

Preface

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We shall have to acknowledge not only the scope of our professional methods but also their limits. It has been said that economics is a box of tools. But we shall have to resist the temptation of the law of the hammer, according to which a boy, given a hammer, finds everything worth pounding, not only nails but also Ming vases. We shall have to look, in the well-known metaphor, where the key was dropped rather than where the light happens to be. We shall have to learn not only how to spell 'banana' but also when to stop. The professionals, whom a friend of mine calls 'quantoids' and who are enamored of their techniques, sometimes forget that if something is not worth doing, it is not worth doing well.
(Streeten 2002:110)

This Reader explores some of the tensions between the broad values-based *approaches* to development that contributors to *Development in Practice* tend to advocate – sustainable, people-centred, participatory, empowering, transformative, gender-equitable, inclusionary, and so on – and the contemporary *methods* and *tools* that are used to put these approaches into practice. As we shall see from the essays included in this volume, some of these tensions are creative, others less so.

While development agencies are never monolithic, and will often accommodate competing or even dissonant views, their policies and practices do nevertheless reflect their fundamental understanding of their mission of development, or the 'humanitarian imperative'. Whether or not they make this explicit, these agencies basically subscribe to a normative mission: that is, they have an idea of how the world should be, they know what they believe is 'wrong' with the *status quo*, and then decide how best to apply their resources to improve matters. The underlying principles that govern the approach taken by a given agency seldom change dramatically over the years, although they will gradually evolve over time; by contrast, the methods and tools by which these are translated into practice are more than likely to

change, frequently and sometimes quite abruptly, in response to new ideas, fads, or funding pressures. These dynamics may produce relatively trivial discrepancies between what an organisation says and what it does, but may if unchecked lead to 'role strain' or more serious disjunctures between its beliefs about itself, its public persona, and the directions in which its ground-level practice is taking it.

There are three contrasting positions concerning the methods and tools used by the development industry at project level, as opposed to the way in which policies evolve and are articulated by specific agencies. The first is to treat them as though they were politically value-free alternatives which confer 'objectivity' or perhaps some kind of academic respectability on the practitioner and on his or her observations. It is therefore quite possible for an agency to hold that development policies are inherently value-laden, while at the same time implicitly adopting a technocratic view of the tools that it uses on the ground.

The second is to see specific methods and tools as embodying the 'hidden agendas' of the organisations that were originally associated with or now promote them, and hence as not remotely neutral. In this sometimes rather conspiratorial reading, a tool that originated in, say, the corporate sector, is inherently 'contaminated' by the for-profit hallmark it bears, and is therefore unfit for use by the non-profit sector. Among some Southern organisations, this may play out, for instance, as viewing gender analysis as an attempt to 'impose Western feminist' views. Among Northern NGOs in particular, unease with logical framework ('logframe') or with managerial methods deriving from New Public Management (NPM) often resonates with a declared preference for 'bottom-up' or 'participatory' methods, and with a concern for 'downward accountability' to those intended to benefit from the agency's assistance, rather than accountability to donors.

The third and probably most common position (to paraphrase from the introductory essay to this Reader) is that of a pragmatic but none-too-rigorous eclecticism – agencies take what they like from the *smorgasbord* of tools and methods on offer, and leave aside the bits that they find unpalatable. This allows them to pick and mix in response to local requirements or preferences, rather than following a single inflexible line. But it can also lead to rather mongrel forms, such as 'bottom-up and top-down strategic planning, ... participatory logframes, ... [or] participatory impact assessment sitting alongside milestones, indicators, and targets set by [outside agencies]' (Wallace 2000: 37). And once the links between methods and the values that inform them

are ruptured, or if the methods themselves are poorly understood or wrongly applied as a result, the overall approach becomes incoherent and directionless.

Which brings us to the question of approaches. On this front, development agencies tend to be more descriptive than analytical – they are better at saying that they promote development that is ‘sustainable’ or ‘rights-based’ than at explaining what they believe development is, or to which (if any) theory they subscribe. To an extent, such agencies can justify this by arguing that their purpose is to get out and change the world, not to sit back and theorise about it. Some might add that the age of ‘grand theories’ came to a close in any case with the collapse of the Berlin Wall. But it is unwise to divorce action from theory, or to ignore the ideological baggage that specific methods bring with them. To do so is to risk ‘depoliticising development’ (White 1996). In her introductory essay to an earlier title in this series, *Development, NGOs, and Civil Society*, Jenny Pearce illustrated the profound dangers of ignoring the larger politics at play and basing action on implicit assumptions, rather than on critical analysis. Taking issue with those who believe that the challenge for the future is not an intellectual but a problem-solving one, she wrote:

... I would argue that there is a serious intellectual challenge, and that sorting it out is as important as getting the praxis and attitudes right. It might not be an empirical research problem as such, but it is about where NGOs ultimately decide to locate themselves in the global system. This raises not abstract, theoretical questions but core issues, such as: what and who is your work for? Among other outcomes, the failure to ask such questions has led to the false linguistic consensus of the 1990s and, to be somewhat harsh, to an intellectually lazy reliance on a handful of concepts and words as a substitute for thought. This has weakened and confused practice and, I would argue, contributed to the present crisis of legitimacy within the NGO sector. (Pearce 2000: 32)

She concluded that ‘[m]aking assumptions explicit is one way of identifying differences, clarifying choices, and ultimately fostering debate and cooperation among people who are committed in some way to building a better world’ (Pearce 2000: 40).

One can certainly make a very plausible case, as Thomas Dichter has recently done (2003), that one fundamental reason why aid agencies find it so hard to make explicit their understanding of development is that their own institutional survival depends upon the *status quo*, and

on conducting business more or less as usual. While development organisations have proliferated around the world, those that have *deliberately* put themselves out of work could probably be numbered on the fingers of one hand. If global inequalities are deepening even as the development industry expands, it is at least worth asking, as Arturo Escobar and other post-development thinkers have done, whether ‘the problem’ will ever be addressed by ‘more of the same’, or whether a more radical re-think about the function of international co-operation is required.

Be that as it may, development agencies are here to stay for the foreseeable future, and it obviously does therefore matter that they should be principled and professional, rather than expedient or amateur. Indeed, considerable progress has been made over the last two decades to raise standards in both the humanitarian and the development fields. There *is* a difference between gender-blind and gender-sensitive approaches to development, just as there is a difference between applying ‘blueprint’ approaches that do not take local views into account and seeking to put one’s resources at the disposal of disadvantaged people in their own efforts to change their quality of life. The real point made by the contributors to this Reader, and reinforced in the introductory essay by **Jo Rowlands**, is that while techniques and methods alone do not add up to a coherent approach, beliefs about development are worth little without the skills to put them into practice, and the wisdom and humility required to learn from experience.

References

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