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THE ROAD NOT TAKEN: INTERNATIONAL AID'S CHOICE OF COPENHAGEN OVER BEIJING

'Two roads diverged in a wood, and I
took the one less travelled by,'¹

Rosalind Eyben

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Gender Equality: Striving for Justice in an Unequal World

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¹ from *The Road Not Taken* by Robert Frost



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INTRODUCTION

The origins of this paper lie in a proposal from UNRISD that I contribute to one of the series of background papers commissioned for the tenth anniversary of the Beijing Women Conference. The suggestion was that within the series on the Changing Political Economy of Development I explore the extent to which Poverty Reduction Strategies (PRS) are a genuine innovation or alternative to former international development policy approaches, contextualising this with reference to the PRS process in Bolivia about which I had already written (Eyben 2002, 2003, 2004, Eyben and León 2003).

Taking this suggestion as a starting point and, writing from a disciplinary perspective of social anthropology rather than political economy, my response was to explore how the international aid system ‘thinks’ and therefore ‘knows’ and how that thinking shapes policy possibilities and ignores or trivialises potential alternatives. This present paper should be read very much as work in progress. After many years as a policy practitioner, it is only recently that I have been able to begin this exploration, including a reflexive revisiting to my own actions, beliefs and knowledge. Thus, I have written the paper from the perspective of what I am now, an academic social analyst, as well as from the perspective of what I have been, a former aid official. Throughout the 1990’s I was working for the UK Department for International Development (DFID) on poverty, participation and gender issues. Between 2000 and 2002 I was head of the DFID office in Bolivia at the time its Poverty Reduction Strategy was being developed and initially implemented.

As an aid official, I was very much engaged in debating and negotiating concepts and issues of gender and poverty with other practitioners and policymakers including with those in government bilateral aid ministries, in international NGOs and in the United Nations and International Finance Institutions. All of these organisations together make up what I shall refer to as the international aid system. In that system I saw myself involved in a contest between different kinds of knowledge that was shaped by relations of power. In the last two years I have come to appreciate increasingly my own ‘situatedness’, one that even shaped my moral position on the meaning of development (Ufford et al. 2003). I was ‘passionately concerned and ethically engaged’. (Rosaldo 1989: 169). At the same time, I was not only a ‘missionary’ but also a civil servant – a ‘mandarin’ (Miller and Razavi 1998). I had a duty to my Minister, and through the Minister to a democratically elected parliament, to implement, rather than shape policy. The ambiguity of my own position is not unusual and in different ways may have shaped the actions and beliefs of many of those in the aid system, including those of economists who are the dominant profession in the system.

The imagery of the ‘road not taken’ allows me to explore how decisions are produced and choices made. I argue that the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) were a product of a long-standing struggle within the international aid system between left and right wing economists – and that this struggle took place within well defined parameters of possibilities that largely ignored or discounted the significance of society, culture, identity and power as concepts that can help us interpret and seek to bring about change.

To illustrate my argument I have chosen to compare the context, themes and outcomes of the two United Nations conferences, held within six months of each other in 1995, that is the World Summit on Social Development at Copenhagen and the Fourth World Conference on Women at Beijing. . They were two in a series of inter-governmental policymaking events taking place in the decade following the collapse of communism. These and the other conferences in the series (such as the one on Environment at Rio in 1992 and on Population in 1994) were typified by significant parallel gatherings (fora) of representatives from global and national civil society.

The Beijing Conference, held twenty years after the first in Mexico, was able to take advantage of the heady atmosphere of the immediate post Cold War period to recognise the significance of the international women's movement as represented in the parallel civil society forum and to propose in the Beijing Platform for Action an explicit agenda of transformational change. National governments, civil society and the international aid system were all assigned responsibilities in implementing that agenda.

The Copenhagen conference, decided later but held some six months earlier did not have the same historical roots. It was a one-off event that brought together the heads of most governments in the world to agree a programme of action in relation to reducing poverty, reducing unemployment and promoting social integration. The symbolic culmination of the international aid system's growing interest in poverty as the over-arching issue for development, Copenhagen set the scene for the choice of poverty reduction as the framework for international debt relief. Its target of reducing world poverty by half by 2015 was chosen as the first Millennium Development Goal.

Copenhagen set the scene for the aid system's over-arching policy instrument, the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP). Beijing became invisible to the mainstream. Could it have been otherwise? The poet decides to take the road less travelled. Is this impossible for development policy? Can the gender equality agenda still provide an opening to different ways of thinking about economy, society and politics that would allow international aid to support transformative processes for social justice?

In exploring this question, the paper starts, in section one, with a discussion of the road that *was* taken, namely the PRSP process as it developed at the end of the 1990's and in the context of Bolivia. I describe my own initial experience of the country at the beginning of the year 2000 when I arrived in Cochabamba at the time of the 'water war' that has become one of the iconic stories of the global social justice movement. This unexpected introduction to Bolivia led to me looking at conflict in Bolivia as being as much about the interpretation of history and concepts of identity as about access to a resource, a theme that I return to in my conclusion. The second part of this section then describes the consultations and decisions that were made in relation to the Bolivian PRSP and briefly considers the treatment of gender in that process.

In section two, I enter the realm of fantasy and look at how donors might have behaved differently in Bolivia if the international aid system had selected the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action as the overarching framework for assistance, rather than the concept of poverty emerging from the Copenhagen conference. In so doing I

imagine a world in which donors would engage seriously with concepts of society, culture and power as legitimate ways of understanding human action and I conclude this section by asking whether the implications of taking these concepts seriously would have been so radical that to save itself the system had no choice but to reject them.

I pursue this question in the third section of the paper where I leave Bolivia and return to the global arena. I explore how those advocating the poverty reduction element of the Copenhagen agenda dominated the decision-making processes of international development policy and I discuss how the opportunity to take up the Beijing agenda was not fulfilled. In conclusion, I ask what is the potential for the international aid system to define development, not just in terms of aid instruments, such as PRSPs or targets, such as Millennium Development Goals, but as also about transformational processes and relationships?

Section One International Aid And The PRSP in Bolivia

An introduction to the context: the Cochabamba water war

I arrived to work in Bolivia at the end of January 2000. I spent my first month living in a popular quarter in Cochabamba. Economic stagnation had hit the city following the crack down on coca cultivation. The government decision to pursue its reform agenda by privatising the city's municipal water supply became an opportunity for people with a variety of grievances to voice their protest about much they felt to be wrong with the way the country was governed.

The city of Cochabamba sits in a fertile agricultural region that bears the same name. Population expansion and climate change have resulted in there being more people claiming rights over fewer water resources. As part of its policy of privatising utilities the government went to international tender for the management of Cochabamba's water supply system, at that time run very badly by the local government. Many people in the town only had water for a few hours a day. People not on the system had to buy water from tankers; some urban communities had organised themselves to drill their own wells and manage micro-distribution systems. The community where I stayed to improve my Spanish was one of these. The government decided that the new private management would be responsible for all the water resources in the urban and peri-urban areas including these community wells and farmers' private water supplies. Some months of violent protest, composed of a coalition of interests and organised by a well known anti-globalisation campaigner, led to the company finally being chased out of Bolivia and the management of the loss-making municipal system going into the hands of the leaders of the protest. Those opposing privatisation variously interpreted the situation as follows:

- an imperialist theft of the country's natural resources, the last in a long line of such predation dating back to the Spanish Conquest;
- yet another example of the ruling white elite oppressing the Quechua people for whom water was a spiritual as well as an economic resource;
- an attack on community cohesion and autonomy;
- an attempt to destroy small holder agriculture by the powers of big business;
- an example of government as corrupt puppets of international capital

Coca growers from the neighbouring region joined the protest. There is some evidence that the protest movement may have been funded by internationally organised narco-traffickers as an attempt to destabilise the government that, under US pressure was forcibly applying a coca eradication policy.

From the perspective of the diplomatic and international community in Bolivia, the privatisation of Cochabamba's water supply and the overall management of the scarce resources would have brought the following benefits

- the quality and quantity of the supply would improve (and indeed did so for the few months before the company was chased away).
- more people would have access to a regular water supply.
- some people would pay more for water but many would pay less.
- the take-over of a large number of private and community water sources would produce positive environmental benefits and enhance the sustainability of the supplies.
- the country needed foreign direct investment.
- the drain on local government finances would end and the revenues could be used for social services.
- the opposition to privatisation was a neo-conservative activity, dressed up as part of the anti-globalisation movement, one seeking to reinstall the old corporate state system which benefited the few rather than the many.

The protestors won the war. They chased out of city and the country the international consortium that had won the contract to privatise the service. The water service went back to the public sector but many of the management and financing problems that had initially led to the idea of privatisation did not go away. Many people in Cochabamba still had a problem in securing sufficient quantities of good quality water at a reasonable price.

People caught up in the water war were interpreting the past to shapes their present and future action. The area where I was staying was largely occupied by redundant miners. In their protests about the privatisation of the water supply they referred to the earlier privatisation of tin, another resource of Pachamama, Bolivia's earth goddess, which had left them without work. When I spoke with them at the barricades, they remembered a government massacre of striking miners in 1967 and said they expected nothing different from the current, democratically elected government. On the other hand, government leaders and the elite press spoke disparagingly of the non-rational mentality of the indigenous people and lamented their inability to understand what was good for them.².

When staying in Cochabamba I had been in a privileged position of hearing the views different parties to the dispute as not only was I living with a family of active protestors, through the British Ambassador I was able to meet with the general director of the international consortium that was eventually chased out of the city. This unexpected introduction to Bolivia led to me looking at conflict in Bolivia as

² For alternative academic analyses, see Nickson and Vargas (2002), Laurie and Crespo , Lobina 2000 and Laserna 2001.

being as much about the interpretation of history and concepts of identity as about the equally significant issue concerning access to a resource.

It also encouraged me to reflect on how I interpreted what was happening around me and how that was not only shaped by my position as a long-term serving aid bureaucrat but also as a feminist and social anthropologist employed by an official development agency. I saw that all the actors involved, from their perspective were taking both a moral and rational position. There appeared to be no obvious right and wrong. It revealed for me how difficult it is for the complexity and paradoxes of a micro-level process to be understood and responded to in any meaningful way by international development policy actors and their instruments.

It led me to enquire as to whether, nevertheless, there were alternatives to 'doing development' that might have offered the possibility of the international aid system playing a more facilitative role in the Cochabamba conflict. As it was, although it had not been directly involved in terms of extending credit or technical assistance, the overall policy framework of the Bolivian Government had incorporated the prescriptions of the Washington Consensus. My hosts in Cochabamba noted all prior experience of privatisation in Bolivia had been bad and therefore everyone was very sceptical about the privatisation of the water supply system. They said industry and utilities were being privatised on the instructions of the World Bank and not based on democratic consent. The population had not been consulted, they said, nor informed about what all this meant. These issues of influence and quality of consultation were to remain major themes during the process of preparing the Bolivian Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper.

The Bolivian PRSP³

In the eyes of the international finance institutions, and the bilateral donors that provided aid to the country, at the start of the year 2000 Bolivia appeared to be a paragon among developing countries. As seen from Washington, during the previous 15 years it had stabilised the economy, privatised the state owned industries, attracted foreign direct investment, reduced the power of the old trade unions to a shadow of their former selves, and had used the aid to make significant investments in the country's health and education sectors.

In the mid 1990's the Bolivian government was also seen as having undertaken some steps to address the diverse nature of Bolivian society, giving constitutional recognition to multi-culturalism and introducing bi-lingual education for primary schools in areas with high numbers of people of indigenous origin. Most importantly, with respect to multi-culturalism, it had reduced the power of the central government by strengthening local government and its accountability to citizens. This 'audacious reform' (Grindle 2000) responded both to the liberal agenda of rolling back the state and to the local demands for state recognition of traditional communities. More recently, following the 1997 election to the Presidency of former military dictator, General Banzer, Bolivia had pleased the United States by implementing a programme of coca eradication in the Chaparé region close to Cochabamba, Bolivia's third largest

³ This section draws on Eyben (2004)

city. Bolivia was a pilot for the Comprehensive Development Framework and at the cutting edge of government and donors working together in a coordinated manner. For all these reasons, Bolivia was one of the prime candidates for preparing a nationally owned and high quality Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper.

Bolivia was one of the first countries to complete a PRSP and have it endorsed by the International Finance Institutions in June 2001. The PRSP instrument had been conceived by the international aid system as an instrument not only for securing access to debt relief but also as the basis for World Bank IDA credit and IMF programme support. Many bilateral donors have also been prepared to realign their own aid programme to a country's PRSP. As of September 2003, the total number of countries with PRSPs had reached 32 and a further 21 had embarked on preparing a PRSP (IMF/IDA 2003).

The PRSP approach stresses in-country development of pro-poor strategies, through processes that increase the influence of local actors outside government, and provides focus for coordination of donors around a nationally-owned and coherent set of macro and sector policies. It requires the articulation of structures for dialogue between government and the donor community, makes transparent the targets and indicators on which they agree to focus, and seeks to bring policy, institutional and capacity building issues to the fore.

The practice of PRSPs, as distinct from the aspiration has meant that while governments appear to take a bigger role than in the design of earlier aid instruments they are heavily constrained especially with regard to macro-economic policy (Stewart and Wang 2003). In Bolivia the government at that time had no problems with this imposition. Ministers were the first to assert that the model (*el Modelo*) was not to be touched.

The Ministry of Finance was staffed with economists who had trained in United States universities and who had close ties, or even former (or the promise of future) employment with the World Bank. Furthermore, the close relationship established between the local authors of the PRSP on the one hand and the donor community on the other hand, was reinforced by their sharing a similar racial as well as class and professional background. Sections of civil society protested that the PRSP process did not allow them to challenge the economic model but the officials and politicians responsible for the Bolivian PRSP were in full agreement with the World Bank and IMF policies of privatisation and liberalisation commonly referred to as the Washington Consensus (Stiglitz 2002).

In its ideal form, the PRSP is a very sophisticated document. Tracing the links between poverty diagnosis, policy prescription, costing and budgeting, monitoring and consultation with poor people, is an extraordinarily ambitious task and one that donor governments have rarely attempted in their own countries. While many in the international aid system recognized the extent of this ambition, it still seemed a worthwhile venture. This was because earlier, more limited instruments (projects, sector wide approaches, structural adjustment credit) had often failed to make any impact in those countries with the biggest problems of deep-rooted poverty. In Bolivia, the PRSP process was characterised by three key issues: the definition of

poverty reduction, the scope of the PRSP, and the design of the required participatory process.

Following its adoption in 1985 of the key elements of the Washington Consensus, aid flows to Bolivia increased substantially rising to 11% of its GNP by 1990 (UNDP 2002) and with more than half of its public investment being dependent on aid between 1987-2002 (UDAPE 2003). Although the aid may have contributed to improvements in health and education indicators, it did nothing to reduce levels of economic poverty. . By the time the PRSP was approved, the Government was admitting that incomes had dropped by 10% between 1997 and 2001.⁴ The privatisation and liberalisation measures had led to an expanded informal sector that has failed to create full and remunerative employment for most people. Forty three % of the economically active population in 1995 were working eight or more hours a day but earning less than the minimum wage. Among those employed, women on average were reported to receive less than 50% of male incomes (CEPAL/ECLAC 2000). Falling incomes were accompanied by rising income inequality, reported by UNDP (2002) to be the sixth highest level in the world.

Poor and rich, Bolivians and foreigners (including donor staff) variously interpreted and re-shaped the institutional definition of, and response to poverty. Perhaps because of the cultural complexity of Bolivian society, there may have been a greater explicit appreciation of this definitional challenge than might have been the case in some other aid-dependent countries and the Bolivian authors of the country's UNDP human development report stressed the importance of local interpretations of well being (UNDP 2000).

Poverty reduction had only become an important issue for Bolivian politicians in recent years and largely because of donor pressure. The Government of Bolivia's approach to tackling poverty had evolved little in the decade following the publication of the 1990 World Development Report 1990. Poverty reduction was expected to be achieved through a twin-track, un-linked strategy of human capital investment and economic growth. The state was not judged to have a direct role in helping poor people secure improved livelihoods but only to enhance their access to health, education and water.

To meet the international community's requirement for a broad based participation in the development of the PRSP, the Government established a 'National Dialogue', run by an independent secretariat and funded by international cooperation through UNDP. Initially due to start in the first month or so of 2000, internal conflict within Government on the advisability of such a process delayed its start. It was only after the Cochabamba water war that President Banzer was reluctantly convinced that a consultative process might diminish the risk of further violent conflict.

Although funded by donors, development cooperation influence overall on the National Dialogue process was probably not *that* significant. Despite the urging of local donor representatives, such as me, that the Dialogue should be a broad-based consultation - directly involving poor people - on the nature of poverty and how to

⁴ Bolivian Minister of Finance *Report to Consultative Group*, October 2001

tackle it, the focus of consultation was maintained on the use of the debt relief to meet basic human needs.

Some elements of civil society were of the opinion that the Dialogue should be opened up to a discussion of incomes and livelihoods. Their views, supported at the start of the PRSP process by those individuals in the bilateral donor network who had moved beyond the Washington Consensus, led to a growing insistence on a broader definition of poverty. In this respect, the objectives in the final document reflected those in the World Development Report 2000/01. Conceptually, at least, integration had been achieved between social and economic policy. However, poverty itself was still understood as a problem of poor people, not as a problem of the country as a whole in which everyone had to change, not just the poor.

The government refusal to permit informed discussion on the fundamental principles of the economic model (despite economic liberalisation discernibly not having made any improvement in poor people's livelihoods) may well have contributed to the growth in popularity among poor people of authoritarian and demagogic leaders. These grew in strength following their victory in the Cochabamba water war when they had challenged the status quo. A major series of violent strikes and road blocks in October 2000 were described by some, including Government officials, as 'the Other Dialogue'.

As a result of the narrow parameters the Government set itself, while the final draft of the PRSP referred to issues such as social exclusion, the actual programme of action related to the document varied very little from the policy agenda of the previous fifteen years. The changes it *did* introduce, in relation to poverty criteria for distribution of the enhanced debt relief and legislation of a National Dialogue process (Eyben 2004), made no impact on preventing the rising tide of protest against the way the country was run. The local bilateral donor co-ordinating group in Bolivia, which I chaired, advised their Executive Directors on the boards of the IMF and the World Bank that the PRSP had not adequately addressed issues of governance and the corruption of the ruling political parties. We were worried that we laid ourselves open to the charge that once again, as with donor support to earlier reforms such as the decentralisation law (Gray-Molina 2001) the PRSP could be seen as attractive window-dressing behind which the local elite and the international aid community colluded to maintain the status quo. Our comments were largely ignored by our country representatives in Washington. They endorsed the Bolivia PRSP. For the IMF and World Bank boards, within the limits previously established, it was judged a good document.

As to the PRSP itself, I concluded that it was a 'good enough' plan for securing and spending the debt relief in a reasonably transparent and equitable fashion, as provided for through the National Dialogue Law approved by the Bolivian Congress following the completion of the PRSP. On the other hand, it was *not* a nationally owned plan that could tackle the deep-seated causes of poverty and exclusion in the country. Even the achievements of the National Dialogue were at risk of being undermined while the government and the international aid community pretended that poverty could be reduced without changes in the political and social structures of the country.

Gender and society in the PRSP

During the drafting of the PRSP, feminist organisations and gender specialists in donor organisations had worked hard to bring issues of gender equality into the discussion. The broad-based National Dialogue around the content of the PRSP had not favoured equally the voices of women and men. It was only as an afterthought that, in the structure of consultation at the local level, a token woman was added to the municipal team of local government leaders who were to represent the views of all the people in their municipality. Many of these women were chosen simply because they were the wife or other relative of the *alcade* (mayor).

DFID sponsored the visit of Caroline Moser, an internationally known gender specialist, who organised a series of workshops with representatives of the Bolivian government, civil society and the international community. Moser invited workshop participants to identify the key gender issues in relation to the objectives of the PRSP that had themselves already been set and were related to enhancing poor people's livelihoods, their human capital, their security and their participation social integration. (Moser 2001, Whitehead 2003). There was a significant agreement on priorities in relation to mainstreaming women's concerns into the pre-established agenda, including the issue of violence, but it was too late and possibly too difficult to imagine, what would represent a national strategy that would prioritise the achievement of gender equality. Even the modest recommendations from the workshops, presented by the Vice-Minister for Gender⁵ to the PRSP drafting committee of the Ministry of Finance, were largely over-looked in the final text sent to Washington.

With hindsight, it would appear that those seeking to incorporate gender issues into the PRSP had become entrapped into the same perspective of reality as the Ministry of Finance team who were drafting the strategy. Just as the National Dialogue did not provide a space for discussing unequal power relations in Bolivian society, so the gender lobby had avoided the issue of the role the State could play in supporting societal transformation. Tactically, it addressed the issue of how the State could pay more attention to addressing poor women's as well as poor men's practical needs, for example lobbying for greater access to services without any change to prevailing economic and social structures. The conclusions from Moser's workshops were more radical but the lobbyists themselves often remarked how difficult it was to shift from a WID to a GAD perspective.

They also noted that those of Bolivia's feminist organisations involved in this lobbying (and who met with donors) were largely composed of women from the educated middle class, including those who came from the families that traditionally made up the small ruling elite. They commented that in 2000, Dutch aid had financed a conference where representatives from these organisations sought to dialogue with women's peasant organisations such as the Federación Nacional de Mujeres Campesinas de Bolivia – Bartolina Sisa. They discovered that the distance between the two groups was vast; the latter being concerned with basic livelihood issues which the middle class feminists tended to downplay. At the same time grass roots women were playing an active part in the popular conflicts, such as the Cochabamba water

⁵ A vice-ministry that was 90% dependent on aid from the Dutch and Swedish governments

war and in associations of micro-enterprise and agricultural production. Domestic employees and sex workers were also organising to challenge gender-related exploitation and oppression.

As head of a donor country office, I explored the extent to which gender could be treated as one aspect of social exclusion and how far one could go in seeking to persuade the Ministry of Finance that it was the dynamics of exclusion that were maintaining and reproducing poverty in Bolivia. The outcome of this effort was a preface to the PRSP. Despite the comprehensive concept of exclusion expressed in therein, the main document did not pursue the issue. The efforts of the working groups facilitated by Moser to incorporate gender as a cross-cutting theme in the PRSP main objectives were ignored. Gender was left as a stand-alone issue, along with the environment, as something to be included otherwise there would be complaints from the donors. It was not noted as a theme relating to integration (or lack of it which the PRSP referred to as 'exclusion') which focused primarily on discrimination against Bolivians of indigenous origin but even here proposed little policy of any significance.

Thus, the Bolivian government succeeded in producing a PRSP, well-received at the global level in the international aid community, that paid only tokenistic attention to the severe and deep-rooted inequalities that were contributing to the prevalent chronic poverty and already clearly threatening to tear apart the social and economic fabric. Rather, the expectation was a high rate of growth, the removal of bureaucratic impediments to free enterprise and an efficient administration practising results-based management to deliver quality health and education services so that poor people could fully participate in the benefits of growth.

The PRSP process, as implemented in many aid recipient countries, has been extensively criticised. There are three areas of criticism that are particularly pertinent to Bolivia.

The first of these relates to the understanding of 'poverty' that is based on a harmonious view of the world. Oyen (2004) argues that poverty researchers have found conflict as a stronger explanatory framework for social change but that this does not fit the consensus seeking approach of the international aid system. As in Bolivia, Gould and Ojanen (2003) note for Tanzania that its Poverty Reduction Strategy was produced in a small partnership of government and aid technocrats that represented itself as highly consensual, reflecting the consensus of all the different stakeholders. I return to this theme of consensus and conflict in section four.

The second area of criticism concerns what was considered as legitimate subjects for debate over strategy and especially the absence of any discussion relating to macro-economic policy frameworks and the inequalities in the international economic order and the production of poverty within developing countries (Craig and Porter 2002; Actionaid 2004, Cornwall and Brock 2004). It was the absence of this debate in Bolivia that fanned the flames of the Cochabamba dispute and provided the organisers of the protest with the opportunity to relate a matter of strongly felt local concern to issues of inequitable globalisation.

The third main criticism relates to the process of participation itself and the comments that consultative processes have tended to rely on a narrow conceptualisation of participation that may ignore or by-pass existing political systems and procedures. It can be argued that instead of the PRSP principles supporting a transformation in what governments do, they risk overriding or derailing domestic political and policymaking processes by imposing international priorities and undermining local level political accountability. (Piron with Evans 2004)

This last concern has led to donors taking a greater interest in political systems and change. In late 2001, in preparation for its new country strategy for Bolivia, DFID asked a political scientist working in the country, John Crabtree to review the history of the previous fifty years and identify how foreign aid could best contribute to supporting sustainable poverty reduction (2001) His conclusions were rather gloomy. He noted that the collapse of the traditional representative trade union movement had left the mass of the population without an organised voice, making them vulnerable to populist leadership that was pursuing its own sectional interests, as for example has proved to be the case since with the rise of the party of coca growers. He argued that donors had to maintain a delicate balance between influencing political or social actors and excessive interventionism, commenting on the long tradition of overt outside interventionism in Bolivian affairs with negative consequences. The challenge was for donors to interact simultaneously with both the state and civil society in ways that convinced local actors of the need for structural change and for them to assume responsibility to make this happen.

As described elsewhere (Eyben and León 2003) many in the aid community in La Paz were uncomfortable with specific efforts by a minority of donors to take up this challenge of engaging with civil society as well as with state organisations in an attempt to support structural change. Ministry of Finance officials also strongly disliked such interventions, seeing them as a threat to the government's ownership of the poverty reduction agenda, as defined by the PRSP process. It seemed to me that they and us, the staff in the aid community, had a common policy approach that was informed by a shared understanding of the way the world worked. I suggest that this understanding had become so deeply ingrained *we were no longer capable of imagining other kinds of policy approaches*, even when outside the Ministry, the people were rioting and those of us in a meeting with the Director General and his staff were wiping our eyes from the tear gas that had seeped in through the cracks in the windows.

In the following section, I shall explore what might have taken place if an alternative policy approach had not only been imagined but implemented. What if in 1999, instead of the PRSP, the international aid community had decided to make the Beijing Platform for Action the over-arching framework for aid to developing countries? What would that have meant for aid policy to Bolivia?

Section Three: What if? Imagining another international development policy approach to Bolivia

The Beijing Platform for Action (PfA) contains language of power and transformation that is not present in the Copenhagen text that only uses the language of 'empowerment'. Beijing's twelve strategic areas of concern encompass every aspect

of economic, cultural, social and political relations. The PfA proposes a plan for achieving gender equality that could be interpreted as the means or entry point to wider global social justice. What if Beijing, rather than Copenhagen had shaped the international policy agenda in the second half of the last decade?

In asking this question, I am taking a 'utopian' approach to desired change. It is an imaginative picture or searchlight with the aim of making it possible for us to envisage a fundamental change, not just as casual fantasy but as a real possibility (Midgley 1996). By this, I mean that I am deliberately choosing one of a number of many possible visions of development, in this case in an attempt to highlight what is usually down-played. My proposed alternative scenario is no less selective than that which informs the PRSPs. By ignoring the macro-economic dimension in what follows I am compensating for the more usual tendency within aid policy analysis to ignore the macro-societal dimension.

In sketching this alternative scenario, I am drawing principally on activities in which I myself became involved and/or was encouraging the DFID office to support. In speculating on the impact of doing development differently, I am very cognisant of my own superficial acquaintance with the history and sociology of Bolivia. That ignorance itself points to the caution required from donors when supporting processes of social change in an aid recipient country. Such caution recognises donor fallibility and the context specific nature of the issues. At the end of this alternative scenario, I return to this point and explore whether *any* over-riding framework for donor assistance, be it derived from Beijing instead of from Copenhagen, could be judged as either effective or ethical.

Meanwhile, what immediately follows is a counterfactual approach to history employed as a means to stimulating the imagination:

Following the decision at the 1999 Autumn Meetings of the World Bank and the IMF to ask highly indebted countries to develop a nationally owned strategy for achieving gender equality as a condition for debt relief, the Bolivian government started a broad-based process of consultation, described as the National Dialogue. Through the Comprehensive Development Framework mechanism, all the bilateral and multilateral organisations present in Bolivia made a commitment to reshape their aid programmes to support the Strategy that would emerge through this Dialogue.

In 1999, with encouragement from the aid community in Bolivia, the Government recognised that legislative and regulatory frameworks and accountability mechanisms, together with enhanced user participation and access to information, were needed to ensure that the changes in the management of the Cochabamba municipal water system would enlist broad-based support (Laurie and Crespo 2003). The sensitive and bottom-up approach to a deliberative consultation, in which all concerns were open to discussion and consideration, led to a solution to Cochabamba's water crisis that satisfied the great majority of the population and led to tangible benefits in terms of a more accessible, efficiently run and cheaper water supply. This deliberative and participatory approach became a model for the National Dialogue process in relation to the development of a national gender equality strategy.

The consultation process was structured to facilitate the equal voice of men and women in the process, using participatory methodologies with local communities, in addition to more formal consultative processes with local government and debates in Congress and through the mass media.⁶

Representatives of grass roots organisations debated the issues in a series of national workshops facilitated by one of the main universities, exploring the links between gender and other dimensions of societal relations in Bolivia.⁷ Each workshop in its different way grappled with the inter-relationship between different aspects of cultural, political and economic exclusion. Some exclusion understood exclusion as inequality of access to opportunities. Others saw exclusion as more political, as an involuntary absence from decision-making fora, while querying whether they, the excluded, were complicit in this process. Yet again, others considered exclusion as a monopolization of power and wealth by the few to the detriment of the many. Hot, recurrent topics were concepts of land rights and territory, of exploitation and police oppression, of lack of voice and discrimination. (Arauco and Eyben 2002)

One of the workshops discussed the four different mind-sets or “discourse-logic” prevalent in Bolivia: the modern, Western discourse of donors and Harvard-trained Bolivian technocrats; the Spanish colonial discourse of the traditional ruling elite; the Andean discourse of the Aymara and Quechua world view; and the Amazonian discourse of lowland indigenous peoples. Thus the workshops revealed that how we look at the world influences the kind of objectives we set (op.cit)

To some extent, the conclusions of the Dialogue reflected the Government’s Beijing plus Five report, highlighting the need to integrate social policies generally and gender equality policies specifically into the economic policy sphere, particularly in regard to employment and productivity. However, because of the more deliberative process of consultation the conclusions went further than that report, placing greater emphasis on the way that class and ethnicity shaped and informed relations between women as well as between women and men. An urgent recommendation was for Congress to pass the law on minimum working conditions for domestic employees, legislation that had been previously blocked by a caucus of women parliamentarians from the ruling elite.

Following the Dialogue the Ministry of Social Integration⁸ took the lead within the government in drafting the Bolivian Strategy for Gender Equality. The strategy explicitly addressed the deep-rooted societal problems in Bolivia. It analysed current gender relations, including the widely pervasive gender-related violence as one dimension and reflection of processes of social exclusion linked to identity-based discrimination and very levels of income inequality. The photograph on the cover of the document was of an Aymara maidservant employed in the elite housing area of southern La Paz. She is holding the broom that symbolises her very long hours of work and the low pay that she receives from the creole mistress of the house. Beneath

⁶ For what really happened see Richmond 2002 and Eyben 2004

⁷ This latter consultation did actually place in the first half of 2002. See Arauco and Eyben

⁸ Such a ministry was actually set up following the major social convulsions in October 2003

her are the words: “I want this strategy to work so that my daughter will not have to do this job.”⁹

The key objective of the strategy was to ensure that all men and women could enjoy their rights as citizens. These included enhancing a range of economic and social rights. Among these were land reform (including strengthening women’s rights to inheritance), support to micro-enterprise, trade (largely women’s activities) as well as production and, in the area of health, emphasis on access to family planning services and to reproductive health care that responded to what women were looking for, rather than what the medical services or the Church thought they should receive.¹⁰ In terms of cultural rights and noting that many more women than men were non-Spanish speaking, Quechua, Aymara and Guarani became official languages, thus enhancing women’s capacity to speak for themselves in public fora and recognising the equal identity of indigenous people with those of European origin. The existing provision for bilingual education was changed so that knowledge of one other official language, as well as Spanish, was mandatory for acquiring the secondary school leaving certificate.

Regarding civil and political rights the strategy emphasised the right to participate, the right to information and the right to an identity. The enhanced representation of excluded groups in political life and public service was seen as a fundamental step to progress in gender equality. Although the institutional forms of representative democracy were in place (elections, political parties, the Constitution, etc.), the strategy noted that the attitudes and behaviours of those engaged in politics had remained largely pre-democratic. Public information was not readily disclosed, and decisions were often taken behind closed doors by select groups of men (almost invariably). Lip service was paid to public consultation processes but the dominant political culture, perhaps more so than elsewhere in Latin America, had remained caudillist, clientelistic, and patrimonial (Blackburn 2000).

In consequence, men and women excluded from the formal democratic processes had taken to the streets and blockaded the public highways as the only means available them to exert their voice. At the same time, they were the most badly affected by the economic stagnation resulting from these frequent strikes and protests.

To avoid this downward spiral resulting from a break down in communication and consultation, programmes were developed for a massive investment in the existing independent local radio stations, the principal means by which poorer people and particularly women, were able to access information. The information disseminated, and the debates encouraged around the issues, were linked to concrete situations which resonate with people’s daily lives. A number of participatory research exercises in different parts of the country on rights themes, such as work and wages, health care and domestic violence, quickly generated the more ‘grounded’ information that allowed radio producers to engage with their audience (op.cit.)

⁹ The image of the Aymara maid servant was used in the 2002 election campaign by MAS, the political party led by the coca-grower leader, Evo Morales.

¹⁰ These were the conclusions from the workshops facilitated by Caroline Moser discussed earlier (Moser 2001)

Securing identity documentation had posed particular problems for women of indigenous origin but research revealed that many men of indigenous origin also experienced this problem. Without such documentation people were unable to vote, to inherit land, take out a loan, attend secondary school or travel legally overseas.¹¹ The cumbersome and bureaucratic requirements for obtaining identity cards were radically overhauled and there was a massive investment in outreach programmes that actively encouraged and facilitated a simple documentation process.

The IMF had already been discussing tax reform issues with the government. Donors and the government now looked at how tax reform could be an instrument to reduce social exclusion. It could do this by ensuring that not only did rich people pay the taxes they owed, based on a progressive rather than regressive system, but also, by broadening the revenue base so that all Bolivians, women as well as men recognised themselves as taxpayers to whom the state was accountable (Iledo et al 2004).

The budget was assessed from the perspective of the new national strategy and substantial cuts were made to the armed forces budget and the resources saved provided to strengthen the office of the human rights ombudsperson (Defensor del Pueblo) and for restructuring and retraining the police force, including the opening of special units to deal with domestic violence. Government and civil society capacity would be strengthened for the systematic assessment of the differential impact of public policy, programmes and services on different sections of the population and a select committee of Congress would be empowered to hear evidence from all parties concerning progress in achieving the strategy's objectives.

In all these aspects, the government actively sought donor financing, with the President declaring the national strategy to be her first priority for foreign aid. Reflecting the strong Bolivian public concern to identify more productive, less conflictive ways of managing state-society relations, the government invited donors to help them improve these relations by systematically and simultaneously supporting efforts by both state and civil society institutions in all of the above themes and to facilitate spaces for encounter. The implementation of the strategy was given a significant impetus by the decision of the United States government to legalise cocaine. This destroyed the power of the narco-traffickers (who many believed had been instrumental in stoking up trouble over the Cochabamba water issue) to disrupt efforts at peace building within the country.

The adoption of gender equality as the focus for the country's national development strategy allowed foreigners and Bolivians alike to recognise that policy choices should not only be informed by the fifty year debate about trade-offs between redistribution of resources and growth. Policy makers also had to recognise that debates of interpretation and respect for different perspectives were equally significant in shaping citizens' views of the good society. (Fraser 2001)

And so we return gently to reality.....

¹¹ The exclusionary effects of the lack of identity cards are highly significant. Findings from community-led research in 2002 revealed the fallacy of a country-owned poverty reduction strategy that donors were funding. Those for whom the strategy was allegedly designed not only had no voice in the formal political process; they were also denied economic and educational opportunity because the state had denied them identity. (León et al. 2003)

As mentioned earlier, most of the examples I have provided in that alternative scenario come from initiatives or thinking that DFID was supporting between 2000-02. They were largely viewed by government and the rest of the donor community as radical and, if not unnecessary, certainly impolitic. Perhaps more significant is whether these kinds of measures, even if fully implemented with donor support, would have brought about the transformation that I have suggested. Certainly, the deep-rooted nature of unequal gender and ethnic power relations are too intractable for even the most culturally and politically sensitive support to transformational processes of change by donors unless they give themselves both very modest objectives and are prepared to stay engaged over the very long term. Instead of promoting ambitious objectives related to an idealised or wishful thinking concept of the political system in which they are involved, this would mean living and working within the present messy reality.

My sketch of the alternative way of doing development in Bolivia has been very fragmentary. It does not seek to address many important aspects of Bolivian society and contested identities – including for example the disputes between different regions and between highland and lowland indigenous peoples. Equally absent is any problematization of the role of donors in supporting the processes I have just described. Today, for example, the international aid system is providing financial and technical support to the new (post October 2003) process of establishing a Constituent Assembly. It is hoped that this process will lead to a re-structuring of Bolivia's institutional arrangements so as to address the deep fractures of class and ethnicity that are creating so much instability and impoverishment in the country. The donor presence in this process is reminding the ruling class of the need to change its deep-seated disdain towards the majority of the population.¹² The feeling of unease in the aid system's involvement in these processes may itself contribute to more reflexive learning about what donors can and cannot do and contribute to what Giri calls a 'global conversation' on development as a shared responsibility (2004).

Possibly, such a conversation would be more feasible if we understood development as being about relationships (Rahnema 1997). The significance of Beijing is that it offered the international aid system an entry point to thinking about the world in that way. In the next section, I leave Bolivia and turn to the idea of development as currently constructed by international policy actors. I explore why these actors still largely understand poverty as a non-relational concept and what it is about the idea of gender that makes it harder to reduce to equally non-relational terms. I ask whether that explains why Beijing was the road not taken.

Section Four Power, relationships and international development policy

CONCEPTS OF POVERTY AND GENDER: COPENHAGEN AND BEIJING

In the 1980's, just as just at the time that Gender and Development (GAD) approaches had begun to permeate slowly into the thinking of the international aid system (Razavi and Miller 1995), UNDP and UNICEF challenged the structural adjustment policies of the Bretton Woods Institutions. They started a process that led to poverty

¹² I am grateful to Inigo Retolaza for this information

reduction becoming the central goal of international development policy. Kabeer (2003) notes that, in the process, the understanding of poverty has been transformed from the early equation with income poverty to a more multi-dimensional understanding, including its human dimensions as well as its structural causes. She then comments that while the understanding of gender issues has also grown, it has been more slow and uneven. She attributes this unevenness to gender equity being potentially more threatening to the power and privilege of policy-makers themselves rather than being confined to a constituency 'out there'. She notes also that the lack of progress may also be explained by the characteristics of mainstream macroeconomic analysis, models and methodologies.

An opposing point of view to Kabeer's, and one that I shall now explore, could be that the understanding of poverty has not been substantially transformed *because it is still a non-relational understanding* and because the structural causes are still not being addressed. Her comment that gender equity is more threatening to the power and privilege of policy makers would be equally apposite to poverty reduction should it acquire a relational meaning. At the same time, in terms of the power of the idea, gender resonates more as a transformational concept than does poverty reduction. It is the characteristic of 'poverty' as a concept to be more easily understood as non-relational that may have allowed Copenhagen to become a much more mainstream policy event than did Beijing.

The proposal for a social development summit emerged from the growing concern in the international aid system, championed by the United Nations, to attack the neo-liberal agenda of the minimalist state in which poverty would disappear by freeing the market. Poverty had returned as a central issue for development policy following the discrediting of structural adjustment policies in the 1980's – the 'lost decade' when aid recipient governments were encouraged to cut government budgets, introduce user fees for social services and cut subsidies on basic goods and food supplies. While the aim was not to hurt poor people – and indeed, in many countries affected many poor people had benefited very little from the subsidies and services that were being cut, the overall impact was that poor people became poorer.

Development policy makers began to learn about vulnerability and understand that when there are shocks to the political economy those with least voice, least capacity to organise in response and least economic assets tend to most severely affected. It appeared that structural reform of the economy was not sufficient for all people to move out of poverty and that some particular additional steps would be required by the state if that were to happen.

The Copenhagen proposal demanded that states intervene to tackle the poverty and misery in which were living hundreds of millions of people. It was a demand instigated and championed by the more Keynesian part of the official development bureaucracy, the United Nations. Its focus was on a greater redistribution of resources from rich to poor countries, including the promotion of policy ideas such as the 20/20 concept whereby recipient governments would pledge 20% of their budget to social service expenditure in return for official aid programmes to doing likewise.

Copenhagen was the inspiration of a group of UN officials and diplomats, representing a swing in the pendulum in the fifty-year aid debate between economists.

It was not the conference of a social movement. Unlike Beijing, although it captured the interest of some civil society organisations, such as the International Council for Social Welfare, there was no global movement behind it, and no passionate engagement of many people from the South. Copenhagen was primarily a venue for re-capturing the ground established in the 70's and lost to the neo-liberal agenda in the 80's. Society was included in Copenhagen's programme and certainly mattered to the conference organisers but the emphasis was more on consensus than on contestation as a means to social change.

Building on the prior social exclusion work of the Institute of Labour Studies, the Copenhagen process promoted a harmonious view of social integration deriving from the Durkheimian emphasis on social solidarity. De Haan (1999) argues that the greatest value of the concept of social exclusion is its potential to explore the processes that cause deprivation. Nevertheless, the concept risks supporting the status quo by implying there is the possibility of bringing marginal people into the existing social structure without any need to change radically that structure or indeed, by ignoring the existing and complex social relations that give rise to and perpetuate inequities (Sayed & Soudien, 2003:10).

Although Copenhagen had three pillars, poverty reduction, employment and social integration, it was undoubtedly the first of these that has been the most influential. Indeed, despite its formal title, the Conference was referred to in the British press as the 'poverty summit'.¹³ The opening statement of Copenhagen Programme includes:

'Policies to eradicate poverty, reduce disparities and combat social exclusion require the creation of employment opportunities, and would be incomplete and ineffective without measures to eliminate discrimination and promote participation and harmonious social relationships among groups and nations.'

The Beijing PfA opens with:

'The principle of shared power and responsibility should be established between women and men at home, in the workplace and in the wider national and international communities. Equality between women and men is a matter of human rights and a condition for social justice and is also a necessary and fundamental prerequisite for equality, development and peace. A transformed partnership based on equality between women and men is a condition for people-centred sustainable development'.

While the men in the Vatican and their allies openly declared their patriarchal interest in preventing such a transformation, most governments tolerated the participation of their marginalised women's ministries at the official conference but showed their indifference by not sending any senior ministers or heads of government. Some sent their wives. Copenhagen was different. It was the inspiration of men and proposed an agenda with which all were familiar although some strongly resisted. Many heads of

¹³ Officials were informed that it was because of this focus on poverty that the (Conservative) British Prime Minister chose not attend, on the basis that there was no poverty in the United Kingdom. This position was reversed in 1997 when Labour came to power with a domestic poverty reduction and social inclusion agenda.

government attended, particularly those in the North from more left-wing administrations, and many from the South who saw it as an opportunity to demand a more equitable global distribution of the world's resources.

Beijing was not just another UN conference. Or rather, it was more than such a conference. The diplomatic wrangling, the tedious processes and the behind the scenes dramas of trying to produce a draft Platform for Action in time for the preparatory conference were typical of any international conference. The decision to hold it in China, rather than in a country with a more open society (such as Denmark) was an additional barrier to facilitating a broad-based civil society forum that was sited some 40 miles from the official conference proceedings. Yet, it was a conference that represented a movement whose members were present in not only the forum but also playing an active (and sometimes subversive) role in official delegations.

The year of Beijing was arguably the moment that the transformational approach to gender relations had the greatest chance of influencing the way the international aid system thinks about social change. The May 1995 High Level (Ministerial) Meeting of the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, endorsed gender equality, rather than women in development, as a vital goal for development and development assistance efforts. Although the statement from the meeting repeated some of the by now well-rehearsed efficiency arguments, there was also, for the first time, remarks about the 'transformation of the development agenda' (OECD 1995).

In many aid circles, officials and politicians had not appreciated the radical-ness of this switch. This may be partly due to the concern of those like me, advocating for the change within the aid community, to handle the matter very softly so that our superiors should not be frightened and reject it outright. It was also probably due to many in the aid system either simply not understanding was being advocated or not being prepared to understand it. Nevertheless, by adopting gender equality as a goal, international development policy was theoretically committing itself to supporting a transformation in social relations. It was implicitly accepting a view of the world not based solely on the rational choice of individuals operating on a (more or less) level playing field.

Some actors in the OECD Development Assistance Committee were more aware of the subversive nature of the change than were others. Japan refused to make the policy switch from women in development to gender equality, recognising the possible implications for domestic policy. Significantly at the closed meeting of (all male) senior officials in the Hague in 1996, when the DAC finalised the selection of the international development targets that were to evolve into the Millennium Development Goals, it was the Japanese representative who ensured that the target with reference to gender equality should be restricted to parity in education (OECD 1996). Others present, despite the briefings they had had from the gender specialists in their own ministries to propose a more broad-ranging target, agreed to the Japanese proposal with little fuss or resistance.¹⁴ Thus, one year after Beijing the DAC rejected

¹⁴ This account was given to me after by the senior British official attending the meeting and shortly after the event.

the broad-based challenge of the Platform for Action. The Beijing agenda ran into the ground.

Copenhagen was a revival of the growth versus equity debate but it also responded to some of the emerging ideas from sociology concerning social integration and exclusion, best represented in the United Nations system by the ILO and UNRISD. Although Sen himself afterwards sought to factor social exclusion into his work on capabilities, the conversation between Keynesian economists and sociologists was not very deep. Yet, from my own experience, the epistemological struggle to maintain this conversation, while at the same time working to 'mainstream' gender within the aid system meant that the too few people interested in this issue within the international development community were seeking to cover too much ground. Although I was very happy with a greater focus on poverty, at the same time I felt that Copenhagen itself was significantly undermining Beijing's prospects for making a serious impact on development policy and the conceptual thinking underlying that policy.

Inside the international aid system, gender specialists found themselves struggling to pursue the theme of gender equality separate from this burgeoning poverty agenda. (Goetz 1998, Jackson, 1998) Some, like me, did not fully appreciate what was happening. In natural sympathy with the Keynesians, we were delighted that our concerns about state action to address misery and deprivation were at last being recognised and becoming official policy. We failed to notice (or decided not to care) that the themes that gender analysis brought to the fore – culture, identity, power, violence – were disappearing from the debate. Only after the first euphoria did we notice that all that was left us was the new and anodyne theory of social capital subjected to measurement and regression analysis. Society re-packaged into something economists could digest (Fine 2002).

Thus, since Beijing, although Gender and Development approaches developed at that time looked to transform unequal power relations in society, aid agencies have tended to use the concept of gender in reductionist ways. They have failed to grapple with the issues of the larger social, cultural and political contexts that frame women's and men's ability to resist conditions of oppression (Bhavnani et al. 2003). For example, the World Bank's gender strategy (World Bank 2002) is concerned with reducing 'disparities' between men and women and does not address the issue of structural social change that might be required to achieve such a reduction.¹⁵ It is a strategy focused on efficiency arguments concerning human capital investment, underpinned by an approach that at the most sees the problem as the need to establish 'a level playing field' where men and women have equal chances in the game, rather than one where there could be a legitimate case for changing the rules of the game, or even requiring a new game. Instead, the emphasis on poverty reduction led to an approach that sought consensus to achieve social change.

The Millennium Consensus: a shared public management approach to development

¹⁵ See the discussion by Baden and Goetz (1998:22) 'Bureaucratic requirements for information tend to strip away the political content of information on women's interests and reduce it to a set of needs or gaps, amenable to administrative decisions about the allocation of resources'

More than has ever been the case in the last fifty years, all the separate institutional actors in the international development community have come together in shared perspective of what needs to be done to get rid of poverty. They have all subscribed to the Millennium Aid Consensus.

This consensus has the following elements:¹⁶

- Focus on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). This in turn implies recognition (a) that poverty matters (b) that poverty has many dimensions, and (c) that growth per se is not an adequate answer to poverty.
- Belief that aid can be effective if the institutional and policy context is right. Arising from this are (a) a focus on policy reform, institutional development and capacity building, and (b) arguments for concentrating resources on good performers. (At the same time, the problem of countries that are both poor and poor performers is addressed under headings such as LICUS¹⁷.)
- A set of aid management principles to which the Comprehensive Development Framework (CDF) label is often attached. These stress the importance of donors' building on (a) the country's development vision and agenda; (b) a systematic and comprehensive diagnosis; and (c) an informed view of what others – including the private sector – are doing.
- Recognition that traditional modes of aid delivery – uncoordinated projects managed outside of government systems – have been unsustainable, have imposed unnecessary costs on government, and have undermined the development of government capacity, at least in aid dependent countries. Hence there are pressures for harmonisation among donors, stress on using and strengthening government systems, and advocacy for non-project approaches to aid, including Sector Wide Approaches (SWAs) and budget support.
- Acknowledgement that aid should be part of wider efforts to establish a more favourable global economic and policy environment for poverty reduction.

While this consensus is a remarkable achievement, it is one that may not survive the increasing return by rich countries to the realist agenda of international relations. In this moment of flux and global uncertainty, it is worth examining the aid community's diagnosis of the problem that led to the PRSPs. With a different interpretation of history, would the aid community have had a stronger chance of sustaining a consensus, one more informed by an appreciation of how the world looks from the South in which local experience is privileged over the global assumptions (Darby 2003)?

Therien has suggested that the history of international aid policy can be understood as a debate between right and left wing views of the world (2002). The right wing view sees aid as 'charity' and the left wing as 'entitlement'. As charity, it is the donor who has the decisive voice in whether to give. When the recipient has a more powerful claim it is seen as an entitlement. Therien suggests that in the 1950's and 1960's the right wing view was dominant and the creation of the OECD Development Assistance Committee and the World Bank's International Development Association

¹⁶ This draws on Eyben and Lister forthcoming 2004

¹⁷ Low Income Countries Under Stress

consolidated an asymmetrical power structure in which decision making was concentrated in the hands of the donors. The simultaneous 'left wing' creation of the UNDP did not substantially rectify this. It was in the 1970's that the leftist view became more predominant around the debate on the establishment of the New International Order and the recognition that 'trickle down' had not materialised and that only the elite had profited from the initial phase of foreign aid. This became the decade of 'basic needs' and rural development superseded by the 1980's and the resurgence of the right both in OECD domestic policies and in aid giving. In the 1990's the pendulum swung again with a return to an interest in poverty reduction and a discussion as to how this could be achieved

For some, the numbers so needing this additional help were fairly minimal¹⁸, or such help if required would come from private charity. This might be termed the extreme liberal position. For others, there were too many constraints for trickle down to work for more than a minority: diminution in overall numbers of those living in poverty could not be achieved without significant effort by governments and their international development partners. This effort required some redistribution of resources, both from the richer to the poorer countries and, within poorer countries, by progressive taxation systems for delivering basic services to those who could not afford to buy them from the private sector. From the extreme liberal perspective, the danger of redistribution was that it placed a brake on entrepreneurship and private enterprise, constrained by having to pay too high taxes. Either, in a globalising world, business would go elsewhere to a lower tax regime or it would stagnate. In whichever case, growth would not happen and thus there would not be sufficient taxes paid to help poor people and they would stay poor.

I do not intend to enter into the growth and equity argument but rather to point out that within this debate the concept of poverty has been largely uncontested. This is because the debate has been within a public management framework premised on rational choice theory and optimal utilization of scarce resources. Thus, while Therien argues that this has been a struggle between two world views, with the Right more interested in a cost-benefit analysis of results and the Left in moral principles, I suggest that it has been rather more a debate within a more limited intellectual space. The pendulum swings back and forth between neo-classical and Keynesian approaches to public management and resource allocation and that the debate is possible indicates that we are within the same paradigm. People are listening to each other, as is not the case when hegemonic structures translate the voice of the powerless into meaningless utterances (Haugaard 1997)

The multi-dimensional understanding of poverty promoted at the beginning of the '90's and confirmed in the definitional statement at Copenhagen and in the MDGs, did not substantially change this understanding that outcomes were a result of individual rational choice. It rather built on this understanding by recognising the lack of a level playing field. Individuals vary to the extent they possess what Rawls referred to as 'primary goods' and Sen converted into means or 'capabilities' to make free choices. Thus poverty becomes defined as a constraint on making choices and the role of development policy is to help enhance people's capabilities. (Sen 1992).

¹⁸ Thus, today DFID has a policy theme of 'Reaching the very poorest', implying that the majority of currently poor people will automatically benefit from growth and human capital investment without the need for any additional intervention.

This is the position taken in the series of UNDP Human Development Reports. Building on Sen's work and in relation to gender inequality Nussbaum specifies certain basic functional capabilities at which societies should aim for their citizens. (Nussbaum 1995) The onus thus lies with the state to ensure this is achieved, rather than on the citizens to make the demand.

I suggest that inside the world of development policy, the contest was between those left wing economists who accepted the capabilities proposition as a justification for an interventionist state and those on the right wing who argued for a minimalist state and saw poverty as simply a market failure. Gender and development was always outside that debate. Rather its origins lay in the women's movement and some of its achievements, such as the 1985 Nairobi conference, occurred at the height of the neo-liberal dominance of the development policy agenda.

While, the left wing tendency in aid policy has always been more prepared to tolerate the issue of women's rights it is not really interested and certainly not prepared to consider gender relations as a central issue of development. For example, it did not occur to those in 1994 who were championing the cause of Copenhagen that Beijing had already been long since decided and that there was a risk of undermining the gender equality agenda by demanding a separate conference on social development.

On the margins of this debate between left and right were a small number of sociologists and socio-cultural anthropologists who took a different view of what development was about. Their starting point for thinking about poverty was not the individual but social, cultural and political systems and relations. That most of them engaged in development policy were working on issues of gender, was an outcome of the women's movement in the North that demanded official aid take this as a significant issue whereas there was much less external pressure for other aspects of the social dimension to be considered. I was among a small minority licensed to take a perspective that looked at other aspects of society in addition to gender relations.

We had this license because of the apparent failure of some development projects in which it appeared that the potential beneficiaries were not behaving as would have been expected were they to be making informed rational choices. It was judged that non-economic explanations concerned with society and culture were sometimes required to prevent or minimise such failures. Ironically, bearing in mind how men in aid-giving countries had long perceived women as irrational, it was when relations between men and women were understood as an essential element to the project design, that economists were most ready to accept non-economic, in other words, non-rational, explanations, for individual behaviour. 'Culture' was noise in the system and it had to be managed. In a very similar fashion, the educated ruling elite in Bolivia observing the Cochabamba water war commented in their favourite newspaper, *La Razón*, on the irrational, pre-Descartian nature of the indigenous population incapable of making a rational choice about a simple matter of a value-for-money water supply system.

How feminists inside development agencies contributed to and took advantage of the emerging poverty reduction consensus has been well analysed by Razavi (1989). Why have gender equality advocates relied so heavily on poverty in making their case? It is not just for the instrumental reasons that poverty is a language that fits

more easily with public management rational choice theory. Voices from the South have made a strong case for the gender dimension of deprivation and powerlessness and the social forces that create scarcity on the one hand and discrimination on the other may be analytically distinct but experientially seamless. On the other hand, the power/knowledge of the international development community does not concern itself with this experience of social forces. Copenhagen and the PRSPs did little to change an approach which continues to ignore the historically generated dynamics of unequal power relations that label people as 'the poor' (Wood 1989, Medina 2000) and as a problem that requires a managerial solution rather than a change in relationships at all levels of society.

As part of the new convergence within the international development community, PRSPs risk constraining alternative views on poverty, its causes, consequences and possible solutions (Craig and Porter 2003). A review of African PRSPs found that they ignore power disparities and it is argued that the World Bank's own poverty assessments fail to offer significant analysis of why poverty persists and what could be done about it. (Wilks & Lefrancois 2002). While 'empowerment' appears in policy documents, including those of the World Bank, power is a much less common word. In international aid, euphemisms are often used for "power over". For example, the World Bank's Country Assistance Strategy for India speaks of "the *constraints* that inhibit and exclude people from participating in and sharing the benefits of development". What would be the impact on the Bank's relations with the Government of India, if this were to be re-worded to read "the exercise of power that inhibits and excludes people from participating in and sharing the benefits of development"? Another common euphemism is "entrenched hierarchy". Oyen comments on how aid policy refers to the 'causes' of poverty, rather than to speak of its 'production' since the latter wording implies someone is involved in making it.(op.cit). The reluctance of international aid organizations to use the language of power when considering poverty issues may be for the very same reason that Kabeer noted their reluctance about gender. It comes too close to home.

CONCLUSION: POWER AND RELATIONSHIPS

Trying to introduce to donors in Bolivia a different interpretation of why people stayed poor, led me to consider that such efforts are fairly futile when the overall framework of international aid policy is supported by a an understanding of the world that trivialises the significance of society, culture and power as forces that shape history and individual lives.

I believe the international aid system could not have taken the alternative, Beijing road in 1995-96. The left wing enthusiasm for distributive justice, as spelt out in a series of UNDP Human Development Reports throughout the 1990's, was bound to lead to some kind of PRSP approach. Ironically, the subsequent turn again to more neo-liberal politics at the end of the decade has meant that PRSPs have not lived up to their initial promise of moving much beyond the Washington Consensus. (Stiglitz 2002)

Despite this further turn in events, even as late as mid- 2002, it was still possible for the World Bank's Chief Economist, Nick Stern, to remark at the Bank's annual conference of development economists that the international aid community had

learnt its lessons and the main challenge now was implementation (Stern 2002). That almost triumphal message of Stern and others derived from the apparently successful negotiation of the Millennium Consensus. It was a message that made it difficult for staff members in development agencies to challenge the single view of the world as presented by Stern at that conference - a view based on a 'natural' rational choice liberal epistemology that is posited on methodological individualism that sees societal processes and outcomes as the sum of discrete, intentional acts by autonomous actors who are pre-constituted, that is not defined through their relations with others (Hawksworth 2003). It is an epistemology that considers poverty as a deprivation of material things and a failure of just distribution employing concepts that are grounded in a non-relational understanding of the individual (Curtis 1999).

In Bolivia, as the country becomes more politically and economically troubled León has found aid recipients caught in a dilemma of recognising a dependency that they would like to reject but know they cannot. They want to maintain or increase the flow of aid while breaking the patron-client bond. León posits a chain of power and voice that runs from the 'constitutional space' where rich countries decide on the structural rules of the game of aid through to collective spaces such as international fora where donor and recipient governments agree the modalities, down to country-level spaces where aid bureaucrats meet their counterparts to decide programmes and projects. She suggests that the October 2003 uprising was a repudiation of this structure of relationships. People protested at government measures, interpreted as policies of the ruling elite, clients of the international donor community. León concludes that official aid agencies need to be less dependent on a small group of Bolivian 'client' consultants from this elite class, consultants who have adopted the language and mind-set of their international patrons and whose analysis is very distant from the reality of poor people's lives. (León 2004)

Donors in Bolivia, and perhaps elsewhere, are beginning to realise there is more to learn and understand than had perhaps been appreciated. This may now be an opportunity to encourage aid policy actors to take another look at that road not travelled. However, although the world increasingly appears a messier place and donors themselves are under greater scrutiny the underlying assumptions about the rational individual remain largely unchallenged within the international aid system.

Beijing, by making transparent the issue of power, carried within it the potential to challenge the whole development construct. Unlike the anti-globalisation movement and the World Social Forums, the women's movement was able to get inside the international aid bureaucracy and institutionalise feminism through the UN conference process. However, the initial impetus has faded and if we consider knowledge as the power to dominate, then a dominant discourse tends to make invisible what has the potential to challenge that power. (Foucault 1980) So Beijing has become largely invisible. Does this mean that the international aid community has lost its chance of changing itself from within? As the pendulum swings to the right, the Millennium Consensus unravels and PRSPs fail to deliver on their promise, what are the prospects for re-introducing alternative understandings of the world into the international aid policy agenda?

As the aid system responds to 'North-South contagion effects' (Rogerson et al.2004) and a concern for the security of the donor countries, one possible entry point may be

the growing realisation that some people have a different perspective on the world than do aid and foreign policy bureaucrats. It is clear that struggles over interpretation and resources are very complex and can sometimes be bloody and horrible – with devastating impact on community well-being and individual hopes and chance of life. In all this violent confrontation and extremism there may be the opportunity for development organisations to contribute to widening the space for peaceful struggles leading to greater global and local social justice. The United Nations system may find the chance to give itself once again a distinct voice from that of the OECD and the Bretton Woods Institutions (although clearly handicapped by its dependency on its richer members for its survival). To achieve this it needs to privilege perspectives and knowledge that complement development economics.

To take this opportunity would include thinking about defining development, not in terms of aid instruments, such as PRSPs or targets, such as Millennium Development Goals, but as transformational processes and relationships. It would mean seeing the transfer of resources as a means to that end, rather than the be-all and end-all of the aid relationship. Writing primarily about the domestic political scene in the United States, Nancy Fraser has suggested that the forces of progressive politics have been divided into two camps. On one side are the proponents of redistribution (the left wing of aid policy in Therien's terms) and on the other side are those who emphasise the importance of diversity – of a 'difference-friendly' society where assimilation to dominant cultural norms is no longer the price of equal respect. She argues there is a widespread decoupling of the politics of difference from the politics of equality. (Fraser 2001).

In international aid policy, 'recognition' has so far been given short shrift, including an indifference to aid recipients' frequent objections to being labelled 'poor' discussed earlier. However, in the current crisis in aid policy, we must heed Fraser's warning concerning the dangers of recognition politics being understood and responded to as 'identity' politics. She suggests that the standard identity model of recognition is group-specific cultural identity in which misrecognition consists in the depreciation of such identity by the dominant culture and the consequent damage to group members' sense of self. It is a dangerous model because it reifies culture and ignores the complexity of people's lives and the multiplicity of their identifications. Nevertheless, that people are concerned about more than their poverty, demanding also respect and dignity, implies that aid policy must respond to the recognition agenda.

Fraser proposes an alternative analysis of recognition, based on the idea of social status. On this model, misrecognition arises when institutions structure interaction according to cultural norms that impede people's standing as full members of society and 'parity of participation' in social life. She suggests that such parity of participation depends on two conditions. The first of these conditions is what Rawls would describe as 'primary goods' or Sen as 'capabilities'. This is where the left wing commitment to aid as distributive justice plays its part. It is her second condition that is new to mainstream aid policy thinking and explains why even the redistributive thinking behind the PRSP process was incapable of analysing the events of the Cochabamba water war. This other condition requires that institutionalised patterns of cultural values express equal respect for all participants and ensure equal opportunity for achieving social esteem. Whereas the first condition concerns

material well-being, the second relates to the quality of societal relationships. Neither condition, she argues can be reduced into the other and it is together that they form a definition of social justice.

The Beijing agenda has been the only significant attempt by the international aid system to grapple with a concept of social justice that included the relational idea of social status. Ten years later, and to avoid a simplistic and possibly dangerous response to the global and local claims of reductionist identity politics, it may be a timely moment to develop and apply the thinking of Beijing without losing the commitment to Copenhagen. As with those two conferences, the lead must be taken by the United Nations system but it means also a re-evaluation by the member countries of the OECD Development Assistance Committee of their own understanding of their role and power to shape events. Particularly important will be the need to embrace intellectual diversity and to welcome a multiplicity of voices in the construction of knowledge within their own aid ministries.

It is easier to surrender the fiction of being in control when we put ourselves into the analytical framework. To understand ourselves as part of the play rather than the person directing it. This means asking questions about who we are and why we understand the world in a certain way because of who we are. Gender is a concept that challenges people to ask these questions and to explore relations within their organisations as well as with aid recipients. It is a concept that can point to questions that require international development organisations to reflect on their own power and the dilemmas of engagement in other people's struggles.

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