

Beyond Buzzwords

“Poverty Reduction”, “Participation” and “Empowerment” in Development Policy

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Acronyms

| | |
|---------------|--|
| CSO | civil society organization |
| DAC | Development Assistance Committee |
| HIPC | heavily indebted poor countries |
| IDS | Institute of Development Studies |
| IDT | International Development Target |
| IFI | international financial institution |
| ILO | International Labour Organization |
| MDD | Millennium Development Declaration |
| MDG | Millennium Development Goals |
| NGO | non-governmental organization |
| OECD | Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development |
| PRSP | Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper |
| SAP | structural adjustment programme |
| Sida | Swedish International Development Agency |
| UN | United Nations |
| UNDP | United Nations Development Programme |
| UNICEF | United Nations Children's Fund |
| UNRISD | United Nations Research Institute for Social Development |
| WDR | World Development Report |

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Summary/Résumé/Resumen

Summary

In the fast-moving world of development policy, buzzwords play an important part in framing solutions. Today's development orthodoxies are captured in a seductive mix of such words, among which "poverty reduction", "participation" and "empowerment" take a prominent place. These words give today's development policies a sense of purposefulness and optimism. They suggest a governable, controllable world where everyone gets a chance to take part in making the decisions that affect their lives, where policies neatly map out a route for implementation. But what difference do these words make? Has their use led to any meaningful change in the policies pursued by mainstream development?

This paper takes a critical look at how these three terms have come to be used in international development policy, exploring how different configurations of words frame and justify particular kinds of development interventions. It begins by investigating the form and function of development buzzwords in the statements of intent of development agencies, exploring their performative effects as well as their semantic qualities. Second, it discusses how these buzzwords have changed over time, and analyses their use in the context of two contemporary development policy instruments, the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Finally, the discussion broadens to reflect on the place of such terms in development policy more generally.

The argument put forward in this paper is that the terms we use are never neutral. They come to be given meaning as they are put to use in policies. And these policies, in turn, influence how those who work in development come to think about what they are doing. The way words come to be combined allows certain meanings to flourish, and others to become barely possible to think with. We show how words that once spoke of politics and power have come to be reconfigured in the service of today's one-size-fits-all development recipes, spun into an apoliticized form that everyone can agree with. As such, we contend, their use in development policy may offer little hope of the world free of poverty that they are used to evoke.

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Résumé

Dans le monde de la politique de développement, où les choses changent vite, les mots à la mode sont pour beaucoup dans la présentation des solutions. Aujourd'hui, les conceptions orthodoxes du développement se résument en un assemblage séduisant de mots, parmi lesquels la "réduction de la pauvreté", la "participation" et l'"autonomisation" ont une place de choix. Ces mots donnent une impression de justesse et rendent optimiste quant aux politiques de développement actuelles. Ils laissent à penser que le monde est gouvernable, contrôlable, que chacun y a la possibilité de prendre part aux décisions qui ont une incidence sur sa vie et que les politiques établissent clairement le mode d'emploi à suivre dans la pratique. Mais quelle différence font ces mots? Leur emploi a-t-il entraîné un changement quelconque des politiques poursuivies par ceux qui dominent le développement?

Les auteurs portent ici un regard critique sur la manière dont ces trois termes et expressions ont été employés dans la politique de développement internationale, en étudiant comment différents assemblages de mots décrivent et justifient des types particuliers d'intervention en matière de développement. Elles commencent par s'interroger sur la forme et la fonction de ces mots à la mode dans les déclarations d'intention des agences de développement, en étudiant leurs effets performatifs autant que leurs qualités sémantiques. Ensuite, elles se demandent en quoi ces mots à la mode ont changé avec le temps et analysent leur emploi dans deux outils de

la politique de développement actuelle, les documents de stratégie pour la réduction de la pauvreté (DSRP) et les Objectifs de développement pour le Millénaire (ODM). Enfin, elles élargissent le débat pour mener une réflexion sur la place de tels termes et expressions dans la politique de développement en général.

Les termes que nous employons ne sont jamais neutres: tel est l'argument avancé dans ce document. On leur donne un sens par l'usage qu'on en fait dans les politiques. Et ces politiques, à leur tour, influent sur la façon dont ceux qui travaillent dans le développement envisagent ce qu'ils font. La manière de combiner les mots permet à certains sens de faire florès alors que d'autres sont pratiquement impossibles à intégrer intellectuellement. Les auteurs montrent que des mots qui renvoyaient naguère à la politique et au pouvoir ont été reconfigurés pour entrer aujourd'hui dans des recettes de développement passe-partout et vidés de leur sens politique pour convenir à tout le monde. Elles en concluent que l'emploi de tels mots dans la politique de développement ne laisse guère espérer l'avènement de ce monde sans pauvreté qu'ils évoquent.

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Resumen

En el dinámico mundo de la política de desarrollo, las palabras de moda desempeñan una función importante en la definición de las soluciones. Las ortodoxias actuales sobre el desarrollo se reflejan en una mezcla seductiva de estas palabras, entre las cuales ocupan espacio prominente los términos "reducción de la pobreza", "participación" y "empoderamiento". Estas palabras confieren a las políticas de desarrollo de hoy un sentido de finalidad y optimismo; sugieren un mundo gobernable y controlable en el cual todos tienen la oportunidad de participar en la toma de decisiones que afectan sus vidas, y donde las políticas trazan con toda nitidez la ruta para su consecución. ¿Pero qué cambio entrañan estas palabras? ¿El uso de estos términos produjo alguna modificación importante en las políticas que siguen las actividades de desarrollo predominantes?

En el presente documento se hace un análisis crítico de la forma en que se ha llegado a utilizar estos tres términos en la política de desarrollo internacional, al estudiar la forma en que diferentes configuraciones de palabras encuadran y justifican tipos particulares de intervenciones de desarrollo. En este análisis se comienza por investigar la forma y función de las palabras de moda en las declaraciones de intención de los organismos de desarrollo y se exploran sus efectos sobre el desempeño así como sus cualidades semánticas. Posteriormente se debate cómo estas palabras de moda han cambiado en el transcurso del tiempo y se analiza su uso en el contexto de dos instrumentos contemporáneos de política de desarrollo: los Documentos de Estrategia de Lucha contra la Pobreza (DELP) y los Objetivos de Desarrollo del Milenio (ODM). Para concluir, el análisis amplía su ámbito para reflexionar sobre el lugar que ocupan estos términos en la política de desarrollo en general.

El argumento que se postula en el presente documento es que los términos que utilizamos nunca son neutros; terminan por adquirir un sentido a medida que se utilizan en las políticas. Y estas políticas inciden a su vez sobre la forma en que quienes trabajan en el campo del desarrollo llegan a pensar sobre lo que están haciendo. La manera en que las palabras llegan a combinarse permite que florezcan ciertos significados, mientras que otros apenas pueden comprenderse. En el documento se muestra la forma en que las palabras que alguna vez se utilizaron para hablar de política y poder se han reconfigurado al servicio de las actuales recetas "talla única" para el desarrollo y adquirido una forma apolítica que todo el mundo puede aceptar. Es nuestra opinión que, en ese sentido, el uso de estas palabras en la política de desarrollo puede brindar pocas esperanzas de alcanzar ese mundo libre de pobreza que las mismas suelen evocar.

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Introduction

The last 10 years have witnessed the most remarkable apparent confluence of positions in the international development arena. Barely any development actor could take serious issue with the way the objectives of development are currently framed. This new consensus is captured in a seductive mix of buzzwords. "Participation" and "empowerment", words that are "warmly persuasive" (Williams 1976:76) and fulsomely positive, promise an entirely different way of doing business; harnessed in the service of "poverty reduction" and decorated with the clamours of "civil society" and "the voices of the poor", they speak to an agenda for transformation that combines no-nonsense pragmatism with almost unimpeachable moral authority. It is easy enough to get caught up in the emotive calls for action, to be moved by talk of poor people "crying out for change" (Narayan et al. 2000), to feel that in the midst of all the uncertainties and instabilities of the day international institutions are working together for the good, and that they have now got the story right and are really going to make a difference.

Today's development policies capture this sense of purposefulness and resound with a decisive ring of optimism. They evoke a world where everyone gets a chance to take part in making the decisions that affect their lives, where no one goes hungry or is discriminated against, and where opportunities exist for all to thrive: a governable, regulable, controllable world in which policies neatly map out a route-map for implementation. Open the newspaper and the first few pages often have enough talk of violent death, inequity, deprivation and misery to make one feel the world we live in is hardly a place where a "world without poverty" could ever come to exist. From the delicate tinkle of the fountain in the atrium at the World Bank's H-Street headquarters and the soft-carpeted corridors of the hotels favoured by the development elite on mission, to the sublime confidence that permeates the marketing of solutions by the army of consultants and advisors who occupy these spaces, the trappings of the development industry are part of a world that is ever more removed from the world in which poor people live their everyday lives.

Three terms, "poverty reduction", "participation" and "empowerment" have gained considerable purchase in recent years in the language of mainstream development. Carrying the allure of optimism and purpose, as well as properties that endow them with considerable normative power, these words have not completely permeated the terrain of development policy. But their presence in the language of the most influential development agencies would appear, at first sight, to represent a considerable shift in approach. What difference has all this made? Has it led to any meaningful change in the policies pursued by mainstream development? One way to approach this would be a comprehensive look at what is actually being done in the name of poverty reduction, participation, and empowerment, and to ask questions about to what extent this represents real differences in practice – or simply, as some might charge, the appropriation of nice-sounding words to dress up "business as usual". This is an important task, one that a number of researchers have turned their attention to in recent years.¹

But, we suggest here, another tack is to enquire into what these words, *as words*, do for development policy.² Sorel (1941), writing in 1908, cautions that comparing statements of intent with what actually happens in practice is to misunderstand their purpose. The fine-sounding words that are used in development policies do more than provide a sense of direction: they lend the legitimacy that development actors need in order to justify their interventions. Paying closer attention to the ways in which particular development buzzwords have come to be used, then, sheds interesting light on the normative project that is development. "The task of deconstructing particular aspects of development discourse", Gardner and Lewis argue,

¹ See, for example, Crewe and Harrison (1999) and Mosse (2004).

² In doing so, we take our cues from the fascinating and important work that has been done in recent years on discourses of development, such as Gasper and Apthorpe (1996), Gardner and Lewis (1996) and Grillo and Stirrat (1997).

can have a directly practical and political outcome, for to reveal what at first sight appears to be objective reality as a construct, the product of particular historical and political contexts, helps problematise dominant paradigms and open the way for alternative discourses (2000:19).

It is in this vein that this paper is intended. Before we begin, a caveat is called for. The way policies work in an organization depends on a host of factors, from organizational culture to the nature of existing bureaucratic fiefdoms. Every development organization is a complex agent, not just an actor whose views and positions can be personified and treated as singular. The published policies of development agencies are often products of successful discourse coalitions, but might be produced by a handful of people whose views do not necessarily resonate with others within their own organization.³ It is an almost inherent property of buzzwords that they facilitate a multiplicity of contingent, situational and relational meanings. How these come to be negotiated in particular settings would reveal further differences in perspective, and the way in which these perspectives are translated into concrete practices involves further layers of contestation over meaning.⁴ In focusing here on the discursive, we acknowledge that this is one of many arenas in which meanings are contested; without privileging words over actions, we suggest that discursive framings *are* important in shaping development practice, even if a host of other factors come into play in affecting what actually happens on the ground.

Our analysis proceeds in three steps. First, we investigate the form and function of development buzzwords in the statements of intent of development agencies, exploring their performative effects as well as their semantic qualities. Second, we situate the use of these buzzwords in shifting configurations over time, focusing in some detail on two frames of reference for development intervention that have gained currency in recent years: the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Here, poverty reduction and participation come together, with empowerment as an implicit adjunct. Our third step is to situate the shifting configurations of the three buzzwords against a wider backdrop of reflections on the place of such terms in development policy.

Discourses and Dissonances

Nobody trying to be influential can afford to neglect the fine art of buzzwords. ... Images conveyed by simple terms are taken as reality, and words are increasingly loaded with ideological symbolism and political correctness. It may seem innocuous. It surely is not. Why make a fuss? The reason is that the terms we use help to shape the policy agenda [...] The linguistic crisis is real, and is not going to go away (Standing 2001:13).

There is something about today's development language that is quite at odds with the hard-edged linearity of the dominant tropes in development thinking. Many of the terms with which we have become so familiar in recent years evoke a comforting mutuality, a warm and reassuring consensus, ringing with the satisfaction of everyone pulling together to pursue a set of common goals for the well-being of all. They are what Williams (1976) called "keywords": words that evoke, and come to carry, the cultural and political values of the time. Take, for example, the following excerpt from a speech delivered at the plenary meeting of the United Nations (UN)-hosted, Financing for Development conference in Monterrey, Mexico, in 2002, by James Wolfensohn, president of the World Bank and a master of the art of feel-good rhetoric:

³ This becomes evident in recent work on the politics of the policy process, notably that of Hajer (1993) and Keeley and Scoones (2003).

⁴ See, for example, Bebbington et al. (2004) on "social capital" in the World Bank, and Cornwall and Pratt (2004) on "participation" in the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida).

What is this new partnership? It is an understanding that leaders of the developing and developed world are united by a global responsibility based on ethics, experience and self-interest. It is recognition that opportunity and empowerment – not charity – can benefit us all. It is an acknowledgement that we will not create long-term peace and stability until we acknowledge that we are a common humanity with a common destiny. Our futures are indivisible. And we have the makings of just such a new partnership before us. A new generation of leaders is taking responsibility in developing countries. Many of these leaders are tackling corruption, putting in place good governance, giving priority to investing in their people, and establishing an investment climate to attract private capital. They are doing it in the private sector, in civil society, in government and in communities. *They are doing it not because they have been told to. But because they know it is right* (World Bank, 2002, our emphasis).

Redolent with purpose, his speech couples terms like "understanding", "recognition", "acknowledgment" with together-words—"united", "us all", "common humanity with a common destiny", "our futures"—to stake out a normative position as consensus.

"Crucial in all policy practice", Gasper and Apthorpe (1996:6) argue, "is framing, specifically who and what is actually included, and who and what is ignored and excluded". In *Ways of Worldmaking* (1978), the philosopher Nelson Goodman argues that how we interpret the world depends on the frame of reference that we use. Different "ways of worldmaking" use different frames of reference, and can produce very different views of what is true or right. "A statement is true and a description or representation right", he argues, "for a world it fits" (1978:132). Applying Goodman's insights to development is instructive. Policies, speeches and mission statements create versions of the world that fit particular frames of reference. But these frames of reference may be so utterly different that a statement that is true for one way of worldmaking may make no sense for another. For example, the mission statement, "For a World Free of Poverty" is shared by ActionAid, the World Bank and War on Want. Seen through the frame of their different approaches to the way of worldmaking that is development, three distinctively different possible worlds come into view.

Buzzwords are an ever-present part of the worlds that are made and sustained by development agencies. Making sense of what they do for development calls for closer attention to be paid to the discourses of which they form part. By discourse, we mean the "ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categories through which meaning is given to phenomena" (Hajer 1993:45). The term "discourse" has become so overused in development studies it has itself gained the status of a buzzword, and is often taken as monolithic, totalizing: impossible to change. This, we suggest, is far from the case—certainly not in the work of Foucault (1979), whose argument for the strategic reversibility of discourse is central to ours here. As he suggests:

There is not, on the one side, a discourse of power and opposite it, another discourse that runs counter to it. Discourses are tactical elements or blocks operating in the field of force relations; there can exist different and even contradictory discourses within the same strategy; they can, on the contrary, circulate without changing their form from one strategy to another, opposing strategy (pp. 101-102).

Within and among development agencies, as we go on to suggest, competing ideologies coexist within the same discourse; despite the apparent uniformity of today's development consensus, which masks dissonance, different actors invest key terms like poverty reduction, empowerment and participation with a range of different meanings. "Discourses frame certain problems" by distinguishing "some aspects of a situation rather than others", Hajer (1993:45) argues. In doing so, they define paths of action, containing in their problem-statements certain kinds of solutions. The term poverty *reduction*, for example, rings with measurability, and harks to the rationality of policies that can serve to bring poverty into check. Poverty *alleviation* carries quite a different set of meanings, a making-better rather than making-less; and to talk of

eradication, as the UN so fulsomely did some years ago, before being swept up in the discourse of poverty reduction once more, is to evoke another world altogether (Øyen 1999).

Particular combinations of buzzwords are linked together in development policies through what Laclau (1996) calls “chains of equivalence”: words that work together to evoke a particular set of meanings. In recent years, the chains of equivalence into which poverty reduction, participation and empowerment have been brought have included a range of other buzzwords—partnership, accountability, governance, ownership, transparency, rights-based approach and so on. Configuring participation and empowerment with “governance”, for example, produces a different set of possibilities than would be the case if governance were to be replaced with “social protection”. As a word comes to be included in a chain of equivalence, those meanings that are consistent with other words in the chain come to take precedence over other, more dissonant, meanings. The more words that become part of the chain, the more that meaning resides in the connections between them. Pared down to the elements that would permit coherence, the terms that form part of today’s development jargon are reduced to monochrome; while they may be filled with other meanings when deployed in other contexts, by other actors, their appearance as consensus neutralizes dissonant elements that would otherwise jar.

The world that appears through the frame of reference of the international consensus consists of similar objects to previous versions; it is made familiar enough to feel comfortable with elements that work to “anchor” (Moscovici 1984) as well as to assuage (Roe 1991). But there is a growing feeling that the words that are used as part of this project of worldmaking have lost their meaning; a feeling that Standing (2001:12) talks of as veritable “linguistic crisis”. In what follows, we sketch out some of the discursive shifts that have got us where we are now, exploring shifting and plural meanings of poverty reduction, participation and empowerment and the ways in which they have been configured over the last 30 years. Our attention then turns to the MDGs and PRSPs, as it is here that our three buzzwords come together in the service of the consensus; it is here that the increased rhetorical and operational coherence between international development actors is at its most evident. Occupying central positions in supranational governance discourse about what needs to be done in development, and how to go about it, the PRSPs and MDGs encode the declared consensus in linear logic; poverty reduction, participation and empowerment are invoked in defining both means and ends.

The narratives of poverty reduction, participation and empowerment put forward by the PRSPs and MDGs are complementary. Patterns of narrative coevolution are clear. However, there are also essential contrasts between the two, concerning the configurations of actors associated with each discourse, and their imperatives and agency, and the operational elements of the policy instruments associated with the narratives. Each stems from a distinct trajectory, deriving from the UN conferences of the post-Cold War era on the one hand, and from the hegemony of the poverty imperative within international agencies on the other. Both have been shaped by the engagement, demands and pressures of non-governmental actors; and through the enlistment of nation-states, although through very different modes and with different positions of opportunity and power. Examining these contrasts and complementarities foregrounds the processes by which discursive shifts happen and coalesce in changed models for policy.

The Art of Euphemism in an Era of Declared Consensus

Poverty reduction, participation and empowerment are feel-good terms: they connote warm and nice things, conferring on their users that goodness and rightness that development agencies need to assert in order to assume the legitimacy to intervene in the lives of others. At times, they come to be used as metonyms: that is, they come to stand for something bigger, signifying the normative project of development or indeed the grander-still interpretation of rightness that Wolfensohn is so fond of evoking. Each word has a distinctive history; and each has been, to a greater or lesser extent, mainstreamed across international development agencies, being configured and reconfigured in chains of equivalence with a range of other development buzzwords.

Poverty reduction may be the contemporary euphemism for today's development consensus, but the term poverty is bound up with the very notion of development (Escobar 1995; Rist 1997). Participation has long associations with social movements, and with the struggle for citizenship rights and voice.⁵ As politically ambivalent as it is definitionally vague, participation has been used for centuries as a means to enable ordinary people to gain political agency and engage in shaping the decisions that affect their lives, but also as a powerful means of maintaining relations of rule (Cohen and Uphoff 1980). Its uses for neutralizing political opposition (Vengroff 1974) and taxing the poorest (Chambers 1974; Salole 1991) were tried and tested in the colonial era before being deployed in the service of neoliberalism (Ribot 1996; Rist 1997). Ideas about its benefits have been part of mainstream development discourse since the early 1970s, appearing, for example, in the United States government's 1973 Foreign Assistance Act (Cohen and Uphoff 1980), although it is only in the last decade that they have been taken up more widely in attempts to shape the way in which development is done. These competing currents continue to course through discursive representations and practices of participation.

Empowerment has a more curious history, having gained the most expansive semantic range of all, with meanings pouring into development from an enormous diversity of sources, which include feminist scholarship, the Christian right, New Age self-help manuals, and business management (Moore 2001; Henkel and Stirrat 2001). Its rise in the World Bank in recent years is a story embedded in the harnessing of a range of relational buzzwords by a particular actor-network to create bureaucratic and policy space (Bebbington et al. 2004), as indeed to "strike a positive chord with those 'progressive' groups on whom the very existence of international aid agencies and programmes increasingly depends" (Moore 2001:322-323). Ironically, the feminist emphasis on the politics of the personal has been only too readily taken up in the service of individualism. While empowerment retains a prominent place in agencies' policies concerning gender, it often appears in mainstream policy discourses in a diluted form, neutralizing its original emphasis on building personal and collective power in the struggle for a more just and equitable world (Rowlands 1997).

Jan Vandemoortele, of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), notes two underlying threads in the construction of the declared consensus:

The partnership between rich and poor countries takes many forms, including foreign aid or official development assistance. In essence, there are two major dimensions to that partnership: one is concerned with 'money changing hands' the other with 'ideas changing minds' (2004:2).

In the discussion that follows we explore the trajectories of poverty reduction, participation and empowerment in the interplay between "money changing hands" and "ideas changing minds" that is international development.⁶ Our narrative begins in the 1970s and traces threads across the intervening decades to the present. Necessarily brief, superficial and selective, this overview seeks to highlight the moments and movements that we see as critical antecedents to today's policy narratives.

Poverty reduction, participation and empowerment

A brief consensus about the centrality of poverty reduction as the goal of development was given permission in the early 1970s by the Cold War geopolitical imperative of preventing the poor from seeking solutions in Communism; the World Bank, under the leadership of Robert McNamara, widened the focus of its lending, beginning to embrace rural development for small farmers, and the provision of social services to the rural and urban poor. Beneficiary participation was envisaged as a critical component of development projects and policies even at this juncture (Chambers 1974; Cohen and Uphoff 1980), and was articulated with the same mixture of pragmatism and principle that is found in today's calls for participation. What was

⁵ See ILO (1978), Pearse and Stiefel (1979) cited in Stiefel and Wolfe (1994), Rahman (1995) and Gaventa (2002).

⁶ See Brock et al. (2001) and Cornwall (2000) for longer overviews of the uses of "poverty reduction" and "participation", respectively.

then termed “popular participation” had, of course, a much longer history, one that captures some of today’s ambivalences but also carries with it some of the radicalism that many bemoan as having been lost in today’s participation discourses (Cornwall 2000).⁷

Contemporaneous with this focus on poverty reduction was the development of the basic needs approach, which suggested that the focus of aid should shift from investment in capital formation to the development of human resources. Popular participation was positioned as a central pillar of this approach. Statements from UN organizations articulating this relationship are revealing in their similarity to contemporary narratives. In one of the most resonant with the kind of language used in today’s consensus, in 1975 the United Nations Economic and Social Council urged governments to

adopt popular participation as a basic policy measure in national development strategy...[and] encourage the widest possible active participation of all individuals and national non-government organisations in the development process, in setting goals, formulating policies and implementing plans (cited in Cohen and Uphoff 1980:213).

Almost exactly the same exhortation can be found in the PRSP sourcebook (World Bank, n.d.).

Empowerment, in this era, was envisaged as a radical project of social transformation, focused on building countervailing power to enable otherwise excluded social groups to mobilize collectively to define and claim their rights (Fals-Borda and Rahman 1991; Friedman 1992). It was also a nascent discourse within the growing movement of second-wave feminism, in which it gained the individual as well as collective dimensions that were to give it such purchase in the mainstream where the message it was associated with in this epoch: of grounding the personal in the political (Rowlands 1997). These came to be the dissonant elements that fell away as it came to join words like social capital as part of a chain of equivalence that stripped it of any political potency.

For much of the 1970s, as in the preceding decades when social movements carved out political space from which to press their demands, the spheres of officialized beneficiary participation and popular mobilization intersected, but remained largely distinct. It was this interface that was of particular interest to a network convened by Andrew Pearse and others at the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) in the late 1970s. In 1979, UNRISD’s popular participation programme was launched. Its focus was “the encounter between the pursuit of livelihood by popularly-based groups and the policies being pursued by the state and other ‘developers’” (Barracough 1994:xii). Participation was, for the UNRISD team, fundamentally about the redistribution of power, and was defined as:

the organized efforts to increase control over resources and regulative institutions in given social situations, on the part of groups and movements hitherto excluded from such control (Stiefel and Wolfe 1994:5).

We will return to the prescience of many of the conclusions from this project, and the continued relevance of the way in which it chose to frame participation.

From grassroots movements to networks of practitioners spanning north and south, participatory approaches became a focus for innovation over the course of the 1970s, and into the 1980s. But while grassroots community development work was reframing development, with methodologies such as Development Leadership Teams in Action and Participatory Action Research, what participation had come to mean to the mainstream was less to do with radical

⁷ Threads of 1970s participation discourses, both radical and pragmatic, can be traced further back in the domestication of dissent through colonial community development (Presley 1988) and decentralized governance, or indirect rule (Ribot 1996). Traces of these experiences patterned participation in struggles over political space in the global South; they were also, of course, patterned by shifting configurations of power in the political contexts that shaped the policies of development agencies, whether the waves of popular participation in America and Europe over the course of the 1960s, or the politics of the Cold War.

shifts in power than engaging communities in sharing the costs, and the burdens, of development—much like today's Community-Driven Development. The 1970s slogan of self-reliance was fast being transformed into the "do-it-for-yourself" ethos that was to characterize mainstream development in the 1980s.

Domesticating participation, disciplining the poor

The rising power of neoliberal orthodoxy, triggered by oil crises and the election of right-wing governments in Britain, the United States and other powerful countries, heralded an era of unprecedented power for the international financial institutions (IFIs). Their structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) firmly reinstated technical and economic policy solutions to underdevelopment. Nonetheless, project funding by donor and creditor agencies spanned the two eras, and continued to create spaces for practices in which new meanings of both participation and poverty reduction were shaped and negotiated.

During the 1980s, earlier people-centred narratives of popular participation met the exigencies arising out of neoliberal reforms and the realities of the rolled-back state. Community participation became a channel through which popular participation began to be operationalized. In the process, it took a rather different shape than that conveyed by the statements of intent that preceded it. Rather than seeking to involve "the people" in defining their own development, 1980s community participation largely focused on engaging "intended beneficiaries" in development projects. Cost-sharing and the co-production of services emerged as dominant modes of participation; the concept of ownership began to be stripped of any association with a transfer of power and control and invoked to describe the need for people to make contributions in cash or kind to support these processes.

What participation meant to mainstream development agencies in the 1980s rarely went beyond cost sharing and consultation; Paul's (1987) review of World Bank projects highlights how few had empowerment as an explicit objective. What is perhaps most ironic about the entry of the term empowerment into the chain of equivalence that is today's governance-speak is that the very same projects might now be reclassified, and indeed celebrated, as contributing to empowerment goals, much as the label Community-Driven Development has served to rebrand otherwise unfashionable interventions.

A decisive impetus for further reconfigurations of meanings came in the last half of the 1980s. Critiques of the negative economic effects of adjustment were an essential stage in catalyzing a broader discursive shift about the nature of poverty, as well as providing a home for the sanitized versions of participation, which were a familiar part of the development landscape by the mid-1980s. The publication of *Adjustment With a Human Face* by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) was pivotal in this regard (Cornia et al. 1987). In making its critique of the SAPs, the report fulfilled several important functions. It served as a singular and morally authoritative voice to transmit the broad concerns of a wide range of development actors, many of them non-governmental organizations (NGOs), making some of these criticisms audible to the IFIs. The report presented a hybrid agenda, characterizing the failure of the SAPs as one of implementation rather than conceptualization; this lack of foundational critique increased its audibility. The policy coalition it represented was able to exercise influence through translation of a diversity of unheard opinions into influential language and networks.

In its arguments about enhanced participation, it offered the IFIs a vision of a potential route to neutralizing future opposition, one that was more than familiar to the colonial authorities:

Community participation is an essential ingredient of adjustment with a human face. On the one hand, it can help generating the political support needed to overcome short-term political and bureaucratic opposition. On the other, it is essential for the planning, implementing, and success of the approaches devised, as well as for keeping the cost of the programmes down by means of community contributions (Cornia et al. 1987:295).

Indeed, some would suggest community participation was subsequently actively fostered by international agencies such as the World Bank precisely because of the opportunities it afforded for countering grassroots resistance to reforms, providing a palliative that served to neutralize popular resistance to the SAPs (Rahman 1995; Leal and Opp 1998). The practice of participation to which it gave rise served to render technical what were essentially political problems, providing non-challenging support for orthodox development solutions.

A marriage of convenience?

Just as the uptake of community participation in World Bank practice reveals a different normative use of the concept from its historical antecedents, the incorporation of some elements of the basic needs approach into World Bank policy narrative contribute to a subtle reframing of the problems and solutions of poverty reduction. The 1990 *World Development Report* (WDR), dedicated to poverty, shows strong traces of the policy agenda put forward in *Adjustment With a Human Face* – advocating investment in human capital and social safety nets (World Bank 1990). These elements are wedded in a marriage of convenience to the achievement of income poverty reduction through economic growth; but it is growth, and technical prescriptions for attaining it through macroeconomic stability, privatization and liberalization, that dominates the discourse.

Looking forward a decade, from the WDR 1990 to the WDR 2000/1, several discursive shifts are discernible. First, the World Bank's narrative had acquired a *moral* tone: garnished liberally with quotations from "poor people", the report attempts to establish moral authority through introducing a new vocabulary (Gaventa 2001). A second shift concerns the definition of the problem: the nature of poverty, which by 2000/2001, on the surface at least, is presented as a multidimensional phenomenon. Third, the framing of a solution to poverty reduction has shifted: by 2000/2001 the "two and a half prong" approach of the WDR 1990 had given way to the PRSPs and the new, coordinated partnership of aid – with the state reinstated as a "partner" in the enterprise, with whom external development actors conduct "policy dialogue" in the new language of euphemism.

Events in the 1990s gave rise to the simultaneous co-creation of the three elements of discursive shift, and the changed practice implied by the WDR 2000/1 agenda. With hindsight, this era could be characterized as one where the World Bank reshaped its existing narratives to make them more palatable to an increasingly critical international community; the public reputation of the IFIs needed to be overhauled. Simultaneously, however, the multidimensional nature of poverty needed to be negotiated in order to conform to the "hegemony of rational choice theory" (Eyben 2004:16) and thus be internally palatable; participation needed to be rebranded to connect it to a logic of free market access; and the practices of Southern governments needed to be controlled beyond explicit conditionalities. Several key episodes were important here. Major UN summits – especially those at Rio in 1992 and Copenhagen in 1995 – provided spaces for declarations, which, while they did not result in structural change, did catalyze influential new discourse coalitions and networks of change agents in development finance institutions, and in bilateral agencies (Bebbington et al. 2004; Eyben 2004). Rio, for example, offered legitimacy to those who advocated sustainable development, some of whom went on to be key movers and shakers in their advocacy of participation; Copenhagen did the same for those who considered that the state was central to the provision of social services.

One effect of the rediscovery of what was left of the state in the poverty reduction discourse of the later 1990s was to extend advocacy of participation beyond the realm of projects into the broader terrain of economic, social and political life in the context of an attenuated state. Advocates in the mid-1990s used successful examples of scaling up participation to argue for mainstreaming in government agencies (Thompson 1995; Blackburn et al. 1999). Empowerment was still, by the late 1990s, a term that had a more radical ring to it, and was often invoked by participation practitioners in contrast to the forms of practice associated with the scaled-up

activities of bilateral and multilateral agencies (Cornwall et al. 2001; Pratt 2001). But then, as now, it was a term profoundly associated with local-level processes, and with communities.

A second effect, in the later 1990s, came out of the good governance agenda. Participation came to feature increasingly prominently as providing the mechanisms through which these policy objectives might be realized, recast as consumer involvement in shaping service provision and in accountability mechanisms such as the partnership models that had become a feature of local service provision in many countries (Loewenson 2000; Manor 2004). Over the course of the decade, decentralized governance sprang into fashion as the most acceptable route to "good" governance. Offering the answer to multiple ills, development myths about decentralization regularly invoke the participation of "the poor". Conflict and power are as absent from this world as they are from the world we are offered in today's development policies; versions of participation and empowerment invoked in decentralization policies are those that fit the frame, forming part of a chain of equivalence in which the more conflictive elements of both are stripped away in the service of poverty reduction.⁸

Operationalizing the New Consensus: The MDGs and PRSPs

The buzzwords associated with different policy episodes and eras—good governance, partnership, scaling-up, multidimensionality—have shaped existing discourses of participation and poverty reduction, and their relationship to each other in development policy. One outcome of the harnessing of participation to poverty reduction is that a set of policy solutions to development, in the shape of overarching, universalizing models, are now more than ever firmly and explicitly embedded in mainstream discourses of development. The framing of the problem and the solution have become inextricably linked. We view the PRSPs and MDGs as an expression of this linkage, embodying as they do a consensual discourse of collective responsibility for reducing multidimensional poverty.

All three of our buzzwords come together in the PRSPs and MDGs, in which the increased rhetorical and operational coherence between international development actors is at its most evident. Occupying central positions in supranational governance discourses about what needs to be done, and how to go about it, the PRSPs and MDGs encode the declared development consensus in linear logic. While the narratives of poverty reduction, participation and empowerment put forward by the PRSPs and MDGs are complementary, as befitting their pivotal role in the consensus narrative, there are also essential contrasts between them. These contrasts are the echoes of the dissonance that the consensus submerges; they concern the configurations of actors associated with each discourse, their imperatives and agency, and the operational elements of the policy instruments associated with the PRSPs and MDGs. While PRSPs are a development instrument, styled out of pragmatism, backed with economic power, the MDGs are a normative framework, backed with a moral imperative. Both are championed by supranational institutions, but institutions that contrast significantly in function and modes of leverage, tactics and efficacy. Differing in form, these two frames—an instrument and a statement of aspirations—are familiar objects in the landscape of development, which has always rested on some combination of the two.

The narrative of the PRSP consensus—that poverty reduction can only be achieved through country-driven, result-oriented, comprehensive, partnership-oriented, long-term strategies—chimes with the narrative of the MDG consensus: that international development is a measurable moral goal toward that the governments of all countries should strive. Actors across a broad spectrum have been able to fit their own understandings—whether of the need for a multidimensional approach to poverty, effective aid, structural financial reforms, debt relief or citizen participation—into the storyline. It is to the MDGs and the PRSPs that we turn in this

⁸ See Manor (1999) and Crook and Sverrisson (2001) for further, empirical, exploration of the limitations of participation in decentralization narrative and practice, and for a critical view of the relationship between decentralization and poverty reduction.

section, to explore how our buzzwords and the worlds they make translate into targets, instruments and plans.

The MDGs: Targets out of buzzwords

The adoption of the Millennium Declaration by the United Nations General Assembly in September 2000, and the reformulation of the International Development Targets (IDTs)⁹ into the MDGs, can be seen as part of a broader consensus with an extraordinarily diverse buy-in. As well as reflecting the evolving, domesticated narratives of participation and poverty reduction discussed above, the MDGs provided a response to several ongoing debates. Designed not only to meet challenges about the effectiveness of aid, and agendas for greater coherence between the IFIs and donors, the MDGs were also a response to the moral authority and effectiveness of the Jubilee 2000 campaign, which caught the imagination of a global development audience and saw the citizens of Northern countries participating around development issues to a previously unprecedented degree.

Although progress toward the MDGs can be monitored at different levels and scales (Vandemoortele 2004), their primary nature is one of composite measurability. Their narrative is one of measuring change already set in motion, not one of analysis of the forces that produce poverty (Asia Pacific Civil Society Forum 2003). In doing so, however, the MDGs stimulate new conversations, principally about why they might not be met, and what can be done about it. As a set of time-bound, numerical targets, set within a frame of human development, the MDGs imply, rather than direct, necessary policy change. From one angle, they can be seen as the ultimate in compromise, the lowest common denominators of legitimate change, the price of international coherence and cooperation. From another, they can be seen and used as tools for changing minds, and for holding accountable the powerful. As identifiable discourse markers emerging from a supranational space, the MDGs represent a way of worldmaking that lacks any sense of place. As participation, and now empowerment, has become normalized and bureaucratized through exercises in mainstreaming, goals and targets at the global level represent the next step of displacement from the specificities of context. With the mantle of moral credibility that they lend, they are both symbol and product of the new consensus.

While reference to the MDGs appears in many policy documents, usage tends to be decorative; in many advocacy documents, however, they are used to suggest paths of change. Advocacy largely focuses on the behaviour of Northern governments, and has continued both through established networks and constituencies, and through the UN system itself. Jubilee Research, for example, uses the MDGs to advocate debt cancellation, noting that increased aid flows will prove ineffectual in heavily indebted poor countries (HIPC), unless there is a 100 per cent debt cancellation (Greenhill 2002). Meanwhile, paths for Southern civil society organization (CSO) advocacy around the MDGs are considerably less clear. While the UNDP seeks to strengthen the CSO capacity in monitoring both the MDGs and PRSPs, and to extend beyond “their narrow role of ‘social watchdog’” (Vandemoortele 2004:2), there is the possibility of further reinforcing experiences of hollow, invited pseudo-participation that have become so prominent a part of the political landscape in many countries, including in bilateral donors’ own backyards (see, for example, Taylor et al. 2004).

Civil society actors are not the only ones asking why progress on the MDGs, while apparently feasible, is not “on track”. There is a tension between changing minds and winning hearts with advocacy, and the realities of changed practices of Southern governance implied by the very notion of “being on track”. It is worth taking the time to juxtapose two analyses from different sources, because they reveal how some of the implicit assumptions of the MDG narrative play out. The first, from within the UN, addresses the question “why are promises not being kept?” and suggests a way forward, including stronger partnership and deeper participation. What

⁹ In 1996 the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) published *Shaping the 21st Century: The Contribution of Development Co-operation*, which contained seven IDTs that aimed to halve the proportion of people living in extreme poverty by 2015.

meaning do such recommendations have when they are applied to a particular place, a particular context? This is the subject of the second extract, from an empirical study of the domestic politics of the Tanzanian PRSP, which discusses the meanings that emerge when buzzwords like partnership and participation are applied to an existing context.

Why are the promises not being kept? Why are hundreds of millions of people struggling to overcome the daily grind of hunger, disease and ignorance when the global economy is experiencing unprecedented prosperity? ... Two reasons stand out in virtually all countries: (i) under-investment in basic social services, and (ii) public action that frequently fails to take advantage of cross-sectoral synergies. ... While the MDGs remain unfulfilled, they also remain feasible and affordable. Committed leadership, stronger partnership, extra money, and deeper participation by the poor can bring the world back on track towards the MDGs (Vandemoortele 2004:16).

The Strategy privileges allocations to social sector spending at the expense of the longer-term structural issues like factor productivity, employment, the viability of smallholder agriculture and agro-industrial linkages. The Government's responsibility for promoting economic transformation is largely restricted to budgetary instruments for the management of aid-sponsored public expenditure. ... The trend of co-ordination and harmonization cements the bonds between the parties to the partnership and contributes to the lowering of the transaction costs of aid management. At the same time, these arrangements also streamline the negotiation and disbursement of new lending from the International Financial Institutions. Since democratic public oversight of foreign lending is virtually non-existent, there is a serious risk that the streamlining of new credits will lead to the rapid accumulation of new debt for social sector investments. ... In sum, the lack of a strategy for economic transformation in concert with the removal of bureaucratic obstacles to new credits is likely to deepen Tanzania's already crippling long-term aid dependency (Gould and Ojanen 2003:7-8).

Read side by side, these two extracts show a worrying set of consequences that are not part of the explicit intentions of the MDG narrative. As both a product and a tool of a supranational arena of governance, the MDGs encapsulate considerable assumptions about how change happens in different arenas: closer "partnership", for example, facilitates new debt as well as lowering transaction costs; focusing on social spending detracts from other issues. Beyond this, it has also been argued that the MDGs make considerable assumptions about the benign nature of the IFIs to create equitable change (Alexander and Kessler 2003), and about the efficacy of the PRSPs as the principal route to mobilize national actors to achieve the MDGs (Bullard 2003).

Policies in practice

Thus far, we have paid particular attention to the dynamics by which discourses of development are transformed among international institutions. But what have the discursive shifts represented by the PRSPs meant in practice?

As the PRSPs, these discourses translate into a policy model that is projected toward existing national level policy processes. These involve a diverse set of actors—some from the supranational level, but also certain agents of national governments, development-oriented CSOs, international NGOs and bilaterals. Beyond this is a third level, where the projected model is transformed anew, through implementation, involving a different set of actors again—agents of decentralized government, service delivery CSOs, citizens, and (ostensibly at least) the poor. The meanings of buzzwords are transmitted and transformed by actors and networks, which overlap across these different domains and levels. The sanitized, consensual meanings from the centre of the discourse are refracted again and again.

The application of discourses of poverty reduction and participation to national processes via the PRSP model refracts into the key binary adjuncts of ownership and partnership. In this

instance, the pair are entirely inseparable: in other words, co-dependent. Gould and Ojanen's study of the Tanzanian PRSP discusses the meanings of ownership and partnership that emerge from implementation:

[In Tanzania,] the international aid agencies have convinced state representatives to remake their multilateral aid relationships into a new breed of 'partnership'. Under the terms of this partnership, the donor community promises African governments greater 'ownership' of their social policies. For the elected leadership, the main perk was the increased leeway for political manoeuvre that the (partial) relief of foreign debt can provide. In return, recipient/partner governments are required to commit themselves to a multi-tethered program of state reform (2003:30).

Framed as a necessity for poverty reduction, country or national ownership is closely related to the narratives of coherence, cooperation and harmonization that are encapsulated by the consensus that emerged from the same conference in Monterrey, where Wolfensohn evoked the rightness of contemporary approaches to poverty reduction. Under the logic of the Monterrey consensus, the MDGs can only be achieved by harmonization of the operational procedures of donors, "ensuring that development assistance is delivered in accordance with partner country priorities, including 'poverty reduction' strategies and similar approaches" (OECD 2003). The implicit assumption, that "poverty reduction" strategies deliver national priorities owned by partner countries, is acted on regardless of ongoing negotiations of meaning, such as those outlined by Gould and Ojanen (2003). Examined in context, rather than in the displaced world of the consensus, the meanings of ownership, partnership and harmonization circumscribe and bound the legitimate terrains of agency for a range of different actors, located in government, civil society and the donor community.

The nature of ownership actually created through the PRSP partnership inheres, at least initially, among a small group of actors (Eyben 2004, Gould and Ojanen 2003), among whom the totalizing nature of the policy model that forms the foundation of the partnership has become deeply ingrained so that "they are no longer capable of imagining other kinds of policy approaches" (Eyben 2004).¹⁰ The new vocabularies of this model, suggests Kakande (2004), can "reinforce status and widen the gap between expert and novice", creating an inner circle of people who share a common language. The master buzzwords of the PRSP—ownership and partnership—may create an overarching embrace, but the new vocabularies that arise from them as they are operationalized spread out beneath and create patterns of exclusion in implementation. The processes of establishing joint meanings for language that signals a united goal require negotiation (Hinton 2004); the dynamics of who is allowed to participate in that conversation of negotiation are part of the pattern of determinants upon which the transformation of model into practice depends.

The dynamics of ownership in this inner circle are at odds with the PRSP narrative, which purports that a broader, social ownership can and should be created through participation. In the PRSP implementation, the consultative processes, which are designed to create this social ownership, have relied on a narrow conceptualization of participation, and often run to externally dictated timetables that seldom regard the rhythm of the domestic policy process.¹¹ They have usually offered limited spaces for engagement to invited CSOs, whose views beyond the consensus, if they are expressed at all, seldom find their way into final documents (Whitehead 2003). Craig and Porter (2003:58) label this phenomenon "surrogate political participation", noting also that the politics of the PRSPs themselves "have hardly been a matter for debate". The framing of CSO participation in the PRSPs creates roles for the CSOs that are not necessarily congruent with their existing form or function (Lister and Nyamugasira 2003) and presents considerable contradictions. International NGOs, proactive in the realm of policy advocacy around the PRSPs,

¹⁰ Reflecting on the implementation of the Bolivian PRSP from the perspective of a bilateral donor.

¹¹ See Knoke and Morazan (2002), Booth (2004) and Stewart and Wang (2003).

have gained new levels of access to the "inner circles of the policy elite" (Gould and Ojanen 2003:8). In some cases, this has created a crowding out of national NGOs.

In both the bureaucracy and the polity, the implementation of the PRSP model has infused the partnership and ownership binary with meaning; in doing so, it has also demonstrated what partnership and ownership do not mean. Creation of meaning circumscribes versions of change; policy change is as much about what is *not* said and done as about what is said and done. Country ownership, for example, has seldom meant the participation of democratically elected actors in a PRSP process. Further, the poverty analysis presented in the PRSPs is not structural; the distribution of resources, income, human capital and power are not analysed or understood. Nor do they offer an understanding of the national distribution of resources, income, human capital and power (Whitehead 2003). Many commentators note that the PRSPs seldom vary, usually prescribing the three or four basic prongs that mirror the WDR 2000/1 framework.¹² Craig and Porter (2003) note:

PRSPs' silence in the face of rising concern about the pervasiveness of unequal market power, consolidating corporate power, restricted migration and access to rich economies, and local political realities (elite capture, underregulated monopolies, rising global and local inequalities) has fuelled critics. Promoting universal global integration, while remaining silent about power issues, PRSPs heighten critics' fears that they serve as an instrument of hegemonic economic interests.

The mutually reinforcing dynamics of ownership and partnership mean the perpetuation of the dominant narrative, almost regardless of what is going on either behind the façade of participating institutions, or at the level of national policy. Potential change here is circumscribed, hemmed in and bounded, by the discursive shifts that have already taken place upstream in time and space, in the centres of global power.

Little attention, then, is paid to the actual dynamics of the national policy level, the interface where the policy model may be expected to create change with a downward orientation. Even less attention has been given to what happens in the contexts where this downward orientation plays out, the level of decentralized governance. Here, where the PRSP is little more than another policy of a distant central government, existing meanings of participation and poverty reduction have been constructed not only through exposure to international development discourses, but through lived experiences of local planning and the structures of the state. These experiences are often at odds not only with the world of the national PRSP, but also with the positive visions of ownership and partnership encapsulated by the supranational consensus narrative. A snapshot image of a subcounty planning meeting in Uganda illustrates some of the disjunctures of meaning to which the disconnection between worlds gives rise (see box 1).

While a single snapshot such as this obscures the complexity of local political dynamics, it does serve to illustrate the refractions of meaning discussed above. Participatory, demand-driven, poverty alleviation and ownership are all invested with meanings that differ radically from the imagined, decontextualized world of the consensus narrative. A participatory process is one in which participants cannot ask questions, and are told what to do. The demands that drive local development are made in the form of material contributions. Ownership is created through listening to an inaudible rendition of problems, and an illegible rendering of solutions.

The PRSPs and the consensus narrative they represent are, as we argue above, seductive; but they are also profoundly decontextualized from the kind of scenario described in the snapshot. They focus the gaze of development's civic audience on the centre of the state, where the PRSP consultation circus is being enacted in the services of a benign set of goals, firmly framed in an

¹² For Craig and Porter (2003), these are: (i) promoting opportunity (as broad-based growth); (ii) facilitating empowerment—by promoting good governance, especially anti-corruption; (iii) enhancing security—by investing in health and education, which often includes a fourth: social protection (to protect the marginal).

assimilated, yet foreign, language of moral imperative. Watching this show—speculating on what the PRSPs might offer development via their intended and unintended consequences—helps us forget the street outside the theatre, the world outside, and the action backstage.

Box 1: Implementing the PRSP in Uganda: Participatory local planning for “poverty reduction”?

The sub-county administration is holding a four-day planning meeting as part of its planning process. The District Planner proudly tells us that this is a “participatory, bottom-up planning process”. It is supposed to contribute to a locally-owned development plan, which will dictate how resources from debt relief, secured by the government through the elaboration of a PRSP, will be spent on poverty reduction. Elected councillors from village, parish and sub-county, and representatives of civil society, have been invited to attend the meeting.

One of the meeting facilitators informs us that the purpose of the gathering is “to tell the sub-county representatives what government policies are so that they can correct their sub-county plans according to these guidelines”.

Attending the meeting are about 120 people, of whom perhaps 10 are women. They sit in classroom-like rows facing a raised platform on which several officials—all men—were seated. “Situation analyses” of the water and health sectors are made from the platform. For each sector, the relevant civil servant from the District stands on the platform and addresses the audience, writing key points on flip-charts in writing so small it cannot possibly be legible from the second row of the audience, even if the audience were literate. The presentation is hardly audible from the front row, let alone the back; and it is in English, not the local language.

During the presentation, one of the civil servants notes that “there is a part the community is supposed to play—mobilized community participation—contributing labour and materials to government programmes.” He observes that “the community has to express their demands by making some contribution”.

At the end of the water sector presentation, questions are invited, and one man stands up to enquire about the status of two boreholes in his village which are in disrepair, and what the sub-county might be able to do about this situation. In response, he is asked abruptly and aggressively, “Have you made any contribution? Do you really want this water?” He is unable to reply to this, and sits down again.

Someone attempts another question from the audience, but is ignored by those on the platform.

In closing the meeting, the planner addresses the audience. “The main purpose of us being here”, he says, “is to own these problems. After owning it, you ask yourself why. How do we share the responsibilities? Who should do it? How do you get that person to do it? Exposing ourselves arouses our answers.”

Some weeks after the meeting, we meet a civil servant from the sub-county, waiting for a bus to go to the District capital. He is going to present the sub-county plan, which is the product of the planning meeting we attended. This hand-written plan is organized by sector—health, production, education, administration, and so on. Each sectoral plan was in the form of a flip-chart, with columns for problems, objectives, strategy, activity and source of funding.

The objective of the production sector is “poverty alleviation and improved livelihood of the local population”. Only the health sector plan has anything written in the “source of funding” column.

The civil servant tells us that he has not been told by the District about any sources of funding, or about how much was available. “Not all secrets can be revealed to us down here.”

Source: Karen Brock, fieldnotes.

This has several consequences. It diverts and directs our attention within a single country, away not only from spaces of decentralized governance, but also from non-consultative spaces at the centre where important decisions and negotiations take place. Second, beyond national borders, it takes our attention away from countries and regions of the world that are less dependent on the aid industry, but where mass poverty and inequality are issues with a different political resonance.

While the PRSPs are notionally “country owned”, global targets—to the non-HIPC and HIPC countries, Northern and Southern governments alike—represent attempts to tackle poverty as a *global* phenomenon, one in which every nation is implicated. As such, the MDGs have a potential to galvanize concerted action to tackle the causes as well as symptoms of poverty that is, in many respects, unparalleled; and the terrain on which they are able to do so is in a

universal moral debate about progress. As such they could provide a significant counterbalance to the narrow focus of the PRSPs, harnessing the good intentions of the Millennium Development Declaration (MDD) to urge routes to policy change that depart from the business as usual solutions peddled from Washington. Donors might have latched onto targets, forms that fit more neatly into the linearity of development planning, and are more amenable to the kind of reductionism so evident in the kind of one-size-fits-all solutions that we see emerging from the PRSPs. But the statement of principle they signed up to with the MDD promises something else altogether.

Contrast Wolfensohn's "global responsibility based on ethics, experience and self-interest" with what the Millennium Development Declaration has to say:

We recognise that, in addition to our separate responsibilities to our individual societies, we have a collective responsibility to uphold the principles of human dignity, equality and equity at the global level. As leaders we have a duty therefore to all the world's people, especially the most vulnerable and, in particular, the children of the world, to whom the future belongs (United Nations 2000:paragraph 2).

By locating the world's leaders as duty holders, the MDD situates the commitment they made within a frame of reference set some 14 years before with the declaration of the Right to Development, a right emerging from the successful mobilization of countries in the global South and long sidelined by Northern governments.¹³ The MDD goes on to name a series of fundamental values: freedom, equality, solidarity, tolerance, respect for nature and shared responsibility. Used alone, these terms can be as easily manipulated as any other: think, for example, of the fate of "freedom" in the hands of US President George W. Bush. But, put together in a chain of equivalence, they come to capture something that could serve as a moral underpinning for a way of approaching the MDGs that would give them the bite that so many feel that they currently lack.

Of Myths and Utopias

"Humanity requires 'myths'—inspiring images of battle and triumph—for any substantial forward movement", wrote Hirschmann (1967:31). Citing Sorel's caution not to confuse such promises with any actually existing reality, he contends that "extravagance in promising future benefits" is a necessary part of what makes the development enterprise tick (1967:31).¹⁴ The MDGs might be understood in this vein, as grand, evocative calls to action. The part policy statements play in discourses of development is, in many respects, *performative*: their "extravagance in promising future benefits" is coupled with modelling the very controllability that they wish to bring about (Wood 1985). If policy statements encode these promises, development buzzwords lend them the normative basis they require, swathing development agencies with the mantle of rightness, and conferring on them the legitimacy to intervene on behalf of "the poor" and needy.

We argue in this paper that participation and empowerment, words that speak to the laudable aim of enabling poor people to have voice and choice, have now come to symbolize the legitimacy to pursue today's generation of development blueprints, under the rubric of poverty reduction. In the texts of mainstream development agencies, this triad of "good things" is used to purvey a storyline that situates them as guardians of rightness and champions of progress.

¹³ Indeed the MDD declares, "we are committed to making the right to development a reality for everyone and to freeing the entire human race from want" (United Nations 2000:55/2, para. 11). For one Northern donor, the Department for International Development, this has led to some edgy positioning that places the emphasis firmly on the national government as duty holder, carefully avoiding any implications for supranational actors or other foreign governments who are part of development activities in any given country (Piron 2003).

¹⁴ See Rist's (1997) brilliant and disconcerting analysis of the emergence of "development", and the role of myth in its creation and continuity.

This storyline is more than utopian, in Sorel's (1941) sense: more than an exercise in intellectual construction. It comes imbued with powerful myths about the desirability of donor coordination, policy coherence and a series of embedded assumptions about the doing of development that place the entrenched ideas and practices that undergird the development industry entirely beyond question. Sorel contends:

myths are not descriptions of things, but expressions of a determination to act...A myth cannot be refuted since it is, at bottom, identical with the convictions of a group (1941:33).

Myths safeguard utopias, Sorel argues. The statements of intent that constitute the policies and prescriptions of international development agencies gain the qualities of myth precisely because they are born of convictions: and they seek to call us to action, name what we can do, give us a sense of the possible, and make us into agents of the possible. Like all successful ideologies, they work because they do more than convey a good argument; they compel people to listen because they themselves are the main protagonists of the story (Althusser 1971). Development myths work through emotional identification, not through rationality (Laclau 1996); they build and sustain the feeling of conviction that people need in order to be able to act. Good argument has its place here, but is secondary to something that is of quite a different order: a feeling of rightness, backed by the creation of normative instruments, like the MDGs, which serve an almost ceremonial function in bolstering a feeling of togetherness, purposefulness, of a visionary goal toward which to strive.

But buzzwords are more than pep-words. Their use in development discourse is not just to promote a we-can-do-it boost. The utopias that are shored up by development myths and bolstered by buzzwords are profoundly ideological constructions (Rist 1997). International development organizations may appear to have appropriated concepts once used by radical alternative movements, but they have not necessarily swallowed them whole. Efforts to promote particular concepts within these institutions have produced partial victories, as actor-networks linked to broader, overlapping networks of advocates and activists in civil society organizations have sought to gain ground in their efforts to expand room for manoeuvre within their own institutions, large parts of which may remain entirely unresponsive to new ideas (Bebbington et al. 2004; Cornwall and Pratt 2004).¹⁵ And to talk of terms being co-opted is to assume that buzzwords have singular meanings. But buzzwords are useful in policy statements because they are fuzz-words. Their propensity to shelter multiple meanings with little apparent dissonance makes them politically expedient, shielding those who use them from attack by lending the possibility of common meaning to extremely disparate actors.

The downside of all this is discursive closure: it becomes more difficult to disagree with the use of words like empowerment than it would with the ideas that underpin the way of worldmaking that frame their use by particular institutions. Nice-sounding words are, after all, there for the taking, and the nicer they sound, the more useful they might prove to be for those seeking to establish their moral authority. As Sen (2004) argues, what makes a concept valuable is precisely that which gives it broad-based appeal.¹⁶ To have that appeal, it needs to speak to those who work in development and speak about their preoccupations, their hopes, their values. To become *hegemonic*, in Gramsci's (1971) terms, is to move beyond contests over meaning to unquestioned acceptance. What is perhaps most interesting about the "linguistic crisis" is that the use of euphemism has become so extreme that more and more people are coming to regard words that were once taken for granted as something about which to be a little more circumspect. Hegemony is dissolving into mere ideology; and with it the different ideological underpinnings that constitute different ways of worldmaking come into closer view.

¹⁵ It needs to be borne in mind that these struggles are only ever partially over meaning: they are also over turf, and may be driven as much by bureaucratic convenience and organizational imperative, or by rivalry, ambition and a desire for personal power, as by moral and intellectual conviction.

¹⁶ Comment made in discussions of this paper at the UNRISD conference, Social Knowledge and International Policy Making: Exploring the Linkages, UNRISD, Geneva, 20–21 April 2004.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have considered what our buzzwords have done for mainstream development policy. What might they do for alternatives to the current orthodoxy? To consider this, we return to a definition of participation in which all three buzzwords are implicitly present. It was put forward 25 years ago, as part of UNRISD's ambitious programme of work on popular participation, and spoke of participation as:

the organized efforts to increase control over resources and regulative institutions in given social situations, on the part of groups and movements hitherto excluded from such control (cited in Stiefel and Wolfe 1994:5).

Let us take a closer look at this definition. It is packed with presuppositions, no less partial than any other. But what it does offer is an example where our buzzwords are put to a rather different kind of work, and where a deliberate choice of words reduces ambiguity and signals, with greater clarity than we find in any contemporary statements on participation, what is meant. Participation in this definition does not speak simply of being given information, being asked opinions, being invited to join committees and the like—the lower rungs on the ladders used to assess degrees of involvement (Arnstein 1971; Pretty 1995), which account for most of what passes as participation in development practice today. It speaks of "*organized efforts...on the part of groups and movements hitherto excluded from such control*". This is not the "voices and choices" variety of participation that one might find in a Participatory Poverty Assessment (Narayan et al. 2000; Brock and McGee 2002); nor the "users-as-choosers" variety favoured in sectoral decentralization policies (Cornwall and Gaventa 2001; Manor 2004). Rather, participation is about "*control over resources and regulative institutions*". "After all, everyone 'participates' in society, whether as an effective actor or a passive victim" Stiefel and Wolfe (1994:5) argue. "By specifying 'control'", they point out, "the definition aimed to rule out evasion of the central issue of power. It excluded certain technocratic or paternalistic approaches that aim to provide access to resources and institutions while withholding control." Talking of "*given social situations*", they go on to explain, "was intended to ward off over-generalizations and the quest for universalized prescriptions characteristic of some criticisms of development during the 1970s".

As the "over-generalizations" and "universalized prescriptions" that Stiefel and Wolfe (1994) describe have become the norm, hard questions need to be asked about the failure of the uses to which mainstream ways of making have put our three buzzwords (Leal and Opp 1998; Cornwall 2004). Are they being used to create opportunities for the "hitherto excluded" to "gain control over resources and regulative institutions"? Or for the domestication of potential dissent in arenas far removed from those in which real power lies (Taylor 1998)? Does what Standing (2001:21) terms the "decentration" of power, "the shifting of governance away from the national level, upwards to supra-national levels and downwards to regional or local levels" simply turn nice talk about empowerment into what Moore (2001) calls "cheap talk"? For all the pressure to hold the consensus together, through talk of donor coordination and policy coherence, few could seriously maintain that the neoliberal way of worldmaking is doing anything more than making the world most of us live in more unequal, conflictual and miserable.

Reckoning with the paradox that the words that work in projects of worldmaking are those that lend themselves most to being filled with multiple meanings, we suggest that it is high time more attention was paid to language in development. If words make worlds, struggles over meaning are not just about semantics: they gain a very real material dimension. But if—as some would charge—our three buzzwords have become implacably emptied of meaning, what can be done? One option is to invent new words, or to pilfer from other vocabularies—much as development tends to do with regularity. Participation and empowerment might be abandoned to the dust of history, left for erstwhile radicals to reminisce about and replaced with a sexy, urgent, new term. But what is to stop the next new word sharing the fate of the buzzwords we have discussed here? The World Bank has such propensity to appropriate and rework terms that it is possible to imagine even stubborn old words like "class" being filled with new, self-

referential meanings, threaded into a chain of equivalence with social capital and opportunity, and put to work.

Giving up on participation and empowerment as irrevocably contaminated by their mainstreaming would be to lose concepts that have been critical, for decades, in animating struggles for equality, rights and social justice. It would, as Sen (2004) puts it, not only be giving up the battle but also losing the war. What, then, remains to be done? Let us look at what Sorel, Goodman and Laclau might offer in the way of resources. Poverty reduction, participation and empowerment come together in mainstream development discourse in a chain of equivalence with ownership, accountability, governance and partnership to make the world that the neoliberal model would have us all inhabit. Dissident meanings are stripped away to ensure coherence. But some of these meanings might be recuperated through a similar strategy of using chains of equivalence that link these terms with *other* words to reassert the meanings that have gone into abeyance. In configuration with words like social justice, redistribution and solidarity, there is little place for talk about participation as involving users as consumers, nor about poor people being empowered through the marketization of services that were once their basic right. Nor is there a place for development solutions that fail to recognize how embedded richer countries are in the fortunes of others. Recognizing the strategic reversibility of discourse is important, as it helps us to recognize that alternative ways of worldmaking can take shape even out of the most apparently closed discursive spaces.

While a well-honed critique can chip away at the intellectual edifices built to promote and defend the neoliberal way of worldmaking, we need – with Sorel – to recognize the powerful grip that myths have on people, placing certain assumptions beyond question. Far from being a game of destructive and ultimately indulgent semantics, the practice of deconstruction and of making strange what is ordinarily taken for granted can serve, in Goodman’s terms, to reveal the frames of reference used in different ways of worldmaking, and with this, the different worlds they would make. No longer shored up by myths, utopias become fragile; no longer underpinned by axiomatic assumptions, they become amenable to being remodelled, or indeed cast aside into dereliction.

What are the implications of all this, a policy maker might ask, for the real world challenges of addressing poverty? What has language got to do with development? Our argument in this paper has been that the terms we use are never neutral. They come to be given meaning as they are put to use in policies. And these policies, in turn, influence how those who work in development come to think about what they are doing. The way words come to be combined allows certain meanings to flourish, and others to become barely possible to think with. Consider, for example, how differently the MDGs would sound if they were animated not with targets but with some of the language of the Millennium Declaration. Think of what uses they might then be put, by progressive governments contending in the international arena with foot-draggers, as well as how much more vital and relevant they would become to the struggles pursued by advocates and activists. Consider, too, what a difference might be made by more “clarity through specificity” that Cohen and Uphoff (1980) called for at the end of the decade in which participation came of age, to avoid, as Cernea put it in 1985, a “cloud of cosmetic rhetoric” from settling permanently over our heads.¹⁷

To do so would require taking apart the existing chain that connects poverty reduction, participation and empowerment with other development buzzwords, and naming the differences between the ways these terms can be understood. Such a move would make visible the different frames of reference that co-exist within the fuzz of current development rhetoric, and expose different ways of worldmaking they imply. It would allow us to recognize that there are many possible worlds to be made with these words, something which consensus

¹⁷ The full citation reads: “Now we often hear sudden declarations of fashionable support for participatory approaches from politicians, planners, economists and technocrats. Social scientists should not confuse these statements with actual participatory planning because, under the cloud of cosmetic rhetoric, technocratic planning continues to rule” (Cernea 1995:25).

thinking calls on us to pretend to ignore. Most of all, it would underscore the lesson of history that development actors ignore at their peril: that any way of worldmaking that gives us one-size-fits-all development recipes stripped of any recognition of, or engagement with, context or culture, politics, power or difference, does violence to the very hope of a world without poverty.

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