

Researching Cooperation agencies:
Methodological responses to technological change
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THE RESEARCH PROJECT

In late 1998, the World Bank published its annual World Development Report. These reports are often both significant and controversial, and the 1998-9 Report was no exception. The chosen topic was *Knowledge for Development* (World Bank 1998). Since James Wolfensohn's appointment as World Bank President two years earlier, the Bank had been refocusing many of its activities and practices around Wolfensohn's vision of becoming a "knowledge bank". Much of what had been going on had attracted little external attention thus far and the World Development Report can be credited for bringing a new level of awareness in the development communities about the relationship between knowledge and development.

Almost at the same moment that the Report was published, the British Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) announced a new research programme, "Future Governance", that would seek to develop new knowledge about policy processes internationally. One of its particular interests was in the way that policy ideas spread across national boundaries. In the Centre of African Studies at the University of Edinburgh we were coming to the end of a large research grant and were thinking of new proposals. One of these was for a comparative study of a set of development cooperation agencies. The almost simultaneous appearance of the World Development Report and the ESRC programme led us to rework our idea somewhat. Not really yet aware of how the knowledge interests of the World Bank were beginning to spread across the bilateral community too, we decided to include the knowledge-for-development focus within our overall proposal to examine what appeared to be the emergence of new ways of working amongst development cooperation agencies. It was thus, perhaps through serendipity, that we embarked on a research project that quickly became primarily focused on the discourse and practice of knowledge-based aid (King 2000).

Thus, from a very broad concern with changes in agency discourse and practice, it was through then conducting research on agencies that we came to a narrower focus on the ways in which knowledge had become an important element of this discourse and practice. In this sense, the focus of our theoretical and empirical explorations emerges primarily from its grounding in the data, although the importance of the focus could have been derived from an extrapolation of trends external to development cooperation agencies, given the emergence of accounts of knowledge economies and knowledge management.

¹ This is a personal reflection on research carried out jointly with my colleague, Professor Kenneth King. The substantive and theoretical debates of the project can be accessed from its homepage: <http://www.ed.ac.uk/centas/futgov-home.html>

For the purpose of the funding application, we had to select a set of agencies in order to explore in detail how the new ways of working were emerging, if that was indeed the case. Whilst both of us had knowledge of, and working relations with, a number of agencies², we did not have the current and detailed knowledge to select those agencies that would be the most interesting case studies of the new approach to aid. Nonetheless, based on the knowledge that we did have, and the practicalities of running a research project, we selected four case study agencies. From the multilaterals, we decided only to select the World Bank, although we were very aware of the growing importance of the European Union as a provider of official development assistance (ODA). Nonetheless, the Bank was not only the biggest player in development cooperation but also often the trendsetter, including in knowledge-for-development. We decided on the British Department for International Development (DFID) both as an agency with which we had good contacts, and as one that was undergoing a process of rapid transformation (including a name change) under the new British Government. We selected the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) as Sweden appeared to be a leader in thinking and practice about key trends in development cooperation such as sector wide approaches and nationally-led development partnerships. Our fourth case study was the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). Japan had been the largest bilateral donor throughout the 1990s in absolute terms. More importantly, however, JICA was the one major agency that was not located in the North-West. Thus, it offered the possibility of practices and discourses that emerged from a radically different cultural understanding.

A first phase of interviews showed that issues about knowledge and development did have resonance for all four agencies. However, it also importantly indicated some major divergences as well as convergences of language and activities. Crucially, this phase of research also began a process of dialogue with the agencies rather than extraction. Thus, we found ourselves invited to a number of agency-oriented fora to participate in discussions about knowledge and development; and to contribute to on-going agency development of their policies and programmes in these areas. As a result, our research began to move early on from mere observation into active participation in the construction of the field we were studying. This appears to be an extended version of Giddens' (1984) notion of the double hermeneutic in which mutual knowledge construction extends into direct involvement in the agencies' own processes of developing theories and practices of knowledge-based aid.

The project was funded for three years, from October 1999 to September 2002, so this paper is written towards the close of this period. In it I will reflect on how the brief story I have told here is of broader significance methodologically, pointing as it does to some new issues for researchers in development-related fields. I do so mindful of the relatively limited existing literature on researching development cooperation agencies and the ways in which the challenges of researching such agencies are reconfigured by changes in the ways that those agencies operate (King and McGrath 2002).

Accounts of agency policy and practice tend to polarise between "official versions" (e.g. Kapur et al. 1997) and polemical attacks (e.g. Hancock 1989) and have been heavily focused on the multilateral agencies. Some, however, have more successfully attempted critical engagement,

² Professor King was already the author of a book on *Aid and Education* (King 1991) as well as a number of articles; and both of us had experience of consultancy and consultations for agencies.

either through an analysis that uses national case studies of the relationship between stated policy and its operationalisation (e.g. Mosley et al. 1990) or through a sensitive and reflective negotiation of access to a single agency (e.g. Jones 1992). Whilst Crewe and Harrison (1998) talk of an ethnography of aid, even their work does little to get inside bilateral or multilateral agencies. Valuable though their approach is, their case studies are essentially of a large NGO (with real insider insights, as one of them worked for this NGO) and of a project of a multilateral agency. Our larger study is an unusual attempt (cf. King 1991) to look in depth across a group of bilateral and multilateral agencies in a way that allows for critical dialogue with the agencies. It is also an attempt to produce a rich sociological reading that moves between the realms of text and practice, difficult though this is.

KNOWLEDGE THEORY AND KNOWLEDGE RESEARCH

It is important to consider the effect that immersion in the literature on knowledge had for our researching of knowledge practices and discourses. Coming from a comparative education perspective, much of the current knowledge debate serves to reinforce the central importance within that discipline of context. The British pioneer of comparative education, Sir Michael Sadler, writing more than a century ago, emphasised the danger of decontextualising knowledge through careless borrowing from other experiences:

We cannot wander at pleasure among the educational systems of the world, like a child strolling through a garden, and pick of a flower from one bush and some leaves from another, and then expect that if we stick what we have gathered into the soil at home, we shall have a living plant. (Sadler 1900: 49)

At the end of the twentieth century, similar sentiments were to be expressed by Joseph Stiglitz, then Chief Economist of the World Bank, two years prior to receiving a Nobel Prize for his work on knowledge and information:

the overwhelming variety and complexity of human societies requires the localization of knowledge (Stiglitz 1999: 7).

Thus, knowledge theory reinforced my professional training in stressing the importance of context. Nonetheless, comparative work faces the challenge of paying more than lip service to this notion. Of crucial importance here is the extent to which it is possible to understand multiple contexts, particularly within the constraints of a time-limited research project. In my other disciplinary home of African Studies, much of the debate in this regard centres on the issue of language. As Mbembe puts it:

It should be noted, as far as fieldwork is concerned, that there is less and less. Knowledge of local languages, vital to any theoretical and philosophical understanding, is deemed unnecessary. (Mbembe 2001: 7)

Our limitations in this regard must be noted. Whilst it can be argued that English is the language of development, particularly knowledge-for-development, it is clear that our lack of competence in Japanese or Swedish had a double impact on our research. First, it made inaccessible those

parts of the “archive” of Sida and JICA written in their national languages. Second, it limited the extent to which we could claim to understand the culturally-embedded meanings behind texts and practices. Nonetheless, the experiences of this project convince me of the worth of attempting such research. This points to the importance of acknowledging such limitations and seeking to address them honestly and openly in research. Thus, it became particularly important to check meanings with agency staff, academics and students from Japan and Sweden; to seek to understand perceptions of how discourses and practices were culturally-embedded; and to explore with the assistance of colleagues some of what remained untranslated amongst agency documents.

There are a number of other elements of knowledge (and learning) theory that also have implications for research on organisations such as this project. First, theory emphasises the networked, social and distributed nature of knowledge. Second, work on the difference between tacit and codified knowledge points both to the importance of the former, and to the difficulty of accessing it.³ Third, Argyris and Schön’s (1978) work on organisational learning has made the important distinction between “espoused theory”, that to which an organisation is officially committed, and “theory-in-use”, that which appears to be manifested in its practices.

These point to the need to get beyond the conventional case study blend of analysing official documents and backing this up with a series of interviews with key informants within the organisations. Rather, it raises the challenge of focusing clearly on where knowledge is inscribed in policies and practices, and exploring this further through the virtual, team-based and networked nature of the contemporary organisation. Repeat interviews, many of them with more than one informant and with different combinations of informants, often reflected the ways in which staff chose to organise and present themselves for interactions but also shed valuable light on the fragmented and sometimes contradictory nature of discourses and practices. Meeting some of the same agency staff in interviews; workshops within their agency and at the inter-agency level; and more informally at conferences, receptions and in canteens enriched this process.

Argyris and Schön’s work also pointed to the importance of seeing large organisations such as these as having an internal architecture that makes the bridge between a study of the organisation-as-monolith and the organisation-as-individuals. Grounded in organisational theory as well as learning theory, their account highlights the nature of organisations as a collection of departmental or divisional fiefdoms, increasingly overlaid by a series of cross-departmental structures that often operate with close reference back to the dominant departmental model. Thus, it was imperative to examine agencies also at the level of some of these structures. This took us into a variety of departments and units and into mini case studies of particular knowledge projects. Foucault (1972) has already popularised the notion of an “archaeology of knowledge” in his study of disciplinary discourses. However, I wish to reuse the notion in a somewhat different way that relates our study of knowledge to some of the practices of the field archaeologist. Part of the challenge for the archaeologist is to understand how the site relates to its broader context, both spatially and theoretically. However, the site will often be excavated through identification of potentially significant locations within it where a series of test pits and

³ Essentially, tacit knowledge refers to that which is understood internally by an individual but which has not been systematically expressed, whilst codified knowledge is that which has been explicitly and systematically expressed.

trenches will be dug; some of which will prove unrewarding and will be quickly abandoned. This is similar to our approach. The overall picture, significance and context were essential but we chose to explore each individual agency also through a focus on what appeared to be significant projects, activities and departments. These were each specific to the agency in question. This was a comparative project at the level of overall methodology and research questions, not at the narrow level of common and rigid research tools and interview schedules.

Key social theory accounts of knowledge have highlighted the close relationship between knowledge and power. This was an issue for the research project. It was important to seek to maintain access to what are powerful agencies and to seek to understand their motivations and practices in a sensitive way. However, it would be impossible to ignore the depth and breadth of the critique of the World Bank in particular and aid in general. The sheer scale of criticisms of the Bank over more than fifty years and the degree of anger and hurt it has caused did influence how the Bank's policies and practices were interpreted. Nonetheless, it was also important to avoid an approach in which the power of agencies was overstated and agency denied to Southern actors.

Perhaps the most challenging aspect of the project was how to research the virtual life of the modern agency. Much of the practice and theory-in-use of agencies is positioned on intranets and in discussion groups and emails. Some of this was made open to us or was in the public domain, in the case of some discussion groups, but much of it is necessarily hidden. Our major strategy for accessing such virtual knowledge second-hand was through a series of life history interviews with agency staff in which we asked them to relate how their everyday practices within their organisations had changed over time. This is necessarily a partial and problematic approach.

RESEARCHING DOCUMENTS IN A DIGITAL WORLD

Much of the data that has been collected and analysed is documentary. However, it is important to note some of the differences in the process of collecting and analysing such texts as compared to a decade earlier when Kenneth King (1991) was writing *Aid and Education*. First, the growth of desktop publishing and the internet have combined with agency concerns with greater transparency, or better public relations, to bring about a step change in the amount of documents that are now produced by agencies.

Second, the internet also has resulted in the easier availability of much of this literature. What was once "grey literature" that had to be physically acquired, often with the good offices of a agency colleague, and which not too long ago, prior to the appearance of the photocopier, would simply not have been available for more than consultation, is now available in huge quantities without leaving the University.

Third, this shifts the challenge of research much more from collection to selection and means that there is far more to be analysed than previously.

Fourth, the emergence of organisational intranets has led to decisions being taken about which documents should be in the public domain. This often appears to be done rather

unsystematically but does force the researcher to seek for reasons behind such decisions. From the limited access that we did get to intranets it appeared that decisions were more likely to be based on innocent motivations rather than a desire to keep things hidden. Bilateral agency disclosure policies are largely determined outwith the agency by overall government policies. Thus, DFID's policies and practices reflect the partial acceptance of freedom of information by the current British Government and its fascination with electronic governance. During the project JICA was forced to respond to a radical opening up of Japanese Government documentation to public scrutiny. Sida has been subject to full public access to its documents since 1988. The need to disclose more could be expected to have had an impact on what is said in documents, but this is not amenable to easy analysis. However, it is also not an issue that arose in interviews and discussions.

Fifth, researching agencies' websites has a greater fluidity than traditional archive or library work. Over the life of the project a number of documents disappeared from websites or had their addresses changed. The changing patterns of presence and absence of documents and topics on websites and of overall site architecture are themselves indicators of changes in both discourse and practice. A good example of this is the treatment of the theme of knowledge on the World Bank's site. This has gone through a number of phases in the past three years. At times the Bank's concern with knowledge is evidenced by a clear link from the organisational home page. At others, however, it has only been through having pages bookmarked that a long trawl through sub-menus across a series of pages has been avoided. The range of "knowledge projects" accessible through the main knowledge page also has shifted over time. Some have never featured whilst other established projects have appeared or disappeared.

Naturally, the central methodological issues of textual analysis remain. In keeping with the emphasis on context earlier in this paper, I favour a critical hermeneutical position in which text and context are both analysed. Whilst there are merits in the post-modernist position that texts cannot be understood in an absolute sense, a careful reading of texts in conjunction with their contexts of production does permit a plausible account of the meaning of a text in which both the text and the reader are historically located. In talking of contexts, it is worth highlighting the historical dimension. As Watson (1998) has argued, comparative education has a duty to contest the atemporality of much of current society and research. It was important for our research to keep in mind that knowledge had always been part of the business of agencies. Equally we needed to remember that many of the new ways of working (such as sectoral programmes) had been tried before. Moreover, we believed that individuals', organisations' and communities' perceptions of what was occurring with knowledge-based aid were deeply shaped by their conscious and unconscious readings of the past.

INTERVIEWING AGENCY STAFF

Knowledge-based aid both resides within certain projects and hence locations in an agency and infuses (or does not infuse) the whole range of agency activities and departments. This needed to be reflected in interviews. Moreover, the challenge of researching four agencies meant that fieldwork was conducted in short bursts, with repeat visits to each agency over the three years of the project. Furthermore, in order to allow for additional visits off the project budget, short trips

were often tied to other meetings to which the researchers had been invited. I shall return to this later.

Sampling was necessarily a mixture of the purposive and opportunistic. Whilst we had a small group of key informants who had agreed to assist the research within their own agency, other interviews had to depend on whether the particular individuals identified were available at the times we were visiting the agency. For each visit we had a list of people that we wished to interview but this was revised as our interviews progressed. Here it is worth pointing to the great importance in research of this kind of attempting a very rapid initial analysis of interview data. Comparative research across agencies makes fieldwork very intensive and it is imperative to be able to abandon certain lines of inquiry and to embrace others based on an awareness of what has been said in the interviews during a visit.

Agency interests in knowledge were very dynamic during the period of research. This meant that certain issues were important for agency staff at specific moments in time. Equally, the horizons of sectoral and country-focused staff were strongly shaped by new initiatives and by important deadlines. One knowledge-related example can give a flavour of this. In June 2001 World Bank staff working on knowledge projects were very aware of an internal evaluation of their work that was to lead to a new proposal to the Board about the future of knowledge activities. It was into this context that we entered when visiting the Bank at the time. The point here is that in such a research context it is crucial that researchers be aware of what is uppermost in the minds of those they are seeking to interview. Having such an awareness had clear implications for the nature of interviews. Whilst they could be described as semi-structured, in the time-honoured way of much of qualitative research; this would not do justice to the often dialogic nature of the intervention. Here was an area that was both new to the agency and of which few outsiders had any knowledge. We were thus unusual visitors who also could be sources of knowledge. Thus, many, though by no means all, interviews had more of a sense of a conversation and knowledge sharing about them. Given the critique that we were developing of much of agency practice as knowledge extraction, it was also desirable on ethical grounds that our work should avoid the same criticism as far as was possible. Moreover, this approach could also be justified epistemologically as part of a broader concern to make explicit the standpoints of researchers as well as researched. Again, this conforms to a broader hermeneutical understanding of the nature of research.

Whilst it was crucial to reach those in charge of the major knowledge projects within the agencies; it was also important to explore the perception of these projects from elsewhere in the agencies. One approach to this was to interview members of staff involved in other major agency initiatives, in order to examine whether there had been any influence on these from the knowledge projects. Another way that we approached this was to go to staff in the sectoral and country departments of agencies involved in the everyday activities of development cooperation. The aim here was to see what if any of the knowledge discourses and practices had filtered down to the operational staff. In particular, we were concerned to see what difference if any had been made to their everyday practices.

From our interviewing, and some internal agency documents, it became clear to us that there were widespread concerns about the exclusion of field-based agency staff from the knowledge revolution. There was no funding within our proposal to allow for field visits. Nonetheless, a

number of field staff were contacted either when we were in the field ourselves through other activities or when we met them at non-project related meetings.

As noted earlier, we were aware of the importance of understanding the longer history of agency's knowledge discourses and practices. These did not simply spring from the void in the late 1990s but existed in other forms and under other names previously. It was here that the small number of life history interviews with agency staff, mentioned previously, played an important role.

The recurrent nature of interviewing was very valuable. Some particularly valuable informants were interviewed six or more times. The multiplicity of interviews allowed for the expansion and clarification of points but, more crucially, allowed for some sense of temporal dynamics to be introduced to the interview data.

The value of joint interviews was not identified in our original proposal. However, given that some 15% of interviews were with two or more agency staff, it is worth reflecting a little on this type of interview. Such combinations were at the suggestion of agency staff. Sometimes the rationale was that it would be valuable for a more junior colleague to be present for the discussion, as a way of accessing the tacit knowledge of their colleague and the researcher(s). However, on a number of occasions such interviews were with staff from different units who found themselves having intersecting interests in knowledge-based aid. Thus, it appeared that the joint interview was designed to allow for the exploration on the agency side of some of the dynamics of working together, including using the interview as a way of establishing certain positions. This was of value to the research as it opened up new dimensions for analysis, particularly when certain individuals appeared in more than one such interview, alongside different colleagues. Without attempting to organise focus groups of busy agency staff, such joint interviews did provide some insights into organisational architecture and the range of internal opinions and their interplay. This experience highlights the importance of flexible research design as opposed to the current fascination with over-specification before the research has even begun.

Some interviews were joint in the different sense of both researchers being present. This accounted for about 10% of interviews. Typically this was where the interview was the first in a series at an agency or with a particularly important informant. In these cases, we informally divided up the areas we would cover and combined our notes after discussion. Having two interviewers present in the field was important in first visits to some agencies for securing access for myself as the more junior researcher. However, it also proved valuable in allowing a greater coverage in one trip and permitting a dialogue at the time about what was being found and priorities for the rest of the trip. What impact the presence of two interviewers had on interviews is less apparent but also worth considering.

Some interviews were invaluable in assisting the documentary analysis. A number of interviewees were identified because of their key participation in the drafting of important agency documents and these interviews allowed greater insight into the processes and rationales that lay behind reports such as the 1998-9 World Development Report.

VIRTUAL PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

The emergence of a knowledge focus in agencies is inextricably linked to the development of new information and communications technologies (ICTs), most notably email and the world wide web. It is not surprising, therefore, that much of the debate about knowledge should have taken place through the medium of on-line discussion groups. The World Bank, sometimes with external partners such as Panos, has conducted a number of email based consultations, including on the 1998-9 World Development Report. Major knowledge projects, such as the Global Knowledge Partnership; the Global Development Network, the International Development Mark-up Language Initiative and the Development Gateway have also used this as a major part of their planning activities. DFID also had an electronic consultation for the information and knowledge sections of its 2000 White Paper.

Such discussions thus seemed a potentially rich source of data for our project and both of us participated in a number of such discussions. However, the overall benefits in research terms did not compensate for the time expended on this activity. None of the discussions we participated had a heavy involvement of agency staff. Rather, discussions were dominated by NGO staff and consultants. Far too often, interventions read more like advertising of the individual or the organisation rather than useful contributions to the discussion. Thus, as a way of accessing agency thinking directly, the discussions were generally of little value. Nonetheless, some moderators did suggest that there were a number of agency staff members who were lurking in such discussions. This highlights one of the challenges of using such groups for data collection, that participation can be hidden. What does emerge in data collection terms is the negative message that such groups are not seen as valuable by most agency staff. This was confirmed in a number of interviews. Staff did not see such groups as an efficient way of gathering knowledge. Instead, many saw such discussions as a public relations exercise designed to show that the agency was interested in outside opinions. However, staff had their own ways of accessing such opinions or needed knowledge that they continued to see as being superior to such sources.

This is not to say that on-line discussion groups are not a useful field for research. There has been valuable work done already on such groups at the sociological and methodological levels (Paccagnella 1997; Moran 1999). However, for a study of knowledge-based aid they are of surprisingly little relevance.

RESEARCH AS PARTICIPATION

A little of what we did under the project could be seen as falling under the traditional notion of participant observation. In the World Bank, for instance, it was possible to get passes that allowed relatively unlimited access to buildings. We were given office space to work from and we were free to visit canteens unaccompanied. Thus it was possible to have a range of interactions with staff, including participation in elements of the social life of the organisation, such as the monthly Irish lunch. In this way a more ethnographic sense of the organisation could be developed. However, this was very different from DFID. There, interaction with staff on the premises is limited to the interviews or invitational seminars, and researchers do not have access

to canteens unless accompanied by staff members. This difference in attitude was justified by security concerns dating from before September 2001.

I have already noted that the practice of the research often moved into dialogue. This was also illustrated by a number of invitations to present our views about elements of knowledge-based aid in agency seminars and workshops, and requests to provide commentary on certain policy documents and initiatives. Participation in such seminars played an important dual role of providing a very rich source of data about agency thinking and internal interactions, as well as allowing for feedback on our provisional analyses.

However, it was through mainly non-project activities that the best ethnographic sense of agencies emerged and where we came closest to taking on the guise of participant observers. This is important to note, for discussions of methodology typically give the impression that the research project is the only point at which the researcher interacts with the field of study. This was not our case, and it was in our other work that much of importance emerged.

As members of the secretariat of the Working Group for International Cooperation in Skills Development, we both had the opportunity once a year during the project to spend time at meetings that brought together staff from a range of agencies including those that we were researching. As participants in these meetings we got a broader insight into trends in agency thinking. These meetings are a good example of inter-agency knowledge sharing and provided much food for reflection. However, it could be argued that the informal interactions with agency staff, particularly from our case study agencies, were equally valuable. Although it was not for one of our four case study agencies, taking part in an evaluation of Danish assistance to skills development, also gave valuable practical insights into the knowledge activities of agencies.

This concern to link the research project to our broader practice was an important strength of our work, allowing multiple spaces for interaction with agency staff and varied insights into their worlds-of-work. We also made use of other points of potential connection with the project. Professor King is editor of the bi-annual newsletter, *Norrag News*, which provides commentary on development cooperation trends and provides a forum for researchers, practitioners and policymakers to interact in print. Two of the issues during the project's life span were focused on knowledge-based aid. These provided opportunities to publicise the research; to get further insights from staff of the case study agencies; and to link these to broader debates about knowledge and development. We also focused one of the annual African Studies Conferences in Edinburgh on development cooperation more generally. Under Professor King's convenorship, the 2001 Oxford Conference on Education and Development had a strong knowledge and development focus.

DISSEMINATION AS RESEARCH

The project highlighted the importance of a cyclical approach to the different phases of the research process. From early in the life of the project, we paid considerable attention to the dissemination of work-in-progress as a means of further data collection. This is evident in some of the comments above about agency workshops and publications such as *Norrag News*. Time

was spent in placing project papers not only on the project website but also on other prominent research development research websites. These papers were widely advertised, particularly to agency staff. Several of these papers also were presented at conferences. Through doing this, we received a number of comments from agency staff that enriched our understandings. We also developed contacts with other researchers in what is a very new and disparate field. A number of interviews were structured around responses to analyses of earlier visits to the particular agency. On some occasions, critiques of some of our analyses led to us being provided with documentation that had hitherto not been shown to us.

One important element that had been written into the initial research design was a mid-term seminar to assist in the sharpening of research focus. We were fortunate to have the support of the German Foundation for International Development in this. They hosted a week-long seminar for 25 participants in Bonn in April 2001. This brought together staff from the four case study agencies, plus German agencies, and researchers from both North and South. This was particularly valuable in allowing the space for lengthy discussions about knowledge-based aid in what was the first such forum for this topic. Moreover, the book that arose from this meeting (Gmelin, King and McGrath 2001) was yet another resource for our method of dissemination as research.

As with many other elements of the research practice, this focus on dissemination as research is in keeping with the nature of the topic being explored. Knowledge sharing as an iterative process became both a focus of study and a way of researching.

ISSUES OF WIDER METHODOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Several of the points made when talking about the specificities of this research project appear to be of wider salience. Having said that, it is also important to note the role that is given implicitly in what has been said to personality and individual career paths. Thus, there is no intention of providing a methodological blueprint.

There is a danger in the current trajectory of research training for doctoral students in Britain that a standard battery of tools will be used regardless of the research area. However, this research has served to reinforce the importance of a methodological approach that is tailored to the theoretical and substantive concerns of the project and the interests and competencies of the researchers. It highlights the importance of intuition over "recipe books".

The research was comparative and was conducted from a professional grounding in comparative concerns. It reiterates, but does not answer, the challenge of doing multi-country research without participation from researchers from the range of countries under study. It also points to the challenge of being able to compare discourses and practices across large organisations. Rather than adopting a narrow comparativism in which a common structure was imposed on the four case studies, the intention throughout the research project was to allow the issues of general significance to emerge from the specificities of the cases. This can only be done through sensitive and flexible research practice, not through exhaustive initial design work. By constantly searching for different aspects of the agencies' knowledge work, the research

highlighted the complexity inherent in the field. This is to be preferred to an approach that sought to narrow learning to a few key themes that all four agencies seemed to have in common. Given the diversities encountered in each agency, it could indeed be argued that much of the comparative analysis was concerned with why things happened in one project but not in another of the same agency. Finally on the subject of comparative methodology, the research also reinforced the centrality of historical contexts. Each of the bilateral agencies to a large extent positions itself, and is perceived by others, in terms of national histories of colonialism and anti-colonialism. Equally, the World Bank cannot be understood without reference to its role in structural adjustment, for instance.

In this project we were deeply concerned with the impact of ICTs on the discourses and practices of development cooperation agencies. Much of our research was pursued using the same technologies that were transforming the everyday practices of those we studied. On reflection, e-research brings both new opportunities and challenges for research. In the case of researching agencies, there has been an explosion of accessibility of texts. Yet this brings with it challenges. First, it can lead to information overload and raises the importance of how a manageable set of data is collected. Second, it can lead to a bias towards the easier to get web-based texts rather than the far more elusive knowledge that is hidden on intranets and in emails. Most importantly, the project highlighted the challenge of researching the everyday life of the networked organisation.

The project also suggested that the use of multiple and joint interviews was important. Such an approach to interviewing, though partial, did bring a far richer sense of the dynamism of the field than would otherwise have been likely. Moreover, it also contributed to the complexity and contestations that appear in the analysis.

Dialogue was an important motif of the research. From design through to dissemination, we had a concern with maintaining a critical engagement with the agencies that were under study. This was informed by a concern that, as far as possible, they should be subjects rather than objects of the research. This led us to discuss both approaches and findings on a regular basis with agency staff. However, it also required us to make the difficult decisions when interpretations differed. It also led us, where feasible, to shape the project's timelines and foci to those of the agencies. Such an approach necessarily makes research more open to capture by powerful organisations and individuals. Nonetheless, it does allow the research to be more organic, in the sense of growing whilst remaining rooted in the cases being researched. This organic quality is likely to make research appear more plausible to the researched. This in turn can be expected to improve its likely impact. This is important as the research sought to inform both academic theory and development practice.

Too much of the recent work on development cooperation has privileged theory over practice, or vice versa. An anti-development literature has grown up that is opposed to the premises of development but is largely incapable of engaging with it to bring about positive change. Indeed, it tends to see such change as impossible. On the other hand, a literature of development management and planning provides little theoretical rigour or critique of the assumptions of development and aid. Through a strategy of critical engagement, it was our intention to chart a middle course, where we remained mindful of the theoretical and practical weaknesses of

development discourse but sought to understand and interact with agency staff, few of whom are the

The dissemination-as-research approach is also worth reiterating. The organic nature of the research led to a cyclical rather than linear process. More significantly, the production of working papers, the *Norrag News* issues and the mid-term book all provided important opportunities for discussion about the research with agency staff and others. It was both through writing and sharing this writing that most insights came.

The project's methods and analysis were deeply grounded in our wider professional practice. This is a point that is generally absent from methodological discussions. Nonetheless, it was a central element of our approach that we should seek to use this research to inform elements of our teaching, advocacy, consultancy and other research work; and that these should also inform the project. Our legitimacy in the eyes of many agency staff came from these other activities. Moreover, many of our insights came from our interactions with staff of these and other agencies in different contexts.

This series of reflections on a single research project are quite lengthy. However, this is because such research, like agencies themselves, appears to be entering into a new way of working. Some elements, such as participation in discussion groups, do not live up to the hype. Others, such as the growth of web-based texts point to new opportunities. Overall, the new research possibilities and the new practices of agencies raise a number of important issues for methodology that may extend beyond the immediate context.

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