Is Good Policy Unimplementable? Reflections on the Ethnography of Aid Policy and Practice

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ABSTRACT

Despite the enormous energy devoted to generating the right policy models in development, strangely little attention is given to the relationship between these models and the practices and events that they are expected to generate or legitimize. Focusing on the unfolding activities of a development project over more than ten years as it falls under different policy regimes, this article challenges the assumption that development practice is driven by policy, suggesting that the things that make for 'good policy' — policy which legitimizes and mobilizes political support — in reality make it rather unimplementable within its chosen institutions and regions. But although development practice is driven by a multi-layered complex of relationships and the culture of organizations rather than policy, development actors work hardest of all to maintain coherent representations of their actions as instances of authorized policy, because it is always in their interest to do so. The article places these observations within the wider context of the anthropology of development and reflects on the place, method and contribution of development ethnography.

INTRODUCTION

There is, today, a preoccupation among development agencies and researchers with getting policy right; with exerting influence over policy, linking research to policy, and of course with implementing policy around the world. An abundance of government White Papers, mission statements, and strategic plans, civil society consultations, and policy forums indicate a striving for coherence in development policy at the global level, while

strategies, models and designs express policy at the project level.[1] For many working in development, getting theory right is the key to addressing the failures and disappointments of development; although the policy process ensures that policies do not command loyalty for long. Better theory, new paradigms and alternative frameworks are constantly needed. In the development policy marketplace the orientation is always 'future positive' (Edwards, 1999).

Despite the enormous energy devoted to generating the right policy models, however, there is surprisingly little attention paid to the relationship between these models and the practices and events that they are expected to generate or legitimize in particular contexts. The intense focus on the future, on new beginnings, is rarely moderated by an analysis of the past in development (Quarles van Ufford et al., 2003: 13). At best, the relationship between policy and practice is understood in terms of an unintended 'gap' between theory and practice, to be reduced by better policy more effectively implemented. But what if development practice is not driven by policy? What if the things that make for good policy are quite different from those that make it implementable? What if the practices of development are in fact concealed rather than produced by policy? What if, instead of policy producing practice, practices produce policy, in the sense that actors in development devote their energies to maintaining coherent representations regardless of events?

These are some of the questions that I want to address in this article by reflecting on the ten year experience of a DFID rural development project in western India which was framed by a new 'participatory approach' (goal, strategy and design). These days projects are not very fashionable instruments of policy in international development agencies. They have lost ground to the greater ambitions of sector-wide approaches, state-level partnerships and policy-based budgetary assistance as the means to reduce global poverty. As then UK Secretary of State for International Development recently put it, we have to 'move away from funding a proliferation of projects to backing poverty reduction strategies drawn up by developing countries themselves.'[2] Have we really learnt all that we can from projects? I will suggest that important lessons remain to be understood from them — about the relationship between policy and practice, the politics of partnership, the

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1. The justification for adopting a broad conception of policy here is the strong inter-connection that exists between project designs (causal theories, e.g., summarized in logical frameworks), policy models (frameworks and approaches, e.g., sustainable rural livelihoods) and the wider policy of a donor agency (e.g., participatory and poverty focused development). So, while much of the focus of the paper will be on policy as project design, model and approach, it will become clear (a) that these acquire form and win (or lose) legitimacy because they articulate (or fail to articulate) wider policy ambitions; and (b) that project exemplars are necessary to frame and sustain wider policy itself.

2. Clare Short, Draft speech for the Johannesburg summit on Sustainable Development, July 2002.

co-existence of different agendas and interests, about the production of success or failure, or about the effects of policy change on organizations. Furthermore, I will argue that these issues have a greater not a lesser significance with a move 'upstream' in international development that only increases the black box of unknowing between development policy and its effects.

I should make it clear, however, that this is neither an evaluation, nor an overview of a development project. It is not a commentary on appropriate approaches or strategies, solutions to problems, success or failure. I am not concerned here with 'best practice' or lessons for replication. Rather, my concern is with the relationship between policy models of all kinds and the practices they are supposed to generate. This is an attempt to prise open the large black box that exists between policy prescriptions, on the one hand, and poverty reducing effects on the other. Secondly, I am not interested, as some critical analysts are, with passing judgement on development. My concern is not whether, but *how* development works. The approach is *ethnographic*. I will begin this article by setting out an intellectual context for the ethnography of development, before narrating a development story, and finally drawing out some methodological implications for development ethnography.

INSTRUMENTAL AND CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON POLICY AND PRACTICE

Understanding the relationship between policy discourse and field practices has been hampered by the dominance of two opposing views on development policy. These can be caricatured as follows. On the one hand there is an *instrumental view* of policy as rational problem solving — directly shaping the way in which development is done. On the other hand there is a *critical view* that sees policy as a rationalizing discourse concealing hidden purposes of bureaucratic power or dominance, in which the true political intent of development is hidden behind a cloak of rational planning (for example, Escobar, 1995; Ferguson, 1994; cf. Shore and Wright, 1997). Neither of these views does justice to the complexity of policy-making and its relationship to project practice, or to the creativity and skill involved in negotiating development.

First, from an instrumental view, the usual concern is how to implement policy, how to realize programme designs in practice. In recent years, the international development shift away from narrow technology-led micro-managed projects to wider programme goals of sector and state-level reform has required more sophisticated models capable of dealing with development as a transactional process linking policy goals and outcomes (see Brinkerhoff, 1996; Mosse, 1998); but the approach is no less managerial, no less concerned with bringing institutional reality into line with policy prescription. Indeed, the more complex development problems become, and the more uncertain the relationship between policy prescription and development outcome, the more necessary are simplifying models of change and detailed planning and

management procedures (cf. Rondinelli, 1983: 90). Arguably, international development is characterized by a new managerialism, driven by two trends: on the one hand, a narrowing of the *ends* of development to quantified international development targets for the reduction of poverty, ill-health and illiteracy (OECD, 1996);[3] but, on the other, a widening of its *means*. Whereas until the 1980s technology-led growth or the mechanisms of the market provided the instruments of development, today good government, a vibrant civil society and democracy are also pre-requisites of poverty reduction.[4] In the extreme, nothing short of the managed reorganization of state and society is necessary to deliver on international development targets (and — since underdevelopment is now dangerous — to secure global security; Duffield 2001).[5] As a 'means', social life is instrumentalized in new international public policy through policy-driven ideas such as social capital, civil society or good governance that theorize relationships between society, democracy and poverty reduction so as to extend the scope of rational design and social engineering from the technical and economic realm to the social and cultural (ibid.: 9). My point here is that if questions are to be raised about the relationship between policy and practice, design and outcome, in rational planning frameworks within the micro-world of the project, how much more important are such questions within the wider framework of contemporary international development.[6]

The second, critical, view works from opposite assumptions. It takes the failure of development interventions as self-evident. Here there is no surprise that management models which isolate interventions from the history and social and political realities of the 'third world', or bend these realities into the discipline-bound logics of diagnosis and prescription (whether in health, agriculture or education), do not achieve their stated ends (Long,

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3. These targets include 'a reduction by one-half in the proportion of people living in extreme poverty by 2015, universal primary education in all countries by 2015, a reduction by two-thirds in infant and under-five mortality rates and by three-fourths in maternal mortality by 2015' (DFID, 1997).

4. Following Duffield (2001: 7–8) these may also be viewed as the criteria or preconditions for inclusion in the global economy. Correspondingly social (and economic) exclusion is what defines 'the South' — increasingly the location not just of poverty, but of conflict and instability, criminal activity, and terrorism. The international response to 'dangerous underdevelopment' is not globally inclusive economic development but 'global poor relief and riot control' (ibid., citing Robert Cox).

5. It is significant that DFID's policy papers (DFID, 1997, 2000) adopt the notion of the *elimination* of poverty, which implies boundaries beyond which poverty (or ill-health) can vanish forever. Here, as Parkin (1995) points out (with reference to medical thinking in East Africa), is a sort of 'black hole' solution to problems, which stands in contrast to the idea that poverty (or disease) is relational and requires constant counterwork; it is a managerial idea that may not easily fit with the concerns and options of people themselves.

6. It would be a separate task to examine aid policy as a political project of strategic global governance (see Duffield, 2001).

2001: 32–4). However, the critics do not really dispense with the instrumentality of development so much as substitute a set of real, undisclosed or unintended ends or effects for the stated goals of development planning.[7] A now extensive literature argues that development's rational models achieve cognitive control and social regulation; they enhance state capacity and expand bureaucratic control (particularly over marginal areas and people); they reproduce hierarchies of knowledge (scientific over indigenous) and society (developer over 'to be developed') and they fragment, subjugate, silence or erase the local, all the while 'whisk[ing] these political effects out of sight' through technical discourses that naturalize poverty and objectify the poor and depoliticize development (Ferguson, 1994; see Long, 2001; Ludden, 1992; Scott, 1998; Skaria, 1998; Tsing, 1993).

Recently the critical eye has turned on policy which labels itself participatory, bottom-up, community-driven or even indigenous (such as Chambers, 1983, 1997; Chambers et al., 1989), which does not reverse or modify development's hegemony so much as provide more effective instruments with which to advance external interests and agendas while further concealing the agency of outsiders, or the more local political manipulations of elites, behind the beguiling rhetoric of 'people's control' (Cook and Kothari, 2001; Mosse, 2001). 'Community', 'indigenous', 'local knowledge', 'people's planning' — these categories which promised keys to counter top-down technocratic approaches and to unlock the power of development for the poor turn out to be dangerous counterfeits, products of modernity, trailing colonial histories of bureaucratically invented custom and tradition (Mosse, 1999; Sundar, 2000). Moreover, the techniques of participation themselves (such as PRA) turn out to be disciplinary technologies deployed to produce 'proper' beneficiaries with planning knowledge out of local people and their ways of thinking and doing.

In short, for the critics, development and its various discourses (understood as policies and practices) have both institutional effects (maintaining relations of power) and ideological effects (depoliticization) (Ferguson, 1994). Power manifests itself as the cunning of reason *and* populism (cf. Agrawal, 1996: 470). Development is not policy to be implemented, but domination to be resisted. And such resistance is celebrated, for example, in the activist documentation of social movements against resettlement schemes or large dams or the logging of the forest or a multitude of smaller acts such as uprooting trees, pulling down fences or destroying irrigation ditches in order to protect rights to land, grazing or water.

These contrasted instrumental and critical views have blocked the way for a more insightful ethnography of development capable of opening up the implementation black box so as to address the relationship between policy

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7. Whether these are viewed as conspiratorial ends or unintended 'instrument effects' (Ferguson, 1994) rather depends upon the theory of agency involved.

and event. Instrumental views are only too obviously naive in relation to the institutional politics of development. But the critical turn in the anthropology of development is also an ethnographic blind alley, which merely replaces the instrumental rationality of policy with the anonymous automaticity of the machine. Development's effects occur, James Ferguson writes, 'behind the backs or against the wills of even the most powerful actors' (1994: 18). The relentless Foucauldian micro-physics of power occur beyond the intelligence of the actors; although not that of the decoding anthropologist. This is a 'new functionalist' sociology that, as Latour (2000) puts it, *substitutes* false objects with real ones — development with social function (for instance, the extension of bureaucratic power) — and therefore destroys its object.[8] Once the substitution is complete, there is nothing to say. Little wonder that critics such as Ferguson apparently spend so little of their time talking to development workers. Both the critical and the instrumental perspective, then, divert attention away from the complexity of policy as institutional practice, from the social life of projects, organizations and professionals and the diversity of interests behind policy models and the perspectives of actors themselves.

CONCERNS OF A NEW ETHNOGRAPHY OF DEVELOPMENT

Recent ethnography of development has begun to blur the bold contours drawn by both rational planning and domination/resistance frameworks. Some has drawn on Foucault's notion of governmentality — 'a type of power which both acts *on* and *through* the agency and subjectivity of individuals as ethically free and rational subjects' (Shore and Wright, 1997: 6) — to show how policy regulates social life and makes subjects and citizens, not by repression and overt control, but through a *productive* power which engenders subjectivities and aspirations (Foucault, 1977: 194; Li, 1999: 296). Other authors, also arguing that the domination/resistance frame is too restrictive to grasp the nature of agency from below, point out that amidst even the most extreme forms of development imposition such as the forced resettlement of 'indigenous' people following dam construction, along with those who confront the contractors out of anger or frustration, there will be some who say 'this will mean a new day for us'; 'we will be much better off' (Fletcher, 2001). In a variety of ways the new ethnography

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8. Sahlins (1999) takes to task the 'afterologists', those new functionalists who would explain away culture as invented tradition whose truth is found in political utilities and instrumental effects; who indulge in 'explanation by way of elimination'. Otherwise we end up only knowing everything 'functionally, as devices of power . . . ; not substantially or structurally' (ibid.: 404). In similar vein, to point out that development activities serve certain interests or have certain political *effects* is not to explain the motivations and meanings of those involved or to undermine its ethic (cf. Crewe and Harrison, 1998). The effect of things does not explain their properties.

of development is distinctly uncomfortable with monolithic notions of dominance, resistance, hegemonic relations and the implication of false consciousness among the developed (or the developers).

Michel de Certeau has added subtlety to the understanding of agency by alerting us to the devious, dispersed and subversive 'consumer practices' which are 'not manifest through [their] own products, but rather through [their] *ways of using* the products imposed by a dominant economic order' (de Certeau, 1984: xiii, emphasis in original). In other words, while 'bene-ficiaries' may consent to dominant models — using the authorized scripts given them by projects — they make of them something quite different (ibid.). It is in this sense that we can think with James Scott (1990) in terms of the existence of 'hidden transcripts' alongside the 'public trans-cripts' of development policy. What is of interest is less the relationship between policy and implementation, or dominance and resistance, and more that between public and hidden transcripts; between the ' "monotheistic privilege" of dominant policy models' and the ' "polytheism" of scattered practices' surviving below (de Certeau, 1984: 48).

Another thing the new ethnography of development shows is that govern-ance brought by development schemes cannot be imposed; it requires col-laboration and compromise. Reputation and legitimacy (upon which governance depends) are scarce resources for governments, donors, state development agencies or even NGOs operating in competitive environments (Li, 1999). Claims to success are always fragile, and counter-claims about development outcomes are 'points of political leverage' (ibid.: 297).[9] There is always 'the possibility of exposure and disgrace . . . [an] uneasy sub-text of political jokes and cynical reflections on the pomposity of a speech, the tedium of a spectacle or the stupidity of a plan — reflections that, while they criticise another also implicate the self' (ibid.: 299). Since success is fragile and failure a political problem, hegemony has to be worked out not imposed; it is 'a terrain of struggle' (ibid.: 316). The critics of development, Li points out, emphasized the *project* of rule, but missed the political contests, the feigned compliance, the compromises and contingencies involved in the *accomplishment* of rule (ibid.: 295). This (*pace* Ferguson) makes the promises and practices of development deeply political (cf. Gupta, 1998; Moore, 2000). Amita Baviskar (forthcoming), working on decentralized natural resource development in India, shows how schemes work so as to secure political consent while Tania Li, studying state resettlement programmes in Indonesia, reveals the inherent vulnerability of policy models and 'bureaucratic schemes for ordering and classifying

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9. Recent anthropological treatment of the state and bureaucracy also cautions against assertions about the state as a unified source of intention and power, the extension of bureaucratic power, of mistaking policy intent for practical outcome, or failing to understand the fragile self-representation of state or bureaucracy (Abrams, 1988; see Fuller and Harriss, 2000; Scott, 1998; Sivaramakrishnan, 1999).

populations [which] may be secure on paper, but [they] are fragile in practice' (Li, 1999: 298). Programme success depends upon the active enrolment of supporters including the 'beneficiaries'. This is not to say that such compromises are in the interests of the poor, who are often excluded from benefits by pragmatic collaborations between junior bureaucrats and the better-off that compromise development targeting.[10]

So, to reiterate, the ethnographic question is not whether but *how* development projects work; not whether a project succeeds, but how success is produced. One thing is evident: whether disciplining or empowering in intent, the operational control which bureaucracies or NGOs have over events and practices in development is always constrained and often quite limited.[11] What is usually more urgent and more practical is control over the *interpretation* of events. The critical analysts of policy discourse rightly argue that power lies in the narratives that maintain an organization's definition of the problem (also Roe, 1994) — that is, success in development depends upon the stabilization of a particular interpretation, a policy model — but they fail to examine the way in which policy ideas are produced socially. As Bruno Latour reminds us, the success of policy ideas or project designs is not inherent (not given at the outset) but arises from their 'ability to continue recruiting support and so impose . . . [their] growing coherence on those who argue about them or oppose them' (1996: 78). The point is that authoritative interpretations have to be made and sustained *socially*. Development projects need 'interpretive communities'; they have to enrol a range of supporting actors with reasons 'to participate in the established order as if its representations were reality' (Sayer, 1994: 374, cited in Li, 1999: 374).

Now, the more interests that are tied up with their particular interpretations, the more stable and dominant development's policy models become. For example, the narrative of African deforestation and savannization that Fairhead and Leach (1996, 1997) critique is buttressed by many interests. It not only secures media-fed constituencies for Western governments, or financial solvency for a Guinean government reliant on green-conditional aid, or routine revenue for officials in a Prefecture from a system of fines, bribes and exclusions, but also underpins professional identities for junior foresters disciplining 'irresponsible villagers', and even the ethnic identity of 'savannah' against 'forest people' (Fairhead and Leach, 1997). To this set

10. As Heller notes, regarding participatory or decentralized development, 'when a weak state devolves power it is more often than not simply making accommodations with local strongmen rather than expanding democratic spaces' (Heller, 2001: 139, cited in Abraham and Platteau, forthcoming).

11. Quarles van Ufford (1988: 26) draws on Henry Mintzberg to argue that 'the scope for control [of upper over lower levels] in professional organisations such as development bureaucracies is limited, and even decreases as they become larger'. Policy-makers, donor staff, consultants or senior managers are often marginal actors who are able at most through 'thought work' to shape codes and rules to guide the behaviour of others with wills and motivations of their own (Heyman, 1995: 263).

could be added donor advisers, consultants, researchers and many more whose interests come to be tied up with ruling models.

Clearly common narratives or commanding interpretations are supported for different reasons and serve a diversity of perhaps contradictory interests. The differentiation of practical interests around 'unifying' development policies or project designs is a consequence of successful enrolment, and a condition of stability and success. But it also requires the constant work of *translation* (of policy goals into practical interests; practical interests back into policy goals), which is the task of skilled brokers (managers, consultants, fieldworkers, community leaders) who read the meaning of a project into the different institutional languages of its stakeholder supporters. For projects, 'there's no *inertia*, no *irreversibility*; there is no *autonomy* to keep them alive'; no respite from the work of creating interest and making real through 'long chains of translators' (Latour, 1996: 86, emphasis in original). The problem is that this diversity itself destabilizes and militates against coherence. The greater the number of people that are invited to the party the more energy is expended attending to their needs, and the more their needs shape a project (ibid.: 127). A postmodern emphasis on fragmentation and the endless multiplicity of actor perspectives provides only half the picture, however, and is only a partial correction to the reductive analysis that explains away a development project by substitution; that debunks, blames or destroys its object (Latour, 2000). The ethnographic task is also to show how, despite such fragmentation and dissent, actors in development are constantly engaged in creating order and unity through political acts of *composition* (ibid.). It involves examining the way in which heterogeneous entities — people, ideas, interests, events and objects (seeds, engineered structures, pumps, vehicles, computers, fax machines, or data bases)[12] — are tied together by translation of one kind or another into the material and conceptual order of a successful project (ibid.).[13]

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12. As science and technology studies remind us, the actor networks that produce a development project are not confined to social relationships but also involve *things*, technologies and other material resources which constitute relationships. 'By themselves things don't act, but neither do humans' (Law, 1994 in Steins, 2001: 19; cf. Strum and Latour, 1999; Winner, 1999).

13. Latour's emphasis on translation and political acts of composition rests on the broader point that the modernist idea of the *a priori* unity of the social, or hidden social structure, has to be discarded. There is an affinity here with Stuart Hall's notion of 'articulation' which creates unities and cultural identities which are always provisional: 'the so-called "unity" of a discourse is really the articulation of different, distinct elements which can be rearticulated in different ways because they have no necessary "belongingness". The "unity" which matters is a linkage between that articulated discourse and the social forces with which it can, under certain historical conditions, but need not necessarily be connected. Thus, a theory of articulation is both a way of understanding how ideological elements come, under certain conditions, to cohere together within a discourse, and a way of asking how they do or do not become articulated at specific conjunctures, to certain political subjects' (Hall, 1996: 141–2, in Li, 2000: 152).

A STORY AND FIVE PROPOSITIONS CONCERNING DEVELOPMENT POLICY AND PRACTICE

If development policy can be regarded neither in terms of its own pro-claimed rationality, nor as a dominating discourse; if its models are fragile and depend upon the recruitment of an active network of supporters from the ranks of both the beneficiaries and the political bosses sustained through the nifty translation work of brokers, how are we to view the increasingly sophisticated ideas, models or designs elaborated and disseminated from the headquarters of international development agencies? What, to return to my opening question, is the relationship between policy models and the prac-tices of development agencies on the ground?

Here I want to tell a development story that concerns a successful British aid funded participatory rural development project in India, the Indo-British Rainfed Farming project (IBRFP).[14] Since I worked as a development con-sultant with this project over a period of more than twelve years, I am myself part of this story. The project, started in 1992 and implemented by a special unit of a national fertilizer manufacturing co-operative, the KBCL, worked in contiguous *adivasi* (Bhil tribal) districts of the western Indian states of Rajasthan, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh. Its initial focus was on low cost, low subsidy inputs in natural resources development to improve the liveli-hoods of poor farming families (Jones et al., 1994). Based on participatory village-level planning, the project made interventions in soil and water con-servation, improved crop varieties, agro-forestry, joint forest management, horticulture, livestock, minor irrigation and credit management for input supply, and promoted village-based user and self-help groups. I will use this project to illustrate five propositions about the relationship between policy models and events in development, starting with the design of the project as an instance of policy-making.

The first proposition is that *policy* (development models, strategies and project designs) *primarily functions to mobilize and maintain political support, that is to legitimize rather than to orientate practice.* Anybody who has been involved in project formulation knows that this is work which is technically expressed (as project designs) but politically shaped (by the interests and priorities of agencies). Project design is the art, firstly of making a convin-cing argument and developing a causal model (relating inputs, outputs and impacts) oriented upwards to justify the allocation of resources by validat-ing higher policy goals; and secondly of bringing together diverse, even incompatible, interests — of national governments, implementing agencies, collaborating NGOs, research institutions, or donor advisers of different hues. One could summarize by saying: (a) that the discourse of policy acts

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14. The British Overseas Development Administration (ODA) which funded this project was re-named the Department for International Development (DFID) when the Labour government came into power in May 1997.

internally and has internal effects (it is donors who are disciplined by their own discourse; Johnston, 2002); and (b) that development policy ideas are important less for what they say than for *who* they bring together, what alliances, coalitions and consensuses they allow, both within and between organizations (cf. Latour, 1996: 42–3).[15] But there is always a tension between these two; between maintaining policy coherence to legitimize interventions (implying imposition of a policy agenda), and enrolling partner agencies and acknowledging their different agendas and interests. How did this work out in the IBRFP project?

In the early 1990s the project presented a coherent policy argument in the then fashionable language of participation. There is no space to explicate a rather complex project design here; suffice it to say that 'participation' meant several things: *generally*, that poor people and not outside agencies or governments should determine development needs, decide how they should be met (in consultation with outsiders), and should manage the process, which would make development appropriate, sustainable and result in self-reliance; *specifically* (as an Indian agriculture project), that farmer knowledge and judgements should shape technology choices and development — a challenge to the prevailing Indian agricultural research establishment. And when formulated as a *project design* with causally linked inputs and outputs, participation meant a participatory planning process (PPP) leading to better designed, more effective and sustainable programmes, or participatory technology development (PTD) leading to improved agriculture; that is, paradoxically, participation meant something that people lacked and could be *provided by the project*.

Now, some rather different interests lay behind this project design. From the *donor* management point of view, it had the calculated effect of speaking powerfully and pragmatically to emerging concerns in the early 1990s. Firstly, it helped to answer rising public criticism of the British aid programme by marking a shift to genuinely poverty-focused participatory development. Secondly, by working through a co-operative sector partner agency (KBCL), the project design met an emerging 1990s interest in non- or para-state actors, and public–private partnerships. Thirdly, its emphasis on (then) new ideas of farmer agency and indigenous knowledge helped enrol a wider international community of interest and support; and fourthly, the ambiguous idea of participation — which could mean both market research and empowerment — resolved an internal professional tension between ODA's Social Development and Technical Advisers, and mediated the very different professional goals and understandings of plant

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15. Here I focus on 'participation' in DFID, but another good example would be how 'social capital' (concept and quasi-causal model) has been promoted and shaped within the World Bank by those trying to forge the internal and external coalitions necessary to advance a 'social development' agenda in an economics dominated organization (see Bebbington et al., forthcoming).

breeders, soil engineers, economists, anthropologists (among others) within the project design team, by submerging differences and allowing people to talk to each other.

But the project design had to enrol other interests as well, in particular those of KBCL, the co-operative project agency. KBCL was an Indian manufacturing and marketing giant, firmly oriented to high-input technology and commercial agriculture and the maximization of its fertilizer sales. At the time it was not clear why this agency would sign up to the donor's strong poverty agenda and a participatory policy model stressing low-cost, low-input technology and response to the demands of very poor tribal farming communities with negligible demand for fertilizer. Despite the rhetoric of 'local ownership', the organization's interests and preoccupations were anyway never openly solicited or expressed during the project design process. The dominance of the donor agenda was taken as read. However, KBCL managers did have distinctive perspectives and specific interests. In fact, they were interested in the value of the project as a high profile, high prestige, internationally-funded venture able to advance KBCL's profile to its client base, and especially to promote its image and relationship with government (who allocated fertilizer quotas and other commercial projects), rather than in any potential the project had in establishing a (very low value) local market for fertilizer — although there were also ambitions to exploit marketing/processing opportunities from commercialized agriculture.

This organizational agenda was by no means the same as the donor's, but rather surprisingly the donor project model with its emphasis on participation *did* provide a good vehicle for KBCL's promotional agenda, which kept the organization on board. To put it briefly, the project (staff and consultants, including myself) effectively turned participation into a commodity (loosely speaking) which like urea could be bagged with the company label on it. This was made possible by the high profile accorded to this as a participatory project by the donor, and by a rising demand for skills in participatory approaches and a package of methods (mostly PRA-based) by government organizations, and by the project's ability to deliver these. Through skilful public relations the project succeeded in establishing 'participation' as a technique/commodity, and itself as the primary source or supplier, which enabled the wider organization to reap the rewards of high profile visibility and reputation. The work that consultants like myself did in documenting and systematizing 'participatory processes' inadvertently helped in their commoditization.

In this case it was clear that the ambiguous policy idea of participation — the project's 'mobilising metaphor' (Porter, 1995) — could mean many things to many people, and allowed a multiplication of criteria of success. This not only meant that the participatory approach was a constant source of argument around the project, but also that it allowed the project to win and retain support from a range of actors with very different interests and

agendas. Of course, only some of these interests were acknowledged as legitimate. Specifically, the self-promotion interests of the project organization as a commercial marketing agency were not; nor were its system goals of protecting administrative rules, procedures and hierarchy. They persisted only as shadow goals, illegitimate concerns that constantly threatened project purposes. Nonetheless, the project's design model worked (overtly or covertly) to forge the complex set of relationships necessary to bring this project into existence. A multitude of contradictory interests and cross purposes got translated into a single, technical-rational, politically acceptable, ambitious and ambiguous project model. However, policy models that work so well to legitimize, mobilize support, and bring people and agencies together across organizations, nations and cultures (by taking on more and more agendas, increasing complexity, burying differences) do not provide good guides to action, nor are they easily turned into practice. The logic of political mobilization and the logic of operations is different. So, to the second proposition.

The second proposition is that *development interventions are driven not by policy but by the exigencies of organizations and the need to maintain relationships*. Reflecting on a decade of project level practice, it became clear to me that it was not the policy model that made IBRFP practice intelligible, but rather the system of relationships produced by compliance with the political and cultural logic of field encounters, managerial style, and organizational rules and procedures. Without question a highly committed team of project staff worked with sincerity to develop good relations with *adivasi* farmers in a region of western India to identify and meet livelihood needs, but there were many ways in which the project's participatory theory did not, and *could not*, shape actual practice in the project.

Firstly, early on we discovered the ways in which participatory planning processes were controlled by local elites and excluded marginal actors including women (Mosse, 1994). Secondly, we realized, too, that participatory planning and its 'local knowledge' were easily manipulated by external interests, and outsider analyses of problems (within and beyond the project). Thus, although farmers in these upland villages were most concerned with maintaining soil fertility and emphasized the importance of cattle and fodder and gave priority to capturing water in valleys for irrigation (issues that became clear through interviews in the course of later livelihood impact studies), village planning exercises (PRAs etc.) invariably focused on soil erosion and the need for physical soil and water conservation (SWC) works. So-called local choices were also shaped by the development agendas of government officers, scientists, foreign researchers, anthropologist consultants, donor advisers and agencies with whom the project had to maintain a relationship (had to enrol) and who brought a stream of new (sometimes flawed or inappropriate) schemes, from animal-drawn iron farm machinery to mushroom cultivation. Within the general rubric of participation, all of these could be represented as responses to farmers' needs.

Thirdly, we were acutely aware that, despite resistance from the project unit, development choices and implementation practices were profoundly shaped by the KBCL's managerial regime and its organizational systems and procedures — budget categories, sanctioning time-frames, procedures for approval or targets. These prioritized familiar conventional programmes over innovations. As a result, routinized PRAs, CPAs (community problem analyses) and village workplans produced a strong convergence of activities into a fixed set: crop trials, SWC, tree-nurseries (etc.) rather than diverse programmes responsive to differentiated and localized needs. An operational logic locked the project into certain design choices: for example, physical SWC works (earth 'bunds') met quantitative targets, disbursed development budgets, sustained farmer credit groups (through contributions from wages), supported a cadre of village experts (*jankars*), reproduced professional identities (among project engineers) and a hierarchy of staff posts at the level of the project office. The specializations of visiting consultants, KBCL budgeting, approval and accounting systems, and the complicity of villagers desiring subsidies and off-season wage labour benefits in the short term, all structured technical choices (for example, physical *vs* vegetative methods) — belying the consumer choice implied in PRA matrix ranking methods (Fiedrich, 2002). These factors shaped the style of project practice (tight schedules, targets, subsidies) and the type of project relationships (patron–client, employer–employee) that emerged. Moreover, in any project, fieldstaff or project managers hard pressed to meet targets, spend budgets and show signs of progress are commonly willing to accept the better-off (self-presented as the poor) as their target group. For IBRFP staff, the poorest were unrewardingly hard work (and so too were women), non-compliant, assetless; their land was poor and resisted new technologies, or the gains from those crop varieties specifically adapted for these conditions were compromised by debt and dependence; they are unwilling participants lacking time or labour to realize new entitlements to water or forest resources, or employment; or as migrants were non-members of the new organizations through which these entitlements were realized. Above all, the poor, and women too, lacked what Arjun Appadurai (forthcoming) calls 'the capacity to aspire'; they were poor collaborators, unskilled in navigating the links between immediate needs and wider goals and policy objectives. There is always an incentive for staff to select those people who already possess the characteristics that a project aims to create, the educated, the organized, the innovators, independent, solvent, modernizing peasants; that way a measure of success is guaranteed (Li, 1999).

We were aware, fourthly, of a process of 'mirroring' whereby villagers shaped their needs to match project schemes and administrative systems — requesting only what was most easily delivered (Mosse, 1996). In this way, the institutional needs of the project (host and donor organizations) became built into community perspectives making the project decisions appear 'perfectly participatory'. Perhaps administrative systems inevitably push

participatory planning to this sort of closure. We realized too that the performance of farmer Self Help Groups (as micro-finance institutions) was negatively affected by monitoring and accounting systems and a patronage approach (which swamped savings groups with project grants, reduced incentives independently to link to banks, refused to devolve control of SWC finance to groups, and treated SHGs as programme implementation units absorbing project investments), all of which resulted in weak financial management, risk-averse strategies and restricted fund circulation.

It was increasingly clear that project practices were shaped less and less by the formal goals (of policy/design) and more and more by the organization's 'system goals' that revolved around the preservation of rules and administrative order (cf. Quarles van Ufford, 1988). While banished from official project policy, these ensured that action conformed to KBCL's systems and procedures, respected its hierarchy, observed its rules and delivered progress in its terms — as quantified outputs in compliance with pre-defined budget categories and targets. Significantly, the most successful project components were those which were broadly compatible with KBCL systems. The most obvious example of this was the outstandingly successful (and more widely influential) crops programme based on Participatory Varietal Selection and Participatory Plant Breeding which identified and popularized improved varieties of rice, maize and other crops for low input upland conditions (see, for example, Joshi and Witcombe, 1996). In practice this programme of client-oriented technology development was a sophisticated form of market research — albeit focused on the subsistence needs of the most marginal farmers and drawing on their capacities to experiment — but consistent nonetheless with the institutional rationale of the wider marketing agency. Another success was the creation of a cadre of trained village extension workers (*jankars*) who extended the reach of the project programmes as brokers delivering them effectively to villages.

Running this project involved devoting considerable management energy to maintaining relationships upwards to senior managers, Board members, and bureaucrats; constantly translating the project into *their* terms. This meant a degree of compliance with the wider political logic and culture of an Indian farmer co-operative marketing agency, which made the project a field for patronage and display, favour and personal honour. These relationships had to be maintained in order to get things done, and as a buffer to protect the development project from even more direct control; but the urgent demands of these relationships shaped what was done and how. As James Scott points out, 'formal order is always and to a considerable degree parasitic on informal processes, which the formal scheme does not recognise, without which it could not exist, and which it alone cannot create or maintain' (Scott, 1998: 310). Certainly, as *designed* this participatory project was, like many, from the start *unmanageable*.

Ironically, operational possibilities were also constrained by the interests of Bhil villagers themselves. For instance, the project's Self-Help Groups

might have been weak or failing against the standards of current micro-finance models (which emphasize enterprise from maximally rotating loan funds); but they were not shaped by this logic. For Bhil villagers, the groups were rather a means to establish and sustain vertical relationships with a project patron and to secure entitlement to the waged labour or assets which it provided. The demands of relationship-building under conditions of uncertainty required that Bhil kin groups multiplied economic activities that would attract subsidies, and maximized the *accumulation* of capital (and assets) from the project as a form of social security.

More generally, as soon as 'participation' with its implication of local control or autonomous action becomes institutionalized as policy, part of the 'language of entitlement' rather than the 'tactics of consumption' (de Certeau, 1984: 49), it too is colonized and eroded from within (ibid.). Authorized models of participatory development (such as Self Help Groups, MFIs) are subject to a multitude of hidden tactical readings. In a variety of ways people discard the discipline of participation (*bhagidari* or 'contribution'), self-help and project withdrawal by making themselves clients, labourers or employees so as to secure continuing patronage, capital assets or wage labour from project staff who make themselves patrons behind the veil of 'facilitation'. Unruly objects of development, these people strive to be modern when we want them to be indigenous, chaotic when we demand order; they present themselves as our clients and employees when we call them partners; dependent when we insist on their autonomy. They make a mockery of our models and our explanations.

So, international donor policy (for instance, on participatory development) only has effects through its imperfect translation into the intentions and ambitions of others; the institutional interests, operational systems, procedures and organizational culture of collaborating agencies, their workers and those recruited as beneficiaries. A development project like IBRFP is a relationship-maintaining system involving skilful mediators, multi-lingual in the discourse of Bhil villagers, project office, corporate bureaucracy, local politics and donor policy. It involved a long 'chain of organisation' (Quarles van Ufford, 1988) with many translations to mediate different rationalities and expectations across institutional and cultural boundaries (Latour, 1996). Through its self-maintaining connections the project system became inherently conservative and structure-affirming in its effects, reconstituting rather than challenging relations of power and patronage at every level. It is in terms of this political and cultural logic that practices (choices or operations) are intelligible, rather than in terms of policy or theory (project models and designs), which for myriad reasons do not (often cannot) transform realities *in the way that they claim*. But this practical logic is not just unacknowledged, it is hidden by the active promotion of policy models; and so to the third proposition.

My third proposition is that *development projects work to maintain themselves as coherent policy ideas, as systems of representations as well as*

operational systems.[16] Policy may not generate events, but it helps stabilize the interpretation of events. Despite the fact that the logic of practice routinely contradicted its project model, IBRFP was constrained to promote the view that its activities resulted from the implementation of policy. Even though its practices departed from principles of participatory development, IBRFP became an exemplar of this mode of development. Indeed, while its operational systems made the project gradually less exploratory and flexible, re-enforcing preconceptions and narrowing options, it was being acclaimed (by visiting donors and officials) especially for its *participatory* processes and the sophistication of it methods. How was such success produced?

Partly this was good marketing, a convergence of the development agenda of participation and the self-promotional goals of a fertilizer company that ensured the packaging of a systematic participatory approach into frameworks and manuals. Partly it was the ambiguity of the concept of participation itself, which meant that increasingly routinized field activities — PRAs, village meetings, workplans, or crop trials — could be taken as measures of success in themselves, and as a sign of wider social transformation, awareness or empowerment by project visitors and observers. But it was also the admirably efficient and timely execution of high quality programmes — soil and water conservation, improved cultivars, forestry, minor irrigation — that brought deserved praise. However, the delivery of programmes was far too important to be left to *participatory* (that is, farmer-managed) processes, hence the strong vertical control of activities and implementation backed by systems of rewards and punishments. Indeed, staff who tried to be too participatory — spending too long investigating needs or women's perspectives, or insisting on the slow build-up of capital in village groups — would be seen as under-performing by both project and community. Here was a contradiction: high profile publicized 'participation processes' on the one hand, vertical control over programme delivery on the other. It is a contradiction that must characterize all 'participatory interventions' to varying degrees. The point is that this sort of contradiction is easily concealed.

Ultimately what secured rising success for this project (in 1994–6) was neither a series of trivial participatory events (PRAs etc.), nor even the delivery of quality physical programmes. Rather, success depended upon the donor-supported (and consultant elaborated) *theory* that linked participation/farmer control on the one hand, and better, more effective/sustainable programmes on the other. When interpreted through the assumptions of the project model, a landscape of well laid out SWC bunds, woodlots, wells and

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16. A distinction borrowed from Baudrillard, via Hobart (1995). As Shore and Wright (1997: 5) note, 'organisations exist in a constant state of organising'; they are concerned with the work of making 'fragmented activities appear coherent, so it can be claimed that an intention has been realised and a successful result achieved'.

pumpsets and an expanding range of group activities is read, not only by visitors but by staff and management themselves, as demonstrating the success of DFID goals of people's participation and farmer-managed development, regardless of the actuality of practice.

In other words, this project (like others) worked because it sustained a coherent policy idea, a model offering a significant interpretation of events, as well as a delivery system producing outputs. Perhaps the predictive capacity of the policy model is like that of a popular horoscope; it facilitates recognition. The point is that such validating project models (or policies), regularly invoked in workshops and donor-review visits, establish precisely the causal link between participatory processes and efficient implementation that is absent (or difficult to establish) in practice.[17]

Certainly in the case of IBRFP, a considerable amount of effort went into formulating and explicating the assumptions of the project model. This was a feature of consultant reports, manuals, workshops/seminars promotional films, even ODA's new 'Output to Purpose' reviews. Far more effort went into this than into examining actual project practices, in which there was little interest. We had so much confidence in the model that when the logical framework was revised in 1995, the project Purpose was defined as 'establishment of a replicable, participatory ... FSD (farming systems development) approach', that is, a model, and the project developed a 'dissemination strategy', a 'replication programme', as key outputs. Invariably perhaps, managers of successful projects find an emphasis on dissemination more rewarding than struggling with the contractions of implementation (although they have to do both) — which is not to deny the important effects of selling the IBRFP model to influence wider policy, particularly in the area of crop research.

Put simply, IBRFP development outputs were brought about through a complex set of practical improvisations, and institutional and political relations (informed by 'hidden transcripts'), but the project was constrained to believe and promote the view that these activities were the result of the implementation of official participatory development policy (its 'public transcript'). In practice, the project's model of community-driven development in many respects did not, and *could* not orientate operations. There were too many pressing institutional needs for the ideas of farmer-managed planning, or project withdrawal to be systematically operationalized. And why would a marketing organization want to get rid of its best customers, and villagers a serviceable patron? Instead, the project worked to establish and extend its power and influence locally through relations of patronage.

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17. Reviewing community-driven development, Mansuri and Rao (2004) also identify the specific difficulty of establishing causal relations in participatory development, that is between participation or group activity on the one hand and project effectiveness and sustainability on the other.

There is no suggestion of duplicity. Interpreting and presenting events through the official model was a habit (of mine too). Project designs become thickly woven into professional practice, identity (or habitus). Indeed, policy is implicated in the production and alteration of modes of subjectivity and agency.[18] The IBRFP project is not exceptional here. Participatory models and ideals of self-reliance are often more part of the way projects work as systems of representations, oriented upwards and outwards to wider policy goals and institutions that secure reputation and funding (or inwards as self-representation), than part of their operational systems (Mosse, 2003). Of course to varying degrees, project staff were aware of the fact that coherence-building and success were based on contradiction. Their self-critical commentary captured the unease, anxiety and 'false atmosphere' of a regime of success of which they were a part (Mosse, 2004).

Considerable work is needed to sustain such a system of representations both within and beyond the immediate project through the practical tasks of model-building and reporting, field visits and review missions, public events and promotional literature, or publicity and marketing. In other words, project models and their interpretations, upon which project success and survival depends, have to be secured and stabilized *socially*, not only by winning the compliance of beneficiaries, but also through actively recruiting and enrolling other supporting actors who tie their interests to the representations of the established project order. Projects like IBRFP are *made* successful by social processes that disperse project agency (Li, 1999: 304), forge and maintain networks of support, and create a public audience for their work of social transformation.[19] Skilful brokers translate the meaning of the project into the many different institutional languages of its stakeholder supporters (cf. Latour, 1996). The more extensive the connections, the more diverse (and more powerful) the interests tied up in it, the more stable the project and its policy model, and so the more assured its success. The energy of the IBRFP Project Manager is testimony to the considerable effort and political skill that had to go into such networking with senior managers, donors, officials, consultants, beneficiaries, who together comprised what might be called the project's 'interpretive community' (Porter, 1995: 66). The project had robust networks; it was well 'contextualised' (Latour, 1996). This was a hugely successful 'flagship' project, the 'jewel in the crown'.

The conclusion I was drawn to was that development projects are 'successful' not because they turn design into reality, but because they sustain policy models offering a significant interpretation of events. In other words

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18. A point gratefully taken from one of my anonymous reviewers.
19. Elsewhere I have indicated the way in which public rituals are used to create a wider public for the project work. These include seminars, public PRAs and other displays, the calendar of national festivals or international events (Republic Day, Independence Day, International Women's Day, Health Week); see Mosse (2004).

policy models do not generate practices, they (policies) are sustained *by* them. Development proceeds not only (or primarily) from policy to practice, but also from practice to policy. Correspondingly, project failure is not the failure to turn designs into reality, but the consequence of a certain dis-articulation between practices, their rationalizing models and overarching policy frameworks.[20] Failure is not a failure to implement the plan, but a *failure of interpretation*, which brings me to the next proposition.

The fourth proposition is that *projects do not fail; they are failed by wider networks of support and validation.*[21] Despite its reputation, the success of the IBRFP project was never entirely secure. First of all it was challenged in 1995 at its mid-term evaluation. The evaluation report was striking in its refusal to accept the prevailing assumption of the model that more partici-pation equals better programmes and impact. Indeed the evaluators broke ranks with the project's interpretive community and criticized the project for having *too much participation* and too little impact. The report cynically noted that: 'being accountable for generating measurable impacts is far tougher than being accountable for faithfully using a hazy, intangible, almost ephemeral, participatory planning process [PPP]. For the same reasons, GOs and NGOs may be strongly attracted to adopt IBRFP's PPP approach, especially if they can find funders to support them without having to show concrete livelihood impacts' (Shah et al., 1996).

The ODA review which followed underlined the new challenge to 'partici-pation'. This project, designed on an early 1990s wave of criticism of top-down, technology-driven state programmes, now had to answer awkward questions about the transaction costs of participation, or the evidence of impact. However, the criticisms levelled at the project did not arise from a new capacity of the donor to penetrate the reality of project practice, but rather from the fact that they were asking different questions. Indeed, it was not the *practice* of the project that the ODA team was scrutinizing, but its

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20. Some might object that, by showing how policy-making is (also) local practice, I have simply demonstrated the futility of distinguishing between the two (policy and practice — 'policy is just a course of action . . . exercised by institutions . . . and people' [Alberto Arce, pers. com.]; peasants and fieldworkers are policy-makers, they establish rules and norms, develop strategies and form judgements). While this is true, the problem is that it does away with the asymmetries of power that ensure the need to register desires and aspirations, to retain legitimacy, to access resources and reputation by translating one set of thought-actions into another — the capacity for which is unevenly distributed (cf. Appadurai, forthcoming). Policy in my terms implies authority (sometimes precarious), which is not inherent in privileged organizing, unifying conceptions themselves, but is an effect of the social actions/relations that produce them. As Apthorpe (1996: 4) points out, notions of development's 'discursive practices' or development as 'a modernist regime' or a 'discursive field' involve a dangerous loss of distinction between discourses and practices, and it is precisely the relationship between the two that has to be explored in an ethnography of development.

21. 'Projects do not fail, they are failed. Maybe policy fails projects (as in terminates them). Failure is manufactured not inherent' (Latour, 1996: 35–6).

theory. Donor interest was not in the project as event and relationships, but as a coherent rationalizing policy idea (a system of representations). If this was a crisis, it was a *crisis of representation* in which external policy shifts had made 'participation' a less than adequate metaphor for the development process. The project was vulnerable to 'failure' not because of its practice, but because a new (ODA) policy environment made it harder for the project to articulate with the pre-occupations and ambitions of its donor supporters and interlocutors. Indeed, the ODA review team did not ask the project to change what it did, but to modify its *theory* in order to bring it into line with new 1995–6 thinking on matters such as impact assessment, project cycle management, value-for-money or 'sustainable rural livelihoods'. The Review team insisted that the project revise its LogFrame, changing its Purpose from 'a participatory *approach*...' to 'sustainable improvements in livelihoods...' and that it 'clarify the instrumentality between process and benefits...', so as to produce interpretations that were consistent with emerging donor policy.

The project never did clarify the instrumentality of its model, instead it focused on demonstrating impact. Significantly, the series of detailed impact assessment studies that followed (and in which I was involved) demonstrated that the project was perceived by villagers as having a significant positive economic and social impact; thus proving the reviewers wrong. To be sure, the principle economic gains from project activities such as soil and water conservation, minor irrigation, improved seeds, agro-forestry, or vegetable cultivation accrued to households in proportion to the land they possessed (quality — that is, lower valley rather than upper slope — as well as quantity); and the poorest (including the land poor) received less of the project's subsidies, while, *contributing* more (to common assets) through their own subsidized labour on project works; but at the same time, what the project offered — especially wages and low-cost credit — was also of *greatest* importance to the livelihoods of the poorest and most heavily indebted households.

What these studies did *not* do, was to investigate the relationship between these impacts and the participatory practices. They did not explore the operational system that produced project outcomes, and they could not distinguish impacts derived from efficient vertical delivery and patronage from those of farmer-led development. The relationship between policy and livelihood impacts was no clearer, and inherent contradictions were evaded. Indeed the ultimate purpose of these studies was not to reveal the impact of the project model on tribal livelihoods, but rather to model rural livelihoods so as to show how project interventions, re-articulated within new policy frameworks, would improve them; that is, to clarify and justify a (new) development model rather than demonstrate its effects. After all, this was the most urgent need for project survival. Despite the proclamations about evidence-based policy, invariably it is policy which produces evidence rather than vice versa.

So, timely analytical work and evidence-making re-contextualized the IBRFP project by re-connecting it to contemporary donor policy trends in 1997–8, in the process re-shaping the project as an effective container for ODA/DFID policy, establishing it once again as an 'exemplar' and offering protection against failure.[22] Confident that somehow livelihood impacts *followed* from project policy, around 1998 DFID moved to a much larger £25 million Second Phase in which (a) the policy model was more clearly stated (more in line with new thinking on rural livelihoods) and (b) the role of the mainline organization KBCL, having been pathologized as 'external influence', was weakened by the establishment of an independent Trust to run the project.

The new phase involved a purified assertion of donor policy over institutions and relations that was initially to have disastrous effects. Firstly, the emphasis on policy coherence involved naivety about institutional capacity. A huge burden was placed on a complex and shaky system: the project had to create a new organizational structure, to quadruple the size of its operations, recruit and train well over a hundred new staff including senior fertilizer men who knew little about rural development, 'fast-track' its process, retain its intense focus on participation, disseminate technologies and replicate its (otherwise over-expensive) model; and work closely with the state to demonstrate the new DFID White Paper policy goals of governance, state-level partnerships and pro-poor policy change (DFID, 1997). The demands were too great. Secondly, the effort to override institutional relations or 'external influences' by severing links with the mainline KBCL organization through forming a separate project holding Trust, produced profound institutional insecurity which unleashed highly disruptive informal attempts to grasp back control and security, by both senior KBCL management and project staff. The donor assertion of policy over institutions involved ignorance of complex relationships of development and the effects of their disruption.

Thirdly, these ruptures were made potentially lethal to the project by a new DFID policy environment which was hostile to 'enclave projects' with 'parallel structures', and in which there was no longer place for the 'replicable model', even less for the downstream micro-managed project. IBRFP was now a *first generation* project, doubly displaced by *second generation* state watershed programmes and *third generation* state-level partnerships. Here was a project that had lost its interpretive community and its context, whose networks were in tatters; a project whose old supporters, advocates and project-policy brokers had moved on. Just as interpretations are *social*

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22. Successful development projects are to policy models, what exemplars are to scientific paradigms in Kuhn's usage (see Fine, 2002: 2061). The importance of an exemplar, a world view and a body of supporting professionals (capable of switching allegiance) gives policy models a superficial resemblance to paradigms, and policy change to 'paradigm shift' (ibid.).

— they involve the establishment of networks, and interpretive or 'epistemic' communities (Haas, 1990) — so too project failure involves social rupture. In this case the IBRFP project becomes 'decontextualized' (Latour, 1996) as various of its supporters disconnect themselves and their interests from it. It begins to lose its reality. Policy change involves disruption of the social systems that produce coherence and success; it not only alters the fashionableness of development approaches, but also rearranges relationships and the allocation of power in organizations. The IBRFP project was associated with old structures of ODA; it fell within the old fiefdoms of ODA sector advisers and carried the imprint of an earlier regime. Project survival depended upon finding ways to articulate new policy imperatives, in this case linking the project to a new 'governance' aid agenda, emphasizing links with government or policy influence; or, as one DFID official put it, 'moving [the project] upstream by bringing it within the compass of our work with our partner state of Madhya Pradesh'.[23] But this was now a more difficult process since the relationships and systems through which the project translated its own partially autonomous field of action into the policy models of DFID or the management goals of KBCL were considerably weakened.

Understanding the way in which policy change ruptures relationships and disrupts the informal systems of support and brokerage that make a project function and secure its reputation is of more than passing interest. Of course policy change is not bad; in fact new policy creates new relationships and makes new connections between people, and that is part of its value. But rapid policy change which has little regard for the institutions and relationships involved in the practice of development is a worrying characteristic of aid agencies today. Policy frameworks that focus on global institutions and state policy are obviously key to the progressive repositioning of bilateral donors, but an upstream centralized demand for policy coherence also makes it harder for these agencies to perceive the downstream system of relationships that are affected by policy, even though this policy is articulated in the language of local partnership and dialogue.

Despite this language, aid policy processes and the 'power effects of donorship' reproduce inequalities between donors and recipients at all levels: in the making and execution of policy, in the 'dependent leadership' (promoted under the auspices of the donor community in projects or countries), in the language of education, tutelage, or trusteeship, in the displacement of alternative visions, or in the rules of partnership (Slater and Bell, 2002: 350). In the present case, the lack of reflexivity in DFID's own policy process meant that the donor's culpability in producing 'failure' (which was usually represented in technical terms or as the project's 'weak management'), was just as obscured as had been its earlier role in the making of project success.

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23. From a DFID internal memo, 2002.

My fifth proposition is that *'success' and 'failure' are policy-oriented judgements that obscure project effects.* The impact assessment studies undertaken in IBRFP showed that the project had executed broadly appropriate programmes that probably had a significant impact on the livelihoods of many thousands of poor tribal people in western India. This did not make IBRFP a shining example of participatory development. To claim this, or to refute it, is to give priority to policy 'success' or 'failure', and to ignore how things actually happen. Indeed, an intense emphasis on current policy, burdens projects with new models (a governance agenda), which may have little bearing on the actual reasons for the socio-economic effects they may have.

So what if a project fails to articulate one or other preconceived model; if the project fails to be fully participatory, or to adopt a genuine livelihoods approach, or to show links to government? It can still have important positive livelihood effects. A more pragmatic appraisal of the IBRFP project would not see failure of participation or engagement with the state, but new avenues of non-state patronage which were advantageous in a remote tribal area, providing new input lines for improved technology or marketing possibilities rather than failing to meet current development policy objectives. Indeed this is happening even as the project purveys images of farmer-management or self-reliance, (and now of state-linkage) and is represented as success or failure in terms of one or other policy idea.

At the end of Phase 1 (1998), the project benefits of improved seed inputs, assisted seed distribution and storage, mediated links to national and international agricultural research agendas, and a variety of village level investments and assets were highly significant to many Bhil villagers. Arguably they depended upon the permanent and expanding presence of the project organization as a para-statal extension service offering better technology and more affordable inputs to remote tribal villages rather than autonomy and independence — a peculiar policy preoccupation. This may or may not have been participation or sustainable development; it was certainly a subversion of the currently dominant international development ideas of farmer-managed, community-driven development.

Perhaps IBRFP was a moderately successful participatory development project; it might yet prove to be a viable livelihood project; or, who knows, even a governance project as it stumbles along with a heavy policy baggage (creating its own internal contradictions), maintaining a complex system of representations requiring skilled consultants to articulate. But perhaps with less policy correctness IBRFP could have been an outstanding rainfed technology input supply and marketing agency in a national co-operative, building on an existing institution and its corporate values. Perhaps . . . but as such it would never have been a successful aid project able to articulate international policy and therefore assemble supporters and resources for work in a remote tribal region.

CONCLUSION

Aid policy and practice

So what can be concluded here about the relationship between aid policy and practice? Well, for one thing it is clear that even in small projects the intersection of the world of policy thought and the world of development practices is partial and socially managed. Policy discourse generates mobilizing metaphors ('participation', 'partnership', 'governance', 'social capital') whose vagueness, ambiguity and lack of conceptual precision is *required* to conceal ideological differences, to allow compromise and the enrolment of different interests, to build coalitions, to distribute agency and to multiply criteria of success within project systems (cf. Dahl, 2001: 20; Li, 1999). But, secondly, ideas that make for 'good policy' — policy which legitimizes and mobilizes political and practical support — are not those which provide good guides to action. Good policy is unimplementable; it is metaphor not management[24] (although 'management' is perhaps the most important development metaphor of all). Or, rather than 'unimplementable', we should say that policy goals come into contradiction with other institutional or 'system goals' (Latour, 1996: 92) such that policy models are poor guides to understanding the practices, events and effects of development actors, which are shaped by the relationships and interests and cultures of specific organizational settings.[25] Of course this is common knowledge among reflective donor policy-makers, who know that their own institutional practice is necessarily concealed behind (or within) the coherent policy paper. But at many other levels too (in project offices, fieldstaff meetings, PRAs, or villager assemblies) a significant part of development *practice* involves the reproduction and stabilization of policy models secured upon social networks that constitute interpretive communities for projects and programmes, which is my third point. The 'public transcripts' of development are sustained by the powerful *and* the subordinate, both of whose interests lead them to 'tactically conspire to misrepresent' (Scott, 1990: 2). In development we cannot speak of policy controlling or disciplining, being resisted or subverted. Policy is an *end* rather than a cause; a result, often a fragile one, of social processes. Projects are successful because they sustain policy models offering a significant interpretation of

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24. The expression borrowed from Raymond Apthorpe (pers. comm.) is perhaps inaccurate in that, following Ricoeur (1978), metaphors are vehicles for both understanding and managing reality, even if they do not shape events in the way that is claimed. I am grateful to Ingie Hovland for this point.

25. As Quarles van Ufford puts it, bureaucracy is not an instrument of policy but 'an independent generator of ideas, goals and interests', that is 'system goals' (1988, citing Vroom).

events, not because they turn policy into reality. In this way the gap between policy and practice is constantly negotiated away.

Development professionals will argue that of course the relationship between policy ideas and events, experiences or outcomes is indirect, perhaps dialectical (Michael Cernea, pers. comm.), and I am certainly not proposing that policy has no effects, even less that policy is unimportant. As indicated, without the mobilizing effects of national or international aid policy, resources would not have been directed to Bhil villages (and failure to articulate with policy seriously threatened resource flows). Policy is part of the context of action (Satoshi Ishihara, pers. comm.). Professional identities, alliances, divisions within project, consultant and donor agencies are structured around the making and interpretation of policy, and policy provides the idioms of speech and reporting. Farmers negotiate with field staff and legitimize their claims to project resources in terms of the classifications and identities offered by policy; and it is around policy ideas that the wider networks of support from politicians, administrators and scientists are forged.

However, this does not mean that policy is *implemented*. Practices and events are too obviously shaped by the logic and demands of institutional relations (and incentives). Indeed, during the 'implementation phase' all the diverse and contradictory interests that were enrolled in the framing of an ambiguous policy model and project design, all the contests and contradictions that are embedded in policy texts, are brought to life and replayed. At the same time, development workers and managers are unable (or unwilling) on the basis of this experience to contradict the models in terms of which they are busy framing and validating their enterprises and identities; the models that make them successful, ensure coalitions of support and justify the flow of resources. So, while the coherence of design unravels in the practical unfolding of a project, everybody is particularly concerned with making, protecting, elaborating and promoting models with the power to organize authoritative interpretations, concealing operational realities, re-enforcing given models and limiting institutional learning.[26] I only had to reflect on my work as consultant to the IBRFP project over several years to realize that the conceptual work (of policy) did not *precede* or direct action but followed it, providing an authoritative framework of interpretation, or a 'second-order rationalization of politically and economically ordered work routines' (Heyman, 1995: 265; also see Mosse, 2004: Ch. 6).

Further consequences follow from a preoccupation with (project) models as determinants of 'success' and 'failure'. Firstly, knowledge of development is overly deductive, and allows little inductive understanding

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26. See Ellerman (2002) for further discussion of the contradiction between the promotion of official views ('branded knowledge', 'best practices', 'funded assumptions', 'science') and the capacity to promote learning in development organizations.

of interventions. Secondly, when externally-generated policy changes faster than the life of a programme, which is now normal, project agencies (such as IBRFP) are forced into a reactive mode — orienting their energies to preserving themselves as *systems of representations* in order to manage their upwardly-oriented representations, rather than learning or effecting poverty-reducing change. Thirdly, as policy discourse among international donors strives to ensure that practices are rendered coherent in terms of a single overarching framework, the diversity of approaches or the multiplicity of rationalities and values (see Arce and Long, 2000) is overridden. The point is not so much that there is a self-enforcing conservatism built into policy discourse which stabilizes particular models (probably true in the short term), but that belief in the efficacy of rational planning is reproduced, and with it existing hierarchies of knowledge and expertise, while contextual and historical (even ethnographic) understanding is limited (cf. Mitchell, 2002).

The Ethnography of Development

How do these reflections touch on current debates in the anthropology of policy and practice? Firstly, following Latour, I have suggested the need for a shift from a reductionist analysis that explains away development by substitution to looking at successful development interventions as the creation of order through social acts of composition. The coherence attributed to a successful development project is never *a priori*, never a matter of *design* or of *policy*. As Latour notes (1996: 78), 'If we say that a successful project existed from the beginning because it was well conceived and that a failed project went aground because it was badly conceived, we are saying nothing, we are only repeating the words "success" and "failure", while placing the cause of both at the beginning of the project, at its conception'. But the order of a successful project rests on disjuncture and contradiction. Subordinate actors in development — tribal villagers, fieldworkers, office staff, even project managers and their bosses in relation to donors — create everyday spheres of action autonomous from the organizing (or legitimizing) project models (in the manner of de Certeau's analysis), but at the same time work actively to sustain those same models — the dominant interpretations — because it is in their interest to do so. The social processes which multiply interests and experiences and those which unify and strengthen authoritative representations are the same. Paradoxically, the *practices* of project workers erode the models that they also work to reinstate as representations. Moreover, because it rests on disjuncture and contradiction, the coherence and order of a successful project is always vulnerable; interpretations can fail.

In focusing on the 'problem of policy' — the question of how 'ideas with power' and social practice interact, once narrow instrumental or populist

views are discounted[27] — I hope to have added to the tradition in the sociology of development that is interactionist or 'actor-oriented' focusing on project interfaces, or 'front-lines', the lifeworlds of workers and the inter-locking intentionalities of the developers and the 'to-be-developed'.[28] In demonstrating that (policy) ideas do not have a life of their own apart from institutions, persons and intentions, but can only be understood in terms of the institutions and social relationships through which they are articulated,[29] I follow a long tradition in social anthropology (Douglas, 1980: 60). On the one hand, policy models (their theories of cause and effect) are patterned by institutions and accountabilities, and on the other, wider networks, interests, and claims develop around policy models and the metaphors or identities they offer.

Finally, as an ethnographer who is also part of the world described, I have myself contributed to the composition and ordering of this project as well as to the analysis of disjuncture and contradiction. Ultimately, mine is an interested interpretation that rests on the frustrations of experience (the effort to realize policy ideals), not a scientific judgement; it adds interpret-ations to those of actors whose experience I share (Latour, 1996: 199–200). If my analysis looks for objectivity, this cannot be that of standing above the fray or of suppressing subjectivity, but rather that which comes from maximizing the capacity of actors to *object* to what is said about them (to raise concerns, insert questions and interpretations) (Latour, 2000).[30] None-theless, ethnographers of development have to stabilize their own version of the facts, and as co-practitioners we do so by performing the reality we describe (Latour, 1996: 199).[31] An ethnography which subordinates itself to management in the interests of practicality (being useful) or legitimacy (being tolerated) is unlikely to throw light on the processes of order and disjuncture that connect policy ideas to practices and outcomes, while

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27. The idea that practice is either a product of policy intention or arranged to resist it.
28. See, among others, Arce and Long (1992); Grammig (2002); Lipsky (1980); Long (1992, 2001); Long and Long (1992); Olivier de Sardin (forthcoming).
29. Burawoy equivalently talks of an ethnography of the *production* of globalization as well as the experience of globalization (2001: 150).
30. The real danger, Latour (2000) suggests, is that people 'lose their recalcitrance by *complying*'. He notes, by contrast, the contribution of feminism to new discoveries on gender, achieved by its effect of making potential interviewees more recalcitrant, more able to *object* to what was said about them. The internet source (www.ensmp.fr/-latour/ articles) from which this article was accessed does not give page references.
31. In drawing a contrast between such 'relativist' (or relationist) sociology and 'classical sociology', Latour (1996: 199) echoes earlier critics of anthropological authority (for example, Pels and Nencel, 1991), and of the anthropologist as decoder, cultural overseer who 'knows what everybody else is doing whether *they* know it or not' (Daniel, 1984: 33), and in particular of the structuralist to whom society is a text to be read, and from which the '*real* meaning' of statements can be decoded 'regardless of whether they are acknowledged by its agents' (Asad, 1986: 161).

ethnography which stands above the fray and asserts godly authority has little capacity for criticism in a politically meaningful sense.

The conclusion of my argument is that policy is more not less important than we imagined; and important in more ways than we realized. But most agencies are bound to a managerial view of policy which makes them resolutely simplistic about (or ignorant of) the social and political life of their ideas. What ethnography can offer the policy process is an element of critical reflection, a means to understand in individual cases how, as Mary Douglas writes, 'the work that thought does is social . . . thought makes cuts and connections between actions' (1980: 54). Perhaps good policy is not implementable, but it is absolutely central to what happens in arenas of development, and it is important to know how.

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