Reframing expert support for development management

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Abstract

Three critiques of participatory development (PD) and their respective challenges for expert support are discussed – (i) the masking of ideological imperatives behind PD (ii) the depoliticising practice of policy language, and (iii) the restrictive space for enabling responsible support from different fields of expertise including science. Drawing on the experience of two interventions – one Guyana based and one European based - three conceptual tools are suggested for dealing with these issues respectively. First, systems thinking is described from a critical systems perspective, interrogating the legitimacy of boundaries that we use to frame reality. Second, social learning is considered as a complementary policy instrument in which language and communication are regarded as integral to development. Third, critical space for systems thinking and social learning is examined with reference to the limitations of space provided by conventional project management.

Key words: systems thinking, social learning, critical space.

1   Introduction

"… (T)he engagement of citizens and professional experts potentially opens a learning space… (A)ny human engagement both occupies and creates space where outcomes cannot be pre-determined. In particular, the assumption that everyone will discover the same universal truths requires challenge. The literature that investigates 'beyond the truth', drawn principally from participation and development studies, and public engagement with science…is, however, limited in that the focus in both literatures is largely the potential for active citizenship… There is much less about the potential of others who inhabit these spaces. Prominent among these is the professional expert who, characterised as a technocrat and accorded only circumscribed agency, is seen too often solely as part of the problem" (Wilson 2006) p.511)

In his paper, *Beyond the Technocrat*, Wilson acknowledges the demise of positivist epistemology exemplified by (a) critiques of the elitism of professional expert 'learners' (for example, through promotion of rapid and participatory rural appraisal methods), and more recently (b) elevating citizen 'learners' and 'self discovery' through, for example, promoting in-country Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs). But he counsels against denigrating both science and the value of practice through positing oppositional dichotomies (ibid, p. 521) – postitivist *or* constructivist, and practice *or* understanding. Wilson advocates instead a more practical exploration of a social constructivist epistemology through enabling space for interaction between professional experts and citizens (see also Wilson, this issue).

Advocating an alternative role for professional expert support resonates with a plethora of issues in development studies, not least issues around participatory development (PD) and the role of development management (Thomas 1996; Cooke 1998; Cooke and Kothari 2001; Thomas 2007). Here though I focus on two questions relating to PD. The two questions illustrate wider issues of development to which professional expert support might be addressed; firstly, issues of thinking constructively about complex realities of development, and secondly, issues of

engaging multiple perspectives in developing innovative forms of practice and understanding.

First, how might an alternative space provide for PD's radicalisation through confronting Western-centric "complicities and desires" (Kapoor 2005)? According to Ilan Kapoor, PD is an ideology. Drawing particularly on the psychoanalytical work of Slavoj Žižek, and citing the definition of ideology as a 'lie which pretends to be taken seriously' (*ibid*: 1207), PD is characterised as professing benevolent ideals for the Third World which effectively covers up the complicities and desires of those with interests in sustaining rather than transforming existing relations of power. An alternative strategy suggested by Kapoor is to make visible these ideological (complicities and desires) 'realities' as constructs of 'the Real', serving particular interests.

Cornwall and Brock (2005) - citing Goodman (1978) and Apthorpe and Gasper (1996) - similarly allude to the importance of appreciating conceptual constructs or reference frames as a means of distinguishing perspectives in the use of development language. The second question is how might reference frames as systems of practice and systems of understanding perpetuate the depoliticizing practice of using buzzwords - 'participation', 'empowerment', 'poverty reduction' - in development policy initiatives like PRSPs and the Millenium Development Goals (MDGs)? Cornwell and Brock signal the importance of language as a practical tool in development practice. In mainstream development discourse particular meanings or understandings associated with ownership, accountability, governance and partnership are attached to words like participation, empowerment and poverty reduction in what the authors (after Laclau) call a 'chain of equivalence', rendering such words as less meaningful (hence 'buzzwords'). The alternative strategy argued for is to actively rework chains of equivalence to reassert a configuration with meanings associated with social justice, redistribution and solidarity. The concern here resonates with the importance of agency in development practice and the need for managers with other stakeholders to continually renew and negotiate their values amidst multiple stakeholder perspectives (Abbott, Brown et al. 2007; Mowles 2007).

The two questions raise two issues: one, about reflecting on the wider picture of development intervention; and two, about enabling constructive play between practice and understanding amongst stakeholders involved with intervention. As testified by practitioners in the field, the issues are not purely academic: "[M]ost days of the development manager are about managing feeling about the bigger picture, in the face of one's own limitations, at the same time as dealing with the day-to-day nitty-gritty" (Crawford *et al.* 1999 p.170). Given that development practitioners' work is often circumscribed by projects, a third dilemma is raised: to what extent might appropriate space for reflection and interaction be compromised through conventional project management cycles?

Taking my cue from Wilson, this paper endeavours to suggest space for professional expert support to work more constructively with citizens as an exercise in promoting (i) *systems thinking* for shaping improved reality with transparency, and (ii) concerted practice with understanding through *social learning*; both mediated through (iii) an appropriate *critical space*. The first two concepts are explained through my experience with two interventions:

1. (2004-06) **ECOSENSUS** (Electronic/Ecological Collaborative Sensemaking Support System): Guyana focused intervention exploring distributed process-orientated environmental management as an alternative to conventional project-orientated management types of intervention ((Berardi *et al,* 2006; Reynolds *et al.* 2007).
2. (2001-04) **SLIM** (social learning for the integrated management and sustainable use of water at catchment scale): European Commission supported intervention investigating the socio-economic aspects of the sustainable use of water. The project involved about 30 researchers from France, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden and the UK (Ison *et al.* 2004; Blackmore *et al*. 2007)

This paper does not report on the empirical output from these interventions. Such information can be sought through references provided above and associated open access material on project websites.[1] My focus here is on the respective heuristic devices associated with each intervention. Each heuristic, I suggest, provides clues towards developing appropriate space for enabling professional expert support to counter (i) a proclivity towards 'hidden agendas' in development management, (ii) depoliticised interactions in development practice, and (iii) the tyranny of conventional project cycles.

2   Surfacing 'the Real': systems thinking in ECOSENSUS

ECOSENSUS developed practices for collaborative spatially distributed work in environmental planning involving professional experts with other stakeholders. The participants included a European-based team lead by the Open Systems Research Group at the Open University, and colleagues from Guyana including environmental scientists, land-use planners, and indigenous Makushi Amerindians and their representatives associated with the protection and development of the North Rupununi wetlands.

The project had three objectives:

1. To help develop open-source dialogue-mapping software tools for enabling representatives of marginalized communities with some direct or indirect access to the internet to engage with environmental decision making using simple visual language.
2. To develop open content learning units to support the use of these tools and processes, enabling development of collaborative skills in managing natural resource dilemmas.
3. To measure the success of objectives 1 and 2 through piloting the use of the tools embedded in an open-source virtual learning environment.

The project and course development was structured around critical pedagogy (Freire 1970) and participatory action research (PAR) (Fals-Borda and Rahman 1991). But crucially we wanted to build upon the distinction made in contemporary systems thinking between the complex realities or *situations* of (natural resource) dilemmas, and conceptual *systems* for making sense of and improving such situations (see Figure 1). Cabrera *et al.* (2008) helpfully distinguishes this cognitive constructivist sense of

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[1] http://kmi.open.ac.uk/projects/ecosensus and http://slim.open.ac.uk. (both last accessed April 2008)

'systems thinking' from 'thinking about systems' (e.g., ecosystems, health systems, legal systems etc.).

Building on this distinction, contemporary systems thinking from a *critical* systems perspective might be regarded as a cognitive process of constructing systems boundaries for the purpose of: (a) making sense of the holistic interrelationships between entities in a complex reality; (b) fostering engagement between multiple perspectives based on different boundaries; and (c) developing responsibility in accepting that systems can neither be entirely holistic nor appropriately conversant with all perspectives (Reynolds, 2008).

Figure 1 ECOSENSUS heuristic: systems thinking, critical pedagogy and participatory action research
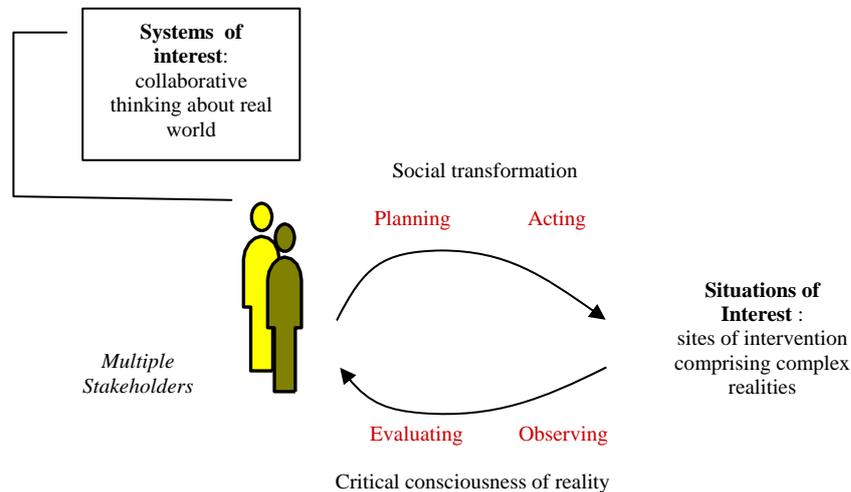
A colleague in the ECOSENSUS team based in Switzerland, Werner Ulrich, provided the systems template for serving the Freirian intent towards critical consciousness and social transformation through his development of critical systems heuristics (CSH) (Ulrich 1983; 1996; 2003). CSH makes explicit the stakeholder interests associated with intervention such as participatory development.

2.1   CSH: making visible complicity and desire

"The propagation of PD depends fundamentally on a propagator or convenor, who in the current geopolitical conjuncture tends to be *us* as members of elites and institutions in both the North and South. It is because of such inescapable complicity that personal and institutional benevolence in PD, while outwardly other-regarding, is deeply invested in self-interest (geopolitical, cultural, organisational, economic) and desire (narcissism, pleasurability, self-aggrandisement, purity, voyeurism, manageability, control)… PD's propagation is premised on overlooking these contaminations (ie. the Real), and to this extent it is an ideology… (T)he disavowal of complicity and desire (ie the construction of PD as ideology) is a technology of power" (Kapoor, 2005, p.1214 original italics).

Kapoor's insight dovetails with the endeavour to which CSH serves in promoting reflective practice. The 'Real' to which Kapoor refers is the actual reality of the situation, in contrast to a dysfunctional system or 'ideology' (using Žižek's meaning of the term). The aim in using CSH as a template for mapping conversations between stakeholders is to surface the kind of complicities and desires to which Kapoor refers.

In describing CSH I can here only provide a very brief introduction. Further details can be sought from references to Ulrich (particularly 2003) and Reynolds (2007a).

CSH consists basically of twelve questions which Ulrich categorises in terms of roles, role-concerns and key problems, and which I have interpreted in terms of stakeholder groups, stakes and stakeholdings (*ibid*). CSH identifies four stakeholder groups that are important sources of influence for any system of interest – those who benefit, those who control resources, those who provide relevant knowledge, and those who are adversely affected by the system. Figure 2 summarises the CSH questions.

Figure 2 Critical systems heuristic questions as stakeholders, stakes and stakeholdings *(adapted from (Ulrich 1996))*

A Constituents to a system of interest			
	Stakeholders Social Roles	**Stakes** specific concerns	**Stakeholdings** Key Problems	
Sources of **motivation**	1. Beneficiary who ought to be /is the client or beneficiary of the system (S)	2. Purpose what ought to be /is the purpose of S	3. Measure of success what ought to be/is S's measure of improvement?	The involved
Sources of **control**	4. Decision maker who ought to be/is in command of resources necessary to enable S?	5. Resources what ought to be /are necessary relevant components ('capital') to secure improvement?	6. Decision environment what relevant conditions ought to be /are outside the control of the decision maker?	
Sources of **knowledge**	7. Expert who ought to be/is providing expert support for S?	8. Expertise what ought to be/ are relevant skills supporting S?	9. Guarantor what ought to be/ are regarded as assurances and false assurances of successful implementation?	
Sources of **legitimacy**	10. Witness who ought to be /is representing the interests of those negatively affected by but not involved with S?	11. Emancipation what ought to be/are opportunities for the interests of those negatively affected to have expression?	12. Worldview what ought to be /are the contrasting visions giving meaning to improvement in S?	The 'affected'

Stakes are the core interests associated with a particular *stakeholder* group relevant to a specified system. The prime stake of any system is category 2, purpose, and hence the first defining question to be addressed. When addressing a set of CSH questions, all responses must be consistent with fulfilling the stated purpose of the system. *Stakeholding* is a useful expression as it conveys a problematic sense of intransigence associated with stakes. Stakeholding represents a tension which holds promise of development as well as the risk of intransigence for particular stakeholder groups associated with a system of interest.

CSH provided a template for developing online dialogue mapping. It provides a structure in which the stakeholding of professional experts like scientists might engage more purposefully with other stakeholders' interests. The dialogue being

mapped might be considered as conversation between *systems* and *situations* (Figure 1). There are several tensions in a CSH dialogue that potentially radicalises PD.

1. Tensions between the CSH as one conceptual device – a system or framework - and the real world of other ways (framing devices) of looking at and acting in the world.

It is well to remember that the template itself is a system or framework. As with any framing device, it is (to use a famous systems adage) a *map* of a situation or territory, not to be confused with the actual *territory*. It is of the same stuff as ideology – a conceptual construct with a particular take on reality (the Real).

CSH reinforces the dialectic between systems and situations by prompting two further points of tension (both illustrated in Figure 2):

2. Tensions between the normative (systems-orientated) 'ought' mode and the more descriptive/ analytical (situation-orientated) 'is' mode for each question.
3. Tensions between CSH question 1-9, constituting the (systems-orientated) 'involved', and 10-12 – the (situation-orientated) 'affected'.

Contrasting 'ought' with 'is' and 'involved' with 'affected' provides the crux of learning for users of CSH. It can be used as a reflective tool at different levels; from a relatively localised decision-making situation to a more global set of imperatives. For example, undertaking a CSH mapping (ought and is) of the Millenium Development Declaration beginning with the purpose of social justice is likely to reveal a picture of complicity and desires – including the contested values, accountability, agency and validity referred to by Thomas (2007).

Kapoor's own four ('ought') possibilities for confronting our complicities and desires in relation to PD (2005, p. 1216) might be aligned with the four CSH sources of influence:

(i) *"Publicizing complicity and desire"* - speaks to CSH generally but <u>sources of motivation</u> in particular provides a trigger for revealing underlying values.
(ii) *"Extending participation to the economy and development decision making"* - speaks to <u>sources of control,</u> and specifically what ought to be part of 'relevant components'.
(iii) *"Linking up with democratic politics"* - speaks to <u>sources of knowledge</u> and the need for extending expertise for incorporating political dimensions of knowledge generation.
(iv) *"Hijacking participatory development"* - speaks to <u>sources of legitimacy</u> in prompting regard to opportunities for alternative viewpoints.

The template can be refined and used by different stakeholder groups working together on a system of intervention. These include not just intended beneficiaries, but donor agents and other resource providers, and the various forms of expertise including development managers and scientists. CSH moreover provides an ethical expression for those whose desires in development tend to be compromised by dominant ideological constructs. In short, it supports "the viewpoint of those who

refuse to play the game of victimisation, an ethics that refuses to engage in the banalisation of the promises of development" (De Vries 2007 p.41).

2.2   Traps and challenges

Three potential traps surfaced with respect to CSH and its use in ECOSENSUS. First, the language of CSH can be very obscure and inaccessible. This is not surprising given its derivation from European eighteenth century Enlightenment philosophy, and provides a major challenge of translation to (i) contemporary Western culture (ii) non-Western cultures particularly of the global South, and (iii) non-literate and/or non-academic sub-cultures in both North and South.

A related second trap is in the values embedded in CSH as a result of its philosophical tradition. Specifically, users need to be alert to possible anthropocentric, ethnocentric and even androcentric biases. In development practice sensitive to ecological and social justice any such biases need surfacing.

Finally, despite our stated aim to produce tools and capacity building materials that enabled individuals to bridge the digital divide enabling marginalised groups to benefit from e-science developments, there is the trap associated with transferring an essentially discursive tool such as CSH and approaches like PAR onto a technologically mediated platform of conversation mapping. This can itself prompt unintended further forms of alienation, particularly amongst cultures and sub-cultures not familiar with, or indeed having access to, internet technology.

The challenges here relate to wider issues of how stakeholders interact and negotiate meanings and develop values around shared practice.

3   Buzzwords in policy practice: social learning and SLIM

SLIM deals with the socio-economic aspects of the sustainable management and use of water. The main focus of interest lies in the application of *social learning* as a conceptual framework, as an operational principle, as a policy instrument, and as a process of systemic change.

Social learning attracts interest as another way of conducting public business in managing natural resources, alongside the use of conventional top-down regulatory and fiscal devices (Röling 2002). It is recognised as a key process in adaptive management and has been promoted particularly in the context of complex natural resource dilemmas where multiple stakeholder interests and conflicts are evident (Röling & Wagemakers, eds. 1998). The introduction of the European Water Framework Directive in 2000, and the requirement for *public participation* in its implementation, added practical relevance to the SLIM research.

As stated in the final SLIM report (Ison, Steyaert et al. 2004) social learning practices help to:

- Recognize and reframe our mental models.
- See issues through fresh eyes.
- Resolve social dilemmas.

- Define and articulate what we value.
- Discover a shared purpose.
- See through conflicting views to a shared vision for the common good.

The notion of social learning builds on the importance of nurturing the tension between changing *practice* and *understanding* between stakeholders. John Friedman (1987) contrasts social learning with the more control-oriented tradition of policy analysis:

"Policy analysis is focused on decisions; it is a form of anticipatory decision-making, a cognitive process that uses technical reason to explore and evaluate possible courses of action […] Social learning, on the other hand, begins and ends with action, that is, with purposeful activity. […]It is the essential wisdom of the social learning tradition that practice and learning are construed as correlative processes, so that one process necessarily implies the other." (Friedman 1987 p. 181)

In SLIM social learning is considered an emergent property of interaction between understanding and practice in the process of transforming a situation. Figure 3 illustrates the SLIM heuristic.

Figure 3 SLIM heuristic (adapted from Ison *et al.*, 2004)

(a) Social learning as concerted action

(b) Social learning as stakeholding development
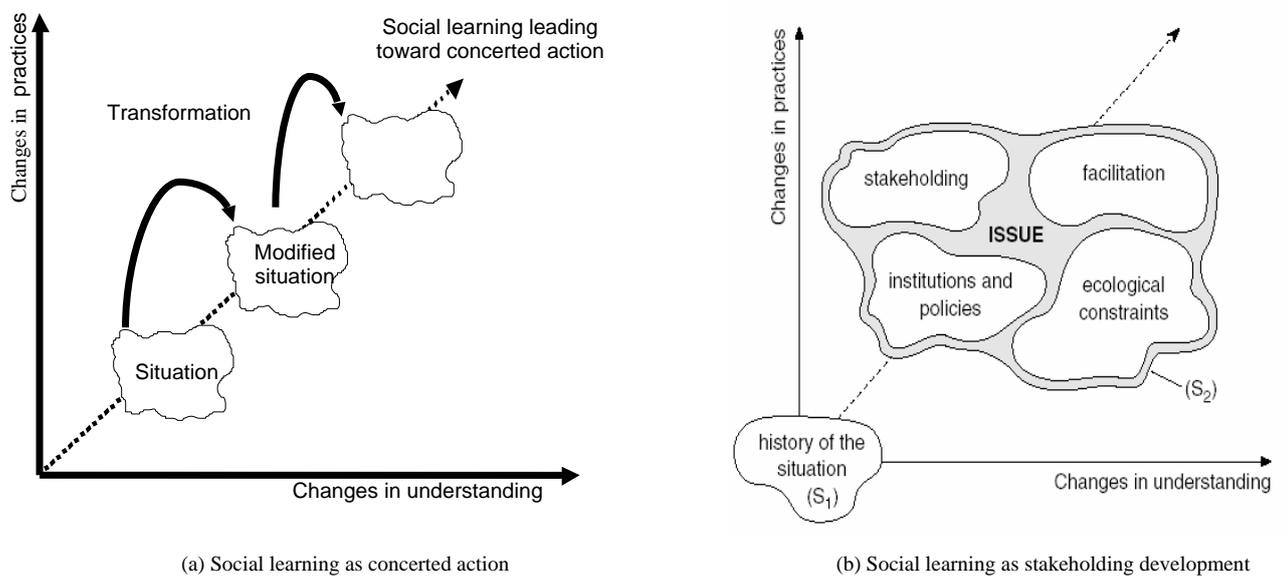
The heuristic suggests that effective learning is enhanced by the interplay between *understanding* and *practice*. The learning here is collaborative (hence 'social') involving multiple stakeholders including professional experts, and the action is concerted, again involving multiple stakeholders. The notion of concerted action is captured in the metaphor of an orchestra, with multiple individual players doing different things, though all contributing towards some harmonious output. SLIM generated many examples of different forms of practice being used for triggering new understandings and concerted action. In Italy co-operation between SLIM researchers at the Università Politecnica delle Marche, local farmers and the theatre company, "La Botte e il Cilindro", produced a civic theatre event at the Festa della Cicerchia in Serra de Conti. The process provided an opportunity for co-learning and future collaborative action on water use and pollution in the area. In other SLIM case studies, living and non-living intermediary objects of mutual interest were used as focal points of reference for mobilising practice and understanding. For example, the Maraîchine cattle in France, and on-farm microweirs in The Netherlands helped both in identifying stakeholders and for mediating the process of co-deliberating on stakeholdings.

3.1 Social learning: reclaiming chains of equivalence

Words are also tools used for mobilising practice and understanding. They provide a medium for a particular type of practice including that of policy design.

"Our argument here has been that the terms we use are never neutral. They acquire meaning as they are put to use in policies. And these policies, in turn, influence how those who work in development think about what they are doing. The way words are combined allows certain meanings to flourish, and others to become barely possible to think with." (Cornwall & Brock, 2005: 1056)

Using the SLIM heuristic (Fig.3a), the terms practice, understanding and concerted action can be substituted by 'words for policy design', 'meaning', and 'policy'. The heuristic also prompts attention to particular aspects of policy as concerted action (Fig. 3b) - aspects of stakeholding, institutional development, facilitation skills, and ecological constraints. The four aspects suggest attention to wider sources of influence on a system as represented in CSH (Fig.2) – sources that can be described as idealised expressions of reclaiming chains of equivalence:

1. SLIM: stakeholding (CSH: motivation) - developing value through stakeholding as against simply protecting and entrenching stakeholdings (cf. Benington and Moore, 2008)
2. SLIM: institutions and policies (CSH: control) - nurturing conducive co-operation (power with) and co-ordinated collaboration (power to) rather than competition (power over) (cf. Robinson *et al* 2000)
3. SLIM: facilitation (CSH: expertise) - promoting agency skills in communication as a complement towards technical skills (cf. Chambers, 1997)
4. SLIM: ecological constraints (CSH: legitimacy) - exploring different worldviews regarding what might be valid or legitimate, as against presupposing some absolute truth determined solely by science (cf. Leach *et al* 2005)

The SLIM heuristic might thus be used normatively, emphasising the terms *changing* practice and understanding, and *transformation* of policy. Or it can be used as an analytical tool for appreciating the historic cultural practice in which terms like participation, empowerment and poverty reduction have acquired buzzword status. Word chains of equivalence and the attachment to particular meanings (understandings) might be traced more precisely using the heuristic through the medium of (1) stakeholding entrenchment, reifying the existing status quo, (2) continued institutional control from dominant development agencies such as international finance bodies, (3) a technocratic impetus in removing more political value-laden connotations, and (4) a singular worldview of development associated with, say, neo-liberal economic growth.

Many of these features are in-part addressed through significant critiques like Cornwell and Brock (2005). The point here is that a heuristic of social learning may help to crystallise such issues further, invite more precise interrogation, and be used for circumstances of development intervention wider than water management or the use of buzzwords in policy practice.

3.2   Traps and challenges

There are several traps in the SLIM heuristic, each prompting associated challenges for improved expert support in development intervention. First, despite SLIM's focus on multiple perspectives, the human presence in the model, and particularly that of the intervenor(s), is not made explicit. Like many framing devices, human agency is inferred rather than made explicit. But in the domain of development intervention, the absence of the human intervenor is rightly construed as itself a device for perpetuating hidden agendas and masking human interests - "disavowing complicity and desire" (Kapoor 2005 p.1203).

Second, the SLIM heuristic framework gives a rather benign image of development. Changes in practice and changes in understanding appear to seamlessly contribute to a synthesis of concerted action expressed through a normative notion of social learning. The implication of the transect lines in Figure 3 is one of progress and improvement. But as the use of buzzwords testify, the apparent harmony of concerted action (for example, with PD) might not translate easily to everyone's idea of progress and improvement.

Both traps here, as with traps associated with CSH in the ECOSENSUS heuristic, prompt the importance of using frameworks critically. They also signal the importance of having frameworks that do not mask the importance of conflict and tension constituent in development intervention. Whilst frameworks are helpful and necessary guides for intervening in situations, they must allow critical space for stakeholders, including professional experts, to enact inevitable tensions in a creative manner. Too often, the frameworks employed regard such tension and conflict as an aberration.

4   Critical Space for responsible expert support

Tyranny is a common theme used in surfacing what's wrong with participatory methods and PD (cf. Bell 1994; Cooke and Kothari 2001; Hickey and Mohan 2004: Williams 2004). Tyranny implies quashing opposition; effectively depriving appropriate space for progressing radical development management. In the complex realities of development management such space is often circumscribed by linear models of project management

4.1   Tyranny of project management

Projects have long provided the dominant framing device for delivering development intervention. Marsden & Sonnino make reference to the *project state*: "[a]n acceptance that the only way to govern is through setting up more and more competitively organised 'projects'" (quoted in High and Nemes 2007). The project management cycle is arguably one of the most pervasive expressions of what Kelly (2004) refers to as the 'tyranny of safety' (Figure 4).

Fig. 4 Project Management Cycle[2]

The typical project management framework appears as a very tidy abstract. It has no discernable human presence. It appears closed and insular with little attention to importance of external effects. The process has circular linearity. Expressions of project management cycles tend towards ending with specified stages of 'execution' and 'closure' or 'phasing out'; projects by definition are short term (compared with programmes) with a defined time to exit the situation. In short, the project management framework expresses a tendency towards command and control. Using CSH prompts (that is, four sources of influence – motivation, control, knowledge and legitimacy), the framework consists of (1) predefined (command-set) objectives or goals, involving (2) a set of resources (including human, social, physical and natural capital as well as finance) under the control of decision makers who 'own' the project, and (3) selected experts necessary to implement (control) the process. Furthermore, (4) the cycle once in motion allows little or no dissent (Reynolds 2007b).

4.2   Critical space for development

This of course is a generalised caricature. Frameworks must be judged by their actual use in practice, and many practitioners are able to use project management in a liberating manner. Nevertheless, the guidance given in the use of such frameworks can shape the expectations of users. It is beyond my remit here to critique the practice of project management. I want to simply finish by signalling an alternative conceptual space for responsible expert support; one that invokes the concepts of systems thinking from a critical perspective and social learning discussed in this paper. Figure 5 provides a composite heuristic of these two conceptual tools, building on Figure 1.

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[2] From a project management kit provided on http://www.method123.com/project-lifecycle.php (accessed January 2008)

Figure 5 Two dynamics of development intervention
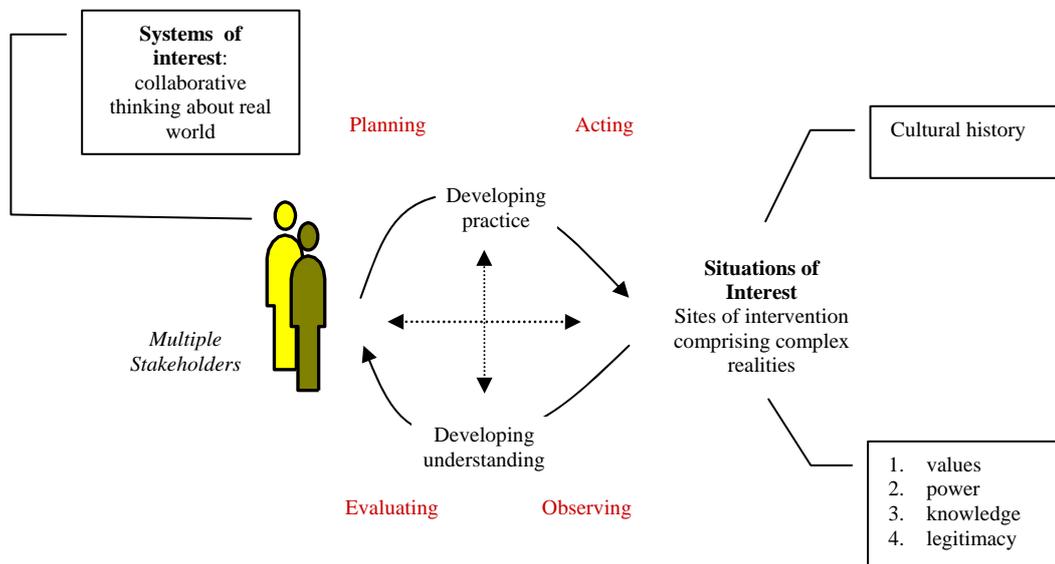
From the viewpoint of this paper 'space' for development has two expressions. One, a reflective space (indicated by the horizontal double-headed arrow) enabling conceptual constructs – systems thinking – to converse with and shape the realities of development. Two, a discursive space of social learning allowing for continual interaction of practice and understanding amongst multiple perspectives, involving not just local stakeholders and their representatives, but donors, managers, and scientists. Together the two dynamics provide what might be called a critical space. It is a space that finds actual expression in Web 2.0 and suggested Development 2.0 platforms (see Thompson, this Issue). The key point of departure from a project management cycle is the appreciation given to these two ongoing tensions of intervention, and the dimensions of responsibility invited, particularly with regards to expert support. Critical space is not presented here as a complete alternative to project management, but offers instead a conceptual supplement to enhance intervention through whatever models are preferred or conventionally used.

5   Conclusion

I have chosen three critiques illustrative of wider dimensions of what is wrong with expert support to development. Each offers insight to improving development management. First, is a critique of discursive constructions as ideologies illustrating what is wrong in the dynamic between systems we construct and the complex realities we inhabit. Second, a critique of buzzwords illustrating what is wrong in the dynamic between practice and understanding. Third, is a more overarching critique of the type of space occupied for effective expert support to development practice.

The ECOSENSUS heuristic brings out the tension between systems as conceptual constructs – 'reality' - and the complex situations and dilemmas of development management – 'the Real'. This in essence is systems thinking - a cognitive process of boundary making. Following Kapoor, a critical systems perspective actively interrogates the legitimacy of boundaries used in constructions of 'the Real'. Critical systems heuristics provides a particularly compelling framework for such interrogation.

The SLIM heuristic emphasises the tension between understanding and practice; a creative tension that leads to social learning and concerted action. Frameworks for understanding and frameworks for practice might themselves be considered as particular types of systems – conceptual constructs used to guide (following Freirian pedagogy) critical consciousness and social transformation respectively. Social learning can be regarded as a complementary policy instrument in which language and communication are considered integral to development. Following Cornwall and Brock, the idea of reclaiming chains of equivalence invokes a process of social learning where values are continually reflected on and renewed and meanings renegotiated.

Heuristic frameworks though are simply constructs – systems proposed as useful for complementing and enhancing existing practice. The value of such framing in providing alternative space for expert support to participatory development can only be gauged through practical use and adaptation in different contexts.

Acknowledgements

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