# Institutional sustainability as learning

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## Introduction

This article is concerned with how negotiations between stakeholders over action on development can enhance institutional sustainability. It argues that institutional sustainability is based on a three-point agenda for negotiation which provides a framework for action and performance assessment, and hence a means of learning and innovation. We see learning and innovation as key to institutional sustainability because development is a dynamic process, not simply a set of desired targets or goals. However, learning and innovation often involve steering a course through conflictual social relations in which relative power and strength of interests will be evident. Learning within and between development organisations and other participants in development processes is not automatically consensual, while negotiating conflict creatively can also be an important source of innovation.

Our three-point negotiation agenda for institutional sustainability involves: (i) the ability to investigate *assumptions* behind action; (ii) agreeing roles and responsibilities — or establishing forms of *accountability* over action between actors and their constituents; and (iii) being able to *attribute* the outcomes of action (and therefore enable further learning and innovation). Engaging with such an agenda implies participatory management and open rather than closed systems (Murray 1992). It also implies moving from a goal-oriented to an action-oriented approach to interventions (Carley and Christie 1992).[1] Such an approach is also in line with Guba and Lincoln's (1989) proposal for 'fourth generation evaluation' reviewed by Marsden et al. (1994). Fourth

generation evaluation consists of two key elements: *responsive focusing* (allowing the boundaries of the evaluation to be set by the constructions and interactions of its stakeholders) and a *constructivist methodology* (providing the wider frameworks within which meanings are constructed). Out of this process emerges an '*agenda for negotiation*' (ibid.: 30).

Guba and Lincoln's agenda is based on what is not resolved during the dialogue of the evaluation process, whereas we advocate an *a priori* agenda. We do so because simply allowing an agenda to emerge exposes stakeholders to a potential tyranny of 'structurelessness' where the content of the agenda can depend on the positions taken by powerful stakeholders, positions which may be more or less 'enlightened'. An *a priori* agenda, however, provides a basis for continual negotiation of action and learning.

The framework we propose is both a blueprint and a process, in that it is a framework for a process approach. The link between blueprint and process is that the detailed content of the framework/blueprint is itself processual in that it is subject to change and innovation via its application. Our discussion of the development of the framework/blueprint engages us in a process of our own: that of staged model-building. The debate about blueprint and process approaches (as well as whether learning does or does not take place in development interventions, whether blueprint or process — see, for example, Hulme 1989) has become an integral part of development management discourses. In practice, development managers weave between the two, with emphases on one or the other approach. These tensions are evident, for example, in the use of logframe (logical framework analysis) in planning, implementing and evaluating interventions, and of processes such as participatory action research (e.g. PRA, PLA, PAR). Thus, the framework we develop below, and its contribution to institutional sustainability, cannot be seen simply as a set of tools or be applied mechanically. The relationship between blueprint and process is a tension to be acknowledged and managed.

We first look briefly at some concerns and debates about the concepts of sustainability, sustainable development, and institutional sustainability, and then at how such concepts can be used in practice as broad parameters for establishing an agenda for negotiation and action. We then disaggregate the negotiation agenda and show how it can contribute learning and innovation within and between development organisations in the context of their interventions. We conclude with some qualifiers about participation, consensus, and conflict.

## Constructing institutional sustainability

Our argument that institutional sustainability is based on people's capacities to learn and innovate is derived more generally from our views of sustainability and sustainable development. These two concepts have been interpreted extremely widely and have lent themselves to many areas of analysis, and policy rhetoric and design. One question is what useful meanings can be given to these concepts. Another is whether and how they can inform the management of development processes, or development management — in particular whether and how they can be used to provide a framework for learning and longer-term action.[2]

The literature on sustainability and sustainable development is extensive.[3] Concerns about the relationship between environment and society, or environment and development, often focus on how social forms and practices act to the detriment of the environment, whether in practices associated with industrial development (including in agriculture) and profit-oriented activity, the supposed short-term nature of poor people's survival strategies, or the environmental effects of social upheaval and war. From a primarily environmental focus, sustainability/sustainable development has taken on many meanings from informing a critique of economic policies and practices to the nature of social organisation, values, and behaviours in society at large. The concepts of sustainability and sustainable development are often used interchangeably largely because of this widespread inflation of their meanings (Mitcham 1995). In his perceptive analysis of the strengths, weaknesses, and operationalisation of the concepts of sustainability and sustainable development, Lélé (1991) points out that attempts to combine concerns about environmental degradation, development objectives, and the participation of different people (especially 'the poor') in development planning results in unrealistic consensus-building across widely differing social forms, power relations, and conflicting interests. Lélé states:

In short, SD [sic] is a 'metafix' that will unite everybody from the profit-minded industrialist and risk-minimising subsistence farmer to the equity-seeking social worker, the pollution-concerned or wildlife-loving First Worlder, the growth-maximising policy maker, the goal-oriented bureaucrat, and, therefore, the vote-counting politician' (ibid.: 613).

Sustainability and sustainable development have become a form of discourse about development in which many perspectives on change can be located, even though they embody different views about means and

ends. Thus, questions such as: what is being sustained? why? and, for whom? remain areas of contention, as do relative emphases on the environmental and the social. In spite of (and because of) this inflation and diffuseness of meaning, we do not suggest that the terms be abandoned but rather that they be used to frame and enable debate and negotiation between stakeholders in development. Such a process can provide the backdrop for sharing values or discovering areas of disagreement and difference of values and understandings, all-important if action is to achieve its goals and have a longer-term perspective.

In this article, we inevitably incorporate some of our own values about sustainability/sustainable development. However, they act as an 'example framework', the precise content of which may be drawn differently by others. For example, Mitcham (1995: 323) suggests that sustainability/sustainable development 'can insinuate... core principles into new areas... Sustainable development need not require growth, but it does imply an input-output management'. Input-output management can be seen as balancing (and replenishing) the use of resources, whether physical or human. However, we choose to see it as a relationship between action (input) and learning and innovation (output) for future action (further input), while recognising that such an action-learning cycle approach to intervention needs to be attached to some substantive meanings and values about means and ends.

**Box 1** Sustainable development and sustainability

Characteristics (or tasks) of sustainable development may include:

- developing sustainable resource use;
- building sustainable livelihoods;
- reducing vulnerabilities;
- enabling empowerment;
- increasing equality;
- increasing self-reliance.

Sustainability may include:

- continuity;
- an extended time frame;
- the potential for activities to be self-supporting;
- the development of capacities;
- the realisation of capacities through performance;
- learning as an integral part of developing capacities and assessing performance.

Source: adapted from Johnson and Wilson (1996: 17–18).

In a recent teaching text at The Open University, we gave some 'working characteristics and tasks' to the concepts of sustainability/sustainable development (see Box 1). They are not our own original list but comprised from existing debate and were suggested as parameters for guiding monitoring and evaluation, or performance assessment. However, in practice such 'working characteristics and tasks' are a negotiating point between stakeholders.

It is this process of negotiation of meanings of sustainability/sustainable development and the subsequent process of negotiating and carrying out a performance assessment agenda which, we suggest, can lead to learning and innovation and hence institutional sustainability. This view is based on the idea of institutions as 'complexes of norms and behaviours that persist over time by serving collectively valued purposes', which can either be diffusely practised or structured into organisations (Uphoff 1996: 8–10). Thus, we argue that a combination of (i) negotiation over meanings of sustainability and sustainable development as a framework for action, (ii) negotiation of an *a priori* performance assessment agenda linked to this framework, and (iii) a participatory and open involvement in this agenda by stakeholders, can lead to (iv) learning and innovation. This is a process through which collective and purposeful norms and behaviours can be developed and changed over a sustained period of time, both in shared practices and in the coordination and cooperation of organisations. In other words, this process is an approach to thinking about — and acting on — institutional sustainability.

At this point, it is worth adding a note about 'participatory and open', to which we return in our concluding comments. It is often suggested that sustainability/sustainable development requires participation and that participation can in turn lead to empowerment. A valid critique is provided by Lélé (1991) who points out that participation has replaced concepts of equity and social justice in sustainable development discourse. Lélé states that while the concepts of equity and social justice highlight issues such as resource distribution and use — that is, structural inequalities which lead both to poverty and to environmental degradation — the concept of participation is neither equivalent (particularly in the many ways in which it is discussed and operationalised) nor can it be a substitute. One might add to Lélé's analysis that unequal power relations between different stakeholders (as well as within organisations and communities) are likely to be a serious obstacle to certain forms of participation. This is a complex arena about which there is now a considerable literature. Lélé's and other critical

writing (see, for example, Brown 1997; Mosse 1994) have opened up the discussion on the role of experts and 'outsiders', of social and cultural differentiation in development, and have contributed to rethinking the relationship between blueprint and process.

## Operationalising concepts

If one were to take our distinctions between sustainable development and sustainability, as shown in Box 1, it might be concluded that sustainable development comprised a set of ends while sustainability was substantially about means. However, the distinction between means and ends is not evidently clear-cut, and it can also change over time. Thus, for example, a sustainability goal for an aid organisation may be the longer-term self-sufficiency of the recipients of aid; however, the goal of self-sufficiency may be a means to a different and even longer-term end for the recipients. Equally, empowerment of a given group of people may be an end in terms of improving the social position and control of that group, but it also may be a means towards further ends such as a development of new livelihood opportunities or having a voice in local or national policy.

Thus, looking more closely at these 'working characteristics and tasks' suggests that:

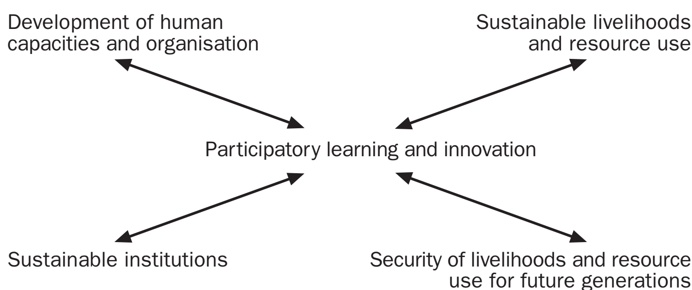
- means need to be taken into account as much as ends;
- means have an important role in whether ends are achieved or not;
- both means and ends require continuous negotiation and agreement between actors and organisations in any given context.

This leads to our first model (see Figure 1), in which the relationship between sustainability and sustainable development, and means and ends, is seen as a process of participatory learning and innovation.[4] Figure 1 appears more like a grid than a set of flows (inputs and outputs) or feedback loops. In this representation, the meanings of sustainability and sustainable development and the suggested distinctions between means and ends are a starting point for negotiation: they offer a way of giving direction to action and/or agreeing anticipated outcomes. The precise content of the cells are thus subject to negotiation between stakeholders. There is also a central cell which is apparently unrelated to others in the grid but which is the location of processes which enable the other cells to be linked to each other: participatory learning and innovation (which can lead to new forms of control and empowerment) is the kernel of institutional sustainability.

**Figure 1** Institutional sustainability as a negotiation grid

| | Sustainability | | Sustainable development |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Means** | Development of human capacities and organisation | | Sustainable livelihoods and resource use |
| | | Participatory learning and innovation | |
| **Ends** | Sustainable institutions | | Security of livelihoods and resource use for future generations |

**Figure 2** Institutional sustainability as an influence diagram



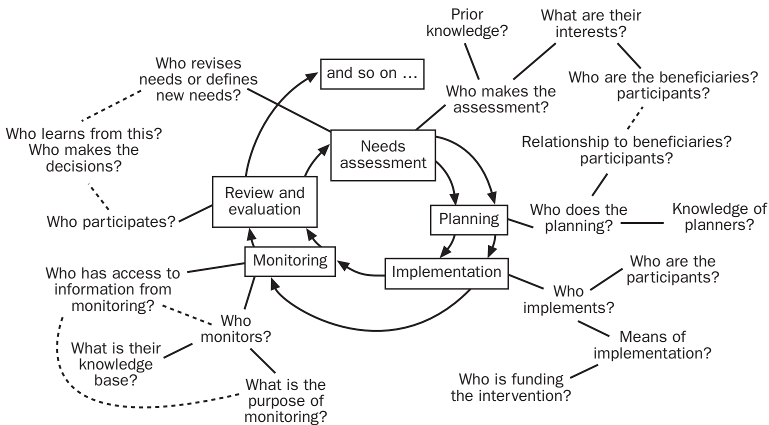

Once one starts looking at this matrix in terms of feedback loops, it becomes clear that the means and ends are fluid — there is a constantly changing and adapting process being socially constructed between stakeholders (who may also change) over time. Taking out the means and ends cells, the figure would then look like the influence diagram in Figure 2 with two-directional arrows between the outer cells and the central process of participatory learning and innovation.

While this model can conceptualise a way of negotiating meanings and areas of consensus or difference, and suggest a framework for ongoing dialogue, further steps are needed to give it substantive meaning, in particular to allow participants to have a say in how the involvement of different organisation s and individuals can be maintained over time.

This takes us to a second model, that of the familiar intervention spiral which we have presented in annotated form in Figure 3. Figure 3 interrogates the central core of Figure 2, that is, the process of learning and innovation, and the extent to which such a process can be empowering for participants. Discussion of the 'who?' questions posed in Figure 3 — which can be elaborated further than in this figure — is likely to show very quickly that stakeholders are embedded in a social dynamic, possibly hierarchical and possibly contentious, which is likely to affect the processes of planning, implementation and realisation of goals, as well as the extent to which learning is part of an organic process between participants.

The perspective behind these models is similar to — but also has some differences from — the process approach to sustainable development given by Carley and Christie (1992). Carley and Christie are concerned to develop an action-centred network approach to managing sustainable development. Their definition of management 'replaces control by a few people with that of negotiation and organisation al learning... *management is teamwork* based on a continually evolving consensus on the direction towards sustainable development. This more egalitarian, participative approach to management is fundamental to the idea of an action-centred network' (ibid.: 13, authors' emphasis). However, consensus-building, egalitarian, and participative approaches are neither straightforward nor

**Figure 3** The social relations of learning in intervention spirals




Source: Johnson and Wilson, 1996: 18

always possible, given the probable social differences as well as those of values and interests in any given context. Nevertheless, we suggest that one of the functions of setting a negotiation framework and an *a priori* agenda for performance assessment is to help discover whether open processes of planning and managing the implementation of interventions are possible, even when stakeholders have different views and understandings over means and ends.

## Operationalisation in practice: an approach to action-learning

Looking at Figures 2 and 3 thus suggests two further steps, one conceptual and one operational. The first is that the social dynamics of development interventions take place within existing institutional landscapes and help, intentionally or otherwise, to create new ones. However, the definition and realisation of 'collectively valued purposes' depends, as suggested, on the preparedness of stakeholders to negotiate agreed norms and behaviours, or, in other words, their commitment to building an institutional framework for action which has a broad legitimacy. The second step which links Figures 2 and 3 is to construct mechanisms or means of enabling learning and innovation. How can action-learning take place within and between groups and organisations during the course of development interventions or other forms of public action so as to contribute to sustainable development and build institutional sustainability? We focus on two issues:

- how to operate and steer towards the broad mission (sustainable development) in a 'turbulent' (Carley and Christie 1992: 165) context, characterised by uncertainty, inconsistent and ill-defined needs, unclear understanding of means and impacts of actions, and fluid participation from different actors (ibid.);
- how to supersede a goal-orientation rationale of management by an action-learning rationale based on teamwork and evolving consensus (ibid.: 13, 178) in order to build human capacity.

These two issues are of course interrelated, because in order to steer action we have to learn from it. This involves a process of continual examination and reflection of what we do which is used to construct modified or new action. In the management literature, this process is called performance assessment (PA).

To make PA effective in meeting the needs of different stakeholders, we suggest there should be a *conscious* social construction of it which involves negotiating three contested areas. For short-hand purposes, we label these the 'three As':

(i) agreeing, investigating, and testing assumptions between stakeholders about sustainable development and sustainability, and about plans for intervention in the contexts in which it is intended to occur;

(ii) agreeing roles, responsibilities, and time-frames, and the means for making decisions — that is, negotiating an institutional framework for accountability;

(iii) establishing processes of monitoring and evaluation which allow discussion and understanding by stakeholders of what particular outputs and outcomes can be attributed to the intervention.

**Box 2** Socially constructed performance assessment using the three As

Identifying and investigating **assumptions** is an important part of the ubiquitous development manager's tool — framework planning — where assumptions form the fourth column of the 4 X 4 matrix. Assumptions around interventions invariably relate to social contexts and power relations within which a given intervention takes place, the material, financial, and human resources available, and the social context of the implementation process itself. Failure to account for the latter especially has been identified as the cause of failure of many development programmes. In terms of the two major issues identified above, assumptions relate to both the turbulent or uncertain contexts of interventions and the substantive meaning that is given to sustainable development.

**Attribution** is an analytical process that interprets the observed impacts of interventions. At an operational level it turns the data of monitoring into the information of evaluation. To provide a hypothetical example: an irrigation project may have the goal of improving livelihoods of poor farmers in a drought-prone region. Over a period of, say, five years monitoring may show that livelihoods have improved. This may indeed have been due to the laying of irrigation channels, but it may also have been due to external factors: five years of good rains, improved markets and prices for the produce, or changes in a range of social conditions. Who can tell? Who can separate out cause and effect? This issue is recognised by major donors, such as the UK ODA (since May 1997 the Department for International Development [DFID]): 'A major difficulty in attempting to measure the benefits, is to determine the extent to which it is possible to attribute improvements to the project as opposed to factors external to the project such as economic growth, increasing demand for labour, investment in public services (health, education and training) and infrastructure, all of which have a positive impact on well-being' (Robinson and Thin 1993: 26).

**Accountability** is the most overtly political of the three As. Those to whom one is accountable exercise the power to regulate and guide interventions. They are the ultimate arbiters of the substantive meanings given to sustainable development and the two issues on which we are focusing: the process of steering towards sustainable development through a turbulent context or conditions of uncertainty, and the rationale (goal-oriented or action-learning-oriented) for interventions. Thus, a crucial issue in the construction of performance assessment is to whom an agency planning and implementing an activity is accountable. Is it to the donors (upwards accountability) or to the supposed beneficiaries (downwards accountability)? Or is it to all stakeholders, themselves defined by negotiation (multiple accountability)? (Edwards and Hulme 1995)

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As indicated in Box 2, the three As share some important characteristics. None is easily divorced from social process and the social contexts in which learning takes place. They each direct learning away from the narrow confines of implementation to a consideration of wider context and a challenge of underlying goals. Also, because there is no question of any of them being settled in a technical sense, they each require the active engagement of the multiple stakeholders in an intervention. This process of negotiation between stakeholders becomes itself a learning experience that is transferable across a range of contexts — learning how to negotiate, and when to collaborate or challenge. Or, as Fowler (1995: 151) puts it, performance becomes '... defined as the — often contested — outcome of social judgements of the parties involved, using criteria which are important to them.'

**Figure 4** Institutional sustainability as a learning cycle

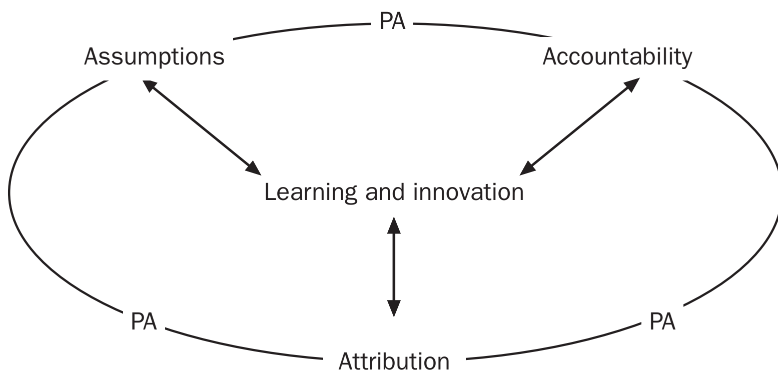
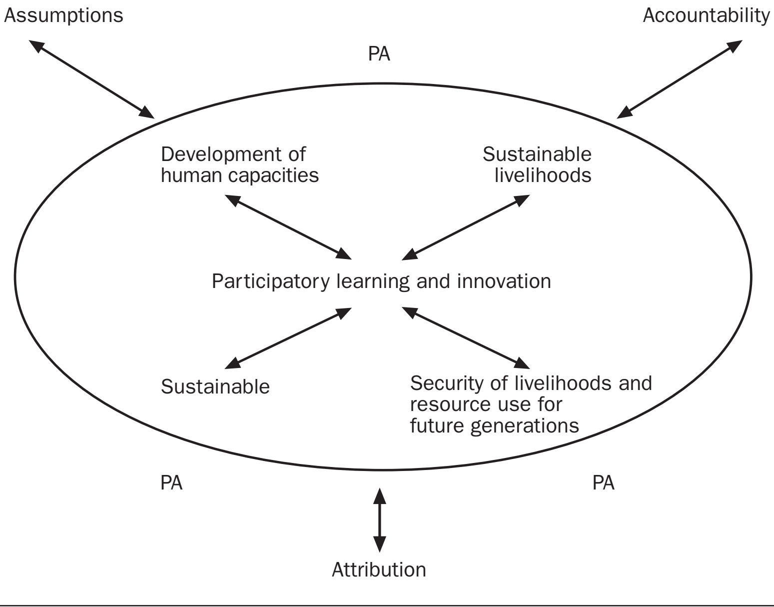


**Figure 5** A provisional, 'working' model for the practice of action learning




Such a framework forms our next stage of model-building, represented by Figure 4. This portrays institutional sustainability as a learning cycle carried out through performance assessment. From Figure 4, it is a short step to incorporate the dynamics of action learning shown in Figure 2 which links learning and innovation and sustainability and sustainable development. This results in our provisional 'working model', which is shown in Figure 5.

The fluid action-learning dynamic leading to institutional sustainability portrayed in Figure 5 is given shape and meaning by performance assessment. The three As in turn provide an enabling agenda for performance assessment. It may seem a broad agenda, but its negotiation and resolution have direct implications for what is assessed, how it is assessed, and why. This is crucial because PA is typically represented (e.g. by the former ODA) as the measurement of effectiveness (performance in relation to targets set in the original plan) and efficiency (the rate and cost at which inputs result in outputs) (Robinson and Thin 1993: 6). However, measuring effectiveness and efficiency via monitoring and evaluation of performance in relation to previously defined goals can lead to a static view of what are essentially dynamic situations. It tends

towards what has been described as the 'statistics of measurement' (Potter and Subrahmanian 1997) where the questions asked during monitoring and evaluation are of the 'what' or 'how many' variety: for example, how many poor farmers have been helped in an irrigation scheme; what impact has there been on their livelihoods? Negotiation of the three As moves beyond a statistics of measurement to a 'statistics of understanding' (ibid.) where 'why' and 'what if' questions are to the fore. For example, why have some farmers been helped by the irrigation scheme and not others? what if the irrigation scheme were implemented differently or even replaced by a different project? This in turn leads to fluid conceptualisations of effectiveness and efficiency and brings them into the process framework.

What kind of learning might we expect from our working model? Action-learning has been described as an iterative process that involves learning how to innovate, be adaptive, and deal with complexity and turbulence (Carley and Christie 1992). It takes place at several levels, for example:

- *learning in depth*, so that particular practices may be fully understood and then changed, adapted and/or improved; that is to say, virtuous circles of learning and practice are facilitated.
- *learning in breadth*, which places a special onus on performance assessment so that it is similarly broad. When sustainable development is the underlying aim it is not only the implementation of a practice that should be assessed, but also its underlying goals, assumptions, and the social context in which it takes place. In other words, the substantive meaning of sustainable development itself is continually re-assessed within the context of the intervention. Again, this puts a special onus on monitoring and evaluation to provide the statistics of understanding discussed above. In short, the PA practices of monitoring and evaluation become pro-active when learning in breadth is a goal, rather than reactive to particular and largely fixed conceptualisations of a given intervention's previously defined goals.
- *transferability of learning*, when the purpose of learning is not restricted to the improvement of implementation of a particular practice, but also about increasing the ability to weigh up options, to make decisions about all aspects of life — when to improve implementation of a particular practice, when to re-define the goals of a practice, when to do something else, how to identify opportunities and constraints. This is not just about personal, managerial life-skills, or even about organisational learning, but also the transferability of the learning process to new situations.

Finally, as we hope our model indicates, learning itself is a social process and therefore not neutral. What is learned (and who decides), how it is learned, who learns, and what they do with their learning, involves social power, negotiation, and conflict. This last cannot be overstated and it is the rock on which many a well-intended intervention has foundered.

## Institutional sustainability and participation

Much current literature points to the key role that 'participation' can play in performance assessment. We agree with this view. However, there is a danger that some of the claims for participatory approaches are elevating them into a realm where expectations are far too high. Nevertheless, in our view, a framework that is based on the recognition of social process, power, conflict, and negotiation needs to be lubricated by participatory approaches. This is indicated in our final model (see Figure 5). Indeed, one can go further and claim that any negotiation requires participation of the negotiating parties, by definition.

Is participation a *sufficient* as well as a necessary condition for negotiation that takes different interests into account? The current elevation of 'participation' into a development paradigm is dangerous because not only does it raise expectations, but it also has the potential to provoke backlash when those expectations cannot be fulfilled, a backlash that might be aimed, moreover, at the basic tenets of the participatory approach. One of the easiest yet more questionable assumptions concerning participation is that, if one works hard enough at it, it leads eventually to consensus in relation to what needs to be done; and, having reached this consensus, reconciling accountability to different stakeholders is a simple matter because all have the same objectives. The main obstacles to achieving consensus in this view are the professionals and experts from the agencies and the solution is for them to 'up-end' and put themselves 'last' (Chambers 1995).

In this consensual view, the dominant mode of procedure is *inquiry* in order to find the common ground for consensus and then to use that common ground as a springboard for action. But development management is characterised by very deep value conflicts and takes place on an inherently conflictual social terrain (Thomas 1996). Is it not a self-delusion to believe that there are even grounds for consensus in such circumstances, and that inquiry then becomes little more than social engineering to reflect the wishes of the powerful?

An alternative, more conflictual, less 'nice', view of participation, but one that does not pretend to make grand claims, is to recognise that it often takes place in fundamentally adversarial settings where social power relations ultimately determine the outcomes. Here the trick is to strengthen the poor and powerless so that they are able to engage effectively and have a strong voice in these settings. A similar point is made by Munslow et al., when they introduce an author (Edwin Richken) who is writing about the South African Government's Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP): '[L]ocal forums set up under the RDP to help communities decide upon their priorities are unlikely to be able to redress power disparities. For the author, the marginalised groups, such as rural women, need their own forums rather than being party to a multi-stakeholder forum where their concerns can be ignored' (Munslow, Fitzgerald and McLennan 1995: 20).

Interventions that seek to engage in this form of capacity-building are a far cry from more conventional interventions such as contributing to physical infrastructure, or public services in health and education, or creating micro-finance schemes to promote economic livelihoods. Nor can their efficiency and effectiveness be easily measured by conventional means. Because of this, interventions that seek to strengthen poor and marginalised groups appear modest, but they do attempt to recognise the realities of social power and enable the poor to have a substantive voice in defining sustainable development and operationalising it within their own local and social contexts.

Returning to our three As agenda, the requirement to negotiate accountabilities should at least make the power divisions between stakeholders explicit (which in itself can be a salutary learning experience for everybody!). This points to a way between consensus and conflict that seeks to create the 'win-win' ethos of the former, while recognising the importance of developing the capacities of the poor to negotiate their interests in adversarial settings. In this 'third' way, the negotiating parties do not pretend that consensus is achievable when clearly it is not, but they consciously try to achieve an accommodation of their different interests. Minimum requirements for this accommodation are firstly for all stakeholders to have the capacity to express and argue for their interests, and secondly, to find a common 'conceptual container' within which the interests can be accommodated, even if they are strongly conflicting (Isaacs, quoted in Thomas 1998). Operationalising the three As can form such a container.

## Notes

**1** Guba and Lincoln suggest that there has been a gradual evolution from evaluation as measurement (first generation) to the development of 'programme evaluation' (second generation) to evaluation as judgement (third generation) (Marsden et al. 1994: 16).

**2** The concept of development management used in this paper is that defined by Thomas: 'The management of intervention aimed at external social goals in a context of value-based conflict' (Thomas 1996: 106). This is not to deny the importance of internal organisational goals and the management of organisations. However the main concern of development management is public action: that is, 'purposive collective action' (Mackintosh 1992: 5) in multi-actor fields from international organisations and governments to local voluntary associations, and in which actors only have partial control over processes and outcomes.

**3** The authors have commented on some key aspects in Johnson and Wilson (1997).

**4** '[A] simplification of the messy world that surrounds us'; 'relates to the real world and an imagined world' (Thomas 1998: 8).

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