

Revealing the impact of interface representations, identities and use-values on the poor: a research agenda for NGOs

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Abstract: *This paper argues that NGOs should focus their attention on revealing how, despite the 'pro-poor' development discourse that has underlined the international project of poverty reduction, poor people still lose in grassroots practice. This is because conflicts in perceptual meanings (image-conflicts) involved in interfaces among actors operating from different frames of reality are not properly explored and managed. Case studies of interactions between development agencies and rural communities in Malawi showed that it was through representations (use of language and/or actions) that poverty was constructed. People were categorised or characterised (and indeed people also categorised themselves) using labels that suited particular forms of intervention rather than their actual identities. There were also conflicting meanings of development as 'good' change arising from defined interventions (use-values). It was in the analysis of the nature of these interface negotiations that it was evident that poor people were at a disadvantage. In order to assist these vulnerable people, whose livelihoods are increasingly threatened, NGOs have to continually deconstruct stakeholder identities, representations and use-values and take appropriate action.*

Introduction: globalisation, development discourse and poverty

Literature on globalisation has tended to focus mainly on its economic implications ignoring the far reaching cultural and political ramifications that globalisation could have on the situation of rural poverty. The opening of cross-border markets could be the cause of not only of new economic flows but also of the cultural and ideological technologies that justify certain practices and images¹ while discounting on others, through language.

The language of development then is a combined set of linguistic representations and linguistic constructions of how to relate 'problems' to 'solutions'. It is a certain way of framing problems, attributing essences, and finding solutions based on the objectivisation of what constitutes development (Arce, 2000, p. 33).

In effect, the language of development is mediated through labels, which everyone strives for in order to attract attention. On the part of development agencies this could be for the purpose of ensuring that programmes and projects are successfully proposed and funded. On this realm, there is a global currency of language, which development agencies log into, the family of such concepts as 'empowerment', 'negotiation', 'participation' and 'capacity building'. The expediency of using these concepts has become even more intense as they have become the common denominator for development policies of states and institutional donors. The use of 'language', in this case, goes beyond the spoken to the behavioural and written

symbols that carry powerful images for commanding intended responses from targeted parties. The discourse of 'good' development is implied here, with the power to externally influence the setting of intervention priorities, policies and the frame of reference for the implementation process (Keeley and Scoones, 2000; Muchie and Baca, 2001).

In a commodity market these competing discourses and agendas among different actors would improve the quality of both production and consumer choices. This is because, under normal circumstances, if a producer uses an attractive brand name for a product that fails to deliver the quality it claims, there is a swift response from consumers. On the contrary, however, the product of development implicit in these discourses, such as empowerment, is sufficiently abstracted, making it very easy for development agencies to allude to development without proving the quality of delivery. Furthermore, the poor on whom development focuses are not a homogenous entity and often take too long to organise themselves for concerted action. This is exacerbated by their limited direct forms of 'voice' and 'exit' (Hirschman, 1970) owing to their preoccupation with ensuring basic livelihood securities. In other words, even if a development agency fails to deliver on its claims, the poor tend to still associate with it without applying direct sanctions because they still hope to benefit from the 'partnership'. These circumstances give room to the prominence of certain discourses and meanings that work their way, albeit in different forms, from the global arena into communities where development projects are implemented.

This interface reality was evident in the fieldwork that was conducted in Malawi between 1998 and 2000. In this case, people living in rural communities interacted with many different development agencies, in the context of development projects and programmes. With conflicting agendas and images of reality in this context, much depended on whom, among the community members, was in a position to use the expected image in dealing with each of the agencies to their advantage. In other words, use of images that attracted development agency attention became the people's major strategy for accessing external assistance, a kind of 'weapons of the weak' (Scott, 1985). It was also apparent, however, that not all people were able to use this strategy effectively because of the different forms of 'gate-keeping' and power-mediated relationships, such as traditions, within communities themselves. In other words, the negotiation of external interventions within communities was not in a systematic pattern but affected different people differently, with some gaining and some losing.

In the various sections of this paper, I reflect on the results of this study, which included fifteen months of ethnographic analysis of the nature of interactions between development agencies and purposively selected rural communities in Malawi. I concentrated on cases that enabled comparing and contrasting images that NGOs,² and the people formed of the different aspects of the programme design process. I also sampled cases of similar programmes that were funded by the European Union and GTZ through the Government of Malawi. A theoretical analysis of these interactions showed that they were based on the use of language or actions (representations) that had conflicting interpretations. It also showed that there were categories or characterisations of people in use that were not related to how 'the categorised' people identified themselves (understood themselves as being). Lastly, there were conflicting meanings of the uses or change that took place in peoples' livelihoods from use of the different forms of interventions (use-values). I, therefore, concluded from this study

that representations, categorisations and use-values are the mechanisms through which development agencies and the people participate and negotiate in projects. It is in these mechanisms that the dynamics of exclusion and inclusion are interweaved with the normative allusion to participatory development. These project processes include the critical aspects of agenda setting, decision-making and implementation involving different actors or 'stakeholders' as the commonly used project language.

The first part of the paper gives a synoptic reflection on what the study, on which this paper is based, was set out to achieve. I quickly go on to briefly discuss how the fieldwork was shaped around impressions and expressions that emerged from my first contact with people in communities and development agencies that were assisting them rather than from fixed frames of research reference. The paper then shows how project appraisal processes and experiences of project interventions that follow are a product of bargain of perceptual images that both the people and external agencies form of the various aspects of the project experience. The concept of 'project' is used loosely here so as to allow the reader's understanding to go beyond the limits of product delivery projects, such as increasing food production, to embrace process-oriented projects and any intervention based activity. This should allow extrapolation of principles of research shared in this paper to other endeavours such as processes of consultation with the poor on policy formulation and similar externally initiated projects. It is in discussing these perceptual image bargains and negotiations that the paper shows the importance of understanding representations, identities, categorisations and use-values, as a way that could assist in unpacking what different interventions mean for the poor. The paper is centred on sharing principles or ways of thinking about NGDO research in a changing world, from the authors research experience, rather than offering a methodological tool kit for universal usage.

About the Study: encountering image-conflicts

The main objective of the research was to understand how development agencies and the people (as actors operating from different meanings of poverty and development) accommodate each other in a development project. Furthermore, understanding how the accommodation process affects decision-making and actions (agency) of different stakeholders, especially the generic group known as 'the poor'. The study included purposively selected case studies obtained from some communities in the Northern Region of Malawi. The fieldwork methodology involved in-depth interviews, participant observations and documentary analysis as informed from principles of grounded theory. In essence, I learnt and reflected on issues and decided on the appropriate way to proceed as the research was going rather than operating from a fixed and premeditated methodological logistics. Included in the sample were purposively selected individuals and focus groups from the communities, and agency fieldworkers.

As with any encounter, these interactions were initially based on their expectations of what I wanted to hear, 'impressions given' (Goffman, 1969).³ In this case, field workers quickly talked about the development process with emphasis on the concepts of 'participation' and 'empowerment', as one fieldworker explained,

Particular attention is paid to the state of women who bear the greatest burden of ill health and poor nutrition. Women from the **beneficiary** communities will not only benefit from increased coverage of health services, but even more importantly, from **participation** in planning and design process, implementation in village-level committees, and in monitoring of project activities (NGO Fieldworker).

The interview extract above meant that for the NGO that was supporting these women, the fundamental outcome of the intervention, which she wanted me to hear, was the 'participation' of women in the planning process. People in these rural communities, on the other hand, also had their impressions to make on me on my first encounter with them, regarding their association with projects. Apparently, these impressions had no clear relationship with the concepts of participation and empowerment, which were the impressions given by the development agencies.

In the case of the people, the common expressions included 'As They Wish', 'Construction NGO' and 'For the Community', as direct translations of the local language to English.⁴ A few illustrations of such conceptual expressions are provided below in bold, as extractions from interviews.

*#Kaswa: We are in serious problems. In this area of ours we have no means of generating income for meeting our various needs, as is the case with our friends in other areas. We just depend on farming that is why we even fail to construct good houses because we fail to roof them properly we just put a grass thatch because of our poverty. We just expect you people to think of how to assist us, you should be saying, 'you are building a house, what are you going to use to roof it?' and you will assist us **the way you may think of it**. Concerning businesses we just think that development agencies are mocking us to expect that we can repay a loan of MK10000 in one year. How can we do it is our maize crop is sold at MK30 a tin? That is why we are saying we are poor and we do not know what to do. They should just assist us **as they wish**.*

*#Neli: Malawi Red Cross has stood on giving us boreholes, farming and sanitation. Health concerns our diseases and that is why they are involving the Health Surveillance Assistance from the government. Red Cross had problems at first because people thought that they abduct and pump blood from people in the communities and some communities rejected them. The officer from Red Cross explained to us that Red Cross wants to assist people who have shortage of blood and not to kill them. He asked people for evidence of where Red Cross killed people but they failed to produce it. He also explained that in Malawi, Red Cross is assisting in development work as well. They want to assist us in this area after their explanation but many people still do not believe them. They think it is World Vision and Malawi Social Action Fund that are **Construction Agencies** and not Red Cross. We will see what happens.*

*#Queen: At that time, we heard that the organisation has come with assistance for both our homes, through loans, and also construction work and they encouraged us to start with construction. When the loans time came they told us to belong to groups in order to receive loans and they said we should contribute money to our groups and show our savings to them. How can I contribute money to the group since I am poor requiring assistance myself? That is why we leave this aside and go on with construction work even though I am poor. Since development work is for the **whole community** we just do it.*

In comparing conceptual expressions that agency workers and the people (such as accounts by Kaswa, Neli and Queen above) it was observed that interface⁵ image-conflicts regarding the role and purpose of external agencies and their assistance mediated the nature of interactions. The 'groups' that Queen the community member refers to in her account above, for instance, were mechanisms for empowering women, as a perception of most development agencies working in this community. Therefore, I undertook to explore these image-conflicts and how both the people and development agency workers were handling them. An ethnographic approach, which entails understanding multiple realities in their natural setting (including organisational and traditional culture), informed my interviews, observations and document analysis (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1995). Goffman (1969) also points out that if you take longer enough with the subjects you wish to study, you are likely to uncover most of their real life experiences from their 'impressions given off' or their staged impressions.

I lived in the villages and observed people and development agency fieldworkers performing the 'projectised' development activities alongside their normal cultural and social activities. For instance, I participated in most meetings and field activities, which fieldworkers were conducting and kept looking for what the concepts such as 'addressing people's priorities', 'empowerment' and 'participation' meant in practice.⁶ In the selected communities, I also observed different people (youths, women, men, traditional, religious and party leaders etc) perform their own activities, without external agency involvement. I sought to understand how they perceived 'project work' as similar or different from these activities. From this perceptual analysis, it became clear that there were differences in the perceptual meanings that different actors formed of the same experiences, and the role and purpose of external assistance. In essence, despite the commonality of the language of development that they were using, it meant different things to different social actors (stakeholders in project terms). The ongoing data analysis also showed that these differences affected participation and negotiations in the critical project areas of defining the project, management and defining the quality of change. The sections that follow reflect on how participation and negotiation processes were mediated in the context of image-conflicts in these critical project areas.

Defining the 'Project'

With regard to the definition of the project, entailing the normal project appraisal processes for any kind of project, development agencies mapped out the intensity of the problems in the community using PRA and commissioned surveys. This form of appraisal led agencies to categorisations of people into problem categories (taking-off categories from problem trees) such as 'the food insecure', 'the malnourished' and 'the marginalized' people. This was based on the fieldworker's technical knowledge, as informed from their organisations' ideological underpinnings, and the input of the people, which was regarded as local knowledge. However, people were not necessarily identifying themselves with these categories. As a result, for instance, people referred to the various meetings, which development agencies called participatory planning meetings as meetings for 'registration'. From my probing and observations, 'registration' meant 'being known to the development agency so that you are on the list of those to be assisted with any form of assistance'. This means that the people's local knowledge was selectively used to match with the development agency's expert knowledge in order to access assistance. Consider, for example, a conversation that I had with Mateyu, a community leader during the research.

F: What made it difficult for you to inform the NGO about the PHC committee, which was doing active work before the government pulled out?

Mateyu: Because the NGO survey already brought out these things and therefore we thought we should just follow what they want. The NGO will be here for a short time and pull out their assistance and so we need to concentrate on something that will change people's lives.

F: How would this change be?

Mateyu: We should see how people would change according to the survey the NGO conducted because they even put down percentages on every problem. They put such figures on our agriculture, health and education and their task is to reduce on those percentages.

Interestingly, Mateyu talks about changing of people's lives, which NGOs always indicated as their main objective. However, in explaining this change, Mateyu expresses it in terms of what agencies want, reduction on percentages, rather than in the expression of development of the people. This was not coincidental but revealed the framework in which project appraisals were negotiated. In other words, it was a negotiation strategy that people used in working with development agencies that assisted within certain categories of poverty. In the Red Cross and World Vision examples above, this means that people would accept being categorised as lacking necessary sanitation to Red Cross as a critical problem category. The same people would also accept the category of 'lacking school education for their children' by World Vision, also as the most critical problem category in the community. These images informed negotiations between development agencies and the people.

In this negotiation, therefore, development agencies were preoccupied with their own knowledge of poverty (based on their development philosophies) in defining problems in view of the solutions they already had in mind. In this situation, the powerful people also used their expressions of 'As They Wish', 'Construction NGO' and 'For the Community' as negotiation strategies for accessing external agency assistance. They used the reputation of an external agency in terms of either being a Health Agency or Small Enterprise Agency and positioned themselves for 'successful projects' as access to external resources during participation and negotiation meetings. In other words, the extra resources that development agencies provided had the 'incentive power' for participation of the people but for purposes that were not genuinely shared with the development agencies (Dowding, 1996).

Ultimately, therefore, the appraisal process was a bargain of images of development between development agencies and the people, where the idea of focusing on 'priorities of the poor' was effectively framed. The best explanation that fieldworkers would give was 'we cannot do all things' or otherwise, 'we have to design good projects for donors to support us'. This bargain of images could diagrammatically be conceptualised as shown in Figure 1 below.

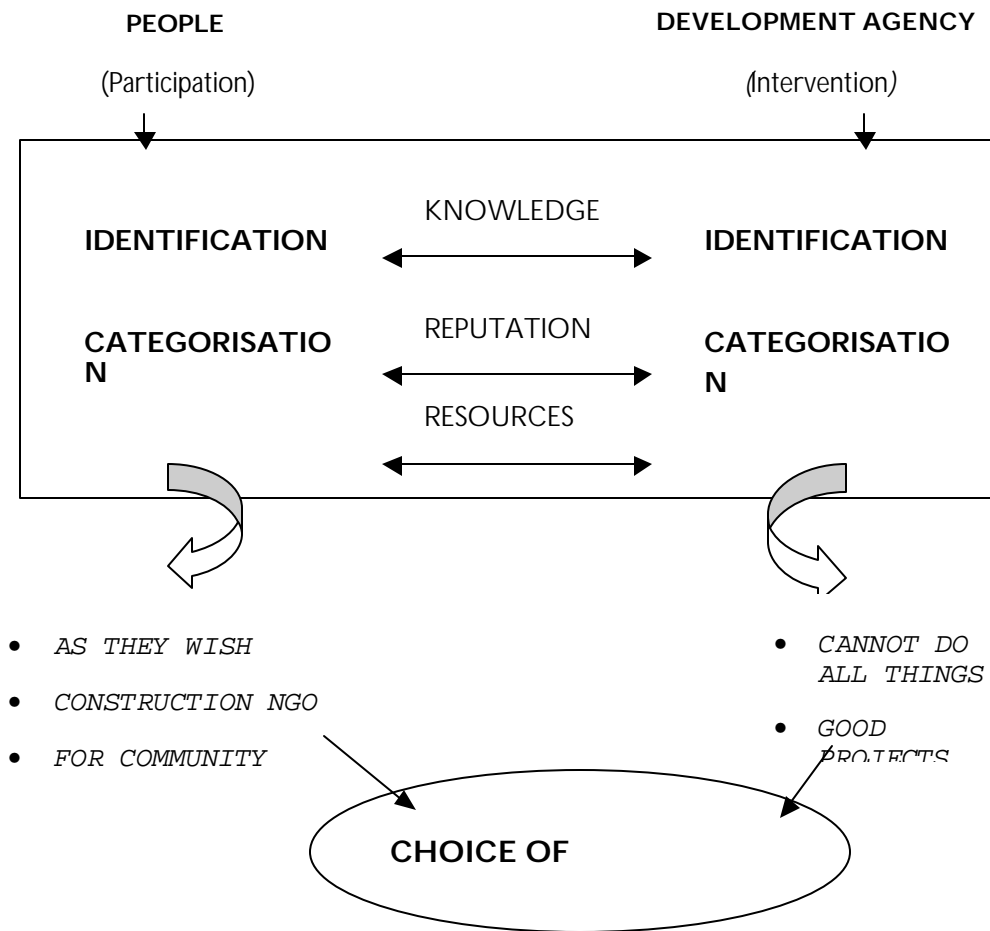


Figure 1: A conceptual overview of the process of choice of assistance (Adapted from Tembo, 2001, p. 187).

Figure 1 above, conceptualises how people are involved in interventions facilitated or motivated from external agencies through the language of ‘participation’, external agencies being the bearers of ‘development interventions’. However, it is the language of ‘as they wish’, ‘construction NGO’, ‘for the community’, ‘cannot do all things’, ‘good projects’ that occupies interactions between these agencies and the people during project appraisal processes. In this way, the fact that this language is informed from the power of knowledge, reputation and resources rather than real articulation of livelihoods is ignored. In other words, the underlying images that are informed from the power of knowledge, reputation and resources that are being talked about are not adequately explored. It is these unexplored images that actively inform the processes of categorising people into different categories of poverty, which at the same time misses on the identities with which these people genuinely associate. The middle part of the figure represents this dimension, which is ignored in most of the project appraisal processes.

This conceptual understanding reflects the fact that certain communities gain access to external assistance through being ‘popular for participation’ in certain forms of assistance (reputation). Conversely, without this popularity, even the most daring development agency might avoid assisting such communities, claiming that the people are not participatory. In this case, the language of participation is used to externalise the problem of ‘interventions’ to the people rather than external agencies, which ignore conflicting images of their intentions with those of the people. The language of development, therefore, is a powerful weapon for inclusion and exclusion, especially in the hands of those that are privileged to both construct and command through resources. In a globalised world this power takes effect at the regional, national and international arenas of development dialogue. For those actors and communities that manage to successfully negotiate projects with external agencies (beyond project appraisal), image conflicts affect the way interventions are managed during project implementation.

Management of Interventions

Development agencies in the study area had ‘unstated’ conditions for interacting with the people, which were related to their understanding of participation, empowerment and capacity building. This is understandable given that it is difficult to imagine assistance or aid that is totally unconditional, because even good intentions, if not in the mind of the recipient, become a condition. In this case, however, it was also apparent that, people too had their own ‘unstated’ conditions for appraising the appropriateness of external interventions in relation to their livelihoods. With image-conflicts occurring at the interface of these conditions, development agencies regulated negotiation processes with the people, including PRAs, through representations of inclusion and control.

Representations of inclusion were cases where people were given the impression of being part of the people who qualify for assistance. In this case, although fieldworkers had the image of organising people into PRA meetings or groups for them to design, plan and implement their own programmes, people participated with external assistance in mind. As a result, most people in these communities availed themselves for being organised or organising themselves into the groups that development

agencies required. An interview with Sosa, a community member, clearly illustrates this perceptual image.

Sosa: When the development agency came, they told us that they have come to assist people who are poor. Village headmen and all of us were very happy to have such assistance. However, when we were given loans, we discovered that they were cases where we had to be convicted in court if we failed to pay back because of drought affecting our crop production. We were surprised because we thought we heard them say that donors want to assist the helpless in these communities so that they can get better in their livelihoods. When you have been told that the thing you are being given is assistance, then it has to be assistance.

Accounts such as that of Sosa, the community member, above show that inclusive representations such as 'people should participate in their projects' were useful only for drawing people to participate in the projects. They might not have participated in that way without these representations, as implied in the community member's account above. This should cause development agencies to question how practices or policies for the poor are negotiated with the poor themselves, what images are projected. Fieldworkers in this study were open to point to pressures of time when designing projects and that their bosses measure fieldworker 'success' by the number of people who participate in these negotiations. Inclusive images, therefore, become instruments of securing people presence at meetings and not necessarily active participation agenda setting, decision-making and implementation commitments as described in development agency project documentation. The same would occur in different processes that involve the people, where agendas have already been set.

Whereas inclusive representations were used to impress on other social actors that they were part of the agenda, control representations impressed on people that they were in control of the development process. With this image, fieldworkers perceived committees and groups as planning their own development. These people were also involved in procurement of project materials using external assistance. This too was for ensuring empowerment, capacity building and, ultimately, sustainability of projects, as one fieldworker explained,

James: The thing that we actually do is that as much as possible we do not just have to have the structure put in place, whether schools, boreholes or roads; no, we make sure we do the capacity building, we want to build the capacity in the community. One of the main things is capacity building and again community empowerment is in finances. We believe you cannot empower a person without giving them the finances, he must be taking charge of the finances and then we will say you are now empowered because the scarcest resource is finances. So when we have approved for a project like a school, the community must account for the funds themselves (NGO Fieldworker).

Accounts of fieldworkers such as above put forward a strong perceptual image of the people being in control of the events in a project endeavour. In actual sense, however, I observed that although control over resources in the process of development is empowering (Kabeer, 1999) this control was situated in some other 'controls', beyond the people's influence. This is of-course true of any real life situation, because we cannot expect people to have a complete 'free will' when they are supported by external agents, with their own objectives. However, where these external controls are not clear to the people and hence not anticipated they affect the exercise of decision-making. In the study, this was the case because people were not sure which decision might negatively affect the external resource flows on which they had no control. This was evident from image-conflicts that were observed with respect to development agency's inconsistencies in the conditions of handling of assistance and the fieldworker's frequent reference to policy. As one leader expressed it, 'they tell us it is policy and they change the way of doing things but we cannot sue them because we have nowhere to do that, we are uneducated!' In other words, the way interventions are managed reflects the fact that there are realities that exist beyond the control of local actors, into which they have to fit. The discourse of development, reflecting local initiative and control masks these realities and facilitates external frameworks to gain supremacy over those of the local.

Nevertheless, it was also learnt that people's decision-making opportunities, from meanings they form of their livelihoods, could be constrained but they cannot be contained. Findings from this study showed that people used the same control representations to facilitate their access to external resources. Community members, for instance, did not have problems with the formation of committees that development agencies wanted for managing interventions. They were useful in as far as supporting agencies were active in the community. Most of these committees disbanded as soon as the project or programme was over. In the words of one former committee member, 'if the pastor is not visiting you, church services go down.' The problem, instead, was who among these community members would benefit from being part of project committees, groups and other forms of organising assuming control and representation. This reality is discussed after reflecting on how image-conflicts affect the understanding of change expected or realised from project interventions.

Quality of Interventions

Looking at the image-conflicts that were observed in the study in relation to the quality of interventions, it was apparent that they were negotiated through meanings that people and development agencies formed of inputs and outputs provided for accomplishing specific projects. In this case, both inputs and outputs derived their value from this social-construction, rather than from their implicit values as could be technically defined. In other words, as Ingold rightly argues,

Objects do not, in themselves, prescribe the nature or the context of their uses; they become use values only through a system of signification which links each object to an idea or representation in the mind of a cultural subject. This representation,

furnished by an expectation of how the object will be used or consumed, both precedes and motivates the act of its production (Ingold, 1992, p.49, emphasis mine).

In which case, both development agencies and the people gave value to resources, including money, labour, time and knowledge, in terms of 'the perceived' change that these resources could potentially bring to a livelihood situation. Outputs were meant to enable the achievement of specific project purposes or changes in people's livelihoods, also part of the project design. As evident in several ways in the study findings, these 'use-values' then formed the basis for strategic negotiations for both people and development agencies.

Leke: The only problem in this community is that people have herds of cattle but they rarely sell some to solve their problems. They would rather keep them for use during funeral ceremonies than sell the animals for other household needs. I remember an incident where I saw a child naked. When I asked the parent why he could not sell one of the cows and buy clothes, he replied, "I cannot do it because if I do, may be my son in-law will pass away, how am I going to appear before my relatives at the funeral." They place more value in the herds of cattle than in the person, and death is respected more than the well being of a person.

In the contexts, such as the one Leke, the fieldworker, above refers to, the actual uses of external agency assistance were also disguised, with people mentioning expected changes in their livelihoods associated with projects. This would ensure that they have access to development agency assistance because the 'use-values' used at the interface with agencies related to their command of resource inflows. For example, that they needed to grow vegetables in order to improve their nutritional status was not difficult for people to associate with during negotiations with external agencies. In reality, however, people could sell the vegetables and gain some money for their cultural ceremonies. In essence, people would agree with development agencies to 'increase their assets' (as in a sustainable livelihoods framework) towards certain outcomes, such as increasing income for child education. They would then use it for diverse and different purposes when that increase has been achieved.

It was evident from this analysis that development agency's use-values were based on 'what goods can do for people' (Sen, 1997, p.510), where the 'doing', however, is defined by development agencies based on technical knowledge. The people's use-values, on the other hand, were related to critical needs, experiences and pressures that they were facing in their social, economic and political livelihoods. They included aspects of 'subjective' realities such as protection from witchcraft and respect for the dead (Edwards and Sen, 2000).

Same community, different people, different poverties

In the sections above, I have shown how both people and fieldworkers negotiated in the context of image-conflicts. During project appraisal processes, they negotiated through image pre-dispositions, from the fieldworker's technical knowledge and backgrounds, and the people's knowledge of what each development agency was about. Regarding the management of interventions, people and development agencies negotiated through the different processes and ways of organizing for assistance, entailing inclusion and control representations. Lastly, in terms of quality of assistance, they articulated the use of particular project inputs to achieve certain outputs for achieving their livelihood purposes in different ways, as use values. Therefore, both development agencies and the people, interacting in these development programmes, were participating and negotiating from a framework of images. It should further be noted, however, that in each of the cases discussed above, people in the communities studied were in different positions of articulation and influence. Consider documented accounts of two community members explaining their 'For the Community' images of assistance, for instance.

Helebu: When you want to mention a problem that affects your home you are told by the village leaders not to disturb but to just go to the office of these NGO officials and complain there --- we are just discouraged.

Tafwa: Even if I want to say something, my friends may say they do not want it mentioned at the meeting with development agencies. If I say I do not have a blanket, will they assist me?

It should be possible to see from perceptions such as quoted above, how difficult it is for the marginalized poor to find spaces for articulating their realities so that they are considered in the interactions with development agencies through mechanisms that are available. Even where the development agency seeks to involve everybody in the community, such as during PRA exercises, there are always underlying social processes that shape the way people of particular identity or category participate in these processes. These social processes inform the images that different people, more likely of different 'poverties', negotiate their interfaces in a project of empowerment or capacity building. Identities, categorisations, representations and 'use-values' are therefore, critical to the understanding of social, political and cultural spaces that are available for the poor. They represent a discourse that has fundamental implications on the quality of participatory processes with local contexts in general and the different people involved in development processes within particular situations.

Identities, Categorisations, Representations and Use-Values

The discussion above has shown how perceptual image-conflicts are implicit in the interplay between identities and categorisations that both the agencies and the people bring to the participation or negotiation platform. These actors use identities and

categorisations to strategically position themselves for achieving their stated and unstated agendas. It has also been discussed that representations of 'inclusion' and 'control' are also instrumental in characterising the management of interventions. In this case too, whereas many people were involved, it was only those who were well placed to find spaces for influencing negotiations towards their ends that benefited. The interplay between representations of development, at the interface with development agencies, and those of tradition and culture, serve to build complex configurations where different people find themselves with respect to objectives of the project. The normatively stated project objectives, such as 'empowerment', 'involvement of the poor', 'capacity building', do not represent any specific use-value of project inputs and activities nor quality of change. This allows for many actors to associate with project objectives for different agendas but also to the disadvantage of others whose realities are systematically subdued.

It should be very difficult to deal with such image-based situations, characterising participation and negotiation, through conventional principles of participation, as presented in literature. Otherwise, the poor, not apt with appropriate information on development agency roles and purposes, and hence not finding appropriate spaces for presenting their realities from meanings they form of their life experiences, will only be problematically included. The fact that the programme is based on participation, empowerment and capacity building principles will be politically correct for the assisting agency but impacting negatively on the poor. NGDOs, as ardent interlocutors of the cause of the poor, especially the vulnerable groups, must concentrate on revealing how locally and globally constructed representations, identities and use-values affect the poor in particular context. This will assist in their pursuit for pro-poor policies and programme design decisions.

Conclusion

This paper has concentrated on grassroots development practice showing how, without identifying and managing interface image conflicts, the poor might not gain from external assistance. This will be the case even when promising global concepts of development, such as 'empowerment' suggest that the poor will benefit more in the current than in the past development approaches. Revealing what actually occurs at the action point, in communities where external assistance is channelled, would improve the design of transformational development projects. It will be interesting to see the kind of conceptual frameworks that would emerge when the poor reflect on their livelihoods and their 'futures' from their cultural and social representations. This is not to suggest that projects should be based on 'non-interventionist' approaches to development but to argue for creation of space for the often referred to as the 'primary stakeholders' to articulate development from their images of reality. As argued in the paper, this has strong links to 'power from within' to which other forms of power including 'power to do' and 'power over' are based; all being forms of empowerment. The traditional PRA approaches while able to provide 'situations of empowerment,' through allowing people to speak and draw, for instance, they do not provide an 'empowering situation' (Crawley, 1998). It is an empowering situation when space is created and the poor effectively use it to articulate livelihoods from meanings as embedded in their socio-cultural frameworks.

Globally used concepts such as empowerment and capacity building, therefore, must be rooted in images that poor people make of their livelihoods and their involvement in externally assisted projects if they are to be practically authentic. It is this 'rootedness' that will reflect the people's agency, linked to their 'power from within' (Townsend, 1999), and provide the foundation for extending political space for their participation. Townsend and other authors, in Townsend et al, (1999) have candidly expounded on other forms of power including 'power with', 'power to do' and 'power over', which should flow from this positioning process. This discussion goes further in providing the basis for bringing such analytical frameworks into an empirical picture, a moving picture of a project involving different social actors experiencing different dimensions of power. This configuration and analysis should further be seen as mediated through different interfaces, from global to local and vice-versa, using these various representations and affecting different actors differently. No pro-poor policy can overcome such interface dynamics and genuinely lead to empowerment of the vulnerable poor in societies such as the communities studied in Malawi.

In my opinion, the research thinking introduced in this paper also has potential to improve the effectiveness of negotiations of NGDOs at other interfaces. For example, the European Commission has provided room for non-state actors, including NGOs, to participate in development cooperation. Participation in this case has been conceptualised as going beyond the traditional project implementation to policy dialogue, planning and programming, and evaluation and review of the development process (ECDPM, 2001). In most of the developing country contexts, however, there are no neatly divided spheres of 'State', 'Market' and 'Civil Society'. They interact, both functionally and politically, in ways that could include the poor in agendas that do not benefit them. From the research thinking discussed in this paper, NGOs would analyse policies and practices of players in development cooperation. This is in terms of what they mean in practice, in the rural populations, as applied in a sector such as 'Food Security'. They would then take appropriate negotiation or advocacy action, in form of either face-to-face negotiations or use of strategic representation in fora where other actors, in the public and private sector are involved. Ultimately, NGDOs would effectively engage in pro-poor policy dialogue as well as build the capacity of poor people in their constituencies to effectively advocate at their interfaces with governments and business entities for improving their livelihoods.

For NGDOs to adopt this approach to research and development, however, they will firstly require fieldworkers and researchers that are committed to reflexivity as a way of managing development. This is to understand themselves, doubt their actions and perceptions as they analyse the other actor's meanings of experiences. As Chambers (1997) has rightly argued, the best reflexivity is personal commitment to change and to know that there is mutual benefit to the process. Secondly, it can best be done from a commitment to participatory activities rather than single-day interviews with the concerned actors. This implies more time and money has to be spent at this form of research. Development agencies that are impatient for results and consider budgets in terms of quantitative deliverables might find this thinking difficult to apply to their situations. Elsewhere (Tembo, forthcoming), I have developed these principles further in order to conceptualise how they can improve social analysis and PRA practices for fieldworkers. I have discussed, for instance, how a systematic identification of image-conflicts, interface fields and how different project stakeholders negotiate them can be carried out in the context of social analysis and PRA. The emphasis is on principles, which are ways of thinking that could enable

development facilitators to ask both themselves and other project participants the next questions from information that is emerging from interactions. These are questions that reflect on meanings of what they (different stakeholders) are involved in and where they are going with the project.

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Notes

- ¹ The concept of images, as used in this paper, refers to meanings that social actors make of a life situation that they are presented with, which makes them to decide, relate and act in a certain way towards the situation (tangible or non-tangible) in question (Hamlyn, 1996). The concept of 'agency' is therefore also implied in this definition. 'Agency' with quotes does not mean development organisation, as sometimes also used in this paper.
- ² The term NGDOs stands for Non -Governmental Development Organisations and has been used interchangeably with the commonly used term 'NGO' in this paper without undermining the theoretical differences between the two terms that some authors have drawn in literature.
- ³ Goffman (1969) refers to impressions as 'given' when actors assume roles that are expected by those watching them but then as time goes they start showing their true characters, thus give out impressions as 'given-off'. In other words, they cannot continue pretending.
- ⁴ 'As They Wish' was the concept that people used to communicate that assistance as anything that external agency or their own village leaders wanted to provide, 'Construction NGO' was where the mention of the agency name was associated with a particular form of assistance, loans for example. 'For the community' referred to assistance that was meant to benefit the whole community.
- ⁵ Interface as used in this context refers to 'a critical point of intersection or linkage between social systems, fields or levels of social order where structural discontinuities, based on differences of normative value and social interest, are most likely to occur' (Long, 1989, p. 1-2).
- ⁶ I kept on checking my observations and conclusions with the people concerned in order to avoid imposing my own interpretations on concepts that meant different things to the observed actors.

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