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What do Buzzwords do for Development Policy?

A critical look at “Poverty Reduction”, “Participation” and “Empowerment”

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What do Buzzwords do for Development Policy? A critical look at “Poverty Reduction”, “Participation” and “Empowerment”

Andrea Cornwall and Karen Brock

1. Introduction

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

Today’s development policies resound with a decisive ring of optimism. They evoke a world where everyone gets a chance to take part in making the decisions that affect their lives, where no-one goes hungry or is discriminated against, and where opportunities exist for all to thrive. This world is one that can be brought into order by alignment and by a clear sense of mission, a governable world in which policies neatly map out the actions that can then be taken. And, we argue here, the way in which development policies invoke these worlds works to sustain the myths that those who work in development need in order to continue to imagine the possibility of their interventions making a difference. Open the newspaper and the first few pages often have enough talk of violent death, inequity, deprivation and misery to make one feel the world we live in is hardly a place where a “world without poverty” could ever come to exist. The world that development agencies seek to alter is one so far removed from the delicate tinkle of the fountain in the atrium at the World Bank’s H-street headquarters or the soft-carpeted corridors of the hotels favoured by the development elite, that it is literally unimaginable.

In this paper, we take up the invitation given to us by the conference organisers to examine three buzzwords - “participation”, “empowerment” and “poverty reduction” - and to explore the relationship between the discursive shifts that have made them ‘keywords’ (Williams 1976) in today’s development jargon, and any meaningful changes in policy. Aware as we are that the published policies of development agencies are often the product of successful discourse coalitions, actor-networks who may range beyond a particular organisation to embrace allies in other spheres (cf. Hajer 1995), and that the way policies work in an organisation depends on a host of factors, from organisational culture to the nature of existing bureaucratic fiefdoms, what is said in these documents remains an important touchstone.¹ Standing contends:

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

‘The task of deconstructing particular aspects of development discourse’, Gardner and Lewis argue, ‘can have a directly practical and political outcome, for to reveal what at first sight appears to be objective reality as a construct, the product of particular historical and political contexts, helps problematise dominant paradigms and open the way for alternative discourses’ (2000:19). It is in this vein that this paper is intended.

Our analysis proceeds in three steps. First, we investigate the form and function of development buzzwords in the statements of intent of development agencies, exploring their performative effects as well as their semantic qualities. Second, we situate the use of these buzzwords in shifting configurations over time, focusing in some detail on two frames of reference for development intervention that have gained currency in recent years, the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The first is a development instrument, styled out of pragmatism, backed with economic power; the second is a normative framework, backed with a moral imperative. Both are championed by supranational institutions, but institutions with significant contrasts in function and modes of leverage, tactics and efficacy. Differing in form, if not in function, these two frames - an instrument and a statement of aspirations - are familiar objects in the landscape of development, which has always rested on some combination of the two. And in both, poverty reduction and participation come together, with empowerment as an implicit adjunct. Our third step is to situate the shifting configurations of these three buzzwords against a wider backdrop of reflections on the place of such terms in development policy.

2. Discourses and Dissonances

There is something about today’s development language that is quite at odds with the hard-edged linearity of the dominant tropes in development thinking. Many of the terms with which we have become so familiar in recent years evoke a comforting mutuality, a warm and reassuring consensus, ringing with the satisfaction of everyone pulling together to pursue a set of common goals for the wellbeing of all. Take, for example, the following excerpt from a speech delivered at the plenary meeting of the Financing for Development conference in Monterrey in 2002, by James Wolfensohn, a master of the art of feel-good rhetoric:

What is this new partnership? It is an understanding that leaders of the developing and developed world are united by a global responsibility based on ethics, experience and self-interest. It is a recognition that opportunity and empowerment—not charity—can benefit us all. It is an acknowledgement that we will not create long-term peace and stability until we acknowledge that we are a common humanity with a common destiny. Our futures are indivisible. And we have the makings of just such a new partnership before us. A new generation of leaders is taking responsibility in developing countries. Many of these leaders are tackling corruption, putting in place good governance, giving priority to investing in their people, and establishing an investment climate to attract private capital. They are doing it in the private sector, in civil society, in government and in communities. *They are doing it not because they have been told to. But because they know it is right.* (www.worldbank.org; speeches; March 21, 2002, our emphasis)

Redolent with an active sense of purpose, Wolfensohn’s speech couples terms like ‘understanding’, ‘recognition’, ‘acknowledgment’ with ‘together-words’ - ‘united’, ‘us all’, ‘common humanity with a common destiny’, ‘our futures’ - to stake out a normative position as consensus. Again in June 2003, in Wolfensohn’s remarks to the Bretton Woods Committee Annual Meeting, the term ‘right’ makes an appearance, in the service of consensus:

These are not conditions being imposed by the Fund or by ourselves or by any other international institution. These are suggestions and indications coming from the countries themselves *because they think they're right.* (www.worldbank.org; speeches; 21st June 2003, our emphasis).

'Crucial in all policy practice', Gaspar and Apthorpe argue, 'is framing, specifically who and what is actually included, and who and what is ignored and excluded' (1996:6). In *Ways of Worldmaking* (1978), Goodman argues that different frames of reference provide entirely different ways of making sense of the world: 'a truth is true and a version is right for a world it fits' (1978:6). Policies, speeches and mission statements create versions of the world which fit particular frames of reference. Actionaid, War on Want and the World Bank share as a mission 'a world free of poverty'. But this is not the same world. Viewed through the distinctively different approaches that each organisation has to the project of 'world-making' that is development, different worlds come into view.

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

There is not, on the one side, a discourse of power and opposite it, another discourse that runs counter to it. Discourses are tactical elements or blocks operating the field of force relations; *there can exist different and even contradictory discourses within the same strategy; they can, on the contrary, circulate without changing their form from one strategy to another, opposing strategy.* (1979:101-2, our emphasis)

Within and amongst development agencies, as we go on to suggest, competing ideologies co-exist within the same discourse; despite the apparent uniformity of today's development consensus, different actors invest key terms like "poverty reduction", "empowerment" and "participation" with a range of different meanings. 'Discourses frame certain problems' by distinguishing 'some aspects of a situation rather than others', Hajer (1993:45) argues. In doing so, they define paths of action, containing in their problem-statements certain kinds of solutions. The term "poverty reduction", for example, rings with measurability, and harks to the rationality of policies that can serve to bring poverty into check. Poverty *alleviation* carries quite a different set of meanings, a making-better rather than making-less; and to talk of *eradication*, as the UN so fulsomely did some years ago, before being swept up in the discourse of poverty reduction once more, is to evoke another world altogether (Øyen 1999).

Shifting configurations of 'participation', 'empowerment' and 'poverty reduction' with other development buzzwords mark out distinctive domains of discourse in which these terms carry a range of different meanings. These meanings, we suggest, are more than paradigmatic, that is, they do not simply constitute a class of similar things. Rather, each of these terms can come to convey meanings that differ from each other rather more fundamentally. Configuring 'participation' and 'empowerment' with 'governance', for example, produces a different set of possibilities than would be the case if 'governance' were to be replaced with 'social protection'. Some of the meanings associated with these buzzwords would seem to be directly competing, even contradictory: contrast, for example, the kind of 'participation' implicit in contributing costs towards clinic maintenance and that invoked in calls for 'participation' in PRSPs.

While the configuration of these words lends distinctively different contextual meanings, they are linked together in the discourse of international development agencies through what Laclau (1997) calls 'chains of equivalence', words that are brought together in the service of the expression of meaning, much as a policy seeks to do. Meaning comes to reside more and more in the connections between them than the words themselves as more words are added to the chain - 'partnership', 'accountability', 'governance', 'ownership', 'transparency', 'rights-based approach'

and so on. What might appear at first sight as an enrichment of meaning, is, Laclau argues, quite the opposite. Holding the chain together requires that differences between these terms are sublimated to the need for a coherent narrative. Pared down to the elements that would allow this semblance of coherence, the terms that form part of today's development jargon are reduced to shadows; whilst they may be filled with other meanings when deployed in other contexts, by other actors, their appearance as the discourse of consensus neutralises dissonant elements that would otherwise jar.

The world that appears through the frame of reference of the international consensus consists of similar objects to previous versions; it is made familiar enough to feel comfortable with elements that work to 'anchor' (Moscovici 1984) as well as to assuage (cf. Roe 1991). But there is a growing feeling that the words that are used as part of this project of world-making have 'lost their meaning'; a feeling that Standing talks of as veritable 'linguistic crisis' (2001:12). In what follows, we begin to sketch out some of the discursive shifts that have got us where we are now, using examples of shifting and plural meanings of participation and poverty reduction to illuminate the discursive roots of the present. We then turn to reflect on the MDGs as expressions of this discourse, the embodiment of its moral dimensions; and turn from this to explore how contemporary policy discourse has played out 'on the ground' in terms of the impact of PRSPs on national development policy processes.

3. The art of euphemism in an era of declared consensus

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

"Poverty reduction" may be a more contemporary euphemism for today's development consensus, but the use of the term "poverty" in policy discourses stretches back beyond the very notion of "development". "Participation" has been part of mainstream development discourse since the colonial era; a well-worn way of neutralising political opposition (cf. Vengroff 1974; Cornia et al. 1987) and taxing the poorest (Chambers 1974; Salole 1981) as well as of providing opportunities for the exercise of citizenship and voice for poor people and those otherwise excluded from decision-making (cf. ILO, 1978; Pearse and Stiefel 1979, in Stiefel and Wolfe 1994; Rahman 1995; Gaventa 2002). "Empowerment" has a more curious history, having gained the most expansive semantic range of all, with meanings pouring into development from an enormous diversity of sources, which include the Christian right, New Age self-help manuals and business management (Moore 2001; Henkel and Stirrat 2001). Unlike "participation" and "poverty reduction" it does not seem to have caught on much beyond the World Bank - beyond its prominent use in documents relating to "gender" and "women" - where its rise and rise is a story that is embedded in the harnessing of a range of relational buzzwords by a particular actor-network to create bureaucratic and policy space (Bebbington et al. 2004), or indeed to 'strike a positive chord with those "progressive" groups on whom the very existence of international aid agencies and programmes increasingly depends' (Moore, 2001:322-3)

All three terms come together in the PRSPs and MDGs, in which the increased rhetorical and operational coherence between international development actors is at its most evident. Occupying central positions in supra-national governance discourse about what needs to be done in development, and how to go about it, the PRSPs and MDGs encode the declared consensus in linear logic. In both, poverty reduction, "participation" and "empowerment" are foundational elements. Each stems from a distinct trajectory, deriving from the UN conferences of the post-

cold war era on the one hand, and from the hegemony of the poverty imperative within international agencies on the other. Both have been shaped by the engagement, demands and pressures of non-governmental actors; and through the enlistment of nation-states, although through very different modes and with different positions of opportunity and power.

Jan Vandemoortele, Head of UNDP, notes two underlying threads in the construction of the declared consensus:

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

The narratives of "poverty reduction" and "participation" put forward by PRSPs and MDGs are complementary, and emerge from the same basic ideology. Patterns of narrative co-evolution are clear. However there are also essential contrasts between the two, concerning the configurations of actors associated with each discourse, and their imperatives and agency; and the operational elements of the policy instruments associated with the narratives. Examining these contrasts and complementarities foregrounds the processes by which discursive shifts happen and coalesce in changed models for policy.

3.1 Trajectories of poverty reduction and participation: intersections and discursive shifts

"Poverty reduction" has become *the* cornerstone of the consensus politics of turn-of-the-century development discourses, the obligatory phrase which must be included in the rationale for every programme, project or intervention. Although the concepts of poverty and development have long been associated, poverty reduction as an overarching development goal returned to the fore in the 1990s. Throughout this decade, the UN played a part in framing a normative discourse on poverty reduction, through HDRs and the processes that led to and from the Social Summit in 1995. Poverty reduction assumed centre stage in development debates, simultaneously signalling revised meanings of poverty as a term and a revision of the meaning of development itself. As such, poverty reduction has come to be framed as a collective, consensual enterprise of partnership between different actors, seamlessly embracing diversity under a single, clear moral imperative.

During the 1990s, discursive shifts around the meaning of poverty brought us from the reduction of income poverty to the reduction of *multidimensional* poverty. In parallel, there has been a discursive shift around the nature of poverty reduction policy itself: from conditionality, to "partnership" and "ownership", to more recent talk of "shared responsibility" and "accountability" (Government of Sweden 2002; Shetty, 2003; UNDP 2003). The Millennium Development Declaration rings with the sense of common purpose, invoking words like "equality", "tolerance" and even "solidarity", offering a frame of reference for a world in which there is shared responsibility, the will to work together for better lives for all, the possibility of mutual accountability. The MDGs are regularly invoked in providing a justification and legitimacy for development purposes, borrowing from the MDD a sense of nations, donors and institutions working in concert towards a set of common goals - but with rather different small-print.

A result of these parallel shifts is that a set of solutions, in the shape of overarching policy models, are now more than ever firmly and explicitly embedded in the mainstream discourse of poverty reduction; the framing of the problem and the framing of the solution have become inextricably linked. Both PRSPs and the MDGs are an expression of this: embodiments of a discourse of collective responsibility for reducing multidimensional poverty. Refracted versions of participation narratives of various kinds are reflected in both aspects of this parallel shift in the framing of poverty reduction. The gradual discursive re-framing of poverty as multi-dimensional owes a great deal both to advocates of participation within influential international institutions,

and contests about practice that have arisen from their advocacy (Bebbington et al. 2004). Similarly, the re-framing of conditionality into partnership and ownership has been engendered partly through notions of ‘scaling up’ participation to result in multi-stakeholder policy processes; multi-stakeholder spaces have, in turn, produced the appearance of consensus and lent the new versions of poverty reduction policy legitimacy.

In the discussion that follows we explore the evolution of the intertwining narratives of participation and poverty reduction², and their links to Vandemoortele’s two dimensions of partnership and the discourse coalitions associated with each. Our narrative begins in the 1970s and traces threads across the intervening decades to the present. Necessarily brief, superficial and selective, this overview seeks simply to highlight the moments and movements that we see as critical antecedents to today’s policy narratives.

3.2 Poverty Reduction, Participation and Empowerment in the Age of Optimism

A brief consensus about the centrality of poverty reduction as the goal of development was given permission in the early 1970s by the Cold War geo-political imperative of preventing the poor from seeking solutions in Communism; the World Bank, under the leadership of McNamara, widened the focus of its lending, beginning to embrace rural development for small farmers, and the provision of social services to the rural and urban poor. Beneficiary participation was envisaged as a critical component of development projects and policies even at this juncture (Chambers, 1974; Cohen and Uphoff, 1980), and was articulated with the same mixture of pragmatism and principle that is found in today’s calls for participation. What was then termed “popular participation” had, of course, a much longer history, one that captures some of today’s ambivalences but also carries with it some of the radicalism that many bemoan as having been lost in today’s participation discourses (Cornwall 2000).

Contemporaneous with this focus on poverty reduction was the development of the basic needs approach by the UN, which suggested that the focus of aid should shift from investment in capital formation to the development of human resources.³ “Popular participation” was positioned as a central pillar of this approach. Statements from UN organizations articulating this relationship are revealing in their similarity to contemporary narratives. In one of the most resonant with the kind of language used in today’s consensus, in 1975 ECOSOC (the United Nations Economic and Social Council) urged governments to “adopt popular participation as a basic policy measure in national development strategy... [and] encourage the widest possible active participation of all individuals and national non-government organisations in the development process, in setting goals, formulating policies and implementing plans” (cited in Cohen and Uphoff, 1980:213). Almost exactly the same exhortation can be found in the PRSP sourcebook.

Threads of 1970s participation discourses can be traced further back, through the domestication of dissent through community development (Presley 1988) and the use of institutions mirroring those of today’s decentralised governance as a mode of indirect rule by the colonial authorities (Ribot 1996), and the simultaneous existence of popular spaces outside those created by state-sponsored participation through which mass popular resistance to colonial rule and alternative developmental models were forged (Manji 2000). Traces of these experiences of development patterned participation in struggles over political space in the global south; they were also, of course, patterned by shifting configurations of power in the political contexts that shaped the policies of development agencies, whether the waves of popular participation in America and Europe over the course of the 1960s, or the politics of the Cold War. “Empowerment” in this era was envisaged as a radical project of social transformation, focused on building countervailing power to enable otherwise excluded social groups to mobilise collectively to define and claim their rights (Fals-Borda and Rahman 1991; Friedman 1992); it was also a nascent discourse within the growing movement of second-wave feminism, in which it gained dimensions of the personal as well as the collective, grounding the personal in the political (Rowlands 1987).

For much of the 1970s, as in the preceding decades when nascent social movements carved out political space from which to press their demands, the spheres of officialised beneficiary participation and popular mobilisation intersected, but remained largely distinct. It was this interface that was of particular interest to a network convened by Andrew Pearse and others at UNRISD in the late 1970s. In 1979, UNRISD's popular participation programme was launched. Its focus was 'the encounter between the pursuit of livelihood by popularly-based groups and the policies being pursued by the state and other "developers"' (Barraclough, cited in Stiefel and Wolfe 1994:xii). Participation was, for the UNRISD team, fundamentally about the redistribution of power, and was defined as: 'the organized efforts to increase control over resources and regulative institutions in given social situations, on the part of groups and movements hitherto excluded from such control' (Stiefel and Wolfe, 1994:5). We will return to the prescience of many of the conclusions from this project, and the continued relevance of the way in which it chose to frame participation.

From grassroots movements to networks of practitioners spanning north and south, participatory approaches became a focus for innovation over the course of the 1970s, and into the 1980s. But whilst grassroots community development work was reframing 'development', with methodologies such as DELTA (Development Leadership Teams in Action) and Participatory Action Research (PAR), what participation had come to mean to the mainstream was less to do with radical shifts in power than engaging communities in sharing the costs, and the burdens, of development - much like today's 'Community-Driven Development' (CDD). The 1970s slogan of self-reliance was fast being transformed into the 'do it for yourself' ethos that was to characterise mainstream development in the 1980s..

3.3 Domesticating participation, disciplining the poor

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

During the 1980s, earlier people-centred narratives of popular participation espoused by the UN system met the exigencies arising out of neo-liberal reforms, and the realities of the rolled-back state. 'Community participation' became a channel through which 'popular participation' began to be actualised. In the process, it took a rather different shape than that conveyed by the statements of intent that preceded it. Rather than seeking to involve 'the people' in defining their own development, 1980s 'community participation' focused on engaging 'intended beneficiaries' in development projects. Cost-sharing and the co-production of services emerged as dominant modes of participation; the concept of 'ownership' was stripped of any association with a transfer of power and control and invoked to describe the need for people to make contributions in cash or kind to support these processes. Chambers' (1974) observations continued to ring true, much as they do these days:

The way in which words are used in the rhetoric of self-reliance and participation encourages the idea that increased participation will mean a more democratic, egalitarian and equitable society...[Yet] There are many ways in which "participation" accentuates inequity. Greater local participation in planning tends to widen regional inequalities. It favours those areas which are better able to produce plans and to implement them... Participation in planning is also likely to mean plans drawn up either by civil servants or by civil servants together with a few members of the local elite. Participation in development committees can mean that those who are already well off approve projects and programmes which favour and support those who are already well off. Participation in self-help labour can mean that the women, already overworked, turn out while the men find excuses. Participation through "voluntary"

contributions can mean an income-regressive flat rate tax which hits the poorest hardest; and failure to pay... may be penalised through the denial of public services. (1985[1974]:108-9)

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

A decisive impetus for further reconfigurations of meanings came in the last half of the 1980s. Critiques of the negative economic effects of adjustment were an essential stage in catalysing a broader discursive shift about the nature of poverty, as well as providing a home for the sanitised versions of participation which were a familiar part of the development landscape by the mid-1980s. UNICEF's 'Adjustment with a Human Face' (1986) was pivotal in this regard. In making its critique of SAPs, the report fulfilled several important functions. It served as a singular and morally authoritative voice to transmit the broad concerns of a wide range of development actors, many of them NGOs, making some of these criticisms audible to the IFIs. It presented a hybrid agenda, characterising the failure of SAPs as one of implementation rather than conceptualisation; this lack of foundational critique also increased its audibility. The policy coalition it represented was able to exercise influence through translation of a diversity of unheard opinions into influential language and networks.

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

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

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

3.4 A Marriage of Convenience?

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

Looking forward a decade, from WDR 1990 to WDR 2000/1, several discursive shifts are discernible. Firstly, the World Bank's narrative had acquired a *moral* tone: garnished liberally with quotations from 'poor people', the report attempts to establish moral authority through introducing a new vocabulary (Gaventa 2001). This new language was ostensibly more people-

centred and sought to be more overtly normative, stealing some of the territory that was once clearly that of the United Nations institutions. A second shift concerns the definition of the problem: nature of poverty, which by 2000/1, on the surface at least, is presented as a multi-dimensional phenomenon.⁴ A third shift concerns the best way to approach the solution: by 2000/1 the 'two and a half prong' approach of WDR 1990 had given way to PRSPs and the new, co-ordinated partnership of aid - with the state reinstated as a "partner" in the enterprise, with whom development actors conduct "policy dialogue" in the new language of euphemism.

Events in the decade between WDR 1990 and WDR 2000/1 gave rise to the simultaneous co-creation of the three elements of discursive shift, and the changed practice implied by the WDR 2000/1 agenda. With hindsight, this era could be characterised as one where the World Bank re-shaped its existing narratives to make them more palatable to an increasingly critical international community; the public reputation of the IFIs needed to be overhauled. Simultaneously, however, the multi-dimensional nature of poverty needed to be negotiated in order to conform to the "hegemony of rational choice theory" (Eyben, forthcoming:16) and thus be internally palatable; participation needed to be re-branded to connect it to a logic of free market access; and the practices of southern governments needed to be controlled without explicit conditionalities.⁵ Several key episodes were important here. Major UN Summits – especially those at Rio (1992), and Copenhagen (1995) – provided spaces for declarations which, while they did not result in new paradigms as such, did catalyse influential new discourse coalitions and networks of change agents in development finance institutions, and in bilateral agencies (Bebbington et al. 2004; Eyben, forthcoming). Rio, for example, offered legitimacy to those who advocated sustainable development, some of whom went on to be key movers and shakers in their advocacy of participation; Copenhagen did the same for those who considered that the state was central to the provision of social services.

One effect of the re-discovery of what was left of the state in the poverty reduction discourse of the later 1990s was to extend advocacy of participation beyond the realm of projects into the broader terrain of economic, social and political life in the context of an attenuated state. Successful examples of 'scaling up' of participation were used by advocates in the mid-1990s to argue for 'mainstreaming' in government agencies (Thompson 1995; Blackburn, Chambers and Gaventa 1999); and Participatory Poverty Assessments came to gain purchase, talked up as representing the shift from projects to policy, and as offering a chance for the poor to influence policy makers directly (Robb 1999). What often amounted to rather shoddily conducted qualitative research was dressed up with new clothes: 'participatory' came to be a label that needed to be worn. Internal critics amongst the loose network of practitioners associated with PRA saw PPAs as a form of market research for neo-liberal policies, if not the ventriloquy of the poor in their support; and many more made reference to the difference between "extractive" and "empowering" uses of PRA, finding PPAs lacking not for the way they were coming to be used at policy level, but for their failure to 'empower' communities. "Empowerment" was still, by the late 1990s, a term that had a more radical ring to it, and was often invoked by participation practitioners in contrast to the forms of practice associated with bilateral and multilateral agencies (Cornwall, Musyoki and Pratt 2001; Pratt 2001). But then, as now, it was a term profoundly associated with local-level processes, and with 'communities'.

A second effect, in the later 1990s, came out of the 'good governance' agenda. Participation came to feature increasingly prominently as providing the mechanisms through which these policy objectives might be realised, recast as consumer involvement in shaping service provision and in accountability mechanisms such as the 'partnership' models that had become a feature of local service provision in the health sector in many countries (Loewenson 2000; Cornwall, Lucas and Pasteur 1999). The 'good governance' agenda and the shift towards demand-driven development were coupled with the harnessing of 'participation' in giving muscle to citizens as consumers and consumers as citizens who would press demands on the state, whether for improvement in service delivery or accountability (Cornwall and Gaventa 2001; Goetz and Gaventa 2001).

Over the course of the decade, decentralised governance sprang into fashion, making a return in a form that was strikingly similar to that advocated in colonial Africa as a mechanism for indirect rule (Ribot 1996). Offering the answer to multiple ills, and capturing such items of faith as the promise of greater equity due to proximity to the people, and greater efficiency due to heightened requirements for probity, decentralisation came to be lauded for its place in empowering the poor. Development myths about decentralisation regularly invoke the participation of ‘the poor’. The story-line is captured by Blair:

The hope is that as government comes closer to the people, more people will participate in politics... that will give them representation, a key element in empowerment, which can be defined here as significant voice in public policy decisions which affect their futures. Local policy decisions reflecting this empowerment will serve these newer constituencies, providing more appropriate infrastructure, better living conditions and enhanced economic growth. These improvements will then reduce poverty and enhance equity among all groups. (2000:)

Conflict and power are as absent from this world than they are from the world we are offered in today’s development policies; little evidence exists that would support this vision as one that can be realised in practice, as Manor (1999, 2004) and Crook and Sverrisson (2003) make clear. And yet, belief in decentralisation persists, and with it in versions of ‘participation’ and ‘empowerment’ that fit the frame, and form part of a chain of equivalence in which any of the more conflictive elements of either are stripped away.

4. Operationalising the New Consensus: The MDGs and the PRSPs

The buzzwords associated with these different policy episodes – partnership, scaling-up, multi-dimensionality – have shaped existing discourses of participation and poverty reduction, and have undoubtedly created change at the level of providing a new policy model for development, with a quite unprecedented and diverse buy-in. The new configurations of participation, empowerment and poverty reduction were invested with a particular relevance for the IFIs, thanks to the success of the international campaign for debt relief, Jubilee 2000. On one hand, this pressure for change resonated with ongoing debates about the effectiveness of aid, a concern which has traced a path towards the Millennium Development Goals, and an agenda for greater ‘coherence’ between the international financial institutions and donors. On the other, hand, pressure was focused towards the HIPC agreements, finding resonance with ongoing debates about ensuring a poverty reduction focus to national government expenditures. Jubilee 2000 caught the imagination of a global development audience (Whaites 2002), was invested with the moral authority of deep linkages to churches, and saw the citizens of northern countries participating around development issues to a previously unprecedented degree.

The narrative of the PRSP consensus – that poverty reduction can only be achieved through country-driven, result-oriented, comprehensive, partnership-oriented, long-term strategies – chimes with the narrative of the MDG consensus – that international development is a measurable moral goal towards which the governments of all countries should strive. Actors across a broad spectrum have been able to fit their own understandings – whether of the need for a multi-dimensional approach to poverty, effective aid, debt relief, or citizen participation – into the storyline. It is to the MDGs and the PRSPs that we turn in this section, to explore how our buzzwords and the worlds they make translate into targets, instruments and plans.

4.1 The Millennium Development Goals: targets out of buzzwords

The ‘Monterrey Consensus’ which emerged from the first conference on Financing for Development, hosted by the UN, states

Upholding the charter of the UN and building on the values of the Millennium Declaration, we commit ourselves to promoting national global and economic systems based on the principles of justice, equity, democracy, participation, transparency, accountability and inclusion.

Viewing this introduction to an expression of commitment to increased coherence between development finance and trade institutions, through the frame of the first Millennium Development Target (to reduce by half the number of people living on less than US\$1 a day), poverty reduction and participation can be seen as anchors in the consensus narrative which contextualises the MDGs. Although progress towards the MDGs can be monitored at different levels and scales (Vandemoortele 2004), their primary nature is one of composite measurability. Their narrative is one of measuring change already set in motion, not one of analysis of the forces which produce poverty. In doing so, however, the MDGs stimulate new conversations, principally about why they might not be met, and what can be done about it.

As a set of time-bound, numerical targets, set within a frame of human development, the MDGs imply, rather than direct, necessary policy change. From one angle, they can be seen as the ultimate in compromise, the lowest common denominators of legitimate change, the price of international coherence and cooperation. From another, they can be seen and used as tools for changing minds, and for holding accountable the powerful. As identifiable discourse markers emerging from a supranational space, the MDGs represent a way of world-making that lacks any sense of place. As participation, and now empowerment, has become normalised and bureaucratised through exercises in mainstreaming, goals and targets at the global level represent the next step of displacement from the specificities of context. With the mantle of moral credibility that they lend, both symbol and product of the new consensus, the MDGs provide IFIs with further opportunities to steal into the normative spaces that were once the sole preserve of the UN.

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

Civil society actors are not the only ones asking why progress on the MDGs, whilst apparently feasible, is not ‘on track.’ There is a tension between changing minds and winning hearts with advocacy, and the realities of changed practices of southern governance implied by the very notion of ‘being on track.’ It is worth taking the time to juxtapose two analyses from different spaces, because they reveal some of how some of the implicit assumptions of the MDG narrative play out ‘on the ground’. The first, from within the United Nations, addresses the question ‘why are promises not being kept?’, and suggests a way forward. Key aspects of this way forward which are being actualised through PRSP implementation are analysed in an extract from an empirical, fieldbased study of the domestic politics of the Tanzanian PRSP.

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

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

Read together, these two extracts show a worrying set of consequences that are not envisaged in the intent of the MDG narrative. As both a product and a tool of a supranational arena of governance, the MDGs encapsulate considerable assumptions about how change happens in different arenas. It has also been argued they also makes considerable assumptions about the benign nature of the international financial institutions to create equitable change (Alexander and Kessler 2003).

The linkage between the PRSPs and MDGs is an important one, for it is through the policies put forward in PRSPs that the 'money changing hands' should support the 'changed minds' of those who have signed up to the MDGs. It is to a closer analysis of how PRSPs have played out that we now turn.

4.2 What have the discursive shifts represented by PRSPs meant in practice?

Thus far, we have paid most attention the dynamics by which discourses of development are transformed amongst international institutions. As PRSPs, however, these discourses translate as a policy model which is applied to national level policy processes involving a different set of actors - some from the supranational level, but also certain agents of national governments, development-oriented CSOs, international NGOs, bilaterals. Beyond this is a third level, where the model is transformed through implementation via discourses that are local to a different set of actors again – agents of decentralised government, service delivery CSOs, citizens, and the poor. Discourses are transmitted by networks, which overlap across these different domains; meanings from the centre of the discourse are refracted again and again. There is less evidence of refraction from the third realm; less attention has so far been given to how discourses impact on policy change at this level.⁶ Thus, while it is essential to learn the lessons of the first round of PRSPs (Oxfam 2004), such lessons are mostly relevant to national policy spaces and processes.

The application of discourses of poverty reduction and participation to national processes via the PRSP model refracts into the key binary adjuncts of 'ownership' and 'partnership'. In this instance, the ownership and partnership are entirely co-dependent; inseparable. Gould and Ojanen's (2003) study of the Tanzanian PRSP suggests the meanings which implementation invested in ownership and partnership:

[In Tanzania,] the international aid agencies have convinced state representatives to remake their multi-lateral aid relationships into a new breed of 'partnership.' Under the terms of this partnership, the donor community promises African governments greater 'ownership' of their social policies. For the elected leadership, the main perk was the increased leeway for political manoeuvre that the (partial) relief of foreign debt can

provide. In return, recipient/partner governments are required to commit themselves to a multi-tethered program of state reform. (2003:)

Country or national ownership, framed as a necessity for poverty reduction, is both created and taken for granted by a related narrative, that of coherence, cooperation and harmonisation. In this narrative, named the 'Monterrey Consensus,'⁷ MDGs can only be achieved by harmonisation of the operational procedures of donors, "ensuring that development assistance is delivered in accordance with partner country priorities, including poverty reduction strategies and similar approaches" (OECD 2003). The implicit assumption, that poverty reduction strategies deliver country priorities owned by partner countries, is acted on regardless of ongoing negotiations of meaning such as those outlined by Gould and Ojanen. The meanings given to ownership, partnership and harmonisation circumscribe and bound the legitimate terrains of agency for a range of different actors, located in government, civil society and 'the donor community.'

The nature of ownership actually created through PRSP partnership inheres, at least initially, amongst a small group of actors (Eyben 2004, Gould and Ojanen 2003), amongst whom the totalising nature of policy model that forms the foundation of the partnership has become deeply ingrained so that "they are no longer capable of imagining other kinds of policy approaches" (Eyben, 2004).⁸ The new vocabularies of this model, suggests Kakande (2004), can "reinforce status and widen the gap between expert and novice, creating an 'inner circle' of people who share a common language." The master buzzwords of the PRSP – "ownership" and "partnership" – may create an overarching embrace, but the new vocabularies that arise from them as they are operationalised spread out beneath and create patterns of exclusion in implementation. The processes of establishing joint meanings for language that signals a united goal require negotiation (Hinton 2004); the dynamics of who is allowed to participate in that conversation of negotiation are part of the pattern of determinants upon which the transformation of model into practice depends; who is allowed into the central policy space, located in the bureaucracy.

The dynamics of ownership in this 'inner circle' are at odds with the PRSP narrative, which purports that a broader, social ownership can and should be created through participation. In PRSP implementation, consultative processes have relied on a narrow conceptualisation of participation (Bendaña 2002, Knoke and Morazán 2002, McGee 2002), often run to externally dictated timetables which seldom regard the rhythm of the domestic policy process. They have usually offered limited spaces for engagement to invited CSOs, whose views beyond the consensus, if they are expressed at all, seldom find their way into final documents (Whitehead 2003). Craig and Porter label this phenomenon "surrogate political participation," noting also that the politics of PRSPs themselves "have hardly been a matter for debate." (2003:58) The framing of CSO participation in PRSPs creates 'roles' for CSOs that are not necessarily congruent with their existing form or function (Lister and Nyamugasira 2003) and presents considerable contradictions. International NGOs, proactive in the realm of policy advocacy around PRSPs, and have gained new levels of access to the "inner circles of the policy elite" (Gould and Ojanen, 2003:8). In some cases, this has created a crowding out of national NGOs.

In both the bureaucracy and the polity, the implementation of the PRSP model has infused the partnership and ownership binary with meaning; in doing so, it has also demonstrated what partnership and ownership do not mean. The creation of meaning circumscribes versions of change; policy change is as much about what is not said and done as about what is said and done. Country ownership, for example, has seldom meant the participation of democratically elected actors in a PRSP process. Further, the poverty analysis presented is not structural; the distribution of resources, income, human capital and power are not analysed or understood. Nor do they offer an understanding of the national distribution of resource, income, human capital and power (Whitehead, 2003). Many commentators note that PRSPs seldom vary, usually prescribing the three or four 'basic' prongs which mirror the WDR 2000/1 framework.⁹ Craig and Porter (2002) note:

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

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

PRSPs and the consensus narrative they represent are, as we argue above, seductive. They focus the gaze of development's civic audience on the state where the PRSP consultation circus is being enacted in the services of a benign set of goals, now firmly framed in an assimilated language of moral imperative. Watching the show – speculating on what the PRSPs might offer development via their intended and unintended consequences – helps us forget the street outside the theatre, the world outside; and the action backstage. This has two consequences. Firstly, it diverts attention from the other policy instruments associated with the PRSP narrative, such as the Poverty Reduction Growth Facility and the Medium Term Economic Framework, thus obscuring the importance nature of decisions, often concerned with conditionality, which are usually made in non-consultative spaces. While the IMF has absorbed some of the narrative, this does not match the degree of absorption by the Bank; Oxfam (2004) note the “ yawning gap between rhetoric and reality in Fund programmes”. Secondly, it diverts our attention away from countries and regions of the world that are less dependent on the aid industry, but where mass poverty and inequality are issues with a different political resonance. In a way, they focus our attention on the world's most compliant countries, those with the least power in the international hierarchy; the indebted and the aid-dependent.

It is here that the interface of the PRSPs with the MDGs becomes important. Global targets, to non-HIPC and HIPC countries, northern and southern governments alike, represent an attempt to act on a view of poverty as a global phenomenon. They attempt to engage all countries in a universal moral debate about progress. As such they provide a counter-balance to the narrow focus of the PRSPs, seeking different routes to policy change. However, as Alexander and Kessler note, ‘critics of development assistance maintain that governments will not achieve the MDGs until they are made accountable to their citizens – and they are right. But that accountability cannot be imposed externally by the IFIs or mandated through their blueprinted policies’. For all President Wolfensohn's nice words about countries deciding to dance to the same tune because of its rightness, just like the world this version fits the gap between aspiration and actuality is not getting any narrower.

Conclusion

The MDGs serve as a good example of the ‘extravagance in promising future benefits’ that Albert Hirschmann (1967:31) identifies as a mode of persuasion that animates and inspires development action. Hirschmann cites Georges Sorel's argument that ‘humanity requires “myths” - inspiring images of battle and triumph - for any substantial forward movement’ (1967:31). Development agents need to believe that they are able to make a difference, and that the turbulent world in which they operate is amenable to their intervention; they need the conviction of their rightness to lend them legitimacy, to permit them to intervene in the lives of distant others. And they need a kind of near-sighted optimism that keeps the complications in the background safely indistinct. In the texts of mainstream development agencies, “participation”, “empowerment” and “poverty reduction” are used to purvey a story-line that situates these agencies as guardians of rightness and champions of progress. This story-line is

more than utopian, in Sorel's sense: more than an exercise in intellectual construction. Sorel writes:

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

Myths safeguard utopias, Sorel argues. The statements of intent that constitute the policies and prescriptions of international development agencies gain the qualities of myth precisely because they seek to call us to action, name what we can do, give us a sense of the possible, of ourselves as agents of the possible. Successful ideologies work because they do more than convey a good argument; they compel people to listen as those for whom their story is all about, and as those who are its key protagonists, its main subjects (Althusser, 1974). Development myths work through emotional identification, not through rationality (cf. Laclau 1997); they build and sustain the feeling of conviction that people need in order to be able to act. Good argument has its place here, but is secondary to something that is of quite a different order: a feeling of rightness, one that may be backed by the creation of normative instruments, like the MDGs, which serve an almost ceremonial function in bolstering a feeling of togetherness, purposefulness, of a visionary goal towards which to strive. To talk of a ‘world free of poverty’, of the participation of the poorest and most marginalised, of empowering women and ‘entire communities’ is a call to action to the development actor; and the ‘extravagance in promising future benefits’ a means of galvanising people for what would otherwise appear an insuperable struggle ahead.

Geof Wood argues that the very concept of policy tends to ‘involve a particular kind of discourse which relies on the appearance of rationality, technique and efficiency’ (1985:8). The part policies play in discourses of development is to provide reassurance precisely because they appear to model the very controllability that they wish to bring about. Development buzzwords function to provide the normative basis for the management of planned intervention; they swathe development agencies with the mantle of rightness, lending them legitimacy to intervene on behalf of “the poor”. “Participation” and “empowerment”, promoted by advocates at the margins of development as a means to give poor people more of a voice in shaping policies and projects aimed to assist them (cf. Chambers 1997; Robb 1999), has equally served to furnish the legitimacy needed to purvey today’s generation of development blueprints. There is a definite feeling in many quarters that what is now paraded as “participatory” and “empowering” is little more than the Emperor’s New Clothes.

Yet at the same time, it is important to remember that the utopias that are shored up by development myths are profoundly ideological constructions; and, as we note at the start of this paper, competing ideologies may co-exist within the same discourse (Foucault 1979). “Participation”, “poverty reduction” and “empowerment” may have come to play starring roles in the ‘happy ending’ narratives purveyed by contemporary development policies (Roe 1991). But struggles over meaning continue to be waged. International development organisations have not simply absorbed the kind of language once used by radical alternative movements, neither have they necessarily co-opted these concepts and swallowed them whole. On the one hand, battles for the acceptance of alternatives within institutions like the World Bank or DFID have produced partial ‘victories’, as actor-networks linked to broader, overlapping networks of advocates and activists in ‘civil society’ organisations have sought to gain ground in their efforts to transform their own institutions (cf. C. Long 1999). (And it needs to be borne in mind that these struggles are only ever partially over meaning: they are also over bureaucratic turf and organisational priorities, and may be driven as much by bureaucratic convenience and organisational imperative, or by rivalry, ambition and a desire for personal power, as by moral and intellectual conviction). On the other, the sanitised versions that have emerged of terms that were once associated with a radical critique of the development establishment, have in many respects less in common with former usages than they do with each other; as part of ever-expanding ‘chains of equivalence’, development buzzwords have dissonant meanings pared away

in order to fit together, and as Laclau argues, the longer the chain, the emptier the signifiers that are attached to it become.

If these three words have become implacably emptied of meaning by their domestication into these chains of equivalence, what then? Some might say that since words have lost their meaning, we need to seek new ones, and invest them with the meanings that have gone into abeyance as the development establishment has stolen their signifiers. The problem is, as Foucault pointed out, that any discourse can contain within it multiple, competing, versions; any new version of a word can quickly become filled with further variants of meaning. As such, it simply cannot stand outside development discourse and speak to those who work in development: to successfully appellate others, after all, a term needs to have some resonance, something about it that will appeal whether on the level of emotion or intellect: people need to recognise themselves as having something to do with it, they need to feel it speaks about their preoccupations, their values. The words we use cannot remain “unadulterated” by the ways in which they are brought into convergence with other words by others, gaining new meanings (or, as Laclau might argue, being emptied of meaning) in the process.

Others would argue that ceding these terms to those who would make their own meanings hegemonic would mean giving up the struggle over meaning - and losing three words that matter. “Participation” may have been domesticated, but for some it still connotes the right of each and every person to have a say in the decisions that affect their lives; it may have been equated with sharing the costs for maintaining the pump, and with hand-picked “representatives” of “people’s organisations” being invited to meetings to be told what their country’s poverty reduction strategy should be, but these uses do not - and cannot - exhaust its meanings. Adding adjectives to mark out a distinction in meanings has always been one tactic pursued by those who would differentiate themselves from the mainstream: possibilities, then, might be a return to popular participation, or driving a distinction between citizenship participation (Gaventa and Valderrama 1999) and participation as ‘users and choosers’, consumers and beneficiaries (Cornwall and Gaventa 2001; Cornwall 2000), to signal a move away from today’s anything-goes-words. These moves do not serve to fix meaning any more successfully than trying to mark out difference through the use of completely different signifiers. But they do serve as a means of contesting, and keeping alive, a dynamic debate about meanings and ideals which is critical not only to challenging the complacent orthodoxies of mainstream development, but providing those who would seek alternatives with their own myths to live by, their own source of energy and inspiration.

It is only by deconstructing the ways in which buzzwords are used that we can begin to identify fissures in the narratives they support, and the possibility of alternatives. To do so, we need to look beyond the appearance of consensus and one-size-fits-all “poverty reduction”, “empowerment” and “participation” recipes, to actually-existing diversities in the ways in which concepts like these take shape in different bureaucratic, political and social contexts. It is with this in mind that we return here to the definition of “participation” established by UNRISD researchers 25 years ago, to look at the ‘frame of reference’ it lends us for another ‘way of worldmaking’, to use Goodman’s (1978) language, reconfiguring our three buzzwords in a very different way to today’s development consensus. Pearse and Stiefel (1979) defined participation as:

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

Let’s take a closer look at this definition. The emphasis here is not on the kind of participation that one might find, for example, in a Participatory Poverty Assessment (PPA), where individual ‘voices’ come to represent ‘the poor’ (Narayan et al. 2000; Brock and McGee 2002). Nor is it the participation one might find in the kinds of deliberative institutions favoured in sectoral governance over the last ten or so years (Cornwall et al. 1999; Manor 2004; Cornwall and Coelho

2004). Rather, the definition speaks of '*organized* efforts... on the part of *groups and movements* hitherto excluded from such control'. And it does not speak simply of being given information, being asked opinions, being invited to join committees and the like - the lower 'rungs' on the many ladders that have been used to analyse participation (cf. Arnstein 1971; Pretty 1995), which account for most of what passes as participation today. Rather, it speaks of '*control over resources and regulative institutions*'. Moreover, Stiefel and Wolfe write, 'the reference to "*given social situations*" was intended to ward off over-generalisations and the quest for universalised prescriptions characteristic of some criticism of development during the 1970s' (1994:5).

If at UNRISD's 30th birthday celebrations the popular participation programme was declared one of the most important programmes that UNRISD had ever funded (Barraclough, cited in Stiefel and Wolfe 1994), ten years on it has arguably gained even greater relevance. Its focus on the 'encounter between the pursuit of livelihood by popularly-based groups and the policies being pursued by the state and other "developers"' (ibid 1994:xii) remains perhaps the greatest challenge for 'inclusive' development. As spaces for the participation of ordinary people, whether as users, consumers, citizens or beneficiaries, continue to proliferate, hard questions need to be asked about the effects of all this fostering of participation in the service of the notional goals of "poverty reduction" and "empowerment" (cf. Leal and Opp 1998, Cooke and Kothari 2001, Cornwall 2004). Is it creating opportunities for the 'hitherto excluded' to 'gain control over resources and regulative institutions', or for the domestication of potential dissent in arenas far removed from those in which real power lies? Does the 'decentration' of power, 'the shifting of governance away from the national level, upwards to supra-national levels and downwards to regional or local levels' (Standing 2001:21) simply turn nice talk about "empowerment" into what Moore (2001) calls 'cheap talk'? For all the pressure to hold the consensus together, through talk of "donor co-ordination" and "policy coherence", maybe it is time that some of those who once supported a development agenda that was about words like 'solidarity', 'redistribution' and 'a world free of oppression' began to carve out for themselves something more distinctive, myths that can gird a rather different other-possible-world and inspire those who would struggle for it, than simply subscribing one and all to the most grandiose development myth: the myth that all-purpose development solutions can transcend context, culture and politics and apply to all.

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Notes

¹ The relationship between formally adopted policy and the exercise of bureaucratic discretion and relationships at the interface with partners or clients is of course complex, and something about which much has been written (Long 1979; Lipsky 1980; Grindle and Thomas 1991; Keeley and Scoones 2003). Ethnographic studies remain rare, but those that exist illustrate some of the pitfalls of assuming that policies crafted by a cluster of people in the headquarters of an organisation can simply be 'implemented'. Crewe and Harrison's (1999) excellent book is one such example.

² See Brock, Cornwall and Gaventa (2001) and Cornwall (2000) for a longer overviews of the uses of poverty reduction and participation respectively.

³ The basic needs framing of poverty was an intellectual and ideological precursor to Amartya Sen's capability approach, which subsequently to have a significant impact on the re-framing of poverty as multidimensional (Skirbekk and St. Clair, 2000)

⁴ Skirbekk and St Clair note that the pre-publication draft of the WDR 2000/1 (Section 1, paragraph 7)1, paragraph 7 the WDR states that: "Whatever the concept of poverty, certain dimensions dominate the analytical and policy discourse because of their relative ease of measurement and because they lend themselves to comparison across individuals, communities, and countries. These include indicators of health, nutrition, and education, but most dominant are indicators of poverty based on monetary measures of income and consumption."

⁵ A convincing nucleus of which is laid out in HDR 1990

⁶ As Stewart and Wang (2003) note, because of their short history it is only possible to analyse the process and content of the PRSPs, not their impact when implemented.

⁷ Emerging from the UN-hosted first conference on Financing for Development in 2002

⁸ Reflecting on the implementation of the Bolivian PRSP from the perspective of a bilateral donor.

⁹ For Craig and Porter, these are: promoting opportunity (as broad-based growth); facilitating empowerment (by promoting good governance, especially anti-corruption); enhancing security (by investing in health and education) which often includes a fourth, social protection (to protect the marginal).