

Editorial

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Recent years have witnessed a renewed emphasis on the need to value local knowledge(s)¹ in the formulation of development interventions, and there has been a burgeoning of methods and techniques from the PRA school of practice based on the principles of Rapid Rural Appraisal formulated by Robert Chambers. To a large extent, this interest in local knowledge is pragmatic: the failure to find out what local people know and think has often led to costly mistakes. Clearly, if communities are to participate meaningfully in decisions that affect them, then their own values and understandings must be properly taken into account. Unfortunately, what passes as participation often amounts to little more than a formal nod in the direction of consultation, after which the decision makers carry on with business as usual (White 1996:8). Similarly, although the current wave of democratisation and decentralisation (the focus of our November 2004 issue) seeks to foster local participation in formal political life, this does not necessarily mean that the resulting policies will reflect worldviews that diverge from the mainstream; rather, the price of participation may be a public–private divide, whereby non-hegemonic worldviews or perspectives are withheld from those arenas within which they have little or no influence. This may be a valid survival strategy, but it makes it still less likely that the cultural and ideological underpinnings of a given policy direction will be challenged from below. At the global level, too, poor countries and poor communities often face no-win choices: joining the global economy means accepting terms that are often deeply prejudicial to their interests, but simply turning their backs on it is not a viable alternative. Participating in ways that will actually shape global economic processes to the benefit of the poor—as the alter-globalisation movement seeks to do—will be a necessary but constant struggle.

Describing what they refer to as ‘constructing alternatives to globalisation’, **David Barkin** and **Lourdes Barón** present an account of work being done with indigenous Purépecha communities in Mexico, where the long-standing practice of migrating to the towns and cities in search of employment is no longer a feasible option. A revival of traditional forms of cooperation and livestock management, and new ways of managing the ecosystem in this major avocado-producing district, have given rise to a project to produce low-fat pork, by feeding pigs on non-export-grade fruit. This not only has economic potential but is also helping to sustain a way of life by providing a source of local employment, particularly for women, and maintaining the community’s cultural dynamism. Writing about crop production in the Andes, **Jon Hellin** and **Sophie Higman** show that the traditional risk-reduction strategy of maintaining diverse varieties of quinoa and potatoes is being undermined by market pressures. In particular, the requirements for consistency and quantity of production, coupled with imports of subsidised wheat products, are displacing these indigenous crops. Efforts to maintain crop diversity while ensuring that farmers benefit from market opportunities depend on adopting extension approaches in which the emphasis is on farmers’ active participation and support

for appropriate public and private interventions in remote rural areas. **Joanna White** and **John Morton** focus on the devastating impacts of HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa, at every level of society. Apart from the human suffering involved, the epidemic is claiming the lives of working-age adults and disrupting traditional forms of knowledge transmission, as well as compromising household livelihoods. The authors find that, although local NGOs are developing broad-based approaches to enable survivors within the affected communities to thrive economically, the donor community is still focused on curative and preventive health services.

Several papers in this issue look at methods for eliciting and interpreting various kinds of information from local people. **Neil Price** and **Deepa Pokharel** describe the Key Informant Monitoring (KIM) tool being used by a project in Nepal that aims to increase the uptake of mid-wifery and essential obstetric care services. A first step is to understand the logistical, financial, and cultural constraints on access to such services, which local researchers were hired to explore. Their findings have helped to modify the project design, and have also informed a range of educational activities and practical interventions at the village level. Another methodology, Appreciative Inquiry (AI), has generally been applied to issues of organisational learning and change. **Sarah Michael** describes its value in interview-based research undertaken with NGO directors across Africa. While AI begins by looking at the best of an organisation or individual's experience, it can help researchers to gain a subtly nuanced understanding of their subjects' principal successes and their most serious obstacles. The author finds that an AI approach creates a comfortable and stimulating environment for interviewees that can yield information of an exceptional quality. **Keith Bosak** and **Kathleen Schroeder** focus on the potential relevance of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to gendered research within the international women and development agenda. There are many opportunities, but the chief obstacles to its application are inadequate gendered data sources and the ability of GIS to represent women's issues. **Elisabeth Paul** presents a methodology for evaluating Fair Trade that incorporates standard project evaluation criteria and is based on a wide range of proven methods for collecting and analysing data, both qualitative and quantitative. The modular framework provides an overarching logic that allows practitioners to select according to their needs, and makes it possible to compare Fair Trade programmes with conventional development projects.

Finally, two polemical contributions challenge aspects of the ways in which some international NGOs go about doing their work. **Dip Kapoor** suggests that by channelling their funding through intermediary organisations, these NGOs may unwittingly contribute to the domestication or depoliticisation of grassroots struggles; if international NGO staff were to see these conflicts at closer range, they would, he maintains, be persuaded to handle their own power in a more democratic fashion. **Agustín Velloso de Santisteban** argues that international NGOs run the risk of propping up the very systems that perpetuate injustice by using these systems to bolster their own capacity to fundraise and deliver aid rather than focusing on educating the tax-paying public to demand global economic justice. While it is perhaps necessary to do both, the author believes that if the logic of self-perpetuation sets the pace, the goal of eradicating poverty and injustice becomes ever less attainable.

Note

1. The term 'local knowledge' tends to be used in opposition to 'expert knowledge', which is often external not only to the culture or locality but also to the country or even the continent. It is, however, problematic in implying that local knowledge is unitary and homogeneous, and that its relationship to power is uncomplicated. In fact, knowledge systems are always gendered and, since knowledge is not static, often contested; and both 'local' and 'expert' knowledge vary in relation to education.

life experiences, social class, ethnic identity, religious conviction, language, and so on. Some forms of knowledge are accorded higher status or associated with powerful groups, while others are ignored, stigmatised, or suppressed; a standard way to deny competing forms of local knowledge is to label them in such a way that their authenticity is called into question. It is less threatening to hegemonic local knowledge to claim, for example, that feminist critiques are by definition 'Western' than to admit the existence of diverse opinions and dissenting voices from within.

Reference

White, Sarah C. (1996) 'Depoliticising development: the uses and abuses of participation', *Development in Practice* 6(1):6–15.