

CHAPTER NINE

Conclusion: Making a Better World

Through the consideration of seven inter-connected facets of reflexive aid practice, I return to Cohen's thesis about states of denial, examining its relevance for international aid. Reflecting on what happened with my father, I have learnt that owning up to what I know – and asking myself what I should do about that knowledge – helps navigate a path in the contradictions of development practice. I have learnt how reflexivity manages these contradictions through being aware of the theory I choose for deciding a course of action, tested against my values, context and feasibility. I conclude by looking to the future. International aid can be a force for good, provided its practitioners admit to history and the partiality of their position and place democratic relationships at the centre of their work.

Using my own life in international development aid as the locus of inquiry, this book has explored the dilemmas faced when trying to make other people's lives change for the better. As an anthropologist, wife, consultant, civil servant, and now as a scholar-activist, I have attempted an autobiographical reflection on the development paradigm as it has evolved with the slow contraction of post-colonialism and the recent emergence of erstwhile aid recipients as new donors. Through the critical lens of my own experience I have interrogated the lives, practices and ideologies of people and institutions in international aid. The power of relationships runs through this book, along with a reflexive recognition of the use and abuse of my own power and of my response to the systemic power that decides whose knowledge and ideas count. The writing of this book has helped me explore these themes and learn more about reflexive practice and to ask how reflexive practitioners can help make a better world.

Learning about reflexive practice

According to Edgar Schön, experienced practitioners know more than they can easily explain – this is 'tacit knowledge' - allowing them to be competent in new circumstances. But says Schön, reflective practitioners go further. They are simultaneously thinking in single and double loops, querying the assumptions informing their action. Reflexivity takes this into a further, triple loop that turns the lens back onto the practitioner and examines the interplay of history and biography that shapes her practice. Critical consciousness takes one beyond *reflective* practice and asks what I should do differently to make a better, more just world. I am - for the moment at least - *reflexive*. There are seven key words I try to remember in my every day practice: mirror, marginality, history, relationships, dialogue, power and contradictions.

Starting with the person in the mirror

This book has taken an auto-biographical approach to international aid so as to understand the historical processes to which I was party and thus illuminating what is constant and what has changed in the dilemmas and challenges of aid practice. Colleagues and I at IDS have encouraged development

professionals, including our students, to look at their own life-stories. In response to their concerns about possible narcissism or self-indulgence, in an email Patta Scott-Villers explained the purpose of self study –

It is about knowing ones positioning, ones world-view and tracking the emotional, cultural and political elements of our own engagements, so that the more "external" aspects of engagement are put into context. Once a person can see herself, that person can perhaps begin to see others more clearly.

Tools used at IDS to help this process include making a pictorial river of one's life on a large flip chart, with imagery connected with a journey down river to the present time to portray the key moments that have shaped where, why and who one is today. When shared with others (as students of the MA in Participation do in small groups in their first week at IDS), the diversity that the rivers of life reveal is the starting point for collaborative work. 'Digital story telling' is a more elaborate and time consuming process involving choosing images to tell a story about one's life, making a short film with these, including audio voice-over. As a longer term creative process, reflexive journaling - including free fall writing and graphic art is a common of self-interrogation that, as a student wrote, 'sets up a dynamic relationship between the activity of the journal and the practice the practitioner wants to develop.'

It can be difficult. One student wrote about the importance of supportive conversations with like-minded friends, 'otherwise, it would have engulfed me in self-doubt'. Another wrote in her reflexive journal that 'in the past few weeks I have been de-constructing myself. It feels naked and I feel tired'. She then gradually realised the effect self-scrutiny was having on her work and relationships and how she and her colleagues were changing their approach in working with local communities –

If I look back at how I functioned before, I never used to think about whether or not processes were transparent ...I used to go to a community and talk to the village elders and community representatives and draw conclusions without even thinking about how meetings had been convened and why.

Writing about the experience of his work place assignment in the London office of an international NGO, Daniel Guijarro used the idea of 'the man in the mirror'¹ to make the argument that aid agencies had to practice collective reflexivity to engage with their internal power dynamics as an integral element of trying to change global inequities. Colleagues and I took a similar approach when inviting senior staff from some big international NGOs to a series of facilitated conversations about how their organisations could be more effective agents of progressive social change.² Each meeting (in a quiet retreat centre) was organised around certain key questions – for example participants' theories of change – and drawing on relevant literature and individual experience as well as case studies prepared by the NGO participants. They not only learnt more about their organisation by examining it in the context of learning about the challenges within other participants' organisations but they were also able to recognize experiences they had in common. Similarly sharing one's individual life story both deepens the process of reflexive enquiry (as I have found in writing this book) and also encourages others to identify the interplay between the personal and the systemic, exploring the potential for making a difference.

Cultivating marginality

By marrying at a time when educated married women were denied the normal career paths of their male peers, history placed me and my fellow travellers in marginal positions where we learnt to be versatile and entrepreneurial. These were skills that served me well in my early years working for the British aid ministry but once I made a success of it, I failed to cultivate that gift of being on the edge. I have thus learnt that the more integrated I am into my current social and organisational location, the harder it becomes to spot the possibility of choice.

Marginality allows reflexive practitioners to be aware of different perspectives and to appreciate that the normality of their organisational world is just one among many others. As insiders they learn to understand and behave appropriately in the organisation that employs them - otherwise they will have no credibility and little influence. As outsiders, they keep their critical distance from the organisation and are able to challenge 'how things are done around here'. Marginality helps prevent denial by encouraging double loop enquiry, and checking for pre-suppositions. Is there something happening that I am refusing to recognize? Marginality requires conscious cultivation to continue recognizing and remembering the world may be very different from how it appears to me. I learnt with hindsight the importance of keeping – and revisiting – a journal to stop me forgetting what for my comfort I would rather not remember. Other ways include deliberately changing organisational positionality or institutional location, as did Ines Smyth when she moved from Oxfam to the Asian Development Bank and then back again.³ My move from London to Bolivia was a deliberate attempt to see the world from a different viewpoint, although habitual ways of thinking and working were difficult to overcome.

History matters

I have used my position as both author and subject to write and then reflect upon a partial account of the history of international development that connects individuals – and their motivations, relationships and organisations and motivations – to half a century of geo-political and societal transformation. Individual agency matters to the conceptualization and delivery of aid programmes. Yet how far it matters and what it achieves depends on wider circumstances, as exemplified by my fellow travellers that I have introduced into the book as a mirror to my own life. Although the people-centred development decade of the 1990s can be explained at the systemic level by the end of the Cold War, such an explanation is insufficient. During the years leading up to this change, a generation of experienced practitioners had been preparing the ground. My fellow travellers were caught up in and became part of the two great emancipatory moments of the twentieth century: freedom from colonialism and the women's liberation movement. These moments both shaped our consciousness, and produced political effects that gave us the opportunity to influence development practice.

My early chapters emphasized the interplay between individual biographies and historical change; I have told personal details about my life to encourage my readers to reflect on their own. I have learnt that what might appear to be trivial incidents at the time were points where things shifted, where I became aware of myself as having changed, key moments when I made a choice to behave and think differently. I have only made sense of my professional life in retrospect, recollecting these different moments of crisis and revelation and spinning them together into a narrative, giving them a logic, a sense of direction of which at most times I had only a faint inkling. The ultimate art of reflexive practice is learning to see and act consciously *in* the moment. I am not sure that I, or

perhaps most readers, will learn to do this. However, through understanding the inter-weaving of history and biography that constitutes anyone's potential for agency, I can reflect on how my own agency must be similarly constituted and investigate its implications in practice.

A concern with relationships

My sense of self and understanding of the world is shaped by my relationships. As well as professional relationships, this book has deliberately touched upon the influence and ideas of familial relationships. The reader has met my mother, father, sister, two husbands and will shortly encounter my daughter. My early experience as an international aid housewife has helped me reflect on how personal relationships at home and at work interconnect to shape my sense of self and my understanding of the world. Reflexivity, I have learnt, is a process of deliberately making myself feel insecure about how I understand, speak about and behave in relationships with others. In Bolivia I was self-consciously testing a relationships approach to aid management and seeking out the other realities that these relationships revealed to me. It helped me question how my socializing with Bolivia's ruling elite both shaped my understanding of the country and influenced what those outside such circles thought about what DFID was doing. I have also learnt that personal relationships by themselves cannot wipe away the realities of whom I represent. Reflexivity includes discovering and responding to others' perceptions of my personal, professional and organisational identity and appreciating that my and my organisation's benevolent objectives, may be regarded with rather differently by those whom the organisation is aiming to help. 'I trust you, Rosalind', said the G77 diplomat, 'but not those who you represent'.

International aid, child of the last days of Empire, was brought up by parents who chose not to recognise their child's origins and ignored that after four hundred years of European expansion into the rest of the world they, the parents, were in decline. Amnesia is the enemy of reflexivity. I had to learn from others in that 'rest of the world' how I was seen. It was very different from how I saw myself. Being alert to the influence and limitations of personal relationships has helped me consciously choose with whom to associate and learn from and with. Keeping track of who I meet, how often and what was discussed can be a useful tool for constructing relationship maps and for asking questions about who is present and absent from them.

Learning through dialogue

Power operates through historically structured patterns of social relations and norms. Every time I follow these norms I contribute to maintaining the 'self-evident and natural order which goes without saying and therefore goes unquestioned'.⁴ My father taught me this as a child when I had to pretend to be a Martian. Strangers to my world can open my eyes. As an FAO consultant in the 1980s I exercised the privilege of whiteness and expertise to walk into villages in Cameroon, Mali, Lesotho, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Rwanda and the Central African Republic, among others. Accompanied by an interpreter I poked into people's granaries, climbed up into their storage lofts and peered into their drums and sacks of stored food. It was a friend in England who had never been involved in development who gently reflected on what it would be like if a foreigner were to turn up on *her* doorstep, demanding to look into her (not very clean) fridge and larder. Would she be convinced, she wondered, by an argument that such an invasion into her privacy was for her own good? How would

she have felt, she enquired, after the stranger had left, and she never heard from her again, not even getting a hamper of food delivered to stock up her fridge?

In *States of Denial*, Stanley Cohen emphasises 'not knowing' works best when people, unaware, collude with each other's denials. Conversely, conversations with colleagues, reassure me that I am not alone, that uncomfortable truths can be acknowledged and that a critical examination of our collective practice is possible. Such conversations can be more formalised, as in the reading weeks I have facilitated. Another useful technique is inviting outsiders to facilitate action learning sets, enabling a group with a shared agenda to distance themselves from their daily work and look at it from different perspectives – as for example happened with a group of Sida staff, described by Seema Arora-Jonsson and Andrea Cornwall.⁵ Similarly, the MA in Participation, Power and Social Change at IDS offers creative methods for development professionals to cultivate mutual self-awareness of their power, identities and worldviews and to reflect on how these in turn shape their perceptions and actions. By appreciating they are not alone in struggling with development's contradictions, graduates are better equipped to seek out professional colleagues with whom they can make sense of and cultivate a more critical understanding of the world they work in and are part of – and act to change it. One of them, Daniel Guijarro has written about his experience of working with a colleague and how what 'started as a process of individual reflection and empowerment had become an entry point for organisational change'.⁶

Becoming aware of power

When I took advantage of my whiteness to barge my way to the head of the queue in a Kinshasa hospital to give my child's life priority over the lives of other women's children, it seemed a perfectly normal thing for me to do. Almost, but not *quite* normal - otherwise I would not have remembered it. Not remembering is itself a choice, confirming rather than challenging the prevailing power structures of my location. My decision to slip away from the World Bank representative's birthday party helped me understand how profoundly my practice had been shaped by invisible power that had prevented a reflexive choice in my behaviour. Recognizing and trying to change the invisible power that supports and sustains inequitable relationships is the hardest aspect of reflexive practice. Power operates to encourage self-deception.⁷ Even the most progressive international NGOs, like Action Aid International (I have been a trustee on its UK Board since 2010) find it challenging to have conversations within the global federation of affiliates from rich and poor countries about how invisible power operates through historically constructed norms of race and gender to shape informal power relations. Most other organisations do not even consider attempting it.

Looking afresh at old photographs⁸ I have imagined what it must feel like to be the different people in them. I become aware of power relations that I was blind to when taking the pictures. Drama and role play also reveals informal and invisible power, for example acting out the experience of a recipient government civil servant over-whelmed with visiting aid missions. It is also worth looking out for opportunities to observe, real live situations from a fresh perspective. This is not an immersion for the empathetic purpose of imagining what it must be like to a woman living in poverty in a West African village, but rather to see myself through that other person's eyes and change my behaviour. Some two years after leaving Bolivia, during a visit to Peru, I met Carlos and Felipe, the leaders of a small local NGO. They told me they were to meet an official of a bilateral aid agency respecting a grant proposal, the first they had ever submitted to a foreign donor. At their request we

rehearsed the meeting, I taking the donor's role, and I accompanied them to the meeting to provide silent, moral support. I was affected by their anxiety. My heart beat fast, my mouth was dry. Soon after Carlos had started to explain the NGO's work, a secretary came into the room with a message for the official. She left and Carlos tried to continue. But the official was evidently not listening, and without an apology, he called the secretary back into the room with the words, 'let me know when he is free and I will go to him'. Once again, he did not apologise for the interruption; Carlos, ever more stressed, yet again had to recommence. Observing the official, who appeared a pleasant enough man, I realised he had no idea whatsoever of the impact he was making nor of the significance of this meeting to his visitors, compared to what was for him a clearly trivial in a busy schedule where his priority was his boss. How often, I asked myself, had I behaved similarly?

On the other hand, power can also change the status quo. Tools such as organisational power mapping can identify where and with whom action is possible. In 2013, participants at a conference on the politics of evidence in development practice concluded we can be blind to the power we have to make change: 'the power to challenge, agree, question, and create'.⁹

The political management of contradictions

Reflexivity's destabilising effects creates 'an awareness of the political choices to be made in practice'.¹⁰ Those of us working in internationally for social justice through the means of foreign aid cannot escape the uncomfortable political position of supporting a global institution – international development – that arguably sustains inequitable power relations more than it succeeds in changing them.¹¹ The reflection group with staff from big NGOs (mentioned earlier) looked at the contradictions when NGOs seek to be vehicles for social justice when seeking increased funding from Northern governments interested in preserving the status quo. We concluded that such a contradiction could be managed through reflexive awareness and that whether NGOs are able to use official aid for progressive work depended as much on the politics and values of individual staff in donor and grantee organisations, as on the official policies and procedures of the funding agencies.¹² I have named this 'subversive accommodation'.¹³

Informal alliances between differently positioned individuals and groups are crucial for such subversion. From working as a feminist bureaucrat, I have learnt that 'when the going gets tough only a well-orchestrated inside/outside political strategy will work'.¹⁴ From wherever I am located, I can harness the power that location provides, as long as I am acutely aware how that power shapes my consciousness and thus the choices I make. Such alliances can also encourage empathy and help me see the world from someone else's perspective, helping prevent the taken for granted.

Making a better world

Katherine McKinnon has described development as a 'project of hope guided by the aspiration for greater social justice and emancipation of the poor and disadvantaged in the world'.¹⁵ Indeed, this was exactly the concern that has been at centre of my professional life, believing that the organisations I worked for and with could learn to get things right. The urgency of that belief closed my eyes to what I did not want to see and for a long time, despite my academic training as an anthropologist, stopped me from appreciating other people's realities. When meeting villagers in

Bolivia or G77 diplomats at the United Nations, I failed to appreciate that *their* perception of my interest in them differed from mine. I ignored the geo-politics of memory. Others remember what the West chose to forget - that the international aid system grew from the ruins of Empire, inheriting and rarely challenging imperial ideas and behaviours. 'Making a better world' was how I explained to myself what I wanted to do when choosing to study anthropology with the intention of helping build a newly independent Africa. In the 1960s anthropology had not yet commenced its subsequent painful efforts to move away from its colonial origins, ideas of positionality and reflexive consciousness were still in a feminist future, and the problem of representation – of thinking of our subjects of study as 'the Other' – have never occurred to me. Thereafter, when I was a development professional, I kept a distant eye on these theoretical pre-occupations as they were published and debated in the 1970s and 1980s. However, I only began gradually to wake up to these ideas ten years ago, thanks to the friendships developed when working in Bolivia. Subsequently as an academic I learnt about how 'reflexive practice' encourages individual and collective critical reflection about how we live our lives and relate with others, which has been the purpose of this book.

I am still struggling to understand my own motives and why for so long I have wanted to do good somewhere else than at home. I have, however, come to realise that one should not preclude the other. The lives and livelihoods of Joshua and Rebecca in West Africa are mutually constituted with mine and my neighbours in Europe. International NGOs like Action Aid recognize this through campaigns for tax justice or for the reduction of carbon emissions. Some development NGOs have expanded their activities to work at home as well as abroad: poverty and injustice exist here as well as there. The barriers of First and Third World, developed and developing countries, North and South, are crumbling. Still, however, most Northern NGOs and bilateral aid agencies – with the support of their domestic constituencies – are maintaining those old imaginaries by continuing with Mrs Jellyby's 'telescopic philanthropy'. There is little pressure on donor organisations to learn to think about the world differently. On the contrary, the drive for results-based management and the performance of accountability to domestic constituencies reinforces these old ways. 'Best practice' in a fictitious world squeezes out 'good enough practice' that seeks to respond to and engage with other realities.

Caddell and Yanacopolous¹⁶ have employed Cohen's thesis of states of denial to look at how development agencies have responded to conflict and civil war, including through interpretative denial - events are re-framed to obviate the need for action – and implicatory denial – the facts are not disputed but the implication for any responding action is denied. The same kind of analysis can be usefully applies to the everyday routine of aid relations. Development professionals and academics like me are complicit in both the reframing of what we know and in denying its implications. Townsend and Townsend, looking at NGOs, describe such complicity as 'misrepresentation' and suggest that it is 'conceivably on ethical grounds'¹⁷ that aid money might stop flowing if there were exposures of the realities of all that goes wrong.

'The twilight between knowing and not knowing'

The autumn day in 1991 that the Soviet Union disappeared, my father took down from his shelves his very considerable collection of books about Soviet Communism. Volumes that had been part of our childhood were carried down to the bottom of the garden. My sister feebly protested at seeing a valuable first edition of Beatrice and Sydney Webb's magisterial book on the Soviet Union make its

way with the others to the bonfire. My father burnt them all. Yet, having burnt his books, it was only after my mother's death in 1994 that he began to talk about the difficult things.

He was washing up after supper. Wiping a sponge over the old enamel saucepan, he propped it on the draining board for me to dry. I waited for the next dish. Sponge in hand, he stared down into the sink. Slowly he took a plate from the soapy water, and held it tight as it dripped onto the draining board. He looked down again at the sink. There was something he wanted to tell me, he said. A confession, he said. At some level of consciousness he had already known the truth about the Stalinist terror before Khrushchev had made it public in 1956, but he had told himself then and for many years afterwards that this was not the truth. Recently, he had been trying to puzzle out what had been going on for so long in his mind. He put the plate back into the dishwasher, turned around and faced me with a look of miserable embarrassment. I gripped my tea towel hard. I did not know what to say, other than 'Go on'. He could no longer avoid owning up, he said, that he had indeed known and was thus complicit in something very evil.

Driven by a moral vision of making a better world, he made invisible that which contradicted and risked destroying his dream. My father's confession triggered a question for me - not then, but later. If it were possible to engage more reflexively with reality, to self-interrogate why I see the world in a certain way and to enquire into my motives for making invisible what interfered with my vision, would that enable me better to see History as it is rather than the way I would like it to go? Could I avoid living 'in that twilight between knowing and not knowing'¹⁸ by developing personal and organisational habits that would make such reflexivity routine, while at the same time maintaining that commitment to social justice that had been the motivation of my father's self-deception?

'Self-deception', writes Cohen, 'is a way to keep secret from ourselves the truth we cannot face'.¹⁹ Cohen's interest is in ordinary people's collusion for their own comfort in turning a blind eye to the suffering and evil that their state is wreaking on fellow citizens. My father's case is different in that the driver of his self-deception was his belief in making a better world. Here lies the similarity with international aid practice. My high moral purpose to change the world for the better, just like my father's, renders me vulnerable to a self-deception that ignores the contradictions between my beliefs and my practice – as when working for DFID, I *valued* the knowledge and the diverse realities of the people who we were there to help but *arranged* matters so that the organisation's reality determined what it did. Forgetting this was a dilemma, I entered the twilight zone between knowing and not knowing. My enthusiasm made me blind.

In Bolivia I learnt that reflexive practice engages with (rather than wishes away) such contradictions and tensions of development aid. I can consciously choose to be part of the system without letting it capture me. I do this through making the effort to converse with and listen to others who have different points of view, and different theories about how the world works. I have found that dilemmas can be managed by being aware of the theory I am using to decide my course of action and by testing that theory against my values.

Thinking critically about change

Richard Slater suggests that thinking critically is about 'investigating the clash of ideas and the durability of difference' and that it also challenges 'the myth of a world settled around a ruling consensus'.²⁰ Theory mediates reality. Any theory illuminates just one part of reality; in so doing it obscures our view of the remainder, just as a street lamp lights up immediately beneath and around it but renders very dark the rest of the street. Theory provides an explanatory perspective. Another theory will give a different perspective. I find it good theory when more useful than another in providing an explanation. It gets interesting when others propose alternative theories to explain the same issue, for example why there are higher levels of maternal mortality in Angola than in Australia. I may need to use a number of different theories to try to answer that question, drawing on bodies of knowledge from economics, geography, political science, etc. This is why development studies is a multi-disciplinary subject. It is not just academics, but all development professionals who use theory, although perhaps unaware. A debate about how their aid organisation should tackle maternal mortality is likely to be informed by different theories. Disagreements between colleagues may be due to different but possibly implicit theories of change, as when my Dutch colleague and I disagreed about the right-to-identity project in Bolivia. In my own case, my choice of theory at any particular moment and context is influenced by my relationships, observations, ideology, values and feasibility for realisation.

Theory is *implicitly* present even when someone *explicitly* rejects theory in favour of being practical. When the High-Level Panel on the Post-2015 Development Agenda ruled out tackling inequalities, the British Prime Minister's spokesperson said -

The prime minister wants to keep the focus on measurable concrete actions that would help you to alleviate poverty and keep the focus on being something people could judge whether or not we are delivering. We think it is right that we should be using this [panel] to address equality of opportunity. Obviously we want to be lifting up the world's poorest. But the best way to do that is to have more specific actions rather than some overarching high-level message.²¹

Cameron's 'fundamentally anti-theoretical edge'²² pre-supposes a normality to the status quo – of 'us' lifting up 'them' – and forecloses debate about the challenges international aid confronts in reducing the global and national inequalities in voice, knowledge, power and assets.

Reflexive practice encourages me to test different explanatory models against my observations. This is tricky because I may choose to observe only what I want to see, and *that* in turn is influenced by my values and positionality. Take the case of how aid agencies should support empowerment. If I favour the approach that society changes through individuals, each seeking to achieve their own happiness, then what an aid organisation should do is help create an environment that enables all individuals to pursue their life choices. Possible actions might include encouraging the removal of red tape for small- and micro-enterprise development. On the other hand, if I believe that society changes through new ideas and beliefs, then the aid organisation should support those who are influencing and transforming ideas and values in society. Possible actions might include financing mass media campaigns against discriminatory informal rules of the game, helping organisations write textbooks that promote gender equality, and helping train front-line workers to deliver services with respect.

One theory may be better at explaining to me the reality of a particular context, but others looking at the same context may disagree. Yet, without critical reflection and an open debate about the 'clash of ideas', people may unthinkingly favour one theory over another. Power and voice then come into play, as in the case of the Post-2015 Panel just mentioned. One of the other three co-chairs of the Panel, Ellen Sirleaf-Johnson, President of Liberia, was over-ruled when she wanted to include inequalities in the agenda. Even within aid agencies there may be factions, each with different ideologically-informed theories of change, advocating and even implementing different strategies accordingly. Values also influence the theories that inform aid agencies' action. I was one of the facilitators at a strategic planning workshop for Oxfam staff and encouraged participants to experiment designing their strategy using different theories of change. Because of the value these particular participants placed on changing power relations, they had a hard time imagining how they would apply a market-led rational-choice model of change.²³

Finally, a choice of theory is influenced by judgements about feasibility and positionality. Once, when working for DFID, I visited a project in Bangladesh that aimed to help landless labouring families enhance their incomes through breeding fish in government-owned stretches of water. The project was failing due to landowners in the locality illegally draining the ponds for irrigating their crops. 'How can DFID help you prevent this from happening?' I asked. 'Give us guns' came the answer. *Their* theory of change was violent revolution, one that made most sense to them in their circumstances but one that both as a British civil servant and a woman with pacifist leanings *I* could not agree with. I learnt the limitations of international aid while looking for alternative institutional and political means that DFID could support to prevent the draining of the ponds.

Once I admit to the myriad contradictions and consequent dilemmas that I have faced in my aid practice, I risk losing my sense of direction. Theory proves a useful compass. 'How can I change anything in development when power structures are so hegemonic?' a student asked me recently. I responded with Weick's theory of 'small wins'. Bearing in mind that a social transformation agenda is profoundly radical,²⁴ small gains may be all that is possible for a development practitioner, Accumulated, they can make a big difference –

A small win is a concrete, complete, implemented outcome of moderate importance. By itself, one small win may seem unimportant. A series of wins at small but significant tasks, however, reveals a pattern that may attract allies, deter opponents, and lower resistance to subsequent proposals.²⁵

Rather than frozen into inaction by contradictions and dilemmas small wins may be secured by exploiting and working within the contradictions. Writing about social transformation, Erik Olin Wright²⁶ argues that rupture or revolution is rarely possible and in any case terror and death are often its corollaries, as my father eventually recognized about the Russian Revolution. Wright offers an alternative of transformation as metamorphosis, in which relatively small incremental transformations cumulatively generate a qualitative shift. International aid has this potential. It may well mean radical practitioners using instrumentalist arguments and compromising ideals, but such arguments can be strategic if securing an accumulation of small wins, while appearing as if fitting into prevailing discourses and practices. Some reflexive rights-based feminists working inside official development agencies do this with their eyes wide open when they argue for money to be spent on women's and girl's empowerment, not on the grounds of social justice, but as a key driver of sustainable development. Only their reflexivity prevents these feminists from being absorbed into the

organisation and becoming prisoners rather than liberators of its dominant discourse – and they can use their location to fund other more ambitious projects.

Figure 9.1.
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The former DFID colleague with whom I discussed my dislike of the results agenda takes advantage of 'results' discourse in this way. It is discursive judo. She reminded me that I had done something similar twenty years before when I used the Ministry's interest in structural adjustment to gain a foothold into policy debates. Just as I had then, she needed outsiders' strong criticism of the Ministry to lever internal change. Even should power and politics prevent open communication – and this happens less than people often fear or imagine²⁷ – an awareness of this external pressure helps her stay engaged with other realities and hone her strategies accordingly. I have learnt from my own experience that such external contact, combined with cultivating a network of supportive relationships within the organisation, sustain independence of thought. Making time to read critical literature also matters. So is, as I now know from writing this book, a regularly re-read journal for engaging with reality rather than wishing away the contradictions that the system generates. All this can help a reflexive aid practitioner position herself on the margins of different realities – both Rosalind and Rosalinda – that helps to avoid co-optation and limits the risk of self-deception. To cite Foucault –

'We must escape from the dilemma of being either for or against. After all, it is possible to face up to a government and remain standing. To work with a government implies neither subjection nor total acceptance. One may work with it and yet be restive.'²⁸

Looking to the future

During a recent visit with my daughter to Burundi, our hosts took us to the highest spot on a long ridge that runs north-south through the heart of the country. Looking down the west slope are streams draining into the Congo basin, whose river eventually finds its way into the Atlantic. On the east slope is a spring, the southernmost source of the river Nile that flows into the Mediterranean. We knew we were at a watershed because it is in all the geography books, but standing on the ridge we could not see these two great rivers flowing out to separate seas. That would have required distance, removing ourselves from Earth to look down upon the continent of Africa from the international space station. Poets and theologians, biographers and historians use the metaphor of watershed – a particular event in time – to signify a decisive moment of change in the lives of individuals, nations and of humanity as a whole. But those observers are not in a space station; their perspective, as is mine in this book, is limited and partial. The presence, location and significance of a watershed for shaping both the collective landscapes of history and the personal ones of biography may shift in accordance with who is doing the remembering and when, where and with whom we are doing it.

figure 9.2
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Watersheds and turning points have served in this book to identify moments of crisis, of dilemmas and of a change of direction. Thus 1989, the end of the Cold War, shaped what my fellow travellers – and many others like us – could do in using aid money in support of people's rights and the furtherance of social justice. The fall of the Berlin Wall was also personally important, permitting emotional resolution of the ideological dissonance haunting my childhood. Yet, as I learnt when scrambling eggs with my Marxist mother, synthesis creates new contradictions. In my enthusiasm for the end of the Cold War, I neglected a greater historical watershed. I did not sufficiently reflect on how the landscape of international aid was initially formed as a consequence of the European expansion and dominance of the rest of the world. Against that wider perspective, the end of the

elements of the system so that collectively they help development aid contribute to making a better world.

Occasionally the approach that the IDS MA programme in participation takes to reflexive practice provokes a critical reaction from students, as in the following email –

It is hypocritical for us, the uppers who have benefited from modernity, interventionist states and the unequal global economic structure, to critique from idealistic norms without ever worrying about how to manage the dirty reality from which we've benefitted.

Worrying about the dirty reality from which we've benefitted points to a difficult question as to whether working as an international development practitioner helps prop up rather than change global inequities. We probably do both. But reflexive practice generates less of the former and more of the latter.

Rosario León wrote –

In more than twenty years working in the development industry, seldom did I meet donors who were reflective, supportive, emotional, had some dose of courage to go beyond the frontiers of bureaucracy, and who enjoyed diversity. But in those cases, the projects were real contributions to life, politics, human growth, people's strategies and knowledge, and therefore, to change.³³

Coda

Crises help me look at what occurs beneath the apparent surface of normality and to change perspective. Some events, however, have been difficult to come to terms with. In my professional life the most difficult of these has been what happened in Burundi. I first went there in the late 1960s, soon after it had achieved independence from colonial rule, and shared the optimism of many international development workers. Because this frame of mind prevented me from wanting to know about the bad things that were happening, I could not digest the terrible death of my friends in 1972. Writing this book has forced me to notice a hard lump inside me I had tried to ignore. In 2012, I returned to Burundi for the first time since my visit there in 1984 when Josephine told me about the death of her husband and of so many neighbours.

As a trustee of Action Aid UK I am encouraged to visit a country programme. I said I wanted to go to Burundi. Wanting a fellow traveller to help me reflect on the experience, I asked my daughter Karin to accompany me. She had last been there when a baby. On our arrival we found the country preparing to celebrate its fiftieth anniversary of independence from Belgian rule. The immediate post-colonial era of international development I had known in the late 1960s was now history. Forty years ago, aid organisations were staffed with expatriates (some of whom were former Belgian colonial administrators), including technical staff working in rural areas. Now these had nearly all gone. While Burundi was still very aid-dependent – and the majority of the vehicles we saw on the roads outside the main towns belonged to aid agencies – at least it was Burundians in the vehicles and who are largely responsible for the international agencies' programmes (although not for the purse strings).

Burundi's tragedy has been the cycle of violent conflict that since the 1972 massacre continued for more than thirty years. Many were killed, including in 1993 ten Action Aid staff. Homesteads were destroyed and hundreds of thousands of people were internally displaced or fled to neighbouring countries. In 2005 a peace deal was at last agreed and since then United Nations agencies and international NGOs, including Action Aid, have been supporting people return to their homes through community-based reconciliation. Today Burundi is a democracy and one in which women are active participants. People we met talked more frankly about politics than they had ever done when I was there before. 'I can say whatever I like about the President without being arrested,' one person said to us, favourably comparing Burundi with the authoritarian regime in neighbouring Rwanda. Less good news was the very high levels of government corruption which Action Aid staff spoke to us about. In my visit report to the country director, I commented on how Action Aid's rights-based approach to strengthening citizen voice was so clearly desperately needed.

While everyone we met spoke of the importance of peace, we found them using an evasive language in which nothing and nobody was named and the internecine conflict that had involved neighbour killing neighbour was spoken of as if it were a natural disaster. Karin, who works with local communities in Northern Ireland, said to me, 'Everyone is anxious to turn the page without first looking at it'. Until, that is, we met Maggy Barankitse, walking with the charismatic presence of a queen unannounced into the meeting room of Ruyigi's Action Aid office. Joining the staff and us visitors around the table, she launched into jokes about '*le peace-building*' (using the English expression) to illustrate how everyone – international consultants, UN officials and local NGOs – had an interest in maintaining the industry. That was the warm-up. She shifted to jokes about Hutu and Tutsi. The Burundians around the table giggled nervously. Karin and I listened, amazed. After several days in the country, it was the first time we had heard *anyone* speak the words 'Hutu' and 'Tutsi', let alone laugh about them. Maggy saw the look on our faces. 'You will wonder why I make jokes', she said. '*They* don't like it', she added, glancing around the table at her compatriots, 'but we have to talk about it if we are to learn to live together and they know it. That is why Action Aid supports my work', she said, smiling affectionately at Pierre Claver, the area coordinator.

Maggy invited us to breakfast next morning at the home she had built for children orphaned in the civil war and who she supports to help build a better future from their fragmented communities. Now serious, she spoke of the horrors of the violence and told us how she deliberately played the role of *la folle* – the madwoman – making outrageous statements and jokes to break the silence. She remained the only person we met who spoke openly about 'Tutsi' and 'Hutu' having killed each other and to whom, she said, the living have a duty to stop it happening again in the future. Maggy taught me that reflexive practice for a better future means being responsible for talking with each other about the pain and difficulties of the past we would rather sweep under the carpet.

¹ Guijarro

² Shutt 2009

³ Smyth 2013

⁴ Bourdieu 1977: 161.

⁵ Arora-Jonsson and Cornwall 2006.

⁶ Guijarro 2010:107

⁷ Chambers 1997

⁸ For example, figures 4.1 and 5.1

⁹ Big Push Forward 2013

¹⁰ Kilminster et al 2010 p. 5

¹¹ See for example Crush 1995, Escobar 1996 and Pieterse 2000.

¹² Shutt 2009

¹³ Eyben 2010

¹⁴ Sandler 2013: 157

¹⁵ McKinnon 2007: 772.

¹⁶ Caddell and Yancopolous

¹⁷ Townsend and Townsend: 271

¹⁸ Cited in frontispiece to Cohen 2001.

¹⁹ Cohen: 39.

²⁰ Slater 2004: 25.

²¹ www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2013/may/14/david-cameron-united-nations-poverty-targets

²² Sharp et al. 2010: 1129.

²³ Eyben et al 2008.

²⁴ For a longer discussion about this and tempered radicalism, see Eyben 2013.

²⁵ Weick 1984: 43.

²⁶ Wright 2010.

²⁷ See Patti O'Neill in Eyben and Turquet 2013.

²⁸ Cited in VanderPlaat 1999: 779. I am grateful to Andrea Cornwall for bringing this quote to my attention.

²⁹ see Chakrabarty 2000

³⁰ See for example, Kharas and Rogerson 2012.

³¹ See, for example, Chaturvedi et al 2012, Chin and Qadir 2012, Gore 2013.

³² At the time of going to press, University of Sussex, Ph.D student, Katia Taela, was embarking on an ethnographic enquiry into Brazilian aid workers in Mozambique.

³³ León 2009: 22.