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The Road not Taken: International aid's choice of Copenhagen over Beijing

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Abstract

A decade after the United Nations conferences on gender equality and social development, this paper explores their policy origins and discusses their differential impact on international aid since 1995. The author draws on her direct experience to consider why Copenhagen led to Poverty Reduction Strategies and the first Millennium Development Goal whereas Beijing has become largely invisible in the mainstream world of aid. She argues that the powerful influence of economic rational choice theory associated with bureaucratic modes of thought has meant that the central debate in development policy has remained that of growth versus equity. Beijing's agenda of societal transformation offered another paradigm of development that has remained marginal. The paper concludes with a proposal. If international aid policy could handle more than one paradigm and thus be more open to different ways of thinking about economy, society and politics, aid agencies would be better able to support transformative processes for social justice.

Introduction

'Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—

I took the one less travelled by,'¹

There may have been a moment, 10 years ago, when international aid organisations could have taken another paradigmatic road. Rather than conceiving aid primarily in terms of managing finance this road offered the possibilities for it to be understood as a support to changing the world through a transformation in social relations. (Green 2003, Rahnema 1997). A minority of aid staff - mostly, sociologists and social anthropologists like me - had long advocated this alternative, less travelled road.² With hindsight, 1995 may have been the year when we had the greatest opportunity. How this came about and why the shift did not happen can be attributed to multiple and mega-causes, such as the changing global political economy that go well beyond the scope of this present article which concentrates on just one element, namely the way aid institutions 'think'.

I do this by exploring the context, themes and outcomes of the two United Nations conferences, held within six months of each other in 1995 - the World Summit on Social Development at Copenhagen and the Fourth World Conference on Women at Beijing. I write from a tentatively modernist perspective, with a belief that humanity can, at least to some extent, organise

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itself for greater global justice and equity and that international aid has the potential to help in such an effort. Much of what follows draws from my experience as a social development adviser in the British aid programme³ responsible to Ministers for UK aid policy on gender and the social dimensions of development and more specifically on aid policy with regard to these two conferences and their follow up. Trained as a social anthropologist I draw on my own intellectual positionality as a case study in the history of a complex policy process.

Beijing, 20 years after the first women's conference in Mexico, was able to take advantage of the heady atmosphere of the immediate post Cold War period to privilege the international women's movement, as represented in the Conference's civil society forum, and to propose in the Beijing Platform for Action an explicit agenda of transformational change. National governments, civil society and the international aid system were all assigned responsibilities in implementing that agenda.

Copenhagen, decided later but held some six months earlier, did not have the same historical roots. A one-off event, it brought together the heads of most governments in the world to agree a programme of action for reducing poverty, and unemployment and promoting social integration. Copenhagen set the scene for the choice of poverty reduction as the framework for

Final version as submitted to *Third World Quarterly* for publication in Vol. 27, no. 6.

international debt relief and budgetary support. Its target of reducing world poverty by half by 2015 became the first Millennium Development Goal.

I consider how those advocating the poverty reduction element of the Copenhagen agenda dominated the decision-making processes of international development policy in the years that followed. Copenhagen laid the foundations for the aid system's over-arching policy instrument, the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP). The message of Beijing became invisible to the mainstream. Could it have been otherwise? The poet decides to take the road less travelled. Is this impossible for international aid? Can the gender equality agenda still provide an opening to different ways of thinking about economy, society and politics that would allow international aid to support transformative processes for social justice?

In exploring that question, I conclude that the answer may be to go down both roads at the same time. The first is the current highway, the road that tackles injustice through the redistribution of resources. The second, so far less travelled road is signposted with culture, power and history. It is one that respects otherness and difference as values in themselves and understands that the search for justice requires a political process that is more than responding to material needs.

Concepts of poverty and gender: Copenhagen and Beijing

In the 1980's, just at the time that Gender and Development (GAD) approaches had begun to permeate slowly into the thinking of the international aid system (Razavi and Miller 1995), UNDP and UNICEF challenged the structural adjustment policies of the Bretton Woods Institutions. They set in train a process that led to poverty reduction becoming the central goal of international development policy. The understanding of poverty began to change from the early equation with income poverty to a more multi-dimensional understanding. Kabeer (2003) notes that while the understanding of gender issues grew concurrently, it was slower and uneven. The characteristics of mainstream macroeconomic analysis, models and methodologies are attributed as one factor in this progress. Another is gender equity being potentially more threatening to the power and privilege of policy-makers themselves in their own gender roles, in contrast to poverty which relates to a constituency 'out there', distinct from their own personal situation.

Of course it is debatable the extent to which international aid's understanding of poverty has indeed been substantially transformed during the last decade. Income measurement still prevails in assessing poverty and even when it *is*

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understood as multi-dimensional it *is still a non-relational understanding*

(Pieterse 2002), a theme to which I return in the last section.

Thus while poverty understood as relational is potentially as politically threatening as gender, the evidence of the last decade indicates that international aid organisations are capable of managing the poverty reduction agenda so that they can encourage campaigns such as 'Make Poverty History' without recognising the necessity of addressing issues of power (Eyben 2006).

Consequently, in the present state of ideas, gender still appears more dangerous than poverty, perhaps because as Kabeer notes it touches the personal in a way that poverty fails to do.

Poverty may have been more malleable to bureaucratisation because it is possible to define it as an 'absolute' condition - absent from donors' home countries and, unlike gender inequality, in another place. Furthermore, when poverty is thought of as material deprivation, failure of basic needs or even, in relative terms, lack of access to services, it can be understood within an economist's concern for allocation of scarce resources between individuals.

Long before gender was conceptualised there was an intellectual tradition dating back centuries of a bureaucratic response to poverty (Schaffer and Lamb 1981). Besides, gender may be more psychologically dangerous just because, unlike the poor, women are more visible. They are at home and in

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the workplace and their potential disorderliness can rouse deep fears in many male officials responsible for aid policy (Eyben 2004). These reasons may help explain why Copenhagen became a more mainstream policy event than Beijing. However, as I later discuss, there is possibly a further explanation related to how bureaucracies think.

The growing concern that aid should focus on poverty reduction was the origin of the proposal for a social development summit, championed by the United Nations in reaction to the neo-liberal policies of the minimalist state whereby poverty would disappear simply by freeing the market. Thus poverty returned as a central issue for development policy following the discrediting of structural adjustment policies in the 1980's – the 'lost decade' when aid recipient governments were encouraged to cut government budgets, introduce user fees for social services and cut subsidies on basic goods and food supplies.

It is at that time that aid organisations began to think about vulnerability, learning that when there are shocks to the political economy those with least voice, least capacity to organise in response to the shocks and least economic assets, tend to be most severely affected. Structural reform of the economy was not sufficient for moving everyone out of poverty; some further steps would be required for that to happen.

Copenhagen was an agenda for market-friendly state intervention. It was instigated and championed by the more Keynesian part of the official development bureaucracy, the United Nations. Its aim was a greater redistribution of resources from rich to poor countries, including the promotion of policy ideas such as the 20/20 concept whereby recipient governments would pledge 20% of their budget to social service expenditure in return for official aid programmes to doing likewise.

Copenhagen was the inspiration of a group of officials and diplomats. It represented a swing in the pendulum in a 50-year debate between economists. Unlike Beijing, it was not the conference of a social movement. It elicited the interest of some elements of global civil society, such as the International Council for Social Welfare, but there was no passionate engagement of activists from all over the world. Copenhagen was primarily a venue for recapturing the ideological ground established by Third World countries through their membership of the United Nations and lost to the neo-liberal agenda in the 80's. Rather than *societal* relations, the issue was *global* relations over access to resources. As I argue later, Copenhagen was about distribution, Beijing about recognition. Bureaucracy tends to privilege the former over the latter. Indeed, if we accept the commonly held view that the function of bureaucracy is to manage impartially the allocation of scarce resources, then

there is every reason for bureaucracy to be positively uninterested in a recognition agenda that privileges difference.

Compared with modes of public administration based on partiality where an official may treat people very differently depending on personal or familial ties or sense of common religious, gender, class or ethnic identity, the bureaucratic ideal emphasises an ethic of disinterestedness where all are treated as the same (Courpasson and Reed 2004, Du Gay 2000). At the same time of course, a bureaucratic mode of organisation reflects, enacts and contributes to the maintenance of the values and power relations of the society of which it is part. Thus, through the power of the bureaucracy officials may contribute to the reproduction of racism or gender discrimination in a non-emotional and objective fashion.

As an ideal type, a bureaucratic form of organisation is quintessentially rational, basing decisions on objective evidence that has been scrutinised by professional experts working in a hierarchical system where all authority from the most junior to the most senior obey the operating procedures by which decisions can be impartially reached. It is the power of knowledge based on rational, scientific method, rather than the power of relationships, that is the essence of a modern public bureaucracy (Courpasson and Reed 2004) It is thus because gender is about relations and relationships that it may

be contradictory to a bureaucratic world view which civil servants hold dear as an ideal.

Certainly, societal relations were included in Copenhagen's programme in the form of its third, 'social integration' pillar and it mattered to the conference organisers⁴. Relational consensus rather than contestation was seen as the means to social change. Copenhagen promoted a harmonious view of social integration derived from the Durkheimian emphasis on social solidarity and the concern of the Catholic Church for mutual respect and obligation between citizens that is reflected in much of European Union thinking about social cohesion.⁵ De Haan (1998), exploring the diverse origins of the idea of social inclusion that informed the Copenhagen perspective (for example the work of the Institute of Labour Studies) argues that the greatest value of the concept of social *exclusion* is its potential to explore the processes that cause deprivation. However, if the concept is interpreted to focus on *inclusion*, as I suggest was the case at Copenhagen, it risks supporting the status quo. It implies the possibility of bringing marginal people into the existing social structure without any need to change radically that structure or potentially ignoring the existing and complex social relations that give rise to and perpetuate inequities (Sayed & Soudien, 2003). Social integration also fits better within a neo-classic image of an economic system in which the interests of various groups are harmonised (Barber 1967).

Social integration or transformation?

Copenhagen had three pillars, poverty reduction, employment and social integration. It was the first pillar that has easily been the most influential. The British press at the time referred to it as the 'poverty summit'.⁶ The opening statement of Copenhagen Programme includes:

'Policies to eradicate poverty, reduce disparities and combat social exclusion require the creation of employment opportunities, and would be incomplete and ineffective without measures to eliminate discrimination and promote participation and harmonious social relationships among groups and nations.'

The Beijing equivalent opens with:

'The principle of shared power and responsibility should be established between women and men at home, in the workplace and in the wider national and international communities. Equality between women and men is a matter of human rights and a condition for social justice and is also a necessary and fundamental prerequisite for equality, development and peace. A transformed partnership based on

equality between women and men is a condition for people-centred sustainable development’.

While the men in the Vatican and their allies openly declared their patriarchal interest in preventing Beijing’s agenda for transformation, most governments tolerated the participation of their marginalised women’s ministries at the official conference. They showed their indifference by not sending any senior ministers or heads of government. Some sent their wives. Copenhagen was different. It was the inspiration of men and proposed an agenda with which all were familiar, although some strongly resisted. Many heads of government attended, particularly those in the North from more left-wing administrations, and many from the South who saw it as an opportunity to demand a more equitable global distribution of the world’s resources.

Beijing was not just another UN conference. Or rather, it was more than such a conference. The diplomatic wrangling, the tedious processes and the behind the scenes dramas of trying to produce a draft Platform for Action in time for the preparatory conference were typical of any international gathering. The decision to hold it in China, rather than in a country with a more open society (such as Denmark in the case of the social development summit) was an additional barrier to facilitating a broad-based civil society forum that was sited some 40 miles from the official conference proceedings. Yet, it was a

Final version as submitted to *Third World Quarterly* for publication in Vol. 27, no. 6.

conference that represented a movement whose members were present in not only the forum but also playing an active (and sometimes subversive) role in official delegations.

The year of Beijing was arguably the moment that the transformational approach to gender relations had the greatest chance of influencing the way the international aid system thinks about social change. The May 1995 High Level (Ministerial) Meeting of the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, endorsed gender equality, rather than women in development, as a vital goal for development and development assistance efforts. Although the statement from the meeting repeated some of the by now well-rehearsed efficiency arguments, there was also, for the first time, remarks about the 'transformation of the development agenda' (OECD 1995).

In many aid circles, officials and politicians had not appreciated the radicalness of this switch. This may be partly due to the concern of those gender specialists advocating for the change within the aid community, to handle the matter very softly so that their superiors should not be frightened and reject it outright. It was also probably due to many in the aid system either simply not understanding - or not being prepared to understand - what was being advocated. Nevertheless, by adopting gender equality as a goal, international

Final version as submitted to *Third World Quarterly* for publication in Vol. 27, no. 6.

development policy was theoretically committing itself to supporting a transformation in social relations. It was implicitly accepting a view of the world not based solely on the rational choice of individuals operating on a (more or less) level playing field.

Some members of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) were more alert to the subversive nature of the change than were others. Japan refused to make the policy switch from women in development to gender equality, recognising the possible implications for domestic policy. Significantly at the closed meeting of (all male) senior officials in the Hague in 1996, when the DAC finalised the selection of the international development targets that were to evolve into the Millennium Development Goals, it was the Japanese representative who ensured that the target with reference to gender equality should be restricted to parity in education (OECD 1996). Others at this meeting, despite the briefings they had had from the gender specialists in their own ministries to propose a broader gender target, agreed to the Japanese proposal with little fuss or resistance.⁷ Thus, one year after Beijing the DAC rejected the broad-based challenge of the Platform for Action. The Beijing agenda ran into the ground.

Copenhagen was a revival of the growth versus equity debate but it also responded to some of the emerging ideas from sociology concerning social

Final version as submitted to *Third World Quarterly* for publication in Vol. 27, no. 6.

integration and exclusion, best represented in the United Nations system by the ILO and UNRISD. Although Sen himself afterwards sought to factor social exclusion into his work on capabilities, the conversation between Keynesian economists and sociologists was not very deep. The epistemological struggle to maintain this conversation, while at the same time working to 'mainstream' gender within the aid system meant that too few people interested in this issue within the international aid system were seeking to cover too much ground. In reference to my own experience, although encouraged by international aid's greater focus on poverty, at the same time it appeared that Copenhagen was distracting attention from the Beijing agenda. It risked potentially undermining Beijing's prospects for making a serious impact on the conceptual thinking that was shaping development policy.

Inside the international aid system, gender specialists found themselves struggling to pursue the theme of gender equality separate from this burgeoning poverty agenda. (Goetz 1998, Jackson, 1998) It was a challenge for DFID social development advisers because of the sympathy for Copenhagen's redistribution agenda where concerns about state action to address misery and deprivation were at last being recognised and becoming official policy. Caught up with this new agenda, time passed before noticing that the themes that gender analysis brought to the fore – culture, identity, power, violence – were disappearing from the debate or were reduced to the

Final version as submitted to *Third World Quarterly* for publication in Vol. 27, no. 6.

idea of social capital subjected to measurement and regression analysis:

society re-packaged into something economists could digest (Fine 2002).

Although Gender and Development approaches developed in the years before Beijing looked to transform unequal power relations in society, aid agencies have since then tended to use the concept of gender in reductionist ways. They have failed to grapple with the issues of the larger social, cultural and political contexts that frame women's and men's ability to resist conditions of oppression (Bhavnani et al. 2003).

For example, the World Bank's gender strategy (World Bank 2002) is concerned with reducing 'disparities' between men and women and does not address the issue of structural social change that might be required to achieve such a reduction. As Baden and Goetz observe "Bureaucratic requirements for information tend to strip away the political content of information on women's interests and reduce it to a set of needs or gaps, amenable to administrative decisions about the allocation of resources' (1998:22). The Bank's gender strategy focuses on efficiency arguments concerning human capital investment. It is underpinned by an approach that at the most sees the problem as the need to establish 'a level playing field' where men and women have equal chances in the game, rather than one where there could be a legitimate case for changing the rules of the game, or even requiring a new game.

A debate between economists?

Over the last 50 years aid policy has involved a swing in the back and forth between different economic theories to public management and resource allocation (Therien 2002). How did this shape aid agencies' response to the women's movement efforts to put gender into development policy?

The first UN Women's conference in 1975 coincided with the decade of 'basic needs' and rural development superseded by the 1980's and the resurgence of neo-classical economics with the theory that the free functioning of the market would normally advance the general welfare. Thus when part of a World Bank mission to Ghana towards the end of that decade I learnt from a fellow team member that 'poverty is a market failure', a phrase that profoundly intrigued and troubled me for many years to follow. It revealed a yawning paradigmatic gap between his and my understanding of the world. Put simply, I found it extraordinarily difficult - emotionally and intellectually - the liberal economic position that takes as its elementary unit of analysis a 'stripped down individual' from which followed a methodological premise based on mathematics that made possible the arguments about trickle down and 'autonomous equalisation through time' (Schaffer & Lamb 1981).

Final version as submitted to *Third World Quarterly* for publication in Vol. 27, no. 6.

In this decade, at the time of the 1985 Women's Conference in Nairobi, feminist economists began to engage with the policies of structural adjustment. They sought to bridge the yawning chasm between relational understandings of the world of the social anthropologists who tended to fill positions of gender advisers in aid ministries and this particular kind of economics that deeply influenced senior administrators and politicians.

In the 1990's the pendulum swung again with a return to an interest concerning the role of institutions in poverty reduction and a tentative re-legitimation of discussions about distribution. Much less than half understanding the economic theory underlying the debates between economists, it appeared to me, as a social anthropologist that at the very least aid policy was shifting to a concern about what was happening to real people.⁹

This 50-year debate between economists has been possible because the protagonists are within the same paradigm. People are listening to each other, as is not the case when hegemonic structures translate the voice of the powerless into meaningless utterances (Haugaard 1997). It is a lesson that the small group of beleaguered social scientists learn every day inside the World Bank and other aid agencies.¹⁰

I do not intend to enter the growth and equity argument, for which in any case I lack the theoretical base, but rather to point out that within this debate the concept of poverty as non-relational has been largely uncontested.¹¹ The argument has taken place within a public management framework premised on rational choice theory and optimal utilisation of scarce resources. It is a theory that has become naturalised in the world of aid. People do not realise they are using it. Posited on methodological individualism, societal processes and outcomes are seen as the sum of discrete, intentional acts by autonomous actors who are pre-constituted rather than defined through their relations with others (Hawksworth 2003). It is an ideology that considers poverty as a deprivation of material things and a failure of either markets or states (depending on one's position) employing concepts that are grounded in a non-relational understanding of the individual (Curtis 1999).

The multi-dimensional understanding of poverty promoted at the beginning of the '90's and confirmed in the definitional statement at Copenhagen and in the Millennium Development Goals, did not substantially change the paradigmatic view that outcomes were a result of individual rational choice. It rather built on this by recognising the lack of a level field where each individual could play the game equally. Hence, because individuals vary to the extent they possess what Rawls referred to as 'primary goods' and Sen converted into means or 'capabilities', poverty becomes defined as a

Final version as submitted to *Third World Quarterly* for publication in Vol. 27, no. 6.

constraint on making choices and the role of development policy is to help enhance people's capabilities. (Sen 1992). This is the position taken in UNDP's Human Development Reports.

Inside the world of aid, the contest was between those economists who accepted the capabilities proposition as a justification for an interventionist state and those who argued for a minimalist state and saw poverty as simply a market failure. With little understanding of the premises underlying the debate, the DAC gender network and its members resourced the feminist economists to explain that policy needs to ask 'for whom' (Elson 2003). However, those responsible for policy remained largely indifferent.

While, the Keynesian economists working on aid policy tended to be more sympathetic to women's rights, apart from a minority of younger women, they were not really interested in and certainly not prepared to consider gender relations as a central issue of development. For example, it did not occur to those in 1994 who were championing the cause of Copenhagen that Beijing had already been long since decided and that there was a risk of undermining the gender equality agenda by demanding a separate conference on social development.¹²

Final version as submitted to *Third World Quarterly* for publication in Vol. 27, no. 6.

It was thus on the margins of this debate between economists that a small number of sociologists and socio-cultural anthropologists in the aid system took a different view of what development was about. Their starting point for thinking about poverty was not the individual but social, cultural and political systems and relations. That most of them were working on issues of gender, was an outcome of the women's movement in the North that had demanded official aid made this as a significant matter. There was much less external pressure in the domestic constituencies for including other aspects of political and social relations. Only a small minority of such social scientists in the world of aid were licensed to take this broader perspective (Eyben 2003).

How feminists inside development agencies contributed to and responded to the emerging poverty reduction consensus has been well analysed by Razavi (1998). I offer three reasons *why* they adapted their thinking to the poverty paradigm. First, as already hinted, there was a tactical reason for giving their work a poverty focus. Provided poverty is not given a *relational* understanding, it fits more easily with public management rational choice theory than does gender. A focus on poverty allowed them to make alliances with Keynesian economists. Second, voices from the South have made a strong case for the gender dimension of deprivation and powerlessness. The social forces that create scarcity on the one hand and discrimination on the other may be analytically distinct but they are experientially seamless. Third,

it was difficult to avoid intellectual co-option. This happened to a number of women aid ministers during the late 1990's when they had to 'talk with the boys' (Elson 1998) and found themselves gradually changing their point of view, perhaps worried that an over feminist perspective might lose them credibility at international aid negotiations.

Thus, for these reasons, feminists in the world of aid contributed to constructing the Millennium Consensus. Since 9/11 it is a consensus that may not survive the increasing return by rich countries to the realist agenda of international relations. Even so, although the world increasingly appears a messier place and donors themselves are under greater scrutiny, the underlying assumptions about the rational individual remain largely unchallenged within the international aid system.

By making transparent the issue of power, Beijing had the potential to challenge the whole development construct. Unlike the anti-globalisation movement and the World Social Forum, the women's movement was able to get inside the international aid bureaucracy and institutionalise feminism through the UN conference process. However, the initial impetus has faded.

If we consider knowledge as the power to dominate, then a dominant discourse tends to make invisible what has the potential to challenge that

power. (Foucault 1980) Many civil society groups have expressed discouragement that the vision and commitments of Beijing have become largely eroded (Naidoo 2005). Does this mean that the international aid community has lost its chance of changing itself from within? As the pendulum swings again and Poverty Reduction Strategies fail to deliver on their promise, what are the prospects for re-introducing alternative understandings of the world into the international aid policy agenda?

Conclusion: other roads?

I have argued that one among other explanations for the failure of Beijing to influence how aid institutions think is because development as a construct trivialises the significance of society, culture and power as forces that shape history and individual lives. Aid policy has been largely successful in appropriating and taming these sociological ideas to fit within an already constructed paradigm (Bergeron 2003).

What are the conditions for aid policy actors to be prepared to think with more than one paradigm rather than just debate within a paradigm? As the aid system responds to 'North-South contagion effects' (Rogerson et al.2004) and a concern for the security of the donor countries, a possible factor may be the growing realisation that many people have perspectives on the world that are different from those of aid and foreign policy bureaucrats (Darby 2003).

Final version as submitted to *Third World Quarterly* for publication in Vol. 27, no. 6.

One such different perspective is that social change often occurs through contest and challenge rather than through a consensus established by the powerful. The gains won by the women's movement were not freely offered.

Struggles can be complex and sometimes bloody and horrible – with devastating impact on community well-being and individual hopes and chance of life. Yet, in all this violent confrontation and extremism there may be the opportunity for development organisations to increase the space for peaceful struggles leading to greater global and local social justice. The United Nations system may find the chance to give itself once again a distinct voice from that of the OECD and the Bretton Woods Institutions. To achieve this it needs to privilege perspectives and knowledge that complement development economics.

This would require thinking about development, not just in terms of aid instruments, such as PRSPs or of targets, such as Millennium Development Goals, but as transformational processes and relationships. It would mean seeing the transfer of resources as just one means to that end, rather than the be-all and end-all of development actions.

Writing primarily about the domestic political scene in the United States, Fraser has suggested that the forces of progressive politics have been divided

Final version as submitted to *Third World Quarterly* for publication in Vol. 27, no. 6.

into two camps. On one side are the proponents of redistribution and on the other side are those who emphasise the importance of diversity – of a ‘difference-friendly’ society where assimilation to dominant cultural norms is no longer the price of equal respect. She argues there is a widespread decoupling of the politics of difference from the politics of equality. (Fraser 2001).

In international aid policy, ‘recognition’ has so far received short shrift. Aid uses its power to categorise and measure others, not to hear how they would like to describe themselves (Wood 1989). At the same time, the current enthusiasm for worrying about ‘group based inequalities’ (Stewart 2002) means aid runs the risk of responding to ‘identity’ politics. Fraser warns it is a potentially dangerous response because it reifies culture and ignores the complexity of people’s lives and the multiplicity of their identifications.

What Fraser calls ‘misrecognition’ arises when institutions structure interaction according to cultural norms that impede people’s standing as full members of society and ‘parity of participation’ in social life. She suggests that such parity of participation depends on two conditions. The first of these conditions is similar to what Rawls would describe as ‘primary goods’ or Sen as ‘capabilities’. This is where many development economists’ commitment to

Final version as submitted to *Third World Quarterly* for publication in Vol. 27, no. 6.

aid as distributive justice plays its part. I suggest it is Fraser's second condition that is new to mainstream aid policy thinking.

This other condition requires that institutionalised patterns of cultural values express equal respect for all participants and ensure equal opportunity for achieving social esteem. Whereas the first condition concerns material well-being, the second relates to the quality of societal relationships. Neither condition, she argues can be reduced into the other and it is together that they form a definition of social justice.

The Beijing agenda has been the only significant attempt by the international aid system to grapple with a concept of social justice that included a relational as well as a distributional theme. More than ten years later, with the urgent need to avoid a simplistic and possibly dangerous response to the global and local claims of reductionist identity politics, it may be a timely moment to develop and apply the thinking of Beijing without losing the commitment to Copenhagen. As with those two conferences, the United Nations would, in theory, appear best placed to take the lead. However, it would also require a re-evaluation by the member countries of the OECD Development Assistance Committee of their own understanding of their role and power to shape events. Particularly important would be a readiness to embrace intellectual

diversity and to welcome a multiplicity of voices in the construction of knowledge within, between and above all *beyond* their own aid ministries.

For those working on day to day policy matters rather than in universities, simultaneously bearing in mind two different ways of viewing the world, what has been referred to as 'negative capability' is extraordinarily difficult. I have never seen a civil servant's submission to a Minister with the comment that there are two or even three ways of approaching a problem, all equally valid. People working in bureaucratic organisations are trained to think of there being a correct solution to a problem, based on un-theorised 'objective' evidence¹³. To shift to an acceptance of multiple paradigms means asking questions about whom we are and why we understand the world in a certain way because of who we are. Gender is a concept is helpful in that respect and its token legitimacy in the world of aid (through the Millennium Development Goal number three) could be an entry point for stimulating such a shift. It challenges people to ask these questions and to explore relations within their organisations as well as with aid recipients. It is a concept that can point to questions that require international development organisations to reflect on their own power and the dilemmas of engagement in other people's struggles. It can contribute to more reflexive learning about what donors can and cannot do and contribute to what Giri calls a 'global conversation' on development as a shared responsibility (2004).

End notes

¹ from *The Road Not Taken* by Robert Frost

² This article is based on a longer background paper commissioned by UNRISD for its report on Beijing plus 10. I am grateful to Andrea Cornwall and anonymous reviewers for commenting on earlier drafts.

³ The Overseas Development Administration until 1997 and then in its successor, the Department for International Development.

⁴ Particularly to the Secretary General, Juan Somavia, a Chilean sociologist and diplomat.

⁵ The original proposed title for this third pillar had been 'social cohesion' but the ODA/DFID social development advisers thought that sounded so conservative they asked the UK delegation at a preparatory meeting to get it changed it to 'social integration'

⁶ We officials were informed that it was because of this focus on poverty that the (Conservative) British Prime Minister chose not attend, on the basis that there was no poverty in the United Kingdom. This position was reversed in 1997 when Labour came to power with a domestic poverty reduction and social inclusion agenda.!

⁷ This account was given to me after by the senior British official attending the meeting and shortly after the event.

⁸ Thus, ironically, and for completely opposite reasons, I was supportive of the UK Government's official line at that time not to give Copenhagen a high profile.

⁹ Although right to late '90s, economists in DFID considered Sen a dangerous radical.

¹⁰ See Bergeron's point: 'The new ("modern") economic theory's emphasis on institutions is not,

Final version as submitted to *Third World Quarterly* for publication in Vol. 27, no. 6.

however, based on the kinds of holistic or complex social and institutional analyses of development called for by feminists and other "outsiders". These sorts of analyses are instead often pushed to the margins of the Bank's discourse because they have failed to base themselves on rigorous theoretical notions such as individual optimization.' (2002:401)

¹¹ See also Pieterse's similar view of the contest between economists in US domestic policy on poverty (2002).

¹² I am arguing rather differently from what is sometimes suggested concerning the failure of gender mainstreaming, namely that this was due to conflict between the feminist goal of gender equity achieved through state-led redistribution and the neo-liberal goal of efficiency achieved through market-driven economic growth. (True 2003)

¹³ See the discussion by Geyer (2003) on this matter in relation to the relevance of complexity theory for helping those involved in shaping public policy understand there are multiple ways of understanding problems and multiple solutions.

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