United Nations University

WIDER

World Institute for Development Economics Research

Research Paper No. 2004/57

Participatory Approaches and the Measurement of Human Well-being

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August 2004

Abstract

This paper considers the use of participatory methods in international development research, and asks what contribution these can make to the definition and measurement of well-being. It draws on general lessons arising from the project level, two larger-scale policy research processes sponsored by the World Bank, and the experience of quality of life studies. It also considers emerging experiments with using participatory methods to generate quantitative data. The paper closes by assessing the future trajectory of participatory approaches in well-being research, and reflects on some dilemmas regarding the use of participatory data on well-being in the policymaking process.

Keywords: participation, appraisal, methodology

JEL classification: I32, D63, R29

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This study has been prepared within the UNU-WIDER project on Social Development Indicators (Measuring Human Well-being) directed by Professor Mark McGillivray.

UNU-WIDER acknowledges the financial contributions to the 2002-2003 research programme by the governments of Denmark (Royal Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Finland (Ministry for Foreign Affairs), Norway (Royal Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Sweden (Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency—Sida) and the United Kingdom (Department for International Development).

ISSN 1810-2611 ISBN 92-9190-646-8 (internet version)

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to give special thanks to Robert Chambers (IDS Sussex) for his comments and examples related to participatory approaches to defining poverty and well-being, Laura Camfield (WeD Bath) for her guidance on quality of life research, and Ian Gough (WeD Bath) for his perceptive comments

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Camera-ready typescript prepared by Liisa Roponen at UNU-WIDER
Printed at UNU-WIDER, Helsinki

1 Introduction

'We are all democrats now,' wrote John Dunn ironically in his 1979 review of *Western Political Theory* (Dunn 1979). Twenty-five years on, democracy has acquired the status of a sacred totem, which commands obeisance far beyond the arena of formal politics. Rites and symbolic acts of participation have accordingly been 'mainstreamed' across a remarkable range of institutions, from neighbourhood school boards to multilateral agencies. Though very different in their form and practice, the promise is similar. Incorporating participation will mean that processes of policymaking, administration and research become more inclusive, more responsive, more equitable, and so represent more fully the interests of 'the people' they claim to serve.

This paper considers one aspect of these dynamics, the use of participatory methods in international development research, and asks what contribution these can make to the measurement of well-being. We begin by charting the terrain, setting out very briefly some main dimensions of well-being and participation, and noting some connections between them. We then identify the two main issues that the paper will consider: the contribution of participatory methods to the *definition* of well-being on the one hand, and its *measurement* on the other. Discussion of each of these issues concerns not only *technical*, but also *political* questions, regarding how participatory methods are placed within the broader context of institutions and policy processes. In the next section we introduce some of the main techniques and principles of participatory research in international development. The main body of the paper then considers how these have been used in practice to define and assess poverty and well-being. This draws on general lessons arising from the practice of participatory research at project level, and on the experience of two larger-scale policy research processes sponsored by the World Bank. These are the participatory poverty assessments (PPAs), undertaken to counter criticisms of the narrowly economic focus of the poverty assessments; and the *Voices of the Poor* study (Narayan *et al.* 2000) commissioned as a background for the *World Development Report* of 2000/01.[1] Since measurement of well-being has been most rigorously pursued through quality of life research,[2] we also consider the role that participatory approaches have played in this. We then reflect on Kanbur's (2002) discussion of the potential for complementarity between qualitative and quantitative methods in poverty appraisal, and the emerging experiments with 'participatory numbers': using participatory methods to generate quantitative data. Bringing this review of experience to a close, we consider some more general issues concerning the validity and limitations of participatory methods. In the final section we assess the future trajectory of participatory approaches in well-being research, and reflect on some of the dilemmas regarding the use of participatory data in the policymaking process.

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1 The research study itself was entitled 'Consultations with the Poor'. However, since the major publication of its findings appeared under the title *Voices of the Poor*, we use this term throughout for the sake of clarity.

2 This refers to the defining and measuring of subjective and objective well-being by two separate groups of researchers: economists, psychologists and sociologists from the social indicators movement, and collaborations between clinicians and psychologists.

2 Well-being and participatory research: some interconnections

The concepts of well-being and participation share an obvious similarity: they are both highly contested, internally diverse umbrella terms. This makes the issue of measurement a somewhat fraught one! They also share the quality of being 'hurrah' words: they are good things, engendering a warm glow and drawing people to them.[3] For participation, the reason for this lies in its association with the sacred value of democracy. In the case of well-being, it is clearly founded in the positive 'well' qualifier it contains. This can be something of a problem in the context of international development research where many people are experiencing serious deprivation. Early responses in Ethiopia to research on well-being thus included the query: if the study was limited to 'well-being' then who was going to be looking at everyone else? The *Voices of the Poor* study addressed this issue by exploring together concepts of both well-being and ill-being (Narayan *et al.* 2000).

Complicating the issue still further, the relationship between well-being and participation is not simply an external one of two entirely separate, independently defined entities. Rather, there exists already an internal relation between the two concepts. Inherent in the concept and practice of participatory research is the assumption that participation will enhance well-being, both as a good in itself, and as the means for the better representation of other interests. Similarly, people's capacity to participate has long been a critical variable in discussions of poverty (Townsend 1979), human need (Doyal and Gough 1991), human development (Sen 1999), and well-being (Nussbaum 2000). Indeed the extent of participation and responsiveness to 'other' voices has featured as one of the criteria for judging the legitimacy of a paradigm of well-being. In terms of the philosophy of well-being, this is particularly evident in discussion of Martha Nussbaum's work. In empirical studies, it is perhaps most striking in the work of health policy and social indicators researchers on quality of life (for example, Cummins 1996; Hagerty *et al.* 2001; Michalos 1997; Veenhoven 2000). The formation of the World Health Organization's quality of life instrument, the WHOQOL, for example, involved the extensive use of focus groups reflecting different national contexts and sees its cross-cultural legitimacy as significantly founded in its participatory approach (Camfield and Skevington 2003).

Well-being is a complex notion with many different dimensions whose definition is disputed. The 'well' qualifier makes the concept irreducibly normative, concerned with values and assessment. Its focus on 'being' suggests attention to states; not only of body and material endowments, but also of mind and subjective perceptions. In order to understand these, however, it is necessary to explore the processes through which both 'subjective' states of mind and 'objective' endowments have arisen and to which they in turn give rise. This introduces a third, social or process dimension, which shows how subjective perceptions and objective welfare outcomes are constituted through social interaction and cultural meanings (McGregor and Kebede 2003). This paper therefore considers the potential of participatory methods for exploring each of three levels of observation. The first is what (different) people have or don't have (material and human resources, social relationships). The second is what people do, or don't, or cannot do with these resources, and why (social or cultural action). The third is how people judge,

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3 This point was originally made in relation to participation by Judith Turbyne (1992).

assess, and feel about these things; how they make or cannot make sense of what happens (meaning).[4]

Like well-being, participation also has many aspects and generates many controversies, both in terms of the range of practices which go under that name, and in the objectives they are hoped to achieve. In this paper we aim to focus primarily on the use of participatory *research* methods for assessing poverty and well-being, rather than the action-related dimensions of appraisal, planning and social mobilization. As will become clear, however, this is a somewhat difficult line to hold, since a practical orientation towards making a difference through action has been a primary and abiding characteristic of participatory research.

The diversity and multiple objectives which participation may serve is well illustrated within one of the most influential traditions of participatory poverty research, the participatory rural appraisal (PRA) approaches which emerged in the late 1980s and 1990s.[5] On the one hand PRA traces its ancestry to innovative methods developed and used by community organizers in rural areas across the world, as they sought to engage communities in reflecting on their situations in order to design strategies for change. On the other hand, it also derives from the techniques of 'rapid rural appraisal' (RRA), developed in the late 1970s and 1980s by researchers working as consultants in international development, who had become frustrated with expensive and unwieldy household surveys, and sought quicker and more cost effective techniques. A further dimension, mixing democratic and efficiency motivations, concerned suspicions of the bias and ignorance of highly paid outside 'experts'. This coincided with recognition in the development industry more generally that the failure to consult local people or generate a sense of ownership amongst them had resulted in a plethora of high cost inappropriate technologies and ineffective programmes (Burkey 1993). Since the people living within a situation could plausibly be expected to have a better understanding of the many issues facing them than outside experts 'bussed in' for a few days or weeks, it made sense to elicit and employ this 'local knowledge'. Seeking such knowledge in turn required a different range of research techniques from those conventionally used in 'scientific' approaches. Last but not least, was a political dimension. For community organizers working within a Freirean paradigm of conscientization,[6] participatory

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4 This conceptual framework is taken from the approach to well-being developed by the ESRC Research Group on Well-being in Developing Countries (WeD) at the University of Bath. An interdisciplinary study with country teams in Peru, Ethiopia, Thailand and Bangladesh, this explores the social and cultural construction of well-being through a major programme of comparative empirical research. See www.welldev.org.uk.

5 The evolution and spread of PRA, often associated with the work of Robert Chambers at IDS Sussex, can be more accurately traced to a global network of practitioners not only at IDS but at the International Institute of Environment and Development (IIED) and at a host of innovative institutions in the global south. An overview of the evolution and spread of PRA, including critical reflections by practitioners, can be found in the *Pathways to Participation* reports cited later in this paper (Cornwall and Pratt 2001, and in Chambers 1997).

6 Paulo Freire (1970) was a Brazilian educator whose methods of adult literacy had a profound, world wide influence on community development and social change strategies. Freire's 'pedagogy of the oppressed' uses participatory research methods to enable poor people to gain awareness, analyse their reality and take steps to address the causes of their poverty. Freire's methods shaped a continuing tradition of participatory action research (PAR), often seen as more empowering and less extractive than participatory research used to generate data for analysis and action by outsiders.

research was seen as a means to empower disadvantaged people through giving them tools of analysis and awareness. Advocates of PRA, similarly, saw these methods as a means to give more voice to the intended 'beneficiaries' of development programmes, and so greater opportunity to shape what is done in their name. This 'democratic' promise of participatory approaches is clearly of prime significance to their present incorporation within larger-scale processes of policymaking such as participatory poverty assessments (PPAs) and poverty reduction strategy papers (PRSPs). Inevitably, of course, the political aspect also has a shadow side. As many critiques have pointed out, participatory methodologies can also be used to obscure differences within target communities, legitimize extractive and exploitative processes of information gathering, impose external agendas, and contain or co-opt potential popular resistance.

From this brief review, it is clear that there are two distinct but related contributions that a participatory approach may make to the understanding and measurement of well-being. In the first place, the key promise of participatory methodologies is that they are 'experience-near' in terms of their participant/respondents: they are able to reflect more closely the knowledge and worldview of people themselves than more formal, abstract, or 'scientific' approaches. Along with other hermeneutic social science approaches, participatory methods have thus contributed to the much wider recognition of contextual, subjective and non-material dimensions of human experience, and of the complex dynamics and causalities behind poverty and well-being. Current understandings of well-being thus already in part reflect the influence of participatory research. This is evident, for example, in livelihoods analyses, which built substantially on RRA-style innovations in the analysis of agro-ecosystems and households' resource portfolios. At their best these stress not only the diversity of livelihoods but also the importance of appreciating the dynamic interaction within and between different aspects of ecological, social and political systems. This process continues, as the focus of development research expands from aspects of poverty and livelihoods to broader dimensions of ill-being and well-being, as was the case in both the PPAs and the *Voices of the Poor* study. Projecting this trend forward, participatory approaches therefore have clear potential to contribute to 'scoping' the concept and meaning of well-being, and ensuring in particular that people's own perceptions of well-being and the dimensions they comprise are properly understood. This is not as straightforward a process as it might at first appear. As we consider below, participatory approaches, just like other more conventional research, carry with them baggage of assumptions and methods, which can act as a filter on genuinely alternative perspectives. They are also critically affected by the broader political and institutional contexts in which they are undertaken.

The second potential contribution of participatory methods concerns the measurement of well-being. The issue of measurement has been an area of controversy since the early days of RRA. As Andrea Cornwall describes it, two principles were adopted. These were ' "optimum ignorance" (find out as much as you need to know now) and "appropriate imprecision" (there is no need to know everything exactly)' (Cornwall 2000: para 4.1). While perhaps raising fearsome spectres for convention-bound quantitative economists, these could of course simply be seen as sensible guidelines for any data collection process which does not want to be burdened with such a weight of information that it is unmanageable to analyse. For well-being as for more conventional investigations of poverty, measurement issues concern both the *distribution* of well-being across a population and the *extent* of well-being enjoyed by a particular individual, household, or community. The much more inclusive character of well-being than poverty and especially its less tangible dimensions, however, make such

measurement a complicated issue. Assuming the three-fold distinction into subjective, objective and interactive or process dimensions of well-being suggested above, there are clearly questions to be asked as to *which aspects* of these are best explored by participatory methods as well as *how* these may be pursued. Reflecting on practice to date as well as possible future directions, may yield rather surprising findings. Prima facie, for example, research into subjective perceptions might be thought to lend itself most easily to qualitative analysis. In fact, however, this is the area in which to date participatory methods have been used to produce the most rigorously quantitative data, through the generation of numerical profiles reflecting people's self-assessed quality of life.

Finally, there may be a further aspect which should be present in poverty analyses but is often overlooked. This concerns the question of *how* people experience well-being—the analysis not of subjective components of well-being, but the subjective, socially and culturally constructed experience of well-being as a whole. Such questions may not easily lend themselves to incorporation within policy perspectives, but are nonetheless critical to the promise of participatory approaches genuinely to reflect people's own values and orientations. One may be able, for example, to get people to participate in generating numerical values to represent their assessments of the relative importance of different aspects of their quality of life. This does not, however, necessarily mean that this rather abstract exercise reflects the ways that people live their lives, or captures the underlying rhythms within which they take action and understand the meaning of their experience overall.

3 Participatory methods: what are they?

Participatory research methods involve a wide range of tools, techniques and processes, which are often applied in a customized mix and sequence that is iterative and complementary in order to 'triangulate' perspectives and to build progressively from one stage of inquiry to the next (cf. Pretty *et al.* 1995). Some of these techniques are common to other social science methods, such as small group discussions and in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Others are more visual and interactive, involving the creation of tangible maps, matrices and lists which can in turn be analysed using visual methods of scoring, and ranking using tokens of some kind as counters. These visual and interactive techniques often involve the analysis of trends or seasonal cycles using timelines and calendars, or diagrams which can be used to explore the flow of causes, symptoms and impacts. The methods may be repeated with different individuals or subgroups in order to draw out and then discuss differences in perspective within communities, for example by age, gender, ethnicity, occupation, or social status. Table 1 gives a list of the principal tools and methods used in the World Bank sponsored participatory research projects drawn on in this paper.

The genesis of these methods lies mostly in small-scale programmes of non-governmental and community-based development organizations and the action of researchers and social scientists working alongside them. 'Well-being ranking', for example, evolved from the earlier practice of 'wealth ranking,' which drew on work in social anthropology and was developed in PRA. 'Wealth ranking' involves sorting

Table 1
Principal methods used in PPAs and the *Voices of the Poor* study

Participatory poverty assessments	*Voices of the Poor*
Focus groups	Focus groups
Preference ranking or scoring	Small group discussions
Wealth or well-being ranking	Well-being ranking
Charts indicating cyclical change	Listing
Trend analysis	Scoring
Causal flow diagrams	Cause-impact analysis
Participatory mapping	Trend analysis
Institutional diagramming	In-depth interviews with individuals or households
Drawings – pictorial representations	
Source: Norton *et al*. (2001: 33)	Source: Narayan *et al.* (2000: 307-13)

households—usually depicted on cards—into different categories, and in the process generating a range of locally-defined criteria for wealth. The concern here is with capturing significant differences in levels of economic prosperity, not to produce exact calculations of income. While criteria typically include income, therefore, they also go beyond this, but in most cases are limited to ownership of or access to tangible assets or resources.[7]

The kinds of measures generated in this process are well illustrated in Table 2. This shows the classification of five levels of wealth produced in a village in South Africa. The levels of poverty in Table 2 were defined by local people for the purposes of identifying the poorest families to join a micro-credit programme. The criteria were generated during a ranking process by small 'reference groups' of villagers, while sorting the households into levels. Up to four reference groups sorted the same households to ensure consistency of results and to identify outliers. Although the criteria used to define the levels and to rank the households varied from one exercise, section or village to another, the levels of poverty and wealth turned out to be remarkably consistent and comparable from one area to the next, even in very large villages. The numerical data generated by this process proved to be highly accurate and commensurable in identifying the poorest families over populations numbering in the thousands (Simanowitz 2000). The results from participatory wealth ranking exercises in 8 villages were used to produce a quantitative household economic status index, in which participants' criteria were used to define the poverty lines (Hargreaves 2004).

While it is tempting to focus on its distinctive methods and techniques, the essence of participatory research—and, as we review later, the focus of the most profound criticisms of it—lies not in these, but rather the commitment to certain principles which guide the conduct of the research. These include the following. The primary principle is

7 For more detail see Pretty *et al*. (1995) and Simanowitz (1999).

Table 2
Characteristics of different wealth groups identified in Sofaya, South Africa

Poorest

- single parent unemployed, or two parents both unemployed
- many children
- being unmarried and having no family to assist
- dependent on temporary jobs
- no means of provision except by begging
- widows with lots of children
- insufficient and poor quality food; sometimes have to beg food
- no proper place to sleep; poor quality housing
- orphans with no parents
- inability to educate children
- no clothes; almost never buy
- no assets

Poor

- temporary jobs (e.g., farm labourers)
- have some food, but struggle
- working widows and pensioners with many children
- parents dependent on working children who also have their own families in the same household sharing resources
- working on agriculture scheme
- lots of children
- no pension/ pensioners with lots of children
- unmarried
- have some house (though not good); some made of mud bricks and show cracks
- can provide something from their temporary job

Quite poor

- earns enough to cope daily—mostly temporary work/ self-employed
- those with smaller number of children to look after
- pensioners with less children
- widows with pensions from late husbands
- have sleeping place
- unmarried
- payouts from old jobs
- children attend school irregularly
- able to buy enough food

OK

- pensioners with only themselves to look after
- few children
- good supply of food
- families where at least one parent has a permanent job
- children attend school regularly
- good house
- more than enough food

Note: The fact that a pensioner who supports few or no people is considered moderately well off should give information about absolute levels of poverty and allow comparison with national figures.

Wealthy

- professionals and business owners
- good money to adequately supply their family
- children attend school properly
- migrant labourers
- electricity in the house
- owning a television
- smaller families
- owning a car/gun
- eating bread with margarine
- children nicely clothed
- children attending tertiary education
- company pensions
- food in abundance
- excellent housing

Source: Simanowitz (2000)

that researchers should act as facilitators, guarding against their own biases and seeking to minimize any power differentials between themselves and the respondents, so as to enable local knowledge and perspectives to emerge. Reflecting this, the research design should be flexible, able to respond to changing contexts and emergent findings as these arise. This does not mean that a larger research design and guidelines cannot be in place, particularly if there is a need for comparability. But flexibility is encouraged in the way that methods are applied and sequenced in order to give maximum scope for local perceptions and analysis to emerge. A third principle is to use methods which are visual and interactive, to allow participants of all backgrounds and levels of education to engage in both generating and analysing data. Many PRA methods were developed specifically for use with people with mixed or low levels of literacy. This relates to a fourth principle, which is that participants should be involved in the process of analysis, not just in the collection of data. This does not necessarily preclude further analysis by external researchers, nor indeed the use of participatory methods at some stages and more conventional methods at others.

These inclusive methods of analysis, often using forms of group dialogue and deliberation, are an important aspect of the power of these approaches in identifying people's own perspectives, knowledge, values, categories, definitions and priorities. In principle at least, the process is as important as the outcome. The perspectives that emerge should not simply reflect aggregations of individual or household responses, but rather the shared understandings or differences among the people and groups involved, which have been identified through dialogue and debate. The researchers' skill in facilitating the interaction involved in this process is critical. Such an approach clearly makes it difficult to sustain the conventional separation between 'data' such as measures and indicators and the 'methods' used to generatethem. While this relationship is particularly evident in the case of participatory research, critical reflection in the sociology of science suggests that this is a feature of research more widely. The separation of theory, methods and data is in fact far harder to sustain than has typically been assumed, even within the most conventional of natural science contexts (for example, Knorr-Cetina and Mulkay 1993).

4 Participatory methods and defining well-being

As noted above, perhaps the most obvious contribution of participatory research to the understanding of well-being is in its capacity to draw out culture, location and social group-specific understandings of the dimensions of well-being. A review of experiences with PRA methodologies in eight countries thus notes the value of these methods in identifying 'improved quality of life according to local standards' (Cornwall and Pratt 2002, 2003) and in 'capturing local perspectives' (Cornwall, Musyoki and Pratt 2001: 6). In Mexico, for example, locally defined indicators for 'improved quality of life' ranged from jobs, income, health and housing to gender relations, self-esteem and reaffirmation of cultural identities (Garcia and Way 2003: 30). Karen Brock's (1999) review of the micro-level participatory research being done by NGOs and research institutes during the 1990s, documents in more detail the diverse and context-specific views of poor people, finding that these could indeed be identified and measured, even if not easily aggregated.[8] Drawing on qualitative data from 58 sources in 12 countries,

[8] Brock's study was undertaken as part of the 'Voices of the Poor' project. This was a study carried out by the World Bank in 23 countries using participatory and qualitative methods to identify poor

she notes the frequency with which different indicators were mentioned. Concerning the objective endowments of material resources and social relationships, certain broad indicators emerged time and again, with marked differences for men and women and for people living in rural and urban areas:

> Respondents in rural areas placed a strong emphasis on food security in their definitions of poverty, ill-being and vulnerability, as well as lack of work, money and assets. They also emphasized the vulnerability of particular groups within the community: the old, the disabled, female-headed households and those living alone, isolated from social networks. The definitions of those in an urban setting place far more emphasis on the immediate living environment: crowded and unsanitary housing, lack of access to water, dirty and dangerous streets and violence both within and outside the household (Brock 1999: 9).

Similar patterns are evident in the World Bank sponsored PPAs (Brock and McGee 2002: 3). Echoing earlier livelihoods analyses, these show the importance of time and seasonality, differences by gender, the value of safety-nets to tide over bad times and the value to the poor of multiple sources of food and income (IDS 1996: 3, summarized in McGee and Norton 2000: 28).

The importance of social processes and interaction to people's experience of well-being also emerges from these studies. These include the ways in which social factors 'shape people's experiences of poverty and determine their priorities'; poor people's own explanations of causes, and the 'dynamics of deprivation at levels other than the household' (Robb 1999: 22-4, cited in McGee and Norton 2000: 28-32). Brock's study also sheds light on connections between social processes and interactions and people's subjective experiences, particularly as these concern issues of power and powerlessness.

> The disaggregated findings clearly demonstrate that different kinds of poor people experience their lives in very different ways, and that relationships of power are often a crucial component in understanding the dynamics of poverty and ill-being (Brock 1999: 1).

The mix of the three dimensions of 'objective' endowments, social interaction and subjective experience is also reflected in the 'Voices' project, with the participants themselves drawing attention to the linkages and dynamics of causality between them. The study thus reports that powerlessness has many inter-related dimensions. Some of these relate to livelihoods, food, income and assets, but others are grounded in experiences of social isolation and exclusion, unequal gender relations, physical isolation and vulnerability, and abusive behaviour by the more powerful. They also include the political dimensions of being excluded from or disempowered by institutions or of being only weakly organized as poor people (Narayan *et al*. 2000: 248-50).

Many of these findings were obtained through the aggregation of focus group discussions, a key methodology used in both the PPAs and the 'Voices of the Poor'

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people's own perspectives on their poverty, ill-being, and priorities and to inform the *World Development Report 2000-01* (World Bank 2000). For other outputs see Narayan *et al.* (1999). For a critical reflection, see Chambers (2002).

research. In general, however, there seems to be a trade-off between the scale of research methods and their explanatory power to reveal these more subtle connections. Larger-scale PPAs may miss the 'intangible' dynamics and causes of poverty that ought to be addressed by policy, particularly relations of power, gender and social exclusion. Even when these do surface, evidence of a more complex, dynamic social picture appears to be more problematic for policymakers to respond to (McGee and Norton 2000: 33). Thus while the 'Voices of the Poor' project identified as one of its more important conclusions an 'inter-connected web' of the 'dimensions of powerlessness and ill-being' (Narayan 2000: 249), this finding hardly appeared in the resulting *World Development Report 2000-01* (Chambers 2002: 302). As will be considered further in the concluding section, there are important 'technical' issues here about the relationship between the local and the universal, and the need for recognition of proper distinctions between these, which confound any default assumption that universal models are simply a reflection of the local, 'writ-large'. There are also political issues which concern sensitivity not only to the micro-politics of particular 'community' contexts, but also to the institutional structures, cultures and interests of the development agencies which make use of any data gathered in participatory ways.

Reflecting on such observations has led some to advocate a return to the activist inheritance of PRA, albeit in a new form. This involves a shift away from seeing participatory methods primarily as a source of data and inputs for policy, towards seeing them as vehicles of more direct policy influencing, engagement and advocacy. Norton *et al.* (2001: 11) thus suggest there may be 'second generation' PPAs, the chief contribution of which is to act as catalysts for enhancing participation and voice in policymaking. Such a shift does not deny the unique informative role of participatory methods, but reflects caution regarding the high expectations and misunderstandings about the use of PPAs for more 'objective' monitoring of poverty and well-being:

> PPAs will not produce a precise pseudo-scientific measure of a single indicator… [and] thereby give a comforting sense that things are definitively getting better or worse… PPAs can contribute to monitoring trends in poverty in the following ways: by eliciting people's perceptions of trends in well-being and factors that effect it…; by highlighting significant indicators of well-being which can then be followed by more orthodox survey methods…; [and] by investigating trends in areas which are difficult to monitor through orthodox quantitative methods (Norton *et al.* 2001: 14).

5 Participatory methods and measuring well-being

While participatory research is typically associated with qualitative methods, in fact it can and often does produce quantitative data. There is no simple equivalence between a low tech approach—such as the use of visual methods, with local materials to map out a matrix, rather than a printed questionnaire—and qualitative data. In fact, as is discussed further below, the reverse may be the case, since many hermeneutic, qualitative approaches depend heavily on language and sensitivity not only to *what* is said but the *ways* in which it is said. In practice, both qualitative and quantitative data may be produced at once. A group process, for example, of identifying local problems through a matrix, and then assigning weightings to them, may produce a quantitative outcome in

terms of numerical scores reflecting the significance of different problems to people's welfare. But it may at the same time produce a qualitative output through the discussion that it stimulates, which reveals the processes underlying such problems, and the meanings they have in people's lives.

Regarding the three dimensions of well-being identified above, participatory methods can and have been used to measure both 'objective' endowments and 'subjective' perceptions. It is more difficult to see what measurement and issues of numerical quantification have to offer in understanding the dimension of social processes and interaction. This is true not only of participatory methods, but also of more conventional research approaches.

The strength of a participatory approach is its capacity to reflect local categories of value and assessment. This concerns objective endowments, not only subjective perceptions. The distribution of housing of varying quality, for example, could be assessed by an external researcher. Alternatively, participatory methods could be used to identify what local people regard as the key factors in house quality, and the different social meanings these express. The advantage of the first, more 'objective' approach, is easy comparability across different sites. The advantage of the second is that it works with local categories, which may give a simpler method of classification, and more accurately reflect the particular factors that give housing its social significance as an indicator of well-being. Despite the attraction of 'hard' categories held constant across different contexts, if the research focus is on 'well-being effects', rather than the character of housing per se, it is arguable that in fact the proper factor for comparative analysis are these 'socialized categories', which a participatory approach is better equipped to deliver. Probably the best approach lies in a combination. Initial qualitative and participatory research can identify certain critical factors in local understandings of well-being. Building these into the structure of a household survey enables the questionnaire both to reflect the specific social realities of the communities being researched, and to generate internationally comparable data. This may in turn lay the basis for further, more detailed qualitative and quantitative studies, to explore specific aspects of the well-being matrix in greater depth.

Well-being ranking, which as mentioned above offers an expanded version of the earlier wealth ranking methodology, uses a participatory process to generate and rank criteria which make up 'the good life' and assess how well-being is seen to be distributed within the group (Norton *et al.* 2001).[9] The key issue in terms of measurement then becomes whether the data produced are valid only within that particular context, or whether they can in some way be aggregated with data produced through similar exercises undertaken in different locations. As Laderchi (2001:11) notes, since wealth and well-being rankings typically arrive at some form of ordinal information, their numerical nature is relatively undisputed. Wealth rankings have been found to result in similar patterns as economic surveys (Scoones 1995 in *ibid*) and even to produce greater accuracy than formal surveys, particularly in identifying very poor people for programme benefits (for example, Simanowitz 2000; Barahona and Levy 2003). The degrees of symmetry may also differ with the profile of respondents, with data from

9 Norton *et al.* note that well-being ranking 'can only be used within the limitations of the shared mutual knowledge of the group carrying out the analysis (detailed knowledge is needed to establish the ranking)' (2001:33).

women differing most significantly from the survey data, suggesting the importance of gender as a key variable in both knowledge (for example, of differing income sources) and values (Norton *et al.* 2001). This is consistent with the findings of the 'Voices of the Poor' research (Brock 1999) and with detailed micro studies of household budgeting and markets in other contexts (see, for example, Johnson 2004).

Some studies, however, have raised questions regarding the reliability of quantitative data gathered through PRA compared with that gained through surveys or key informant interviews (for example, Davies, Richards and Cavendish 1999, in Laderchi 2001). While direct comparisons between different pieces of research are often difficult to draw, such asymmetries in findings between PRA and other forms of data collection may lead to better understanding of the conditions in which both are produced, and thus more precise understanding of what is being measured. Laderchi (2001) gives an example of this, as she reports McGee's (2000) discussion of discrepancies between the Ugandan PPA in which poor people recorded a deterioration in well-being and the household survey (UNHS) which showed rising consumption per capita over four subsequent years. In part this reflected the broader focus of the PPA, differences in the time spans considered, and the distinction between the national span of the household survey versus the selection of particular 'representative' districts in the PPA. But it also pointed to the importance in poor people's perceptions of rising expectations and increased market dependence, and the significance of the PPA's disaggregation by region and gender. In general, the discrepancies emerging from the Uganda PPA suggest that a more nuanced and differentiated set of insights may be achieved with participatory approaches.

As mentioned above, the issue of measurement has been addressed most robustly in the area of quality of life research, which seeks to assign a numerical value to people's subjective perceptions, and so enable comparison across contexts. The origins of this research lie on the one hand with the social indicators movement, and on the other in the area of medicine and health, where the information has been sought as a means of testing the comparative utility of different drugs or treatments. While all of the quality of life approaches involve some elements of participation, they differ considerably in the form and level at which this occurs. The WHOQOL project of the World Health Organization (WHO) represents one pole, with a highly structured, relatively bureaucratic approach, backed up by extensive psychometric testing. Focus groups made up of people with a range of professional experience, scientific knowledge and cultural background participated in defining 25 key 'facets' of the six 'domains' (physical, psychological, level of independence, social relationships, environment, and spirituality) identified by the WHO. The measures for overall quality of life and general health perceptions were developed simultaneously in 15 centres, and the core instrument was then translated into different cultural and linguistic contexts through a rigorous iterative process (Camfield and Skevington 2003). The result is a formidable instrument of 200 questions in the full version or 52 in the summary version (WHOQOL BREF) which respondents are encouraged to answer using a five-point scale.[10] This is now being used in more than 50 countries. Some hold that scores from the different domains should be recorded independently, while others advocate amalgamating them all into a single indicator, implying either an equivalence of importance across the different

[10] The WHOQOL also makes available specific modules for different countries, people living with HIV/AIDS, older people and on spirituality and personal beliefs.

domains or a weighting between them. Even if the domains are considered separately, however, the data are rendered comparable across context, and amenable to complex statistical analysis.

An alternative example, from near the opposite pole of maximum flexibility and participation at the level of the individual respondent, is the person generated index or PGI (Ruta *et al.* 1994).[11] In this case the individual respondents themselves specify the areas (or domains) of life that are important to them, and then evaluate their performance with respect to these. Such individualized measures are becoming increasingly influential within medicine because they have high 'face' and 'content' validity and directly address the changes that are important to patients. From the perspective of well-being research, the attraction of this more individualized approach lies in the way it is designed both to identify the value system of individual respondents and to use this system in working with them to gauge their quality of life. While it clearly has much to offer in terms of sensitivity to local culture, conditions, and the social identities of participants, it also gives scope for comparative analysis. One aspect of this would concern the frequency with which different domains are identified, and the range of scores that they attract. The PGI can also be used to yield a single indicator of overall subjective quality of life, defined as 'the extent to which our hopes and ambitions are matched by experience' (Calman 1984). In order to be meaningful, however, it is likely that this figure showing the gap between what people have and what they desire would need to be matched by another, externally defined measure (Camfield, pers. comm). In terms of the measurement of well-being, there is clearly scope to broaden out such an instrument from its particular focus on health, and this is already being developed (Ruta 1998). It could also potentially be used in pre-appraisal or evaluation of development programmes, by identifying the critical areas of people's lives where intervention is required, or showing the perceived impact of an intervention according to a range of locally or personally defined criteria. In an exploratory study considering the scope for developing from these approaches a broader profile for 'development related quality of life', the participants involved in piloting the PGI in Ethiopia 'visibly enjoyed' allocating coins to indicate their priorities and were 'amused and pleased' by the outcome (Bevan, Kebede and Pankhurst 2003).

The logic of this discussion of participatory measurement is the need to move beyond a negatively cathected qualitative/quantitative, or indeed 'participatory/objective' divide and recognize the ways in which different approaches may complement or enable sequentially one another. This view is put forward strongly by Kanbur (2002)[12] reporting on a workshop concerned with methodologies for poverty research. By developing a more nuanced typology of 'qual-quant', and by avoiding the common tendencies to conflate 'methods' with 'data' and 'quantitative' with 'numerical' and so on, participants in this 'q-squared' workshop created a five dimensional spectrum for locating data and methods within the two traditions, shown in Table 3.

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11 This was originally entitled the patient generated index.

12 Kanbur's edited volume presents the contributions made toward a workshop at Cornell in 2001 on 'Qualitative and Quantitative Poverty Appraisal: Complementarities, Tensions and Ways Forward' and is relied upon in this section because, agreeably it 'represents a remarkable statement on the state of the art and debate' (Kanbur 2002).

This typology, and the analyses and discussion that produced it, illuminate three key points about the contribution of participatory methods in measuring well-being. First, by separating data from methods (Booth *et. al.* 1998, cited in Kanbur 2002: 6), we recognize that both traditions can and do produce both kinds of *data*, which Kanbur more helpfully describes as 'numerical' and 'non-numerical'. What differentiates qualitative *methods* is their 'attempt to capture a social phenomenon within its social, economic and cultural context' while quantitative methods seek data 'untainted by the context in which it is described' (*ibid*, cited in Kanbur 2002: 6). This distinction, with some modification, is represented by the spectrum of 'population coverage', ranging from 'specific' to 'general'. Second, there is the question of who is involved in research *design* and in the *collection* of data, captured in the spectrum of 'population involvement' ranging from 'active' (subject-driven) to 'passive' (researcher-driven). Third, there is the process of *analysis* or 'inference methodology' which may be characterized as ranging from 'inductive' to 'deductive'. The latter is positivist and logical, seeking an unbiased process that aims to capture a single objective reality. The former is 'interpretive and constructivist', accepting the possibility of multiple realities and seeking 'to involve many stakeholders and to obtain multiple perspectives on the subject of the research and the meaning of the concepts' (Christiansen 2002: 115).

Table 3
Characteristics of qualitative and quantitative poverty appraisal

1. Type of information on population	Non-numerical to numerical
2. Type of population coverage	Specific to general
3. Type of population involvement	Active to passive
4. Type of inference methodology	Inductive to deductive
5. Type of disciplinary framework	Broad social sciences to neoclassical economics

Source: Kanbur (2002: 1)

Table 4
Indicators used in participatory poverty index, China

Livelihood poverty	Cash flow through the household
	Food insecurity
	Poverty of personal environment, especially shelter
Infrastructure poverty	Potable water
	Isolation / access / all-weather road
	Energy poverty (e.g., no reliable electricity)
Human resource poverty	Women's health (e.g., unable to work)
	Education (drop outs as indicator)

Source: Weldon (2002)

The Q-squared dialogue recognizes the potential for going much further in using participatory methods to generate and process numerical data. Reflecting this, there is a wealth of methodological experimentation occurring in this realm of 'participation and numbers' (Chambers 2003).[13] In some cases, these approaches involve local 'ownership' and participatory analysis of the data, while in others the data are aggregated and processed by outsiders in the same way conventionally-generated quantitative data are treated, including the use of standard statistical methods. Barahona and Levy (2003) give a good example of this from Malawi, and a thorough consideration of some of the methodological issues it raises. There are also new innovations emerging in larger-scale, participatory monitoring of aspects of poverty and ill-being. One is the use of visual diaries by people in more than 2000 villages South India to monitor their experiences of discrimination and abuse.[14] Another is a 'participatory poverty index' created for use in poverty alleviation planning in rural China. This index has recently been adopted by the Chinese government for use in nearly 600 of the country's poorest counties as an alternative to the national poverty line (Weldon 2002).[15] Table 4 shows the eight 'village-friendly poverty indicators' which were found to have a certain universality.

Many of the trade-offs in terms of process and quality in such larger-scale and aggregated approaches have already been discussed. There remains, however, further potential for mixing participatory and conventional approaches, and especially for the added value and insight that participatory methods can bring to more complex and context-specific issues (Hargreaves 2004). A synthesis of experiences with 'participatory numbers,' including a recommended 'code of good practice', is now being developed (Holland and Abeyesekera, forthcoming).

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13 Many useful innovations and guidelines for practice have emerged from 'Combining Qualitative and Quantitative Methods in Development Research' held at Swansea in July 2002, and from 'discussion of the informal "participatory numbers" group which has met in the UK at the Centre for Development Studies, Swansea, the Centre for Statistical Services, Reading, the Institute of Development Studies, Sussex, the International HIV/AIDS Alliance, Brighton and the Overseas Development Institute, London' (Chambers 2003: 11). See also Barahona and Levy (2003) and Holland and Abeyesekera (forthcoming).

14 The 'Internal Learning System' of the Bangalore-based NGO New Entity for Social Action (NESA) is using participatory methods to monitor human rights abuses with Dalit, Adivasi and other vulnerable communities. In 2000 villages, literate and non-literate men and women make entries every six months to score degrees of abuse, on a range of 1 to 5. Aspects of life monitored include husbands drinking, domestic violence, Dalits having to drink out of separate glasses, Dalits being made to carry dead bodies or dead animals, whether a girl can select her life partner (pers. comms. Vimalathan, S. Nagasundari and H. Noponen). The diaries are aggregated to give an indication of social change (Chambers pers comm. 2004).

15 The 'County Poverty Alleviation Method' in China uses eight indicators representing livelihoods, infrastructure and human resources. These can be modified and weighted according to local context and to participatory input from residents; 'since the weightings given will be used in the econometric formula used to calculate the final "participatory poverty index" (PPI), this means that the villagers' own priorities will be reflected quite strongly' (Welden 2002: 3) The overall process, which draws on a range of PRA techniques, is backed by the Asian Development Bank, the World Bank and bilateral donors. Thanks to Robert Chambers for calling this example to our attention.

6 The validity and limitations of participatory methods

The quality and ethics of practice have been major themes of self-critical reflection among participatory researchers, especially as these methods have been promoted and scaled-up (cf. Cornwall and Pratt 2002; Cooke and Kothari 2001). As noted above, the key issue in participatory research is not so much the techniques used as the way in which the research is conducted and the relationships established between researchers and research participants. Questions of ethics and quality thus bear directly on the validity of the findings. The Pathways project, a major review of PRA experience in eight countries, thus identified the quality of practice as a key issue, due in part to the rapid mainstreaming of PRA methods and the sheer volume of people claiming 'expertise' in using the methods.[16] Unfortunately, as Laderchi (2001) points out, while the quality of the research practice is clearly critical to the validity of the output, it is very difficult to assess this quality post hoc. In some ways the active involvement of research subjects makes ethical issues a particular concern in participatory, more than other forms of research. It would, however, be a mistake to overemphasize the specificity of participatory research in this regard. It may be, in fact, that participatory researchers have much to offer others in more conventional research traditions in the strength of their self-critical reflection on practice, as the increasing interest in ethics across the research community suggests. The 'social life' of any research project—its principles, conduct and relationships established with respondents—is in fact central not only to its morality, but also to the quality of information it can yield.

An important area of criticism—discussed extensively amongst PRA practitioners—is the danger that participatory research hides diversity, and can present a falsely homogenous view of 'the people' whose views it represents. As with other research methods, PRA necessarily involves some labelling—into women, men, young, old, rich, poor, household, or village—which can mask internal distinctions within groups. The key populist notion of 'community'—another 'hurrah' word conceptually linked to both well-being and participation—offers a particular temptation in this regard:

> This mythical notion of community cohesion continues to permeate much participatory work, hiding a bias that favours the opinions and priorities of those with more power and the ability to voice themselves publicly… the language and practice of 'participation' often obscures women's worlds, needs and contributions to development… (Gujit and Shah 1998: 1).

While some labelling and generalization are endemic both to social science and development policy (see Wood 1985) there is a particular issue here for participatory research. As noted above, an important line in the ancestry of PRA methods lies in their use for awareness raising, community mobilization and collective action. In this context, the dialogic approach noted above is critical to the *forging* of community, the creation of a common interest, a shared version of reality, which can be put to work in the service of a collective project. Differences between individuals within such a

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16 The 'Pathways to Participation' project, hosted by the Institute of Development Studies at Sussex, was a collaborative, critical review of practitioner experiences using PRA methods in Kenya, the Gambia, Mexico, Nepal, India, Vietnam, China and Pakistan. Findings can be found in Cornwall and Pratt (2002, 2003) and in a series of papers available at: www.ids.ac.uk/particip/research/pathways/

community do not thereby cease to exist, but they are set aside *for the present* in the pursuit of a common, shared goal. The facilitators—or 'facipulators', as some have perhaps more honestly termed themselves (White and Tiongco 1997) are therefore not simply allowing an existing consensus to emerge, but are actively involved in *creating* that community, and the shared interpretation of reality which animates it. Community is indeed a myth, in a positive sense, a myth that motivates and energizes, a myth to live by. It is when this shared consensus is divorced from a shared project for action, or when important intra-community differences are so obscured by 'consensus' that some groups are in fact further marginalized by the project, that problems arise. Then the representation of community becomes something flat, a unity borne not of a shared vision of where people wish to go, but a false representation of identity in where people are coming from.[17] The abstraction of participatory research from people's own analysis and action and its incorporation as data for external policymakers, may therefore not only carry the moral hazard that it becomes extractive and even exploitative (Laderchi 2001). It may also produce poor quality information, representing a false consensus and apparent identity of interest where none in fact exists.

The different ways in which participatory researchers use 'triangulation'—multiple methods or sources to explore the same issue from different angles—offers another instance of this tension between an emphasis on unity and diversity. For those concerned with the measurement potential of participatory research in particular, triangulation is used to validate, to check a variety of sources so as to establish the reliability of a particular item of data. Others, however, use it with 'the intention of highlighting different viewpoints' and to ensure that these 'are not buried under singular versions' (Cornwall, Musyoki and Pratt 2001: 32). This reflects a broader tension between those who use PRA methods with positivist aims, seeking unbiased outcomes, and those for whom 'producing knowledge is always an inter-subjective process'(*ibid*).

The related issues of 'facipulation' and the inter-subjective production of knowledge raise questions about the critical claims of participatory approaches that they can represent reality simply as people themselves see it. As Laderchi (2001) comments, where a report must be written and particularly where the research forms part of a policy process, there must always be issues regarding the extent to which analysis arises simply from the respondents themselves unsullied by any contact with researcher concerns. As noted above, the more participatory approaches are 'scaled up', and the more they are 'mainstreamed' and aligned with unreconstructed, dominant development institutions, the further they are likely to get from any straightforward representation of poor people's realities. It is perhaps ironic that this myth of 'hands-free' research, which derives ultimately from a 'hard-science' positivist empiricism should be so central to the legitimacy of participatory approaches which see themselves in many ways as opposed to such a paradigm. In other contexts it is now accepted as axiomatic that researchers are always actors, crafting a representation of others' reality. This is so, for example, in social anthropology where its own version of 'hands-free' research—the participant observer who simply recorded without influencing what he (sic) saw—was a constituent myth in the emergence of the discipline (see, for example, Geertz 1988). The persistent credibility of the promise of PRA to deliver 'the people's' views perhaps owes more to

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17 This is a development of Jordan's (1989) analysis, that significant dimensions of identity derive not from abstract structural characteristics such as gender and class, but rather where we want to go and what we can offer one another.

the politics of development than it does to its connections with the wider intellectual community.

This leads into a final concern with the potential of participatory methods, at least as narrowly defined, to generate genuinely new and surprising information about the frames through which people see the world. These are what mark the limits of 'what is possible', the values that lie so deep they are 'forgotten', the unconscious sense of where the limits lie (Bourdieu 1977; Mitchell 1990). What is at stake here is not only the words used and references made, but also the 'tacit understandings' (Giddens 1977: 169) which constitute the 'common-sense' that shapes people's life-worlds. These are made up of assumptions and ways of seeing which people have so profoundly internalized that they cannot be asked about directly, but are grasped intuitively, as they emerge 'crab-wise' through the stories that are told (White 1992: 8). The 'well-being ranking' noted above, for example, asks for local perceptions of 'the good life,' and may clearly generate unexpected information in terms of the dimensions people identify and the ways in which they prioritize them. However, it may be that the formulation of 'the good life' does not adequately capture the deepest values of what people consider well-being. It may be, for example, that there is a critically moral dimension to this, better captured by the notion of 'living a good life' which lies outside the frame which the 'well-being ranking' unconsciously imposes. An example of what we mean is offered by Veena Das (2000: 224) in a footnote to her discussion of a woman's responses over her life-time to the disasters that the partition of India and Pakistan wrought in her family:

> I must emphasize that the moral stakes for Asha can only be understood if we can enter a lifeworld in which she felt that her eternity was in jeopardy.

There is a danger that all forms of research, especially when undertaken cross-culturally, will be tone deaf to such subtle harmonies. For researchers of well-being, however, this may mean missing the underlying melody, which makes sense of the themes and variations sung through the more tangible data. This is, of course, not primarily an issue about methods and techniques, but as mentioned earlier the conduct and principles of research. However, the danger of misrepresentation is particularly acute in the case of participatory methodologies. When their findings re-confirm rather than challenge the dominant hegemonies, it seems a more grievous failure than when other research approaches do the same, simply because they often make such strong moral claims about being able genuinely to represent 'other' voices.

6 Conclusion: trajectories and challenges

As this paper makes clear, there is considerable scope for participatory methods to extend understanding of how people experience well-being, addressing all of the three dimensions identified above: objective endowments, subjective perceptions, and interactive processes. They also have a significant potential, particularly in combination with other approaches, to contribute to its measurement. Larger-scale studies may aggregate findings to generate potential indicators of well-being that can be used with larger populations of a similar character. PRA is also increasingly being combined with

conventional survey and statistical methods: micro-level and qualitative participatory research methods can be used to identify appropriate criteria and questions, and to design better surveys which are then implemented in a conventional manner. There is growing interest in the potential of participatory methods to generate numerical data. Recent innovations in combining methods which are qualitative and quantitative, numerical and non-numerical, participatory and conventional, are likely to lead to greater use of participatory methods in not only conceptualizing well-being, but in monitoring and measuring it on a larger scale. While attention needs to be paid, as ever, to methodological concerns with quality and epistemological concerns with the hybridization of research paradigms, this train has already left the station!

Despite the high profile given to participatory research, however, there remain significant institutional barriers to putting the findings to good use. Brock (1999: 4) notes the huge amount of data being collected continually by NGOs and research institutes, but finds that 'such information is usually marginalized in planning top-down poverty alleviation strategies'. Despite the progress that has been made in integrating qualitative and quantitative poverty data, she found that 'this does not often include making the full use of the micro-level qualitative data which already exists', due in part perhaps to 'the absence of relationships between micro and macro institutions in the policy process' (*ibid*). This information gap from micro-level participatory research findings persists in a context (or perhaps even as a result) of widespread efforts to scale up participatory poverty assessment in national policy processes. Implicit in the commitment to participatory methods is the need not just to link indicators and techniques, but to bridge gaps between diverse actors at different levels, often with quite distinct knowledge and interests (Brock and McGee 2002). The generation and integration of appropriate data are not enough: there is also a need to strengthen the engagement and relationships among key actors within processes of research, policy and practice. This means that 'the people' should not be the only participants in the research process. Rather, participatory research may involve key officials as stakeholders within the design and process, and so help them own the findings, and influence knowledge and action at the levels of policy formulation and programme implementation, rather than simply relying on the research report to achieve results. One risk in 'extracting' participatory tools for well-being measurement is that this action-research dimension may easily be lost, as the goal shifts to finding useful indicators and away from including key stakeholders in the process of finding relevant indicators and measuring them. Officials and middle managers are often those who could best benefit from an enhanced understanding of poverty and well-being, and from more experiential immersion and knowledge of poor people's realities. There are many innovative examples of this approach to participatory poverty research (see, for example, Brock and McGee 2002, and Jupp 2002).

While there is no doubt scope for working with institutional actors in this way, it is important not to forget the politics and dangers of co-option which have beset participation from its earliest adoption within development agency discourse (Selznick 1949/53). As mentioned above, many of the scaled-up and mainstreamed practices of participatory research have not been particularly effective at (or even interested in) measuring or analysing things like exclusion or power (Gujit and Shah 1998: 3). Rather, there has been a tendency to over-stress technical issues and under-recognize political dimensions of poverty and well-being. Even where the more complex dynamics of power, exclusion and relationships have emerged within the PPAs and 'Voices of the Poor' research sponsored by the World Bank itself, there has often been resistance to the

recognition of these elements within the relevant policy arenas. Laderchi (2001:5) thus advises that the view that PRA is widely accepted 'as a "serious" source of hard evidence on poverty' should not be too easily adopted. Rather, she cautions:

> The alternative, i.e. the widespread adoption of PRA as an expensive window dressing exercise, cannot be entirely ruled out.

Even where this degree of pessimism does not seem justified, three major conditions need to be met if participatory methods are to be used effectively in enabling genuinely alternative understandings of well-being to emerge and assessing extent to which people are able to live good lives. First, while the question of measurement lends itself to debates regarding technical validity, it is important to locate these within discussion of more substantive issues. These concern on the one hand the *meaning and interpretation* of numerical data when removed from the contexts in which they are generated, and on the other hand broader questions regarding the *purposes* of measurement: what kinds of data are required for what and by whom.

Second, and following on from this, there needs to be far greater sophistication in appreciating the relations between local and universal models of reality, and what characteristics are proper to each. There may indeed be some generic differences between the worldviews of 'policymakers' and 'the poor', especially in the realm of the complexity, and multi- and inter-dimensionality of the problems that poor people face, and it is without doubt important that these be recognized. However, it is not simply the case that micro-studies can be 'scaled up' to provide macro-level data, that universal models of reality are simply local models 'writ large', or that data remain 'the same' when they are abstracted from context. These are not simple issues, but they are critical to address if there is a genuine commitment to render the lives of research subjects as more than 'cases' of poverty or deprivation (Wood 1985), and to pursue interventions that are appropriate to the real contexts in which people live their lives.

Finally, the close associations between 'participation' and 'well-being', noted above, mean that it is rather easy for 'well-being' simply to be adopted as a virtual antonym for poverty or synonym for development, albeit in wide-angle lens.[18] This danger is very evident in the slippage between 'wealth-ranking' and 'well-being ranking', where the second can easily be simply a more inclusive—or invasive—version of the first. While 'well-being' as presented, for example, in the *Voices of the Poor* study, undoubtedly wears a more human face than economic growth models of development, there is nonetheless a worrying familiarity about the shape of many 'new' findings and their resonance with 'old' development rhetoric and priorities. This familiarity intensifies the closer in and higher up one gets in the development policy nexus, with the clear danger that 'well-being' may simply offer a new euphemism for old agendas. There is no doubt, of course, that 'development', like 'well-being,' is a very broad, contested, normative concept, for which many competing definitions are offered. The days of a simple faith in economic growth as the means of bringing 'progress' and 'modernization' are, for most of us at least, long past. However, it seems difficult to empty 'development' entirely of its grounding in an enlightenment view of the world, and the conviction that improvement in the material conditions of people's lives is the primary focus of concern. This may indeed be the way that people always and

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18 Our thanks to Jane French (WeD) for this image.

everywhere identify their 'well-being', but whether this is or is not the case, should be a matter for *empirical* exploration, not assumed by definition. The promise of both participatory research and the focus on well-being is that they will enable genuinely different voices to be heard, voices that speak from and about realities other than those configured by development discourse and institutions. While definitions and indicators of 'development' may be determined by outsiders on a 'universal' template, a participatory approach would suggest that notions of 'well-being' must include local social and cultural values and meanings, as well as the subjective perceptions of individuals and groups. If this is the case, it should be possible to ask the question, 'Does more development bring greater well-being?' Only when such a question can be asked, and answered, will the critical criteria for the participatory definition and measurement of well-being be met.

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