

WORKING PAPER **288**

Somewhere Over the Rainbow?
The Politics and Dilemmas of
Researching Citizenship and
Marginality

Lyla Mehta
August 2007



Citizenship DRC



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Somewhere Over the Rainbow? The Politics and Dilemmas of Researching Citizenship and Marginality

Lyla Mehta

Summary

Research on development is normative, engaged and seeks to make a difference since it focuses on the excluded, on power relations and aims at the empowerment of the voiceless and increasingly on the 'pedagogy of the powerful'. This makes it even more loaded and contested than other kinds of research. However, how aware and reflexive are researchers of their own biases and positionalities? Do final research accounts pay attention to questions concerning power and politics in the course of the research process? What are the dilemmas and contradictions encountered by researchers in both the North and South when they work with marginalised and powerless groups? This paper focuses on these issues by drawing on the experiences and testimonies of researchers involved in the Development Research Centre (DRC) on Citizenship, Participation and Accountability based at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex. By focusing on the methodologies and methods that DRC researchers drew on while researching questions of citizenship and marginality in India, Nigeria, Mexico and Brazil, the paper discusses the increasing distance between researchers and the research participants and the politics of researching citizenship and marginality. It also provides theoretical and personal insights on issues related to methods, ethics, positionality, reflexivity and power. The paper intersperses personal statements and reflections (presented in italics) with theoretical reflections to highlight the messiness and confusion embedded in the research process which rarely come to the fore in conventional research papers and reports. It demonstrates that development research that seeks to make a difference must rethink questions concerning policy influence, change at local and global levels and the politics of research given the interconnectedness between the problems in the South with policies and politics in the North. It urges us as researchers to ask critical questions, decide more forcefully how to engage with the powerful and take the sides of the weak while maintaining a pragmatism of hope.

Keywords: Development Research Centre (DRC), research on citizenship and marginality, action research, research ethics, reflexivity, methods and methodology.

Lyla Mehta is a Research Fellow at the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex. Her research has focused on power/knowledge interfaces in environment and development debates; natural resource governance and rights and access to resources (addressed through the case of water and sanitation); gender and development-induced-displacement; and rights and forced migration. She has been grappling with issues concerning the ethics of development research and the politics of researching subaltern groups and marginality since her first experiences of village-level research in 1991.

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Preface

Research on development is normative, engaged and seeks to make a difference. After all, it focuses on the dispossessed, the marginal, the excluded, on power relations and aims at the empowerment of the voiceless and increasingly on the 'pedagogy of the powerful'. This makes it even more loaded and contested than other kinds of research (see Mehta *et al.* 2006). However, how aware and reflexive are researchers of their own biases and positionalities? Do final research accounts pay attention to questions concerning power and politics in the course of the research process? What are the dilemmas and contradictions encountered by researchers in both the North and South when they work with marginalised and powerless groups? What methodologies and methods do researchers draw on while researching questions of citizenship and marginality? This paper provides some theoretical and personal reflections on these issues by drawing on the experiences and testimonies of researchers involved in the Development Research Centre (DRC) on Citizenship, Participation and Accountability.¹

The paper emerged out of a reflection and synthesis process during and after the first round of the DRC. In the period 2003–2005 a small methods group emerged. Researchers from Mexico, Brazil, India and the UK began to critically reflect on the methods that they had employed whilst conducting research on participation and citizenship. In particular, it was felt that there were many ethical dimensions to the research that had implications for knowledge generation, development practice and the research participants. Furthermore, researchers felt that a research programme such as the DRC should try to combine theoretical and policy relevant reflections around questions of citizenship, participation and accountability with a concrete engagement with the politics of research and praxis. This paper is a result of those reflections.² Although it is written by one person who has emerged as the author of the paper, it is very much the result of reflections emerging from the methods working group.³

While the paper deals with the politics of research in one very specific research programme, it hopefully has a wider relevance for those concerned with the

1 The DRC, based at IDS, was one of the seven research centres funded by the Department for International Development (DFID) in 2000 to facilitate research collaboration across countries. The Citizenship DRC is a five-year collaborative initiative that focuses on enhancing the efforts of poor and marginalised groups to define and claim their rights and make citizenship matter. With research institutions and civil society groups from seven countries, the DRC aims at collaborative research that should enhance the capacity for policy influence in both the North and South. In the first round (2000–2005) partners included IDS (University of Sussex, UK), the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (Bangladesh), the Centro Brasileiro de Análise e Planejamento (Brazil), the Society for Participatory Research in Asia (India), the Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México/Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana – Xochimilco (Mexico), the Theatre for Development Centre (Ahmadu Bello University, Nigeria) and the Centre for Southern African Studies/School of Government (University of the Western Cape, South Africa).

2 See Appendix 1 for the questions that guided the reflections that I drew on as I wrote this paper.

politics of research, action research, researching citizenship and development research more generally. Firstly, many funding bodies are prioritising programmatic funding to large research centres. Most of these are based in the North and led by Northern institutes such as IDS, a globally renowned development research institution. Thus the lessons from this DRC paper will be relevant for many large international research programmes that juggle a range of commitments around knowledge generation, policy influence and mutual ‘capacity building’. This becomes all the more difficult since such programmes are embedded in wide networks around the world with diverse partners juggling multiple roles and identities in the course of the research process. Thus many important lessons emerge concerning equitable research partnerships both within countries and across the North and South and the risks embedded in research that seeks to make a difference for both policy and practice.

Secondly, while reflexivity, reflections on ethical dilemmas and situating the researcher in the research process are an intrinsic part of several anthropological and sociological studies and participatory research, they have not explicitly been a key concern in development research. There has been an influence from critical anthropology and the sociology of development (e.g. Escobar 1995; and Crush 1995) but this is not yet mainstream. This is quite surprising given that development research is concerned with social and economic change and with improving human wellbeing. Thus, the paper is hopefully inviting the development community to engage with how the research process is influenced by power relations and how researchers have the power to influence the research product through their own ideological and moral commitments and personal backgrounds. All this calls for an awareness of the fragility of our final research products and conclusions and the need for modesty regarding how much can be achieved through research that seeks to make a difference. These issues are teased out by drawing on the personal reflections of the researchers who provided written submissions. Furthermore, specific examples of in-country research by the DRC programme are also provided.

This paper is structured in the following way. The first section builds on Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of the ‘schizo’. It introduces the notion of the researcher as a ‘schizo’, given the distance between her and the research participants. The use of ‘schizo’ is not intended to be offensive. This paper builds on the way it has been used in Deleuze and Guattari (1972). It then goes on to discuss the dilemmas and politics of researching citizenship and marginality by drawing on both theoretical and personal insights and experiences by DRC members on a range of issues related to methodology, methods, ethics, positionality, reflexivity and power. Personal statements and reflections (presented as italics) are interspersed throughout the narrative which provide practical and theoretical reflections. The highly personal reflections begin with my own views and positionality. I then go on to introduce the other researchers and present their frank views and in-country

3 In particular, Ranjita Mohanty and John Gaventa were key to this process. My role was to help synthesise the reflections and provide an overall context which is why I became the author of this paper. It must also be noted that this paper reflects the experiences and research contexts of those who contributed to the methods reflection process. It cannot speak for everyone involved with the DRC programme or for all participating researchers.

experiences alongside discussing the politics of researching citizenship and marginality. This style has been consciously deployed and is intended to highlight the messiness and confusion embedded in the research process which rarely come to the fore in conventional research papers and reports.

As you will see, both the author and the researchers contributing with their reflections are exposing themselves somewhat by taking the risk to ask and tackle difficult questions. The paper also deploys a somewhat unusual and different style of writing and discourse. Whether we have succeeded and the risk is worth taking or not, is for you, reader, to let us know.

Development Research Centre on Citizenship, Participation and Accountability Synthesis Papers

This working paper is part of a series of synthesis papers from the Development Research Centre on Citizenship, Participation and Accountability (DRC). From 2001–2005, the Citizenship DRC was funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) to carry out research around four main themes: meanings and expressions of rights and citizenship; realizing rights and claiming accountabilities; spaces for change; and citizens and science in the global context. The synthesis papers were commissioned to draw together the findings of the past five years work; speak to, challenge and critique existing literatures and assumptions; articulate and communicate policy implications of our work; and pull out key questions to inform our work in the future. The DRC is continuing to work for another five year phase of research, with new themes relating to deepening democracy in states and localities, local-global citizen engagements and violence, participation and citizenship.

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at the DRC synthesis conference of November 2005 for their useful feedback, especially those from Lawrence Haddad and Robert Chambers. I also thank the paper's reviewers; and Alison Norwood and Alison Dunn for their help with the copy editing of this paper. All errors that remain, however, are mine.

[...] capitalism, through its process of production, produces an awesome ‘schizo’phrenic accumulation of energy or charge, against which it brings all its vast powers of repression to bear [...] there is the twofold movement of decoding or deterritorializing flows on the one hand, and their violent and artificial reterritorialization on the other

[...] As for the schizo, continually wandering about, migrating here, there, and everywhere as best he can, he plunges further and further into the realm of deterritorialization [...]

(Deleuze and Guattari 1972: 35–6)

1 The researcher as a ‘schizo’?

We live in a fractured and contradictory world. The promise already seems to have gone sour with an imperialist war fought in the name of freedom and democracy; natural disasters killing thousands and rendering millions homeless; suicide bombings everywhere; pronounced methodological fundamentalism and autocratic rulers in US and UK politics; new forms of ‘Othering’ in Europe, India and elsewhere; the increasing influence of corporate power and control over our lives, our water, our basic rights and so on and the militarisation of aid in the name of ‘security’. But at the same time, we are united in our commitments to reduce poverty. We have the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the Millennium Project and new commitments to increasing aid spending. Africa is ‘in’ and sexy thanks to Bono, Bob Geldof, Tony Blair and the Africa Commission. And those concerned with development want to make a difference by working towards a fairer and more just world.

I suppose I should begin with myself: I am Lyla. I grew up in an elite minority community in South Bombay and landed up via Vienna completely wide eyed and clueless in India’s Narmada Valley to study dam-based displacement. There I experienced for the first time ‘tribal’ life in remote hill villages along the banks of the Narmada, and witnessed incredible police brutality but also amazing protest and resistance. A few years later I had some life-changing experiences in Kutch, western India, where I studied access to water and water scarcity and hung out in a multi-caste village amongst feudal lords, wandering pastoralists and excluded Dalits. I am now a professional researcher at IDS and flit in and out of many worlds. I miss the long spells in the villages but try to connect with the anti-dam movement in different ways. Now most of my research trips last about 3–4 weeks. Many of my research projects have focused largely on interviewing policymakers and urban commentators in metropolitan areas. I spend a lot of time going to conferences/workshops and meetings. I have many stories to tell but since my field research was not done specifically for the DRC, there won’t be too many personal reflections from me in this paper after this. I am your synthesiser and narrator.

Deleuze and Guattari are often dismissed as wacky postmodernists but I find some truth in what they write. I don’t do drugs but there are those rare moments when I’m not rushing about in my daily work and life that I can identify with the above quote. I believe research should have emancipatory and liberational outcomes but I’m often

not sure whether what I do really makes a difference. Yes, sometimes, I feel like a 'schizo' as I try to make sense of development, the overlapping worlds of modernity, pre-modernity and hypermodernity in the societies and countries that I am familiar with. I am often torn between activism and academia; between Europe and India. Sometimes I think being at a research institute in the North such as IDS enables me to have the power to engage with many different realities and dip in and out of academic, NGO and policy worlds and say things that will be taken seriously. At other times, I think it is too distanced from what really matters. It then feels like a strange bubble. I am not alone I think.

John Gaventa (IDS, UK, henceforth John): I would like DRC research to be linked to social change and emancipation but I struggle with issues of distance vs groundedness. One of the things I miss in this programme is the groundedness that I felt in the Highlander Center⁴ where I was before coming to IDS. It is challenging to balance the different roles of director, manager, colleague and ally, all of which affect how I behave and is confusing for me and everybody else. There is also the tension which goes with now being in a powerful position. Before I was a young activist. Now I am a middle-aged white man in a mainstream institution, trying to coordinate large research programmes with multiple, often conflicting, accountabilities (Methods Workshop, 27–29 April 2005).

Carlos Cortez (UAM-X, Mexico, henceforth Carlos): My relationship to this research programme needs to be linked to my split and fractured life. Even as a student I was always trying to do something because I thought a lot of things were not acceptable. When I was involved as an activist I thought we needed to be more analytical. And when I started my academic career I started to be worried that this was very abstract and not related to practical and experiential realities. I have the privilege of being part of different groups, working with people that combine theory and practice and are very creative. But balancing all their competing interests calls for 'delicate equilibrium' (Methods Workshop, 27–29 April 2005).

2 Why does it matter?

Deep down, academics, community workers, researchers, practitioners, activists and policymakers working on marginality, development and citizenship often face tussles and huge contradictions. But we rarely articulate them. In fact, development studies, given its positivist and post-positivist origins, almost discourages critical reflection and reflexivity. More often than not, our working papers, our journal articles and books are sanitised, distanced and authoritative accounts. The entire process of research and fieldwork, so crucial for knowledge generation, along with the experiential elements of research are banished from the final text. Such academic distance and authority have been questioned at least in anthropology and qualitative sociology (cf. Rabinow 1984; Clifford 1983; Smith 1989).

4 The Highlander Center is an NGO based in the United States which has a long history of research and education for social change and community empowerment, and which has been very involved in labour, civil rights, environmental and other movements (www.highlandercenter.org).

But researchers experience the world in a fragmentary way. We experience – often vicariously – subalternity and exclusion in the everyday and everynight worlds of the poor and marginalised in the course of research. Sometimes we feel rage and hopelessness as a result. But we also have incredible highs, even during the course of DRC work, for instance when experiencing theatre performances, dances and rituals in the remote villages of Nigeria, Chiapas and India. At times, it is liberating to challenge and be cheeky with powerful bureaucrats in Washington, Geneva and London in the course of free-wheeling interviews. But what happens to all these fragmentary pieces of knowledge and information? How does one translate real life experiences rooted in everyday lives to academic text? More often than not, the experiential aspects and dark bits of knowledge generation are banished from the final account.

Ranjita Mohanty (Society for Participatory Research – PRIA, henceforth Ranjita): How else can the researcher discuss what she researches on without including her own dilemmas that take her sleep away, ethics she holds close to her heart, politics she engages in, her ego she fiercely protects and her renunciations that trouble others? How else will she even begin telling what her (re)search means – at times an overwhelming all-consuming act and at other times such a trivia that she wishes she could have instead been something else, anything, really, because it simply does not matter? But she continues to be the (re)searcher.

Andrea Cornwall (IDS, UK, henceforth Andrea): What I write about regarding what I've learnt in my DRC research is a delicate matter. I've produced versions of it in different forms. The one I am still holding close to my chest, the one that is closest to the 'action', uses the narrative form of a story in which the reader meets the characters and gets a whiff of the politics that they're engaged in. But is this whiff too pungent for the DRC to bear given the normative bias towards making positive stories out of citizen engagement? It is, after all, always easier to spin the story, to find and amplify that which fits the beliefs and feelings we have about how things ought to be, than it is to delve into the murkier depths of what is really going on.

The researcher is never *tabula rasa*. Consequently, the final research product is a 'situated' account given by a particular researcher at a particular point in time. Every academic endeavour ensues from a set of interactions between the researcher and those participating in the research and is the result of the researcher's insights and experiences gained in the world of ideas and in the empirical world. The final output can only be a reconstructed account of facts, events, observations and theory as interpreted by the researcher. The researcher interprets and laboriously pieces together events, quotes and experiences. It cannot be denied that it is also a process imbued with power relations, for the researcher has the power to select, highlight and contextualise certain elements of the data.

3 The DRC and research

Over the past five years DRC researchers have engaged with theory, methodology and praxis in different ways. Some IDS researchers like me have brought empirical insights generated from other projects to the DRC.⁵ Others have had small research engagements or have convened programmes or edited books. By contrast,

the Nigerian team has used 'theatre for development' to learn about and push the frontiers of citizenship and accountability issues in the Niger Delta and in the Northern Delta. In Mexico, Carlos Cortez has worked with diverse networks to advance the Chiapas struggle and Luisa Paré and Carlos Robles have balanced their commitments to environmental work and watershed management with doing DRC research. In Brazil, researchers have used extensive surveys to understand civil society and citizen engagement in health councils. In India, the PRIA team has used action research to make sense of and try to bring about social change amongst nomads and indigenous peoples. We do not all share similar paradigms. We have positivists, postpositivists, critical theorists and constructivists amongst us, as well as those who mix and match different approaches. We all have different views regarding how we see research and what its purpose should be.

Jenks Okwori (Theatre for Development, Nigeria, henceforth Jenks): For me the DRC research is akin to the proverbial pot of soup which requires several ingredients. Though the ingredients are very different in taste and make-up, put together in an effective blend they provide good cooking. The dilemma is however in the balancing of the ingredients so that the soup does not become a tasteless mismatch. I believe that academics must be useful to their communities beyond generating knowledges which only they or conventional policymakers can consume. And they can do so via civic professionalism through which their research is linked intricately with the changes and happenings in local communities.

Naila Kabeer (IDS, UK, henceforth Naila): I would not see my research as contributing necessarily to change at the local level. Instead, I see my research as speaking to power by engaging with dominant policy debates and dominant discourses. I would not be a good activist. Instead, my skills lie in translating local experiences to the global level. I suppose this could be called a kind of activism too but I would be uncomfortable if the DRC privileged only one kind of activism.

At one level, it is interesting to compare research experiences and examine the range of methods that can be used for researching citizenship in developing contexts. This is particularly important to deepen democratic outcomes for research and practice. At another level, we are also interested in tackling head on and unbanishing all those messy and tricky questions around ethics and the politics of research dilemmas to examine: the ethical dilemmas of researching *on* citizenship while working *with* citizens; the politics of knowledge and situating the researcher, her identities and key experiences in the research process; and the challenges of dealing with power relations within the wider network. We are also concerned with how and whether the research succeeded in linking with policy and praxis and whether we made a difference. Finally, our concern is about research on marginality and powerlessness, to which I soon turn.

5 As will be explained later, due to funding constraints and the high overheads at an institution such as IDS which receives no core funding support, IDS researchers often could not do much field research for the DRC. They instead were given modest time inputs to write papers reflecting on DRC themes, while drawing on earlier research. A few, however, ended up playing convening roles which led to an asymmetry between the roles and responsibilities of researchers based in the North and South. The next round will rectify this asymmetry.

Ranjita: Can research stand independent of the person who does it? This was the first question that troubled me. There are connecting moments between the researcher and the research. No matter what frameworks are given to us, what we are expected to deliver, which institutions we are based in, we essentially bring to the research what we think we are, what we believe in and what we think we ought to be.

4 Approaches to researching citizenship and marginality

Citizenship is often made out to be universal and natural but in reality it is characterised by a history of exclusion and struggle (Kabeer 2005; Lister 1997). The work of the DRC has highlighted how citizenship is experienced differently by different actors; how theoretical debates on citizenship are often very idealised and are not shared by ordinary ‘citizens’ who may not share the same degree of belonging. We have thus largely been interested in the perspectives of the excluded: the non-persons or non-citizens who lack access to the most basic rights such as land, health, water; those whose voice rarely gets to count in expert framings of science or knowledge (Leach *et al.* 2005); and those whose very existence is denied because they are different from the dominant culture (e.g. the Indians in the Zapatista struggle). This raises a lot of challenges for empirical research, not least because notions of both ‘citizens’ and ‘citizenship’ are highly contested both in theory and practice (Fairclough *et al.* n.d.). Thus critical research is required at two levels: one to unpack problematic discourses of citizenship that exclude large groups of disenfranchised and marginalised groups; and the other to examine the performative aspects of citizenship (to see how people position themselves as citizens and are treated by others as citizens (see also Bora and Hausendorf 2001; Fairclough *et al.* n.d.).

Researching citizenship thus means engaging in critical social research. This can be at different levels. Through disclosure which is the ‘the beginning – not the end of the war against human misery ...’ (Baumann 2005: 1097). For Bourdieu, one of the greatest late twentieth century sociologists, in *La Misère du Monde*: ‘To become aware of the mechanisms which make life painful, even unlivable, does not mean to neutralise them; to bring to light the contradictions does not mean to resolve them’ (Bourdieu cited in Baumann 2005: 1097). Thus Zygmunt Baumann, who draws on Bourdieu, argues that no matter how sceptical we are about the social effectiveness of one’s message, nothing is less innocent than being *laissez faire*. Nothing is more dangerous than denying the possibility of living together differently or with less misery or no misery (see Baumann 2005).

Carlos: We see critical social research engaging both at the epistemological and methodological level. It is research that provides the possibility to develop a critical perspective on existing power relations, particularly those that reproduce social exclusion. But it is also interested in changing these relations. It means conducting research with social groups seeking social and political change. Such research generates both academic knowledge and knowledge at the local level that can lead to some kind of action. Such research however does not necessarily privilege local action over analytical rigour. Instead, it recognises that objectivity is relative.

Bourdieu, until his death a few years ago, combined theory, praxis and methodology. He was familiar with both ethnographic methods and statistical analysis and was opposed to rejecting one in favour of the other. He believed that theory and methodology could not be separated, as is evident in the following: 'I have never accepted the separation between the theoretical construction of the object of research and the set of practical procedures without which there can be no real knowledge' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 33). Moreover, for him even the most minute empirical observation involved theoretical choices and the most abstract theoretical puzzle could not be clarified without an engagement with empirical realities. He (unlike most contemporary researchers who have an army of assistants and students) actually went out and did the research himself. He was a theoretician, empiricist and ethnographer and conducted much of the fieldwork, interviewing and analysis for his writings himself.

Others such as Paolo Freire went a step further. They are not merely interested in disclosing the nature of human misery. They seek to change it and seek a research programme that contributes to the struggle for a better world. Freire seeks to transform society by transforming power relations. This entails not just taking power away from those who have it but reinventing it, demystifying power and thus creating a more just society. Action research and participatory action research are heavily influenced by Freire's work and leanings. As Freire wrote, 'if I perceive the reality as the dialectical relationship between subject and object, then I have to use methods for investigation which involved the people of the area being studied as researchers; they should take part in the investigation themselves and not serve as the passive objects of the study' (Freire quoted in Gaventa 1993). As John Gaventa has written, 'research is seen not only as a process of creating knowledge, but simultaneously as education and development of consciousness, and of mobilization for action.'

Still researching marginality is tricky business. Even when we make attempts to be fair, compassionate and honest whilst conducting research with marginalised groups, overt and covert disparities and discrepancies can still persist. We all have our burdens and legacies. So does the term 'research'.

Andrea: When I joined IDS in 1998 it was to work with the Participation Group, for some of whom 'research' was a dirty word, associated with adjectives like 'extractive'. That suited me fine at the time. I'd finished my fieldwork in Nigeria feeling as if I never again wanted to be the white spectator writing about the lives of black women who had no opportunity to speak for themselves except through my narratives – for all that I loved listening to people's stories and spending my days tracing the contours of their lives. I'd gone from there to immersing myself in activist participatory research on estates in south London, choosing to work in my own back yard rather than test my positionality once again by returning to the subject position of privileged white observer-participant.

For some indigenous peoples, research is one of the dirtiest words in their vocabulary (Denzin and Lincoln 2005: 1). Research provided the justification to describe, document and represent the 'Other'. It is associated with colonialism's most sordid legacies. There are risks that development and citizenship research can replicate these colonial legacies yet again (this time under the guise of participation, citizenship and accountability). This is all the more tricky when we are working with

marginalised and poor people who often cannot read what we write and thus cannot challenge our conclusions, reports and writings.

5 Reflexivity and positionality

Reflexivity is the conscious attempt to identify how we as researchers influence the research process and how the whole research process is structured around issues of dominance and power, gender, class, age and race. Reflexivity thus concerns a process of inter-subjectivity where interactions between all the different participants in the process lead to the creation of certain types of knowledges. Feminist research has been key in promoting reflexivity (e.g. Smith 1989; and Harding 1987). Here power relations in the research and the exercise of power during the research process are identified. Similarly, there needs to be a concern for accountability in the research process and a cognisance of the ethical decision in the research process and highlighting upfront the politics and interests of those making the decisions.

Most DRC researchers feel that our research should have emancipatory outcomes contributing to social change at macro and micro levels. Others like Naila feel that her contribution is through influencing policy debates. But there are tensions stemming from our personal backgrounds and institutional positioning. For example, IDS researchers like John, Andrea and me feel that being at IDS often leads to being removed from on-the-ground realities in a way that we were not used to before working here, and thus feel tensions between distance and groundedness. Others such as Steve Oga Abah from Nigeria (henceforth Steve) expressed constantly negotiating plural positions: simultaneously coping with a position of disadvantage alongside a position of privilege. He describes himself as a village boy who went to university who is in a disadvantaged position because he grew up in a part of Nigeria where he was from a minority group but also occupies a privileged position being a university faculty member. His experiences as part of a minority group sensitise him to research on citizenship, rights and entitlements (Methods Workshop, 27–29 April 2005). Thus, having experienced exclusion or disadvantage endows one with greater sensitivity for understanding marginalisation amongst those participating in the research. Personal and research experiences get woven together. On the other hand, being in a position of privilege can also help speak out for issues of accountability, rights and entitlements.

For many in the group, the DRC offered a way to reconcile these different identities. (For example, to find ways to use conventional research to open up political space see Andrea's reflections on Brazil, Section 6.4.) Furthermore, institutional positioning also plays a key role since the institutions we are based in for DRC research can be enabling or restricting and the hierarchies in them can also impact on DRC research and outcomes. Finally, we are also moulded and influenced by funding and donor agendas that can be short term and shift over time. Being funded by a northern bilateral agency such as DFID can offer legitimacy in some situations whilst in others it can arouse suspicion (see reflections by Jenks, Section 6.2).

John: There are some advantages to having the many multiple identities that I've acquired at IDS and through the DRC. There is only so much I can do about who I am but I can try to learn, change and be aware, without being apologetic. There is a challenge in having multiple identities, talking to different audiences, and to different parts of ourselves. We have to constantly negotiate our own identities.

Andrea: During the first phase of the DRC, I co-convened a group in which I was the only person who was not actually doing any research, due to the constraints of the way IDS works (fee rates, in particular) that make doing participatory or ethnographic research from this location virtually impossible. This made me feel uncomfortable: what legitimacy could I have for saying anything about the issues we were working on if I hadn't actually done any of the research? And why should I, the only northern academic in the group at that time, be the only person who was not out there doing fieldwork and, instead, be the one who synthesised and editorialised what others were discovering? In the second phase of the DRC, an opportunity arose to work with Brazilian colleagues on an innovative participatory research project on citizenship and participation, funded by DFID–Brazil. I leapt at the chance, got the opportunity to begin studying a municipal health council and found myself hooked on finding out more long after the project was over. DRC support allowed me to continue and, by timing my visits to Brazil for other funded work to coincide with health council meetings, I was able to follow the health council over a period of three years. Becoming a researcher allowed me to be more fully part of our working group: I had my own empirical research to draw on to ground my observations and test the theories we were discussing against. It was this experience – of a participatory research project turning into a conventional ethnographic research project, by default, rather than design – that helped me reclaim what I'd once valued so highly about anthropological enquiry and really appreciate the unique contribution that ethnography of the most conventional and 'extractive' kind can make to understanding the dynamics of citizenship and democracy.

6 Methods and methodologies

Despite the madness of the twentyfirst century, we are at least liberated from some of the positivist trappings of twentieth century research and Weberian goals of *Wertfreiheit* (value freedom). The legacy of twentieth century interpretive sociologists, feminist scholars and postmodern anthropologists has largely made it acceptable that there is no one universal gaze or explanation for what makes an individual/society/culture work. Every gaze is filtered through the lens of gender, language, class, race and so on. Similarly, since all knowledge is situated and shaped by its locality, cultural, historical and social specificity, there is no one objective observation. It is based on the assumption that objectivity is:

an impossibility, since each of us, of necessity, must encounter the world from some perspective or other (from where we stand) and the questions we come to ask about that world, our theories and hypotheses, must also of necessity arise from the assumptions that are embedded in our perspective [...] The task of researchers therefore becomes to acknowledge and even to work with their own intrinsic involvement in the research process and the part this plays in the

results that are produced. Researchers must view the research process as necessarily a co-production between themselves and the people they are researching.

(Burr 1995: 160 cited in Colombo 2003)

Thus no one method can grasp reality and all its complexities. Instead, there needs to be a deployment of a range of methods to make sense of the world and unravel all its taken-for-granted characteristics (see also Denzin and Lincoln 2005: 20) in order to as Wittgenstein says, 'get hold of the difficulty deep down. Because it is grasped near the surface it simply remains the difficulty it was. It has to be pulled out by the roots; and that involves our beginning to think in a new way' (Wittgenstein, *Vermischte Bemerkungen*, cited in Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 1).

Furthermore, our worldviews and paradigms guide our choice of methods in fundamental ways as our beliefs and the way we approach research both ontologically and epistemologically. Research is like sitting on a felucca. At times the wind blows and you sail along and at other times you are stuck staring at the Nile. To some extent you have to surrender to and soak up what's going on to you and the world at a given time and given place. But a skilful boatman can also steer your felucca to make the best use of the wind. Apart from serendipity, good citizenship researchers need other skills. Like that of the *bricoleur*.

Twentyfirst century researchers are also like *bricoleurs*⁶ – like the handyman, the *bricoleur* employs different methodological strategies that are required in the unfolding of a research situation and also seeks to understand multiple perspectives and meanings. *Bricoleurs* may tinker away but their commitment to social change is explicit. To contribute to social transformation, *bricoleurs* seek to both understand the forces of domination that affect individual lives as well as to remove knowledge production and domination from elite groups (Kincheloe and McLaren 2005: 310; Denzin and Lincoln 2005).

What was the *bricolage* of methods and approaches that different DRC researchers used? Most of the researchers who provided reflections for this paper appreciated the fact that the DRC allowed them to accommodate a plurality of methods and that there was a marked lack of absence of methodological rigidities. This however should not be read to imply a lack of rigour. One of the important themes within qualitative and participatory research is how to evolve differing understandings of rigour, and how we apply those to our own work. This pluralism ranged from quantitative and closed surveys in Brazil to action research in India. I now discuss experiences in India, Nigeria, Mexico and Brazil.

6 Kincheloe and McLaren (2005) develops the concept of *bricolage*, as articulated by Denzin and Lincoln (2005) who use the term in the spirit of Claude Levi-Strauss (1966) and his lengthy discussion of it in *The Savage Mind*. The French word *bricoleur* describes a handyman or handywoman who makes use of the tools available to complete a task (Harper 1987). *Bricolage* can imply the fictive and imaginative elements of the presentation of all formal research (Kincheloe and McLaren 2005: 316).

6.1 Action research in India

Ranjita is from PRIA which is known for its action research. PRIA is a large Indian NGO with over 20 regional offices, and a range of programmes on participation, governance and social action. Ranjita acknowledges that action research is a contested concept. She sees it as research which has the potential of leading to action and change. Methods then become means to an end. PRIA has given her the institutional space to use action research and also experiment with other methods.

Ranjita: The world of action research initially evoked a sense of ambivalence in me. Who will initiate action? Me or someone else? I am quite aware that those engaged in field action seldom read what I write. To bring about change I need to give tips and recommendations. I could never do that in the beginning. I was reluctant to be prescriptive. But later, along with colleagues who have experience in intervening in local realities to bring about change, it became possible to develop a framework for action. I still however hesitate to prescribe an action agenda. This engagement revealed an altogether different way of looking at research. Instead of researching to test theories and concepts, what I am researching can lead to change.

Doing action research in an NGO can be more targeted towards social change than from a university department. Still, in the context of a large international research programme, PRIA's research needed to focus on meeting international research standards and analytical rigour (perhaps to comply with the programmatic need to write up the research and findings). This led to the perception that the overall impact on local change was more modest than it could have been. Furthermore, doing action research in the context of the DRC meant that Ranjita focused more on debates on democracy, state and civil society as opposed to focusing on local level issues in Rajasthan.

There is a wider debate regarding whether action research necessarily means privileging local action at the expense of analytical rigour. Furthermore, is it research for targeted and strategic action or is it research that arises out of action and inspired by praxis? Whatever may be the case, there is the need to investigate more systematically how effective research programmes such as the DRC can be in linking research with action (at the local, national and global levels) and to also understand the contradictory outcomes of action research. For example, local communities may prioritise action that is beyond the scope of the outside researchers' interest and remit (I turn to these issues in Section 8).

6.2 Theatre for development work in Nigeria ⁷

The theatre for development work in Nigeria helped sharpen understandings of rights and citizenship in the process from dictatorship to recent democracy. It helped create synergies between NGOs, activists and academics. In particular, the theatre work helped facilitate methodological conversations between people who

⁷ This section draws from Wheeler (2007).

otherwise would have been stuck within their own disciplinary confines. It also helped bring participatory research closer home to the more conventional academics who engaged in the project in the field in a way that otherwise would not have been possible. For Steve and Jenks, research must have a practical outcome but key is the role of legitimacy. They had to work hard to gain it but once it was established it was possible to work at the community level with community leaders. In Abah's words:

Perhaps one of the outcomes of this project would be to discover the interface between theatre for development and Participatory Learning for Action. Very often research methodologies exist in discrete forms just as their proponents may defend their areas of interest and specialisations. Yet there must be a common agenda between these methodologies in so far as they are talking about making potentials and possibilities realizable in a manner that they open up new ways of seeing.

(Abah 2005)

Drama served as a research tool to gather and analyse information, to summarise key issues and findings for presentation to community stakeholders and to prefigure the development of action strategies. Rather than merely serving a cathartic purpose, Steve emphasises that it was a theatre of release by raising issues and problems. This is why it is also characterised as unending theatre. Steve, Jenks and their colleagues empowered villagers to stage plays highlighting their own problems and concerns. But the drama also raised wider issues concerning citizenship and power. Examples include how villagers are caught in an intricate nexus of corruption at every level to the intricate web of institutional relationships and how they impact on the lives of ordinary citizens. In one drama the characters question notions of citizenship and the social map out of which they discover the oppressive coalition of the mosque, courthouse/prison and the Chief's Palace. The drama thus is an instrument of analysis and for planning future actions. However, Steve, Jenks and colleagues find that it is difficult to bring government officials to the village. Instead, the drama is performed by and for villagers (see also Wheeler 2007).

Steve: Given that the research took place in a context from dictatorship to recent democracy, issues of rights and citizenship are often confused. This is why it is interesting to interrogate these issues, linking interdisciplinary perspectives. We believe that the research must always lead to practical action at the community level, and we usually end with action plans. The communities expect them too. But can a research programme such as the DRC support such action plans?

Jenks: In most of the communities in Nigeria where the DRC research was conducted, people constantly ask: why is DFID doing this research? This could indicate their distrust of research or the fear of a hidden agenda or the possibility of opening up spaces for the articulation of grievance or all rolled into one. But even with this questioning, the scope of the DRC's work (seven countries) conveys some form of added value or credibility to the research in the eyes of participants. Most participants in our research communities feel comfortable and almost privileged that their communities are sites for action research. For them their narratives are being taken beyond the limits of their communities to international policy arenas, where they hope rightly or wrongly that their stories of neglect on the part of the Nigerian state will become the subject of pressure from outside for the state to act.

6.3 The struggle of indigenous peoples in Mexico

In Mexico, the research on the struggle of indigenous people and gender in the Chiapas was located within a wider network of social scientists, philosophers and students with the aim to develop collaborative and interdisciplinary research and action. 'Collaborative interactions' were used to dismantle the so-called boundaries between traditional and scientific knowledge to not only understand the problem but also to link up with proposed action. Thus the focus was on interaction through dialogue rather than conventional surveys; interviews that could facilitate open reflections; focus group discussions that allowed for creating and recreating agendas that the women and students could follow up on in their own regions. Finally, non-discursive forms of expression such as murals helped to express emotions that could not be captured in dialogue (e.g. worry). Of course, using these different methods led to the challenges of moving from reflections and testimonies to analysis when the researcher not only uses the power of interpretation but also intuition. This is only possible when relations of trust have been built during the research process. Still, of course, the researcher can walk away from the situation without looking back raising several ethical dilemmas.

Carlos: Action research led to the confluence of different actors with different worries, perspectives and even ideas of time. It opened up not just the possibility of creating a space for interaction between different knowledges ('popular' and 'scientific' knowledges) but also the scope to develop different actions. As action-oriented researchers we tried to learn from the process and to develop the capacity to act, including the social capacity of acting to change some relations (from technical to political). Given that we were in a violent situation in which trust did not exist, it was difficult to pinpoint who were the good and who were the bad. Often the social scientists tended to assume that they had all the right questions and answers. It was a sobering experience for us all. Just because people do not speak, it doesn't mean that they do not know.

Other work in Veracruz, Mexico, focused on how to build on local processes of mobilisation to create participatory management of the watershed and increase accountability in how reserve resources are managed. Through this action-orientated research, Luisa Paré and Carlos Robles had to reconcile their own agendas, as environmental activists with that of the demands for livelihood alternatives by the indigenous people in the communities where they worked. This required a sensitivity and respect for existing and often fragile process of mobilisation at the local level.

Luisa Paré and Carlos Robles: The real objective for local people is how to have more alternatives for their livelihoods, with the added benefit of protecting the environment. But the discussions about this have led to an exchange between what we as researchers want and what the local people want. We have been encouraging them to consider projects that are viable over the longer term and are environmentally sustainable – and projects that challenge the client-oriented culture that is prevalent ... We have learned how to work with existing processes of social mobilisation rather than convene new processes and push them on people. The result is that the space we have helped facilitate can be used for many things – and it is being used to resolve conflicts.

6.4 ‘Conventional’ research in Brazil

Unlike the work in India, Nigeria and Mexico, the Brazilian team used more ‘conventional’ research methods and were not explicitly interested in action research or research for social change. The team was interested in investigating how inclusive 31 local health councils in São Paulo were and the level of associational activity and participation in the working of the local health council. This included deploying a range of methods: qualitative research (interviews and the follow-up of meetings); surveys; literature reviews; and participatory exercises. These different approaches helped map the profile of participants, the ways the councillors were recruited and the nature of relationships established between the council, civil society and the political and health system. These methods also helped to understand the institutional structures that facilitated inclusiveness. These included: whether the council has its own budget provision; the type and frequency of information made available by the coordination team to the council; and whether the health coordinator has meetings with the council in his/her office, and how often.

Vera Schatten Coelho (Centro Brasileiro de Análise e Planejamento (Brazil): In the first round, we attended all the meetings of the municipal health council and interviewed all councillors using a structured questionnaire. In the second round, we tracked how councillors were selected and how nominations were made by organisations. We also carried out an extensive survey in the 31 sub-municipalities with the aim of researching the inclusiveness of the process of selecting councillors.

To explain why some some councils were much more inclusive than others we used both qualitative and quantitative data. For example, we found that some public officials organised databases with relevant information about the associations/ organisations present in the sub-municipality, as well as other initiatives that aimed to open the council to a large spectrum of organisations. Yet, other officials remained closed to such initiatives. To understand these differences we interviewed a sample of public officials using a semi-structured questionnaire that traced their life histories and political networks. Using all this material we sought to explain why some public officials used more ‘inclusive’ strategies than others. In sum, we used both qualitative and quantitative methods during the research, and both aided the process of generating data and explaining the findings.

Andrea’s reflections on engaging with this more ‘conventional’ research style are interesting:

Andrea: I came to rediscover the value of conventional research at the same time as I sought new ways of connecting these methods with the less conventional and more participatory process I was engaging in.

Surveys might be maligned by participatory researchers as the most distancing of instruments but they produce invaluable insights – and the numbers to convince. Initially, I thought I would use the surveys other Brazil-based DRC researchers were using as the basis for seeking more quantitative confirmation of the issues the research was surfacing and as the basis for dialogue across our very different disciplinary perspectives. So I tried. But old habits die hard. I myself was incapable of applying the adapted questionnaire I laboured over to produce (spending hours and hours that I could have spent out there talking to people!) without deviating from the

questions as soon as the respondent got onto an interesting story. I ended up being led by what they wanted to talk about, what they wanted to tell me, and left the questions behind. Also if I only stuck to the questions people would answer them without telling me all kinds of other things that were important, which I only found out once we could chat, unrestrained by questions to ask. I found it strangely unfamiliar to have questions that had been designed by someone else: it seemed a better bet, in this context, to engage people from the council in designing the survey if it was to be useful to them. And to involve them, if possible, in administering it so they would learn as well and get a chance to do more outreach than they were currently doing.

So I held a survey design workshop, which a number of councillors attended and at which we thought about what things would be interesting to know, and what we needed to ask to find out about them. The research became our research. And because it was 'our' research, when the political circumstances changed, plans for the survey dissolved and I was left with a beautifully designed document that had no practical or political use in the new context. Fortunately, the context has changed and there is now scope to revisit the idea of doing the survey, reanimate it with new ideas as new actors have joined the council. But it was an interesting lesson.

As I spent more time in the field, I found the old tools that I'd learnt as an anthropologist came into their own. And there was nothing in the least participatory about using them – which became an asset in the changing political situation. I learnt more about what I was researching from hanging out with councillors, sitting in the health council office gossiping with people who stopped by to say hello and share the latest news, watching what went on in the meetings – and then dissecting dynamics with people in the street outside after they had finished.

What all this taught me was that I've deprived myself for years of the pleasures of finding out for myself because I felt it was somehow morally wrong to do so when I could be facilitating others to do their own learning. Maybe it was time to think more about the creative complementarities of conventional and participatory research – and about when an outsider's perspective can be useful to say the unsayable, observe what remains hidden to those who are involved in something, and provide the sparks for a debate that might otherwise never happen.

This quote highlights how the researcher plays many roles and wears many masks *à la* Goffman (1969). Sometimes she is an actor 'front stage', sometimes 'back stage', wearing different masks and assuming different roles. This dialectic between being an insider and outsider can be quite interesting, especially when the issues are very politicised. By taking on the role of a naïve outsider, it is possible to pursue questions and interview people on issues that would have been hard for one of the positioned locals.

It is not the purpose of this paper to analyse the strengths and weaknesses of the methods deployed in the four cases presented. As discussed, researchers in India, Mexico and Nigeria were explicitly concerned with action research and research that sought to bring about social change in the communities participating in the research. The methods ranged from dialogue, mural design, focus group discussions (Mexico), to drama (Nigeria). All these different strategies helped enhance local understandings of rights and citizenship as well as the causes of structural inequality.

The Brazilian team approached the issue of engaging with social change in a number of different ways. Vera's research on understanding the politics of participatory spaces in health institutions that impact significantly on the lives of the poor used quantitative methods to make arguments that lent the kind of evidence to efforts to democratise participatory spaces that policymakers relish most of all. Being able to feed this evidence into live policy debates within the city and beyond, Vera's ostensibly 'conventional' research was used to influence policy in ways that were arguably more credible and convincing as a result of its conventional basis. Andrea's research was initially participatory action research, aimed at strengthening the potential of citizen oversight through creating spaces for reflection on citizen engagement in health policy councils. It turned into ethnographic research over time, as the political context in the municipality changed and openings for stimulating change began to close. More recently, things have shifted and opportunities are now arising to influence the municipal government and other actors in the municipality; plans are back on stream for engaging the state and civil society with what can be learnt and what can be done as a result of what has been learnt.

Thus much depends on how methods are used and to what end; much depends also on the political opportunities that exist in a given context and the spaces that are available or that can be opened up to influence. While surveys can be highly extractive, they can generate data that can speak to powerful people. They can also complement qualitative and participatory research. Similarly, qualitative research can be extractive and ridden with power politics. Thus a lot hinges on the intention of the researcher, her approach to research and her research participants, rather than the methods *per se*.

7 Ethics and power relations

Ethical dilemmas arise when researchers experience conflicts that cannot be addressed by their own moral principles or through official ethical codes (Hill *et al.* 1995). There is a universal ethic encapsulated in ethical codes that stresses informed consent, protecting the interests of subjects, maintaining confidentiality and preventing the disclosure of identities where this could harm those participating in the research. These principles are often in university codes and some of them are hopelessly inadequate for developing country settings. Moreover, in participatory research other ethics also emerge, such as those of reciprocity, using the research for change, and being clear about the involvement of those being researched in the process. Thus formal ethical codes are often inappropriate in the context of participatory or action research.

Conventional ethical codes have also been challenged by the 'ethics of care' and by participation scholars. This 'ethics of care' has been influenced by the feminist communitarian model and provides moral imperatives to form solidarity, foster empowerment and encourage a connectedness between the researchers and the researched (see Denzin and Lincoln 2005; de Laine 2000). For example, feminists such as Carol Gilligan and Linda Steiner talk of the need to replace notions of impartiality and formality in ethics with affection, intimacy, nurturing, egalitarian and collaborative processes and empathy (see Christians 2005: 149).

Kathryn Scantlebury (2005) pertinently asks:

Are ethical and professional relationships in qualitative studies a quixotic idea? The dictionary defines quixotic as being ‘*caught up in the romance of noble deeds and the pursuit of unreachable goals*’ (dictionary.com). If [...] researchers conduct their studies while considering issues of power, voice, participation and status for ALL of those involved or potentially impacted by the study, can the research be conducted, completed, and reported? Are these ideals unachievable for large studies but attainable when the research involves fewer people?

(Blodgett *et al.* 2005 cited in Scantlebury 2005)

Research often has highly unanticipated outcomes and it is impossible to predict in advance one that may be harmful. Clearly, it gets tricky when the researcher has to decide what can and cannot be written up. (Andrea’s dilemmas while writing about the health councils is a good case in point.) Either you don’t publish, wait for an opportune moment after things have died down, or publish and be damned. These are personal choices that researchers make.

Bishop and Glynn (1999: 129) identify five key arenas to evaluate power relations in the course of research: initiation, benefits, representation, legitimacy and accountability. Although we may make sincere efforts to be respectful and sensitive during the research process, the very act of trying to be inclusive can lead to a blurring of the actual power differentials that persist between researchers and the research participants (Elmesky 2005). One way to overcome these dangers is to make research participants researchers so that both university researchers and community-based groups can experience each other’s lifeworlds. Thus ethical expertise can be developed that is more fluid and creates new forms of agency for those participating in the research. This was to some extent successful in Mexico, Nigeria and India. In some cases our research encouraged participants to think through what DRC research could offer them (e.g. the health council work in Brazil). In other cases, we perhaps didn’t succeed in redistributing power in a way that allows the have-not citizens to be included and to be co-owners of our research.

Moreover, there are significant risks involved in trying to use research for social change. Action-orientated research can generate expectations at the community level that researchers themselves are not able to fulfil. In Nigeria, community organisations have been asking the Theatre For Development Centre to help them build a factory to process their ginger as a result of the research. One of the key issues for the DRC is how to address the expectations that arise amongst the communities as a result of the research process (see Wheeler 2007). There is also the risk that research can be used for different and contradictory purposes. For example, in Nigeria a visit from international researchers led to the idea of an exchange visit to Belize in the Caribbean. But the village hierarchy saw this as an opportunity to invite a businessman on the trip to make business contacts. Although the visit has not been made, it has created an undercurrent of mutual suspicion between the village authorities and the Youth Association (*ibid*).

Researchers often have to balance out competing interests at all levels, from dealing with their host institutions to village stakeholders and government. For example, in Mexico, Luisa Paré and Carlos Robles were often caught between the

agenda of environmentalists who wanted to conserve the rainforest, and the indigenous communities who wanted to improve their livelihoods. While not impossible to reconcile, as researchers and activists they constantly sought to bridge the gap between the worlds of indigenous peoples and environmentalists. In Brazil, the research highlighted the positive aspects of participating in health council activities which contradicted the activist perspective that participating in official spaces was often a waste of time and effort.

Apart from the risks attached to the research that seeks to make a difference, in some cases it has helped to change not only policies but also the researchers' own perspectives. For example, through working on the evaluation of the state of Chiapas' programmes, Carlos Cortez has realised that his work in the future must include working with government to improve their capacity to respond to participation (Wheeler 2007). In India, Ranjita Mohanty has described how conducting action research has also been a learning experience at a very personal level. As Steve Abah describes it: 'In doing research of this sort, especially at the grassroots level, there is a definite humbling experience that results, where your own knowledge and privilege are challenged (Wheeler 2007).' Still we are painfully aware of the power relations that shape our research, given that most of us conduct research from positions of privilege about people in difficult situations. It is thus tricky to develop relationships that are empathetic and respectful while also complying with standards that lead to good research. A small consolation can only be a constant awareness of this tension and these ethical dilemmas, and making them an integral part of the research.

8 Making a difference?

Ranjita: So I can say with some certainty that I now do research which has the possibility of changing lives. But I'm still not convinced of the policy influencing agenda. I suppose my research has led to develop a perspective on participation from the point of view of the deprived, and I can hope that people at the helm of affairs of planning and policies will one day value what I have written but at the moment that is wishful thinking to indulge in. What comforts me is that I am part of an institutional setting that can reach out to many powerful policymakers and players.

The notion of 'public ethnography' has been put forward by Barbara Tedlock (2005: 473). She refers here to research and writing that is directly concerned with critical issues of our time. Such research moves beyond the conventional academic domains of journals and is inscribed and performed for the public. It is thus both a theory and practice. It is both revolutionary and a powerful pedagogical strategy that creates new possibilities for describing and changing the world (*ibid*: 473). Often such research is undertaken in alliance with marginalised people and seeks to serve the communities in which it is carried out, rather than just policymakers, financiers and educators. Research in Mexico, India and Nigeria followed this principle and one could argue that much of development research and citizenship research in a developing country context should have this aim. Of course, as Naila has expressed earlier in this paper activism and social change can and also must take place in the corridors of power.

What about policy influence? We are aware that the policy process is not linear but a dynamic interplay of actors, processes and ideological currents. These are shaped by processes of power and politics. Development Research Centres are created in the UK and framed by certain globally accepted standards of what counts as influence and impact. These include citations in Northern journals, measuring impacts on donor debates. However, all this can obscure local understandings of influence and impact. In this programme we have tried to challenge this conventional understanding of 'policy level' impacts and influence to tease out a range of local level impacts and understand the different spaces that were created through the DRC research. For example, understandings of accountability were never really part of Mexican research discourse. But through DRC research accountability has emerged as a theme to include in Mexican research agendas. Similarly DRC research has already been picked up in teaching (e.g. in UK development studies curricula and in Nigerian academic work). Thus in many ways there is a recognition that researching citizenship, be it in Nigeria, Mexico or India, can help citizens as actors learn and change through the research process.

IDS researchers also feel that we have engaged with people and constituencies beyond the conventional realms of donor agencies (FORD, UNDP etc.) to include activities with civil society, students, changes to IDS structures, or ways to link local level debates with global discourses on a range of issues. For example, I have linked local level debates on the right to water to global discourses on water management and rights. Many of us also participated in the World Social Forum in Mumbai where we interacted with activists from all over the world. Still it is often difficult to really understand or capture in the short term what the actual level of influence is. This makes it difficult to suggest how best to invest resources and efforts to impact change. There are also the dangers of mainstreaming and co-option of the agenda when the focus is on the established spheres of influence as opposed to the margins or the periphery.

We also need to be modest about what's possible in a research programme. As feminist Ruth Chance says:

I think the more modest you are about what you are doing, the better off you'll be. You can count on it that time is going to upset your solutions, and that a period of great ferment and experimentation will be followed by one of examination to see what should be absorbed or modified or rejected ... but that shouldn't discourage us from acting on the issues as we see them at a given time. The swing of the pendulum will come and maybe you'll start all over again, but it does seem to inch us forward in understanding how complex and remote solutions are.

(Chance quoted in Gorfinkel 2003: 27)

In contrast, other logics, such as responding to donor requests for 'success stories' and 'policy impact' do not encourage such modesty nor nuanced versions of change. Even those within donor agencies that sympathise with these more reflective, self-critical approaches, are under pressure to show how research which has been funded by the UK taxpayer is making a difference. As Brown and Gaventa argue (2005) this challenge of multiple accountabilities to the donor, those being researched, one's own institution and peers is a challenge which leads to and

encourages constant navigation, trade-offs and tensions. As researchers we feel committed to making a difference with our work, and seek to be accountable for how this is done with the communities or constituencies with which we work. But we are also recipients of UK government funds, a position which affects to whom we must report, and how we are perceived by the communities with which we work.

9 Conclusions

Being part of an international network such as the DRC demands a kind of 'delicate equilibrium' to balance out competing needs and interest. But it is also highly enabling since it helps engage with a range of people, build research capacity across different solidarities (activist, academic and students) and learn from other country experiences through visits and field trips. The network also helps grant legitimacy to local actions since it 'opens ears at home' (e.g. in the case of Nigeria). It has also been beneficial to raising awareness, for instance about accountability issues that were new in Mexico. The meetings and workshops held around the world helped build solidarities across a wide and diverse team and many researchers now feel a part of a wider DRC family.

There are important lessons from this work for policies related to development research and how it seeks to bring about change (Wheeler 2007). Much development research is based on a model that evidence, produced by researchers, can contribute to change by powerful decision makers. The reflections here suggest (as does a critical literature on the policy process, cf. Keeley and Scoones 2003) that the process is rarely so straightforward, and that researchers must navigate a series of competing demands, roles, and expectations. Moreover, development research can also change researchers, in turn affecting them as development actors. In so doing, citizenship research in certain circumstances and using particular approaches is a process of engagement that also changes relationships between researchers and citizens, and which can contribute to how both see and act upon the world and the policies within them. Policy research is not only about evidence and outcomes but also about the process through which these are constructed.

There are also conflicting and sometimes opposed views of what research itself is and what should be achieved through research. As Ranjita has asked: 'Is it possible to do participatory research without being an activist?' Not everyone conducting research on marginality and the powerless may consider themselves an activist. But those who consider research as part of a process of the co-creation of knowledge that leads to action often find their perspectives and priorities reconciled with other more traditional views of research and with the pressures to produce 'high-quality' academic work that leads to promotions. There are clear resource implications of these dilemmas.

This paper has also highlighted the dilemmas of being based at a large Northern institute while conducting research in the South. The paper discussed the difficulties of conducting engaging research on the ground due to time, cost and institutional constraints. This leads to the 'distance' and 'schizo'-like feelings described in this paper. Still, there is also a role to be performed by research stemming from a

Northern institute such as IDS given its international reputation and its ability to understand and engage with dominant policy debates. Critical research from the North tends to be at least respected if not followed or listened to and such research can potentially play a far more significant role in the 'pedagogy of the powerful.'⁸ This would include exploring different ways of involving the powerful decision makers, policy makers and elite groups to learn and be reflexive about their own roles in the problems currently experienced by the poor and the marginalised. This is clearly a challenge for future development research, given the increasing interconnectedness between the problems in the South with policies and politics in the North.

This means not losing sight of the bigger picture. We conduct our research in a highly contradictory world, especially post Iraq. The agenda of the government at the moment is to legitimise the war in Iraq and donors often advance relationships between security and development in problematic ways. While there are multiple positions on these issues in development agencies and we would all agree with the need for a human security agenda, it is often not understood in terms of dignity, human wellbeing and rights. In fact, debates of citizenship, rights and accountability have also been powerfully recast in these troubles times to justify the war on terror.

Thus, now more than ever before, there is the need to challenge and reshape these dominant framings more powerfully, to redefine what we mean by influence and research impacts by integrating the local level and more long-term perspectives. It is also important to be more process-oriented and reflexive, bolder in how we want to make 'another world possible' and engage more strongly in a pedagogy of the powerful.

After all, in an age of cynical reason, we have to ask critical questions and need to decide more forcefully how to engage with the powerful and take the sides of the weak. At the same time, we need to maintain a pragmatism of hope. It's better to be a somewhat idealistic, radical but confused 'schizo' than an ambivalent, or worse, opportunistic one.

8 This was expressed by Robert Chambers at the DRC conference in November 2005.

Appendix 1 Synthesis workshop: methods

27–29 April 2005 at IDS, Brighton, UK

Questions to guide future writing

(These questions are intended to guide the reflective writing process. You do not need to stick to each of them or even answer them all.)

1 Pathways of influence

- What have been the pathways of influence (direct or indirect) of your DRC research? Think about impacts on the policy and NGO world (in-country and internationally) as well as on the communities you've worked with.
- What are the trade-offs and tensions that emerge between the different purposes of DRC work (research, policy influence, capacity building)?

2 Positionality issues

- How have we engaged with the DRC process? How have we related to the process as a researcher/individual/member of our institution?
- What shifting and different roles have you assumed during the course of your research on the DRC? (researcher/activist/community worker/teacher etc.)
- What purpose do you think your research should serve – for you? The community you worked with? The wider academic/policy community? (This could be in the form of wish lists as well as what you really think the impact is.)

3 Methodology and methods

- Can you map out the various methods that you've used throughout your research? What were the strengths and weaknesses of the various methods? Would you use them again?
- How did the choice of methods lead to particular research outcomes?

4 Ethics and power relations

- What particular ethical dilemmas have you encountered? Can you remember certain incidents?
- Can you think of examples where power relations between you and your research partners shaped the research outcomes?

- Balancing out power relations – how do you deal with power relations between different groups? (e.g. North/South; researcher/communities; IDS/partners – who is in control?)

5 Partnerships/coalitions of researchers across North and South

- How have we as a group evolved together? How have we worked as a group?
- How have we dealt with changing external demands? How have we responded to competing demands from our institutions/donors/wider network?
- What were the positive and negative experiences of working together? (Give examples.)
- What are the lessons for the future?

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