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Participatory action research into donor-recipient relations: a case study

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Participatory action research into donor–recipient relations: a case study

Rosalind Eyben with Rosario León and Naomi Hossain

This article describes the exploratory and preparatory phase of a research project designed to use co-operative enquiry as a method for transformative and participatory action research into relations between donors and recipients in two developing countries, Bolivia and Bangladesh. It describes the origins of the idea, the conceptual challenges that the authors faced in seeking funding, and what they learned from this first phase. The authors analyse why the researchers, as well as the potential subjects of the research, were uncomfortable with the proposed methodology, including the challenges arising from their own positions and the highly sensitive nature of the topic. They explain why they decided to abandon the project, and they reach some tentative conclusions concerning the options for participatory action learning and research in development practice.

KEY WORDS: Aid; Civil Society; Gender and Diversity; Methods; Latin America/Caribbean; South Asia

Introduction

Arguably, the most crucial node in the complex web of aid relationships is that between the staff from official aid agencies who are resident in a developing country and their counterparts in that country's recipient organisations whom they meet on a regular basis. Placing the personal encounter within the wider political economy and history of aid, we were interested in how international development-agency staff respond and interact with their host country's structure of social relations, and how they relate more broadly with the local elites, which include the staff of the recipient organisations with which they do business. Equally, we wanted to explore how the 'recipients' perceived the relationship, and how they viewed the values and behaviour of the donor-agency staff.

Eyben, trained as a social anthropologist, conceived the initial research idea. She saw it from the donor perspective when she was head of the Bolivia country office of the UK Department for International Development (DFID). She discussed her ideas with León, director of a Bolivian social-science research institute, CERES, and a sociologist with significant experience of the aid relationship. The research idea evolved through this dialogue. Eyben wanted to know how donors'

social relations might send out unintended signals concerning the extent to which they really care about political and social change in favour of poverty reduction. León proposed to expand the research focus to include staff from recipient agencies. They, as much as donors, should have the opportunity to research and reflect upon their role in what she termed 'the development society'.

In mid-2002, Eyben left DFID and joined the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Sussex with a keen interest to pursue this research agenda in partnership with León. We decided that the research should take place not only in Bolivia but also in two other countries, thus hoping to strengthen our chances of securing support from DFID's Social Science Research fund, which prefers to fund multi-country research. Bangladesh and Burkina Faso were accordingly added to the project.

Aware of the innovative nature of our research, of our inexperience with the proposed research methodology, and of the complexity of managing a research programme simultaneously in three countries, we asked DFID to fund an initial one-year preparatory phase. The aim was to identify the extent to which staff in bilateral development agencies, and their counterparts in recipient organisations, would be interested in joining co-operative enquiry groups facilitated by national researchers in each of the three countries. Assuming that there was such interest, we would then proceed to design an implementation phase for which we would seek further funding.

León was to have overall responsibility for managing this first phase, as well as being the national researcher for the Bolivian study.¹ Eyben would provide conceptual support and establish the links between the researchers and the donor communities in the three countries. Naomi Hossain, who had recently completed her doctoral thesis at IDS on the subject of Bangladeshi elites, agreed to join us as a co-researcher. A former colleague of León now working in an international research programme for the FAO was invited to be our co-researcher in Burkina Faso. Soon after we started, however, it became apparent that the communication and travel problems with Burkina Faso would make it very difficult to maintain our links there, and we eventually decided to restrict our work to Bolivia and Bangladesh.

The context and choice of approach and method

Co-operative enquiry

One of the potential biases that Zemelman (2000) identifies in action research is researchers' and practitioners' normative perspective, which encourages them to interpret the present by looking for signs of what they would like (or hope) the future to be. The supremely ambitious goal of eliminating global poverty makes international aid particularly vulnerable to constructing delusional reality out of ideological aspiration. Terms such as 'partnership', 'ownership', and 'participation', and the shared Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), encourage mainstream aid practitioners to avoid critically challenging the view that relations between donor and recipient are essentially non-problematic and that where improvement is required, it can be achieved through reforms to bureaucratic procedures and incentive structures.

We believed that attempts to reform aid would fail, should donors continue to ignore the challenges of constructing and sustaining relations between recipients and donors based on mutual transparency, accountability, commitment, and trust. We designed a participatory action-research project to explore these challenges, seeking to involve staff from donors and recipient organisations as co-researchers. The project had a transformative learning objective. Our co-researchers would become reflective practitioners, seeking not only to examine and change their own behaviour, but also to work together to identify ways of changing institutional structures to support value-based relations between donors and recipients.

Reflective practice concerns learning in action to effect change for the better. Our interest was in the interplay between structure and agency. Although shaped by our social context, we still have the potential either to contribute to the reproduction of existing structures and inequities, or to play a part in changing the world for the better.

Our chosen method, *co-operative enquiry* (Reason and Heron 1999), is designed to encourage a process that allows participants to recognise that change is possible. Participants enquire into taken-for-granted practices and investigate the implications of these in relation to their values and organisational goals. It has been used by small groups of practitioners working in a common profession such as social work, or in a health service. The only example that we knew of from aid practice was within Sida, the Swedish bilateral agency (Cornwall *et al.* 2004).

Unlike focus-group methods, where the researcher is in control, in co-operative enquiry groups everyone has a say in deciding what questions are to be addressed and what ideas may be of help. Everyone thinks about how to explore the questions; everyone gets involved in the activity that is being researched; and finally everyone has a say in whatever conclusions the group may reach. Thus, we could not anticipate the specific questions that participants would wish to explore, but we assumed they would be on issues connected to the themes of power and knowledge that we ourselves had experienced in aid encounters (Eyben with León 2005).

We decided to aim for one co-operative enquiry group to be volunteers from official bilateral aid organisations, and the other group to be volunteers from those recipient government ministries, and other public-sector organisations, who were in regular contact with those from the bilateral aid agencies. An external researcher/facilitator would work with both groups and, over time, we imagined or hoped there might develop an interest and sufficient trust among the volunteers for joint meetings.

We thought it essential that the external facilitator/researchers be nationals of the country concerned, so that they would be acceptable to the ‘recipient’ group, with whom they shared a common language and background. The researchers would also need to have prior experience of working with donors. We thus placed the researchers in a highly ambivalent position, something that proved very difficult for them to manage, as we shall discuss. Among us, the one most enthusiastic about the method, Eyben, was the one who would have least responsibility for making it happen. León, and particularly Hossain, were more doubtful.

A constructionist perspective

In co-operative enquiry, a group of people in a similar position enter a process of research on their day-to-day lived experience. The process aims to help the group to understand their world, to make sense of it, and to develop new and creative ways of looking at it. It also aims to enable the group to learn how to act to change things that they want to change. Participants experiment by making changes in their own behaviour and then evaluating the results, leading to a spiralling process of analysis, change, and reflection.

Epistemologically our project took a constructivist perspective, understanding knowledge as being constructed by social actors, rather than being some objective fact ‘out there’, detached from the person or institution undertaking the research (Loseke 1999). Such an approach recognises that there are different ways of understanding and knowing the social world, and that these are contingent on one’s position in that world; essential, we believed, for research that was exploring the relationship between differently positioned actors in the web of aid. Equally important was that constructivism recognises the unequal relations of power in society that privilege the knowledge of the more powerful. As already mentioned, the power dimensions of donor–recipient relations were a key aspect of our project.

We were therefore situating ourselves among a growing body of social scientists who variously describe themselves as reflexive rationalists, critical theorists, or deliberative democrats. In development studies, the recent work of the IDS Participation Group and its partners on power, knowledge, and political spaces takes such a critical-theory approach, and seeks to operate within and improve the existing order of donor–recipient relations, rather than to reject it outright (Groves and Hinton 2004).

Once started, we discovered that we did not have a common epistemological perspective. We learned how the interplay of identity and experience could make it very hard to develop and maintain a shared understanding – a challenge compounded by the separation of distance and our speaking different languages.

The relevance of complexity theory

We designed our project on the assumption that a change in individual behaviour could have an impact at the organisational level, leading in turn to wider changes in the international aid system. This was assumed from the perspective of complexity theory, which postulates the central significance of relationships for social change. Small everyday shifts, born of greater awareness and reflexivity through mutual explorations of relationships, could lead to systemic and cumulative effects in changing power structures in international aid.² However, our acquaintance with complexity approaches was superficial. It was only later that Eyben became familiar with the wider body of relevant literature, which, while remaining largely unknown in the world of aid practice, indicates the importance of investing in relationships as a means to change systems and structures (Eyben 2006).

Subjectivity

A challenge that was recognised from the start, but which became much more prominent as the year unfolded, related to our own position. How were we to track how others saw us and be aware of the impact that we were having on each other and those whom we invited to be involved? One (male) observer of our research in Bolivia remarked that this could only have been a project conceived by women. This was, he suggested, because of our gendered interest in relationships. Our commitment would not only survive but grew stronger as we explored through our own friendship the issues of power, money, and knowledge, as enacted in the global arena of international aid.

We could not be ‘objective’. Each of us had her own personal baggage, as well as her institutional and societal affiliations. We wished to design a research process that encouraged all the participants, including ourselves, to develop a capacity for self-scrutiny. We wanted to be critically aware of how we know (Chambers 2002) and are capable of reflecting on the part that our co-researchers and we were playing in the formation, framing, and representation of donor–recipient relations.

Reflective practice is not easy, and anyone participating in a co-operative enquiry group is taking risks. They may come to regret the endeavour as they listen and learn. We saw our project as high-risk and we considered collaborative preparation and mutual support to be important for managing the risks. Stories, metaphors, and jokes also help. They illuminate what we ‘know’ but previously have not accepted as knowledge. They provide fun and release tension as we explore assumptions that are taken for granted. This is why we chose a facetious title for our project – ‘Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner’. The choice of a dinner party as a metaphor for problematising the social relations between donors and recipients provided almost by accident experiential case studies of dinners that we held for each other

or to which others invited us; events where we were both actors and observers in the drama of power and knowledge that informs the donor–recipient relationship.

Putting the plan into practice

Because we were seeing this stage of the project as preparation for a longer implementation phase, we had thought it essential to undertake some more conventional research about donor–recipient relations as part of the preparation, as well as setting up the co-operative enquiry groups. We felt we had to establish our legitimacy as *bona fide* researchers, both with the aid communities we were studying and with potential funding organisations to which we would subsequently be submitting our proposal for the main phase. Methods to be used included reviews of locally available literature; focus groups and workshops; one-to-one interviews; and some participant observation. As discussed next, the insights gained from this research helped us to understand the reaction of those whom we invited to join co-operative enquiry groups.

Perceptions of donor–recipient relations³

In both countries, we found that recipients understood their relationship with donors as one of clients towards patrons. In Bolivian society, the giving and receiving of gifts, and the festivities and religious ceremonies associated with this, are important symbolic statements of patron–client relations based on reciprocity and mutual obligation. Donor agency staff are involuntary actors in this system. To promote their aid objectives through dialogue with the political elite, they have no choice but to become engaged in the ritual of reciprocity. At the same time, they find themselves choosing to associate with the Bolivian elite, with whom they share a common language, lifestyle, educational background, and code of behaviour.

Aspiring recipients have much less room for manoeuvre in choosing donor counterparts and developing seduction strategies in which social events play an important part. The stronger the links they establish with the donor community, the greater their cultural and social prestige in the chain of patronage within Bolivian society. Whereas those interviewed from the donor community generally felt uncomfortable with an enquiry that would explore the relevance of their private social life in relation to their professional responsibilities, Bolivians were intrigued, interested, and keen to pursue the subject, because of their feelings of being not only economically but also politically and culturally dependent on donors.

Interestingly, this proved to be the reverse in Bangladesh. Here, donors showed the greater interest, as they saw an opportunity to explore how they were drawn into the local patronage system, and the expectations that Bangladeshis place on donor staff when seeking to become their clients. The system seemed more blatant in Bangladesh. Perhaps the religious, linguistic, and cultural differences between donors and the local elites make the play of patronage more obvious in Dhaka than in La Paz, where it is mediated by a Westernised elite with whom the expatriate enjoys a common social life.

Global power relations inevitably shape relations between donors and recipients, but other institutional and personal characteristics also matter. The most significant of these may be race, but nationality and social status (age, class background, education, and gender) also feature. All of these ‘personal’ factors constitute less familiar territory for research into aid relations.⁴ The attempt to understand these covered ground that most considered personal, some found humiliating or enraging, and all agreed was sensitive. Hossain noted that it is an open secret in elite social circles in Dhaka that the real-life relationship between donors and recipients is a difficult one.

In Dhaka, the interaction between the Bangladeshi elite and the donor community is limited to professional and formal encounters. If anything, the relationship is characterised by social separation and mutual indifference, at times shading into antipathy. The general absence of friendship between donor staff and members of the political and economic elite appears to make it easier for donors to blame Bangladeshi poverty on the behaviour and attitudes of that elite. Race is also an issue in Bolivia, but in this case the tension is not between resident Western expatriates, but between the white elite and the brown mixed and indigenous majority of the population.

In Bangladeshi recipient circles, the donor–recipient relationship is characterised as ‘colonial’. The compatibility of this view with day-to-day good working relations, particularly between Bangladeshi NGO and donor staff, may be due to the former feeling that they have no choice but to work well within a wider system that they believe is unjust. Largely, the Bangladeshis and Bolivians who engaged in donor–recipient relations shared similar sentiments concerning the wider political economy of aid. At the same time, the level of aid dependency in Bangladesh is declining, while in Bolivia the current economic and political crisis makes them more dependent than ever on the good will of donors. This may explain why it was the donor staff in Bangladesh, more than the recipients, who were interested in trying to improve the relationship, as they were realising that they were less needed than before. They were patrons at the risk of losing their clients.

In Bolivia, as the country moves into ever-deeper crisis, so recipients find themselves caught in a dilemma of recognising a dependency on aid that they would like to reject, but know they cannot. This may explain their interest in exploring the relationship further, so that they can learn to maintain or increase the flow of aid while breaking the patron–client bond.

Reactions to the proposed methodology

Hussain and León started by making contact with people whom they already knew. It seemed easier to present oneself as a classic researcher as a warming up to introducing co-operative enquiry. They were in any case cautious about inviting the interest of all and sundry, as it seemed important to develop a profile of the kind of person who might fit best in such a group. In both Bangladesh and Bolivia, three or four individuals were identified who became extremely interested in the subject and engaged fully in the challenge of non-conventional research methodology. They were all people who themselves had research backgrounds in the social sciences. They could not be seen as ‘typical’ of either donor or recipient staff. However, their preoccupations as managers and advisers within large bureaucratic organisations meant that they found it difficult to play the active champion role that we would have wanted.

Apart from these individuals, León and Hossain found some discomfort with the idea of co-operative enquiry among their interlocutors. People were happier with a more conventional research method which assumes the power of enquiry to be with the researcher who defines the problem and designs and applies research instruments. It was suggested that questionnaires be drafted for them to answer. It seemed that most people found it very challenging to be the subjects of their own research, rather than the objects of someone else’s. Many would have felt much happier with the research had it allowed them to distance themselves completely rather than having to enquire into themselves.

Their discomfort affected the researchers. It seemed as if they had discarded the status of ‘expert’, and that their new role of facilitator was not attractive. Shedding the status of ‘expert’ was particularly problematic in encounters with expatriate staff from donor agencies, who queried whether taking an interest in their social lives was a legitimate research interest. Hossain and León already felt that their status as ‘local’ researchers placed them in a

subordinate position in relation to the donor staff, and that dispensing with their expert status disempowered them even more. In Bolivia, it was difficult to gain access to the social functions where donors and recipients met to do business.

We concluded there might be more potential for working primarily with younger, less powerful people, rather than with recipient and donor ‘heavy weights’ who might find it harder to examine their role and position just because they have invested so much already into it and proved themselves, in their own terms and those of their interlocutors, as ‘successful’. These younger people, near the beginnings of their career, might be more open to exploring, through their own carefully observed experience, what it means to be a donor or a recipient.

We began to learn about the differences between us in appreciating the extent of the epistemological challenge. How, for example, could we enrich our thinking by sharing the experience of one of us with 20 years of engagement with the thinking of indigenous forest people in lowland Bolivia for whom, as in co-operative enquiry, there is no separation between subject and object? León’s background of praxis, where theory is thought of as experience-based (Park 2001), contrasted with Eyben’s approach, which was based more firmly on developing theory and then testing this out in practice.

We learned that one of us, Hossain, was less than convinced by the proposed fusion of the researcher and the researched, mainly because it meant relinquishing power over the direction of the research and interpretation of its findings. Whereas this would not matter when the researcher was relatively more powerful than the researched, it was less attractive when most of the power lay with the research subjects. Finally, we discovered that an enquiry into the social relationships of powerful actors in one’s own country puts one’s professional standing at risk. This was significant for any researcher dependent on the respect of representatives of the international aid system for a future career – something less significant for Eyben, approaching the end of her career.

Identifying potential co-operative enquiry groups

Following several months of this preparatory research, formal workshops were organised for separate groups of recipients and donors in both countries.

In Bangladesh, our access to government staff was difficult, and we shifted the focus to the large NGOs that have received significant international aid. About ten staff found the subject reasonably interesting, enough to give up half a day of their time to attend a workshop. However, they made it clear that they had little interest in forming a longer-term group to reflect and learn about their relations with international donors. There was considerable scepticism about the potential for improving working relations. They remarked that international agencies spoke of partnership but in fact established the agenda for as long as the NGOs remained financially dependent upon them. It was tiring to be making a constant effort to establish good working relations with international staff.

Staff from bilateral aid agencies in Bangladesh were more enthusiastic, and large numbers came to the workshop that we held for them. They revealed self-doubt and anxiety about their role and discussed how they were looking for a means to explore these anxieties in a more structured way than through chats at social events or on the margins of meetings. There appeared to be clear potential for facilitating an enquiry group among donor staff; but, as discussed below, Hossain had meanwhile concluded that she was not convinced by the methodology.

In Bolivia the situation was rather different. Staff interviewed in those government departments that worked closely with the international aid community were very interested in the topic. However, the growing political and economic crisis in Bolivia during the period of our

research made it very difficult for them to find time to stop and reflect. Because of the political upheaval in October 2003, it proved impossible to organise a formal workshop with them to explore how to take this forward as part of a longer-term research proposal. On the other hand, informal meetings and discussions have continued, and the interest in the research theme remains high. Since the end of this preparatory research phase, León is continuing to meet and explore themes informally with a small group of staff from recipient organisations.

On the other hand, staff in bilateral development agencies in Bolivia appeared to be less conscious than their counterparts in Bangladesh that others might see their behaviour as a problem. A number of donor staff participated in a workshop, but the majority appeared to be uninterested in further self-reflection.

What we each learned

Many of those interviewed in both countries were uncomfortable with the research, for two reasons. First, we were proposing to enquire into unexamined aspects of donor–recipient relations about which people would generally prefer not to think. They feared this might oblige them to think about *really* difficult issues, such as how much money they earned, and the extent to which racial prejudice informed their relations. Secondly, we proposed using an unorthodox methodology that contradicted the conventional meaning of ‘objective research’. Hossain and León decided that, while their initial findings had substantiated the importance of the research theme, they did not feel able to engage on a long-term basis of a year or more in providing structured facilitation and support to separate donor and recipient enquiry groups in their own countries. They concluded that their own social positions in their native countries would make it impossible to play such a role. For all three of us, the effort involved in trying to set up such groups has resulted in a self-scrutiny of our own role and perceptions as actors in the aid relationship.

For Hossain, there is a strong and declared partiality in favour of the recipients of aid. While she has sympathy with the younger members of staff from donor agencies who are beginning to recognise that they have to change, she does not feel that she is the person who can best facilitate such a process, or that indeed that the process itself, whoever facilitated it, could lead to the mending of this difficult relationship.

For León, the research was an opportunity to explore a subject that many others in Bolivia had wanted to explore but had not managed or dared to do so. It allowed her to reflect critically on her past, both as manager of an international aid project when she was in the position of a ‘donor’ and as a consultant when she learned and experienced the tensions of being a ‘recipient’. The research also helped her to form a better appreciation of the situation of fellow citizens representing the ‘recipient government’. While never losing her commitment to being on the side of the poor in Bolivia, the project allowed her to develop an ‘epistemic’ distance, so that her critique of the relations of elitism and power that are played out between donors and recipients benefited from what she experienced as a greater ‘objectivity’ than had previously been the case. The research experience was empowering both for her and for those ‘recipients’ with whom she met and conversed. It was empowering because it gave them an opportunity to construct a reflexive analysis of the situation in which they found themselves.

León and Eyben had been the founding core of the team. However, the different global positions of the two co-researchers during the research created a certain tension in the intellectual relationship. This was reinforced by León’s incomplete mastery of English, and her commitment to constructing knowledge through practice rather than through the testing of high academic theory. León found it difficult to manage a process in which she and Eyben had a division of labour whereby ‘the North has the theory which is applied in the South’.

As Eyben continued to develop and write about her own theoretical understanding of the donor–recipient relationship, León noted a growing disjuncture from their original starting point, when Eyben had still been a practitioner. León found that her own theoretical development was moving at a different pace and in a different way, due to diverse academic cultures, rhythms of work, and ways in which knowledge is constructed.

Thus, despite all their best intentions, they found themselves re-enacting the relationship between Southern recipient and Northern donor, in which the latter played the dominant role in the construction of acceptable knowledge. Eyben was frustrated that she was not able to play an active part as a country-based researcher and came to query the validity of the methodology as adapted from its original design. She wondered whether co-operative enquiry is essentially a process initiated and conducted by a self-selecting professional group. Perhaps the impetus for change and learning must be internal to that group and is not for wider disclosure or dissemination.

Towards the end of the project, León emailed Eyben, commenting on our ambition:

The project would be managed from the South and from there we would contract the North. We would seek to change the pattern of relations and from that we would contribute to changing the structures of donor–recipient relations. We would attempt a participatory methodology with a transformational objective. We desired to work in [different] countries so as to better understand how development and donor–recipient relations weave global power relations as played out at the local level and through the teams of donors who like development nomads carry with them experience and relations from hither and thither We wanted many things at the same time, this would allow us to understand many dimensions of the process and so it was. (Eyben’s translation)

The over-ambitious nature of our research project and the effort invested to manage the many challenges that it posed was the principal reason for our decision not to take it further. All the other difficulties arising from our position, and failing to find really enthusiastic and supportive champions for the research, combined to discourage us from taking it forward in the way that we had initially planned.

Conclusion

One of the principles of transformative action research (Brydon-Miller *et al.* 2003; Brown *et al.* 2003) to which we subscribe is to construct and share knowledge to change the world in favour of greater social justice. Our proposed methodology aimed to do that by encouraging a virtuous spiral of reflective enquiry and action, through which our co-researchers would develop a discursive consciousness, identifying and testing ways to relate with others differently. However, we concluded that it presented enormous challenges to both the researcher-facilitators and to the putative members of enquiry groups. Hossain and León had revealed to themselves and to those whom they met the deep sensitivities of the donor–recipient relationship. They felt that their lack of prior experience with the methodology, and their personal vulnerability arising from their ambiguous position, would make it very difficult to facilitate co-operative-enquiry groups in such difficult and challenging circumstances.

We were over-optimistic concerning the possibilities for reflective practice, underestimating the structural conditions that constrain individual agency. For example, to what extent are the recruitment procedures of aid organisations biased towards selecting those individuals less prone to self-reflection? Furthermore, our expectations that donor and recipient staff might come together in a shared enquiry overlooked recipients’ possible unwillingness to put at risk their well-tested strategies for ‘donor seduction’.

Wenger and others have developed the idea of 'communities of practice', which, like our approach to simultaneous co-operative enquiry by donor and recipient groups, is interested in the construction of new knowledge that comes out of boundary crossing. Such boundary crossing allows for a process of 'brokering' whereby individuals, who are members of multiple constituencies, introduce elements of one practice into another (Wenger 1998:109). Brokers need to be able to manage their ambivalent position, operating across practice boundaries in order to translate and align differing perspectives. Brokers need sufficient legitimacy to carry influence as well as to address conflict in an effective fashion. Hossain, León, and Eyben were all in that ambivalent position because of their personal histories, ethnicity, gender, professional background, and occupation. However, others did not see us as necessarily having crossed any boundaries; we were still being typecast as 'donor' or 'recipient', effectively undermining our potential as a broker. We could not escape our position, and our efforts to do so created an ambiguity which both we and our interlocutors found difficult to manage. Finally, we found ourselves asking how a community of practice can function in an arena where the effects of power shape relationships so strongly. It is striking that Wenger does not explore the theme of power.

Co-operative enquiry addresses the 'trivial'. Such an enquiry may have an enormously important impact on exploring the operations of power and illuminating the quality of the relationships that structure the practice of aid. Negotiations about funding and monitoring of development programmes do not take place in a technocratic vacuum but are conducted by people living in society with all the values, beliefs, and multi-stranded linkages that this implies. Shared analysis and learning would allow collective action to change what until then had not been noticed or remarked on because to do so would seem to be in bad taste.

If a sufficient number of people are prepared to make statements that convention might judge irrelevant or embarrassing, then they may have the power to change the way their colleagues are prepared to understand the world. Drawing on Foucault and others, Haugaard (1997) proposes that what is considered *felicitous* and *infelicitous* in any society is beyond the control of any single actor. This means that presentation and form are of critical importance to the radical idea or alternative social action. The actor 'must try and gain support from others for the creation of new frameworks of meaning' (Haugaard 1997: 172), so that an infelicitous utterance about donor-recipient relations is turned into a statement recognised as true. We saw our initiative as one possible means of supporting this process.

Our problem was that participants in action research with transformational aims tend to be from marginalised and relatively powerless sections of society. León's own research background of working with indigenous communities in Bolivia is from this tradition. On reflection, it was perhaps oxymoronic to propose such an approach with groups of relatively powerful social actors of high status. Such research also differs from action research with marginalised groups because in our case the researchers were less powerful than the practitioners, who saw themselves as relatively disempowered either *vis à vis* the other party and/or within their own hierarchical organisation.

This article was about testing the utility of co-operative enquiry for exploring professional practice in the complex cultural borderlands of unequal power relationships that characterise the international aid system. It described how we, as differently positioned researchers, struggled, and largely failed, to persuade ourselves and others that it was worth investing energy and interest in a one-to-two-year cycle of action and reflection, leading to transformational learning about donor-recipient relations. This prompts broader questions as to the conditions under which co-operative enquiry is a feasible methodology and why the multi-country/multi-agency research that we were proposing to undertake did not match those

conditions. It may well be more feasible when instead of a stand-alone enquiry it is embedded within an aid project in which the various stakeholders are obliged to work with each other.

We firmly believe that participatory action research is of fundamental importance for the international aid system, but we conclude that more small-scale, locally championed and embedded initiatives offer greater potential for transforming donor–recipient relations than a formal large-scale stand-alone research project. We hope that readers of *Development in Practice* will respond to this challenge.

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Notes

1. We hoped to contribute to this change process by being the first social-science research project funded by DFID in which the project management and the administration of the funds were the responsibility of the Southern partner, namely CERES.
2. Four key elements of complexity theory are most relevant for a relationships-based approach to aid:
 - (a) Change commonly occurs by self-organisation of elements in the system through interaction with each other: this understanding privileges relationships, processes, and networks rather than structures.
 - (b) There are multiple causes, multiple effects, and multiple solutions, for example to poverty reduction.
 - (c) Anyone's diagnosis of the problem and its solution(s) is necessarily partial, because the information that any individual possesses about the complex system will be limited, and his or her understanding will be influenced by prior conceptions of how change happens.
 - (d) In unbounded problems (where there is no clear agreement about exactly what the problem is), there may be non-proportionality of cause and effect, there is ambiguity as to how improvements might be made, and there are no limits on the time and resources that the problem could absorb (Eyben 2006: 48–9).
3. The following section draws on unpublished research reports into donor–recipient relations in Bangladesh and Bolivia by Hossain and León respectively.
4. For excellent commentaries on the significance of race in development, see Crewe and Harrison (1998) and White (2002).

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