

## **UNESCO Background Paper on Interface Analysis, October 1999**

### **THE MULTIPLE OPTIC OF INTERFACE ANALYSIS (working title)**

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#### **Introduction**

This paper explores the implications of an actor-oriented (1) interface analysis for understanding cultural diversity, social difference and conflict inherent in processes of development intervention. Interfaces typically occur at points where different, and often conflicting, lifeworlds or social fields intersect, or more concretely, in social situations or arenas in which interactions become oriented around problems of bridging, accommodating, segregating or contesting social, evaluative and cognitive standpoints. Interface analysis aims to elucidate the types and sources of social discontinuity and linkage present in such situations and to identify the organisational and cultural means of reproducing or transforming them.

Although the word 'interface' tends to convey the image of some kind of two-sided articulation or face-to-face confrontation, social interface situations are more complex and multiple in nature, containing within them many different interests, relationships and modes of rationality and power. While the analysis focuses on points of confrontation and social difference, it must situate these within broader institutional and knowledge/power domains. In addition, it requires a methodology that counterpoises the voices, experiences and practices of all the relevant social actors involved, including the experiential 'learning curves' of policy practitioners and researchers (Long 1984, 1989 and N. & A Long 1992; Long and Villarreal 1993; Arce and Long 1987, 1992).

The paper is organised in three parts. The first outlines the key elements of an interface approach. The second illustrates the usefulness of this approach for understanding organising practices, knowledge encounters and the relations between service-providers and so-called beneficiaries. And, in the final part, I discuss the implications of interface analysis for exploring policy and issues of participation and empowerment. Its major advantage is that it transcends simple structural and institutional explanations and solutions by focusing on how the different actors' responses and knowledge frames are constructed and reconstructed on the basis of their ongoing interface encounters, struggles and segregations.

#### **Key elements of an interface perspective**

##### ***Interface as an organised entity of interlocking relationships and intentionalities***

Interface analysis focuses on the linkages and networks that develop between individuals or parties rather than on individual or group strategies. Continued interaction encourages the development of boundaries and shared expectations that shape the interaction of the participants so that over time the interface itself becomes an organised entity of interlocking relationships and intentionalities. For example, the interface between management and workers in a factory or between landlord and

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1. It is important to emphasise at the outset that the interface analysis proposed here is firmly embedded in what I have elsewhere called an actor-oriented approach to development. See Appendix, 'Concepts and Dimensions of an Actor-oriented Approach'.

tenants persists in an organised way over time with rules, sanctions, procedures, and 'proven' practices for handling conflicting interests and perceptions. The former is framed through the roles accorded trade union officials, workers' representatives, management personnel and independent arbitrators; and the latter through a hierarchy of personalised ties based upon patron-client and friendship relations. The same organising capacity holds for interfaces involving government officials and local peasant or farmer leaders, or for those occurring between less formally constituted groups that differ from each other on religious, ethnic or other grounds. As small group studies have shown, even the most informal networks of individuals and families will tend to evolve standardised modes of relating to non-members and outsiders. The establishment of such normative middle ground may be endogenously and/or exogenously negotiated, and may involve contestation between state, private and civic organisations and interests that aim to influence or control the rules of engagement.

### ***Interface as a site for conflict, incompatibility and negotiation***

Although interface interactions presuppose some degree of common interest, they also have a propensity to generate conflict due to contradictory interests and objectives or to unequal power relations. Negotiations at the interface are sometimes carried out by individuals who represent particular constituencies, groups or organisations. Their position is inevitably ambivalent since they must respond to the demands of their own groups as well as to the expectations of those with whom they must negotiate. This, of course, is the dilemma of the village leader, workshop foreman or the student representative on university boards; indeed anyone occupying an intercalary position between different social domains. Those who become skilled in managing such ambivalent positions are able to deploy them to their personal or political advantage, and sometimes they act as intermediaries or brokers.

In analysing the sources and dynamics of contradiction and ambivalence in interface situations, it is important not to prejudge the case by assuming that certain divisions or loyalties (such as those based on class, ethnicity or gender) are more fundamental than others. One should also not assume that because a particular person 'represents' a specific group or institution, that he or she necessarily acts in the interests or on behalf of his/her fellows. The link between representatives and constituencies (with their differentiated memberships) must be empirically established, not taken for granted.

### ***Interface and the clash of cultural paradigms***

The concept of interface helps us to focus on the production and transformation of differences in worldviews or cultural paradigms. Interface situations often provide the means by which individuals or groups come to define their own cultural or ideological positions vis-à-vis those espousing or typifying opposing views. For example, opinions on agricultural development expressed by technical experts, extension workers and farmers seldom completely coincide; and the same is true for those working for a single government department with a defined policy mandate. Hence agronomists, community development workers, credit officers, irrigation engineers, and the like, often disagree on the problems and priorities of agricultural development. These differences are not merely personal idiosyncrasies but reflect differences laid down by differential patterns of socialisation and professionalisation, which often result in miscommunication or a clash of rationalities (Chambers 1983; Box 1984). The process is further compounded by the coexistence of several different cultural models or organising principles within a single population or administrative organisation (Law

1994) which creates room for manoeuvre in the interpretation and utilisation of these cultural values or standpoints.

Interface identifies the nature of contests (explicit or implicit) over the dominance and legitimacy of particular socio-cultural paradigms or representations of modernity; although, at the same time, it is important to recognise that commitments to specific normative or ideological frames, and types of discourse and rhetoric, are situation-specific. That is, for the actors involved they do not remain constant across all social contexts. It becomes necessary, therefore, to identify the conditions under which particular definitions of reality and visions of the future are upheld, to analyse the interplay of cultural and ideological oppositions, and to map out the ways in which bridging or distancing actions and ideologies make it possible for certain types of interface to reproduce or transform themselves.

### ***The centrality of knowledge processes***

Linked to the last point is the importance of knowledge processes. Knowledge is a cognitive and social construction that results from and is constantly shaped by the experiences, encounters and discontinuities that emerge at the points of intersection between different actors' lifeworlds. Various types of knowledge, including ideas about oneself, other people, and the context and social institutions, are important in understanding social interfaces. Knowledge is present in all social situations and is often entangled with power relations and the distribution of resources. But in intervention situations it assumes special significance since it entails the interplay or confrontation of 'expert= versus >lay= forms of knowledge, beliefs and values, and struggles over their legitimisation, segregation and communication.

An interface approach then depicts knowledge as arising from 'an encounter of horizons'. The incorporation of new information and new discursive or cultural frames can only take place on the basis of already existing knowledge frames and evaluative modes, which are themselves re-shaped through the communicative process. Hence knowledge emerges as a product of interaction, dialogue, reflexivity, and contests of meaning, and involves aspects of control, authority and power. 'It is multi-layered (there always exists a multiplicity of possible frames of meaning) and fragmentary and diffuse, rather than unitary and systematised. Not only is it unlikely therefore that different parties (such as farmers, extensionists and researchers) will share the same priorities and parameters of knowledge, but... 'epistemic' communities (i.e. those that share roughly the same sources and modes of knowledge) ... [will be] differentiated internally in terms of knowledge repertoires and application.' (Long and Villarreal 1994: 43).

### ***Power as the outcome of struggles over meanings and strategic relationships***

Like knowledge, power is not simply possessed, accumulated and unproblematically exercised (Foucault in Gordon 1980: 78-108). Power implies much more than how hierarchies and hegemonic control demarcate social positions and opportunities, and restrict access to resources. It is the outcome of complex struggles and negotiations over authority, status, reputation and resources, and necessitates the enrolment of networks of actors and constituencies (Latour 1994; Callon and Law 1995). Such struggles are founded upon the extent to which specific actors perceive themselves capable of manoeuvring within particular situations and developing effective strategies for doing so. Creating room for manoeuvre implies a degree of consent, a degree of negotiation and thus a degree of power, as manifested in the possibility of exerting some control, prerogative, authority and capacity for action, be it front- or backstage, for flickering moments or for more sustained periods (Villarreal 1992: 256). Thus, as Scott (1985) points out, power inevitably generates resistance,

accommodation and strategic compliance as regular components of the politics of everyday life.

### ***Interface as composed of multiple discourses***

Interface analysis enables us to comprehend how 'dominant' discourses are endorsed, transformed or challenged. Dominant discourses are characteristically replete with reifications (often of a 'naturalistic' kind) that assume the existence and significance of certain social traits and groupings, pertaining, for example, to 'communities', 'hierarchical' or 'egalitarian' structures, and cultural constructions of ethnicity, gender, and class. Such discourses serve to promote particular political, cultural or moral standpoints, and they are often mobilised in struggles over social meanings and strategic resources. Yet, while some actors 'vernacularise' dominant discourses in order to legitimate their claims upon the state and other authoritative bodies, others choose to reject them by deploying and defending countervailing or 'demotic' (lit. 'of the people') discourses that offer alternative, more locally-rooted points of view.(.2)

A major task of interface analysis is to spell out the knowledge and power implications of this interplay and the blending or segregation of opposing discourses. Discursive practices and competencies develop primarily within the circumstances of everyday social life and become especially salient at critical points of discontinuity between actors' lifeworlds. It is through the lens of interface that these processes can best be captured conceptually.

### ***Interface and planned intervention***

Drawing upon the above insights, it becomes clear that interface analysis can make a useful contribution to an understanding of how processes of planned intervention enter the lifeworlds of the individuals and groups affected and come to form part of the resources and constraints of the social strategies they develop. Thus, so-called >external= factors become >internalised= and come to mean quite different things to different interest groups or to the different individual actors, whether they be implementers, clients, or bystanders. In this way interface analysis helps to deconstruct the concept of planned intervention so that it is seen for what it is - namely, an on-going, socially constructed and negotiated process, not simply the execution of an already-specified plan of action with expected outcomes. It also shows that policy implementation is not simply a top-down process, as is often implied, since initiatives may come as much from below as from above (Long 1992: 19; see also Long and van der Ploeg 1989).

Hence it is important to focus upon intervention practices as shaped by the interactions among the various participants, rather than simply on intervention models, by which is meant the ideal--typical constructions that planners, implementers or their clients have about the process. The concern for intervention practices allows one to focus on the emergent forms of interaction, procedures, practical strategies, and types of discourse and cultural categories present in specific contexts. It also enables one to take full account of the >multiple realities= of development projects (by which we mean the different meanings and interpretations of means and ends attributed by the different actors), as well as the struggles that arise out of these differential perceptions and expectations.

From this point of view, then, planned intervention is a transformational process that is constantly re-shaped by its own internal organisational, cultural and political dynamic and by the

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2. See Baumann 1996, for further insight into these processes in a multi-ethnic area of London; also Arce and Long 1999.

specific conditions it encounters or itself creates, including the responses and strategies of local groups who may struggle to define and defend their own social spaces, cultural boundaries and positions within the wider power field.

The interactions between government or outside agencies involved in implementing particular development programmes and so-called recipient populations cannot be adequately understood through the use of generalised conceptions such as 'state-citizen relations' or by resorting to normative concepts such as 'local participation'. These interactions must be analysed as part of the ongoing processes of negotiation, adaptation and transformation of meaning that takes place between specific actors. Interface analysis, which concentrates upon analysing critical junctures or arenas involving differences of normative value and social interest, entails not only understanding the struggles and power differentials taking place between the parties involved, but also an attempt to reveal the dynamics of cultural accommodation that makes it possible for the various worldviews to interact. This is a difficult research topic but one which is central to understanding the intended and unintended results of planned intervention carried out by public authorities or development agencies or initiated from below by diverse local interests.

### **Encounters at the interface: the significance of social and cultural discontinuities in development and change**

I now endeavour, through selected case material from Mexico, to show the usefulness of this idea of interface for depicting organising practices and processes of knowledge/power construction. I first concentrate on the arena of rural development intervention, using data collected in the late 1980's and early 1990's by a team of Wageningen researchers who, under my direction, carried out detailed ethnographic work on this theme.<sup>(3)</sup> This is then followed by a discussion of the findings of a study of street children in Mexico City which utilises an interface perspective to explore the contradictory dynamics of interventions designed to get them off the streets.

#### ***Water guards, the interface brokers of a large irrigation scheme in western Mexico***

The Autlán-El Grullo irrigation scheme (consisting of 9,000 hectares) located in western Jalisco was constructed in the 1950's and formed part of the Mexican government's drive to promote rapid increases in agricultural production, especially sugar cane and horticultural crops for export. The operation of the scheme required the active co-operation of a whole gamut of people (farmers, engineers, canal maintenance personnel and water guards) with distinct and sometimes conflicting interests. From the beginning, the local office of the Ministry of Agriculture and Hydraulic Resources (SARH) was made formally responsible for the overall operation of the system, including of course the work of the water guards. Later, in 1989, a water users' association acquired responsibility for canal maintenance and eventually it played a more active role in water distribution. These changes presaged the introduction of a national policy shift geared to handing over these operational tasks to local user groups.

At the time of Pieter van der Zaag's field study (1987-89), water distribution had evolved into a complex pattern that was not simply governed by the rules and procedures implemented by the

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3. The discussion that follows focuses on the studies of Pieter van der Zaag (1992), Alberto Arce (1993), Magdalena Villarreal (1994) and Monique Nuijten (1998) and draws extensively on their arguments.

SARH district office, but was mostly improvised by frontline water guards (*canaleros*) in interaction with local plot holders. Since the latter were free to choose which crops they cultivated (sugar cane, maize, and vegetables) and to set the sowing dates etc., neighbouring farmers had at some stage to agree on the arrangements and cooperate with the water guard who would schedule the water flows to their plots. This made the water guard's work one of delicate, judicious and often irksome negotiation. The scheme employed six water guards, each managing an area of 1,500 hectares divided into 300 fields requiring irrigation turns, with about 250 water users. Each water guard controlled the gates and sluices of some 30 to 40 kilometres of lined canals; and where there was another water distribution block below his, then he would have to make sure sufficient water was left for his colleague to meet the demands of his block. This added an extra potential problem since those managing blocks lower down the system were ever ready to accuse those higher up of misappropriating water destined for down stream. The water guards operated the weirs and sluices, and worked out (in their heads, not on paper) the water distribution programmes, thus translating and to a degree re-writing the annual irrigation plan drawn up by the District engineers. In this way, the water scheduling arrangements were negotiated and renegotiated (as the irrigation season progressed) with the various user groups.

At the same time as coping with the problems involved in organising at field and canal level, the water guard had also to retain good relations with the chief irrigation engineer and his assistants stationed in the nearby district town, with whom he communicated everyday. Being a frontline worker, the water guard was responsible for the translation of technical guidelines and administrative orders from above, which he adapted to meet the varying needs, constraints and pressures generated at farmer, field, and block levels. And, in some instances, he would align himself with specific farmer groups and give voice to farmers' views and preferences *vis-à-vis* irrigation policy and the position taken by the engineers.

#### *The intersecting lifeworlds of water guards and farmers*

A water guard works some 60 hours per week, covering between 50 and 80 kilometres on his motorbike, overseeing all the irrigation turns in operation, checking and adjusting gates, and talking to farmers, their labourers or their share-croppers. Water distribution is worked out on an *ad hoc* basis according to crop needs, individual requests for irrigation turns, and the options available within the canal infrastructure. An official who records water pressures and deficiencies within the canal network sometimes accompanies the water guard. Water requirements vary considerably since horticultural crops need water every 7-15 days, maize every two to three weeks, sugar cane every three to four weeks; and sandy soils require water more frequently than clays.

The intricate, demanding nature of water management practices produces specific locally-rooted knowledge, which in turn gives the water guard a degree of authority and some freedom of decision making. He not only needs this freedom of action to be able to do his job properly; but also uses it for his own benefit. Thus he will favour his farmer friends and irrigate his own sharecropped plot more frequently than is formally permitted. Both water guards and farmers are drawn into each other's worlds and often share the same experiences - some sharing the same origins as the farming families of the area. This was especially the case with the small-scale *ejidatarios*. Working with smaller farmers is, as one water guard put it, 'almost like social work' ... 'You have to be there, in the field because you will always find water users there, if only to ask you a question. To me it may seem a stupid question but for them it is very important. For instance, have you seen somebody who can buy my maize? ...or whatever. For them, you are like a life-buoy (*tablita de salvación*), a

moment of distraction, and it also serves you well' (van der Zaag 1992:88).

Different relationships develop with the more prosperous farmers with large water requirements. One particularly rich and influential farmer had plots in three different zones and communicated by radio with the three responsible water guards. The latter would always jump to his orders, since, as they explained, they did not want their boss later passing on identical instructions. Another had close ties with an employee of the agricultural bank who arranged cheap credit and insurance for the water guard's own crops. In exchange the farmer expected favours in respect to irrigation turns. Another example was a large-scale tomato producer who rented vast amounts of land. In this case, the water guard hardly ever met with the farmer but instead had to deal on a regular basis with his farm administrators. Then, when the tomato producer urgently needed water, he would simply communicate directly with the chief engineer, who then sent instructions to the water guard.

### *Interactions between water guards and engineers*

Every afternoon, the water guards meet with the engineers at the District office. The two water measurers and the irrigation supervisor are also present at the meeting. Of the engineers, it is usually the head of the operations department and/or his deputy who attends. The atmosphere during these meetings is relaxed. Usually, conflicts between water guards and engineers are covert. Before the meeting, the guards gather under the big tree in front of the District office. There they joke and gossip. It seems that this is the moment of the day when they can air the tensions built up during a hard day's work in the field. It is the only occasion where they are among equals and can share experiences.

During the office meeting, the discharges flowing into each zone are evaluated, and each guard has the opportunity to request a change in water quantity, and will raise any problems encountered. Then every second day they have to write a report that lists the plots that have finished their irrigation turn. Only occasionally do conflicts surface since water guards prefer to safeguard their arena of operations and preserve as much autonomy as possible to resolve problems.

Sugar refinery reports detailing which sugar cane plots have been ordered to suspend irrigation are also presented. This list is difficult to decipher because the refinery does not use plot numbers to identify the areas affected but instead uses its own list of plot holders or users expressed in six digits. The engineers in the office cannot comprehend this information, because they work with plot numbers. This is further complicated by the fact that the refinery works with areas under production, and not total land areas. Only the water guards can translate these data. The speed at which they do so is staggering. It is the water guards then who become the effective link between the refinery and the District irrigation administration.

On the other side, the refinery staff are unable to enforce their requests to suspend irrigation. They have to rely on the guard, who convey the order to the farmers affected who, in turn, usually dispute it or procrastinate, since an extra irrigation turn before the harvesting increases the gross weight of the cane and maximises their payments. Although the guards carry out the refinery's orders, they often express some bitterness, when, at the end of the year, they hear rumours that the refinery is donating bags of sugar to all the personnel working in the refinery but giving none to them.

Another problem left with the guards to solve concerns silted up tail-end sections of the irrigation system. Clearing the silt usually requires the use of the District's hydraulic extractor, which is very often unserviceable. So, in the end, it is the water guard and users who have to

improvise a solution. On one such occasion, a water guard who complained about this at the engineers' meeting was advised by his fellows not to worry if the water overflowed and the canal broke down! It was simply not his responsibility.

While the engineer is sitting in his office on the first floor, overseeing the arena, the field personnel must get their boots muddy and struggle with the vicissitudes of day-to-day water management problems. There is a huge divide separating the engineer and his field staff, not only culturally speaking and in terms of educational levels, but also practically and cognitively: in short there is a marked discontinuity between what the engineer observes and how he interprets things, and that of the water guard. Those at the lower end of the hierarchy are confronted with great variety and complexity, while the engineers deal in abstract designs based on simplified assumptions and incomplete data. Every day the engineer updates the graph on his wall that plots the relation between expected and actual volumes of irrigation water released from the reservoir. On the basis of this graph the head engineer devises appropriate strategies and issues instructions to the water guards to act accordingly. In this way he complies with his formal mandate which, in the end, boils down to making proper use of the stored water in the reservoir. He knows that his superiors in Guadalajara will not complain if this is seen to be satisfactory.

All this he does without having to leave his office, where he gathers together the information, summarises it and generates the documents required by his superiors. Having interpreted all the data at hand, he devises new procedures if necessary, instructs staff, and mobilises people in the field, and all this without hardly moving beyond the confines of the District office.

#### *Strategic management in the face of farmer discontent*

One day in March 1988, van der Zaag visited the fields of one lateral, where he knew there were problems with irrigation due to the limited capacity of the inlet. Miguel, the water guard, had told him that he was fed up with the situation, because he could not meet the requests for water from the users. Van der Zaag (1992: 91) records :

“I come across Miguel. We stop and chat. I see that he looks tired. Immediately he starts to tell me of all the discussions he has had with the farmers of this canal. I realise I function as a kind of sounding board for him: he airs his frustration. He says he had expected these problems and that two years ago he had told his superior that he should press the Maintenance Department to construct a new inlet with a diameter of 24 inches. But nothing was done. And, when at the beginning of this irrigation season, 50 hectares more of sugar cane was planted along this canal, he got angry with the engineer, and said he would not be responsible for the problems this would cause." Miguel concluded: "now it is me who is facing the problems.... We are like bull fighters: we fight the bulls, and the bosses are way up in the stand, yelling *olé, olé*." (paraphrased)

Miguel went on to explain that this morning he came across two water users from the tail of the canal who accused him of purposely denying them irrigation water. He relates how he had tried to explain the situation to them; that because of the small inlet no more water could enter the lateral. "But they did not believe me", he sighed, "because they had seen that the lateral upstream was completely filled with water". They thought Miguel was favouring other water users. "I tried to explain to them that the lateral was indeed full of water because the level was set high in order to feed a sublateral, but that all that water was 'dead water' (agua muerta), that it was only being stored in the canal." But he could not convince them without taking them to the spot and opening the sluice that was backing up the water. Only a small stream of water emerged and they were finally



convinced.

This incident, like the situations vis-à-vis the refinery and the engineers, underlines the fact that the water guard must manage a complex body of local social knowledge as well as a practical technical understanding of the workings of the irrigation system and the peculiarities of his operational area. He needs to be able to draw upon and communicate this knowledge at various interfaces.

Another dimension which structures water distribution is the water guard's own interests and those of his superiors. It is not unusual for the water guard to be given gifts by water users as a token of gratitude for his services, probably with the hope of favours in return. A small share of a farmer's harvest, a sack of fertiliser, a tire for his motorbike, a bottle of liquor, or some present at Christmas are useful additions to his wage. He is sometimes loaned the use of a farmer's agricultural labourers to help on his own plot. Or he may receive an interest-free cash loan.<sup>(4)</sup> Moreover, it is not unknown for the guard to actively stimulate 'gratitude' from farmers by creating (unnecessary) 'water scarcity' in his zone. Rich farmers (say, with over 20 hectares of irrigated land) who never give presents are considered 'codo' (avaricious). The water guard is cautious about accepting gifts (especially money) and will try to keep it quiet. Hence, there is a critical limit to the scale and extent of giving favours to certain water users, especially if the livelihoods of other farmers become prejudiced by it. There is, of course, the possibility that they may complain to the head engineer.

#### *Group culture and practice*

*El grupo de canaderos*, as they describe themselves, consists of the six water guards, two water measurers, normally ex-water guards, and the supervisor (also an ex-water guard) who also stands in for any guard who falls ill. The group as such is most visible when they gather outside the District office every afternoon. The rest of the District personnel (some 80 persons) acknowledge them as a 'closed' group that shows solidarity when pressing for higher wages or better conditions. Occasionally the District engineers will invite the water guards to social gatherings, and they themselves receive an invitation to the water guards' annual 'closing of the gate' celebration that marks the completion of the irrigation season.

The water guards assemble as a group whenever it is necessary to reach a broad consensus and pursue some common strategies. Their regular contact and discussions encourage the sharing of experiences, knowledge and solutions, and facilitate the development of shared cultural understandings and priorities. They all experience a similar work situation that requires the creative application of numerous working rules and the processing of social and technical information. Local knowledge is, of course, also passed on from older to younger generations, and some of it may also be conveyed to new guards joining the scheme.

When a new water guard is appointed (invariably a man), he will be initiated into the job by one of the water guards and expected to shadow him for at least a month. In this way the newcomer acquires a working knowledge of the many technical rules of thumb (e.g. lowering a particular shutter-gate by 10 screw-threads leads to a reduced discharge of 200 litres per second). He receives advice on how to deal with both farmers and engineers, and learns the need for solidarity and caution when one of their number is accused of malpractice or corruption. One frequently stated recommendation is 'if you don't want trouble, never accept money from water users. A safe present

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<sup>4</sup> At the time of the study (late 1980s), the latter was of great benefit since the interest rate on loans was generally 15% or more per month.

would be something in kind, such as tires for the motorbike.’

### *Concluding comments*

Like other front line workers, the water guard is confronted with a technical infrastructure, an institutional reality, and must be actively engaged in the social dynamics of the irrigation system. As far as the institutional aspect is concerned, the case of the water guard shows how low-ranked field personnel play an important role in scheduling and implementing water distribution. The water guards emerge as key actors who make the system work. The head of the operations department would say that they simply "distribute the water, and we do the rest", but the water guards hold the view that they are "the movers of everything".

Although it would be exaggerated to suggest that it is the water guards who are the sole driving force in this scheme, it is valid to say that the engineers in their offices have only a limited view on what actually happens in the field. This allows the water guards the room to create their own autonomous fields of action. Although there have been several administrative re-organisations in the District over the last 10 years, including the delegation of more responsibilities to farmers themselves, these changes have had little impact on the way in which water guards do their job. Engineers, farmers and field personnel alike, express the view that the water guards have been the only constant factor in the District.

The guard's technical competence is directly related to the type of infrastructure (characterised by adjustable gates and intakes), and this makes his position crucial. But within these limits he has a certain flexibility to meet the varying demands for water. As van der Zaag puts it, 'what is flexible in the system is thus the water guard.' His flexibility lies in the fact that he does not strictly conform to the policy dictates laid down by the District, since these cannot cover the ongoing contingencies and variabilities in the field. In effect, he is the interface: he links farmers to the District irrigation office; the District office with the sugar refinery; and also, as we have seen, creates linkages among farmers. As far as the technical guidelines received from the District engineers are concerned, these are far too broad to be operational. If the water guard rigidly adhered to these, he would have problems with many farmers facing difficult circumstances – where water is scarce and where they are in direct conflict with others. In such circumstances the water guard attempts to solve problems pragmatically and not by the application of generalised models.

To some extent, the situation is surrealistic in that there is very little match between the formal irrigation plans, statistics, charts and maps, and the actualities of everyday water management. But the myth of convergence persists because the water guard, and perhaps even the engineers and others aware of the complexity on the ground, find it in their interests to pay lip service to and comply bureaucratically with the ideal-typical model presented to them. From this case we also learn that lower level field personnel are more than simply employees or subordinates of government or other agencies. They also are implementers, consciously transforming broad guidelines into specific forms of practice. In some instances they may even act to organise, and stimulate farmers into joining forces and taking initiatives against the governing authority.

### **The remaking of development intervention from within**

The following examples, also drawn from the same general region of western Mexico, focus on

processes of knowledge/power construction in relation to rural development intervention.

***Promoting and transforming women's enterprise: the interweaving of domains and identities***

The first example concerns a group of women living in an *ejido*(5) village close to El Grullo, a small market town located on the margins of the irrigation scheme described earlier. Following the initiative of the Mexican Ministry of Agriculture and Water Resources (SARH) in the late 1980s to promote women's projects that would encourage peasant women to become involved in market-oriented production, the group opted to set up a collectively organised bee-keeping business. Government assisted them by providing credit to acquire the necessary technology and other inputs, technical advice and the opportunity to obtain a plot of land for siting the beehives and a storehouse for processing the honey and holding meetings. The original group consisted of some sixteen members, the majority of whom were already related through kinship, affinal, and friendship ties.

The central challenge of the study (Villarreal 1994) was to analyse the social interfaces generated by this type of intervention, focusing on the socio-political spaces opened up by the interaction between the women and different social groups within the village and among the women themselves. Such spaces are characterised by the creation of new identities and relations, in which discontinuities of power based on existing and newly formulated interests and values are generated. At the heart of this process is the issue of 'subordination' which, as the title of the study (*Wielding and Yielding*) depicts, entails a detailed understanding of the everyday manifestations of power, in which the wielding of power simultaneously presupposes yielding to it. Thus, rather than simply assuming the existence of relations of domination/subordination based on cultural mores and differential access to critical resources (material, social and ideological), Magdalena Villarreal sets out to explore the ongoing processes by which power relations emerge out of the interplay of elements of compliance, conformity and submission, as well as resistance, defiance and opposition. As she (1994: 263) argues, 'subordination ... implies both an action imposed from 'outside' and a self-inflicted condition'. This interweaving of processes, especially as they relate to gender issues, shaped the women's modes of engagement with the project and its outcomes.

The bee-keeping project offered a methodological entry point for exploring the encounters between women beneficiaries and various state and village-level authorities, as well as for addressing the broader question of how women's strategic interests and changing identities knit into, and yet also challenge, the prevailing ethos and practices of the male-dominated worlds of the family and *ejido*. While the project itself was originally designed to promote women's agro-industrial activity, different members of the group developed their own conceptions of the meaning and value of the project to them. Although as a group they adhered to the idea of group solidarity and shared benefits, individual members differed in their self-definitions as beekeepers. Some readily took on the label of the entrepreneurial peasant woman and wished to maximise their economic returns, others saw their participation as entailing no more than a supplement to household income and were therefore less committed to industrialising the product for outside markets. Yet others saw it primarily as a valuable recreational activity that gave them a break from the chores and tedium of household domesticity. Most were inclined to switch between these differing representations as and when they saw fit.

Over time, their battles with visiting government officials and technicians about funding,

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5. A socio-legal entity concerned with the administration of (state-owned) land and other collective properties.

training and technology options, and their struggles with local village authorities, husbands and families and opposing social groups over access to land and participation in local decision-making, strengthened their resolve to make some kind of success of their endeavours. Gradually they became adept at manipulating outsiders and contesting or silencing moves to undermine their position. They achieved this to different degrees, both individually and as a group. By general standards, their gains might be judged meagre but they were able to create space for manoeuvre and they learnt how to find their way around and extract benefits from local *ejido* and municipal authorities, even if this meant complying with local cultural norms or at least paying lip service to them. As women, they often yielded to male authority, but in so doing they devised methods of shoring up their own new-found identity as a group with specific interests. This was principally achieved through enrolling male authority to speak for them. Not all sixteen women were able to remain fully committed to the enterprise and a few were edged out of membership, or were driven by their family circumstances to give priority to other activities and relationships.

Villarreal charts the history and changing dynamics of the project and the livelihood vicissitudes of the different women and their families, thus highlighting how particular domains of social life intersect to reproduce and reconfigure social asymmetries and solidarities. Using the concept of social domain, Villarreal (1994: 264, see also 58-63) emphasises that '[a]ctivities within domains involve a heterogeneity of relationships...and intertwine power relations that draw upon diverse normative frames. In specific domains, 'rules of the game' are negotiated and defined, authorities recognised, and relations to institutions, to other villagers and with the environment, are [at least provisionally] 'fixed'. Interaction within a domain entails distinct organising practices, [and] criteria with which to evaluate and shape others' behaviour and ways of securing resources.'

The bee-keeping project became such a domain of interaction, organised around certain interlocking practices and values. The identities adopted by the women at different stages and contexts of the project were not simply self-generated. They were coloured by a range of social expectations, images of hierarchy and boundaries for social action that derived from other domains of social experience, in particular their household/family set-ups, their social positions in and knowledge of village and *ejido* affairs, and their links with the 'outside world' through experience with town life, market relations and migration. Hence the boundaries that the women set for their undertakings and ambitions, as well as the struggles they were prepared to undergo (either individually or collectively) in defence of their own space vis-à-vis state and *ejido* authorities were shaped by a diverse network of relations and perceptions drawn from a wide range of social experience. This made the project a blending of often diverging self images, interests and objectives. In the later stage of the enterprise, government and other outside agencies, seeing the degree of their success, and with their own projects in mind, tried to steer the project towards becoming a fully fledged small industry, producing honey as a branded product for sale in wider markets. However, this transition to industrial production demanded a more consistent and heavier commitment from the members than they could muster as a group, and so they opted to stay small.

As already implied, the critical experiences and learning opportunities for these women took place mainly through their interface encounters and dealings with other domains both within the village and beyond. They learned how to use and manipulate the discourses appropriate to these different 'authoritative' domains and took on new identifications – as entrepreneurial women, as peasant women seeking access to resources of the *ejido*, as new-style wives and mothers, and as members of a newly crystallised social group with some clout. In short, perhaps the most striking outcome of this government project was how women were able to appropriate it and fashion it to

meet their own conceptions of the already ongoing changes in the status of women. In so doing, they acquired new forms of knowledge, skills, networks and organising practices upon which new identities could be built. These changes provided a platform for a broader debate in which both women and men sought to realign and re-conceptualise relationships in the context of changing dimensions of power and authority.

***A tecnico tries to bridge the gap between government and peasant livelihoods and knowledge***

The second example (Arce and Long 1987, 1992) concerns the dilemmas of Roberto, a *tecnico* (agricultural extension worker) who tries to bridge the gap between the interests and cultural orientations of peasant producers and a government agricultural programme. As a *técnico*, Roberto was a frontline implementer of SAM (Mexican Food System, 1980-86), a national initiative that aimed to promote the production of basic staples, especially maize, for national markets. He was expected to build close ties with his clients, but was formally accountable to his SAM superiors and required to follow certain administrative procedures in the implementation of the programme. Given his pivotal position, he was well placed to acquire much experience in dealing with both the demands of the administrative system and those of his peasant clients.

Like fellow *tecnicos*, Roberto's entanglements with these two contrasting, and often conflicting social worlds, produced a body of knowledge based upon personal experience, through which he devised his own strategies of intervention in both the village and official administrative arenas. Although it might be assumed that such strategies would be highly idiosyncratic - being based upon a chronology of experiences of a particular individual - in fact they are shaped by the possibilities for manoeuvre and discourse that already existed within the two arenas and by the dynamics of the institutional locales within which actors interacted. The case shows how the different actors developed their own everyday understandings or models for action that originated from and acquired their potency and legitimation through the interplay of opposing views and contrasting forms of organisation. It also shows how *tecnicos* cannot simply escape these influences and constraints by attempting to ignore their existence, and if they try to do so, they stand to lose their professional legitimacy in the eyes of both the peasants and the bureaucrats.

The story starts with the posting of Roberto to a remote rain-fed district of Zapopan, located to the north-west of Guadalajara. The area is mainly devoted to livestock production, supplemented by agriculture and independent, small-scale opal mining carried out by local peasants. In the past the location was renowned for its robber bands that raided gold from the Zacatecas mines. Today the area retains this image of being associated with illegal activities, due to the production of marijuana and livestock for sale in a network of illegal markets. The arrival of SAM was designed to encourage the modernisation of agriculture through the introduction of a technological package of highbred maize with inputs of fertilisers and insecticides. Accompanying this was an *ejido* tractorisation unit whose tractor and implements were eventually sold off to two local farmers and a shopkeeper. Roberto's main task was to revitalise the production of maize and improve the take-up of agricultural credit.

His first activities involved undertaking a general diagnostic study, but this proved difficult and misleading. Producers exaggerated the inputs they invested in production and underestimated the number of cattle they managed. Maize production was high but much of it was fed to cattle or marketed outside official state-controlled channels. Also it was impossible to determine the profits deriving from the sale of livestock in unregistered slaughter houses and from marijuana traded through migrant networks. Attempting to probe these matters further and at the same time to

establish bonds of friendship and trust, Roberto entered into a frank criticism of his SAM colleagues and of government. He admitted that many SAM officials acted irresponsibly in failing to deliver fertiliser loads which they explained in terms of spillage on the road, or in claiming a 20 per cent share of subsidies and loans secured. The paradox, he said, was that these very same officials were often treated to meals and drinks, or given gifts of local produce, as a reward for their efforts. In turn, the peasants gave examples of how they themselves had tricked government officials with inaccurate information or blatant lies: for example, one year when 50% of their maize crop failed they claimed full exemption from repayment of their agricultural loans.

This sharing of information about malpractice drew the conclusion that deceit and counter-trickery are endemic in the relations between officials and local people, giving rise to a strong element of mutual distrust in their everyday lives. It also provided a platform from which Roberto, in consultation with local farmers, could identify potential new strategies for local development. Given the central importance of livestock, the scarcity of good pasturage and fodder, and the need for increased maize in national markets, one obvious possibility was the acquisition of a baler for cutting and preparing improved pasture and fodder for cattle. This would also have the spin off effect of perhaps persuading farmers to commercialise their maize through government outlets. A second idea concerned the planting of orchards for the production of various fruits. Both ideas were originally put forward by prominent local people and quickly taken up by Roberto, who insisted that they would have to lobby the local population and deliver to his boss lists of signatures in support of these new projects; if successful, government credit would be forthcoming. The signatures took time, a lot of haggling, and many totes of tequila, to obtain. But, finally, Roberto set off, armed with project documents and signatures, to seek the approval of his superiors.

At this point, Roberto radiated optimism. At last he had identified an alternative local development strategy, backed by plenty of local support, that he could believe in. He went straight to his Unit head to explain the ideas and to present his plans. However, he had not proceeded very far before his head intervened, pointing out that the policy of the Ministry was not to support livestock activities but the production of maize. Roberto was then told to go back to the village to explain the Ministry's policy and to make clear that they could not have a baler!

Roberto replied that he could not do that because this was the first petition he had managed to get from them. It was a sign that producers wanted Ministry assistance. Therefore, like it or not, he could not fail the producers. He would now take the case to the District head. At this point the Unit head attempted to grab the documents but Roberto said he would pass them on to his District head. This infuriated the Unit head who tried (unsuccessfully) to prevent them arriving. He had become especially angry because he regarded Roberto's action as one of insubordination, as a challenge to his authority. He argued that Roberto had taken on responsibilities that were not approved by the Unit head. He made it known that this would cost Roberto dearly.

Roberto bitterly recalls that, after this, the Unit head eventually went to the District head to ask him to withdraw the documents: mysteriously, the papers 'disappeared'. He further comments: 'The Unit head knew that he was creating a problem for me by this action, because I then had to explain to the producers why the petition did not receive attention'. Roberto concluded that this was a standard practice among bureaucrats who sought to discredit the innovative work of *tScnicos*.

The end result was that he is labelled a 'troublemaker' (*un grilloso*) and sent to join a special 'troublemakers unit' for remedial treatment in an even more remote part of the countryside. His lack of success in persuading his administrative boss to accept his solution for bridging the gap between peasant and government interests had the further repercussion that the peasants could now use his

case (like those of his predecessors) to confirm and reinforce their existing negative evaluation of government practice and personnel. Their experience with this particular *tecnico* refurbished their beliefs in how the state works, although this same set of events could later also be used to justify further attempts to restructure the interface between them and government agencies. This situation thus became an important factor in the reproduction of peasant livelihood strategies, which they effectively concealed from government, and in the reproduction of their own representations of development intervention. The combined effect of these various processes was to keep the social worlds of peasants and bureaucrats in opposition through the linking of contrasting everyday knowledge configurations and through the mutual generation of socially constructed systems of ignorance.

### ***Relations with and images of the state***

On yet another level, the analysis of such interface situations contributes to the general discussion of interrelations of the institutions of the state and civil society. Interface studies reveal concretely the nature of these relations in particular localities or regions. They also help to identify how much political space exists for local initiatives aimed at changing the pattern of resource distribution or at improving the benefits received by local groups, and in this way they facilitate an understanding of the character and significance of specific types of policy intervention processes. Theoretical interpretations of planned intervention often operate at a high level of abstraction and tend towards the reification of policy scenarios and the actions of >implementing= and >receiving= institutions and actors. In contrast, an interface approach aims to explore how various forms of state and non-state power are constituted and reconstituted in the settings and practices of everyday life. The approach also highlights the processes by which the relatively 'powerless' appropriate, manipulate and subvert outside authority in their struggles to defend and promote their own interests and >projects'.

Another revealing example of this process is Monique Nuijten's (1998) recent anthropological study of the interfaces between local peasant groups, government agencies, lawyers and entrepreneurs. Making full use of an actor-oriented, interface approach, Nuijten prises open the 'black box' of state-peasant relations to show how a repertoire of symbolic practices and strategic manoeuvres centring on 'the idea of the state' is jointly constructed by the encounters of peasants and bureaucrats. While this cultural construction shifts from time to time, depending upon the actors' experiences and imagined possibilities of achieving their goals and desires, the end result is a culture of the state (partially shared by the various protagonists) which continually leaves open the possibility of claimants and intermediaries successfully resolving their problems and, at the same time, making some individual gains. As Nuijten (1998: 347) comments, 'One peculiarity of the Mexican bureaucracy is precisely its ability, at certain points and in certain circumstances, to overcome people's scepticism and, indeed, entice them to start fantasising again about new projects, hence recommencing a never-ending cycle of high expectations followed by disillusion and ironic laughter'. This is what she calls the Mexican 'hope-generating machine'. In reaching this conclusion, the study documents carefully the multi-dimensional livelihoods of peasants and other actors, and traces meticulously the ways in which this idea of the state is localised and objectivised in maps, documents and legal texts which, over several decades, become a bone of contention between the various protagonists who continuously engage in mobilising support, developing new networks and designing new initiatives. In short, the analysis provides a much-needed and refreshing appraisal of the images, character and workings of the Mexican state: a picture which gives plenty of

room for the agency of the many players involved.

### ***The methodological significance of critical events***

A further methodological dimension raised by the above studies concerns how interface situations articulate with wider institutional frameworks and fields of activity. This involves two crucial observations. The first concerns the fact that interface phenomena are often embedded in critical events that tie together a number of spatially distant, institutionally complex and culturally distinct domains of activity. This holds especially for interventions organised by outside bodies involved in the construction of large-scale infrastructural development programmes such as hydroelectric, irrigation or settlement schemes, as well as for unanticipated man-made disasters, such as the explosion of the Bhopal chemical plant in India and its aftermath or the results of ‘natural’ disasters such as the frequent devastating floods of Bangladesh. In each case, interventions were designed and implemented that entailed the emergence of a series of new (or ‘old’ transformed) interfaces embracing a multiplicity of actors and institutions drawn from local, regional, national and international arenas. These types of events offer a major challenge to interface analysis in that they necessitate a systematic grasp of how many heterogeneous elements – social, ecological, economic, technological, cultural, and ethical – become knitted together through the interlocking of various actors’ interests, modes of organising, resource management practices, and political and cultural aspirations and rationalisations.

The second observation maintains that interfaces contain within them many of the social properties and cultural propensities said to be embedded in ‘society-at-large’. That is to say, they are constituted by, as well as generative of, domains, divisions, discourses, and cultural practices found more generally within the social framework, but requiring detailed interface analysis to reveal their crucial social mechanisms. Having said this, we must of course heed Collins’ (1981) warning that macro-sociological concepts must always be unpacked so as to identify their micro-foundations in everyday life settings; otherwise they are emptied of any significant meaning at the level of social practice. Foucault (1981: 94) makes the same point when he argues that, although power may seem remote and tied up with juridical sovereignty and state institutions and thus beyond the arena of everyday social life, it is actually manifested and reproduced or transformed in the workplaces, families and other organisational settings of everyday life.

### **Street children in Mexico City: the interface between service-providers and unwilling clients**

My last example concerns a study of street children and youth whose environs constitute the spaces around the South Coach Terminal in Mexico City. Though not totally estranged from their families whom they visit from time to time - these youngsters live on the streets, sleeping rough in the parks and sometimes in nearby charity hostels, and they survive by begging, odd-jobbing and acting as porters for taxis at the Terminal. At any one time some twenty or more occupy the area immediately adjacent to the coach and underground train stations. From an outsider’s perspective, they are scruffy and reputed to be addicted to sniffing paint thinners and other solvents. While they are mostly boisterous rather than aggressive, outsiders tend to steer clear of them.

In the mid-1990s, a group of students from the Metropolitan University in Mexico City, supervised by Bernardo Turnbull (1998), undertook fieldwork among them. The project started from the assumption – common among organisations seeking to help them - that street children and youth



are unfortunates who are unable to help themselves and meet their basic needs for shelter, food and clothing. They therefore cannot easily be re-integrated into mainstream society without support from charities or government agencies. The research was primarily geared to identifying the kinds of organisations and help programmes best suited to achieving these goals. However, the researchers soon discovered that there was no shortage of shelters, hostels and soup kitchens, although the children used them strategically, and only occasionally. They preferred the streets, where they were in control and free to organise their own way of life, doing odd jobs, begging or stealing to obtain enough money to feed their drug habits and other necessities.

Consistent with the researchers' own starting point, was the media's and general public's depiction of street children and youth as 'unhappy tragedies' - victims of circumstance and their own inadequacies. Poverty, social injustice and family dysfunction were accepted as sufficient causes for their behaviour and conditions. There was little attempt to examine how they actually managed to cope with life on the streets. Hence, this became the main challenge of the research.

Why were outside offers of help so regularly rejected? Perhaps a participatory approach that would listen to and take account of the children's views would be successful in addressing their needs and redesigning the help programmes. The researchers assumed that the children would have views about themselves and their way of life and would be able and willing to articulate them. So, on the basis of this, it was decided to devise a series of exercises aimed at encouraging the children to define their own problems and suggest possible solutions.

The results produced a sketch of their ideal hostel, a matrix of services and hostels available, and charts drawn on the pavement to profile their time spent on the streets; and they identified the services they used around the bus station. The researchers then invited them to join the weekly research analysis meetings and to read the field notes the research students had compiled. But, despite all of this, the children showed relatively little interest. Like other similar efforts, the researchers met with a wall of disinterest, defensiveness and resistance when they tried to elicit views and information through interviewing and interacting with them. Even though they were able to establish some rapport with individual children through playing board games or sports, the conversations rarely went beyond their immediate needs, such as food, money and clothing= (Turnbull 1998: 72).

The children never fully engaged with these externally planned or improvised exercises. Even when one was lucky enough to strike up a casual conversation with one of them, this would almost certainly be interrupted for some reason or other. Indeed, '[t]he inclusion of any third person in these conversations normally inhibited them and very frequently terminated [the conversations] totally ... They would not come to our meetings either. They did not feel curious about them, they just asked if they would be too long because they did not want to be bored= (Turnbull 1998:76).

These experiences led Turnbull (1998: 73) to reflect more deeply on the methodological and epistemological implications of this and similar research. The goal of extracting information (even using a supposedly participatory mode) would, he concluded, have to be substituted by a more dialogical and interactive method, in which knowledge is perceived as the joint product of the ongoing relations between the researcher and actor, and not as something the researcher obtains from his/her informant. The participation and learning exercises, predefined by the researchers, took no account of the fact that the children were well accustomed to dealing with a wide array of outside groups and institutions that sought unsuccessfully to enrol them in particular projects. It was essential therefore to reorientate the research around the *relationships* between researchers and children, since only then could they begin to grapple with the complex interface issues involved.

Repositioning the >research object= in this manner provided a new epistemological slant on how street children and interveners jointly construct the social life of street living. Interestingly, this point of reflection was only reached some two years into the research, when the senior researcher first became aware of social interface analysis; and for this reason the study lacks a strong ethnographic foundation. Nevertheless, its broad contours of analysis are clear and instructive.

Drawing upon this more interpretative or phenomenological point of view, the study argues that the main concern of outside agencies, such as the police, social workers and charitable bodies, tends to focus on what the children are *missing*, because of what they are *not* doing, and not on what they actually do and why. Agency staff assumed that the children would know and want what was missing. The fact that the youngsters perceived and experienced a *different* reality went unrecognised, although, as the researchers came to realise, it was not simply a question of their living under different circumstances but rather of how others located them and their desires within outsider realities. For example, when the children rejected the offer of free housing and regular food, there was much amazement among government and charity personnel.

What was required, then, was a theory that addressed the role of such discrepancies in understandings and their connection with other experiences and contexts. With its emphasis on the interplay of different lifeworlds and knowledge constructions, the interface approach seemed a likely candidate, since it could show how preconceived notions and power differentials interfered with the learning process and the building of mutual trust. The children's failure to meet outsider expectations would then be explained by reference to the way in which the children had developed an elaborate set of techniques for accessing resources and maintaining some relations with outsiders, without becoming ensnared and enrolled in the latter's visions of how to solve their problems. The approach would also reveal the strength of prevailing external stereotypes that stressed the 'victimisation' and 'passivity' of street children, thus denying them the capacity to respond effectively to their own life circumstances.

Pursuing these interpretative lines of enquiry gave proper weight to the capabilities and powers, or agency, exercised by the street children themselves. Outsiders were not programmed to expect or accept this, since they assumed that those living rough lacked the resources to act in any other way than circumstances dictated. Yet what was deemed to be a lack of power was in fact a particular use of it based on a different appreciation of the situations they encountered. The police sometimes caught the children, but not because they could not evade capture. The children, in fact, considered co-operation with or submission to the police and other authorities as, in some instances, convenient. Even the researchers did not expect the degree of control that street children exercised over their daily lives. The unexpectedness, of course, derived from the researchers' own taken-for-granted ways of perceiving reality and the nature of choice. A re-appraisal of the nature and relations of knowledge/power in relation to the actors' behavioural responses was critical.

The study showed a degree of accommodation taking place between the strategies of street children and outside agencies. According to agency workers and officials, the children did not stay in hostels for as long as they should, whereas from the children's point of view they were simply using the help programmes instrumentally, though not necessarily fully consciously, to match their immediate needs. This was not seen positively by authorities. It was considered an abuse of services and an ungrateful waste of outsider generosity and commitment. Moreover, when programmes >failed', remedial changes were introduced which seldom questioned the underlying principles of the intervention model itself. It was simply assumed that the children would eventually follow established agency precepts and 'get off the streets'. The children, on the other hand, incorporated

any changes in programmes into their own knowledge of the possible, again using the facilities in ways that fitted their own perceived needs.

In this way the two worldviews were reaffirmed and kept apart. Outsiders concentrated their power in the formal control of the programme and thus missed the opportunity of using the children's own knowledge and experience to transform it in a meaningful way. On the other hand, the children focussed on spaces for manoeuvre within the normativity of the programme but aimed to keep outsiders from taking over what control they already had of their own lives. Hence, in these various ways, the relationship between the two worlds was not dissolved or transformed. Its end result was uneasy co-existence.

However, street children's strategies and perspectives should never be considered as totally separate from hegemonic labelling and the images given to them by outsiders. Wittingly or unwittingly, the children worked with and adopted external identifications as 'waifs and strays' or as 'dissolute characters'. Sometimes they even lived up to the worst expectations of outsiders by behaving in a disorderly manner and creating a rumpus so that they would eventually be taken into custody by the police and given food and shelter at a police station or hostel. Likewise, their attempts to defend or expand their sphere of operations were unlikely to succeed if they attempted to empower themselves through group action rather than by adopting more individualised strategies. Indeed, external authorities and charitable organisations probably looked more favourably on them if they present themselves as in search of personal salvation from the evils and degeneracy of street life than if they join together as street children demanding certain rights.

Turnbull's study, then, provides a close-up study of the arduous life circumstances and livelihood strategies of street children. It accords them the respect and tolerance they deserve, and calls for a fuller appreciation of street children's lifeworlds, knowledge and social practices. In addition, it highlights how external ideology and authority interferes with children's own capacities to learn how to improve their own life circumstances through engagement with these other resource-rich lifeworlds. In fact, a central finding of the study is that, despite the growing number of charities and help programmes serving street children, the interventions themselves have paradoxically contributed to increasing and maintaining the number of children on the streets. The study also argues that researchers should not behave as social gate-keepers or function as facilitators who decide what is good for both groups of people or what they are supposed to know about each other, but simply as actors that open up spaces for dialogue between these contrasting modes of knowledge construction built upon different life experiences, expectations and identities.

## **Policy implications of an interface analysis**

### ***Issues of participation and empowerment***

As shown in all four examples outlined above, interface analysis grapples with 'multiple realities' made up of potentially conflicting social and normative interests, and diverse and contested bodies of knowledge. It becomes imperative then to look closely at the question of whose interpretations or models (e.g. those of politicians, scientists, practitioners or citizens) prevail in given scenarios and how and why they do so. Intervention processes are embedded in, and generate, social processes that imply aspects of power, authority and legitimation; and they are more likely to reflect and exacerbate cultural differences and conflict between social groups than they are to lead to the establishment of common perceptions and shared values. And, if this is the normal state of affairs,

then it becomes unreal and foolhardy to imagine that facilitators can gently nudge or induce people and organisations towards more 'participatory' and equitable modes of integration and co-ordination. This is the paradox of neo-populist discourses and participatory methods aimed at empowering local people.

Although such neo-populist measures emphasise 'listening to the people', understanding the 'reasoning behind local knowledge', strengthening 'local organisational capacity' and promoting 'alternative development strategies', they nevertheless carry with them the connotation of power being injected from outside in order to shift the balance of forces towards forms of local self-determination. In other words, they imply the idea of empowering people through strategic intervention by 'enlightened experts' who make use of 'people's science' (Richards 1985) and 'local intermediate organisations' (Esman and Uphoff 1984; Korten 1987) to promote development 'from below'. While acknowledging the need to take serious account of local people's solutions to the problems they face, the issues are often presented as involving the substitution of 'blueprint' by 'learning' approaches to the planning and management of projects (Korten 1987), or in terms of 'new' for 'old' style professionalism geared to promoting participatory management and participatory research and evaluation methods (Chambers 1987).(6)

Such formulations do not escape the managerialist and interventionist undertones inherent in the idea of 'development'. That is, they tend to evoke the image of more knowledgeable and powerful outsiders helping the powerless and less discerning local folk. Of course, many field practitioners, who face the everyday problems of project implementation, show an acute awareness of this paradox of participatory strategies. For example, Kronenburg (1986) provides an insightful description of some of the dilemmas of empowerment experienced by implementers of a non-formal education programme in Kenya which was strongly committed to participatory and conscientizing goals. Discussing the interplay between emancipatory and manipulative processes, he explains:

“There was contradiction looming in the thin line between the use of DEP [Development Education Programme] skills to enhance the capacity of communities and their members to decide on their own development priorities or to attain goals the facilitators themselves had set. Often, discussions on the topic of manipulation emerged at national ... workshops usually at a stage that trust between participants and facilitators had not fully developed. Yet, the possibility was always there that unwittingly participants would be following the path laid out by the facilitators...Closely related to the issue of emancipation versus manipulation is the power of the facilitator to either allow group dialogue to follow its course or to control the discussions by imposing various forms of discipline. By applying time limits on topics judged irrelevant or by emphasising topics familiar or foreseen for discussion, the facilitator could influence the direction of the discussion. This is a dilemma facilitators, applying a non-directive methodology,...are faced with continuously...To forestall manipulation DEP workers attempted consciously to develop sensitivity to group needs and feelings. To do this optimally facilitators always operated in teams to provide counterweight to the undesired tendencies inherent to their work” (Kronenburg 1986:163).

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6. The furthering of participation goals is not, of course, new to models of planned development (van Dusseldorp 1991). See also Frerks (1991) for a critical overview of participation in relation to planned intervention programmes.

Kronenberg's account exposes the multi-faceted nature of power inherent in the relations between development practitioners and their local 'partners' in participatory projects. It also shows how external social commitments intrude into this arena and shape the outcomes of participatory activities. No matter how firm the commitment to good intentions, the notion of 'powerful outsiders' assisting 'powerless insiders' is constantly smuggled in. This is the central dilemma of planning and designing the means for engineering change in the first place. It is not removed by stressing the goals of participation and empowerment.

### ***The contribution of an interface perspective***

It is at this point that an actor-oriented interface perspective is significant, since it provides a systematic conceptual and methodological framework for analysing the interlocking of lifeworlds and actors' 'projects'. The field of enquiry should not, of course, be restricted only to those actors and elements identified in the discourses and practices of development institutions and personnel. It must also embrace the narratives, interests, cultural repertoires, strategic actions and livelihood concerns of all actors (whether implementers, stakeholders, activists or bystanders) directly or indirectly involved in the making and remaking of development scenarios and their outcomes. Central to this is the issue of human agency. That is, the ways in which people (i.e. development practitioners as well as local actors) deal with and manipulate certain constraining and enabling elements, through the use of discursive and organising practices, in an effort to enrol each other in their various endeavours or 'life-projects'. This implies ongoing contestations and negotiations over meanings, values and intentionalities, since social actors may engage with, distance themselves from, or adopt an ambiguous stance towards certain codified rules and cultural frames (cf. Crespi 1989:60; Arce 1999:5). Networks become key elements in these processes for gathering information, forming opinions, legitimising one's standpoint, mobilising resources, and for bridging, defending or creating social and political space within or transcending specific institutional domains.

This struggle for space or room for manoeuvre – at once a battle over images, relationships and resources – and the social transformations and ramifications it entails, can, I believe, best be captured through an interface perspective. The notion of interface provides a heuristic device for identifying the sites of social discontinuity, ambiguity and cultural difference. It sensitises the researcher and practitioner to 'the importance of exploring how discrepancies of social interest, cultural interpretation, knowledge and power are mediated and perpetuated or transformed at critical points of confrontation and linkage. Such discrepancies arise in all kinds of social context. For example, in a village they may entail struggles between peasant and non-peasant interests and lifeworlds; in a bureaucracy, the intersection of political groupings, differing ideologies or authority levels; or in a broader arena, they may involve the interplay of 'worlds of knowledge' (or what Knorr-Cetina (1981) calls 'epistemic communities'), such as those of the farmer, extensionist and agricultural scientist' (Long 1989: 221-2).

In order to get to grips with these contradictory and discontinuous processes, the practitioner or researcher needs to access and learn lessons from the 'autonomous' settings in which people cope with their own problems, irrespective of whether or not the foci of concern or parameters of action can be linked with outside intervention. This requires the adoption of an ethnographic stance rather than the use of experimental method. One must go to where people are already engaged in interactions, problem-solving activities or routine social practice and negotiate a role or combination of roles for oneself, as participant observer, active collaborator, adviser, etc. A fundamental principle of actor-oriented research is that it must be based on actor-defined issues or problematic situations,

whether defined by policy makers, researchers, intervening private or public agents or local actors, and whatever the spatial, cultural, institutional and power arenas involved. Such issues or situations are, of course, often perceived, and their implications interpreted, very differently by the various parties/actors involved. Hence, from the outset one faces the dilemma of how to represent problematic situations when confronted with multiple voices and contested 'realities'. A social arena is of course discursively constructed and delimited practically by the language use and strategic actions of the various actors. How far consensus is achieved over the definition of the situation requires empirical evidence. One should not assume a shared vision or common negotiating platform. Actors must work towards such joint commitments and there are always possibilities for opting out or 'free riding'.

All actors operate - mostly implicitly rather than explicitly - with beliefs about agency, that is, they articulate notions about relevant acting units and the kinds of 'knowledgeability' and 'capability'<sup>(7)</sup> they have vis-à-vis other social entities. This raises the question of how people's perceptions of the actions and agency of others shape their own behaviour. For example, local farmers may have reified views about 'the state' or 'the market' as actors, which, irrespective of their dealings with individual government officials or market traders, can influence their expectations of the outcomes of particular interventions. The same applies to the attribution of motives to authoritative local actors, such as political bosses and village leaders. The central issue here is how actors struggle to give meaning to their experiences through an array of representations, images, cognitive understandings, and emotional responses. Though the repertoire of 'sense-making' filters and antennae will vary considerably, such processes are to a degree framed by 'shared' cultural perceptions, which are subject to reconstitution or transformation. Local cultures are always, as it were, 'put to the test' as they encounter the less familiar or the strange. Analysis must therefore address itself to the intricacies and dynamics of relations between differing lifeworlds, and to processes of cultural construction. In this way one aims to understand the production of heterogeneous cultural phenomena and the outcomes of the interplay of different representational and discursive domains, thus mapping out what one might describe as a cartography of cultural difference, power and authority.

But, since social life is composed of multiple realities, which are constructed and confirmed primarily through experience, this interest in culture must be grounded methodologically in the detailed study of everyday life, in which actors seek to grapple cognitively and organisationally with the problematic situations they face. Hence social perceptions, values and classifications must be analysed in relation to interlocking experiences and social practices, not at the level of general cultural schema or value abstractions.

In analysing these dimensions, we must reject a homogeneous or unitary concept of 'culture' (often implied when labelling certain behaviour and sentiments as 'customary' or 'traditional') and instead embrace theoretically the central issues of cultural repertoires, heterogeneity and 'hybridity'. The concept of cultural repertoires points to the ways in which various cultural elements (value notions, types and fragments of discourses, organisational ideas, symbols and ritualised procedures) are used and recombined in social practice, consciously or otherwise. Heterogeneity points to the

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7. The concepts of 'knowledgeability' and 'capability' are used to characterise the ways in which social actors attempt to solve problems, learn how to intervene in the flow of social events around them, and to a degree monitor their own actions, observing how others react to their behaviour and taking note of the various contingent circumstances (see Giddens 1984: 1-16)..<sup>7</sup>

generation and co-existence of multiple social forms within the same context or scenario of problem-solving that offer alternative solutions to similar problems, thus stressing that living cultures are necessarily multiple in the ways in which they are enacted (cf. the concept of polymorphic structures in the biological sciences).(8) And hybridity refers to the mixed end-products that arise out of the combining of different cultural ingredients and repertoires. Of course there are certain inherent difficulties in the use of the term 'hybridity' to characterise contemporary patterns of change since it suggests the sticking together or strategic combining of cultural fragments rather than the active self-transforming, inter-subjective nature of socio-cultural practice. In a recent, deliberately provocative, paper, Alberto Arce and I have suggested instead the term 'social mutation' for such internally generated and self-transforming processes (Arce and Long 1999).

### **Conclusions**

This framework of analysis has a direct bearing on how one looks at policy processes. Policy debates, including policy formulation, implementation and evaluation, are permeated by interface discontinuities and struggles. Indeed the whole process consists of an intricate series of socially constructed and negotiated transformations relating to different institutional domains and differentially affecting a variety of actors. Hence an awareness of the dynamics of interface encounters and how they shape events and actor interests and identities is critical. The four cases briefly outlined in this paper illustrate the kinds of critical dimensions involved. In addition, several detailed monographs dealing with these issues are available,(9) and there is presently a growing interest in the application of actor-oriented interface methods to applied fields such as agricultural extension, natural resource management, project evaluation, and humanitarian aid.

The following points summarise the important lessons to be learned:

Whatever the precise policy issues and implementing structures, it is essential to avoid framing problems and looking for solutions from within a framework of formal-logical models and rationalistic procedures (Gasper 1997). Such approaches accord far too much weight to external expert systems and undervalue the practical knowledge and organising capacities that develop among field level practitioners and local actors. After all it is the day-to-day decisions, routines, and strategies devised for coping with uncertainties, conflicts of interest and cultural difference that make or break policy. Indeed Lipsky (1980) has argued that it is precisely at such implementation interfaces that *de facto* policy is created.

In order to understand these 'autonomous' fields of action and the pressures impinging on them, research practitioners must devise ways of entering the everyday lifeworlds of these actors (frontline personnel and locals) to learn how these latter deal with the complexities of implementer/client relationships. This requires field strategies based not only on observing and teasing out the meanings of other people's lifeworlds but also on the willingness of practitioners to share their experiences and to put them to the test. Hence we must develop types of reflexive ethnography that explore the relationship between actors' everyday and researchers' theoretical understandings of problematic

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8. In biology, polymorphism denotes situations in which two or more variants of a species co-exist. An intriguing example is that of the African *Papilio dardanus* butterfly, whose females mimic in colour and wing patterning several other species. This heterogeneity protects them from certain predators who mistake them for other, nasty-tasting butterflies, giving them a better chance of survival.

9. Most of these have been the work of social scientists at Wageningen (see. Long 1989, Siriwardena 1989, van der Zaag 1992, de Vries 1992 (1997), Arce 1993, Villarreal 1994, Mongbo 1995, Nuijten 1998)

situations. The added value of this approach is that it enables us to consider the practitioner (both researcher and field officer) as part of the web of powers, constraints, opportunities and potentialities of specific intervention situations. Interface analysis offers a useful conceptual framework for achieving this (Long 1992 and Grammig forthcoming).

In building a picture of everyday encounters and modes of organisation and knowledge, we must be careful not to reify cultural phenomena, even if local people and policy makers do so themselves by using labelling or classificatory devices. The latter create simplifications or 'black boxes', like the idea of society being neatly divided into 'ethnic communities' or 'class categories', or planners' visions of needy 'target groups' or 'stakeholder categories', that obscure rather than throw light on the diversity and complexity of social and cultural arrangements. Moreover such reifications enter into the very process of defining problems for solution, and in this way they may perpetuate existing ideal-typical models of so-called normal and 'pathological' conditions. Instead we must give close attention to the heterogeneity of social practice by focusing on the differential social responses to apparently similar structural conditions: for only in this way can we explain the significance of certain types of strategic agency and knowledge/power constructions. Examples of interface encounters should not then be cited merely to illustrate general principles of cultural polarity, organisational dualism or hierarchy. Rather, they should be visualised as providing a methodological entry point for examining the dynamics and transformation of inter-cultural and inter-institutional relationships and values.

As I have elaborated in the main body of this paper, the types of interfaces associated with development intervention provide a rich field for exploring these issues, since they throw into sharp relief all the ambivalences and complexities of cultural diversity and conflict. They also reveal the paradoxical nature of planned intervention of all kinds – even that promoting 'participatory' programmes – which simultaneously open up space for negotiation and initiative for some groups, while blocking the interests, ambitions and political agency of others. What we now urgently need is to convince policy makers and development practitioners, in search of better project designs and management techniques, to reflect upon and share with us their firsthand experiences of 'struggling at the interface'. In this way the conceptual and methodological framework could be further developed in relation to specific policy practices.

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