APPENDIX THREE
GUESS WHO'S COMING TO DINNER:
METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES AND FINDINGS[1]

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Mexican sociologist, Hugo Zemelman notes that the classic approach of a researcher is to understand reality through the lens of theory, undertaking research to verify or disprove a hypothesis, rather than to change that reality. Practitioners, as distinct from researchers, interpret reality through *past* experience that they use to explain their *present* circumstances. For both researchers and practitioners an additional lens, that of ideology, may mediate their understanding, encouraging them to interpret the present by looking for signs of what they would like or hope the future will be. He identifies the methodological challenge as how to understand and change the present without these three biases constraining the identification of future possibilities (2000). Recognising this challenge, we were interested in identifying a research methodology that would involve development practitioners as theoreticians and researchers. We wanted a method that would help them and us be alert to the distorting effect of normative values causing us to avoid thinking what we would like to be as what is.

Blinding ourselves with our own wishful thinking appears to be particularly prevalent in the world of development practice. Terms such as partnership, ownership and participation and the shared Millennium Development Goals encourage practitioners not to risk challenging the view that relations between donor and recipient are essentially non-problematic, largely requiring reforms to bureaucratic procedures and incentive structures for more effective aid.

This is not to argue that development co-operation has not been problematized and from a range of disciplinary perspectives, including that of institutional economics which throw light on the behaviour of staff in bureaucratic donor and recipient organisations and raise important issues of failure of accountability due to the complexity of principal agent relationships (for example, Ostrom et al 2001). Political sociology and social anthropology have also contributed (Hosssain & Moore 2002; Crewe & Harrison 1998, Stanley 2001, Mosse forthcoming) but it appeared that we were taking a new step within development research. We were seeking to problematize donor-recipient relations within the framework of a participatory action research project where the actors were to become their own researchers, an approach reasonably well-established in organisation development research.

[1] The authors are grateful to Jethro Pettit for reviewing an earlier draft.

Building on our diverse experience as social researchers and practitioners we asked ourselves how were we to design research that had an explicit theoretical lens to help us understand reality combined with a transformative objective, one that aimed to contribute to changing the institutional structure of relations in the world of development practice. At the start of our project, we decided that we could meet these dual objectives by asking practitioners to join us as co-researchers. By self- researching how they related with each other in their day-to-day professional and social lives, they would enrich their understanding of the present reality. They would observe and learn about what had until then been invisible to them. Through that learning, they might together identify future possibilities for organisational change in the world of development practice, a world accustomed to a different epistemology and style of research. [2]

It was an unconventional approach for many of those we wished to involve and the lead researchers had no direct experience in the methodology we were proposing to use. Thus, we opted for a one-year exploratory phase as to the feasibility of our idea. The present paper describes how we planned that exploration and describes our findings and conclusions concerning the feasibility and options for action learning and research in development practice. The next section describes our starting point in relation to our epistemology and to our decision to opt for a co-operative inquiry methodology. We follow with an account of how we collectively developed and implemented our work plan, including how we took forward our decision that the exploratory year should involve initial, more conventional research as a means to engaging the interest of practitioners. We then consider the lessons we have learnt from that experience and the implications for possible future methodological work. We conclude by summarising our planned next steps.

2. THE CHOICE OF METHOD

The choice of a constructivist perspective

When designing the research we had to respond to the challenge of a peer reviewer who criticised our proposal for not being 'objective' research. We responded that in epistemological terms our research proposal took a constructivist perspective. We understood knowledge as being constructed by social actors, rather than being some objective fact 'out there', detached from the person or institution undertaking the research. We were interested in such a perspective for two reasons. Firstly, it recognises there are different ways of understanding and knowing the social world and that these are contingent on one's position in that world. This recognition seemed essential for research that was exploring the relationship between differently positioned actors. Secondly, constructivism takes into account the unequal relations of power that inform

[2] While this approach is more familiar in relations between development NGOs and community based organisations (see for example www.cdra.org.za) our initiative appears to be very innovative in terms of exploring government to government aid relations.

social relations and privileges the knowledge of the more powerful. We had identified the power dimensions of donor-recipient relations as a key aspect of the research.

Constructivism is still unusual in development research. More common is a rational positivist epistemology. This conceives the task of scientific research as the design and implementation of rigorous methods that can discover objective data - 'findings'. Development aid has operated explicitly and implicitly in a modernist framework and looks to research grounded in a positivist epistemology to provide the evidence for a more rapid, efficient and effective achievement of development goals. From that perspective, good research is understood as one that produces knowledge unaffected by who decides on, finances or carries out the research.

At the other end of the epistemological spectrum are post-modernist subjectivists who reject any notion of objectivity and the concept of a "fact". They believe that positivist epistemology is irretrievably flawed. All knowledge is tentative rather than final, uncertain rather than definite and value-laden rather than value free. Knowledge reflects the conditions of its construction and, simultaneously, the understanding gained from this knowledge reverberates back into and helps shape the circumstances that are producing it (Scholte 1993). As knowledge is entirely dependent, or contingent, on who constructs it, so it becomes an instrument of potential power in the hands of the constructor. Thus, goes the argument, knowledge only brings benefit to those who construct it - not to others. For example if donors are uniquely responsible for the construction of knowledge concerning the causes, characteristics and consequences of poverty, such knowledge will only reinforce the existing unequal power relations between donors and recipients. Deconstructionist development discourse analysis (Gaspar and Apthorpe 1996, Crush 1995) are examples of post-modernist epistemology applied to the world of development policy and practice.

The epistemological approach of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* placed itself somewhere in the middle of these two extremes of unquestioned positivism and post-modernism. Like postmodernists, we saw knowledge as uncertain and contingent but we were still committed to the modernist agenda of progress and believed that knowledge could be an instrument to that end. We took the view that "rational" knowledge can indeed result from socially constructed beginnings, provided a much wider range of actors are involved in its construction. *The challenge was to broaden the group of people who construct the knowledge as well as the process by which the knowledge was constructed.*. We had identified the co-operative inquiry methodology as the most appropriate research method to do this, as discussed in a later section of this paper. By inviting others (in this case members of staff from donor and recipient organisations in development co-operation) to construct the knowledge we were also hoping to suggest to them that they might wish to reflect more broadly on the nature of power and knowledge in relation to policy and practice for poverty reduction.

We were therefore situating ourselves among a growing body of social scientists who variously describe themselves as reflexive rationalists, critical theorists or deliberative

democrats (Alvesson& Deetz 1989, Bell 2002, House and Howe 1999). In development studies the recent work of the IDS Participation Group 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 reject it outright (Brock and McGee 2002; Brock, Cornwall and Gaventa 2001). Here discourse analysis is used, not just to deconstruct, but to illuminate problems as a step towards solving them.

Once the project had started, we found that there were new discoveries to make concerning the extent to which we shared a common epistemological understanding and we learnt how the inter-play of age, experience and positionality in the development world could make it very hard to develop and maintain a shared understanding. This challenge was compounded by the separation of distance and the problem of speaking different languages.

The relevance of agency?

One of the criticisms of our research proposal was that it assumed that a change in individual behaviour could have an impact at the organisational level and lead in turn to changes in the institution of development practice. Thus, as part of the wider debate concerning social actor and structuralist explanations of the development process, the question posed was whether individuals can make any difference. Our own position on this issue was less shaped by the social actor school of development studies (Long 1990) than by organisational learning theory (Senge 1999) that explores the relationship between day-to-day behaviour, regular practice and deep structure, as well as by complex adaptive systems theory. On the one hand, it is essential to understand the behavioural features of individual actors if one is to understand the whole system. On the other hand it is equally important to understand the wider context, the behaviour of the system as a whole, recognizing that it has its own dynamism (Groves and Hinton forthcoming).

In such a system the primary shapers are processes, discourses and relationships. Thus we could understand the world of development practice as a myriad of organisational, collective and individual actions and struggles for greater equity in human relations at global and local levels. In such a system social actors are no longer perceived as performing functionally defined 'roles' but are constantly negotiating questions of power, authority and the control of the definitions of reality. (Dirks et al. 1994:4-5). It is not because the research was concerned with the behaviour, values and attitudes of specific individuals - "thick" ethnography - that this would tell us nothing about donor-recipient relations as "institutional aggregates".

Comaroff and Comaroff (1992) define ethnography as the study of meaningful practice produced in the inter-play of subject and object, of the contingent and the contextual. Despite its origins in studying local communities, ethnography can also study those engaged in changes that affect global politics). Ethnography in this sense re-validates the importance of "being there" in a particular place and time. It validates individual

agency, which is the potential difference each person can make, even in the de-territorialized world of donor-recipient relations.

Social actors as researchers: the co-operative inquiry methodology

Our epistemological and theoretical perspective described above pointed us to an action research and learning method known as *co-operative inquiry*.(Heron & Reason 1981, Reason 2001) With this method inquirers are encouraged to work together in a group to integrate into their practice things that they previously "knew" but that they regarded as 'trivial' or marginal. This includes explicitly observing the minutiae of day to day practice that they tacitly know about but do not analyse. The transformational aim is that by making this knowledge explicit the actor has the chance of imagining the possibility of changing his or her behaviour.

The 'trivial' may have an enormously important impact on the quality of the relationships that structure the practice of development co-operation. Negotiations over 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 through cooperative inquiry would allow collective action to change what until then had not been noticed, regarded as trivial or in bad taste to remark on it. If a sufficient number of people are prepared to make statements that convention might judge as infelicitous then they may have the power to change the way their colleagues are prepared to understand the world. They can convert what Haugaard describes as an infelicitous utterance into a felicitous statement (1997: 163ff). We revert to Haugaard's discussion of ‘regimes of truth production’ in the penultimate section of this paper.

The co-operative inquiry research process aims to help the participants to understand their world, to make sense of it and to develop new and creative ways of looking at it. It also aims to help them learn how to act to change things they want to change and to find out how to do things better. Thus, co-operative inquiry is a form of action research, in which the participants analyse their experience and practice, experiment with changes to their practice and then evaluate the results. The idea is to support a spiralling process of analysis, change, and reflection. In co-operative inquiry the split between "researcher" and "subjects" is done away with. All those involved act together as "co-researchers" and as "co-subjects".

Co-operative inquiry has been largely used by small groups of practitioners working in a common profession such as social work, or in the health service. The only prior attempt we knew of to establish such groups among development practitioners had been that of Cornwall, Pratt and Scott Villiers working with two groups within Sida, one at the head office and one in the Nairobi office (forthcoming)

We decided that we would aim for one group to be volunteers from official bilateral aid organisations such as DfID, Sida and CIDA; the other group would be volunteers from

ministries and other public sector organisations and who were in regular contact with the staff from the bilateral aid agencies. The external researcher would work with both groups and over time, we imagined there might develop an interest among the volunteers for joint meetings.

In developing this proposal, we thought it essential that the external 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. At the same time, the researchers would need to have extensive prior experience with working with donors to relate with them easily.

Subjectivity: valuing and unpacking baggage

A challenge that we recognised from the start, but that became much more prominent as the year unfolded, related to our own positionality. How were to manage such a research process while being aware of how others saw us and of the impact we were having on those we were inviting to be involved? We knew that everyone involved in the research was bringing with them their own personal baggage as well as their institutional and societal affiliations. We were not looking for 'objectivity' but for recognition that we do all of us carry this baggage. A (male) observer of our research in Bolivia remarked that this could only have been a project conceived by women. This was because of our gender-related interest in relationships and our commitment to a friendship that would not only survive but would indeed grow much stronger as we explored through our own relationship the issues of power, money and knowledge as enacted by individuals in the global arena of international aid.

It was for this reason that we wished to design a research process that encouraged all the participants, including ourselves to develop our capacity to be reflexive. To collect our baggage, open it up and see what we could do with it. Chambers defines reflexivity as "self-critical epistemological awareness, entailing critical reflection on the part one plays, and one's relationships and interactions play, in the formation, framing and representation of knowledge"(Chambers 2002). From the perspective of praxis we would add to this to read....."the formation, framing and representation of knowledge and *action*".

Trying to be a reflexive practitioner is not easy and any one participating in a co-operative inquiry group is taking risks and may regret the endeavour as they listen and learn. We saw Guess Who's Coming to Dinner as a high risk project and considered collaborative preparation and mutual support as important for managing this risk. 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 taken for granted assumptions. This is why we chose a facetious title for our project. The choice of a dinner party as a metaphor for problematizing the social relations between donors and recipients almost by accident provided us with experiential case studies of dinners that we held for each other or to which others invited us. These were

dinners where we ourselves were both actors and observers in the drama of power and knowledge that inform the donor-recipient relationship. One of us has turned to the medium of fiction to capture the emotions experienced at these events.

The significance of emotions in donor-recipient relations was one of the reasons why were attracted to the theory of the gift as a conceptual framework for describing the complex relations that we wished to explore through participatory action research. (Annexe 4) In that exploration we also learnt more about our own emotions and the personal challenge we felt in listening to people telling us unpleasant truths about each other and, by extension, ourselves.

2. PUTTING THE PLAN INTO PRACTICE

Preparations

In February 2003 the five members of the research team met in a workshop at IDS to plan the programme for the coming nine months or so. We were faced with the problem that, unlike classic co-operative inquiry, the idea for the research was initially ours, rather than of anyone in the donor or recipient communities in the countries concerned. Thus, we recognised the importance of finding champions who would take the lead in encouraging others to become interested in the matter. Notes from that workshop indicate that we were rather confused as to the extent to which we saw such champions as recruiting agents or as key informants in the more traditional sense of ethnographic participant observation. Thus, one of the action points at the workshop was 'Try to get champions or others to use their diaries to give us an idea of who they are seeing, how often and in what capacity; use this to build a list of recipients, and to triangulate, to check who is meeting whom from both sides'.

Because we were seeing this phase of the project as preparation for a longer implementation phase we had thought it essential to undertake some prior more conventional research about donor-recipient relations in each of the three countries as well as setting up the co-operative inquiry groups. We considered we needed to do this to establish our legitimacy as bona fide researchers both with the communities we were studying and with potential funding organizations to which we would be submitting our proposal for the main phase.

The three country-based researchers thus returned home with a detailed checklist of points that were collectively generated at the workshop. They were largely geared to the use of qualitative and quantitative methods for besearching donoRs and recipients as subjects. It is the findings from *that* research that are presented in the main part of the final report (pp 3-6). Methods used for the country studies summarised in that report included reviews of locally available literature, focus groups and workshops, and one to one interviews, combined with some participant observation.

In-country experience

Reactions to the proposed methodology

During interviews and conversations with staff from various development agencies, government departments and other parts of the community of development practice, it became apparent that people were uncomfortable with the research for two reasons. Firstly, we were proposing to inquire into unexamined aspects of donor - recipient relations about which people would generally prefer not to think. They feared might lead to having to look at really difficult issues such as how much money they earned and the extent to which racial prejudice informed their relations. Secondly, it proposed using an unorthodox methodology that contradicted the conventional meaning of 'objective research'.

In the three countries concerned, we started to make contact with people we already knew or with those whose names had been given to us by their colleagues. In all cases it seemed easier to present oneself as a classic researcher as a warming up to introducing the idea of co-operative inquiry. We 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. Both in Bangladesh and Bolivia we identified three or four individuals who became extremely interested in the subject and fully engaged in the challenge of the non-conventional research methodology but in all cases these were people who themselves had research backgrounds in the social sciences.

In the majority of cases, however, we found some discomfort among our interlocutors when we raised the idea of them researching themselves. They told us they were happier with a more conventional research method that assumes the power of inquiry to be with the researcher who defines the research problem, designs research instruments and applies these to the objects of the research. They suggested that we draft questionnaires for them to answer. Their discomfort affected us. It seemed as if we had discarded the status of 'expert' and our new role of facilitative researcher was not one that seemed to interest many people. Shedding the status of 'expert' was particularly problematic in our encounters with staff from donor agencies who queried our legitimacy to be taking an interest in their social lives

It seemed that most people found very challenging being the subjects of their own research, rather than the objects of someone else's research. Even in the latter case, they were worried about our potentially threatening presence as an "observer". In Bolivia, it was difficult to gain access to the social functions where donors and recipients met to do business. Our transparency about our research interest may have created nervousness about being observed and resulted in doors being closed to us. We realised that many would have felt much happier with the research if it allowed them to distance themselves completely and not have to enquire into themselves. They would have felt more at ease with simply being asked to have to complete "more objective"

questionnaires, rather than encouraging our participant observation as an exemplar for their own, reflexive participant observation of their behaviour.

We concluded that 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 recipient.

A further discovery was that it was only those with a professional background in social research who were entering into the spirit of our proposal. This helped explain the decision made by Bernard Dabire in July 2003 to withdraw from the project with his suggestion that a professional sociologist replace him. We had considered that participation and facilitation skills would be the essential qualification among the research team, but it appeared that a knowledge of and interest in the epistemological challenge was equally required. Moreover, even in this matter we began to learn about the differences between us in appreciating that challenge. How, for example, could we enrich our thinking by sharing the experience of one of us of twenty years of engagement with the thinking of indigenous forest people in lowland Bolivia for whom, as in co-operative inquiry, 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 based more on developing theory and then testing this out in practice.

We learnt that some of us were less than convinced by the proposed fusion of the researcher and the researched mainly because its means relinquishing power over the direction of the research and over the interpretation of its findings. Whereas this would not matter when the researcher was relatively more powerful than the researched, it was less attractive when the power laid with the research subjects.[3] We also felt unsure of ourselves in proposing a methodology to others in which we ourselves had had no prior experience other than Cornwall in her work with Sida. This challenge of working with such an innovative approach was compounded by our having to work in several languages and at long distance from each other. Finally, we discovered that an inquiry into the social relationships of powerful actors in our own country put us at risk of losing our professional standing in the community; this was significant when each of us in our own country very dependent on the respect of this community for our own future careers.

Identifying the groups

For reasons discussed in the main report, the work of identifying potential co-operative inquiry groups proceeded only in Bangladesh and Bolivia.

[3] See David's comments that when asked whose side are we on academics might be more bold and suggest 'we are on our own side' (2002)

In Bangladesh the researcher's access to government staff was difficult and the focus was shifted to the large NGOs that have received significant international aid funds. Overall, among the 'recipients' there was little interest in forming such a group to reflect and learn about their relations with international donors. [4] There was considerable scepticism about the potential for improving working relations. International agencies spoke of partnership but in fact, they established the agenda for as long as the NGOs remained financially dependent upon them. It was tiring to be making constantly the effort to establish good working relations with international staff. While it took a long time for newcomers to learn about the context of their work in Bangladesh at the same time they stayed for only a brief period and it was necessary to be constantly repeating the same information to new in-coming donor staff.

Overall it appeared that NGO staff found the subject reasonably interesting (sufficiently so to give up half a day of their time to attend a workshop) but not sufficiently compelling to wish to form a long term inquiry group. Staff from bilateral aid agencies revealed much more enthusiasm for our theme. They also revealed much more self doubt and anxiety about their role. They were looking for a means to explore this in a more structured way than was through the usual chats at social events or on the margins of meetings.

In *Bolivia* the situation was rather different. Perhaps because the country is so much more aid dependent, staff interviewed in those Government departments that worked closely with the international aid community were very interested in the topic. As in the Bangladeshi NGO community, they thought they had a problematic relationship with donors but they also considered it worth their time to research and reflect on this. 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. In the end, because of the social upheaval in October 2003, it proved impossible to organise with them a formal workshop to explore how to take this forward. On the other hand, informal meetings and discussions have continued and the interest in the research theme remains high.

Staff in bilateral development agencies in Bolivia appeared to be less conscious than their counterparts in Bangladesh that their behaviour might be problematic and the majority were not interested in further self-reflection. On the other hand, they were more prepared to encourage us to pursue our researches in a more conventional manner with themselves as the objects of the research to whom we could administer questionnaires. Here also however a small informal group has established itself and intends to continue to meet with the researcher.

[4] More interest was expressed in examining their own role as donors to smaller NGOs to whom they transmitted funds received from international aid.

3. WHAT HAVE WE LEARNT?

El proyecto seria manejado desde el sur y desde allí se contrataría al norte, pretendía cambiar el sistema de relaciones para cambiar las estructuras de las relaciones Donante -receptor. Pretendía una metodología participativa y de carácter transformativo, quería trabajar con tres países para entender mejor como el desarrollo y la relaciones Donante -recipiente tejían las relaciones globales de poder como se desarrollaban a nivel local a través de los equipajes de los donantes que como trashumantes del desarrollo acarrean experiencias y relaciones de aquí y allá.... Queríamos muchas cosas a la vez, eso nos permitiría entender múltiples dimensiones del proceso y así fue.[5]

The viability of the methodology

Reflecting on our experience

In Bangladesh a smaller group from those attending the August workshop has apparently decided to proceed with co-operative inquiry. They are taking this forward without asking for any further support from us. Our two members of the research team based respectively in Bangladesh and Bolivia have themselves concluded that while their initial findings has proved the significance of the research team, they are not convinced that they could engage on a long term basis of a year or more in providing structured facilitation and support to inquiry groups in their own country. They have judged that their own social embedd-ness in that country would put them in an impossible position if they were to play such a role. The effort in trying to set up such groups has resulted in a self scrutiny of their own role and perceptions as actors in the aid relationship.

For Hossain there is a strong and declared partiality with the recipients of aid. While she has sympathy with the younger members of staff from donor agencies who are recognising 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 critically reflect on her past both when as manager of an international aid project she was in the position of a 'donor' and as a consultant she learnt and experienced the

[5] León in a note to 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 would change the structures of donor-recipient relations. We would attempt a participatory methodology with a transformational objective. We desired to work in three 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. '

tensions of being a 'recipient.' The research also gave her the opportunity to appreciate better 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 research allowed her to develop an 'epistemic' distance so that her critique of the relations of elitism and power 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 and the originators of the initial idea. However, the different global positionality of the two co-researchers during the project implementation created a certain tension in the intellectual relationship, 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 in which '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.

> 'We cannot overlook the type of intellectual accumulation that has occurred in the North with its technical superiority... such Northern vision and knowledge can be more useful and pertinent to the South if they become horizontal and symmetric with enough respect for what we in the South have learned and discovered with participatory action research and other schools, and with the concourse of common peoples'. (Fals-Borda & Mora-Osejo 2003: 36).[6]

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. It may be that co-operative inquiry is essentially a process initiated and conducted by a self-selecting professional group. The impetus for change and learning may be internal to that group and is not for wider disclosure or dissemination. During

[6] Of course it was not just a simple North-South issue, although we experienced it as such. Some of the resistance we encountered to the proposed research methodology came from the mainstream intellectual elite, for example in Bolivia where there runs a deep tension between the 'rational Enlightenment world view and that of indigenous communities. (Eyben and Lovett 2004)

the same period, Eyben was engaged in a parallel piece of work with staff in some of DFID's country offices in Asia using some initial research findings to start a series of reflective workshops on how DFID staff relate with recipient organisations. While the opportunity for reflection and action was much appreciated by the staff concerned, there was much less enthusiasm for publishing the results and she was criticised for being unfair to an organisation for which she had worked for many years. This leads to the question as to whether a project can be called 'research' (and receive research funds) if we conclude by recognising that the findings must not go beyond those who participated in a process of reflexive learning. How then can 'researchers' engage in this if their own professional status depends on publishing 'their' work?

Co-operative inquiry in development practice?

Our initial design had been based on the experience, at that time still underway, of Cornwall with a co-operative inquiry group in Stockholm. In this case, she and Scott-Villiers were working with a strong and committed internal champion. It was that champion, rather than the outsiders, who was the driving force that resulted in the establishment of the group. The theme of the group was also less self-evidently sensitive. At first glance, the topic 'participation' demanded less self-examination and the two outsiders, Cornwall and Scott Villiers, were seen as 'experts' on that topic rather than as co-operative inquiry facilitators. The group formally met eight times at on average six weekly intervals and much of their time together could as well be described as the work of any informal network within a large organisation that decides to explore how to take forward a theme that they agree is of importance to them and their work. (Cornwall et al. forthcoming) It does not appear to have evolved into a regular and structured cycle of action and reflection, perhaps because the theme itself did not provide for such an opportunity because the group members were at head office with little day to day opportunity to explore the meaning of participation in interaction with staff from recipient organisations?

The parameters for action research into development co-operation

Based on what we have learnt, we are uncertain concerning the feasibility of pursuing our initial idea of developing a fully costed large proposal for collaborative, centrally managed action research in three countries. Our uncertainty relates to the very high transaction costs of managing such a process. Do these outweigh the benefits of undertaking simultaneously comparative research in three continents when we add to this the challenge of achieving simultaneous access by national researchers to both national recipient and expatriate donor communities? From our experience from this preparatory project, we also have doubts as to whether we ourselves and our possible participant/co-researchers are sufficiently motivated to pursue this particular route. On the other hand, the possibility of comparing different subjective and self-examined experience of donor-recipient relations between one country and another remains for us a valid and important theme of research. What are the options for taking this forward?

Action research as defined by Reason and Bradbury is:

> A participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview which we believe is emerging at this historical moment. It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern (2001:1).

Much action research in the public and private sector has been conducted to achieve goals of organisational efficiency and effectiveness, and as such would be a worthwhile pursuit for international development agencies. Was this our goal? The Guess Who's Coming to Dinner research team did not sufficiently explore the extent to which we were instrumental and operational in our aims ('mending the relationship') or, alternatively saw our work as transformational.[7]

Brydon-Miller et al. are proposing a type of participatory action research that *is* transformational in its aims. They are concerned with social change, challenging the claims of a positivistic view of knowledge: 'We commit ourselves to a form of research which challenges unjust and democratic economic, social and political system and practices' (2003 11). Participants in this kind of research have tended to be from marginalised and powerless sections of the community. León's own research background of working with indigenous communities in Bolivia is from this tradition. It is not easy to envisage starting this kind of transformational participatory action research with relatively powerful staff in donor and recipient organisations. The starting point might be the sense of powerlessness that such staff experience despite their high status and income. From our research in this project and in Eyben's parallel work on Relationships Matter it became apparent that such staff *do* feel disempowered.(Eyben, forthcoming).

We need to learn more about how to undertake participatory action research with people that feel relatively powerless in hierarchical organisations. Such research also differs from the more conventional action research with marginalised groups because in this other case the researcher is less powerful than the practitioner. Power is often associated with access to and control of funding (Brown et al 2003) and as researchers we find ourselves dependent on the practitioners for funding our joint work. This became painfully apparent when we began to explore funding possibilities for the second phase, thinking it useful if country offices of donor agencies were to agree to fund it to give them a greater sense of ownership and thus more likely to take more seriously the research findings. We now believe we should look for funding from a source not directly connected with any donor agency.

Wenger and others have developed the idea of 'communities of practice' that like our approach to simultaneous co-operative inquiry by donor and recipient groups is

[7] From a systems perspective this would imply seeing its potential to lead from small, every day shifts born of greater awareness and reflexivity to systemic and cumulative effects in changing the balance of power in international aid. We are grateful to Jethro Pettit for this comment.

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, p.109). Brokers need to be able to manage their ambivalent position operating across practice boundaries in order to translate and align differing perspectives. They also need sufficient legitimacy to carry influence as well as to address conflict effectively. Hossain, León and Eyben were all in that ambivalent position because of their personal histories, their ethnicity, gender and their professional background and occupation. However, none of us found it easy to manage the ambivalence. At different stages in the research we found our legitimacy was challenged. In any future initiative, we need to invest more time in preparing for and learning how to manage that brokerage role.

Another ambiguity for the researchers to manage is that of how they see themselves as both academic researchers and as facilitators supporting organisational change. In coping with that ambiguity, they must particularly consider the cost of agreeing not to disseminate the research findings. Action research with powerful organisations as distinct from marginalised communities is likely to find publication much more problematic. There are many marginalised communities in the world and it is not too difficult to respect privacy by inventing pseudonyms for places and people. It is difficult to disguise the World Bank, BRAC, and the Bolivian Ministry of Finance or DfID without loss of description of some of the organisation's key characteristics. Thick ethnography becomes very thin.

While the promise not to publish may make powerful organisations more prepared to let their staff engage in participatory action research, the cost is very high. It could be argued that one of the constraints to organisational change is the secrecy in which powerful organisations enshroud themselves. With respect to the practice of development organisations, a common complaint of citizens in the South is their inaccessibility and lack of transparency. How could we justify research that not would not only fail to contribute to the democratisation of knowledge but, just because the findings were not made public, might not even achieve its desired aim of organisational change?

One of the principles of transformative action research to which we subscribe is to construct and share knowledge to change the world in favour of greater social justice. Drawing on Foucault and others Haugaard 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' (1997:172) so that an infelicitous utterance about donor-recipient relations is turned into a statement is recognised as true. Hence the significance of publishing. How are we to manage this predicament both in practical and in ethical terms?

There is clearly no magic bullet solution to taking forward what we believe more than ever to be a research agenda of fundamental importance to development practice. The issue of donor-recipient relations would appear to fall into the fourth category of framing of what Brown et al describe as practice-research engagement, that of 'long-term domain development'. The characteristics of this type of engagement are, they propose, a long term co-enquiry to build perspectives, theory and practice with in-depth analysis and the production of new frameworks for intractable problems resulting in fundamental changes in theory or practice. In our case the fundamental change would be in the practice of the aid relationship but we need to be aware of the warning that, because of the long-term relationship one of the risks with this approach is possible cooptation of either researchers or practitioners (Brown 2003:95). When the practitioners are from a powerful organisation, we would consider that the risk of co-optation to the researcher is very high indeed. Furthermore, this may be particularly the case for development research where the Academy is heavily dependent on those very organisations that the action researcher is seeking to change. In such circumstances, it would appear too risky, in terms of the likelihood of co-option, to adopt Brown's detailed, long-term strategy. Instead we propose taking a more messy and opportunistic approach while constantly bearing in mind the issues and challenges we have discussed in this section. Even a more ad hoc approach still requires funding and poses ethical challenges concerning the extent to which we are transparent about our transformative agenda.

4. FUTURE PLANS

The experience gained in this project has established the methodological foundation for a continuing reflexive partnership between the two lead co-researchers to deepen their investigations. They will undertake various associated activities through a looser network relationship in which each takes advantage of her global positionality. The following actions have already been identified:

- *Continuing the research theme in Bolivia* León is working informally with several interested members from among both donor and recipient organisations and is seeking funding from a donor locally for running more formal workshops and other encounters, using a range of methods as appropriate. At the same time she will institutionalise the theme in her own institute, CERES where three colleagues have already expressed their interest in prioritising this as a research theme for the institute. She will continue to maintain and develop an information resource on the issue and place this at the disposal of other interested researchers, as is already the case with a doctoral research student from the London School of Economics.

- *The enlistment of interest in the subject among autonomous research networks in the South*; Léon is pursuing the possibility of this with CLACSO with the eventuality of starting action research in other Latin American aid dependent countries. In addition she is exploring the possibility of seeking CLACSO support for sub-regional academic networks to research into the differences between aid

dependent and non aid-dependent countries in terms of North South power relations as they are played out in encounters at the local level.

- The IDS programme *Participation, Power and Change (*PPC) has already included the theme of donor-recipient relations as an important element of its work on development actors and this programme will be the means by which CERES and IDS will maintain the research partnership. This may include involving IDS in the work León is developing through her membership of CLACSO.

- In addition to the direct link with CERES, through the PPC Eyben intends to convene an electronic forum in which staff from donor and recipient agencies will be invited for a discrete period to debate some of the key issues arising from our findings in the two national reports concerning donor-recipient relations.

- Finally, as an outcome of this experience, Eyben and Cornwall are currently exploring the possibility of organising a conference in 2005 on the subject of action research methods and ethics in relation to development practice to which they hope to invite researchers and funding organisations.

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