

**Working Paper 143**

**Power, knowledge and political spaces in the framing of  
poverty policy**

**Karen Brock, Andrea Cornwall and John Gaventa**

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INSTITUTE OF DEVELOPMENT STUDIES  
Brighton, Sussex BN1 9RE  
UK



## Summary

This paper explores the dynamics of the making and shaping of poverty policy. It takes as its starting point a critique of linear versions of policy-making, highlighting the complex interplay of power, knowledge and agency in poverty policy processes. We argue in *Section One* that the policy process involves a complex configuration of interests between a range of differently positioned actors, whose agency matters, but whose interactions are shaped by power relations. Making sense of contemporary poverty policy requires a closer exploration of the dynamics within and beyond the arenas in which policies are made and shaped. It also requires an understanding of how particular ways of thinking about poverty have gained ascendancy, coming to determine the frame through which poverty is defined, measured and tackled. To do so calls for an historical perspective, one that situates contemporary poverty policy with regard to antecedent visions and versions. *Section Two* of this paper thus provides an overview of differing narratives on the causes of and solutions to poverty, especially as they have emerged in dominant development discourses. Making sense of participation in the policy process requires that we identify and explore ‘policy spaces’ in which alternative versions of poverty may be expressed by a variety of voices, and the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion that surround them. In *Section Three* of this paper, we examine two broad kinds of policy spaces – those that are found in invited forums of participation created ‘from above’ by powerful institutions and actors, and those more autonomous spaces created ‘from below’ through more independent forms of social action on poverty related issues. By examining how different narratives of poverty and different actors interact in such spaces – as well as how they may be excluded from them – we can better understand the ways in which power and knowledge frame the policy process.



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## Introduction

Current approaches to poverty reduction emphasise institutional processes and the involvement of a broad range of actors in the policy process. They reflect a shift of emphasis in development cooperation, away from delivery through ‘project’ type instruments, towards a focus on policies and programmes, and on improving their effectiveness through greater consultation and ownership with a broad range of stakeholders. These shifts imply the need to better understand the political, bureaucratic and social processes by which policy becomes – or fails to become – favourable to poor people.

This paper explores the dynamics of the making and shaping of poverty policy. It takes as its starting point a critique of linear versions of policy-making, highlighting the complex interplay of power, knowledge and agency in poverty policy processes. Policy, we suggest in *Section One*, is not shaped simply on the basis of ‘good’ research or information, nor does it emerge simply from bargaining amongst actors on clearly defined options and choices. Rather, it is a more complex process through which particular versions of poverty come to frame what counts as knowledge and whose voices count in policy deliberations in particular political and institutional contexts. Making sense of participation in poverty policy processes, then, requires an analysis of the ways in which power and knowledge define spaces for engagement, privileging certain voices and versions and excluding others. It also requires an understanding of how particular ways of thinking about poverty have gained ascendancy, coming to determine the frame through which poverty is defined, measured and tackled.

To do so calls for an historical perspective, one that situates contemporary poverty policy with regard to antecedent visions and versions. *Section Two* of this paper explores the emergence within dominant development discourse of particular ways of thinking about the causes of and solutions to poverty. It traces and situates shifting narratives on poverty, from the growth discourse, to poverty reduction using a basic needs approach, to the neo-liberal approaches reflected in Structural Adjustment Programmes and Social Funds, to Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers, which place poverty reduction at the centre stage of policy frameworks.

Contemporary discourses on poverty, perhaps best reflected in the *World Development Report 2000/1*, increasingly emphasise the role of ‘empowerment’ and of ‘participation’ of ‘communities’ or of ‘poor people’ in the poverty reduction process. Making sense of participation in the policy process requires a closer exploration of some of the new ‘policy spaces’ that have opened up in recent years, the versions of poverty articulated within them and the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion that surround them. In *Section Three* of this paper, drawing on empirical examples from Uganda and Nigeria, we examine how conventional understandings of poverty policy processes need to expand to include other policy arenas. These include not only those that are found in invited forums of participation created ‘from above’ by powerful institutions and actors, but those more autonomous spaces created ‘from below’ through more independent forms of social action on poverty related issues. By examining how different narratives of

poverty and different actors interact in such spaces – as well as how they may be excluded from them – we can better understand the ways in which power and knowledge frame the policy process.<sup>1</sup>

## Part One

### Changing the frame: repositioning ‘policy’

As a first step to developing an understanding of the dynamics of participation in poverty policy processes, it is important to consider how ‘policy making’ has been conceived, and what entry points there might be for citizen involvement in setting policy priorities. Policy-making is often seen as consisting of a series of steps that flow in a logical sequence: from identification to formulation to implementation to evaluation. It has become evident, however, that this linear model fails to capture the more complex and contested realities of policy-making in practice (see, for example, Clay and Schaffer 1984; Hajer 1995; Keeley and Scoones<sup>2</sup> 1999).

A significant feature of the linear model is a focus on agenda setting, and on policies as statements that are based on determinate decisions taken by policy-makers. Yet, as Barker points out, ‘policy is never made once and for all. A policy may change in the process of implementation; the intended outputs and outcomes may not at all be those which result, and those who were intended to benefit ... are not always those who do benefit’ (1996: 27). Lipsky’s (1980) work on ‘street level bureaucrats’ demonstrates the extent to which the discretion of those who implement policies impinges on the form they take in practice. Indeed, as Houtzager’s (1999) research demonstrates, ‘policy change’ may in itself arise, and be driven, from ‘below’ rather than through decisions made ‘from above’.

Fluid and malleable, rather than fixed and static, policies may exist in the absence of any explicit decision-making process. As Weiss (1986) observes, decision-making is cast within the linear model as the ‘bounded, purposive, calculated and sequential events which the actors perceive to have significant consequences’ (1986: 221). But, as she points out, it is rare to be able identify a clear-cut group of decision-makers or a particular event that can be pinpointed as the moment when the decision was made. Indeed, she argues, people may not perceive themselves as making policy: ‘over time, the congeries of small acts can set the direction, and the limits, of government policy. Only in retrospect do people become aware that policy was made’ (Weiss 1986: 222). Rather than a decisive move towards a new agenda, then, policy-making frequently involves marginal adjustments to existing options or simply ‘muddling through’ (Lindblom 1959). Indeed, Clay and Shaffer (1984) go so far as to suggest that policy-making lacks not only

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<sup>1</sup> This paper seeks to sketch out a broad conceptual terrain on which empirical research will be built. Fieldwork will focus more closely on the dynamics of knowledge, power and agency in the shaping of spaces for stakeholder engagement in poverty policy in two countries, Nigeria and Uganda. This paper is also a companion to *IDS Working Paper 133* (McGee and Brock 2001) which explores further how approaches to poverty measurement and assessment interact with the policy process. We would like to thank Robert Chambers and Rosemary McGee for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper, and Sade Taiwo and Rosemary Okech Adong for their contributions to discussions throughout the drafting process.

<sup>2</sup> Keeley and Scoones (1999) provide a comprehensive and insightful review of the substantial literature on the policy process, which this discussion draws on but does not seek to replicate.



linearity, but any sense of rational, programmatic action: rather, they contend, ‘the whole life of policy is a chaos of purposes and accidents’ (cited in Keeley and Scoones 1999: 33).

Gordon *et al.* suggest that the linear model is ‘a normative model and a “dignified” myth which is often shared by policy-makers themselves’ (1993: 8, cited in Shore and Wright 1997). As a normative representation of how things *ought* to be, a rational, technical view of the policy process works to mask the management of uncertainty and the politics of interactions between different agents, positions and interests in the shaping of policy in practice. Shifting the focus away from ‘policy makers’ to a much broader constellation of actors who engage in various ways with the process of making and shaping policy brings these dynamics into clearer view.

### **1.1 Makers and shapers: putting actors into the picture**

A major strand within writing on the policy process highlights the relational dimensions of policy making, focusing on processes of negotiation and contestation and on networks, alliances and coalitions through which policies are shaped – from ‘policy networks’ to ‘epistemic communities’ (see, for example, Haas 1992; Smith 1993). Differences between policy theorists’ perspectives aside (see Keeley and Scoones 1999), an approach to policy processes that puts actors into the picture has much to offer in making sense of poverty policy processes. Such an approach would help to highlight the importance of taking account of the networks through which certain versions of poverty gain credibility and legitimacy, and the ‘policy entrepreneurs’ (Kingdon 1984) who are able to open up spaces and create constituencies for particular courses of action.

Exploring the strategies and tactics particular kinds of actors draw on to attempt to shape the direction of policy can offer insights that further undermine the linear policy narrative and the causal assumption embedded within it that alternative avenues for implementation only emerge *after* a new policy agenda has been set. As Keeley and Scoones’ (2000) work shows, closer attention to the dynamics involved would suggest that policy change emerges from the successful strategising of networks of actors who articulate and extend exposure to alternatives. As such, they suggest, processes of enlistment to an alternative set of practices or propositions make and shape a dynamic and malleable policy agenda, rather than simply responding or reacting to it. Negotiating enlistment and capturing areas of consensus may take a more incrementalist form, rather than offering a radical break with existing conceptions and practices. This would seem to favour the position taken by pluralist theorists such as Hogwood, who suggests that ‘there are less and less areas where new issues can arise and so policy succession, rather than a radical change in the agenda, is the more likely outcome’ (1987: 35).

Colebatch suggests that, ‘a great deal of policy activity is concerned with creating and maintaining order among the diversity of participants in the policy process. It seems to be not so much about deciding, but more about negotiating ... for a common ground’ (1998: 23). Such attempts to maintain order, Colebatch observes, do not take place simply around negotiations for a common position. They also extend to attempts made by lower level workers to create some order for themselves in their jobs, to gain stability and predictability within a situation of flux. This emphasis on negotiation and bargaining, and on

the agency of ‘street level bureaucrats’, brings a perspective to the policy process that further disrupts the mechanistic model of a linear sequence.

The sheer complexity of the webs of actors engaged in policy processes, whose connections and interactions weave across and within the artificial divide between ‘citizens’ and ‘the state’, make the process of understanding the nature of policy change so much more complicated. Different actors within ‘the state’ as within ‘civil society’ may take up a range of subject positions and represent a constellation of competing interests. They may use their leverage to open or constrict spaces for the engagement of others, wage their own struggles within and draw on discourses and alliances across and beyond institutional boundaries to press for change. At once ‘citizens’ and part of ‘the state’, bureaucrats may have multiple, and competing, allegiances and identifications; they are also embedded in social, professional and political networks that span multiple sites and domains of discourse. The ‘inner life’ of bureaucracies is a rich terrain of contestation in which career aspirations, departmental loyalties, unwritten rules and external pressures, as well as different normative constructions of poverty, come into play.

Close attention to the alliances that particular actors may have with others in different kinds of organisations, which may serve to create ‘room for manoeuvre’ (Clay and Schaffer 1984) within as well as routes for influence and leverage beyond them, offers useful entry points for making sense of these complexities. Understanding how particular clusters of actors are able to bring about changes in approach or foster the emergence and take-up of alternative pathways can help to make sense of processes of inclusion and exclusion, of contestation and consensus, through which particular policy positionings are shaped. An exclusive focus on the intentional agency of actors involved in the policy process, however, would obscure not only the extent to which existing institutions condition the shaping of policy as practice. Importantly, it can also occlude ways in which particular versions of policy issues, and of ‘policy’ itself, bound the possibilities for agency.

## ***1.2 Naming and framing: policy and/as discourse***

Making sense of the interplay of knowledge and power in the policy process requires an approach that goes beyond an account of unimpeded, intentional agency – either in contests between actors in dictating the course of particular actions, or indeed in preventing others from engagement. It also requires an approach that can help both to account for how particular versions of poverty, and indeed of policy, are taken up and embedded and to locate the emergence and shaping of these versions in particular social and historical contexts. For this voluntarism is not enough; nor is a conception of power which is underpinned solely by contests between individuals. It is here that the analysis of policy as discourse and of policy discourses has much to offer.

As Gasper and Apthorpe point out, ‘discourse’ is understood and used in a range of different ways in the policy process literature (Gasper and Apthorpe 1996). We draw attention here to two approaches that have particular salience in making sense of poverty policy. One is derived from the analysis of texts and utterances and involves the deconstruction of terms and tropes used in the language of policy. As Apthorpe argues, ‘rival ways of naming and framing set policy agendas differently’ (1996: 24). Taking a

closer look at the terms and concepts and at the stylistic devices that are deployed in framing the objects and scope of poverty policy offers a productive entry point for understanding how particular versions of poverty come to gain hegemony.

Gasper and Apthorpe (1996) highlight the use of a range of such devices in ‘policy-speak’: good/bad binaries to mark out normative positions, metaphors and allusions, nouns rather than verbs, normative rather than descriptive terms or key words and slogans to parade and bolster ‘grand strategies’. Numbering and naming serve to bound and defend particular versions: as Apthorpe contends, ‘indicators are sought as vindicators, not just descriptors’ (1996: 26). From labels such as ‘the poor’ that are ‘overdeterminate and underdescriptive’ (Gasper and Apthorpe 1996: 7, drawing on Wood 1985), to polysemic words like ‘participation’ and ‘empowerment’, the terms and concepts that define the objects of contemporary poverty policy offer plenty of scope for multiple, competing, interpretations and meanings to emerge.

In one of the most significant applications of literary analysis to the language of policy, Roe (1991) likens the narrative structure of policies to that of the folktale, in which a crisis summons forth a hero, who battles against a series of obstacles, emerges triumphant, and everyone lives happily ever after. Meeting a need for simple, evocative, messages that despatch uncertainties and complexities, such ‘development narratives’, Roe argues, ‘tell scenarios no so much about what should happen as about what will happen – according to their tellers – if the events or positions are carried out as described’ (1991: 288).

Highlighting the style, form and language used in the construction of policy statements and in the interactions that shape policy processes, strategies such as deconstruction and narrative analysis can prove valuable in policy analysis. As Apthorpe argues, ‘all parties may or may not have similarly intended or understood the effects and outcomes of discursive structure on development planning. They may, indeed, not even have noticed them at all. What happens in such a case is then that, rather than policy capturing a developmental initiative or intervention, policy is made the captive of a discursive intervention’ (1996: 380). Set within the social and historical context in which ideas are generated and stories are created and told, discourse analysis can provide insights into how particular stories come to gain ascendancy and others fall by the wayside.

A second approach to the analysis of policy discourses has a wider purview. Many contributors to what has been termed the ‘argumentative turn’ in policy analysis draw attention to the ways in which particular concepts or story-lines ‘frame’ what and who is taken into consideration in and excluded from policy deliberation (see Fischer and Forster 1993; Hajer 1995; Rein and Schön 1993). An analysis of framing extends from semiotic or narrative analysis of policies themselves to the ways in which the role of different actors in the policy process are themselves framed by policy *as* discourse. It is here that approaches to ‘discourse’ informed by the work of Michel Foucault (1977; 1979) become particularly valuable in making sense of poverty policy.

Power, for Foucault, is immanent in all social relationships: its effects frame the boundaries for action through discursive processes of ‘subjectification’, through which particular subject positions are made available for individuals to take up. As power, discourses on poverty circumscribe the boundaries of

action for ‘the poor’ and for those who seek to intervene in their lives, by creating a category ‘the poor’ that is then rendered amenable to measurement and intervention. For Shore and Wright, analysing policy *as* discourse is perhaps most significant in drawing attention to the ways in which the political nature of policy-making is camouflaged by recourse to idioms of objectivity, neutrality and rationality. Drawing on Foucault’s notion of ‘political technologies’, they cite Dreyfus and Rabinow: ‘political technologies advance by taking what is essentially a political problem, removing it from the realm of political discourse, and recasting it in the neutral language of science’ (1982: 196). This has important implications for the ways in which information and knowledge come to be represented in the policy process. For, Shore and Wright argue

In one sense, the language of policy-making seems to endorse realism by presenting ‘problems’ as if they could be solved by filling knowledge gaps with new, objective data. But these gaps are not voids. They are crowded spaces already filled with moral values and preconceptions. They require prescriptive language which says what is *needed*, rather than descriptive accounts ‘telling it as it *is*’ (1997: 21).

In perhaps the most comprehensive articulation of a range of different approaches to policy, one that draws on Foucault’s conception of discourse and brings this to bear on an analysis of how policies are constructed and extended, Maarten Hajer contributes two key concepts: that of ‘story-lines’ and of ‘discourse coalitions’. ‘Story-lines’, Hajer argues, gain their discursive power from combining elements from different domains to provide actors with a series of symbolic references that suggest not only a common understanding, but one that ‘sounds right’. This, in turn, is influenced as much by the trust people have in the ‘story-teller’ as the persuasiveness of the story in itself, and the acceptability of the story for their own identities. ‘Story-lines’, then, not only cluster knowledge but position actors, proving ‘the essential discursive cement that creates communicative networks among actors with different or at best overlapping perceptions and understandings’ (1995: 61–3).

Hajer accounts for how particular ‘story-lines’ are taken up in policy through an analysis of ‘discourse coalitions’, through which previously independent practices are actively brought together and given meaning within a common political project. Through these coalitions, actors ‘not only try to make others see the problems according to their views, but also seek to position actors in a specific way’ (Hajer 1995: 53). Highlighting the productive and enabling aspects of ‘discourse’, Hajer paints a picture of competing discourses-in-the-shaping, and the political contests that take place around the framing and promotion of particular ‘story-lines’. In this sense, his account resonates with the actor-oriented perspective, but adds a further layer of depth to it by setting these actors within a broader discursive terrain, which both conditions and enables framings of particular policy issues.

The making and shaping of poverty policy, seen as a ‘political technology’, relies on versions of ‘expertise’ and institutional techniques that *create* – at the same time as they define – the category ‘the poor’. As such, poverty policy does not only make policy about poverty: it frames ‘the poor’ in such a way

as to condition the possibilities for their participation and the very nature of attempts to alleviate their condition. The analysis of discourses and framing devices used in policy deliberation highlights the ways in which particular versions come to gain legitimacy, and provides an important backdrop for making sense of the participation of ‘the poor’.

### **1.3 Negotiated spaces**

As the preceding discussion makes clear, the processes of policy making involve interactions between complex constellations of actors, who both use and are bounded by variant discourses of poverty policy.

Conceptualising policy arenas as ‘spaces’ – as in Grindle and Thomas’ (1991) influential work – focuses attention on these arenas as sites in which different poverty discourses and policy actors interact. It also highlights the ways in which these spaces are permeated with power relations and bounded by forms of discourse used within and about them, raising questions about who participates, with which views of poverty, and to what effect.

If policy-making is driven not entirely by intentional agency and clearly defined interests but remains an essentially indeterminate and unpredictable process of engagement in which outcomes are always contingent and uncertain, the management of indeterminacy cannot ever completely bound off the possibilities for alternatives to emerge. There may be moments where policy space opened up by other actors or events enables advocates of otherwise excluded alternatives to challenge pervasive orthodoxies, reframe the policy debate and reconfigure the relationships between actors. ‘Discourse coalitions’ within policy arenas and of *other* actors from outside existing policy networks and policy communities, may be instrumental in opening up these spaces – helping both to create new policy discourses and to gain entry into existing policy arenas. Yet, Smith (1993) argues, the alternatives that can emerge in these situations can simply be taken up by policy communities and used to construct superficial changes, and to prevent the entry into these spaces of new groups: as ‘damage limitation’ to existing policy agendas and communities.

Such moments, however, remain bounded by previous understandings and framings. Joffe’s (1997) work on AIDS policy offers useful insights into the ways in which, when faced with a new phenomenon – such as an entirely different way of looking at poverty – people draw on representations that they have of apparently similar phenomena. Using Moscovici’s (1984) notion of ‘anchoring’, Joffe suggests that the policy responses that ensue re- evoke cultural memories by assimilating the new within the terrain of the familiar. This process of ‘anchoring’ serves to manage the uncertainties associated with a potential breach of existing patterns of work and the familiarities of existing procedures. Through assimilation, elements of the new are rendered comfortable and unthreatening: they are brought, once again, under control.

This ‘anchoring’ process can, as Roe (1991) points out, be used productively in attempts to bring about a shift in policy. For, he suggests, what appeals to policy-makers is a good story: and existing stories have precisely an appeal that criticism without an alternative, and equally gripping, story line fails to offer. Harnessing existing policies to accommodate new variants – ‘anchoring’ the new in the allure of the old – can serve to realign or incrementally adjust previous versions, with much better prospects of purchase.

This has considerable significance for the analysis of the apparent consensus around the ‘new’ story lines emerging in international poverty policy circles. It is to this that we now turn.

## **Part Two**

### **Putting poverty reduction policy in context: an overview of development discourses**

The way the poverty is framed clearly has an important influence on the ways in which poverty reduction policies come to be shaped. Shifting narratives of the causes of and solutions to poverty both produce and drive policy processes, making available and circumscribing spaces in which different forms of poverty knowledge can be articulated and mobilised. Capturing stories that invite particular interventions and imbue them with authority, these narratives establish frames of reference that define and bound what forms of knowledge count, and whose versions, claims and interests are legitimate. Poverty policy narratives not only convey story lines of cause and consequence. They often have embedded within them the advocacy of particular policy instruments. As Nustad and Sending argue, policy documents have a very particular epistemology: ‘what appears as knowledge is structured by the aim to which it is directed’ (2000: 221). Constructed in a way that permits intervention, the promotion of particular technical approaches lends further persuasiveness to particular policy discourses. For in the coupling of appealing story lines to clear-cut instruments, uncertainties are definitely despatched: all that is required is to implement.

A closer look at the emergence of discourses on poverty reduction and development reveals a process of hybridisation, through which the versions of poverty that have captured mainstream attention at different points in time have selectively incorporated concepts generated by alternative development discourses. This process, whereby dominant narratives are constantly reshaped by their absorption of elements of counter-narratives, has given rise to the articulation of new variants that appear to offer a convergence of competing agendas, recasting elements of older approaches in an evocative new story-line that appears to have appeal across the board. Orthodox approaches have continued to propound a foundational narrative in which economic growth is the solution to development, reducing poverty through the trickle-down of the benefits of growth. The subsumption into this narrative of some of the key words associated with alternative development discourses – ‘bottom-up’, ‘people-centred’, ‘participatory’ – have served to qualify, but not dislodge, its foundation.

There are important ambiguities in how the appropriation of the generative themes of alternative development discourses might be viewed (Roe 1991). On the one hand, the process of incorporation by the mainstream might be regarded as a successful hegemonic strategy that defuses critique by appropriating its principal tenets. Yet on the other, it might be cast by critics of development orthodoxy as a success that opens up possibilities for action and change. Quite how the lexicon of alternative development, with its emphasis on ‘participatory’, ‘bottom-up’ and ‘people-centred’ processes, has been

interpreted and used within the mainstream, however, requires further attention. For as these terms have been redeployed within entirely different frames of reference, they have come to acquire new meanings.

In this section, we explore how the framing of poverty in mainstream development discourses has shifted in the post-war period. In doing so, we provide a simplified overview of major shifts in the discursive construction of poverty and the absorption of counter-narratives, as well as examining some of the policy instruments for poverty alleviation which have been associated with different stages in the evolution of discourses. Whilst retaining an awareness of the plurality of voices and stances, through a focus on how ‘poverty’ and ‘the poor’ are positioned within the mainstream, the section sheds light on some of the implicit ‘rules’ about what constitutes legitimate and useful knowledge in policy processes for poverty reduction. This in turn leads to an examination of the opportunities and constraints for influencing the construction of policy processes that are genuinely responsive to the needs and priorities of poor people.

## **2.1 The growth discourse: the creation of a development orthodoxy**

Poverty on a global scale was a discovery of the post-World War II period. [...] A completely utilitarian and functional conception of poverty emerged, linked inextricably to questions of labour and production.

(Escobar 1995: 23, 89)

Many of the foundations that continue to underpin poverty reduction policy were established in the forties and fifties, part of a discourse that linked material poverty to ‘underdevelopment’. Alongside aid programmes which were clearly motivated by the geopolitical considerations of the Cold War,<sup>3</sup> there was an increasing focus on ‘development’ as an underlying theme in the relationships between the newly independent nation-states of the South, the former colonial powers and the USA. The framing of development in terms of poverty finds roots in the socio-political challenges of ‘governing the poor’ in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe. Existing models of social policy – particularly the residual public assistance model of American liberalism – were also influential in shaping the discourse of underdevelopment (Hoebink 2000).

Early views of development conceptualised Southern countries as being at an early stage of a linear, universal path towards a modern society (Rostow 1969). The essential components for making progress along this path were the existence of a nation-state, and economic change (McMichael 1996). Poverty was defined within this narrative as a material and monetary phenomenon, resulting from underdevelopment; whole countries were ‘poor’. This definition contrasts starkly with the way that poverty was framed in the political discourse of the independence struggles of the South. Here, poverty was seen as the product of systematic denial of social and economic rights, rather than as the ‘problem’ of ‘poor’ countries

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<sup>3</sup> Hoebink (2000) notes that preventing the spread of Communism was a major driver of US and European aid to developing countries in the 1950s.

(Manji 2000). In subsequent academic discourse, the concept of poverty as denial of rights was extended to the idea that the ‘underdevelopment’ and exploitation of some was an inherent and essential part of the ‘development’ of others (Cardoso and Faletto 1979; Frank 1969).

The definition of poverty as a material phenomenon was underpinned by the assumption that living standards could be quantified by monetary measures (McMichael 1996); per capita income therefore became a key indicator of ‘wealth’ or ‘poverty.’ The conceptual roots of income-based measures of poverty are often traced to the work of Rowntree in England in the 1880s (Kanbur and Squire 1999; Hossain and Moore 1999). By 1948, the World Bank defined poor countries as those with a per capita income of less than \$100. Whilst this classification represented an attempt to define poverty in a way that allowed policy for its reduction to be made, it also led to the overnight framing of two thirds of the world’s population as ‘poor’. (Escobar 1995: 24) Such a construction of poverty relies on the positivist notion that poverty is measurable, and thus appears to establish the basic facts of global poverty. As Apthorpe argues, however, ‘basic’ is not an unarguable observation, but a consequence of discourse; a different discourse, with different argumentation, turns up different ‘basic’ facts (Apthorpe 1996).

Poverty came to be constructed as the essential, defining trait that separated ‘developed’ from ‘underdeveloped’ countries. Framing poverty as an economic problem allowed the solution – economic growth, facilitated by capital investment – to be presented as a self-evident truth, which underpinned the transfer of resources between countries in the form of development aid. It also fundamentally defined the solution to poverty in terms that were technical, and presented them as politically neutral.

The policies that resulted from this discourse prioritised the construction of physical infrastructure, which was conceptualised as the first step in a sequence of events which would eventually lead to the take-off of economic growth. Where investment in ‘social infrastructure’ occurred, it was usually in the form of hospitals and universities. During the fifties and sixties, 75 per cent of World Bank aid was concentrated on physical infrastructure, lack of which was conceived as the most important barrier to economic growth, and thus poverty reduction (Hoebink 2000).

Manji notes that as African infrastructure was being built with foreign aid, social problems which in the colonial struggle had been framed in terms of rights and justice were gradually re-framed: ‘The problem was no longer, it appeared, the denial of basic rights, but one of “poverty.” While one demanded action to prevent violations, the other inspired only pity and preoccupations about the technically “correct” approaches to poverty alleviation’ (Manji 2000: 13). Voipio emphasises political needs of non-poor elites in the South for ‘politically feasible strategies for maintaining the status quo, or at least for controlling the pace and direction of social change,’ and suggests that framing poverty as the problem allowed them to pursue this agenda (Voipio 2000: 186).

Science and technology were inseparable from modernisation in the rapidly evolving development orthodoxy, and the knowledge required to make development policy was constructed as information which would reveal the knowable truth of a particular situation. As the power of expertise and the transfer of technology came to underpin development policies, the knowledge of some groups of development



actors was defined as fundamentally more valid than the knowledge of others. As a result, the ‘subjects’ of development were frequently rendered invisible and mute in the pursuit of technically adequate solutions.

In this post-war model of development, poverty is an effect rather than a cause of underdevelopment, and is not therefore the direct focus of policy. Economic growth, facilitated by technical experts and national governments engaged in a donor-recipient relationship, is seen to result in poverty reduction, but modernisation is prioritised over poverty reduction as a policy outcome. Despite criticisms from many different perspectives, and the evolution of the discourse itself towards a periodical re-focus on poverty reduction, many of the assumptions underlying this orthodoxy remain pervasive in the practices and poverty reduction strategies of contemporary development finance institutions.

## ***2.2 Poverty reduction moves to the centre of the agenda***

Basic needs include certain minimum requirements of a family for private consumption, adequate food, shelter and clothing [...] Second, they include essential services provided by and for the community at large, such as safe drinking water, sanitation, public transport, health and education facilities. A basic-needs oriented policy implies the participation of the people in making the decisions which affect them through the organisations of their own choice.

(ILO 1977 cited in Oloko and Oloko 1987: 48)

By the 1970s, some development actors were beginning to define their development agendas more clearly in terms of poverty. This was in part a response to the growing realisation that the post-war development model had resulted in growth, but that this had not been widely translated into either ‘development’, or redistribution of the benefits of growth to the poor. A particularly important indicator of this shift towards poverty reduction is the agenda of the World Bank under the presidency of McNamara, which placed considerable emphasis on poverty alleviation as a key element of the Bank’s mission. This resulted in new areas increasingly becoming the focus of Bank lending: rural development for small farmers, urban infrastructure, and service provision in the health and education sectors.

Concurrent with this shift in World Bank focus, other development actors were arguing that an integrated approach to development was necessary. A United Nations report on Integrated Rural Development is an early example of such an approach. It argues that ‘the very nature of the process of rural development and the size of the problem of promoting economic and social progress in rural areas require that action be taken on several fronts simultaneously, and not independently of each other [...] the concept of the “integrated” approach [...] is a highly structural and systematic exercise in which all components in the system of development can be understood as important and appreciated for the part which they play individually and collectively’ (cited in Oloko and Oloko 1987: 38). Such approaches were influential in shaping policy instruments in the mid-1970s, in the form of Integrated Rural Development Programmes. They exemplified a narrative which envisaged a central role for the state and social infrastructure in the process of development, which was viewed from a systems perspective. This narrative

frames the poor as components in the system of development, rather than simply as ‘the problem’ which development seeks to ‘solve’.

Alongside policy instruments like IRDPs, project-based aid and lending became the most common means of operationalising policies derived from the revised agenda of poverty reduction. For the World Bank, project aid formed part of a broader relationship with the government of a borrower country, which included a policy dialogue aimed at achieving macroeconomic growth. Mosley, Harrigan and Toye note that ‘it is quite possible for project funding and an ineffective policy dialogue to coexist for a long time. The project mode provides a “safe” format of aid-giving when donors and recipients disagree about priorities and general economic policies’ (1991: 33). This description suggests that although poverty reduction, understood as the satisfaction of basic needs, may have been at the centre of the rhetorical agenda of donors, the dynamics of policy dialogue allowed Southern governments some space to shape policy implementation according to their political needs.

The evolution of the project, and its associated cycle, came to be an important component in the way that poor people and their knowledge were framed in development processes. The project cycle provided a space in which two important counter-narratives – basic needs and participatory development – were articulated and thus converged with mainstream approaches.

The 1970s saw the evolution of the ‘basic needs’ approach to development,<sup>4</sup> which suggested that the focus of aid should shift from investment in capital formation to the development of human resources. The analysis of development it put forward was one which suggested the integration of the social and the economic. It also suggested that ‘participation, by itself, is a basic need’ (ILO 1978: 2, cited in Cornwall 2001: 2). This perspective owed a great deal to political movements for self-determination in the South, which located participation as part of a wider process of radical social change, based on rights and equitable resource distribution; as such, it offered an alternative framing of ‘the poor’ – as political individuals with rights and agency (Cornwall 2001).

The project cycle allowed donors to absorb some of the language of the basic needs agenda, whilst investing the notion of participation with a different meaning. From the mid-1970s, there was increasingly strong evidence to suggest that projects were more likely to succeed if their beneficiaries were directly involved at different stages of the project cycle; thus a narrative emerged which equated participation with efficiency. In this narrative, ‘the poor’ are framed as ‘beneficiaries.’ As such, in stark contrast to their framing as citizens with political agency, rights and a basic need to participate, the agency of ‘the poor’ is confined by the boundaries of the project itself, while knowledge and expertise effectively remain under the control of experts and development professionals.

The economic backdrop to the evolving agenda of poverty reduction in the 1970s was provided by the oil crises of 1973 and 1979, the slowing of economic growth, and the availability of ‘cheap’ development loans to the South. The election of right-wing governments in economically powerful

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<sup>4</sup> Probably best summarised in the ILO’s *Meeting Basic Needs* (1977).

Northern countries gave unprecedented power to the international financial institutions, (Mosley *et al.* 1991) and the debt crisis of 1980 heralded a profound shift in mainstream discourses of development.

### **2.3 Neoliberal resurgence, from SAPs to SIFs**

The social and political impact of these policies was to position the multilateral lending agencies [...] where they could determine the both the goals of development and the means for achieving them. They legitimised direct intervention in political decision-making processes. They determined the extent of state involvement in the social sector

(Manji 2000: 14).

A neoliberal perspective on development came to dominate the agendas of many international development actors in response to the economic crisis. It swept away the brief focus on poverty reduction which emerged in the 1970s. Economic growth was firmly reinstated as the solution to the problem of poverty, and the path to economic growth was to be found through the retreat of the State from the economy, and the opening up of all economic activity, particularly agriculture, to free market forces. Structural Adjustment Programmes were the basic policy instrument of the neoliberal resurgence. They gave far greater weight to growth than to distribution and aimed, through macroeconomic reform, to realign domestic expenditure and production patterns in order to restart economic growth processes (Adepoju 1993).

SAPs were presented by the International Financial Institutions as a matter of technical necessity and efficiency (Wuyts, Mackintosh and Hewitt 1992). They framed the poor as rational economic agents, taking reasoned decisions based on economic criteria which could be adjusted through structural macroeconomic reforms. Their implementation however gave rise to impacts beyond the economic frame: it was closely associated with political conditionality. In many cases, SAPs were imposed on the governments of Southern countries, under a new regime of 'policy based lending' by the IFIs. Even where multilaterals were not the principal donor in a given country, SAPs gave rise to greater co-ordination between bilateral donors (Engberg-Pedersen 1996). The context of conditionality and increased donor co-ordination resulted in the diminished power of national governments to set their own development policy agendas, or to find alternative solutions to the economic crisis. Conditionality can thus be seen as an important mechanism through which donors and lending institutions widened the sphere of their assumed legitimacy to shape the policies of national governments, a political reality which the technical focus of the mainstream discourse obscured.

The massive impact of the austerity measures imposed by the SAPs particularly affected the provision of basic social services to poor people, agricultural production and food security. Popular opposition to adjustment measures was widespread in many countries, taking a variety of forms and involving many kinds of civil society organisation. Within the development arena, opposition was increasingly vociferously expressed by agencies like the ILO, UNICEF and international development

NGOs, who drew attention to the serious decline in social services, wages and employment which resulted from SAPs, and pointed out how the most vulnerable members of society were paying a high price for adjustment (Cornia, Jolly and Stewart 1987). SAPs produced an unprecedented polarisation in discourse of development.

Alongside the agenda which crystallised around explicit opposition to the negative effects of SAPs, other alternatives to the mainstream discourse continued to evolve. Contemporaneous debates on participatory development, for example, were based on critiques of the problematisation of poverty in orthodox development. Such debates stressed the diversity of different people who are labelled 'poor' and the diversity of poverty as a condition (McGee 1998). The reduction of a such a complex, multifaceted phenomenon as poverty into a single measure of income or consumption was viewed as a reinforcement of established patterns of dominance, maintained through the mechanism of technical and professional expertise (Chambers 1997). Opponents of such reductionism advocated the use of a form of participatory research for planning and action with local people, which would rely on 'their' rather than 'our' understanding of problems and priorities, and would begin a process of reversals which would gradually transform the practice of development. The articulation of this alternative narrative resulted in an explosion in the use and spread of participatory methodologies, particularly by NGOs, and particularly within the project cycle.

The late 1980s witnessed a 'marriage of convenience' between orthodox and participatory approaches to development (Hoebink 2000). The hybridisation of narratives saw 'participation' introduced into reform strategies which were advocated to offset the negative impacts of adjustment. Perhaps best illustrated by UNICEF's influential document, 'Adjustment with a Human Face' this hybrid agenda problematises the failure of SAPs as one of implementation and the lack of emphasis on protecting the most vulnerable members of society from the impacts of economic adjustment. The solutions it puts forward are institutional reform and the establishment of social safety nets. Institutional reform is seen as involving increased 'participation', which in addition to being presented in terms of effectiveness is also framed as a possible solution to the problem of 'generating the political support need to overcome short-term political and bureaucratic opposition' (Cornia *et al.* 1987: 295). The version of participation which resulted not only reinforced the framing of the poor as 'beneficiaries,' but often defined their participation in terms of efficiency, and the investment of time and labour into development initiatives and social safety nets.

Social Funds<sup>5</sup> were one policy instrument designed to operationalise this hybrid agenda, and they have endured and subsequently evolved. Through the provision of social services by intermediary governmental and non-governmental organisations, Social Funds were characterised as 'demand-driven,' and therefore responsive to the needs and priorities of local people for poverty reduction. The rhetoric of Social Funds designates the community as an important space for capacity building for poverty reduction

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<sup>5</sup> 'Social Funds' is a broad term, used by Cornia (1999) to describe a wide variety of programmes introduced by the IFIs to offset the negative effects of adjustment.

(Marc, Graham and Schacter 1993; Narayan and Ebbe 1997) and thus appears to present an opportunity for a re-interpretation of the role of local people's knowledge and expertise.

The structure of Social Funds in many ways foreshadows the future direction of the mainstream discourse. They are illustrative of the widening of spheres of intervention deemed to be legitimate under the rubric of poverty reduction, and the increasingly wide range of actors who are invited to have an active stake in poverty reduction policy. They suggest the critical importance to poverty alleviation of linkages and partnerships between the state (increasingly, in the form of decentralised local government), the private sector, NGOs and 'the community.' This frame of consensus and partnership in development was to become a powerful feature of new efforts to 'mainstream' poverty reduction.

#### **2.4 Poverty reduction reaffirmed and mainstreamed: poverty assessments and PPAs**

Poverty alleviation is now embedded in a broader macro-economic and macro-political approach involving good governance and attention to the social sector. 'Good governance' refers to a macro-economic policy that is monetarily healthy and promotes liberalisation, but also democratisation and improvement of the human rights situation.

(Hoebink 2000: 215)

The agenda which was put forward by the 1990 *World Development Report* signalled a re-affirmation of the centrality of poverty reduction in development, and put forward the strategies it proposed in terms of achieving poverty reduction through growth. As such, it demonstrates a shift away from the previously orthodox sequence of growth leading to development and thence to poverty reduction.

The context of this shift was the 'Washington Consensus', a term which emerged to describe an apparent agreement amongst many economists concerning the pursuit of macro-economic stability, trade and capital liberalisation, privatisation and deregulation.<sup>6</sup> The term 'consensus' came to be associated however with a broader agreement amongst the donor community about the policy agenda put forward by *WDR 90*, namely labour-intensive growth, investment in human capital, and the provision of safety nets for the most vulnerable. The report also presented a narrative of the causes of poverty which included bad economic management by developing country governments, corrupt officials and institutions, and policy environments that did not favour broad-based economic growth (McGee 1998). This focus provided an increasingly large space to question issues of governance and institutions in the elaboration of poverty reduction policy.

Voipio argues that in the early 1990s there was a wide convergence of donor policies, rhetoric and operational approaches in the direction of the *WDR 90* agenda (Voipio 2000). This shift has led to an

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<sup>6</sup> Naim (2000) describes the Washington Consensus as the name that economist John Williamson gave in 1989 to a list of 10 policy recommendations for countries willing to reform their economies. Lipton (1997) discusses the 'new consensus on poverty' in 1997, basing his arguments around the *WDR 90* agenda.

emphasis on issues of governance, holistic sector-wide programmes and coordinated donor action. Robinson views the increasing convergence of the poverty reduction discourse as a merger of policy currents: the bilateral donors interested in democracy, rights and participation, and the IFI preoccupation with financial accountability and administrative representation (Robinson 1995). This convergence also provided an opportunity for the poor to once again be framed as citizens with rights.

The emergence of the new variation on orthodoxy opened up new domains of actions under the remit of poverty reduction policy. It suggested that recipient governments and civil society actors move towards taking responsibility for implementing good governance initiatives. This shift took place within the continued context of political conditionality in relationships between donors and Southern governments.

The World Bank's particular interpretation of the governance agenda, mirrored by many bilateral donors, placed a strong emphasis on the capacity of governments to design, formulate and implement policies for poverty alleviation and on contracting the implementation of these to NGOs. This resulted in considerable investments in the production of information about poverty, and building capacity for evidence-based planning processes for poverty reduction. In 1994, Davies noted increased demand for new types of information that new doctrines and discourses had given rise to (Davies 1994). The 1990s, perhaps even more so than the 1980s, were an era of methodological refinement of the orthodox approach to poverty measurement (Baden 1995). In the context of debates on consultation, the use of social science information, and the rights of poor people to define the poverty reduction agenda, some of these methodological refinements addressed issues of combining orthodox and participatory approaches to the production of poverty knowledge.<sup>7</sup>

Poverty Assessments were an important mechanism for turning the poverty reduction agenda into poverty reduction policy. Although they were introduced as a policy instrument of the World Bank, they can also be viewed more broadly as a stage in the evolution of donor cooperation for poverty reduction; as Norton *et al.* note, they 'formed a major part of the analytical work sponsored by the donor community in the early to mid-1990s' (2001: 2). In addition, they were a policy instrument which appeared to offer an opportunity for different types of poverty knowledge to have an influence on policy formulation. Tjønneland *et al.* note that Poverty Assessments represented an analytic shift, away from the description of poverty, towards the formulation of strategies for its reduction (Tjønneland, Harboe, Jerve and Kanji 1998). As such, poverty reduction policy was increasingly framed as having at its centre a process of research and information production, which were seen as the first steps in the system of generating policy activities in multiple domains of intervention.

The recommended methodologies for poverty assessments emphasised quantitative analysis of household survey data, from which a poverty headcount and poverty profile were generated. The development of the methodology for poverty assessments was however influenced by an increasingly wide range of voices – within and outside the World Bank – which were arguing that orthodox approaches to

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<sup>7</sup> Current methodological debates on poverty measurement are reviewed by McGee and Brock (2001).

poverty measurement may not present an adequate view of the multiple dimensions of poverty, or the dynamics of its causes and effects. These voices, which can be characterised as a discourse coalition, came together in debates about how best to provide information on the nature of poverty, one outcome of which was the development of Participatory Poverty Assessments. PPAs are field-based, qualitative research exercises which aim to provide information on poverty to policymakers from the perspective of poor people themselves (Norton *et al.* 2001). In addition to the argument that starting with the analysis of poor people would enhance the accuracy and relevance of information for policymakers, some advocates of PPAs suggested that allowing ordinary people a voice in policy processes would also constitute the fulfilment of a basic right.

Although Poverty Assessments became a mandatory mechanism in the Bank's activities, PPAs were optional. Many PPAs were undertaken, however, and some argued that they achieved some success in deepening the Bank's understanding of poverty, influencing policy from poor people's perspectives, and strengthening policy implementation (Robb 1999). Other commentators, however, suggest that numerous obstacles existed which prevent the information generated by PPAs from influencing PAs (Whitehead and Lockwood 1998), and that PAs themselves had a limited impact on the formulation of Country Assistance Strategies (Tjønneland *et al.* 1998). The difficulties evoked by the experience of trying to influence PAs with PPAs can be read as the difficulties of influencing hegemonic discourses and entrenched institutions with alternative agendas. Both commentaries suggest that there are problems to introducing alternative knowledge construction strategies in a way that has an impact on the content of policy statements, and thus the allocation of resources.

PPAs spread rapidly beyond the Bank, and were resourced by both multilateral and bilateral agencies in a wide range of countries. Their scope broadened and methods and design evolved as the challenges of influencing the poverty reduction policies came to be better understood. 'Second-generation' PPAs attempted to have an impact on policy by placing a strong and explicit emphasis on the establishment of multiple stakeholder networks and partnerships through which influence could be achieved, and they entered the policy arena with the stated intention of creating policy change that would produce benefits for poor people (McGee with Norton 1999; Norton *et al.* 2001). As such, the evolution of the instrument reflects a broader shift in the poverty reduction discourse, which by the mid-1990s was becoming increasingly focused on the importance of multi-stakeholder partnerships for poverty reduction.

## **2.5 After the consensus? Creating spaces for change in poverty reduction policy**

There is no question that there is now broad agreement on education and health outcomes being on par with income in assessing poverty and the consequences of economic policy. This is now so commonplace that it is easy to forget that it was not always the case, that twenty-five years ago great intellectual and policy battles were fought in the World Bank on broadening the conception of development and poverty reduction. Perhaps today's new proposals on conceptualising poverty – for

example, that empowerment and participation should in their turn be treated on par with education and health and income – will equally become tomorrow's foundations.

(Kanbur 2001: 40)

Kanbur encapsulates the evolution of the contemporary orthodox discourse. The extremes of the rhetorical consensus are illustrated by the recognition by the IMF, in 1998, of the interrelationships between economic and social issues: 'the main pillars of economic policy that would lead to progress in these three areas [*economic growth, inflation control and promotion of agriculture*] include sound macroeconomic and structural policies, with a strong social policy component, and good governance and participatory development' (Chu and Gupta 1998: 5).

Kanbur also argues, however, that although there is no longer widespread disagreement about the causes of poverty, there is less agreement the way that causal analysis is operationalised through policy instruments (Kanbur 2001). Tjønneland *et al.* (1998) concur with this, suggesting that policy instruments are an increasingly important source of difference in the approaches of various donors, and of different interpretations of the 'consensus' around poverty reduction. In the face of an apparent uniformity of rhetoric, the nexus of contestation has shifted to implementation; as such, policy instruments themselves become important theatres for the enactment of discourse scripts.

Donors and lenders follow a range of paths in their assistance to poverty reduction, from the micro-projects of safety nets and Social Funds, through meso level interventions like sector level poverty reduction programmes, to macro-level interventions which increasingly include efforts to put poverty on the political agenda (Tjønneland *et al.* 1998). The domains into which the poverty reduction agenda now spreads are firmly framed as political, institutional and social, as well as economic; increasingly, they also engage actors at the level of decentralised local government. The poverty reduction policy process thus engages with a wider range of different versions of poverty, in a wider variety of policy spaces, than was the case previously. The terms of engagement, however, remain very much in the realm of 'invited participation' and 'consultation', where more powerful actors frame the way that others are involved in the policy process.

The dynamics of invited participation, and donor control over the issues and actors that are involved in the policy process, are perhaps best illustrated by the changing role assigned to the state in poverty reduction initiatives. As already noted, the agenda of liberalisation had severely constrained the agency of nation-states to decide their own development agendas, through the mechanism of political conditionality. The reverse side of conditionality was the problematisation of the state in the process of development. The convergence of these streams has resulted in the emergence of narratives of good governance in the development discourse.

The 1997 *World Development Report* is illustrative of this shift, in terms of its argument that the state should be strengthened in certain respects. Rademacher notes that in the policy reversal represented by *WDR* 1997, there is 'a notable absence of criticism [...] of the Bank's own role in historically influencing the capacity of the state, particularly in terms of the deleterious effects of SAPs' (1999: 4). The



institutional focus does not extend to critical self-reflection, nor to acknowledging the *influence* of a powerful counternarrative which had criticised the impact of the SAPs on Southern states.

The role for the state put forward in *WDR 97* envisages it not as a direct provider of growth but as partner, catalyst and facilitator in the process of poverty reduction. As such, the boundaries of legitimised state activity in poverty reduction processes shifts again; the invitation extended to state actors to fully re-engage with processes of poverty reduction has been critical in shaping the development of contemporary poverty reduction policy instruments. Changing views of the role of state actors in policy processes have had a strong impact on the way that governments and donors interact. Norton *et al.* summarise some of the key features of such instruments in relation to state-donor relations in his discussion of changes in contemporary development practice:

In general the donor community is seeking increasingly to provide its assistance as contributions to the mainstream planning, budgeting and implementation processes of partner institutions. For work with governments in developing countries this implies donors accepting less direct control over some government actions than a project approach provided them. In return donors (to account for their resources against the purpose for which they are provided) must seek to use their resources to lever pro-poor change in policies of the institutions with which they work. This change in approach is evident in changing instruments for donor cooperation and in changing thinking about the nature of partnerships. [...] In short, the role of donor agencies is increasingly interpreted in a different way. Instead of seeking to show direct use of donor resources for reducing poverty – and account for their funds against this – donors are seeking instead to use their influence to *facilitate broad based pro-poor change in public policy*.

(Norton *et al.* 2001: 13)

These changes illuminate broad shifts in the structure of policy interactions which have resulted from different actors adopting and interpreting the objective of mainstreaming poverty reduction. The extended domain of poverty reduction interventions by external actors now explicitly includes the national policy process. There is also a departure from earlier practice implied by the focus on budgeting and implementation processes, not only in the orthodox domains of finance and macro-economic planning, but increasingly in the development planning initiatives of decentralised national governments.

These shifting relationships between donors, lenders and governments provide the discursive background to the emergence of Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers, the most recent mechanism for poverty reduction developed by IFIs. At the level of stated objectives, PRSPs represent a policy instrument which is constructed as ‘nationally owned’ and relies on a foundation of consultation between government and civil society concerning poverty reduction. Guidelines for PRSP implementation focus on supporting the participation of civil society organisations in the design and monitoring of poverty reduction strategies, as a mechanism for building and sustaining country ownership in policy operationalisation. They are presented as offering the opportunity for a range of actors to legitimately

engage in policy formulation. Simultaneously however, they remain instruments of political and economic conditionality, which are an essential part of the narrative of conditional debt relief established by the IFIs. As experiences with PRSP implementation emerge, a range of constraints have arisen which highlight the difficulties faced by different actors in their attempt to occupy the policy spaces offered by the PRSP in a way which ensures that their views are reflected by the resulting policy. Not least amongst these is the range of understandings of ‘participation’ and ‘consultation’ with which a range of more and less powerful actors inform their engagement in the policy process.

The myriad ways that participation has been framed in the mainstream discourse of development, and the way that different actors have attributed meaning to the term, is an important entry point for seeing how the framing of the poor has shifted over time. The current rhetoric of poverty reduction, exemplified by the *WDR 2000/1*, relies heavily on ‘the voices of the poor’ to counterpoint major policy messages. A distinguishing feature of the narrative put forward by the *WDR 2000/1* is the notion of ‘empowerment’, and its linkages with participation. The report recommends action in three areas, of which one is ‘facilitating empowerment,’ framed as:

Making state institutions more accountable and responsive to poor people, strengthening the participation of poor people in political processes and local decision making, and removing the social barriers that result from distinctions of ethnicity, race, religion and social status.

(World Bank 2000: Foreword, vi)

Two features of the way that empowerment is employed in the construction of the narrative are particularly relevant in terms of wider discourse shifts. The first is how firmly the domain of ‘empowerment’ is defined as the institutional interface of state-citizen relations. The second concerns the analytic use of the term. Moore suggests that in the *WDR*, ‘the concept of “empowerment” is more decorative than directional. It does not really structure the analysis. The term is used in diffuse and ambiguous ways’ (Moore 2000: 1). Moore’s comments resonate with critiques of the absorption of other terms from alternative agendas into the development discourse, and the depoliticisation of meaning which results (Cornwall 2001; Rademacher and Patel forthcoming).

With such sweeping objectives as the elimination of barriers of discrimination, there is little in the *WDR* to suggest a strategy for operationalising the empowerment agenda, although empowerment is closely associated with the notion of decentralised local government. As Øyen points out, however, there is no mention of more traditional mechanisms for empowerment, such as labour unions; and there is no mention given to the conflicts of interest which would inevitably result from the ‘empowerment’ of the poor. She notes that:

Efficient poverty reduction is not possible without facing up to those adversaries and accepting the fact that there are strong interests vested both in sustaining certain kinds of poverty, and in not paying the price in economic and symbolic terms that an efficient poverty reducing strategy calls for. How is the World Bank going to handle this aspect of poverty reduction? The *WDR* is presented

within a model of harmony that is seducing in all its good will and buzzwords of partnership, sharing of social capital, equality and acceptance.

(Øyen 2000: 6)

This harmonic model of partnership underpins the way that ‘empowerment’ is used in the *WDR 2000/1*. Creating and maintaining an illusion of consensus amongst stakeholders is an important part of the World Bank’s ‘hegemonic project’ which aims ‘if not to rule the world, at least to guide it through policy prescriptions’ (Braathen 2000: 29). The meaning attributed to empowerment must be congruent with this notional consensus, and thus is essentially depoliticised. Skirbekk and St Clair note that the value given to empowerment in the *WDR* is fundamentally instrumental: it is, with security and opportunity, a dimension which is instrumental to the success of market values (2000: 24). This attribution of meaning to the term ‘empowerment’ is one way that the boundaries for the exercise of agency of policy actors are established. The evolution of the discourse opens spaces to act, but these spaces are to some extent bounded by dominant understandings of key concepts of the policy actors who occupy them.

The strategies and messages presented in the *WDR 2000/1* can be regarded as the articulation of a new ‘consensus’ emerging amongst international development actors regarding the legitimate range of actors in poverty reduction processes. The evolution of this consensus can be read as the creation of a ‘story line’ which bridges different elements of a discourse to create an agenda to which people subscribe, and which pushes certain elements firmly into the mainstream. As well as embracing CSOs and local government as partners, the ‘story-line’ of the *WDR 2000/1* places a strong emphasis on the ‘community’ as an agent of poverty reduction, expanding still further the range of actors who might legitimately be seen to have a stake in the policy process.

These latest mutations in poverty reduction narratives, which frame policy as an all-encompassing partnership between a vastly expanded range of actors, suggest that unprecedented range of invited spaces for participation in the policy process may be emerging. The overview provided in this section highlights the importance of discourse in relation to the policy instruments of international development actors, but also points out the capacity of such discourse to absorb and depoliticise counter narratives. We suggest that this process of depoliticisation in the poverty reduction policy shapes the way that ‘new’ actors are accepted and included, but also that it obscures the inevitably political nature of policy. The potential of ‘invited’ spaces to result in policy which is responsive to the needs and priorities of poor people depends not only on the terms of the invitation, but on the way that such spaces intersect both with the traditional policy spaces of government, and the more or less autonomous spaces outside government. It is to the contradictions and convergences between these overlapping spaces in the policy process that we now turn.

## Part Three

### Opportunities for change? Occupying space in the policy process

As previous discussions suggest, a complex configuration of actors and interests are involved in poverty policy processes. Different kinds of actors have different opportunities for influencing and shaping policy process as they position themselves, and are positioned by others, in the different sites in which policy making takes shape. As Gasper and Apthorpe contend: ‘crucial in all policy practice is framing, specifically what and who is actually included, and what and who is ignored and excluded’ (1996: 6). In this section, we turn our attention to these processes of inclusion and exclusion within different kinds of policy arenas. Setting our discussion within the context of shifting discourses on poverty, we pay particular attention to the opportunities that the emergence of new ‘policy spaces’ offer for the engagement of those conventionally excluded from policy deliberation.

As discussed in section one, ‘policy spaces’ (Grindle and Thomas 1991) are moments in which interventions or events throw up new opportunities, reconfiguring relationships between actors within these spaces or bringing in new actors, and opening up the possibilities of a shift in direction. An examination of policy spaces enables us to understand more closely the dynamics of power, agency and knowledge in the shaping of poverty policy.

In traditional views of policy making, policy spaces were often conceived as the purview of government. To understand policies on poverty meant the examination of the interaction between actors located within traditional state-based institutions, be they the executive branch, parliaments and assemblies or parties. The key actors on poverty policy were often thought to include Ministries – especially those dealing with planning, budgets or economic policies; statistics, and perhaps those with a sectoral focus – labour, water, health. Policy analysis often involved looking only at what was going on within these arenas, often only at the formulation and pronouncement stage, rather than in the implementation stages, and often at level of national government, rather than in interaction with other levels and other actors.

But, as we suggest earlier in this paper, moves away from traditional state-based approaches to poverty reduction have produced interventions by external donors and lending organisations that have worked to open up spaces for the involvement of non-state actors in the policy process. Broadly speaking, these interventions have involved varying degrees of ‘*invited participation*’ and range from consultation exercises, such as most PPAs and PRSPs, to attempts to bring a wider range of non-state actors into service delivery and local governance, through mechanisms like SIFs and local governance reform. The ambiguities of these moves are evident in commentaries that alternate between celebrating them as ‘opportunities for democracy, participation and regional equality emanating from civil society’ (Schönwalder 1997: 261) and analysing their deployment by powerful actors to dissipate or subsume resistance (Kanyinga 1998).

Just as work on ‘policy communities’ serves to problematise the divide between ‘the state’ and ‘civil society’, it is evident that a range of other arenas exist outside the machinery of governance in which actors of various kinds may articulate and mobilise around alternative poverty discourses (Barya 2000;

Price-Chalita 1994). As arenas that are subject to constant negotiation and renegotiation, policy spaces are ‘an active and interactive context in which social relations and structures are transformed over time’ (Jones 2000). Berberton, Blake and Kotze (1998), for example, develop in their work on South Africa the notion of ‘action spaces’ as the space for poor people to resist, to challenge their conditions and create alternatives. Similarly, Evans and Boyte (1986) discuss the importance of ‘free spaces’ which exist between private lives and large-scale institutions, in which ordinary citizens act, and also where they learn and practice new skills and understandings and visions that may later be articulated in more formal policy arenas.

Following these understandings, we go beyond the traditional state-focused policy processes, to discuss two broader clusters of policy spaces: ‘invited spaces’, created ‘from above’ by powerful institutions, and ‘autonomous spaces’, created ‘from below’ through more independent forms of social action. In each we shall explore how these spaces have been used and occupied by a range of policy actors. Where possible, we situate our discussion in the Nigerian and Ugandan contexts, and use this analysis to highlight issues that will form the basis for later empirical investigation.<sup>8</sup>

### **3.1 ‘Invited spaces’ for poverty policy**

Mainstream poverty narratives make available three principal mechanisms through which ‘poor people’ and ‘other stakeholders’ are to be involved in policy deliberation: occasional or one-off consultative processes such as the majority of PPAs and PRSPs; new institutions such as Social Funds, and the organs of decentralised governance. In each, a different relationship with the state is envisaged: each, too, carries with it different conceptions of citizenship and participation. We explore each of these in turn.

#### **3.1.1 Consultative processes in national poverty policies**

The use of consultative processes, such as PPAs, to determine the needs and priorities of ‘poor people’ has become increasingly common since the early 1990s. These processes were originally conceived of as a means through which to provide policy-makers with information that could help guide policy formulation. Cast within the linear model of policy making, the assumption that underlay early PPAs was that better information would produce better, and more pro-poor policy. A more sophisticated understanding of the policy process has emerged from experience, as PPAs have come to involve other policy-influencing functions that include establishing networks and coalitions for poverty reduction, advocacy and the catalysis of public debate. Perhaps the most significant features of PPAs lie precisely in their other attributes: as highly visible ‘public space’ events backed by powerful supranational institutions and as

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<sup>8</sup> Often held out as a model for others, Uganda offers a particularly wide range of ongoing poverty reduction strategies and processes within a context of strong government support. Nigeria, where the current national poverty reduction policy is less coherent, is in a state of political transition, with a vibrant civil society and fragile and tentative shifts towards democratisation. Comparison of the two countries will offer insights not only into the relationship between approaches to poverty knowledge and policy processes, but also into the degree to which these processes are affected by broader political factors, such as the level of democracy, the nature of political institutions and the character of civil society.

processes that engage a spectrum of actors, and can work to create and solidify new actor-networks and story-lines. Amidst contention about whether or not many of these exercises can be described as ‘participatory’ – or even as ‘research’ – their power and range has been remarkable. PPA-style processes have been used both at global scale and to scale down to the level of regional and district planning (Narayan *et al.* 2000; UNDP 1998a).

The opportunities for engagement that these processes offer need to be set in a broader context than their emphasis on listening to the ‘voices of the poor’. Firstly, ‘the poor’ have fairly limited opportunities to influence the framing of policies that draw on their ‘voices’ for authenticity. Their participation is often framed by the boundaries of the ‘field research’ components of a consultative initiative; the ‘open-ended’ methods that are used often conflict with restricted frameworks for analysis that are imposed from above and frequently imbued with institutional imperatives. ‘Field research’ components of consultative initiatives seldom involve local people either in defining the agenda or direction of the process of enquiry, or the analysis of findings which follows it. What ‘the poor’ think or believe is mediated through the frame within which their ‘voices’ are solicited and analysed.

Secondly, and crucially, it is perhaps not in the ‘participation of the poor’ but in the engagement of ‘other stakeholders’ that the potential of these processes lies. Actors who might otherwise have been excluded from formal policy arenas may gain entry points into the process, both to shape spaces within it and to use the leverage these highly visible events offer to bring other issues and interests into policy deliberations. New ‘story-lines’ and ‘discourse coalitions’ can be forged in these spaces, linking non-state, international and state actors in new configurations to push through policy alternatives. In a number of PPAs, for example, NGOs have played a formative part in the process and have, in some cases, been able to successfully put issues on the policy agenda that they might formerly only have been able to advocate from ‘outside’. Where effort is made to build the preconditions for voice, and to bring the networks of actors that exist within ‘free spaces’ into deliberations, these exercises may provide the lever that enables local actors to draw on professed commitments to ‘listening to the poor’ to provoke action (Norton *et al.* 2001; Adan *et al.* forthcoming).

The concept of PRSPs arises from a convergence of influences: successful use of consultative processes such as PPAs, the perceived need for closer co-ordination between donors and sectors that gave rise to the Comprehensive Development Framework, and the recasting of neo-liberal appropriations of ‘participation’ and associated language of ‘ownership’, ‘partnership’ and ‘empowerment’. Apparently devolving to countries the task of devising their own economic reform programmes, PRSPs provide a frame through which to match national poverty reduction objectives with those of donors and creditors (Northover 2000). As part of the process of developing national ownership, governments are mandated to undertake a wide process of consultation in the formulation of the PRSP. As such, despite their inherent contradictions, PRSPs are seen to offer a space for alternative versions of poverty to be articulated and alternative priorities for poverty reduction to influence the policy process.

Northover discusses the limits to the space offered by PRSPs which arise from the policy priorities and institutional culture of the IFIs. He notes particularly the centralised and disciplined organisational

nature of the IMF, and their reluctance to adapt their core policies, mandate and *modus operandi* to embrace the idea the PRSPs should be shaped according to the particular circumstances of low income countries: 'While the central thrust of the IMF and World Bank Poverty Reduction Strategy initiative is intended to devolve the "ownership" of the policy reform agenda to programme countries, it is not clear to what extent the parameters of the new agenda accommodate development strategies outside their ideas of what constitutes sound economic policies' (2000: 5). This comment locates PRSPs in the historical chain of discourse shifts discussed above: the absorption of 'alternative' agendas does not constitute a foundational challenge to the hegemony of the growth discourse.

Northover continues by observing that many of the background documents for the PRSP use the terms 'participation' and 'consultation' interchangeably, with a lack of definition for either. The key questions he asks of participation in PRSPs is whether – and how – all relevant stakeholders will be involved in the shaping of core policies and programme design, and what mechanisms are in place to mediate the conflicts of civil society organisations in the process of elaborating a PRSP.

Lack of clarity about the differences between participation and consultation are picked up in Collins' summary of experience with implementation in September 2000 (Collins 2000). She notes concerns amongst Southern NGOs about the lack of distinction between the two. In practice, 'consultation' has been the dominant mode in many countries, such that the ideas and views of civil society and other stakeholders are solicited, but draft documentation has already been drawn up and is little altered by the process of 'consultation'. Collins notes some PRSP processes where the government selected CSOs for inclusion in the consultation process, and then delayed in sharing key documents before they were submitted to the IFIs as finalised versions. Such experiences describe the boundaries of the spaces offered by PRSPs, and suggest that the interpretation of key elements of the narratives which underlie the PRSP mechanism are one way that the agency of particular actors is facilitated or constrained.

Lessons from implementation suggest that mapping the process and outcomes of PRSPs in Uganda and Nigeria will provide an important entry point for understanding the dynamics of discourse, actors and policy processes in poverty reduction. Questioning the nature of the space PRSPs offer to different actors is of central importance to understanding whose voices are excluded and privileged within the process; who has been invited into the space, and who has not; and how different actors have chosen to engage or not to engage.

Uganda was the first country to have a PRSP accepted, and from the position of a relatively strong relationship with the IFIs was able to assert the right to base the PRSP on the Poverty Eradication Action Plan, and five years of consultative process which included the three-year Uganda Participatory Poverty Assessment Process. Nigeria is in the process of preparing an I-PRSP, but the process has been highly politicised and contested within the Federal government, and some consider that existing consultative and participatory work was not built on. These very different contexts give rise to the opportunity for comparative analyses of the policy process of PRSPs.

### 3.1.2 Linking the national to the local: social funds

Social Funds, like PRSPs, are a poverty reduction policy instrument which appear to offer spaces for participation. Although they initially emerged specifically to offset the negative effects of SAPs, as described in Section Two, Social Funds have spread to have a wider poverty reduction remit. Through the provision of resources and structures established by donors outside the domain of sectoral ministries, many Social Funds are designed to increase the participation of beneficiaries in identifying and managing projects and other small-scale initiatives. The presentation and framing of Social Funds, with an emphasis on providing a demand-driven mechanism for community-based poverty reduction, suggests that they may represent a space for local people to engage in the planning and implementation of poverty reduction initiatives.

Work on the implementation of Social Funds suggests that the spaces they offer are bounded by similar constraints to those identified from the implementation of PRSPs. Fumo and de Haan (2000), for example, review experiences with Social Funds in sub-Saharan Africa, and suggest that the mechanism of ‘demand-driven’ Funds in many cases is the presentation of a menu of project choices, around which local people can submit their demands. The menu is pre-established according to the priorities of the fund and its donors. This resonates with government-civil society partnerships choosing a strategy for national poverty reduction from a menu established according to the principles of economic growth in the PRSP process.

Tendler and Serrano (1999) present a detailed case study of four Social Funds in Brazil, and a review of the literature. They conclude that SFs in Brazil, despite the claims made for them, are actually supply rather than demand driven, do not work well in environments where there are power disparities, and may actually be detrimental to local communities. Their analysis of the enduring nature of Social Funds situates their findings in a wider discussion of narratives in development policy:

Contrary to the narratives of the donors, many SFs are actually *supply*-driven rather than demand-driven—exactly the critique that is made of traditional government provision. Because the ‘choices’ of the communities are often not actually made by them, the lack of sustainability and ownership of the projects comes as no surprise. [...] The most compelling reason for SF popularity may actually lie elsewhere – namely, in their effectiveness as a powerful ‘development narrative’ [...] In environments characterised by considerable ambiguity as to cause and effect, and low predictability, such narratives offer convincing and simple explanations for the causes of certain problems, and appealingly straightforward blueprints for action. Because of their power as narratives [...] they are quite hardy in their ability to survive the results of empirical work that challenges their accuracy. This is because they surround a problem that seems otherwise difficult to understand and act upon with boundaries, certainty, and simplicity. [...] SFs, actually, would seem to qualify for this position of a highly successful development narrative, with its corresponding blueprint for action. This more than anything else may explain why donors remain so enthusiastic about SFs despite the questionable evidence that they themselves have unearthed (1999: 154).



Tendler and Serrano's comments suggest that the space that Social Funds occupy in their implementation may differ considerably from the idealised space constructed by the narrative that surrounds them. The literature on Social Funds is redolent with examples of operational barriers to establishing space for the prioritisation of poor people's needs. These range from the negative effects of tying Funds to excessively bureaucratic and politically influenced disbursement mechanisms (Fumo and de Haan), to the scepticism of Brazilian community members about the promises of outside development actors (Tendler and Serrano 1999).

Social Funds, and the approach to poverty reduction that they embody, are an important component of current donor-supported poverty reduction strategies in Nigeria. A significant constituency in the World Bank favours the social fund approach, resulting in the design of the Community Based Poverty Reduction Initiative (CBPRI) as flagship of the Bank's projects. The design of such a fund in Nigeria takes place in the context of local government reforms, shifting relationships between different levels of government and a long history of development projects used as spaces for corrupt practices.

The implementation of the CBPRI will provide a useful entry point to examine the way that different actors engage with a newly offered space, with newly designed terms of engagement. Responses to the invitation to participate will be mediated by the historical context of poor relationships between citizens and state, and low levels of trust and accountability. Key questions will centre around the terms and mechanisms of engagement taken up by governmental and civil society actors, and the relationship between the Fund and existing poverty reduction initiatives.

### **3.2 Local governance as a poverty policy arena**

[Decentralisation] is not in itself a goal of development, but a means of improving public sector efficiency.[...] Decentralisation can make state institutions more responsive to poor people, but only if it allows poor people to hold public servants accountable and ensures their participation in the development process.

(World Bank 2000: 10)

For many theorists – cutting across the ideological spectrum – it is the local level where participation by the poor and other stakeholders is most likely to occur, and where it may have the most potential for making poverty reduction policies real. The extract from the *WDR 2000/1* reveals a narrative of decentralisation that is instrumental in increasing the efficiency of public services and their accountability to their clients. Crook and Manor (1998) point out that neo-liberal economists see decentralisation as a way of shifting power away from centralised states; advocates of pluralist politics see it as a way of giving interest groups space to organise, compete and assert themselves; some political leaders see it as a critical component for building for democracy at the local level, and democratic politicians see it as a way of holding the government accountable. In addition, civil society organisations in many countries have used

decentralised structures of government as arenas for engagement in ‘deliberative inclusionary processes’ such as participatory planning and budgeting (Holmes and Scoones 2000).

Schönwälder discusses the way that decentralisation has been framed in the development literature, and in doing so describes the nature of the spaces which decentralisation might open in the policy process (Schönwälder 1997). He outlines two perspectives on decentralisation: the pragmatic and the political. The pragmatic approach frames decentralisation instrumentally, as a policy tool that relies on local organisations as intermediaries between state and local population. In this view, decentralisation is seen as a technical and administrative process, rather than a political one. Taking a political approach to decentralisation, on the other hand, means viewing decentralisation as the democratisation of the state, opening up new channels for participation in the political system through administrative reform and new avenues for direct participation. In the latter approach, local and regional governments constitute a ‘meeting place’ between the state and civil society, in which a ‘new social contract’ can be negotiated. Part of this ‘new social contract’ involves poverty reduction issues – in terms of service provision but also, as accepted definitions of poverty become wider, in terms of governance and participation as rights. In this view, decentralised local government becomes important space situated in a broad conceptualisation of policy as a political process. Blair (2000) summarises one line of argument:

the hope is that as government comes closer to the people, more people will participate in politics ... that will give them representation, a key element in empowerment, which can be defined here as significant voice in public policy decisions which affect their futures. Local policy decisions reflecting this empowerment will serve these newer constituencies, providing more appropriate infrastructure, better living conditions and enhanced economic growth. These improvements will then reduce poverty and enhance equity among all groups.

On the other hand, the evidence about the degree to which these outcomes have been realised is mixed. Traditionally, the more pessimistic argument has been that democratic decentralisation simply opens up space for the empowerment of local elites, not for consideration of the voices and interests of the more marginalised. Obstacles of power, social exclusion, minimal individual and collective organisational capacity mean that few gains will be made by the poor. As Manor observes, he has ‘yet to discover evidence of any case where local elites were more benevolent than those at higher levels.’ (Manor 1999: 91, quoted in Blair 2000).

More recent studies of participatory forms of local governance have begun to point to some more positive outcomes. Blair’s own study of democratic local governance in six countries, for instance, points to some gains in accountability and as well as participation and empowerment goals. Moreover, some improvement may be seen in ‘universal services’, such as education and health care – arguably because these served to benefit the local elites as well. Less success was seen in programmes targeted for the poor themselves, as these were more likely to be ‘captured’ by local elites.

A study of the relationship between poverty reduction and decentralisation in three African countries, Guinea, Mozambique and Ethiopia, identifies three key areas where poverty reduction and decentralisation have been linked in development discourse (de Jong, Loquai and Soiri 1999). Firstly, decentralisation can aim at poverty reduction through an 'empowerment' strategy, by creating spaces for people to participate efficiently in decision-making processes, thereby increasing the influence of local citizens with respect to government. Secondly, decentralisation and poverty reduction are linked by strategies of resource mobilisation which give local people increased influence over resource allocation. Thirdly, the two are linked by the notion of decentralised government becoming a more effective means of delivering basic social services, thus improving welfare and reducing poverty.

The findings suggest that a major factor in whether or not decentralisation and poverty reduction complement each other is the motive for decentralisation, a highly political process that is undertaken for a wide range of different reasons. These motivations are far from universal: the purpose, pace and sequencing of decentralisation efforts are contested political issues. There is a broad agreement in the literature that decentralised government and poverty reduction only have a synergistic relationship in certain contexts, and that interactions are affected by the kinds of factors highlighted by de Jong *et al.* and Schönwälder. Experiences of decentralisation in Uganda and Nigeria, for example, have now spanned two decades, under the tenure of diverse political regimes. In both countries at different periods the decentralisation agenda has been highly politicised, and has been part of the structure of civil conflict. Such dynamics are essential to understanding that spaces of decentralised governance were not empty before they were claimed by the poverty reduction agenda, but filled by existing actors with historically situated understandings, experiences and social relationships.

In Nigeria, the political currency of decentralisation is far broader than any association the process might currently have with poverty reduction, and has been shaped by ethnic conflict and military rule. The current period of reforms to governance structures was preceded by two lengthy earlier attempts at decentralisation (1976–9 and 1987–92) under both military and civilian rule. (Gboyega 1998) Mutizwa-Mangiza and Conyers (1996) note that pressures for decentralisation in Nigeria have always come from above, and that as a result local governments have remained relatively powerless and under the influence of various higher-level institutions. Gboyega points out however that government decentralisation plans have often met a favourable reception because of their congruence with the territorial forms of power-sharing which have traditionally been the vehicles through which ethnic political elites have made their claims. Critically, attempts at decentralisation have also provided the space in which relationships between Federal, State and Local governments have been negotiated and renegotiated. They must also be seen as a response by the government to the phenomenon of citizen disengagement and exit from the state, which attempts to create a space for re-engagement (Gboyega 1998; Osaghae 1998). These insights highlight complexity of meaning already invested in the concept of decentralisation in the Nigerian context, and suggests that the transposing of poverty reduction on to the existing spaces of decentralised government may be a far from straightforward process.

Beyond the governmental dynamics of decentralisation lie the multiple and complex institutions of Nigerian civil society. The lack of ‘fit’ – not to mention the historical lack of trust – between these potential policy actors and the different levels of government will be a key dynamic in shaping the outcomes of current donor-supported attempts to enact poverty reduction in the spaces created by decentralisation.

In Uganda, decentralisation also has a particular political currency. The nascent structures of decentralised local government emerged from the civil conflict of the late 1980s, in the form of Resistance Councils of Museveni’s National Resistance Army. The subsequent evolution of decentralised local government has been an inherent part of Museveni’s vision of a ‘no party democracy,’ a vision which has increasingly come to embrace the language of participatory and accountable governance. This language has become inseparable from the mainstreaming of poverty reduction in government policy, to the extent that poverty is rhetorically equated to good governance at all levels. The powerful influence of the IFI’s construction of Uganda as a ‘success story,’ not to mention the country’s high degree of aid dependency, is reflected in the extent to which current constructs of decentralisation have been transposed onto historical experience. The spaces created by the process of decentralisation in Uganda have been shaped by Museveni’s parallel needs to hold the country together and meet donor conditionality.

Despite strong government rhetoric on the successes of decentralisation, difficulties have emerged in mainstreaming poverty reduction. The 1998 Uganda Human Development Report suggests that decentralisation has failed to substantially enhance citizen participation in decision-making, and the most people, in particular women, continue to feel marginalised and excluded from the system. This results in a lack of bottom-up demands to hold local government accountable for their actions, or become involved in planning (UNDP 1998b). The UPPAP Report notes that there was a lack of understanding amongst the community members consulted regarding what decentralisation actually means for districts and for communities, the roles, responsibilities and relationships of the different levels of local government, and citizens’ entitlements to information. It notes that in the more isolated districts where it worked, some participants were unaware of the process of decentralisation and changes that have been implemented over a number of years (UPPAP 2000).

In both countries, as this very brief overview has shown, there are significant limits to the notional spaces which decentralisation may open up for poverty reduction. The Nigerian example suggests that the space offered by decentralisation initiated from above in the context of a lack of trust between citizens and state may well be largely ignored by citizens. The Ugandan case demonstrates how a space created by decentralisation initiated ‘from below’ can be occupied by both national government and international development actors. Both cases highlight the complexity of interactions between different levels of the policy process. A key question for the empirical research therefore will be to ask how decentralisation and poverty reduction are linked in the perspectives of different actors, with what impact on the nature of the space decentralisation opens up for different versions of poverty and poverty reduction.

### **3.3 Beyond invited spaces: collective action on poverty issues**

While each of the mechanisms discussed above purport to open space for bringing new voices and discourses into the policy process, the extent to which they do so depends on the degree to which they are used by, or intersect with, other spaces and actors. Especially in countries in which there has been little previous formal focus on poverty policies, or in which there has been little previous democratic space in state-based arenas, civil society actors have found other ways in which to engage for themselves on poverty policies, or to make demands ‘from below’ on poverty-related issues. In this section, we shall explore briefly some of the ways in which civil society actors, especially those working closely with or advocating for poor people, have articulated alternative views on poverty, beyond the spaces in which they are invited to participate by the state or donor institutions. These include a brief examination of the role of advocacy groups on poverty, community based organisations and broader social movements.

Understanding such activities in the Ugandan context must inevitably be mediated by the ‘quasi-corporate’ nature of the ‘no party’ state (Bazaara 1999). Houtzager notes that in corporate political systems, new political spaces for making claims on the state can emerge from within the boundaries of the system (Houtzager 1999). In the Ugandan case, given restrictions on the creation and occupation of autonomous action spaces and the extent to which the structures of the state intersect with those of civil society, the articulation of alternative agendas has taken place through the medium of new alliances and coalitions, often with NGOs at their centre, which have acted both to open new spaces and occupy existing ones at the interface with the state. Examples include the Uganda Land Alliance, the Uganda Debt Network and the UPPAP. All three have to different degrees framed their activities in terms of increasing the rights of poor people in to engage in the policy process around poverty reduction issues.

Discussions of civil society actors in contemporary Uganda largely focus on NGOs. The trajectory of their changing role can be linked to the evolution of mainstream discourses: a proliferation of project-based, operational service delivery NGOs emerged at the start of the 90s in response to the impacts of adjustment on government service provision. It is only recently that NGOs have begun to turn their agendas towards policy advocacy – not least in response to the consultative focus of the government’s poverty reduction strategies. This has required developing new capacities and methodologies for action, as NGOs have spread their focus from one space in the policy process to another.

The Uganda Debt Network is an advocacy and lobbying coalition of Ugandan NGOs, institutions and other individuals formed in 1996 with the mission of advocating for reduced and sustainable debt levels, accountability and effective use of national resources for the benefit of all the people of Uganda. At the time of their formation, negotiation of Uganda’s debt was a closed matter between the government and donors, with no input from civil society. The UDN represents one network in a broader coalition of state and non-state actors who have campaigned to try and make the debt negotiation process more open and accountable, and to broaden the legitimacy of CSOs as participants in poverty reduction processes.

UDN's advocacy activities take place not only in the multiplicity of spaces which have opened around the poverty agenda in Ugandan politics,<sup>9</sup> but at the level of participatory monitoring of District budgets. The pursuit of an advocacy agenda means that in each of these arenas, UDN is re-inventing existing spaces to focus action within them on poverty reduction. In addition, however, UDN has constructed an alliance with the government in the international arena, where it was influential in initiating and maintaining Uganda's fast track to debt relief under the HIPC agreement. Growing within the confines of legitimacy imposed by the state and sometimes acting in alliance with it, the UDN has taken advantage of the 'partnership' spaces offered by contemporary poverty reduction to frame an explicitly rights-based agenda in a range of arenas.

By contrast, the UPPAP has occupied a space which was opened in the Ministry of Finance by a coalition of donor and government actors who were advocating for a widened space for poor people's perspectives to be articulated in poverty reduction policy. A hybrid initiative relying on a multi-stakeholder partnership, direct policy impact that the process has achieved has thus far been mainly seen in terms of its impact on sectoral budget allocations. There is also however evidence to suggest that the multi-dimensional narrative of poverty which UPPAP advocates has had influence on the mindsets of some policymakers, and that a distinctive community has emerged from the foundation of the initial coalition. This community has been maintained by a variety of information and discussion strategies with which UPPAP has strived to open spaces for public debate on poverty.

The activities of civil society organisations in Nigeria present a contrast to the Ugandan case. Here, the creation and occupation of spaces for social action has on one hand been historically circumscribed by military rule, but on the other has been catalysed by the consistent failure of the state in the arena of service provision. Although there are recent donor-driven initiatives which have similar features to the multi-stakeholder partnerships of NGO activity in Uganda,<sup>10</sup> there is little tradition for this kind of activity. Instead, civil society organisations with a diversity of form and function undertake a range of activities directly or indirectly related to poverty reduction.

Historically, arising from their work during the previous military regimes, a number of NGO's have played a strong role around human rights and democracy issues. Other NGO networks have also focused on poverty related issues such as the environment, rural development, and micro-finance. However, on the whole these NGOs have not been involved formally in advocacy on poverty policies. Interviews with NGO leaders suggest that some are attempting to re-assess and develop a new role in the new more 'democratic climate'. More recently, at least one NGO coalition has begun to monitor national poverty policies and attempt to channel civil society views upon them.

Rather than a specific focus on policy advocacy, many civil society organisations in the Nigerian context have taken the form of self-help networks and structures. Forms of civil society organisations are regionally differentiated, with hometown associations particularly common in the south, NGOs in the

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<sup>9</sup> UDN facilitates the monitoring of the government's Poverty Action Fund, participated in the revision of the Poverty Eradication Action, and organises a national anti-corruption coalition.

<sup>10</sup> For example, the Grand Alliance for Poverty Eradication launched by the UN.

south-west, and religious organisations in the north. Regional CSOs often have little or no connection with national NGOs or advocacy campaigns, many of which are rights-based and worked in the past to oppose the military regime. Walker notes however that in the south-east, south and middle belt CSOs are numerous and more likely to be involved in advocacy, democracy and governance issues, have closer links with donor community. In North, CSOs are more likely to be based on traditional structures and associational patterns, and less formally organised (Walker 1999).

A study of hometown associations is illustrative of some of the dynamics of surrounding civil society actors' engagement in poverty reduction (Mohammed 2000). All the HTAs in the study were formed during the military regime, and formation was precipitated by the feeling that government could not be relied on to develop towns. It was possible for local leaders to unite different groups within a community around issues of infrastructure. Some HTAs have been successful in meeting their objectives of local development, which often have an indirect impact on poverty reduction,<sup>11</sup> as such, their role can be seen as in part instrumental. As Mohammed notes, however, the more successful they are, 'the more they draw the attention of different political forces with different agendas who may want to manipulate them to achieve certain political objectives' (2000: 29).

Increasingly, as the impact of government and donor agenda of partnerships for poverty reduction becomes part of the mechanisms of local resource distribution, community-based organisations like HTAs will be invited to participate in policy processes. For the HTAs, in common with a range of CSOs, direct engagement with the state in policy processes represents a new approach. Previous governments have sometimes provided state support to self-help development activities, based on the rationale that poverty alleviation will occur through partnership with and funding of parallel structures. Such efforts represent invited participation, which did not give options for the articulation of voice or the use of citizen knowledge in defining poverty alleviation policy. They have largely failed to address basic problems, particularly distrust and lack of confidence in the ability and willingness of the state to protect citizens' rights or interests (Osaghae 1998). The historical relationship is far removed from the current donor model of partnerships between government and CSOs, and will shape the terms under which civil society actors choose to engage with the opportunities that arise as such partnerships become operational.

Partly because of the history of distrust between citizens and state, some community-based initiatives have intersected with Nigeria's rich tradition of social movements. The formation of social movements has often occurred around issues that are intimately related to a multi-dimensional understanding of poverty. Despite this, the way that social movements frame and act upon poverty issues frequently falls outside the bounds of the current hegemonic discourse of poverty reduction policy. As such, social movements are an important entry point to understanding the dynamics and development of alternative narratives and agendas of poverty and poverty reduction.

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<sup>11</sup> On the role of CBOs in poverty reduction, Francis, Akinwumi *et al.* (1996) note that although CBOs often provide some support for 'the indigent', generally they aim to provide benefits at the community level rather than the level of the individual poor person.

Current research on social movements emphasises the idea that marginalised social groups make claims on authorities based on their own interpretation of dominant ideologies (Houtzager 1999). As such, some social movements coalesce around claims to citizenship based on formally promised constitutional rights that have not been delivered. Through the process of interpreting dominant ideologies, social movements often build their identities, networks and alliances around ‘state-society linkages,’ which they seek to politicise through their action. As such, the intersection between social movements and formal institutions is highlighted as an important space for discursive engagement and action.

Nigeria’s post-colonial history provides numerous examples of the way that social movements have used the domain of state-society linkages to further their objectives. In the historical context of a sometimes oppressive military government, social movements have been an important mechanism for the creation of space for alternative visions of politics and development. Strikes, demonstrations and protests by students, trades unions and workers were a regular feature of the post-colonial era, and were often based on claims to rights or justice. Despite the ideological content of the social action, the student movement and the unions were closely linked at various moments to political parties, which coalesced around regional and ethnic identities (Momoh 1996).

The activities of the Ogoni People’s Movement in the Niger Delta demonstrate the process of a social movement which has emerged from local action spaces, and which has addressed its campaign both at the State and at the oil companies. Between 1990 and 1993, the Ogonis used mass mobilisation and direct confrontation in a way that had not been witnessed in the Delta since 1967 (Osaghae 1995). Their ‘uprising’ was triggered by the presentation of an Ogoni Bill of Rights to the military Federal government. Roberts (1999) characterises this strategy as essentially a demand for autonomy within a truly Federal Nigeria. The Ogoni movement successfully constructed a unified front as a response to marginalisation from State power (at the Federal, State and Local government levels) and the contacts of the movement’s leaders with international environmental and human rights organisation, and the media, located the struggle in a global arena. Osaghae notes that the Ogoni struggle was part of a wider stream of political discourse in Nigeria, concerning the rights and political leverage of ethnic minorities. The core of their engagement with the government was a challenge to establish that they, not the state or local government area, should receive revenue allocated from oil production. As such, they were challenging the existence of the State itself, which Osaghae suggests accounts for the brutality of the State response (Osaghae 1995).

The experience of the Ogoni People’s Movement is that of a community-based social movement which is defined by its anti-state stance in circumstances of systematic and violent repression, but which uses the rights offered by the state as a base for action. The current period of civilian rule and the renegotiation of relationships with the international financial institutions have changed the rules of engagement between the state and certain types of social movement. For example, contemporary protests against the policies of the IFIs, particularly catalysed by the rising cost of fuel, occupy not only the streets but also the courts and the House of Representatives (Woodroffe and Ellis-Jones 2000). The Academic Staff Union of Universities is currently attempting to get the High Court to declare the interventions of the World Bank and the IMF illegal, based on the argument that their interference in the Nigerian



economy is unconstitutional, and questioning their competence (Bretton Woods Project 2000). These activities demonstrate how some contemporary social movements have adjusted their identities and activities according, as Houtzager (1999) suggests, to their interpretation of the dominant narratives and mechanisms of poverty reduction.

This overview of the mechanisms by which certain civil society actors engage in poverty reduction activities demonstrates the broad range of spaces that shape and influence the policy process. The empirical examples highlight the importance of looking away from policy statements that attribute particular roles to particular actors, to try and understand the networks and alliances that underpin the agency of different actors to articulate alternative narratives of poverty, and to act to reduce it.

#### **4 Conclusion**

This paper has argued that in order to understand the ways in which poverty knowledge affects poverty policies we must analyse the policy process as multiple spaces of contestation involving complex configurations of actors, discourses and knowledges. By looking at how differing discourses and actors interact in such spaces, we can better understand the ways in which power mediates policy processes. In so doing, as power theorists have long reminded us, we must focus not only whose voices and views are organised into the policy process, but whose are left out, and why. This means that our investigations not only must examine what happens in the formal and invited policy arenas, but also must explore alternative poverty narratives and actions which may not normally be constructed as part of the 'policy process'.

In examining the dynamics of more formally constructed and 'invited' policy processes, we must ask: Who participates? Whose claims do they represent? What versions of poverty and what framing devices are deployed in these spaces? With what impact? Simultaneously, we must also ask whether these actors and discourses within existing policy spaces represent those who are at the margins, and whether those on the outside will use new policy spaces to voice their views, or if not, why not. The spaces or boundaries for action, as we have seen, are shaped by dominant poverty discourses and policy narratives, each of which in make claims to valid knowledge, and each of which are used to organise some actors and narratives into the policy process, and exclude others.

If the relationships of knowledge and method, power and action are therefore intertwined, so too may they vary across types of policy spaces. Global narratives are communicated through donor discourse and international conventions. These in turn are picked up and help to shape national and local policy spaces. Actors at varying levels use differing discourses and poverty knowledges to mobilise support for their claims. Our research therefore will not only need to analyse power, knowledge and action in discrete spaces, but how each in turn serves to widen and limit the boundaries of other policy spaces as well. In this sense, we will need to understand not only the 'horizontal' construction of policy spaces, which organise certain views and voices in while excluding others, but also their 'vertical' construction, examining power relations that are re-enforced or created through interactions of differing levels of the policy process.

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