box called 'resisters', and consider them instead as stakeholders in the process of gender mainstreaming, it becomes possible to think deliberately about their needs as stakeholders and devise a strategy to address those needs.

This does not apply exclusively to gender mainstreaming. During my recent visit to Uganda, referred to earlier, to learn about the Participatory Poverty Assessment (PPA) processes there that have informed their Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP), I and a group of Oxfam UK Poverty Programme partners had the opportunity to meet a district planner who had been one of a group trained in participatory methods and had facilitated the PPA activities in his district. The findings of the PPA had been fed into the process nationally, but it was also clear that his own district-level plans had been shaped significantly by the local findings, and that his own work as a district planner had been profoundly affected by the participatory research process. Clearly this individual had become an advocate for the approach to development represented by the PPA process. He could see how it helped him to do his own job more effectively.

There are challenges to be met when the implementation of particular projects, activities, or initiatives becomes a full-time occupation. Organisations get formed and individuals get paid to do the work that perhaps they have hitherto been doing on a voluntary basis. Or someone gets paid to do work that previously someone else had been doing on a voluntary basis. Through implementing the approach to change, social relations and sometimes cultural relations are changed. Individuals may then become dependent on the ongoing existence of the activity or organisation.[4] Certain kinds of work become 'professionalised' or 'technicalised'. Once the livelihoods of individuals are at stake, it is easy for work to become led by what will attract funding, rather than by what most needs to be done. It can happen that organisations lose their connection with the grassroots, and lose legitimacy as a result (Whitehead 1995). This may eventually undermine the effectiveness of the approach.

How do implementers obtain the necessary support for what they do? How can skills and capacities be developed when they are the less tangible, more ephemeral skills and capacities of facilitation, strategic thinking, organisational development, or counselling? Or when the nature of the change being sought requires personal changes on the part of the implementer? This is the case with gender, where all individuals are embedded in the existing power relations, whether they know it or not, and the extent of their awareness and their ability to confront the need for change in their own attitudes and behaviours can make all the difference to their ability to support others in a process of change. Individuals can attend training courses, but the real development of skill often comes through doing the thing, and then exploring what happened and deliberately learning from experience. Investment in staff is needed. In management contexts, the idea of having a mentor, or coach, is now quite widely accepted in some quarters. The idea of accompaniment[5] as a role that can usefully be played has become quite common in some development circles. This is when an organisation has a regular relationship over a period of time with someone who can provide informed critique, ideas, encouragement, and support for the building of capacity consistently, from a position of knowledge of and support for the organisation's work. Is this an approach in itself? Maybe. It certainly isn't just a method or technique for doing something. It is certainly a kind of relationship, and it challenges the more conventional relationships of power that characterise interactions between many funding bodies and the organisations they fund.

‘Scaling up’ and ‘skilling up’

There was a considerable debate a few years ago about how to ‘scale up’ the effectiveness of development interventions. I remember feeling nervous about it at the time. On the one hand, one would not want to argue with the need for change to happen on a far greater scale, if the conditions of life for millions of poor people and communities around the world are to improve. But there was something in the concept of ‘scaling up’ that sounded too close to the undertaking of mass programmes, imposing them from above, or replicating something that had worked in one place across many places, whether it would be effective elsewhere or not.

It seems to me now that there are two kinds of ‘scaling up’. One is the adoption by governments of pro-poor policies and practice, with the systems that are needed to go with it, where implementation can be at local level and adapted to local realities. This can work to the extent that resources and political will permit, and clearly there are serious limitations to both of those factors in many places. There is a lot to be said for taking this approach. Only the State, in most contexts, has the potential reach and resources to introduce large-scale change. There are, however, dangers of failure inherent in this approach. The political danger of failure is one. The danger of greed and corruption diverting resources is another. This is a risk whenever ‘free’ resources are moved from one place to another; it can be found in government, NGOs, international agencies, and private business, North or South – anywhere where money can be used to buy support or influence, impose policies, create or silence opposition. So if ‘scaling up’ involves any significant transfer of resources, especially where there are organisational inefficiencies and inadequate controls and accountability, corruption presents a risk to its effectiveness.

There is another practical risk in ‘scaling up’ which becomes immediately apparent when you try to adopt something on a large scale: suddenly you need the skills that were being used in the small-scale activity, but you need them quickly and widely. Very often, the skills in question will be ones that take time to develop; they will be available only in small quantities, or they will be expensive to buy in. Your whole ‘scaling up’ endeavour will then depend on whether you can get away with poor skills to implement with, or how quickly and effectively you can train new people – and often you find that what looked like a promising approach is deemed a failure, when it is not the approach that was the problem, but the lack of sufficient people with adequate skills, knowledge, and resources to implement it effectively. It now becomes clear why 'tools' and 'methods' that are simple and can be replicated with very little training are so sought after. And why efforts to take effective work 'to scale' so often founder.

The other approach to 'scaling up' has, to an extent, generated its own momentum, although there is plenty of scope for more. That is the 'scaling up' that can happen through the sharing of knowledge and information about what has been tried, with what success, and for that to be tried all over the place by people who are motivated to implement change. One example of this has been the rapid and spontaneous spread of ideas about the potential of microfinance schemes. This involved a very good idea, of providing small loans to women, which was implemented in some instances, with a very high profile internationally in the development 'community'. There are many impressive cases of effective adaptation of the idea to local circumstances in different places around the world. Sometimes the approach was replicated in rather uncritical ways which over-simplified and lost the nuances of local interpretation – and because it is difficult to admit failure with an approach that has been so clearly successful in other instances, it took a while for a more critical attitude to the good idea to emerge. I suspect that the microfinance idea is most effective when sufficient attention is given not just to the adaptation process, but also to the needs for learning and 'skilling-up' that, if attended to, help to ensure effective use of any method being introduced. This kind of 'scaling up' works because people are motivated to achieve change and will look actively for ideas and inspiration that will help them to figure out what might work in their own circumstances. It is most effective when a good idea or approach or method is not simply replicated, but is tested and adapted to suit the specific circumstances.

Another example of an approach being scaled up by example and by the momentum of a good idea is that of Participatory Budgeting. From its beginnings in Porto Alegre in Brazil, this approach to the active involvement of citizens in financial decision-making and priority-setting has spread with varying success to more than 70 towns and cities in Brazil and is now spreading farther afield. It is currently being piloted, in quite different ways, in Manchester and Salford in the north-east of England.[6] Different places use the tools of the budget matrix and community meetings in their own way, with varying annual cycles of consultation and a range of ways of engaging with more conventional democratic processes and structures. In the UK, although it is too early as I write to assess how well the approach will 'fit' with the cultural context(s) and existing system of representative democracy, there is great interest already from many local authorities. If the approach is seen to work and to be adaptable to the UK context, the idea will need very little active promotion to be taken up and tried by others. As with the example of microfinance cited above, this kind of 'scaling up' risks failing though misapplication and misunderstanding, and through the idea spreading faster than the detailed understanding of the characteristic features of the idea and its application that makes it work. Perhaps every apparently good idea needs a label attached to it saying 'Warning: effective only if applied with skill and used in a way that adapts it to local circumstances'.

Does the wheel need to be re-invented?

An exact reproduction of something that worked in one place in a different place can work if the circumstances are similar enough, or the issue being addressed is sufficiently technical in nature. I certainly would not argue for starting from scratch on every occasion as if this were the first time. But where human beings and human societies and cultures are the context, there is much room for unrecognised or 'invisible' differences which mean that things are not as similar as they might appear at first. Access to the ideas, knowledge, thinking, and experience of others is a crucial resource to spare us unnecessary re-inventing; case studies are most useful if they try to distil the essential elements that would be needed for replication beyond their particular culture and context. If we are to be successful, we need also a capacity, and willingness, to think afresh for each set of circumstances. Then we can work out which elements of other people's experience to keep, or at least try to replicate or adapt, and which elements we should not use.

On occasion, it will be a positive process to re-invent something that others have tried. This is particularly true if it is the *process of working it out* that gives us the skills to apply whatever it is in practice. Mistakes have an important role to play here. If we can use them, mistakes can be the richest source of learning about what works and why.

In the context where I work in the UK, there is currently a strong government emphasis on the idea of *'best practice'*, with great importance placed on identifying and disseminating 'best practice' in many fields. This is somewhat helpful in supporting the dissemination of possibly productive ideas for others to use, adapt, and build on, but the concept of 'best practice' implies that there is one approach or method that is 'best' in some universal way – a blueprint which can and should be followed. This is seriously problematic; it may undermine the flexibility that is needed to achieve specific things with particular people in particular places. At the opposite extreme, however, would be an attitude that believes each situation to be so unique that there is little to be learned from others. This would lead to much unnecessary effort to work everything out from the beginning, which in most circumstances will not be the most effective use of limited resources. *'Good practice'* is a more useful concept, which allows the experience of others to provide a set of possibilities against which the needs of the particular context and circumstances can be tested. 'Good practice' still supposes a particular set of values and priorities – how else do you know it's good? – which may or may not fit other circumstances, but it allows for the possibility that there may be more than one way of doing something.

Participatory and inclusive approaches

One example of the second approach to 'scaling up' described above has been the way in which participatory approaches have spread over the past 20 years. From being a rather radical and idiosyncratic, different way of working, participation has slowly taken the path towards the mainstream, to the extent that now the use of participatory approaches and methods is expected and encouraged in many situations. Interesting ideas and a different kind of methodology were attractive in appearing to hold out the hope of more innovative action and a closer match between the locally experienced needs and resources and the 'solutions' attempted. One of the characteristics of participatory approaches that appealed to people working in communities and at the 'grassroots' was their potential to address some of the power dynamics that had been sabotaging attempts to bring change through more conventional approaches. 'Participation' held out the possibility of actively engaging excluded and powerless groups and individuals, such as women, tribals, young people, older people, people with disabilities, other minority groups, into the centre of development processes. Methods could be chosen to facilitate active participation, and to include the voices and priorities of people otherwise ignored. These approaches were and continue to be full of potential. There are many, many instances now of such approaches and methods leading to programmes and priorities that are very different from what they would otherwise have been. It is no wonder that the ideas spread far and wide across the globe.

However, it is clear also that participation is not a panacea. As with any other approach, there need to be positive results. Participatory methods are vulnerable to being applied mechanistically and without the levels of awareness, self-awareness, and skill required on the part of facilitators. Or they can be applied without sufficient local knowledge for the power dynamics to be visible, leaving local people vulnerable to inaccurate assumptions (Mompati 2000). In such cases, they can be used to put a 'gloss' of participatory democracy over processes that continue to reproduce existing power relations. So the simple fact of using participatory methods is not sufficient to ensure that participatory *approaches* will be applied successfully. Neither, of course, is the mere use of the language of participation sufficient; for many agencies, 'participation of beneficiaries' means joining in their pre-determined projects, or being consulted, which may happen just so that the participation 'box' can be ticked, rather than being enabled to engage in social processes from a position of greater strength (White 1996). Participatory methods can also be used as one-off exercises, putting a participatory gloss on information extraction, which does nothing to address power relations and can bring problems to the surface which are then left unresolved (Jackson 1997).

Participatory methods may themselves become structures: for example, the participatory-budget matrix referred to above was developed to facilitate a complex process of citizen participation in a normally non-participatory process. This is a rare example of a formalised type of participatory decision making, which is significant because of the general lack of variety in decision-making structures in international development thinking, much of which assumes mono-cultural 'villages' or 'communities' as the basic unit.[7] An institutionalised process can be very beneficial in overcoming the resistance of individual prejudice. Once the process is institutionalised, however, there is a danger of rigidity, which could begin to work against the participatory ethos. There have also been many instances where supposedly participatory methods have been used to gather a range of information and opinions or ideas which are then used to legitimise a more conventional programme. In these cases, the methods have become separated from the approaches from which they originated, which often means that the aspects of critical analysis and reflection have been diluted or removed. This creates a dissonance that is felt keenly by the people whose opinions and inputs have been sought, and can contribute to a lack of cooperation the next time the methods are tried with them. For participatory approaches to be sustainable, people need to see the results, or at least see that results will be forthcoming, as these approaches require an investment of time and effort that could easily be directed elsewhere if no positive change emerges.

For participatory approaches to be successfully 'scaled up', there needs to be some way of creating or accessing a sufficient pool of adequately trained and/or experienced people to apply the methods effectively. If this is not achieved, success will be limited, and the attempt to include people who are not usually reached will become self-defeating. If it is not done well, people will say that the approach does not work.

One challenge for the 'community' of participatory approaches is that of 'quality control' and standards. Many individuals and organisations have invested time, creativity, and resources in training and communicating about what makes effective participation. However, there are still many forces pushing for the 'quick fix' and trying to use participatory approaches and methods without investing in the learning and experience required to make them effective. This is partly an issue of time-scale and funding patterns. If you are reaching for deep change in social and power relations, a three-year funded project is not going to be enough. Yet very few funders are willing to contemplate the funding horizons of 15–20 years that might be needed for sustainable and significant changes to which participatory approaches have the potential to contribute. For the smaller organisation that is dependent on project funding, the inability to take the longer view and plan accordingly is debilitating. I know from my own experience as a development worker in a small NGO that there is very little time left for getting on with the work, once the necessary fundraising and consequent reporting obligations have been complied with. This is not a new criticism, and some funders are trying to think differently. There must be ways of applying the ideas and attitudes of participatory approaches to the relationships between implementing organisations and the funders that satisfy the needs for accountability and probity associated with a funding relationship, but do not stifle the creativity and energy needed for effective work on the ground. Power and control is an issue in the funding relationship, just as much as between the development worker and a community.

Another challenge for participatory approaches is perhaps naivety. The power issues are real ones; participatory approaches will not make it possible to slide round them, but will make it more likely that they will become visible and need to be addressed. The results of participation can be hard to predict, which is unsettling (if not outright threatening) to any politicians or others who have a personal investment in the *status quo*. It is certainly the case that some people with power stand to lose out if more equitable arrangements are to be implemented. For changes to be effected, these issues have to be confronted and addressed. Let us be clear about this: participatory approaches, if they are to be inclusionary and transformatory, are no easy option – although they are profoundly inspiring and satisfying when they work well.

Rigorous pragmatism?

For many people and organisations working in development, there is a constant tension between wanting to do the best job possible and needing to get things done, to get results, to meet objectives and targets. Participatory methods can help to get some things done more quickly, such as identifying the facets of a complex issue in a meeting or workshop context – although I have not encountered any attempt to systematise the things to which that applies. The general perception, however inaccurate, is that they slow things down, and are therefore a luxury. How many of us have compromised in the face of time-related pressures or financial constraints – whether or not that compromise was justified? Perhaps we know how something should be done, but how we can actually do it within the constraints we face is a different matter. The idea of doing something to a 'good enough' standard was very helpful to me, although it can be useful only within a framework of agreed minimum standards and a level of clarity of purpose and values. It also needs an accurate assessment of what can be achieved through different methods, given the available time and other resources. Otherwise, how do you judge what 'good enough' is? Without that framework, and the underpinning purpose and values, how do you distinguish between being tokenistic, for example, and doing a quick job that is actually sufficient for the immediate need? There are many occasions where the choice is between being thorough and idealistic, and being pragmatic and getting something done. How do you distinguish between when the former is needed and when the latter is sufficient? Pragmatism so often wins out in organisations that are objectives-driven. I would feel more comfortable with this if there were some way of ensuring that pragmatism is 'rigorous pragmatism', based on good analysis and transparency, rather than expediency – although this would not avoid the important questions about who takes the decisions, who is accountable to whom for the consequences, and so on what basis and in whose interests is even rigorous pragmatism being invoked.

How do we know? Monitoring, evaluation, and impact assessment

To know whether any approach or method is effective, some kind of evaluation is needed. But evaluation itself needs approaches and methods in order to be undertaken. Where these can be consistent with each other, so much the better. Evaluation has been driven, to a large extent, by the need to demonstrate whether a particular approach or method is valid and effective, to justify replication as well as to justify expenditure and provide accountability. 'Top–down' approaches have tended to be evaluated through approaches that attempt to demonstrate 'proof' that the intervention led to the outcomes. Fortunately, this rather rigid approach has been challenged, and there is a growing understanding and an emerging consensus that 'proof', especially in social development, is an inappropriate aim for evaluation. Instead, evaluation can test the logic of the situation, and whether it was likely that the intervention or activity contributed to any changes, and whether this was a positive contribution (Roche 1999). With participatory and inclusionary approaches, evaluation that can explore 'multiple subjectivities', rather than aiming for 'objectivity', is far more conducive to learning, which is increasingly becoming the prime purpose of evaluation. If change is positive, then the 'ownership' of being able to attribute causality becomes less critical, and it is more useful to use evaluation processes to contribute to the 'deep reflection'[8] that will help the positive aspects of processes of change to be internalised and embedded in everyday practice, and help to enhance the possibilities of effective replication and adaptation.

Evaluation has relied heavily on the existence of aims or goals and objectives being stated clearly at the beginning of the programme or project. Many an evaluation report has been written lamenting the absence of clarity of aims and objectives, and some evaluators have concluded that no judgement can be reached in these circumstances. With participatory approaches, a somewhat different attitude to objectives is required, since at least some of the concrete outputs and outcomes will be determined by the people who participate as the undertaking progresses. Objectives may shift and evolve as the programme moves forward. Objectives may need to be more process-oriented, which will require indicators concerned with the *nature* of a change rather than the specific change. So, for example, with the Mexican 'pig-rearing project' referred to earlier, the objective, instead of being the establishment of a viable pig-rearing business run by the women's group, might be the successful and independent generation of income by the women in the group, together or individually. Whether this was though rearing animals or through running a local bus service (as another women's group in Mexico had successfully done) would be immaterial.

Monitoring has been in many respects the poor relation of the 'M&E' pairing. If, however, monitoring can incorporate evaluative elements throughout an ongoing process, learning can be immediate and can allow adaptation and refinement to become a more fluid feature of a programme of activity. The ultimate test of any approach or any set of methods lies, however, in what difference they have made. Impact assessment needs to look not only at what changes have occurred, who is better off and who is worse off, but at the relationship between the approach and methods used and the changes that have been achieved. Perhaps the change has happened despite the methodology, rather than because of it!

Conclusion

No methods, even when they are good ones, can work to obviate the need for good, contextual, analytical, purposive thinking. The best methods do not automatically enable us to address power imbalances or move us towards change and social justice. Methods need to be applied in the context of a clear approach, based on values and purpose, if they are not to become rigid and reinforcing of existing relations. But even when clearly placed within a thought-through approach, methods and tools may fail or be counter-productive if they are used without skill, or are implemented by people with different purposes and intent.

There are challenges here for practitioners, activists, and researchers. A balance is needed between self-analysis and self-awareness (which can become 'navel-gazing') and purposeful action. It can often be better to get something wrong and learn what would work better, than to spend too long agonising over getting exactly the right approach and methods. Will the approach we are taking and the methods we are using make a difference to what happens? Are they likely to contribute to transformative, positive change? For this, both the approach and the methods need to be complemented by strategies and tactics in their use: we need to continue to apply fresh thinking as we learn from our own experience and that of others. The learning process, for individuals and organisations, needs to become far more strongly embedded in the approaches and methods used.

There are more questions than answers in this essay, more issues raised than conclusions reached. Some knowledge and experience, and maybe answers, can be found in the pages that follow.

> *'Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not one bit simpler.'*
> Albert Einstein (attributed)

Notes

1 Tina Wallace (2000) discusses the commercial and even military origins of some approaches and methods adopted by NGOs and questions their applicability to transformational agendas.

2 The Logical Framework, or LogFrame, has been particularly associated with an approach to development that has been much criticised as top-down and technocratic. I will not rehearse the arguments here. The Framework has been used in combination with a participatory model, but it seems to me that its greatest weakness is the reliance on linear logic, and how difficult it is to make it work in a way that shows change as a multi-causal, multi-actor phenomenon.

3 I have explored the various forms that power can take in Rowlands (1997) and Townsend et al. (1999). See also Kabeer (1994).

4 Or organisations like them. I count myself among this group.

5 The Spanish, *acompañamiento*, works better than its rather awkward English equivalent; it communicates the notion of an individual or organisation respectfully 'walking alongside' another, providing the knowledge, skill, or challenge needed to empower the organisation or individual being supported to make a change, think bigger, develop a strategy or whatever it is that is needed, but as part of an essentially peer relationship. *Compañero crítico* ('critical companion') is also used in this way.

6 And very likely in other places of which I am unaware.

7 My thanks to Julie Jarman for this point.

8 Bloch and Borges (2002:464).

References

Bloch, Didier and Nora Borges (2002) 'Organisational learning in NGOs: an example of an intervention based on the work of Chris Argyris', *Development in Practice* 12(3&4): 461-72.

Kabeer, Naila (1994) *Reversed Realities: Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought*, London: Verso.

Longwe, Sara (1997) 'Evaporation of gender policies in the patriarchal cooking pot', *Development in Practice* 7(2):148-56, reprinted in Deborah Eade (ed.) (1997) *Development and Patronage*, Oxford: Oxfam GB.

Howard, Patricia (2002) 'Beyond the "grim resisters": towards more effective gender mainstreaming through stakeholder participation', *Development in Practice* 12(2):164-76.

Jackson, Cecile (1997) 'Sustainable development at the sharp end: field-worker agency in a participatory project', *Development in Practice* 7(3):237-47, reprinted in Deborah Eade (ed.) (1997).

Mompati, Tlamelo and Prinsen, Gerard (2000) 'Ethnicity and participatory development methods in Botswana: some participants are to be seen and not heard', *Development in Practice* 10(5):625-37, reprinted in Deborah Eade (ed.) (2002) *Development and Culture*, Oxford: Oxfam GB.

Roche, Chris (1999) *Impact Assessment for Development Agencies: Learning to Value Change*, Oxford: Oxfam GB.

Rowlands, Jo (1997) *Questioning Empowerment: Working with Women in Honduras*, Oxford: Oxfam GB.

Townsend, Janet et al. (1999) *Women and Power: Fighting Patriarchies and Poverty*, London: Zed Books.

VeneKlasen, Lisa with Valerie Miller (2002) *A New Weave of People, Power, and Politics: An Action Guide for Advocacy and Citizen Participation*, Oklahoma City: World Neighbors.

Wallace, Tina (2000) 'Development management and the aid chain: the case of NGOs' in Deborah Eade, Tom Hewitt, and Hazel Johnson (eds.) *Development and Management: Experiences in Values-based Conflict*, Oxford: Oxfam GB.

White, Sarah (1996) 'Depoliticisation of development: the uses and abuses of participation', *Development in Practice* 6(1):6-15, reprinted in Deborah Eade (ed.) (2000) *Development, NGOs, and Civil Society*, Oxford: Oxfam GB.

Whitehead, Christine (1995) 'Emergency Social Funds: the experiences of Bolivia and Peru', *Development in Practice* 5(1):53-7.