

# RETELLING WORLDS OF POVERTY: REFLECTIONS ON TRANSFORMING PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH FOR A GLOBAL NARRATIVE

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*When 'people' are involved in developmental discourse about civil society – whether the World Bank singing the praises of the ordinary African worker or the geographer lauding peasant science – who the people are, and how they are constructed, are precisely political questions. (Peet and Watts, 1996, p27)*

*We need to worry less about the unintended consequences of our study of local organizations and movements, and to worry more about the intended consequences of our relative lack of study of central institutions of power. (Dove, 1999, p225)*

THIS CHAPTER ADDRESSES concerns surrounding the use of story about 'global' poverty. Through it examines moments of abstract conceptual transition often overlaid on defined social conditions like 'global' analytical transition lies a classic question: how are social experiences removed from contexts in order to view them as human experience? Regarding the transition in which important specificities are gained, emphasizes certain choices to include and what to exclude, as being on a generalized scale. Openly acknowledges her choices at the centre of the transition to the importance of a research approach that pays attention to the broader institutional context. This chapter concludes that researchers who challenge existing power structures, need to be reflexive. However, we must recognize that the more we fix our gaze, the less we may actually know about poverty: knowledge generated through local fact tell us very little about poverty in general. We argue further for a critical approach to our responsibilities as reflexive, knowledge-makers and exercises informed caution in the use of local studies. Finally, the chapter calls for institutional support for participants in participatory poverty studies, not only in the making of local studies, but also in the large-scale making processes that result from

At the intersection of the human question in the investigation of social conditions, whether what they see is idiosyncratic or universal. Disciplinary approaches to address the question of probability theory and statistic

## INTRODUCTION: TRADING CONTEXT FOR CONTINUITY

THIS CHAPTER ADDRESSES conceptual, political and practical concerns surrounding the use of participatory poverty reports to produce a story about 'global' poverty. Through reflections on methodological practice, it examines moments of abstraction from 'the local' to 'the global', a conceptual transition often overlooked in the effort to understand broadly defined social conditions like 'poverty'. Embedded in the local to global analytical transition lies a classic ethnographic and ethical question: when and how are social experiences removed from their historical, political and cultural contexts in order to view them as broader features of a more generalized human experience? Regarding the local–global transition itself as a trade-off, in which important specificities may be lost but broader analytical relevance gained, emphasizes certain choices facing researchers over what to include, and what to exclude, as being representative of a social condition at a generalized scale. Openly acknowledging this trade-off places the researcher and her choices at the centre of the knowledge creation process. It also points to the importance of a researcher's institutional context and turns our attention to the broader institutional agendas that 'global' narratives serve. The chapter concludes that researchers, particularly those claiming to be critical of existing power structures, need not necessarily reject global generalizations. However, we must recognize that in certain important respects, the broader our gaze, the *less* we may actually be able to know about specific experiences of poverty: knowledge generated by and for 'global' centres of power may in fact tell us very little about poverty as it is actually lived in everyday experience. We argue further for a critical imperative in research practice that takes our responsibilities as reflexive, knowledge-producing individuals seriously, and exercises informed caution when asserting social facts at a global scale. Finally, the chapter calls for institutional changes that will ensure that participants in participatory poverty studies are active not only in the generation of local studies, but also in the larger, 'global' knowledge-creation and policy-making processes that result from them.

### THE UNIVERSAL/SPECIFIC TRADE-OFF

At the intersection of the humanities and the social sciences lies a common question in the investigation of social phenomena: how are observers to know whether what they see is idiosyncratic or part of a more general pattern? Disciplinary approaches to addressing this problem range from the application of probability theory and statistical treatments to a denial of the utility of

generalization altogether. In nearly all social science practice, however, generalizations are employed at certain levels; it is almost impossible to talk about society and social processes without using broad categories to illustrate important features of collective behaviour and interaction. In certain respects it is generalization itself that affords a distinction between the social and the individual by emphasizing social practice and action as phenomena that can be observed, experienced and described in terms beyond those that are exclusive to individuals.

Yet analytical generalization involves homogenization; it is impossible to create and use distinctions in society without silencing, at least to some extent, the particular details of each person who comes to constitute a given analytical category. Social researchers are faced with the persistent challenge of how to demarcate clusters of social experience and how to generalize across individuals and groups, while at the same time preserving important realities of heterogeneity and difference. Particularly at a global discursive scale, analytical generalizations run the risk of burying or supplanting critical historical, political, geographical and cultural differences. For this reason, methodological choices and the institutional contexts within which generalizations take place are critical matters in understanding the processes by which 'global' knowledge is produced. Points where contextual data are scaled up can harbour important revelations about the exercise of power in research itself.

Distortionary abstraction is not monopolized by any particular ideology. In the case we explore in this paper, the World Bank, its critics, and we as authors, all use the term 'the poor' as shorthand for a heterogeneous, diverse and incommensurable set of conditions, circumstances and people. The very idea of a single global category within which we discuss poverty is rarely problematized, either by major development institutions or their critics. This chapter suggests that by focusing on how such categories are generated, defined and used we can understand more fully their utility as well as their limitations.

## POWER AND THE PRODUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE

The calculus of advantage and disadvantage that accompanies generalization depends on *who* is carrying out the generalization, and *for whom* certain analytical insights are useful. In an exploration of institutional power in issues of representation, anthropologist Michael Dove (1999, p228) reminds us of Edward Said's provocative questions: 'Who writes? For whom is this writing being done? In what circumstances?' Dove suggests further that we must also ask, 'Who reads, for whom, and in what circumstances?' These questions emphasize both the representative powers of the researcher herself and the

importance of the audiences for whom she is producing knowledge in the first place.<sup>2</sup> A researcher's own social and institutional context is as important as that of her informants and topics of study.

Trade-offs between specificity and generality are the product of negotiated encounters between ideology, the politics of the institutional context of knowledge production, and the agency of the researcher. Knowledge is not only produced, but it is itself a product with its own political economy of extraction, processing and distribution. Asking questions such as, Who gets to choose which details to amplify? and, Which institutional priorities does an individual researcher engage and honour? demonstrates how power relations shape knowledge as a product and how, in turn, this affects what we know – and believe we can know – about social conditions and experiences at a 'global' scale.

This chapter focuses on a methodological process of generalizing the experiences of poor people in dramatically different social contexts to derive broad conclusions about the global experience of poverty. We draw on our work as research assistants to the study published as *Voices of the Poor: Can Anyone Hear Us?* (Narayan et al, 2000)<sup>3</sup> to explore how locally collected contextual narratives assumed the form of a single, more generalized policy-oriented narrative. By focusing on the research process, we aim to draw attention away from the question of whether we 'hear' those living in poverty and towards the question of how we, as researchers and institutions, are 'listening' to our informants.

The purpose of this exploration is threefold: the first is to identify particular moments at which highly contextual data in this study were re-contextualized and transformed through generalization. In examining these moments of transition from 'local' to 'global', we aim to emphasize the power relations that inevitably co-exist with, and in many cases guide the creation of, institutional knowledge (cf Dove, 1999). The second purpose is to identify moments of mediation that rendered the research team agents of knowledge creation. In amplifying certain stories and silencing others, we exercised precisely the sort of power that makes knowledge production, and recent promotions of the World Bank as a 'knowledge bank',<sup>4</sup> central concerns of development practitioners and theorists alike. Reflecting on our own involvement in the research process (Long and Long, 1992; Emerson et al, 1995), while recognizing the multiple institutional actors and understandings that informed the global synthesis (Gardner, 1997), offers important insights into the complexity of the universalizing abstractions behind 'global' institutional knowledge.

Finally, by engaging these topics, we hope to articulate more fully the ethnographic and ethical challenges facing researchers and policy-makers who seek to synthesize qualitative social research. Abstracting local studies and placing them into policy contexts inevitably involves institutional constraints that condition the range of acceptable methodologies researchers can employ

and the conclusions they can reach. The insights afforded by qualitative methods are of critical importance to answering questions such as the one posed by the *Can Anyone Hear Us?* study: How do the poor, themselves, define and experience poverty? A full answer to this question requires both candid reflection and an honest commitment to improving the research practices intended to create spaces for marginalized people to speak. By the same token, the institutional spaces that exist to 'hear' about poverty demand our attention and require reform.

By affirming that the translation of studies situated in specific historical, social and institutional contexts to a 'global' narrative is indeed a *transformation*, we are better equipped to explore the linkages between the social production of facts in one site and their reception in another (Pigg, forthcoming). The political terrain a narrative has travelled is as important as the 'knowledge' it conveys.

## DEFINING 'LOCAL' AND 'GLOBAL'

Before proceeding, it is important to recognize the complexities subsumed by simplistic assignments of the terms 'global' and 'local'. Although these are actually fluid terms defined only in specific research practice, they are often applied in a naturalized way in development discourse: the 'local' tends to refer to smaller scales of social organization, like communities or regions, while the 'global' tends to imply both commonalities in human experience and social conditions shared over large scales. The problem with accepting these terms as given arises when 'the local' comes to imply a bounded place or social experience while the 'global' defies any single locality. Often, social features we take as 'local' in fact have extra-local origins; limiting an inquiry to a bounded locality can sometimes obscure the important non-local origins of problems like poverty. For global institutions or processes that might otherwise be implicated, bounding localities can serve as a convenient way to avoid inclusion in a social problematic. Similarly, our sense of the 'global' is often derived from the knowledge created by very specific institutions, and the universalizing narratives, ideologies and critiques that circulate through and from them.

It is precisely because there is nothing self-evidently meaningful about the terms 'global' and 'local' that an understanding of institutional knowledge-creation is important; it is often through institutional processes that definitions of 'local' and 'global' are stabilized and naturalized (Peters, 1996; Forbes, 1999). In our case, the World Bank functioned as a 'global centre', able to see things at a world level, while PPAs, the contextual data from which we were working, became, necessarily, knowledge of 'local' origin. In this chapter, we use

the terms 'local' and 'global' as provocations to reflect critically on their origin and content.

In the case of aggregating PPAs, turning the 'local' into the 'global' entailed important contextual losses, but potential gains in promoting institutional reform. These trade-offs are only acceptable insofar as they are accompanied by a full and open acknowledgement of the content of the losses and the potential institutional goals that necessitate them. We must ask, in reflecting on transitions from local-to-global discourse: when does the global scale get invoked, and why? If we are suspicious of the global gaze as inclined towards reinforcing existing hierarchies, we are equipped to take stock not only of what a global narrative says, but of what it *does not* say and cannot accommodate. Recognizing that global knowledge is fashioned for global institutional consumption places appropriate limits on what we can say and understand about poverty at the global scale. Our own global synthesis (our contributions to the *Can Anyone Hear Us?* project), and the practice of creating it, reveals as much as an institutional knowledge product as it does as a partial look at the revelatory potentials of participatory methodologies.

## CAN ANYONE HEAR US?

From March to July 1999, we worked as research assistants on a team based at Cornell University commissioned by the World Bank to conduct data analysis related to its *World Development Report 2000/2001* on poverty and development. The project<sup>5</sup> involved the analysis of hundreds of World Bank poverty assessments, conducted between 1990 and 1998, from nearly every country to which the Bank is a lender. After a brief initial review, 73 PPAs were selected for inclusion in the study, based on their use of participatory methodological approaches to addressing the question, 'How do the poor, themselves, understand and define poverty?' The final data set used in the analysis represented reports from 46 countries.<sup>6</sup>

Following the development of a coding protocol, the team coded and analysed the content of the 73 documents using a data analysis software package that facilitated a systematic content analysis on thousands of pages of text.<sup>7</sup> Researchers collated, cross-indexed and compared data from different PPAs, and drafted portions of what would ultimately become *Can Anyone Hear Us?* The final report produced in our phase of the project sought to describe poor people's own accounts of the condition of poverty; each chapter addressed a topic identified by the research team as important for determining social and economic mobility among PPA respondents.

In addition to serving as a synthesis of the findings of participatory research initiatives over the past decade, the report was intended to demonstrate the potential value of participatory research methodologies within the World

Bank. A recent World Bank publication advocated PPAs by arguing that they could

*allow better technical diagnosis of the problem, as well as better design and implementation of the solution. [PPAs] have the potential to increase dialogue and negotiation at a policy level, and strengthen links between communities and policy-makers (that). . . could challenge existing power relations in the long term.* (Robb, 1999)

It is precisely because of the potential of PPAs to help researchers appreciate local details and complexity in the experience of poverty that it is imperative that we explore the transformations of those local details in a global rendering of PPA data.

The data set for *Can Anyone Hear Us?* presented a bewildering variety of possible approaches to, and content for, an overall synthesis. Precisely how and where the team drew the epistemological boundaries for the final report, and what guided our notions of where the boundaries should go, is a central question in mapping and analysing any knowledge production process. The methodological introduction to *Can Anyone Hear Us?* (Narayan et al, 2000, pp16–26) highlights many of the challenges encountered in the project. The present discussion is meant to elaborate these points and place them in a context of institutional knowledge production and authorization.

Two particular methodological features can serve as focal points for understanding the process of generalization in this case: the creation and regulation of a coding protocol, and the parameters within which a ‘helpful’, or acceptable, global report could be located.

## CREATING CODE

A central objective of the *Can Anyone Hear Us?* exercise was to generate a report that emphasized the diversity of experience and definitions of poverty across countries, regions and respondents. Since it was impossible to capture the temporal, spatial and experiential diversity contained in 73 documents from 46 different countries in a global synthesis, the first challenge was to devise a coding scheme that would allow collation, comparison and the identification of informational patterns in the data. Although the stated intent was to ‘let the data speak’ insofar as was possible, certain features of the methodology limited our capacity for doing this.

An inductive approach to devising a coding scheme would have afforded the research team a chance to read through all of the data before identifying the main themes that would comprise a coding scheme (Emerson et al, 1995). Time constraints prohibited such a reading. Instead, the key features of our

master coding scheme, around which most of our analysis later centred, were determined in brainstorm-style sessions very early in the project, at a time when data coders had read no more than a few reports. Inevitably in this set of circumstances, we 'spoke' to the data as much as it 'spoke' to us.

Still, we sought to mitigate the imposition of our own assumptions on the coding scheme by compiling a secondary set of codes that could evolve as the project progressed. The collection of these codes, which we called 'free nodes', allowed us to accommodate some previously unforeseen themes that arose as researchers simultaneously read and coded the data. Each researcher accumulated an individual list of secondary codes, and in subsequent meetings the team discussed them. In cases in which several researchers identified the same topic of interest, a new free node code was added to the team's shared coding scheme. While this method might have allowed more room for the data to 'speak' for itself, by only gradually instituting new codes at the group level it was impossible to ensure that all the documents in the data set had been read and marked for secondary codes.<sup>8</sup>

The practice of coding can easily obscure information not captured in a coding scheme, or de-emphasize those issues not shared across countries or regions. A topic that arises as absolutely central to respondents' descriptions of poverty in a particular report, but which is not repeated in other reports and thus not frequently coded, can be instantly erased or obscured by the act of assigning and aggregating data codes. In the critical moments of creating a coding scheme and assigning it to portions of text, then, a profound transformation takes place: coded data becomes dislocated from their context while uncoded data are lost. The consequences of this transformation can be particularly dangerous for those topics that are neither secured an a priori place in an analytical framework nor mentioned frequently enough across reports to warrant closer examination in subsequent analysis.

In coding qualitative data, researchers inevitably encounter problems of commensurability: text is collapsed into codes and codes are grouped and counted, giving those handling the data the power to determine what counts as 'similar' and what counts as 'different'. Of course, differences among coded data persist, but only insofar as they are able to withstand the process of collapsing data onto dimensions that have been decided, ultimately, by the researcher. An iterative process of coding and reintegrating categories can minimize this, but only within limits.

## THE CATEGORY OF THE 'HELPFUL'

The process of coding and analysing the data set was shaped by practical and institutional constraints. Although we regularly held meetings to share our

comments, opinions and ideas about the project and its methodology, these discussions assumed clear parameters implicitly drawn by regarding certain ideas as either 'helpful' or 'unhelpful'. Several concerns simply could not be accommodated by the project or the formal discussions meant to inform it. For example, questions about how to integrate the considerable body of scholarship that explores the limitations, problems and lessons learned about participatory research in practice (Mosse, 1994; Ribot, 1996; Pottier, 1997; Woost, 1997; Goebel, 1998; Michener, 1998; Hanmer et al, 1999) into our treatment of the data set were ultimately 'unhelpful' – and unresolvable – within project confines.

Critically reading each report would have introduced the complicated task of scrutinizing the very methodological tool our project was intended to advocate; far simpler, and more efficient, was the naturalized acceptance of each report and an uncritical reading and compiling of its contents. For instance, the following quotation, which appears in the conclusion to *Can Anyone Hear Us?*, was read and incorporated into the study at its face value:

*After we had lunch with them, they sang for us. It is really amazing how they used songs to express themselves and their thoughts, expectations, fears, anxieties. The words of the final song were: 'Here they are, yes, we agree, here they are, our visitors who were sent by the World Bank, yes, there they are, they are here to help us and develop us, and we hope they won't forget us.'* (Narayan et al, 2000, p283)

This quotation can be read in many ways, ranging from a spontaneous outpouring of gratitude towards the World Bank to an example of the institution's power to coerce rehearsed responses in the places in which it operates. The implicit and explicit boundaries of the 'helpful' guided us to treat all of our data in the spirit of the former interpretation.

Unhelpful questions were thus suspended as researchers worked to read and interpret the data for a synthetic narrative that would bind 'localized' parts of PPA narratives into a 'global' whole. A searching analysis of each individual report and its conditions of production was impossible within the constraints of the project. Such an analysis would, moreover, have required a capacity for institutional reflection that remains underdeveloped within the World Bank.<sup>9</sup>

## HEARING, LISTENING, KNOWING

Creating a global narrative that would retain some of the 'voices' of people consulted in individual PPA studies often involved searching for exemplary quotations, moments in the global synthesis intended to amplify, in a living,

breathing person's own words, some aspect of the struggle and suffering of living in poverty. Read uncritically, these quotations can punctuate research findings with moments that feel alive and 'real' – moments in which a voice considered powerless and remote is suddenly brought forwards and amplified in an institutional centre that has power to 'do something'. The entire *Voices of the Poor* initiative, on one level, provides an answer to long-held criticisms of development institutions' inability to 'hear' – learn about and respond to – the actual needs of those whom their projects are intended to help.

But the hearing of respondents is incomplete without attention to how they have been listened to. Understanding this 'how' entails articulating gains and losses, both at the local level itself and in the transition from local to global narratives. In assembling the global synthesis, we pulled decontextualized quotes from the data set – quotes that can hardly be thought of as voices in the usual sense of the word. In most cases these 'voices' were simply quotations – raw data material largely stripped of its original social and political context. Most of the quotations in the global synthesis are attributed only to a country name and year, and at times a gender identification or other general marker. As a consequence, it is impossible to discern the construction of self and deployment of agency in the global narrative; the placement of the speaker is largely lost, along with many local-level insights about what each speaker might have actually *meant*. This is to say nothing of the complexity of the local encounter, and local production of the PPA itself. As mentioned above, a great deal of scholarship has demonstrated that in practice, PPAs involve political, and sometimes highly problematic, processes.

What, then, is the utility in calling these the 'voices of the poor?' Certainly, at one level, the enrichment of a report with the actual words on which conclusions or observations are based provides the reader with an invitation to attribute the quote, and the experience, to a human being – a simultaneous agent, survivor and victim. The *Voices of the Poor*, as a concept, is radical in its assertion that connecting our understanding to real, lived experiences is critical to rethinking how development institutions understand and respond to poverty. At the scale of a global narrative of poverty, however, references to the quotations as 'voices' can be easily distorted, and should be read more as an aspiration to amplify a human experience than as an actual assertion that we have now reproduced, at the global level, the unadulterated, unmediated local voices of people living in poverty.

It is important to be clear about the losses incurred if we allow ourselves, or our institutions, to read the words and ideas behind these voices uncritically. The loss at this level involves not only the context that allows us to think about what is said versus what is meant, but also the reality that by the time the 'voice' reaches the global synthesis it has been processed through multiple layers of abstraction and mediation through the eyes, powers and agendas of first the field researchers themselves, then the editors of individual reports,

then the combined layers of our research team, our coding and analysis, and the further analysis, writing and editing conducted at World Bank headquarters. Without explicit attention to the definition and use of the 'localized' voice, the real contribution of participation as a theory and methodology is too easily obscured, redefined, and co-opted.

Rather than argue that this loss is somehow avoidable in any process of retelling what others have said, we mean to underline the importance of employing quotations as 'voices' only in a clearly contextualized and qualified sense. This qualification, one that informs the methodological discussion of *Voices of the Poor: Can Anyone Hear Us?*, is often downplayed at the centres of institutional power because the *imagination* of the voice intact, and of participation itself, allows the centre to congratulate itself, sometimes prematurely, for innovative reforms. Recognizing this institutional reality prevents us from making the dangerous assumption that we are suddenly able to amplify, unproblematically and fully, the true and unmediated voices of those living in poverty.

In the case of *Can Anyone Hear Us?*, without a critical and informed understanding of the use of 'voices' we leave open the possibility that the global synthesis will be used solely as an answer to critics who claim that the World Bank is incapable of either hearing those whom its policies affect or of transparent, rigorously participatory initiatives. Until the Bank is open to hearing the criticisms of development *and its institutions* in what it invites from the voices of the poor, and until it is equipped to receive more contextualized, actual 'voices', it is hard to refute the charge that narratives such as *Can Anyone Hear Us?* are simply using the appearance of listening to remake a World Bank image while avoiding the real work of re-making the institution (Lohmann, 1998). Is *Can Anyone Hear Us?* the institution's agenda made into local expression, or is it the other way around? A truly 'global' perspective on poverty would include the institution itself in its problematic of global and local poverty.

The institutional role played by a 'global' narrative, then, conditions its form and content. One way to understand this conditioning is through critical reflection. Provided that we recognize that this is the case and do not mistake or misrepresent a global synthesis for a globalized PPA,<sup>10</sup> we can use the global synthetic project to promote important institutional reforms.<sup>11</sup>

## SPEAKING TO THE INSTITUTION: REQUIREMENTS FOR BEING 'HEARD'

Institutional expectations, requirements and norms exert control over any narrative created for an institution's own consumption and reproduction.

Even those projects that advocate reform and demonstrate the value of new methods, ideas and approaches – a project such as ours – must, at times, concede to these requirements in return for a chance to be taken seriously by those in positions of power. This is true not only in speaking to the World Bank, but also to its external critics who find themselves working within or through it. Reflecting on moments in the *Can Anyone Hear Us?* project during which these requirements were made explicit helps us to understand how abstraction and translation were guided, sometimes completely unintentionally, by institutional priorities. These conditions included the importance of numbers and the centrality of crisis narratives.

In preparing our initial findings for *Can Anyone Hear Us?*, we were acutely aware of the need to communicate with social scientists more familiar with positivist quantitative methodology. In anticipation of this audience, the research team produced numerical demonstrations of its findings, including matrices and frequency counts. Important limitations in the way our data was delimited and ‘counted’, however, made the numbers useful, at best, only as heuristics.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, the expectation was that numerical expressions of the data would make our report clearer and more legitimate to a wider institutional audience while cultivating a bridge from orthodox approaches to poverty to more pluralist treatments.

Yet, over time, a felt need to package the data for an institutional audience – some of whom, we expected, would not automatically accept our conclusions without numerical proof (nor, we assumed, would they automatically embrace the descriptive potential of participatory methods) – actually *drove* much of our treatment of the data for certain sections of the synthesis. Despite repeated recognition that our numerical data were inconsistent, at times we were guided by them. Matrices assumed a prevalent place among bundles of computer output on which later analyses were based. Often, we found ourselves confirming our conclusions with matrices containing possibly erroneous numbers. In our attempt to comply with the politics of knowledge at the centre, then, a key tenet of ethnographic, qualitative research – that human experience is not necessarily reducible to neutral, numerical metrics – had to be violated.

In addition to the need for numbers, institutional norms dictated a strong preference for crisis narratives. Such narratives are a regular feature of development discourse, and have been challenged by a number of critics (Wisner, 1993; Ferguson, 1994; Guthman, 1997, *inter alia*). In our case, the crisis took the form of a unifying theme: that of widespread and massive institutional breakdown.<sup>13</sup>

While the idea of institutional breakdown was not wholly inappropriate to describe the lives of those whose experiences we read and sought to write about, there are two important points to be made about the use of this crisis to construct our global narrative. First, defining crisis at the global scale

involves selection: many of the very poor respondents whose stories are told in individual PPAs describe multiple forms of struggle related to their socio-economic circumstances. For the purposes of our worldwide synthesis, *particular* crises were identified, developed through the extraction of examples, and emphasized. Identifying which crises to deem 'global' has, inevitably, a connection to the knowledge-creating institution itself. In this case, ongoing policy-level debates about the appropriate relationship between states, lending institutions and markets were, perhaps, unstated factors in the choice of the particular narrative about state and institutional breakdown that was emphasized and developed (Caufield, 1996; World Bank, 1997; Hildyard, 1997). Paradoxically, while we were charged with exploring the breakdown of institutions in our work, the World Bank itself as an 'institution' was analytically off limits.

A second point about crisis narratives underlines the importance of the reflexivity of the global institution itself: assigning 'crisis' status to certain problems can divert attention from *systemic* problems leading to poverty, and instead create an impression that these problems are unnatural, out of the ordinary, or detached from issues of politics or history (or, in this case, the role the World Bank itself might have played in certain modern cases of state failure to provide social safety nets to its vulnerable populations). In a crisis mentality, extra-local forces contributing to a local problem tend to be ignored, and the focus becomes immediate acts of 'helping' rather than comprehensive consideration of the sum of acts of 'hurting' that brought about the crisis to begin with (Wisner, 1993). If read individually, PPAs might be able to refocus poverty analysis towards precisely these more systemic everyday experiences, complete with extra-local details and particular temporal and spatial locations.

## CONTRIBUTIONS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE 'GLOBAL GAZE'

*Can Anyone Hear Us?* is a monumental and comprehensive aggregation of data from an enormous volume and range of materials. It attempts to bring together the 'voices' that emerged from over a decade of qualitative, ethnographic and participatory studies of poverty. In doing so, it seeks to illustrate the value of qualitative approaches to understanding poverty and how PPA data might be used to understand how it is differently, and specifically, experienced. 'The policy challenge that results', Narayan et al write,

. . . is to formulate and implement poverty alleviation measures that succeed because they fit the detailed requirements of each case. Therefore, while we may

*ask, 'What are the trends that unify experiences of the poor across regions?' we must never lose sight of the question these data are truly suited to help answer [namely] what is it about how poverty and social inequality are expressed in a given time, place and circumstance that must be reflected in policy measures? (2000, p27)*

Through this critical point – that policy must be flexible and sensitive to context in order to be effective – *Can Anyone Hear Us?* makes an essential contribution to the promotion of participatory studies as well as institutional reform. As a tool for demonstrating that poverty is indeed multidimensional, and far more complex than traditional economic indicators and exclusively quantitative approaches to poverty can convey, the book makes an invaluable contribution within the World Bank.

Yet even as it makes valuable policy points, the actual findings of the global synthesis remain perhaps surprisingly unremarkable as revelations about global poverty. Assertions that poverty is multidimensional, that it creates particular stresses on households, has gender dimensions, and can be related to failures of certain institutional structures, are not new. This may be a consequence of the fact that the dimensions of poverty PPAs are best equipped to address – contextuality and interconnection – had to be downplayed or eliminated to allow for generalization across reports covering such a wide range of social and temporal contexts. That the final conclusions we reached were unremarkable points to the losses sustained in the synthetic project. We must ask, then: if a global-scale analysis fails to yield new insights, how is the synthesis 'useful'?

The 'global gaze' is taken in institutional circles as the natural and desirable extension of localized studies: since poverty is a reality experienced worldwide, we should be able to discern what 'patterns' exist, and what realities are shared, in its experience. While we do not contend that there *aren't* shared aspects of poverty, we do suggest that by naturalizing the abstraction of knowledge from particular to universal, we might also assume, erroneously, that the most significant aspects of poverty would logically be the universals, the patterns that poor people 'everywhere' share.<sup>14</sup> If, on the other hand, we assume that the 'global' story is but a partial one – and one that might *not* contain the most important pieces of a fuller understanding of poverty – we are better positioned to identify the institutional and political momentum behind the very urge to gaze globally. In asking what is lost in the jump from individual reports to a single narrative, the question of *what counts as knowledge* at the centre becomes a proper one to ask. Through this, the character of the global scale – a scale without location, without history, politics or engagement with its subject – becomes clearer and requires explanation.

Both the limitations of a non-reflexive institution and the institutional requirement for an abstracted study exaggerate the losses incurred in any transfer of knowledge from one scale of reference to another. The urge to

capture and tell the 'global' story can be as much a process of silencing, selecting and retelling as one of trying to convey 'local' realities to centres of power. Ideally, our project should not be a re-presentation and transformation of voices, but rather a struggle to construct institutional and political spaces in which the poor and marginalized can speak for themselves on their own terms (Spivak, 1988). The PPA might be a tool for creating that space, but when employed uncritically it runs the risk of becoming a device for managing, rather than 'hearing', the voices of the poor. The spaces in which researchers and institutions hear are as important as the spaces in which those who live in poverty can speak.

Similarly, until extra-local agents of development are free to include themselves in the construction of the problem of global poverty, there is room to question and suspect the current rhetoric of participation and PPAs. Until the boundaries of the 'global' imposed by the World Bank itself can be interrogated, the institutionalization of participation and PPAs is rightly susceptible to the criticism that through appropriation, PPAs have lost their theoretical force (Woost, 1997).

We are ill-equipped to grasp the institutional life of *Can Anyone Hear Us?* from our position as non-World Bank employees. But it is clear that as an advocacy piece for participatory methods the study plays an important role in promoting and further institutionalizing PPAs.<sup>15</sup> Could it be the case that in order to make PPAs more potent tools for social and institutional change, we must expect to disempower them and empty or transform their content for acceptance at the centre? In doing this, do we advance gradual reform? If so, it is even more important that the gains and losses incurred as knowledge is processed between and among these scales of reference be made explicit *in their entirety* among those who advocate PPA methodologies and their adoption. The global synthesis effort has great utility as an advocate of institutional reform and as a glimpse, albeit partial and limited, of the enormity of what has been missed in decades of defining poverty in narrowly economic terms. This utility can only grow as we reflect on the imperatives for institutional change that it also represents.

## CONCLUSIONS

Brosius et al (1998) usefully ask: 'When a unified discourse emerges from a range of regional contexts and under various guises. . . how might this make generic the ways local institutions are defined by external (ahistoricized) agents?' We are left to consider how the universalized narrative does just that: renders generic certain aspects of poverty even while it advocates a potentially powerful set of tools for understanding what is *ungeneric* about local experiences of poverty. On some levels, the very act of transferring PPA

findings from a local to global scale lends an external ordering that contains the political, decontextualizes voices and experience, and in doing so, removes the institution itself from the problematic as constructed. Recall that individual PPAs might have the potential to describe very specific contours of poverty in particular contexts with distinct histories that the global analysis occludes. The differences between local reports and the global synthesis reveal as much about the institution, and the confines within which it can digest knowledge, as they do about human suffering and its causes.

Participation, and the institutionalized methodologies that purport to employ it, are 'moving targets' and cannot be taken out of history.<sup>16</sup> PPAs are tools that social scientists, planners and activists have been calling for in a quest for more democratic development strategies. Without a clear understanding of when and how they are applied, written about and later abstracted to central policy-level documents, however, the partial perspective of the global gaze is easily mistaken for complete knowledge. This 'knowledge' can then be used to pacify those who advocate genuine change and democratic processes. Perhaps our most important and responsible task is to keep careful track of the movements of this 'target'. We can do this by asking not only how PPAs are conducted at local levels, but how they change as they are aggregated and processed.

Scholarly attention to local–global transitions in development discourse has explored the divergences in global representations of local problems (Dove, 1998) and the impact of totalizing global narratives on local and regional experience, understanding and definitions of development issues (Pigg, forthcoming; Pigg, 1992; Buttel, 1992; Rangan, 1992). An unavoidable dimension of the question of just what constitutes the 'local' and the 'global' is an ongoing debate about the politics of representation<sup>17</sup> and the power of ethnography employed in the service of colonial (Asad, 1973) and post-colonial (Escobar, 1991) centres of power. If participation ideally represents a dissolution of the ethnographic subject and object – that is to say, if it is a truly collaborative exercise – *then the problem of power in representation centres precisely on the translations of that collaborative exercise for communication to more central, and more powerful, audiences.*

An emerging ethnographic focus on the experience of working within specific institutional orders (Pierce, 1999; Dove, 1999), including the development profession (Kaufmann, 1997), provides a guide for examining the researcher as an agent in this process of translation. These works query what is taken as 'natural' in institutional contexts and in so doing expose power relations and norms not openly acknowledged or understood. In studying the production of development discourse, this vantage point allows us a potentially constructive engagement with the idea of 'development' as a social process composed of agents – not the monolithic force producing hegemonic and totalising discourses that poststructural analyses of development have

portrayed (Escobar, 1992, 1995; Ferguson, 1994), but a complex and multi-layered process of making and re-making 'knowledge'. Ferguson's (1994, p18) observation that 'the thoughts of development bureaucrats are powerfully shaped by the world of acceptable statements and utterances within which they live' is complicated in that this world exists at multiple scales; it is neither constant, singular nor bounded, nor indeed is it inhabited by single-minded professionals (Kaufmann, 1997). Multiple discourses exist and encounter one another in the complex flow of 'knowledge' and practice.

Thus an analysis of the creation of synthetic knowledge from a collection of local studies is not sufficient if it is to conclude that our end product, and the process that created it, simply confirms the existence of a singular dominated 'poor' and a monolithic, dominating World Bank. Rather, the problem involves a complex circulation of knowledge and intervention mediated by agents at every level and scale of analysis. Analysing the practice of creating a global narrative out of local reports is thus as much a reflection on the agency of individual researchers in an institutional context as it is a story of the built-in challenges of abstracting locally gleaned knowledge to a document focused on global patterns. Each individual's practice in this project (from the local-level interaction to the global synthetic initiative) was structured by a set of power relations and expectations that influenced, but did not always determine, which decisions were and were not taken. It is imperative to consider these conditioning realities seriously as they dramatically affect the nature of the 'knowledge' we glean from them (Pottier, 1997). Just as the collective – the institution – benefits from a reflexive imperative, so too do individuals in development practice. Perhaps our most critical – and most fully participatory – question should be: to what extent do our research endeavours serve existing power relationships and to what extent do they work to expose and seek to balance them?

The chances to challenge existing power relationships are substantially increased when there is opportunity for self-critical reflection. Much in the exercise of reflection turns on the ability to render previously taken-for-granted concepts problematic – that is, to recognize and interrogate the natural. Reflection is a tool for improving our understanding of the complex journey from local, lived realities to the products of knowledge that are produced, circulated and used by development policy-makers. Reflection is *not* an act of denying or distancing oneself from previous ideas or work; rather, reflexive engagement with past projects is an imperative feature of adaptive learning. As the social anthropologist Bruce Knauft (1996, p144) suggests: '... reflexive moments that look inward to our own forms of knowledge can stimulate, rather than preclude, reciprocal moments that appreciate the substance of ethnographic diversity. Moments of perspectival critique, and those of bracketed objectivity, can be mutually empowering rather than mutually deconstructing.'

Our own reflection, offered here, is thus in no way an attempt to disassociate from the work we undertook for the *Voices of the Poor* project. On the contrary, it is an exercise in engaging the project more fully and assuming accountability as researchers charged with the task of retelling worlds of poverty. In our view, reflection on the research process is an extension of our commitment to democratic forms of knowledge production.<sup>18</sup>

In conclusion, the production of a universal narrative in this case involved, more or less wittingly, a process of generalization that often seemed to owe more to the political circumstances in 'the centre' than to an accountability to the people whose words we wielded. Our argument has not been against abstraction per se, but rather for an active recognition that *every* abstraction involves an opportunity cost – some features are accentuated while others are diminished. The pattern of how opportunity costs fall is an urgent matter, and needs to involve the views of all those involved in the knowledge production process, not just those at the centre. Only in attending to this do we preserve the potential of participation to become engagement – and for that engagement to translate, fully and meaningfully, into institutional transformation. Without sensitivity towards, and dialogue with, those our global narrative claims to represent, the realities of those individuals and groups in participatory knowledge production can come to 'count' only in particularly biased and distorted ways. There is a need, to paraphrase Ribot (1996), for responsible, democratic abstraction, or 'no generalization without representation'. This is the crux of the ethnographic challenge posed by participatory methodologies and the very idea of aggregating them.

## NOTES

- 1 We are grateful to Jo Beall, Michelle Beesten, Christopher Brooke, Andrea Cornwall, Steve Curtis, Michael Dove, Shelley Feldman, Ravi Kanbur, Sarah Koch-Schulte, Phil McMichael, Deepa Narayan, Patti Petesch, Gretchen E. Schafft, Robert Torres, Annyce Turco and, in particular, Kai Schafft for wisdom, insight and support in writing this chapter. The views expressed, and any errors, are our own.
- 2 We refer to knowledge 'production' since knowledge is itself a practice insofar as it emerges within a particular set of social relations and institutional dynamics. Knowledge is not simply the revelation of facts; it is itself productive and reproductive of specific social and power relationships. In this case we intentionally refer to the global document as 'knowledge' rather than 'information'. The latter reserves some agency for the consumer while the former implies that the final product, the knowledge, has already been formulated and is delivered as definitive.
- 3 *Can Anyone Hear Us?* is the first volume of the three-volume *Voices of the Poor* series published by Oxford University Press and the World Bank. The second volume, *Crying Out for Change*, is a synthesis of data from methodologically standardized field studies conducted in 23 countries. Volume three, *From Many*

- Lands*, provides a series of country case studies and presents a discussion of region-specific patterns of poverty and vulnerability. We worked as research assistants to this project during its data coding and analysis phases (March to July 1999), performing tasks ranging from document coding and coding protocol development to data content analysis and writing. The draft report produced from this work was submitted to the World Bank in July 1999, where the volume was edited and reworked before its publication in 2000.
- 4 It is important to engage and understand the implications of the World Bank's growing interest in cultivating its identity as a 'knowledge bank'. Providing 'knowledge' is increasingly identified as a primary function of the Bank: the introductory pages of its website, for example, prominently feature a quotation from Bank President James Wolfensohn that reads: 'What we as a development community can do is help countries – by providing financing, yes; but even more important, by providing knowledge and lessons learned about the challenges and how to address them' (see also Hildyard, 1997, pii). The World Bank's emphasis on its role as a supplier of knowledge, rather than as a source of information, however, can easily obscure the bureaucratic and political filters through which Bank-produced 'knowledge' passes.
  - 5 The Voices of the Poor process, also discussed by Adan et al and Chambers (this volume), was originally called Consultations with the Poor but adopted the title Voices of the Poor in late 1999. This chapter discusses the process of reviewing World Bank PPAs, published as Narayan et al, 2000.
  - 6 The final published version of this report, *Voices of the Poor: Can Anyone Hear Us?* claims analyses of 81 PPAs conducted in a total of 50 countries, as an additional eight reports were added to the study after we concluded our research on the draft global synthesis for the World Bank.
  - 7 For a period of about a week, consultants on the research team sorted through the boxes of documents sent to us from the World Bank's Washington headquarters. In general, we quickly skimmed the text, selecting reports that gave coverage to particular issues such as vulnerability, social exclusion and the gendered dimensions of poverty, as well as reports that contained relatively abundant direct quotes from respondents or otherwise incorporated ethnographic and/or qualitative data in their analyses. Reports were given a preliminary A, B, or C rating based on these criteria. All documents with an 'A' rating were included in the set, as well as some 'B' documents, while all others were disqualified.
  - 8 It is important to note this and other weaknesses in our method. Although the coding tree evolved through the progressive reading of reports, we were not able to revisit the documents that had been coded with a first-iteration coding tree at the beginning of the exercise, in order to recode with a more sophisticated coding schema. Furthermore, there were inconsistencies in how the qualitative data analysis software program we were using delineated individual text units. These units could range from a single line in some documents to entire paragraphs in others, and the software rendered the task of tallying the number of text units coded for an individual topic of interest (for instance, 'social exclusion' or 'effective formal institution') a methodologically uncertain exercise. In many cases it was impossible

- 9 As a matter of course, the World Bank has tended to limit its reflections to internal discussion (the recent online public discussion of the Bank's *World Development Report 2000* is exceptional in this regard). Despite calls for greater transparency, the norm for reflexive critique within the Bank was made deeply explicit when the *Washington Post* printed an internal memo circulated by James Wolfensohn on his first day as President, which read: 'Dear Colleague: I expect from you loyalty to the institution and to each other. . . Criticisms must be internal and constructive. . . I will regard externally-voiced criticism of the Bank as a desire to find alternative employment' (quoted in Caufield, 1996, p312). In our case, not surprisingly, criticism considered constructive existed within particular confines, confines we in turn largely internalized.
- 10 The press release accompanying the launch of *Can Anyone Hear Us?* claimed that 60,000 poor people had been consulted. In a different press release, the number was a more modest 40,000.
- 11 For instance, a new World Bank initiative called 'Global Coalitions for Voices of the Poor' might provide more direct engagement between and among movements on behalf of people living in poverty. While this project is currently in its preliminary phase, it might be indicative of the wider institutional impact of a study like *Can Anyone Hear Us?*
- 12 As noted in Note 6, inconsistencies in how the qualitative data analysis software program we were using delineated individual text units – which could range from a single line in some documents to entire paragraphs in others – rendered the task of tallying the number of text units coded for an individual topic of interest (for instance, 'social exclusion' or 'effective formal institution') methodologically questionable. This point is noted in the methodological discussion at the beginning of *Can Anyone Hear Us?*
- 13 Once the data set had been coded, researchers produced data output of PPA text excerpts coded for particular topics of interest. In an all-team meeting that took place about two months into the project, it was decided that the central theme that would unify our treatment of the data would be the notion of 'institutions in crisis'; this theme became the guiding assumption for writing the report entitled *Crumbling Foundations, Conflicting Relations: Gender and Poverty in the 1990s*, the draft report submitted to the World Bank by the research team, which eventually became *Can Anyone Hear Us?*
- 14 While *Can Anyone Hear Us?* explicitly addresses the limitations of making statements about 'poor people everywhere' based on the study, publicity and official representations of the book went far to suggest that the book could do just that. The important point here is not just the accuracy of the claims, but that there is perhaps something suspicious about the need to accompany World Bank knowledge products with press releases at all. The exaggerated representation of these products lends credence to their role, in part, as tools to improve the public perception of the World Bank.
- 15 In correspondence following the launch of the book, one of the researchers, raising questions about the press materials, was told by a development professional to accept the content of publicity materials – correct or not – as 'inevitable'.

- 16 This phrase was used in an analysis of institutional adoption of cost–benefit analysis by Michael Dove at the Conference on Cost–Benefit Analysis, Yale University, 1999.
- 17 Dove (1999) offers a synopsis of the ongoing debate about ethnographic representation: ‘This debate commenced in the mid–1980s with claims by interpretive scholars, based often on analyses of the implicit premises of colonial–era anthropology, that representation is domination and therefore must be avoided (Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Marcus and Fischer, 1986; Roth, 1989). This critique of representation was countered with claims that the critics employ the same conceptual tools that they attempt to deny to others and that their work further inhibits the possibilities within ethnography for praxis (Parpart, 1993; Roseberry, 1996; Sangren, 1988; Spiro, 1992).’
- 18 It is important to clarify why we continued to work on this project even as we recognized its seemingly intractable challenges. The brief answer lies in a combination of factors, all of which were the subject of continuous discussion and contemplation. They include: loyalty to our supervisor and to the belief that our continued contribution would be able to mitigate the more egregious distortions involved in the project; a genuine commitment to the decentering of knowledge production; and the high visibility of the project, first as a *World Development Report* background paper and, as we learned quite late in the project, a book. As graduate students, the financial inducements of the project were also an important factor. We are currently engaged in a more nuanced ethnographic exploration of the question of our own complicity in the process and problems described in this chapter; this will be discussed more thoroughly in a future paper.

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