

A Perfect Storm: what happens to women in the context of the perverse incentives of development aid funding

A joint Development Studies Association-International Gender Studies Workshop, held at Oxford University Department for International Development (ODID), Saturday 5th February 2011

Report by Fenella Porter and Tina Wallace



Plenary session - photo by Janette Davies, IGS

Introduction

This workshop was held to explore in more depth some of the issues arising from the dominant aid paradigm and their effect on the way development is being done, especially in relation to what is happening to women. An initial paper, 'A Perfect Storm' was written by Tina Wallace and Fenella Porter, and seven speakers were invited to share their analysis based on their own experiences; the speakers were drawn from the research and the NGO communities.

60 people, including academics, students, NGO practitioners and consultants, attended the workshop. The day was divided between presentations (some formal, some informal) and small group and plenary discussions. The participation and engagement of those who came was high and many issues and ideas were discussed. The purpose of this report is to try to capture some of the critical issues, to help those who attended recall what was discussed and to inform those unable to attend about some of the key ideas and proposals emerging from the day.

It is hoped to follow up the workshop in a number of ways:

- short articles for openDemocracy, linked to the theme of how current aid agendas and approaches shape work on the ground and affect local organisations and people, especially those working with women and on gender inequality issues
- a journal special issue publication based on the presentations
- follow-up meetings, perhaps with other organisations such as the GAD Network to think through how to articulate concerns in ways that can be more widely heard in the aid sector



Tina Wallace preparing for the day - photo by Janette Davies, IGS

David Lewis (LSE): ‘How modernity forgets’ (quote from Paul Connerton)

David started the day by presenting two sets of problems in development organisations –

1. *The perpetual present* that dominates development policy worlds, and the consequent inability of development organisations to learn from the past.

2. The distinct *technocratic shift in development organisations*, upstream, with a focus on managerialism that prevents them from connecting with the realities of peoples’ lives.

There are many disjunctures in development (Mosse, 2006) including those between the past and the present and people and policies.

He illustrated the first point by discussing the Flood Action Plan in Bangladesh that was hugely costly and failed; it did not build on past well documented experience from 1920’s about what could/could not work in flood control. The ‘knowledge is there but forgotten’. The current narrative around climate change, with major resources mustered to address this, makes little reference to all the past learning and experience around environmental

work in the country. Donors do not appear to keep archives; projects and reports (and mistakes) are repeated; aid lives ‘in the perpetual present’ and continues to be top down and technical in spite of all that has been learned e.g. about the need for local ownership, participation and engagement of those affected. Short-term placements, characteristic of the development industry, mean that the institutional memory (built up through long-term relationships) is lost. A key characteristic of modernity is that it resists the continuing connection between the past and present through the constant search for the new.

The second point, of the aid focus being upstream and technocratic, results in the work being far from real people. Sector wide approaches, concerns about value for money, and budget support programmes all move development work very far from the concerns and priorities of local people. Donor consortia are now at the heart of decision making of national governments and the new aid agenda has not enabled proper local ownership. In Bangladesh this tendency is illustrated by two sector-wide approaches – on health, nutrition and population, and on primary education.

In an attempt to reconnect high level policy with people the ‘Reality Check Approach’ was developed. It is designed to feed in to the ‘upstream’ process, to give development managers a sense of how the projects are affecting ‘real’ people. It is based on developing relationships between individual researchers and families, over time, which enables the researchers to understand the families’ experiences of health and education services (e.g. access, quality), and to assess the relevance of the provisions in their lives. The Reality Check Approach feeds information/evidence back to those reforming the health and education sectors. They learn how policy reforms are experienced and understood.

The methodology for the Reality Check Approach is based on conversations, drawings, stories; it is an attempt to get a glimpse into ordinary lives. It is not formal research nor a monitoring and evaluation exercise. It sits somewhere outside those categories and therefore can be free of the requirements made of ‘research’ and ‘M&E’ by e.g. the World Bank and other large development institutions. It contains methodological echoes of the ‘listening studies’ undertaken in medical research. It complements but does not replace existing reporting and accountability mechanisms.

The challenge the project has faced, now undertaken over 4 years with SIDA funding, is getting the findings ‘heard’ and acted upon. There are many voices lobbying donors, ‘the market place is crowded’ and it is hard to get their attention, especially around work in progress. Often they respond saying the reports say nothing new, yet if that is the case why are they not addressing the many concrete issues and concerns coming from the people most affected? The huge challenge for the researchers is how to engage with policy and find allies to work with to build a movement to question dominant paradigms.

One problem raised around removing the Reality Check Approach from the definition of what counts as ‘research’ in international development institutions is that this removes the possibility of it acting as a challenge to the dominant assumptions of what constitutes knowledge within the dominant development discourse. Many feminist approaches to research also experience these issues, a theme taken up by Maria Jaschok.

Maria Jaschok: ‘Parallel universes: the triumph of logframes over time, places and languages’

Maria’s presentation was based on her experience of carrying out a large research project on women’s empowerment with a consortium of southern based institutions, funded by DFID. They have just completed the formal report, now they are embarking on a process of reflection around the experience and what they have learned.

The research was looking at *notions of women’s agency and empowerment* for Muslim women, focusing particularly the role of religion. For Muslim women their identity and potential for empowerment has been thrown into crisis over the last few years, as the religious space is increasingly claimed by political Islamists. The project looked at how Muslim women are able to control their own religious space in different contexts; Maria’s concentration was on how Chinese Muslim women were able to create their own religious identity and express their own agency in that context.

The consortia started their work with excitement, seeing it as an opportunity to explore their own histories and contribute unique experiences to understandings of empowerment. In the event, in China, those who participated moved from feeling inspired to being alienated; and in the end some even walked away from the research. Maria wanted to reflect on the tensions introduced into the consortia and their research partners by the requirements of large external donor funding.

The researchers had a shared past and all except Maria came from and worked in the global south. They developed a research framework based on women’s own views of empowerment/disempowerment; women’s engagement vs control; women’s strategies for empowerment, and contestation around what this means in different contexts; and what women’s initiatives resulted in. There was an implicit narrative around power.

However, with the DFID funding came the logframe, and over time the bureaucratic demands around reporting, developing activity plans, revising the logframe grew in importance and the research consortium felt their time units shrinking, and their own control over the project became superficial. Instead of a space in which the researchers could work with women on their own terms, the logframe forced the project to determine ‘impacts’ – often in reckless terms, such as promising ‘paradigmatic shifts’. Thus the *emphasis of the project shifted, towards structural and institutional change, and away from the individual lives and agency of women.*

The role of researchers also changed in response to the demands of donors, losing both the collaborative process of negotiating meaning with the research participants, and also damaging the relationships they had built up with research partners. They ‘danced around’ some of the challenges such as the role of the researcher with their privilege and power; the diverse cultures and divergent experiences not easily brought into simple linear narratives; and the deference to leaders and those with the power. While much good research was achieved, there were major faultlines related to the impact of DFID formats and structures which shifted control to the donors and consortium members away

from local researchers and women. The shift was from sharing and learning to growing administration and meeting donor expectations; often in the process meaning was lost.

While empowerment is about voice, consultation, process and engagement between the researchers and the women/communities in fact the equal relationships needed to do this work were distorted and attention to these issues got lost in meeting the external demands. Methodologies were applied without adequate attention to context and culture: for example, role play as a way of ‘sharing’ realities felt very difficult for the Chinese women, particularly those who still carried memories of mass humiliations during the Cultural Revolution. The lack of ‘fit’ between the women and the frameworks of development aid funding led, ultimately, to the muting of the women. This was reinforced by the ‘infantilizing tendencies’ of many development methodologies (power points/lectures to ‘teach capacity building’, visualisations etc), which engendered resistance from research participants who felt offended by what they felt was a disrespectful processes that simply did not speak to their own identity, and undermined their agency.

At an institutional level, relationships were also fraught. The terminology and language of contracts offended many in the collaborating universities, and led to the further alienation of research participants. The language of ‘deliverables’ and ‘timelines’ undermined engagement and were ultimately rejected by some researchers; the pressure to write ever more reports, meet artificial deadlines and demands from the centre put huge pressure on relationships and led to less willingness to listen or engage. The purpose became increasingly ‘the validation of the framework’ rather than listening and understanding complex and diverse experiences; the space for learning became constrained by externally imposed requirements and *the development frameworks imposed by DFID undermined respect for differences, and thus the ability to work with and appreciate diverse realities.*



Nikki van der Gaag, David Lewis, Rosemary Preston, Anne Coles in plenary – photo by Janette Davies, IGS

Discussion Groups:

Group 1. Rapporteur: Demetrio Martinez



Discussion Group 1 – photo by Janette Davies, IGS

The group began by asking how the problems of accountability to the poor, and particularly to women, are still being talked about after so many years. Is this the clearest illustration of the development industry's inability to learn?

The demands for simple 'information' (as opposed to knowledge) are not just from funders, they are also from campaigns and advocacy departments, who have different priorities. For example, a campaign on violence against women can focus on the risks that women face going to the public toilet, when in fact the vast majority of violence against women is still experienced within the household.

Forming relationships and the intimate understandings of people's lives is only something that can be gained from spending time with the people themselves. But this kind of understanding – although the World Bank now organises staff 'immersions'; spending a few days with a family – is generally undervalued by the powerful NGOs and funding agencies. There is a tension between the personal experience of NGO workers and their relationship with communities, and their need to respond professionally to the prescribed frameworks. This particularly affects peoples' abilities to understand gender inequalities, as these are so often experienced at the personal level. So whilst there may be attempts (such as 'participatory numbers' – an attempt to quantify qualitative information) to bring the realities of poor people – particularly women - into policy level discussions, these are not able to change the underlying technical management frameworks that shape the need for information.

Thus the reality check approach, the use of ‘anecdotal evidence’ etc are usually only effective when they suit the particular needs of the funder, or the advocacy unit of the NGO. They are not used to bring about lasting changes in the way that development practice is understood, and there is no fundamental challenge to the dominant frameworks, and the perpetual present of the knowledge they represent.

Group 2. Rapporteur: Helen McInnes



Discussion group 2 - photo by Janette Davies, IGS

The group began by breaking into pairs, which came up with one or two key issues that had emerged for them from David and Maria’s presentations. One was that communication is often shaped by hierarchy. NGO workers talk in different languages to partners, funders etc ... but there is clearly no real common language. Consequently we do not have common/agreed methodologies – this leads to hierarchies of methodologies and knowledge, dividing knowledge produced for example by academia or by practice.

Another key issue was how can information/learning be reflected and integrated when organisations require everything in 3 bullet points? There are clear tensions between learning and reporting and the lack of mental space outside of the project cycle. The search for the ‘magic bullet’ puts more emphasis on the next ‘new thing’ than drawing on institutional memory.

If we are to succeed in reflecting women’s realities it’s important that feminists who find ways of working with women are able to highlight and talk about their experiences. The reality of development work might be the logframe and dealing with bureaucrats in DFID, but the realities of women’s lives are very different. The feedback from DFID to Maria and her colleagues was that there were ‘too many narratives’ – and that the reporting needed to concentrate on ‘deliverables’. This homogenisation of women’s lives for the purposes of achieving ‘deliverables’ is at the core of why development frameworks fail to capture and respond to women’s priorities.

Group 3. Rapporteur: Bethan Peach



Discussion group 3 - photo by Janette Davies, IGS

The group started with participants from different organisations giving their perspectives on the issues raised. A participant from Womankind said that they are starting to feel the political shaping of DfID's agenda under the coalition government. As an international NGO they are aware that donor priorities are being passed, through them, to partner organisations – but she asked, how can we act as a filter/barrier whilst also being dependent on donor funding? We need to 'play the game' ...but can we subvert the value-for-money agenda?

A participant from DfID said that there is now much more central political control at the micro-level of DfID's work, and a shift from DfID having "NGO DNA" to "private sector DNA". DfID are also in competition, for example with USAID, and much is dependent on their country offices and the historical alignments with certain embassies.

A participant from VillageAid said they have been wanting to build support to challenge DfID's agenda. BOND and the Gender and Development Network are doing some work around this, and there is a key event taking place in Ottawa in May.

DfID is looking for interventions that can be replicated. However, although 'measurement' might work in cases where there are tangible outcomes, it does not work for rights-based work.

Another key area where participants contributed their own experiences was how power relations in funding shape the political agenda. This is not just from DfID or the World Bank - corporate and individual funding carries constraints as well as funding.

We have been here many times, and we need to learn from the past. NGO workers simplify issues in order to meet donors needs and for fundraising purposes. Although NGOs have to be realistic about what will attract funding, they also want to bring about change. This is a difficult balance to achieve. For example, David's use of different ('non-research') terminology in the 'Reality Check' reports increased the likelihood of them being taken on board by donor organisations, but it's not clear that a change in terminology actually changes anything about the dominance of donor frameworks, or about what knowledge looks like, and what is considered a success or a failure, and by whom ...

A final thread picked up by this group was the *disconnect* between local realities and donor perceptions e.g. David's example of flooding meaning one thing locally and another in terms of donor response, also reflected in Maria's talk about assumptions embedded in funding frameworks e.g. Muslims as one homogenous group.

The perception that a "beneficiary" has of an NGO intervention is that this is just one small aspect of their life. The perception of NGOs can be that development interventions are major events in the lives of the people they attempt to support, but people have other pressures and other aspects of their lives to contend with. Donors and NGOs sometimes forget this, and it can lead to the realities of people being misrepresented. Donors are also unrealistic about the timeframes required for real change to take place.

Development is not unified or harmonised...which carries advantages and disadvantages. We need to be wary of the harmonisation argument, for example it hasn't worked in Southern Sudan. It depends on who's in charge of harmonisation, for example it can work well if an NGO can influence its donors to harmonise their reporting formats and timescales, but not if it then homogenizes experiences in one rigid logframe.

Group 4: Rapporteur: Helen Baños Smith

The discussion started by pointing out the fact that (some) large NGOs no longer have libraries; this reflects how NGOs now seem to no longer value past experience or indeed knowledge more generally.

Within NGOs (and development organisations more generally) there is also very little space for 'thinking' - it is not incentivised. The group suggested that this lack of thinking and analysis might be reinforced by donors not asking for good evidence for why approaches might work and/or not asking for evidence that you have learned from experience. But there is also the fact that (especially at the senior levels) staff are increasingly from non-NGO/development backgrounds and have very little understanding of the complexities of development - their interests lie elsewhere (fundraising, building profile), and this skews what gets incentivised in the organisation away from thinking about the issues and more towards the 'perpetual present'.

This led on to a discussion of how people who are attracted to work in the sector might be changing. Nowadays people coming to work in development seem far less 'radical' or political than they used to be - the passion and belief in rights or justice doesn't seem to

be as central to peoples' motivations. This can lead to something quite perverse where the politics of development is not discussed. Development is an inevitably political endeavour, it is there implicitly, but it cannot be challenged or talked about because it is supposedly not there - it is a bit of an 'elephant in the room'. One indication of this might be that you now have the same people working for different agencies - NGOs, bi- and multi-laterals, where as in the past it is unlikely that the same person would choose to work in each of these because they were politically quite different - they were there to challenge one another, whereas they are now all very cosy and the 'poor people' are left even further away from the decision making table.

The next two presenters concentrated on the context of Afghanistan. Afghanistan is critical to the issues discussed in the workshop, both because of its centrality in UK (and US) funding priorities (prevention of terrorism, winning hearts and minds, etc), and the overt commitment to improving women's lives as one justification for military action. It provides a case study on how development frameworks are designed and applied to a complex situation, with almost little understand of how they will affect women's lives.

Deniz Kandiyoti: *'The parallel universes of donor aid and Afghan reality'*

Deniz started by asking, what bearing do donor-led efforts have on women's lives? Do they help or are they counter-productive? What happens when women take up the challenge and assert their own realities?

The premise of the reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan has been that there should be 'just enough state' – for security, for the operation of markets, for electoral activity (the one element of democracy that Western donors take seriously), for civil society promotion and defending human rights, including those of women. Donors, in this context, have 'respect' for the local culture and do not intervene; so when for example a cross factional alliance of clerics shook hands on moves to restrict women the donors stood back.

The work on women is mainly about technical processes and procedures for gender mainstreaming, not internal coherence and political buy-in. The focus is on training and tool kits in a context of major reform, state building and promotion of the neo-liberal agendas. They give gender priority with milestones such as quotas, women in the new constitution and their rights to be safeguarded, and they have promoted UNIFEM in Kabul.

However, in terms of the promotion of women's rights in this context, there are several areas of 'mis-fit'. There are strict timelines for 'securing the future', developing a compact and national development plan, all of which need to have gender as a cross cutting issue. The country signed CEDAW in 2003 without any exemptions, yet not a single report has been produced nor any shadow report- both expected annually. This is 'dead in the water' in Afghanistan, where in fact negotiating with the Taliban is the key priority for women.

Donors actually had different agendas on gender and did not agree on definitions and approaches. They have set up women's national machineries but without personnel or adequate resources, leaving UNIFEM to lead on gender literacy. UNIFEM carry out crash courses in gender training, based on standardised and international frameworks, which are received with some incredulity by Afghans, 'they do not know what hit them'! The training led to a huge sub-contracting culture in Afghanistan, which merely reproduced the hierarchy of the development industry, with gender knowledge coming from the top. This also contributed to a brain drain of women from their leadership roles in communities to join the frenzy of recruitment for international training jobs, seriously distorting women's organising in the country.

Donors also insert foreign technical assistance into the Ministries to work on gender and enable the Ministries to fit the mechanisms of accountability required by donors. Resources are concentrated in Kabul, where the government is operating, which is very different from the rest of the country. 'Customary' institutions continue to be the centre of power in most areas of the country, and the community bodies that perpetuate these structures of power violate both Sharia law and Human Rights law – but they are and have been central to intervention politics for many years. Women are totally excluded from local government and customary institutions, and there remain phenomenal challenges to women's rights in the country.

There are two contradictory tendencies: women's rights as promoted by UN Women (the new UN organisation, replacing UNIFEM) through international frameworks, using a universalist understanding of women's equality on one hand. On the other side are the IFIs and the rest of the UN, promoting localised structures imbued with patriarchal inequalities, and outsourcing security to privatised militias (a huge worry for women). Women are living their lives under the control of unaccountable institutions. There is in fact an alliance of military, NGOs, academics and local elites around agendas that foreclose local discussions about citizenship, politics, inclusion, justice.



Deniz Kandiyoti - photo by Janette Davies, IGS

Ana Hozyainova: *'Lost in Translation: Mainstreaming Gender in Afghanistan'*

Ana took up the theme of Afghanistan, talking from the perspective of someone currently working in the situation on issues of gender equality. The donor community sees Afghanistan as a 'blank sheet', with no acknowledgement of the country's history, or the complexity of peoples' lives there – particularly not women's lives. The donors have come to the situation with the idea that they know best, that they have a framework that will solve all the problems. The framework presents the solutions as a simple linear process, which fits squarely within the neoliberal understanding of development, and illustrates perfectly the dire lack of imagination within the donor community referred to by Deniz.

In terms of gender equality and empowerment, this framework means that women need to take control over their lives, take enlightened decisions, develop their full potential, and exert positive influences over decisions that affect their lives. But the context of Afghanistan is so deeply patriarchal that it completely removes the possibility of gender equality.

In many ways the novelty of the language of 'gender mainstreaming' provides the basis for the lack of trust surrounding the concept in Afghanistan. Because gender is not a translatable term into local languages it usually used directly without interpretation. The term itself is a symbol of a discourse that was forced upon a country that fervently relies on their own traditional and Islamic discourse. To a degree the international community itself has contributed to the challenging playing field it faces today. The discourse used by the international community is incomprehensible not only for the ordinary Afghans it is often misunderstood by the elite too. Simultaneously, the international community is still too unfamiliar with the Afghan discourse. Thus although the international community may determine what changes are brought to the official structure of the Afghan government, it cannot influence and alter the unofficial social structure trusted by the majority of the population.

The initial changes implemented by the international community received a strong backlash from the population. A different approach was needed and a change in strategy has been visible over the last few years. Integration between national and international organisations is increasing, there is a growing nationalisation of international organisations and there are significantly more organisations that have redirected their focus to mullahs for example, in an attempt to reach out to the population. Nevertheless, despite these improvements, gender mainstreaming in Afghanistan is still predominantly a top down process controlled by the international community. Gender equality is being enshrined in the Afghan Constitution. It is announced as a priority in the Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS). It is translated into the National Action Plan for Women of Afghanistan. Finally, the EVAW law indicates that women are protected against violence and defines violence against women. Through these laws and documents the government is able to illustrate its formal commitment to gender equality. Nevertheless, they do not guarantee institutionalisation of gender equality or produce strong enough mechanisms to ensure government's commitment to its implementation.

There is a general lack of awareness within ministries of what their benchmarks are regarding gender equality. NAPWA (National Action Plan for Protection of Women of Afghanistan) is a document specially designed to be taken up in the mandate of all government bodies, including those at a local and provincial level. But many ministries don't even know NAPWA's content, much less have any commitment to implement it. The Ministry of Women's Affairs has the responsibility to ensure that the objectives outlined in NAPWA are realised, but it cannot do this unless the line ministries themselves know their responsibility and communicate their activities, instead of refusing to collaborate with the Ministry of Women's Affairs.

Furthermore, each donor develops and implements its projects separately from other donors. As a result there is a growing tone of cross accusation among donors. They are pointing fingers at each other instead of considering how their cooperation is of crucial importance for a continued existence of the Ministry of Women's Affairs. If donors can't coordinate their programmes when they are supposedly driven by the same agenda, it is an entirely unrealistic expectation that the Ministry of Women's Affairs, learning from them, will be able to cooperate and coordinate their programmes with bodies that often do not share the same end-goal.

As a consequence, the Ministry of Women's Affairs is seen as unsuccessful from all sides. There is no effective advocacy (what donors want to see), and there are no effective services (what Afghan society wants to see), and there is no change in lives (what Afghan women want to see). The Ministry of Women's Affairs is caught in the middle, responding to promises of funding, but without the freedom to develop an effective understanding of the lives of women they are supposed to be working for. In some areas of Afghanistan, for example in Herat, the Ministry of Women's Affairs has reacted to local realities and they have been successful at helping women who have fled abusive situations to return to their family. But in another area, the local area still is still influenced by the Soviet era, and so the Ministry focuses its work on providing *Zabota* – social care, including protection mechanisms which are seen as necessary whether or not the law is in place. This approach also includes developing women's associations – *zhensovets* – as well as day care and guidelines to ensure women are protected in their working lives. Every different area in Afghanistan has a different interpretation of what gender equality means.



Nikki van der Gaag, Ana Hozyainova, Deniz Kandiyoti and Maria Jaschok in plenary discussion - photo by Janette Davies, IGS

Plenary Discussion:

- Gender ‘experts’ can also be naïve in the situation – as women in Afghanistan are often seen to occupy some kind of ‘innocent’ space; but this is not the case. Women are deeply embedded in the factionalised politics of Afghanistan.
- Women and men are highly politicised, regional and class differences are all important in understanding gender inequalities
- Women in Afghanistan have responded to the dire lack of imagination within the donor community – for example there have been successful projects created outside the market (to which women have limited access in Afghanistan).
- There are massive obstacles to women’s mobility and access and women need a safe space to nurture their ideas
- The structured invisibility of complexity is a real challenge to this work
- Little use of evidence in structuring programmes to support women’s rights
- There is a lack of language with which to critique the system of global politics and aid.



Fenella Porter in plenary discussion – photo by Janette Davies

Panel presentations:

Poonam Joshi (Sigrid Rausing Trust): Poonam looked at some of the issues around mainstreaming gender in work on human rights. Some of the learning emerging from a period of trying to promote women’s rights and engage the organisation on gender issues included:

- To work effectively on women's rights and equality an organisation needs a *vision*, clear leadership on gender and consistency in relationships with their partners
- Trying to work on all aspects of diversity and inequality as well as gender makes the brief too wide and unwieldy and takes the focus away from women's rights
- The arguments for and against ring fencing and focusing on women and/or ensuring gender inequality is addressed throughout can be hard to resolve and trying to do both may require more resources than are forthcoming
- In common with many agencies staff and resources for gender are limited and other staff lack expertise in gender
- The culture relies on motivated individuals, who cannot achieve as middle level employees without strong leadership backing
- It can be hard to hear women's needs and voices in the contexts of addressing other rights and building relationships with partners who may not have women's rights on their agendas

Ashish Shah:

'Women's agency and autonomy continues to be excluded from development work, resulting in development models that simply fail to address women's realities'.

Ash used the example of sugarcane farmers in Kenya to describe the multiple contradictions and tensions that exist in that context, arising from a mixture of perverse incentives, external pressures and internal reductionism. This leads to a state of being constantly busy, but not tackling the complex systems that keep the farmers poor and marginalised. Ash demonstrated how these complexities are made up of multiple layers for men; and then he added the further layers of complexity and discrimination that exist for women sugarcane farmers. He argued that with the introduction of a women's rights agenda, development organisations still fail to engage with women's realities because they still fail to understand the complexities of their lives and have a tendency to package their problems into reduced assumptions.

Where we start from in understanding that problem really matters. If we start from the desire to increase funding levels, then we will act in a certain way and analyse things in a certain way. If the desire is increase the visibility of our organisation then we will have different priorities. If the starting point is a 'theme' which defines how the organisation prioritises its work then we will approach the complex system on an ad hoc basis. Engaging with complexity means also being honest about the complexity of change - dismantling each layer in turn, as well as understanding where the layers of interest lie, and the location of each individual actor in the layers of power that surround them. Only by being honest can we

- a) be committed to the cause long term, beyond the project cycle
- b) be able to influence others with a rigour that challenges reductionist analysis

Nothing stops us challenging others except our own lack of initiative. In development all too often the priority is the pursuit of funds, and the need for branding and quick results. But in the end, how much money do we need? If we can challenge donors, and work with

no logframe, no 3-5 year commitment, then the agenda might be freer. This might leave room for a politics and a self-awareness that comes with personal commitment. There might be room for mentoring as opposed to management.

Seri Wendoh (IPPF):

Seri talked about the girls and boys at risk in Africa and the high levels of abuse and ostracisation they face. She used the story of one young girl – and many photographs- to illustrate graphically that NGOs are still not really listening to the girls they claim to serve. NGOs have to find ways to listen to these girls and to work with the boys to address issues of gender inequality, which are often expressed through sexual violence, early forced marriage, teenage pregnancy that cut across the girls’ chances for education, speaking out for themselves and a finding more choices for a better life.

The social norms pushing women to become third and fourth wives, to accept the way they are treated have to be confronted by both women and men; change will not come just through the demands of girls and women. However, to work effectively on these complex and highly entrenched ways of behaving requires humility, respect and listening to and working with the girls and the communities, rather than coming in with externally designed frameworks and concepts, which often have no meaning for local people. Concepts of gender roles, inequalities, women’s needs and rights vary and in order to work to promote positive change we have to understand where people are now and work with their perceptions and aspirations rather than imposing our ideas on them.

Plenary discussion (*rapporteurs: Helen McInnes, Demetrio Martinez, Bethan Peach*)

Is there a tension between the search and the need for a ‘vision’, and making sure that we are able to respond to women’s realities? There needs to be negotiation and discussion of what happens when a vision is ‘applied’ to different contexts – like Afghanistan.

A feminist within a development organisation needs to ensure that the organisation has a commitment to women’s equality, or it will just disappear beneath the other competing ambitions and priorities.

Reclaiming the ‘F’ word – gender mainstreaming has depoliticised many issues, and yet women at the grassroots continue their battles with or without NGOs. Our support for women might be less about funding frameworks and more about solidarity. How to recapture that? It is not necessarily about funding (some participants asked: how much money do we really need?); it is far more important to examine our individual politics. It is important that feminists within NGOs continue to ‘irritate’ their organisations and refuse to let them rely purely on the instrumentalism of management frameworks.

The African feminist movement should also not be forgotten – the feminist agenda should not be dismissed as a western agenda. The African Feminist Forum is an example, but we have forgotten the history of the struggle in the South and INGOs assume that the North brought the feminist agenda to the South (e.g. Oxfam’s early work on gender was in response to demands from women in the South). The feminist movement

internationally *is* intensely political, for example in Latin America where they have been very reflexive about their work and how they engage with the dominant structures of the UN and other development funding organisations. Those who hold the memory of feminism, activism and solidarity need to keep reiterating the history and ensure that we learn from the past and not live in a perpetual present.

Much of what was talked about during the workshop (whether work carried out by large or small UK NGOs, researchers, or partner organisations) was less about mainstreaming, and more about women's empowerment – is the work 'on the ground' more radical than the frameworks reflect?

It is difficult to see how we can ever bring 'real' change to the aid system – it is embedded in priorities and assumptions that have no bearing or relevance to peoples' lives, and the frameworks and the 'perverse incentives' of development funding reflect this. However, the systems have internal inconsistencies and tensions, which can be politicised and used for leverage to bring about small changes. Perhaps we are left with reclaiming the space 'outside' the system – the space for solidarity and politics that has been the subject of so many of the contributions from the participants in the workshop.

Can feminism engage with 'the monster of the development apparatus'? Women's organisations are often poorly resourced, and so the financial support of the development industry is very seductive – but we have to be careful that we don't get eaten up. It's important to focus on partnerships that make sense politically, as well as financially. It is also important to be aware of our own political location. In the UK, we may talk of women's voices and how to reflect women's realities, but we can sometimes be challenged by what we hear.

It is important to think more clearly about what we mean by agency – the agency of women who are struggling against enormous inequalities and injustices can sometimes be messy and complex, and we need to negotiate with them for a shared political agenda and partnerships that work. Likewise, engaging with social movements and operating in the sphere of solidarity is a good thing, but it can be challenging.

Concluding comments:

This day-long workshop brought together participants who were concerned with the fundamental mismatch between development aid frameworks and the realities of women's lives. The speakers pin-pointed key issues for discussion, which were then picked up by groups and added to by participants. The richness of experience and knowledge made the discussions full and stimulating. There were no solid 'conclusions' (how can there be to such complex issues), but it laid bare the realities of working within an aid system that continues to work in the interests of the rich and powerful, and ignore the realities of the poor and vulnerable.



Rapporteurs: Bethan Peach, Klara Marxtova and Helen McInnes - photo by Janette Davies, IGS



(foreground) Helen and Maria Baños Smith, Caroline Sweetman, Shirley Ardner in plenary – photo by Janette Davies, IGS