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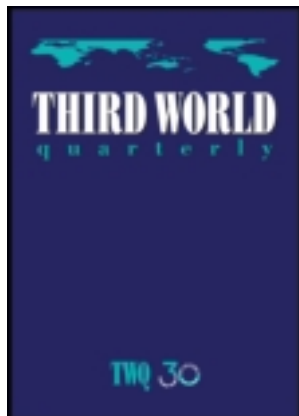Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:

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Review Article

Ventriloquising 'the Poor'? Of voices, choices and the politics of 'participatory' knowledge production

ANDREA CORNWALL & MAMORU FUJITA

ABSTRACT   *The World Bank's* Consultations with the Poor *made development history. One of the most widely discussed piece of development research ever, the Consultations made much of claims to be participatory and to represent the "voices" of more than 20,000 "poor people" in 23 countries. It findings were used to garland speeches and affirm the overwhelming approval of "the poor" for the bank's policy prescriptions, lending them narrative form and moral legitimacy. More than a decade later, references are still made to the "voices of the poor". As the MDG deadline draws closer, there is talk of repeating the exercise to inform the next round of goals. In this article, we look back at this exercise, and examine the methodology that was used to "listen" to "the voices of the poor". Taking one of the regions where the studies were done, Latin America, we trace quotes through from site reports to synthesis. Our findings offer no surprise to those familiar with what Broad describes as the Bank's exercise of the "art of paradigm maintenance". But it offers useful pause for reflection on the politics of knowledge production and the encounters between international development agencies and those whom they would call their "clients".*

For development agencies and donor governments, there is little more stirring than to invoke 'the poor' as the beneficiaries of one's compassion, indignation and assistance. Talk of 'the poor' affirms positions, lends moral purpose and creates as its object a mass of people with lives of abjection that are owed something better. Yet by labelling people as 'poor' within a narrative that casts them as responsible for their own 'empowerment', the inequities of existing social and economic relations that sustain poverty, vulnerability, insecurity and alienation are brushed out of the frame.

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As a new World Bank president who is no stranger to the concept of structural violence nor to the everyday privations of people living in poverty takes office, calls have been made for a new round of 'consultations' that would revisit an ambitious and audacious project carried out over a decade ago by the World Bank in 23 countries with an estimated 20 000 'poor people'. This article revisits this exercise, most commonly known in development circles by the name it began rather than ended with: 'The Voices of the Poor'. In his address to the Annual Meeting of the Board of Governors of the Bank, on 28 September 1999, the World Bank's then president, James Wolfensohn, presented the study's rationale:

> My colleagues and I decided that in order to map our own course for the future, we needed to know about our clients as individuals. We launched a study entitled 'Voices of the Poor' and spoke to them about their hopes, their aspirations, their realities.[1]

The headline finding from the study was unequivocal about what these 'voices' were calling for; Wolfensohn spelled it out in terms like 'ownership' and 'community-driven' that had already become catchwords within the World Bank:

> What is it that the poor reply when asked about what might make the greatest difference in their lives? They say organizations of their own so that they may negotiate with government, with traders, and with non-governmental organizations. Direct assistance through community-driven programs so that they may shape their own destinies. Local ownership of funds, so that they may put a stop to corruption. They want non-governmental organizations and governments to be accountable to them.[2]

What came to be known as 'Consultations with the Poor' provided the World Bank and other mainstream development institutions with a seemingly endless supply of evocative quotes. Speeches invoking the words of a 'poor woman' became *de rigueur* for development dignitaries. Everyone, it seemed, was eager to claim the voices of the people involved in this exercise, who came to be cast as 'the true poverty experts'. These voices came to provide narrative form and moral legitimacy for the neoliberal empowerment policies pursued by the Bank and other mainstream development agencies over the coming decade.

'Consultations with the Poor' was a spectacularly well promoted initiative, one that was arguably more memorable than any other piece of development research ever conducted. But a number of questions arise about the ways in which the perspectives of those involved in this exercise and their identification as 'the poor' were framed by the way the exercise was designed and conducted and the findings distilled.[3] In this article we take a closer look at the site reports and national synthesis reports from one of the study regions, Latin America. This was initially a pragmatic choice, driven by greater familiarity with the region and the sheer volume of material. Yet, as we began to analyse what we found, it also became evident that this is an

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especially interesting site in which to examine the Bank's globalised prescriptions—for reasons that appear nowhere in the synthesis of the voices, but have much to do with the winds of change that swept through Latin America in this period.

In what follows we trace quotes used in the *World Development Report 2000/01: Attacking Poverty* (WDR),[4] and in the principal synthesis of the findings of the 'Consultations' exercise, *Crying Out for Change*, back to the sites in which fieldwork was carried out and about which site reports were produced. In this article, we focus on the aspects of this exercise that relate to questions of empowerment and governance. Examining the ways that the 'voices of the poor' came to be constructed, we consider the implications of the uses to which these voices came to be put in justifying a Bank-driven neoliberal agenda, one that arguably served to weaken some of the most important sources of security for people living in poverty, while widening an ever more gaping chasm between the haves and have-nots the world over.

Garnishing touches? Representing the 'voices of the poor' in the WDR

'Consultations with the Poor' was a stunning publicity stunt for the World Bank. It was a coup for those who sought to humanise the Bank's operations. It brought a glimpse of ordinary people's lives into the field of view of development actors, whose exposure to the realities of life in developing countries is often limited to expatriate enclaves and air-conditioned meeting rooms in five-star hotels. It made headlines within the development world, for doing what no one—or so it seemed from the way the exercise was presented—had *ever* done before: listen to the voices of actual, real poor people.

Reading the WDR, for all the fanfare that surrounded the 'Consultations', it is immediately noticeable how selectively the voices that were culled from this process came to be used. In the chapters under the theme of 'empowerment'—Chapter 6 ('Making state institutions more responsive to poor people') and Chapter 7 ('Removing social barriers and building social institutions')—only *one* of the 18 boxes is dedicated to the 'voices'.[1] In the main body of the text just three quotes appear in Chapter 6 and another three in Chapter 7. The findings from the exercise appear not to have made much of a dent on the overall thrust of the report. Rather, the voices came to be, in Karen Brock and Rosemary McGee's words, 'treated as illustrations and flourishes' to 'humanise the analysis'.[5]

Outside the WDR itself, however, the voices came into their own. In the months following the release of the report, 'voices' were often cited in support of points that prominent World Bank officials wanted to make. They could be used to claim the kind of moral authority that the everyday fare of generalising development narratives simply couldn't offer, imbuing the WDR's policy prescriptions with an aroma of sincerity and a flavour of compassion. As Chambers notes, policy makers and bank staff are likely to be more easily influenced by sound-bite-style headlines.[6] There was an onus

on those producing the 'voices' to find these sound-bites and make the most of them. In their account of the process of constructing the narrative that appears in *Can Anyone Hear Us?* Rademacher and Patel describe how 'voices' were turned into catchy quotes, 'largely stripped of their original social and political context'.[7] For all their talk about listening, Rademacher and Patel ask whether the bank was ever able to receive what 'more contextualised, actual "voices"' might have to tell them.[8]

Hearing voices

The 'Consultations' study set about gathering its voices at a cracking pace. The time allocated to fieldwork in multiple sites in each country was just three months, the same time that the authors had to write a preliminary draft that synthesised the findings. A staggering amount of material was produced: 272 site reports and 21 national synthesis reports. This created a complex set of filters through which the voices came to be read.

The 'Consultations' exercise sought to break new methodological ground. It aimed to provide a way to systematise multi-site participatory research activities in such a way as to generate comparable findings. Grappling with issues of epistemological incompatibility—indeed, some might argue, incommensurability—preoccupied the design process, and its incomplete resolution permeates the Methodology Guide produced to structure the exercise.[9] The leader of the Consultations process, Deepa Narayan, opens the guide with the following words:

> As this is a comparative study, we request that you work closely within the framework of the core themes, methods and reporting formats presented in the Guide. We fully appreciate, however, that the best open-ended and participatory field research is well tailored to local contexts and very dynamic.[10]

Much hinges on that 'however'. As can be discerned from this passage, there were two competing agendas at work: between standardisation for comparative study and dynamic open-ended research tailored to local conditions. Reconciling the two is far from easy, and those involved in the design of the exercise made a brave attempt to do so. Significant in terms of our analysis, however, is that, while the structuring of the exercise itself privileged standardisation, the representation of its results made much of its 'participatory' nature—which became the hallmark of its claims to authority and authenticity, and the source of its cachet.

The voices of the poor are presented in *Crying Out for Change* as if they arose unmediated from open-ended, participatory research. Closer inspection of the Methodology Guide, however, scotches any notion that this was an inductive, iterative process of listening and learning. Rather, the guide is peppered with pre-framed categories and circumscribed questions. Seven pages itemise methods to be used, activities to be done and further questions to be asked.[11] This is followed by a further 26 pages of methodology, which

provide 'tips' on how to start the discussion, how to use the prescribed tools, the format to be adopted, and sometimes precise questions to seek an answer to during focus group discussions.[12] With time pressure, it is easy enough to imagine that seeking to adapt the terminology and discussions to local conditions and making time for reflection, analysis and further exploration might well be sacrificed to getting through all the questions. It needs to be remembered that in some sites the teams spent only two days there and that the average time spent in each site was only ever envisaged to be four to five days.

One of the distinguishing features of participatory research is its emphasis on exploring people's own categories and meanings, and using these as an entry point for analysis.[13] By defining a pre-determined list of topics, loaded with conceptual categories ('vulnerability', 'social exclusion', 'gender', and indeed 'the poor') that have a very particular origin and framing power, the methodology guide frames what is possible for respondents to say and limits the opportunity for participatory analysis. It is not difficult to imagine how this might stifle the space for the creative improvisation and iterative learning that is so important in participatory research. This is reflected in the site reports, many of which came to resemble a list of answers to pre-determined questions. The reports typically consist of short answers and a few potentially useful quotes in response to individual questions, sometimes accompanied by a brief description of group dynamics.

An indicative example of how a pre-existing set of preoccupations worked to frame one of the much-publicised results of the 'Consultations' exercise appears on page 37 of the Methodology Guide. This illustrates, again, the tension between open-ended enquiry and sticking with the agenda prescribed by the Bank's analytical and conceptual categories and associated policy preferences:

Allow the group to generate their own criteria. Once they have done so, check whether the following criteria have been included:

> – which of these institutions are considered important by them
> – people's trust in these institutions
> – their effectiveness
> – provide help when needed
> – people have a say in their decision-making process.

> If these have not been included, ask the group to consider them as well, and if they are willing, include them on the visual. These indicators are crucial for this study and may have to be prompted by the facilitators. Make a note of criteria decided by the group and the ones introduced by the facilitators.[14]

It is perhaps hardly surprising that the much-touted 'finding' that poor people trust their own institutions more than those of the state was to emerge from this exercise. As we go on to suggest, a closer reading of the reports from which the vivid quotes that substantiated this finding were extracted reveals a rather different story. It is to this, and some of the other stories, that a closer inspection of reports from the 'Consultations' exercise tell, that we

now turn. We begin, however, by exploring how 'the poor' came to be constituted as the objects/subjects of this study in order to contextualise how their 'voices' came to be represented.

Creating 'the poor' as a category for analysis

> They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented. (Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*)

'The poor', as we note earlier, is not a category that many people living in poverty would claim for themselves; it is not a social identity around which it is common for people to organise, nor is it a label people would readily identify themselves with. Rather, it is a label used to designate *others*. In a well turned critique of *Can Anyone Hear Us?*, Richard Pithouse argues that in it 'the poor emerge as The Poor—a de-individualised and othered category'.[15] Pithouse goes on to point out 'familial connections between this project and colonial discourses that sought to other people via a process of racialisation'.[16]

Bundling together a disparate collection of snatches of narrative, each labelled by country but lacking anything that might distinguish them further, the analysis produced by the Bank demarcates 'the poor' as an object for 'our' intervention, and 'our' compassion. Pithouse notes the curious absence of any sense of indignation: 'the poor' are produced as 'inert and resigned', presented 'in a strange mixture of corporate-speak and the very same contrived archaism that colonial writers consistently attributed to the colonised'.[17] Their commentaries on change, Pithouse notes, are very selectively editorialised and they are presented as people that exist in another time: their very abjectness, their tales of misery, violation and abuse redolent with sorrow, but never with ire. The causes of this misery are never sought in actually-existing political processes that have disenfranchised them, processes that may, after all, have been instigated by the very institution that seeks to make 'the poor' its 'clients'. Pithouse argues that 'the poor' become, in the Bank's narrative, *them*: not-us.

Reading the site reports, it becomes apparent that the way in which the category 'the poor' is understood and deployed varies according to each site, and by each individual within that site. The technique of wealth ranking, popularised in the early 1990s as a participatory method used for gaining insights into local classifications of wealth and well-being was one of the prescribed techniques in the Methodology Guide.[18] Its outcomes provide interesting reading. In Vila Junqueira, Brazil, for example, one group of young men and women categorised inhabitants into three groups: better living conditions (12%), 'more or less' (64%) and 'poor' (14%, defined as only being able to afford necessary groceries, cannot eat beef, children don't study, incomplete houses with second-hand furniture).[19] It is implied, if not explicitly stated, that the majority of the participants perceived themselves as belonging to the 'more or less' category, discussing what it meant to be poor

with reference to a group who were not 'us', even if they shared certain conditions of life and insecurities.

In some sites facilitators note the difficulty of getting people to make these classifications. In Chota, Ecuador, researchers reported that at the stage of identifying different levels of well-being within the community, the participants (adult women) resisted, saying that they all eat the same food, and that nobody owns cars. The facilitators had to insist, and ask about any group of people who had less before obtaining a further set of categories: older members of the community, those who owned their own land, younger members of the community who were often recently married, and those who owned less land and often sharecropped.[20] In Isla Talavera, participants were opposed to referring to themselves as 'poor' and argued that they didn't face problems of malnutrition or illness.[21] The facilitators first tried to persuade them that they were talking about poverty in general, but met further resistance. They finally agreed on 'deficient quality of life' but the facilitators mention that the discussion hardly took off. In *Crying Out for Change*, a quote from this group discussion among people who were evidently unwilling to class themselves as 'poor'—'there is no unified community, there is no unity, when they have to speak with authorities, they are afraid'—is labelled as having come from a 'group of poor women'.[22] Another example of labelling the speaker as 'poor' comes from Atucucho, Ecuador:

> In Atucucho, Ecuador, a 23-year old *poor mother* says that the situation of women is difficult because of extremely low wages. Some mothers work as domestic employees for 250 000 sucres per month. You know how much bus fare costs these days; they have little money left for anything else.[23]

The site report reveals that the speaker worked in a community day-care centre, and is interviewed as a person who is capable of presenting an overview of the community.[24] Whether or not she herself would have termed herself 'poor' is another question. The dangers of the blanket application of the category 'poor' to all the people involved in the process are evident. These examples point to the arbitrary and slippery nature of the way in which the category 'poor' is deployed in the global reports. The politics of representing the heterogeneous people involved in this exercise as 'the poor' comes into particularly sharp relief in relation to the core policy arguments that *Crying Out for Change* served to advance: affirmation of the bank's neoliberal governance prescriptions.

'The poor' as victims of the state

The analysis of the 'Consultations of the Poor' evades discussion of positional power and differentiation among those who are labelled 'the poor. Yet when their voices speak of the state, there is no such ambiguity. One particular quote, from a discussion group in Esmeraldas, Ecuador

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appears to have captured the imaginations of the writers of the WDR as well as of *Crying Out for Change*:

> Eight women and two men in a discussion group in Esmeraldas, Ecuador describe their helplessness in the face of abuse and unfair treatment by the mayor and municipal staff: 'Some receive us, others don't. It's awful...They are abusive...They treat one almost like a dog...The municipality only serves the high-society ones...The mayor even slapped a woman who asked for help.[25]

The emphasis in the global narrative is on 'good governance'. Any evidence of bad government becomes grist to a narrative in which the state appears as profoundly hostile to the poor, either because of active abuse or by neglecting their needs. In line with this narrative, it is notable that aspects of the discussion that the quote above is drawn from simply disappear. Closer inspection of the site reports reveals that this same group of people viewed the government as potentially capable of giving the necessary external help in terms of the infrastructure of the community and, when discussing the problems of the community, stated that all these problems need the support of the municipality in order to be resolved.[26]

Another example comes from a women's discussion in La Matanza, Argentina that is cited in *Crying Out for Change*:

> It [local government] is non-existent...They do not give you any re-sults...They must get involved in areas they rule; they must look at the small part of Argentina under their scope and fulfil their role, and they don't do it.[27]

There is no mention of the fact that participants in the same discussion group also mentioned that the government is the place to run to for support, especially as the last resort.[28] Nor do the affirmations of the role of government in supporting the poor that appear in the National Synthesis Reports from this region find their way into the global synthesis. The National Synthesis Report for Brazil notes, for example: 'despite the pervasive criticism of government in the groups, many governmental institutions were highly ranked in terms of their role in assisting people in times of crises'.[29]

Indeed, for all the claims that were subsequently made about the poor calling for 'community-driven' programmes—presumably of the kind that the Bank had been promoting and continued to promote with some vigour in the years to follow, despite a devastating critique of their Community-Driven Development programme by poverty experts Robert Chambers and Norman Uphoff in an evaluation for the Bank's own Operations Evaluation Department[30]—site-level and National Synthesis Reports for this region suggest a rather different story. In Brazil:

> Overall the groups showed a surprising disbelief in their capacity to solve problems by themselves. In a very few cases, the groups agreed that the problem being discussed could be solved by the community without

external assistance...A number of important findings on the role of institutions on people's life [sic] were drawn from the site reports. The institutions listed were very heterogeneous in nature but surprisingly there was a prevalence of governmental institutions vis-à-vis non-governmental or market ones.[31]

In Argentina, the National Synthesis Report notes, in the section 'Solving the Problems':

> With relation to who is responsible for solving the problems of the community, most of the groups attribute it to the Government. The most common answer was: 'If the Government doesn't solve this, who is going to solve it?', referring to their own Government, unemployment, health services, the Police, prices. In most of the groups, Government–Community partnerships arose as the way to solve some problems related to addictions, health, malnutrition, housing, family violence, filthiness, empty plots of land, discrimination, thefts, fights, rapes, places for the children, fear, lack of culture, family planning. Also, although in connection with few problems, they decided that the community itself was able to address them—family problems, abandonment and negligence, suicide, relationship problems with their neighbours, lack of solidarity.[32]

As in Brazil, state-administered social policies were seen by respondents as an important part of the solution: 'The problems raised are perceived as mainly structural, which can only be solved through external support (Government) by implementing social and economic policies that will help to overcome this Poverty [sic] situation'.[33] And in Ecuador, amid complaints about the government being slow to respond and ignoring petitions, workshop participants are reported in the Ecuador National Synthesis Report as saying: 'The Municipality cares for the interest of the population', 'It is at least doing something to benefit the people'. 'Municipalities help our people who really need it. It is an institution that the poor need for economic support.'[34] Indeed, the very fact that those interviewed so often recounted terrible experiences of state institutions might be interpreted as *confirming* the importance that these institutions have in their day-to-day lives.

The quotes that are selected to speak about governmental institutions affirm the neoliberal arguments that the bank has consistently promoted. It is easy indeed to fall into line with the implied conclusion that poor people regard the government as useless and that their communal institutions are those that better serve their everyday needs. What the synthesis doesn't convey is the ambivalence that emerges in some of the site reports about the leadership of community associations, as in the case of Nuevas Brisas del Mar, Ecuador—from which a quote appears in *Crying Out for Change*. In it a woman mentions a lack of unity in the community and points out that unity is needed before they can approach the municipality to gain support. The quote is editorialised: 'Poverty of time, political indifference and lack of unity present further obstacles to organizing at the local level'.[35] Yet there is little in the site report to suggest this conclusion: rather, it suggests that people had

mixed attitudes toward the current leadership of the community. From this evidence, it seems to be politics itself rather than political indifference that is at work.

Whose solutions?

The overall narrative of *Crying Out for Change* channels the support of 'the poor' to the World Bank's neoliberal mission. There is little ambiguity about what the Bank has in mind: 'most important is to streamline and "rightsize" public administrative entities and privatise public enterprises and other operational public programs.'[36] Little mention is made in the WDR or *Crying Out for Change* of the effects of these kinds of reforms on 'the poor'. Yet these are more than evident. For example, the Ecuador National Synthesis report reports voices from a workshop:

> The government raised the price of gasoline and now it costs us more to transport and we no longer make a profit. We don't make enough money . . . the currency is worth less . . . Poverty affects us because of the foreign debt. [37]

> We don't have money to buy fertilizer, seeds, everything is in dollars . . . we don't have anything to eat . . . The Government should reconsider and not raise so much the price [of] basic commodities . . . The Government should have more compassion for the poor and not increase the price of electricity . . . They should pay the teachers to come teach. They should give the poor jobs.[38]

Indeed, the Ecuador National Synthesis Report begins by contextualising the study in a setting 'sunk in a deep economic crisis where the policies of adjustment had been the most frequent solution'. The report went on to give an account of drastic measures taken by the president, including the urgent pursuit in the National Congress of bills seeking privatisation of state enterprises. 'These actions', the report goes on, 'have had serious effects not just on the economic standing of all Ecuadorians but also on the political instability and on the loss of credibility of democratic and even financial institutions'.[39] These are also, unmistakeably, the very neoliberal policies so forcefully advocated by the 'Listening Bank'.

It is this kind of contextualisation that is most strikingly absent from the homogenising narrative of the global synthesis, and the disembodied quotes that are scattered throughout the WDR. It becomes erased in the labelling of all of those who participated in these exercises as 'the poor'. This has two effects. The first is of reinstating the legitimacy of an 'us' who read what 'they' have to tell us—and who are then imbued with the moral authority of being the ones who need to respond, to give 'them' what 'they' are asking for. The second is the dislocation of the poor from the political economies in which they are located. The poor come to be represented within the global narrative not just as victims, but also as those charged with their own salvation.

Whether represented as abject, inert, lacking in agency, needing our compassion and attention, or as heroic survivors whose struggles for

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self-improvement merit our admiring support, these representations of 'the poor' echo others in contemporary mainstream development discourse. The poor appear within them as responsible for their condition, living out a destiny that it is up to them to better—through survivalist self-help and micro-enterprise,[40] or by forming 'organizations of the poor' that can better provide for their needs because they embody all that the 'social capital' and 'civil society' discourses would have us believe.[41]

Contests over the normative frame through which these representations come to be read and interpreted are clearly at play in the WDR itself, with a tension between those who argue for pro-poor coalitions between poor people, their organisations and the public sector, and those who advocate cutting back the state even further. Stripped of context, editorialised, and with significant elements of the conversation missing from the frame, voices can be levered in support of either narrative. The emphasis in both is on poor people taking responsibility for their condition and taking on the task of helping themselves to survive: and in both, 'social capital' and 'empowerment' become the panacea. Both deflect attention from the structural conditions—at the micro or macro levels—that produce and sustain poverty. Indeed, as Mick Moore points out, the notion of 'empowerment' that is deployed in the WDR is insistently localised: either in the individual or in small-scale, self-help groups that enable people to cope with their poverty rather than mobilise to transform the structures that keep them poor.[42]

Conclusion

Reading through the site and national synthesis reports, a veritable cacophony of views, experiences and perspectives emerges. *Crying Out for Change* captures these voices in a residual category, 'the poor'. The voices are editorialised so as to tune out any discordant sounds and present an overarching narrative that is in perfect harmony with the World Bank's own policies: their 'cries for change' are harnessed to support a particular set of prescriptions. In order to obtain quotes that could pack a neoliberal punch, *Crying Out for Change* obscures other linkages, other perspectives, other parts of the conversation that provide a less convenient justification for the overall narrative.

In the discussions on institutions in *Crying Out for Change*, we hear one side of the story: that the state is failing to provide decently and equitably to people who are poor. What we do not hear is the voices who express their desire for a state that would see them as citizens, a state that would be their safety net, that would nurture and support them. The narrative speaks to a set of presuppositions about how development might improve the lives of those living in poverty, at the same time as providing justification for precisely the kinds of interventions that the Bank has been prescribing. By selecting 'typical' quotes from individual sites to represent the whole site and failing to explore dynamics *within* each site, and by collating these quotes to confirm a core narrative storyline, the syntheses work to reinforce a set of embedded presuppositions about desirable change. Site reports reveal a much

less unified picture, one marked by a diversity of perspectives and, in some cases, by considerable disagreement. Reducing this diversity of perspectives to a single, consensual narrative is an interpretive act that, because of the highly contested nature of the issues with which the reports deal, becomes explicitly political.

Writing about participation at the end of a decade in which the label 'the poor' began to be popularised in development, Cohen and Uphoff contend:

> Their [the rural poor] being considered as a group is not, indeed, something they would themselves be likely to suggest. There are significant differences in occupation, location, land tenure status, sex, caste, religion or tribe which are related in different ways to their poverty. To talk about 'the participation of the rural poor' is to compound one complex and ambiguous term with another, even more complicated and amorphous.[43]

The power effects of using a term like 'the poor' begs further reflection. One of these effects is to domesticate a diversity of people into a category that holds within it a normative appeal for intervention on their behalf. Not only, as Pithouse points out, are the 'they' who are 'the poor', not the 'us' who read such accounts and identify ourselves with the mission of development.[44] 'They' are a residual category formed precisely of that which 'we' are not. The deployment of the term 'the poor' works to dissociate those engaged in 'poverty reduction' efforts from addressing the underlying structural issues that produce poverty; targeting 'the poor' exacerbates this distancing and dissociation, deflecting attention from the poverty-producing role of institutions like the World Bank and the Western governments that resource its operations.

What the *Consultations* exercise illustrates is that no methodology can be neutral to the relations of power that shape the ways in which 'results' come to be framed and conveyed. This is as true of macroeconomic analysis as of micro-ethnographic studies, yet is a truth concealed by the residual positivism that characterises the vast bulk of mainstream development research. Robin Broad's analysis of techniques used by the Bank to shore up the neoliberal paradigm that its policies promote is a reminder that research is never value neutral.[45]

The representations of the 'voices of the poor' that emerged from this process are arguably not only artefacts of the methods that were used, but also of the dispositions of those doing the interpretive work. Other interpreters might take quite different findings from these data. Our reading of the site reports reveals a multiplicity of sites of resistance, from the group of women who refused to be labelled 'poor', to the way the authors of one of the national synthesis reports contextualised their findings in terms that were clearly critical of the macroeconomic prescriptions of the Bank. It also suggests that other stories might be told using this 'evidence', read through other frames of reference—stories that suggest altogether different policy framings. The analysis in this article provides further evidence of what Robin Broad has called 'the art of paradigm maintenance':[46] the way in which the

Bank manipulates evidence to produce and affirm a narrative that lends support for neoliberal policies and interventions as it builds its 'knowledge empire'.[47]

For all Wolfensohn's fine words about wanting to understand the hopes, desires and realities of 'poor people', the 'Consultations with the Poor' exercise simply provided further sustenance for the Bank's neoliberal prescriptions—and precious little real opportunity for the kind of listening and engagement that was promised. These 'voices' are still very much part of the ether, regularly invoked in conversations and justifications, the stuff of colourful posters in Northern development agencies' offices and of snatch-quotes in reports. In that respect this exercise was phenomenally effective. But what it lays bare is the continuing gulf between the hubristic self-representation of the development industry as the champion of 'poor people' and the very real hardships, injustices and inequalities that were produced by the policy prescriptions that their 'voices' were used to endorse.

Notes

 1 This was published as D. Narayan, R. Chambers, M. Shah and P. Petesch, *Crying Out for Change*, Oxford: Oxford University Press/World Bank, 2000, the second in a three volume series. The first volume in the series, D. Narayan with R. Patel, K. Schafft, A. Rademacher, S. Koch-Schulte, *Voices of the Poor: Can Anyone Hear Us?*, Oxford: Oxford University Press/World Bank, 2000, culled a further 40 000 'voices' from the rather uneven but plentiful selection of Participatory Poverty Assessment reports and other such studies amassed by the Bank.
 2 Reproduced on the flyleaf of Narayan *et al*, *Voices of the Poor: Can Anyone Hear Us?*.
 3 Several of these questions have been raised by those involved in this exercise, including Robert Chambers. See R Chambers, 'Power, knowledge and policy influence: reflections on an experience', in K Brock & R McGee (eds), *Knowing Poverty: Critical Reflections on Participatory Research and Policy*, London: Earthscan, 2002; and R Chambers, 'The World Development Report: concepts, content and a Chapter 12', *Journal of International Development*, 13(5), 2001, pp 299–306. See also A Rademacher & R Patel, 'Retelling worlds of poverty: reflections on transforming participatory research for a global narrative', in Brock & McGee, *Knowing Poverty*; and Brock & McGee, *Knowing Poverty*.
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