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Peopling Policy Processes? Methodological Populism in the Bangladesh Health and Education Sectors

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1. INTRODUCTION

A persistent theme in the history of international development – and within the analysis of policy making and implementation processes more widely – is the problem of the insulation of so called “policy makers”¹ from the realities faced by the people whose problems their policies are supposed to address. Indeed Robert Chambers (2009, p.1) has suggested that “(e)nabling people who live in poverty to analyze their realities, articulate their priorities, and have effective voice to influence policies, is one of the most pressing and most neglected issues of our time”. Yet the past decade has seen development agencies become less interested in the human and social aspects of development and more concerned with approaching development as a technical and managerial process (Gulrajani 2011; Wallace & Porter 2013).

More emphasis is instead given to the management and delivery of aid and to the measurement of the “impact” of interventions than to understanding the social, political and human dimensions of the lives of people who live in poverty (Eyben 2013). The Development Assistance Committee (DAC) countries are once again prioritizing growth over poverty reduction, and there is a general trend towards favoring a stronger role in development for the private sector (Mawdsley 2017; Nagaraj, 2015). One consequence of this shift is that a higher proportion of international aid is now processed through private sector management consultants and accountancy firms whose core expertise is more focused on delivery, information systems and cost-benefit analysis than on social or human development. For example, the UK Department for International Development’s (DFID) spending through private sector contractors increased from 12% in 2010/11 to 22% in 2015/16 (House of Commons, 2017).²

Policy makers usually live urban lives close to their offices and homes in capital cities, far away from the people living in the villages and towns affected by their decisions. Visits to the field are infrequent, formal and brief if they happen at all. The problem that Chambers (1981) described four decades ago as “rural development tourism” has persisted, fed further by the managerial turn in development administration and increasingly also by growing concerns about security (Stoddard et al 2011). Ann Coles (2007, p.140) in her “Portrait of an Aid Donor” describes the declining frequency of field visits within the UK’s Department for International Development (DFID) from the 1990s onwards “which older staff remember with nostalgia” in favor of donor coordination meetings and regular trips to the Ministry of Finance in the capital cities of developing countries. More recently in an article in *The Foreign Service Journal*, Tom Dichter comments that during a study that took him to fourteen different USAID country offices around the world “it became clear how insulated agency staff have become from the countries in which they work” (Dichter 2016).

The problem of remoteness is not purely geographical, but also political. While the diversity of actors involved in policy-making has broadened beyond the state to also include civil society groups, development donors, intergovernmental agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the policy process itself remains dominated by elites. This “pluralist elitism” (Gaventa 2004, p.297) is a second factor that means that policy decisions continue to be made in institutional spaces that are located far away from the everyday worlds of people who find themselves on the “receiving end” of policy. Furthermore, a gradual policy shift away from donor-funded projects on the ground in favor of forms of “upstream” programmatic planning and implementation technologies such as “sector wide approaches” (SWAPs) - particularly since the 2005 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness - has meant that the problem of remoteness has become more acute.

A third set of issues relates to the nature of the information obtained and used by policy makers. The type of impersonal data produced by the information systems on which policy makers mostly rely further distances them from ordinary lives.

Monitoring and evaluation has become heavily focused on quantitative measures (in the effort to determine impact and ascertain measurable outcomes) and financial data (to assess “value for money”) rather than on forms of information that capture everyday experience or human perception. Quantitative approaches can be effective at capturing the material dimensions of developmental change but tend to be less adequate when it comes to engaging with issues of rights, power and voice (Fukuda-Parr, 2013). Furthermore, Copestake and Remnant (2014) have drawn attention to “the limitations of a positivist approach to improving development in the face of overwhelming contextual complexity and multiple stakeholder interests that spawn diverse and competing interpretations of what constitutes credible and useful evidence” (p.19). While systematic technical approaches for establishing the effectiveness and the cost of interventions are clearly important, there is a risk that we end up with a narrow base of knowledge where the forms of information that are available to policy makers to draw upon as “evidence” fail to adequately capture the diversity of voices at community level.

These methodological preferences are not just technical. They reflect a dominant ideology that privileges certain forms of knowledge over others, in ways that are as much about institutional control as about open-ended enquiry. According to Jennifer Greene (2009) this has increasingly taken the form of positivist monoculture that primarily serves the interests of elites with profoundly anti-democratic implications. Greene’s (2009, p.15) response to the problem is a call to build “an alternative view on credible evidence that meaningfully honors complexity, and more modestly views evidence as ‘inkling’ in contrast to ‘proof’”. This she suggests might enable us to do more justice to the messy complexity of ordinary people’s experiences, respect diversity and difference, and provide scope for improving “democratic inclusion” and listening to “multiple voices”.³ As Adams and Biehl (2016, p.124) have argued, evidence making is “an ethical and political proposition that knowledge can come in many forms and be distinctively mobilized”. Both the generation and the use of evidence is “entangled with politics” (Jerven 2011, p.130).

This paper seeks to contribute to debates around the use of evidence by reflecting critically on a five-year experiment known as the “Bangladesh health and education reality check”. Established by the Swedish Embassy in Dhaka and by Sida

headquarters in Stockholm, the project gathered a form of participatory, ethnographic policy knowledge that was constructed from informal conversations and observations with service users at community level. The aim was to supplement with new people-centered data the formal monitoring systems that had been established within two large sector-wide reform programs designed to strengthen the country's health and education sectors. The purpose was to provide the Embassy with "the perspectives and experience of people living in poverty on primary education and health access" so that this information could be used to support the Embassy "in its policy dialogues with government and its development partners" (Pain *et al.* 2013, p.8). Using this distinctive and unconventional form of policy knowledge, the initiative hoped to bridge the gap between the multiple policy makers engaged in the implementation of these sector reforms, and the local people who were being affected by them.

The reality check's approach used to collect this information was, at least in theory, relatively simple. Over a five-year period specially trained field teams made short annual residential visits to a selection of households around the country and lived with them for five days, listening, observing and learning about their lives and experiences in relation to changes in local health and education services. The information gathered by the teams was documented as simply as possible and then written up into an Annual Report. These reports were discussed each year with a Reference Group made up of relevant policy makers in health education (drawn from government, donors and civil society) and then presented each year to the members of the donor consortium. The aim was to inform and influence those responsible for managing the programs using this supplementary form of data in ways that would either enable small changes and course corrections to be made within implementation processes, or prompt further investigation using the programs' formal monitoring systems, and/or through commissioning in-depth research.

The project was therefore based on a form of "methodological populism"⁴ that drew on participatory and ethnographic traditions (Mosse & Lewis 2006). It aimed to show the potential for "humanizing" policy processes in its effort to supplement formal measurement and numbers with people's experiences and stories.

2. APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

The analysis presented in this paper draws primarily on knowledge gained as an adviser to the project for its duration. This position offered the opportunity for a participant observation role that provided detailed insights into the design, planning and implementation of the project through direct involvement in a wide range of central activities: designing the overall approach, training the field teams, undertaking annual post-field debriefings, commenting on and writing sections for the Annual Reports and other project documents, and participating in subsequent attempts to use the outputs to influence government, donors and civil society involved with health and education in Bangladesh. In addition to the documents, reports and emails generated in the course of the work, I took notes at key meetings and events, such as closed workshop presentations by visiting consultants and or public report launch events attended by government ministers.

In this way, my role was that of a “reflexive practitioner” in the sense described by David Mosse (in Mosse & Kruckenberg, 2017, p.211). This role implied working from within institutional processes and social relationships in order to gain insights as an insider that could then later be analyzed from the perspective of an outsider. The advisory role also involved participation in a wide range of meetings both within the project and with other stakeholders. Following Sandler and Thedvall’s (2017, p.2) work on “meeting ethnography”, such gatherings can be viewed as useful research sites where “identities, knowledge and power relationships are produced, performed, communicated and legitimized”.

The analysis in the paper also draws on data collected from twenty-five semi-structured interviews. These interviews were conducted by the author with a range of policy makers as part of a special reflection exercise held during the project’s final year.⁵ The reflection exercise was designed to draw critical lessons from those who had been involved with and supportive of the reality check, as well as a set of observations from those policy makers who weren’t. Donor personnel, government staff, and civil society activists were interviewed as well as those members of the Swedish Embassy in Dhaka and Sida Stockholm who were - or had once - worked with the project. Also interviewed were policy makers from the health and education sectors in Bangladesh who were not specifically known to the reality check team but who might have been expected to have become aware of the project during the five

years of its operation, and were included in order to gauge the project's reach and influence. In addition to the interviews, three focus groups were also conducted as part of the reflection exercise with host households in one of the study locations.

The paper's analysis is also informed by findings from an independent evaluation commissioned at the end of the project. As the evaluation concluded, the project's outcomes were mixed and contested, but the primary aim of the paper is not to evaluate the project's "success" or otherwise.⁶ The intention instead is to reflect on its role as a "counter-cultural" initiative that aimed to improve policy responsiveness in the face of pressures to reshape development as a more technical and managerial process. While a focus on policy "instrumentalities" is obviously important in any effort to bring about positive change, the project was also motivated by the belief that policy makers can ill-afford to lose touch with ordinary people's experiences, ideas, and voices. By bringing a human face to the numbers, indicators and technologies that currently dominate development policy and practice – by making an effort to move people's voices and experiences to a more central position in the policy process - it can be seen as attempting to raise the visibility of the "subjectivities" of those who are impacted upon by policy (Neilsen 2011).⁷ This idea of "peopling" policy through initiatives such as the reality check therefore has both practical and political value.⁸ The analysis presented here aims to contribute not only to debates around the distancing effects of narrowed policy knowledge (cf Adams 2016) but also to the need for more "engaged" forms of ethnographic enquiry (Lewis 2014).

An analysis of the reality check case is potentially productive because it also allows further exploration of the disjuncture⁹ between linear representations of policy and "real world" action on the ground (Lindblom 1959; Lipsky 1980), raises questions about what kinds of knowledge policy makers consider to be "useful" (Cairney 2016; Parkhurst 2017), and highlights temporal instabilities in the policy worlds of international development that play an important role in further contributing to this disjuncture (Sogge 1996; Lewis 2015). Although the reality check design was primarily aimed at uncovering the experiences of ordinary people at the grassroots, it soon became apparent that it was also providing useful insights into the subjectivities of upstream policy makers. In this sense, the account presented here offers elements of "an ethnography of an ethnography" that analyses policy worlds in terms of power,

knowledge and evidence (Long & Long 1992; McGee 2004). As might have been expected, the reality check revealed gaps between what program documents and policy makers claimed was happening on the ground and what could be observed directly at community level. Perhaps more surprisingly, it also suggested discrepancies between representations of the SWAP structures and processes and the arrangements that actually existed. It proved difficult to feed back the reality check data into the existing monitoring and evaluation systems (as originally assumed) since these were hard to find, let alone connect with.

In summary, this paper therefore draws on three inter-related levels of data in reflecting on the reality check project as a case: the data collected as part of the project itself (including the reflection exercise), a post-hoc independent evaluation of the project (Pain *et al.* 2013), and material collected during my own role as an observer participant. Following a short conceptual discussion of contextual issues around managerialism, participation, and populism in the section below, the fourth part of the paper briefly outlines the trajectory of the reality check project and issues arising from its methodology. A fifth section follows containing an analysis of three critical themes that emerge from the analysis: (i) contestations over the status of “popular knowledge”, (ii) the need for critical “policy spaces” within policy processes in which policy makers can engage with such knowledge, and (iii) the “disruptive temporalities” within policy processes that inhibit learning.

3. CONTEXTUALISING THE REALITY CHECK

This section seeks to understand the reality check project against four key aspects of the changing landscape of development policy: the implications of managerialism for discussions around evidence and policy; continuities between the project and other participatory initiatives; relationships between participation and populism; and finally, debates around understanding the policy process.

(a) Managerialism and evidence

Within the “arts of government” that are integral to current forms of neoliberalism (see Ferguson 2010) international aid can be understood as having become once again

more concerned with managing things than understanding people. Wallace and Porter (2013, p.4) describe a preoccupation with linear representations and measurement of results: “a culture of managerialism where change must first be envisaged, then detailed, described and planned for. Once implemented, projects must demonstrate the achievement of pre-set results, which must be measured and reported on in quantitative terms. Change is understood as linear, logical and controlled, following theories of change based on a cause-and-effect model”.

The main claim made for the managerialist approach is that it gets things done. Martin Minogue (1997) suggests that “it offers both a method and a philosophy for achieving efficient and effective administration” (p.17). This is a seductive claim and there is much to be said for focusing primarily on policy impacts. Yet managerialism is also an ideology that derives its power from a particular way of representing the world, in which rational management is posited as a preferred alternative to the supposed irrationality of power and politics. This claim to authority is partly achieved through “avoiding real analysis by constructing a false reality” (Minogue, 1997, p.22), such as through the creation of systems of representation that appear to respond to an issue without actually doing so, or by coining new language that reframes and evades, rather than addresses, a particular problem.

Despite the 1990s growth of interest in “people centered” approaches to development among many development agencies, there has been a return to focusing on deploying resources effectively and securing measurable results (Eyben, 2014). Development, as John Clammer (2015, p.6) has argued, has come to be seen primarily as a “technical process” that pays insufficient attention to the “actual content of our everyday lifeworlds”. A pragmatic emphasis on “what works” has had implications for the types of evidence that can be considered useful. The status of qualitative data has declined in favor of approaches that emphasize measurement and quantification. In this new paradigm the most authoritative forms of evidence are often seen as those generated through the use of formal experiments such as randomized control trials (RCTs). For example, Vincanne Adams (2016) has critiqued the numerical metrics that have come to dominate global health policy and argued for more people-centred ways of knowing (2016). The overall result is a narrowing of the evidence base that feeds into policy processes. This reduces the visibility of people as the end users of

development services and undermines the capacity of policymakers to interrogate different types of evidence and interpret meaning. This trend also diminishes space for critical thinking. As Chris Moyles (2013: 50) has suggested: “a focus on the technical significantly inhibits the ability of staff to engage critically with what is asked of them, and significantly reduces the scope of discussions of development interventions”. In Greene’s (2009) terms, the overwhelming need to obtain “proof” is increasingly prioritized over the potential value of engaging with “inkling”.

(b) Participation, ethnography and policy

The reality check can be situated within other traditions of participatory approaches to learning and action, many of which have roots in the anthropological method of ethnography in their goal of building more “people-centered” approaches to policy and practice (Chambers 1981; 1994).

There have been many efforts within the participatory tradition to better link people’s local experiences with policy processes. For example during the late 1990s, World Bank Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPAs) tried to co-construct participatory knowledge with poor people to inform project and policy design. The World Bank’s *Voices of the Poor* (Narayan 1999) and Sida’s *Views of the Poor* (Jupp et al 2007) were both attempts to move more “people-centered” research knowledge into “upstream” development policy settings and agencies.¹⁰ The *Portfolios of the Poor* approach encouraged people to keep financial diaries that gave more insight into their livelihoods (Collins *et al.*, 2009).

There is also a connection with the “listening study” tradition. Working within the media and communication field, for example, Quarry and Ramirez (2010) aim to challenge the bureaucratic need for control with alternative approaches to communication focused on “active listening, horizontal communication and mutual learning” (p.54). Mary Anderson *et al.*’s (2012) book *Time To Listen* reported on how people think about international development assistance, drawing on a thousand informants across a multi-country study.¹¹

Finally, ideas about the potentially transformative power of professional “immersions” as a form of experiential learning also informed the reality check design. This is the idea that it is beneficial for public officials and aid workers to visit communities and stay for a few nights with a host family “helping with tasks and sharing in their life” (Chambers 2007, p.9). Advocates have suggested that the practice is important for development agencies because it promotes “personal experiential learning, face-to-face, with those we seek to serve as a key missing link in development practice” (Chambers 2007, p.14). Yet while building a small and loyal community of practice in development, such ideas have had only limited impacts on mainstream agency thinking and practice.

The reality check’s approach can also be understood as a form of adapted or “light touch” ethnography. This connects it with anthropology, a discipline that has had a long and sometimes complicated relationship with development (Gardner & Lewis 2015). Studies by anthropologists of development have usually been focused on gaining insights into the marginalized communities who tend to be “acted upon” by development policies and processes. They have used participant observation as a way of understanding ground level realities through person-to-person engagement. Anthropological work has frequently been critical of the idea of development itself, as in the case of Escobar’s (1995) poststructuralist analysis, and sometimes also of those “applied” anthropologists who become directly involved in policy and practice (see Olivier de Sardan 2005; Crewe & Axelby 2012).¹²

Anthropologists have also begun to “study up” (in Laura’s Nader’s 1969 phrase) in order to understand those in positions of power and authority, undertaking multi-sited research away from the local community locations traditionally favored by anthropologists (Mosse 2009). This trend has included the study of policy processes, where the world of international development and its agencies, sometimes known as “aidland”, has been a productive field.¹³ The anthropology of policy tends to present an ethnographic critique that *inter alia* questions the linear assumptions about the way policy processes work.¹⁴ Ethnographic approaches open up possibilities to “populate” the worlds of policy as social rather than merely technical processes, analyze policy makers’ knowledge and belief systems, understand processes of meaning making, and highlight the importance of informal relationships within policymaking processes.

(c) Populism and development practice

Elements of methodological populism can be found within participatory development approaches that challenge the authority of development professionals and government experts, and in ethnographic methods that emphasize the anthropological stance of seeking a “local” point of view (Mosse & Lewis 2006). Methodological populism can be understood as counter-cultural in the sense that it offers a disruptive challenge to the increasingly technocratic mainstream of development policy, since it emphasizes the centrality of peoples’ experiences and subjectivities. By going against the grain in this way, the potential value of methodological populism is the promise of bringing in a stronger understanding of local perspectives and perceptions and humanizing policy interactions. By attempting to generate policy knowledge with claims that it reflected the subjectivities of those affected by policy, the reality check can be understood as offering just such a populist counter-narrative through its appeal to the concerns of ordinary people.

Methodological populism can be distinguished from less benign forms of ideological populism currently resurgent in the political sphere in both the Global South and North. Populism is a contested and varied concept, with emancipatory as well as repressive dimensions (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). While distinct from populism in the broader political sense, methodological populism may share some of the former’s less positive characteristics. One of these is the focus on a positive and often heavily romanticized idea of the “people”. Critics of the participation paradigm have been suspicious of this view, arguing that naïve visions of community underplay important power and difference around gender, class and ethnicity (Guijt & Shah, 1998). Populism also embodies forms of dualist “either/or” thinking that can be problematic in the context of development. Binary categories reflecting ideas such as “indigenous knowledge vs. expert technical knowledge”, or evaluative binaries such as “social movements good/NGOs bad”, are over-simplifications that rarely stand up to detailed scrutiny (Lewis & Schuller 2017). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, another universal characteristic of populism is the implicit or explicit reference to an “anti-group”, usually the political elite, or expert authorities, against which a positive idea of the “people” is contrasted (Deiwicks, 2009). Some forms of participatory

development thinking risk reproducing a similar opposition between rural people and government officials or outsider development “experts”.

(d) Policy interfaces

A key aim of the reality check was to influence policy. Its design made certain assumptions about how policy works, and about the role of evidence within policymaking. These assumptions need further interrogation, since they would turn out to be inaccurate in some respects.

Policy remains a taken for granted category of social action that receives surprisingly little fine-grained attention, despite the existence of differing models of what is often termed “policy process”. The tendency is simply to see policy as a “black box” in the form of “an unproblematic given, without reference to the sociocultural contexts in which it is embedded and understood” (Wedel *et al.* 2005: 43)’. Mainstream theory on policy from within older public administration traditions tends to have a rational linear orientation that today feels dated. On the one hand, this literature sets out rational choice models of policy as linear stages, (i.e. first problem identification, then policy formulation, and then finally implementation), or as systemic “streams” (Kingdon 1984). Implementation is conceptualized as a technical political problem that can be “solved” with the right combination of factors. On the other, this “mind the gap” approach to policy does not stand up to proper scrutiny (Mosse 2005). It is challenged by Lindblom’s (1959) “science of muddling through”, and Clay and Schaffer’s (1984, p.192) view of policy as “a chaos of purposes and accidents”. It pays insufficient attention to representation, power and contingency, and to the *social* processes that construct policy meanings and action among different actors (Mosse 2004).

An actor-oriented sociological approach (Long 2000) offers a more dynamic and less rigid way of conceptualizing policy processes. Drawing on this approach, Brock, McGee and Gaventa’s (2004) “knowledge, actors and spaces” framework provides a useful way forward. It recognizes that the linear models are detached from, and at odds with, the realities of power and contingency that actually influence policy decisions. Yet it also recognizes the way that linear models retain their attraction

because they are nevertheless useful to policy actors, offering useful mental maps that policymakers can use. McGee (2004) notes the contradiction that these linear policy models persist despite their obvious limitations, simply because they fit with the subjectivities of policy makers and enable them to act.

While the linear model survives as a “necessary fiction”, more accurate, realistic and dynamic models are needed with better insight into how policy *actually* operates. This requires understanding the different levels of policy action and interactions among the wide range of actors involved, the nature of the policy spaces in which they interact, and the micro-politics of how information gets transformed into evidence. Every so often, development agencies recognize that aspects of the simple linear assumptions about policy need to be challenged and engage in reflection. For example, as part of the “doing development differently” initiative, concerns were raised about “short-termism” within World Bank interventions that may negatively affect “long-term institution building and transformational engagement” (Bain 2016, p.113).

This question of policy knowledge, and the need to provide more and better evidence to policy makers, has been widely debated (Weiss, 1979; Adams, 2016). Debates can sometimes appear to be polarized unhelpfully between two positions: the evidence-based policy making (EBPM) perspective that “there can and should be a direct and unproblematic link between scientific evidence, policy decisions, and outcomes” which is increasingly viewed by critics as naïve, and the realist but somewhat extreme policy-based evidence view that “politics is so pathological that no decision is based on an appeal to scientific evidence if it gets in the way of politicians seeking election, or so messy that the evidence gets lost somewhere in the political process” (Cairney 2016, p.2). The reality check provides insight into how action actually emerges (or does not emerge) from contestations among policy makers around the competing knowledge claims of those involved in the policy process.

4. THE REALITY CHECK INITIATIVE

We turn now to look in more detail at how the reality check initiative played out in practice. In the first part of this section, the progress and reception of the project are briefly summarized, building on the short overview provided earlier. In the second,

issues arising from the reality check's methodology relevant for our discussion are discussed.

(a) The project

The aim of the reality check experiment was twofold: to document poor people's everyday perceptions and experiences with the implementation of ongoing policy reforms in "real time", and then to use the knowledge created as supplementary evidence that could better inform policy makers by providing a clearer understanding of front line implementation issues from the "bottom up". The key guiding questions were "whether user needs correspond with the policies underlying the two programs and to what extent, knowledge and local interpretations of interventions correspond with their intended purposes" (Arvidson 2013, p.281).¹⁵

As we have seen, the project was conceived as part of the Swedish government's support to Bangladesh's two multi-donor sector wide health and education reforms. As a relatively small donor, Sweden wanted to add value and "punch above its weight" within two program consortia that were dominated by the larger mainstream agencies such as the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and DFID. The way it hoped to do this was by developing and implementing a distinctive experimental add-on component that could sit alongside the two existing programs and supplement the existing management information systems and monitoring activities by feeding in additional information from the grassroots. The SWAP program designs were mainly focused on generating extensive "upstream" quantitative information around technical assistance, resource monitoring and donor coordination, but had given less attention to gathering and using "downstream" information relating to implementation processes and users. The reality check was "devised to function as a complementary source of information that goes beyond statistics and frameworks for monitoring outputs" (Arvidson 2013, p.281). This idea of raising the profile of service users on the ground also fitted with Sida's stated commitment to rights, accountabilities, participation and transparency in its development work, an approach it was particularly keen to highlight.

The method used a form of “light touch” ethnography based on participant observation that could provide a closer link to people’s experiences on the ground. The project first identified and trained small teams of researchers to live for short periods of participant observation with twenty-seven poor “host households” located in three different regional locations around the country.¹⁶ These locations were selected to reflect the country’s diversity with coverage of communities in the north, south and central areas of Bangladesh. Secondary data relating to poverty line, under-five child mortality, and relative food insecurity figures was consulted in order to make these choices. Within each of these three main regional locations there was a further effort to reflect different kinds of local setting by identifying three more categories of local context in the form of an urban, rural and peri-urban study site. In each of these nine locations individual host households were then carefully identified in each area. This was facilitated through community level discussions with local NGOs and local key informants such as schoolteachers and community leaders. As the first Annual Report stated, the intention was to select areas and identify households that could be described as “objectively poor”. Both the locations and the household identities were concealed in the reporting documents in order to safeguard people’s privacy and protect them from official repercussions. In line with the project’s overall aim of “taking the pulse” by providing indicative information rather than systematically sampled or structured research data, the relatively small number of households and locations was judged to be an effective compromise by the reality check team and the Embassy.

While in the field the teams were encouraged to refrain from actively questioning people or soliciting information directly. They were not asked directly about specific policies. Instead, the aim was to listen to people’s stories about their general experiences with health and education, to accompany them as they went about their daily lives (including when they were using or attempting to use local services), and to document what they saw and heard. They also encouraged their host household members to document experiences themselves, using drawings, and disposable cameras, for example, and the teams also made sure to engage in conversation with neighbors and visitors. The teams aimed to establish rapport, participate in the lives of these households (if only for a relatively brief time), and learn from them by taking the insider’s point of view as far as possible. They returned each year to the same

families in order to build the relationship and learn about how things were or weren't changing.¹⁷

The objective was not to offer “findings”, draw conclusions or make recommendations to policy makers in the traditional way. Instead the intention was to provide fine grain description giving as much emphasis as possible to conveying people's own voices and representations. The Annual Reports that were produced from the data mostly contained stories, cases, quotations and pictures and were written in a style that aimed to be as unmediated and plurivocal as possible. It was hoped that the reports would contribute to the widening of policy makers' knowledge base, feed into ongoing planning and monitoring processes, and potentially lead to “course corrections”. In this way, the initiative was designed to complement rather than substitute for formal data collection, adding an additional new source of people-centered knowledge to the technical management information systems that had already been established within the programs by the government and the international development agencies. If necessary, it was intended that issues arising from the reality check data could also be followed up within the SWAPs using more standard forms of research or monitoring.¹⁸

What happened? The teams were able to learn a great deal from listening to people and observing local conditions. Much of this related to the “big picture” – for example, here was a hospital that was supposed to have been built but was way behind schedule, and there was a supposedly free service that in practice people had to pay for because informal charges were often imposed by unofficial intermediaries. As expected, striking disjunctures were apparent between policy-level representations of what was happening, and peoples' experiences on the ground. For example, one program document listed the successful placement of Citizen's Charter on the walls of all public hospitals visible to all visitors setting out their rights as hospital users, but the reality check data made it clear that these were generally poorly understood and rarely used. People's stories brought home just how unlikely it was that anyone would make a complaint about poor service or bad treatment: *'I am not willing to make complaints in the hospital. If I were to do so, I would not receive any services in the future as they would recognize me'*. It also highlighted the importance of informality in determining local service delivery outcomes, such as presence of gatekeeper

intermediaries who controlled access to supposedly free services and imposed discretionary charges, or the continuing presence of private pharmaceutical company representatives on hospital premises who were influencing medical decisions, despite the recent introduction of new restrictions on their activities. These were the kinds of issues that were observed by reality check teams as they accompanied household members in their efforts to access services.

In education, despite the country's achievement of near universal primary education, quality was found to have remained low. Children reported feeling unengaged by the culture of teaching in the classroom, and the team's observations confirmed this. School dropouts were revealed as less likely to be the result of household economic pressures, as commonly believed, and more likely to be the result of this lack of engagement, particularly in the case of boys. It was found, surprisingly perhaps, that even the very poorest parents expressed a strong commitment to the value of education and sending their children to school. This challenged a widespread belief among policy makers and some other outside experts that household economic pressures in poor households were the primary cause of primary school dropout – and this was an example of a reality check finding that over time gradually gained traction with policy makers, unsettling this widely-held conventional wisdom.

Another insight was the importance of effective local school leadership as a critical factor in improving the quality of education. This contrasted with observed practices of making school staff appointment decisions based on family, political affiliation or patronage rather than on evidence of skills or motivation. In the few cases where effective leadership was observed in a local school or health center this was seen to make a very significant difference in the performance of those facilities, as in the case of the school level implementation plans (SLIP) project.¹⁹ Parent teacher associations, where policy makers believed local participation could take place, were often found not to actually exist on the ground, despite being regarded by policy makers as key tool for facilitating local engagement and participation.

Also revealing was the wealth of information generated about the less visible and subtler everyday realities faced by people living in poverty. For example, the culture of the hospital visit was vividly brought to life, along with the anxieties experienced

by the low-income service user. For example, the status hierarchy of the doctor-patient relationship was experienced in ways that severely discomforted the user from a poor household who was on the receiving end. It became apparent from listening to people's experiences about how they felt when being examined by unsympathetic medical professionals: *'We would feel good if doctors examine the patient's body sympathetically, but we hardly ever get to experience that'*. More controversially, a positive view of "traditional" birth attendants (TBAs) was evident, despite the fact that these are increasingly denigrated within program policy discourses centered on improving maternal care with more "modern" providers. The TBAs were generally appreciated as doing a good job in meeting poor people's basic health needs – a finding that jarred somewhat with the Sida-endorsed policy commitment to identifying and training a different group of skilled professionalized midwives to replace them. There was suspicion of the latter, too, since local experiences suggested that being motivated more by profit than by local community values led these newly-trained professionals to sometimes provide an inferior service.²⁰

(b) Methodological issues and challenges

The reality check approach shared characteristics with forms of participatory action research by insisting that this was collecting data *with* people and not *on* people (Hennink *et al.* 2011). The methodology made explicit a set of values around having "conversations rather than interviews", "learning rather than finding out" and "living with rather than visiting" (Arvidson 2013). This was intended to reflect the fact that the reality check positioned itself neither as conventional research, with its overtones of extraction, nor simply as a set of participatory exercises with its implications of control. The field teams presented themselves to host households as not directly linked to the decision makers involved in the health and education sectors but instead as independent learners who would pass on people's views and experiences to those engaged in policy making.

In general, the project underestimated just how challenging the approach to data collection would be, and how difficult it would be to use the material that was obtained. The fieldwork was undertaken under tight time constraints and the teams often found themselves living in tough conditions. The priority was to visit some of

the poorest households and this meant that some team members would for example have to share small rooms with many household members, in surroundings that were unhygienic and sometimes open to the elements.

The closeness of the contact was key and led in many cases to useful insights into micro-level processes. For example, the sharing of food within the household during a period of rapid food price increase amidst sudden economic downturn gave unexpected insight into dietary changes and public health, when increasingly high levels of salt were used by poor people to flavor the lower quality food they could now only afford and compensate for its inferior taste. This approach led to both fine-grained detail in its insights, and helped to create good relationships. As Patta Scott-Villiers (2014) observed when using the approach in another setting during a civil society evaluation in Uganda:

As the time goes by, everyone relaxes and although it is never a completely normal situation, the conversation does settle down and the issues debated become more and more those that simply arise in the living of everyday life. While the stories are fragmentary and positioned, there is a sense that the reality check gets at what matters to people. And it gets at the complex reality of lived life, rather than simplified bureaucratic versions of life.

This mode of working eventually began to create strong bonds that helped to build trust and create high quality conversations. People told us that they were appreciative of simply being listened to by outsiders, and this made it more likely that they would talk openly about their situations: *'We have many complaints and suggestions to make, but nobody ever listens'*.

There was no evidence that over time the host households deliberately manipulated or mislead the teams. The independent evaluation reported that the reality check “produced plausible, credible and valuable understanding of the experience of people living in poverty and the challenges that they face in accessing health and education public services” (Pain *et al.* 2013, p.8). However, it was sometimes difficult to sustain the quality and detail of the conversations over time. Regular visits built up trust, but Arvidson reported that relationships could sometimes assume a taken-for-granted

quality. For example, strategies were needed to ensure that substantive discussions were sustained: “During our fourth and fifth year, our intimate relationship with Alia was mainly evident by the fact that she did not feel compelled to look after us as guests, but got on with her very busy life while we could sit in her home and exchange a few sentences with her now and then ... Although her very relaxed and inviting manners made our stay emotionally comfortable – we felt safe, secure and privileged to enjoy her company – it did not really provide us with much by way of conversations anymore” (Arvidson 2013, p.289). In this case, the conversation was reinvigorated by temporarily adopting a more formal question and answer approach, which reset the relationship, a fact apparently welcomed by the household member.

5. POLICY KNOWLEDGE, SPACE AND TIME

The case provides new insights into three aspects of policy processes in terms of how policy makers interact with information and decide whether or not it is useful: (i) how the status of “popular knowledge” is contested, (ii) problems in the creation and utilization of “knowledge spaces”, and (iii) the role played by “disruptive temporalities” that inhibit learning within policy worlds. This section discusses the main findings drawn from the policy maker interviews and from participant observation during the project.

(a) The status of popular knowledge

How do certain kinds of knowledge come to be seen or not seen by policy makers as “evidence”? The reality check challenged the unhelpful binaries described earlier by highlighting how the construction of policy knowledge is not fixed or cumulative, but negotiated. Such negotiations take place on contested terrain that can be understood as “battlefields of knowledge”, in which different perspectives are questioned, agreed, challenged and reinforced (Long & Long 1992; Gaventa 2004).

There was certainly an initial interest generated by the experiment, and the outputs produced were well received by some individuals in the policy maker community. For example, the World Bank country office head in Dhaka decided to issue the project’s Annual Reports to all its visiting consultants to remind them of the people behind the

policies. But overall, despite recognition of the insights gained into the lives of people living in poverty, results were mixed in terms of the reality check's objective to inform and influence policy makers, as found by the independent evaluation (Pain *et al.*, 2013, p.8).²¹ There was resistance among policy makers to the reality check's presentation of popular knowledge - both in terms of the form of the outputs that were produced, and to many of the messages themselves. The common responses were (and here I am paraphrasing based on observations made during the project) either – "*We can't use this, it's not in a form we recognize*", or "*We can't trust this, it's not proper data, just anecdotes*", or "*We already know this, we're working on it*", or – most alarmingly, because there were agreements in place to ensure the anonymity of our informant households and conceal their locations - "*Tell us who these people are, and we'll go fix it*".

A frequent objection rested on doubts among some policy makers about the project's methodology. There were concerns voiced about the reliability of the data, and about sample size and generalizability.²² The validity of the material was questioned by staff more used to formal monitoring data and who tended to dismiss the teams' reliance on conversations rather than structured interviews, and on what they saw as voices and stories rather than numbers and other objective information.²³ Resistance to the project was framed in terms of a collision between stories and facts, in which reality check data was viewed negatively as "anecdote". The information was also seen as awkward to use in the course of formal policy discussions and negotiations. Policy makers found it understandably difficult to engage with relatively unmediated qualitative data that took the form of personal insights and reflections on experience. There were justified criticisms that the Annual Reports were sometimes difficult to read and draw actionable lessons from, and the independent evaluation report also raised valid critical points about the way the material was sometimes presented (Pain *et al.* 2013).

Another common reaction to the material was that it confirmed what was already known and was not therefore useful. Indeed, the data did sometimes reinforce existing knowledge. While this could be viewed as being useful in affirming the accuracy of the existing knowledge base on which policy makers were basing their assumptions and decisions, it was not always received as such. Some government and donor

officials dismissed the Annual Reports because they said that they were not learning anything new from them. When we did interviews for the reflection report at the end of the five years, one person at the Embassy told us that perhaps they could have done more to highlight some of the results, but that in their view *'None of the findings have been interesting enough'*.

The Annual Reports were often criticized or ignored, and were only occasionally acted upon. Sometimes this was simply because program staff were disappointed that their own representations of the programs were being questioned. This made some viewpoints or stories expressed in the reports “risky” to engage with because they destabilized shared representations and program stories.²⁴ In general, it was easier for the reality check team to engage a few key individuals with critical insights in informal “safe” situations than it was to discuss the reality check findings systematically within formal policy spaces or arenas, where the knowledge was likely to take on a more “risky” character.

Reaction to the project highlighted the routine nature of policy work. During the reflection exercise carried out at the end of the project, some policy makers explained to us how far down their day-to-day priorities the reality check concerns had been. They were preoccupied with what they saw as other more important issues, or were simply too busy. Even the specially-assembled reality check Reference Group was difficult to engage and lacked energy, with its members’ commitment undermined by pressures of other work: *'The problem with the Reference Group is that most of us are so busy. I think we could not really devote the time that was needed, I confess that'*.

Among the reality check team, such objections sometimes fed into a populist view of the people versus local elites. When this happened, a form of “othering” of policy makers who were unconvinced by the reality check approach was occasionally visible. As the project unfolded, some members of the reality check team would see themselves as taking a local point of view on behalf of “their” host households against policy elites. This fueled a counter-narrative that was occasionally prone to characterize or even caricature policy makers as unimaginative, and donors as too rigidly technocratic. This was undoubtedly a factor that contributed to suspicion

around the reality check's outputs and its guiding principles among some policy makers.

The project nevertheless helped to raise the profile of Sweden's contribution to the donor consortia, and highlighted its principles of transparency, participation, rights and accountability. As one former Sida Embassy staff member remarked in the reflection interview: *'The Reality Check made us more visible, and it gave us something to bring to the table'*. The approach has also been subsequently replicated both within and outside the country, spawning a small movement around its use as a development planning and evaluation tool.²⁵

(b) The importance of policy spaces

Different types of knowledge are involved in the design and implementation of policies: "official knowledge" that is normally based on national level survey-based statistical data, "policy narratives" in the form of the stories that different policy actors construct in order to inform policy making processes, and "popular knowledge" that is held by those people who directly experience poverty and who find themselves on the receiving end of policy interventions in their name (McGee 2004). These interactions can be understood as taking place at the "interface" between different actors and forms of knowledge, and where "discontinuities of values, interests, knowledge and power" become visible (Long & Lui 2009, p.71). The reality check was essentially an *attempt to alter the balance of power by raising the status of popular knowledge in relation to that of official knowledge*.

The concept of policy space implies not only physical space, such as the technical meetings where it was hoped that reality check data could be connected with and fed meaningfully into existing monitoring and evaluation systems. It also implies mental and cultural space in which a culture of trust can be created for the safe exchange of knowledge and ideas. Despite the intention of the reality check design to create dedicated invited policy spaces for creative discussion and exchange of the new data, this turned out to be one of the experiment's weak points. Attempts to engage took place in both formal and informal policy spaces. The main formal arena was the "designed space" in which each year's draft Annual Report was presented to a

Reference Group, made of representatives of the donors and the government, before presentation to the donor consortia. Either these spaces failed to materialize, turned out to be excessively formalized and apathetic (as in the case of Reference Group meetings), or became unhelpfully conflictive and therefore unproductive. Overall, the expected formal opportunities to feed reality check data into ongoing SWAP management information systems did not in practice materialize, raising questions about the efficacy and even in some cases the very existence of such systems. This finding, along with the example of the parent teacher associations made earlier, resonates with Minogue's (1997) point regarding managerialism's reliance on the construction of a "false reality".

Formal meetings also took place between members of the reality check team and the embassy, along with more public launch events with civil society groups. Informal interactions also took place outside these forums with individuals from these agencies, some of whom became personally interested in the reality check work. A few informal "change champions" who saw the potential of the approach were also identified. Formal spaces in particular were often highly charged zones of status and prestige, in which professional identities and interests were at stake. Here it became possible to observe the "struggle between actors who aim to enroll others in their 'projects', getting them to accept particular frames of meaning, winning them over to their points of view" (McGee 2004). These tensions sometimes led to conflicts between members of the reality check team and other program and government staff, and these became a key factor limiting the "take up" by policy makers of reality check data.

When data was resisted this was often by those with an interest in maintaining the existing hierarchy of knowledge that was embedded in the design of the program. This became a contestation in large part driven by habits of practice, since most policy makers were more used to valuing forms of knowledge that were more formal, measurement-oriented and results-based. Those who did wish to engage in ways that went beyond surface level were more likely to do so outside of formal settings, as individuals, and in less formal ways.²⁶ In this way the reality check offered a challenge to managers' distanced abstractions, the "thin, schematic models" of social

interaction characterized by James Scott (1998, p.310) in his book *Seeing Like A State*.

These tensions around knowledge and status were important, but were not the only factors that got in the way. The view of the policy process afforded by the reality check suggested that policy makers would not necessarily have taken on board less contentious forms of “evidence” either. Policy makers are required to make their decisions in circumstances of bounded rationality based on dealing with the twin problems of uncertainty due to limited information, and of ambiguity since there are always multiple ways of understanding a policy problem and its possible solutions (Cairney 2016). Furthermore, policy actors may often be in competition with each other in both the interpretation of information, and in advancing possible solutions to problems. The rational response of the policymaker is therefore to take shortcuts – such as drawing on information only from their most trusted sources, and utilizing and adapting it to the ideas and beliefs they already hold, so that they “reveal their biases towards certain courses of evidence, which may be more important than the nature of the evidence itself” (Cairney 2016, p.5).

Policy makers can only pay attention to a small amount of the possible evidence that they could use, and they use strategies such as filtering and framing in order to help them get around the problem. They will always make decisions by utilizing some types of information and ignoring others. Carol Weiss (1979, p.430) was once moved to complain that “[t]here has been much glib rhetoric about the vast benefits that social science can offer if only policy makers paid attention”. The idea that evidence can inform policy in any straightforward way - as is sometimes believed to be the case in more technical policy decision making settings such as health and drugs policy – is increasingly questioned (Parkhurst 2017). Many other political, social and economic factors come into play to influence policy decisions.

The reality check’s position alongside the two sector-wide approaches provided a vantage point from which to observe broader aspects of the policy process. Some of the reality check team began to question key assumptions on which the reality check project had been designed, which in retrospect had assumed a relatively linear model of policy processes. For example, it had been assumed that new data could simply be

fed into existing project systems and structures in order to achieve results. This was found to be strongly at odds with the messy reality of the programs, where management information systems always seemed to be work in progress and still under construction, or else produced highly technical information that was difficult to link with in a meaningful or productive way. And as the evaluation of the reality check pointed out, the reality check design had not paid much attention to developing its own management information system that might have made this easier (Pain et al, 2012).

(c) Disruptive temporalities

The world of development policy is characterized by the bounded and relatively short lives of projects and posts, in a phenomenon that has been termed the “continuity of discontinuity” (Sogge, 1996, p.16). This has a disruptive effect, driven by the rapid turnover of personnel within both foreign donor agencies and government offices. International staff – if they are not temporary consultants - are normally hired on short-term contracts of around two years’ duration, and in the Bangladesh domestic policy environment there are frequent political or administrative reshufflings of senior government posts.

This both impacted upon, and was challenged by, the reality check experiment. Disruptive temporalities produced a form of instability that meant that after the first two years it became difficult to sustain a viable representation of the reality check initiative to its “upstream” audiences from one year to the next. The team was constantly forced to explain again the reality check principles and purpose to an ever-changing array of policy makers throughout its duration. Having to introduce new occupants of key jobs in government and donors and sensitize them to the principles and ideas of an unfamiliar – and sometimes unwelcome – initiative sometimes had the effect of draining energy from the team and the project.

Yet the reality check also challenged these temporal norms through its use of return visits to households over the comparatively long period of five years. People at the study sites told us that they were not accustomed to encountering repeat visits from outside “experts”. As one host family member stated when we discussed this issue in

a focus group during the end of project reflection exercise: *'First we did not believe that they would come back. But by the end of the first visit, we shared a relationship with each other and we thought she would not be lying to us'*. This emphasis on the long term was a key strength of the approach. Trust was built up primarily because unlike other outsiders, the same individuals returned the next year just as they had promised, thereby disrupting the traditional pattern of “one off” visits by aid professionals, NGOs and government personnel. However, the project was itself occasionally vulnerable to patterns of short termism as well, since it was not possible to ensure that all the field team members remained in place for the full five-year period. Several left and were replaced during the project.

With their listening stance on the ground, the reality check teams aimed to challenge normal practices of development agency and government staff, for whom field visits tend to be tightly organized, highly orchestrated, and formally structured. But since the reality check was not conducted as in-depth ethnography, it was vulnerable to the criticism that it was not nearly immersive enough. It was essentially “quick and dirty” work, based on spending just a few days and nights living with households, listening to their stories, and documenting their experiences. By the standards of conventional ethnography, such criticisms were justified. Another shortcoming was that the regular visits did not lead to empowered action that might have enabled people to express their views more directly to policy makers, another point made in the evaluation (Pain *et al.* 2013).

6. CONCLUSION

The problem that policy makers remain remote from the realities of the lives of the people they are supposed to be addressing, and may be becoming increasingly so, does not lend itself to simple solutions. The reality check case suggests that efforts to “bridge the gap” through the generation and application of people-centered information in the hope that it can be translated into better evidence for making policy decisions does offer a possible way forward. Analytically, it demonstrates the power of counter-cultural populist ideology to express popular grassroots subjectivities in the struggle to “humanize” policy processes that have become increasingly subject to managerialism. The case also confirms much of what we know about the non-linearity

and messiness of policy processes. The distance between policy and people is not easily bridged: as David Mosse's (2004) work reminds us, such "gaps" can be understood illusory products of simplified linear understandings of policy processes that are at odds with more complex contingent factors that are at play.

The case also highlights some significant problems around issues of power, space and temporalities in the analysis of how policy makers interact with evidence. It shows how the status of "popular knowledge" struggles to gain traction in relation to other forms of evidence, highlights problems in the creation and utilization of "knowledge spaces", and suggests that "disruptive temporalities" within the policy process undermines learning. The reality check's attempt to alter the balance of power between the status of popular and official knowledge met with only limited success, since it was unable to adequately challenge dominant metrics ideologies, in part because the project refused to present its data in a recognizably "useable" form. The challenge of creating suitable discursive knowledge spaces for policy makers to engage critically with unconventional data proved difficult to overcome, since the model of the policy process that had informed the reality check design was itself at odds with reality. Finally, the constant state of flux within the policy world in which the reality check experiment was conducted further undermined its efforts to stabilize a coherent representation of its identity and purpose, as it faced a constantly changing cast of individual policy makers. This temporal disjuncture further reduced the space for dialogue around the data that was generated.

Although the majority of policy makers in Bangladesh paid little attention to the reality check's portrayal of people's experiences and stories, it does not of course follow that they would have been more influenced by conventional forms of evidence, at least not in a straightforward way. We should not be under the illusion that more inclusive forms of evidence-based policymaking *will* necessarily contribute to better policy making. The EBPM discourse, like that of methodological populism, can be understood ideologically as framing the domains of knowledge contestation within policy worlds in oversimplified ways. The linear model of the policy process may be useful and practical, but it is also lacks accuracy.

While problems around the status of popular knowledge, unclear assumptions about the role of evidence in policy, and disruptive temporalities should not be underestimated, none is insurmountable within the imperfect world of efforts to better link evidence and policy. Moving beyond the critical deconstructivist approaches of some anthropologists, a link with meta-modernist theory and its sense of “guarded hopefulness” could offer a potentially useful way to navigate the poles of optimism and naivety, or of hope and despair, that are raised by methodological populism of this kind. Its emphasis on oscillation is a call to move beyond ‘either/or’ towards ‘both/and’ thinking, and expresses a productive tension that enables us to hold onto contradiction (Vermeulen & van den Akker 2010, p.2). The reality check’s subsequent replication and adaptation in several other countries and settings suggests that it has become a viable “mobilizing metaphor” (Wedel *et al.*, 2011) with the potential to animate methodological and cultural change within policy worlds. If the challenges raised by the Bangladesh case can be addressed then there may be scope for such examples of methodological populism to contribute to the further humanization or “peopling” of policy processes.

Notes

¹ The term “policy maker” is commonly used by academics to describe the expected audience for implementation recommendations arising from research. It has a problematic lack of precision since it refers to a wide range of people, from elite politicians to street level bureaucrats (Lewis 2012a). In the context of the reality check it refers to high-level government personnel, international donor staff, and senior program planners.

² The UK House of Commons International Development Committee recently raised concerns about the quality of DFID’s oversight of the supply chain and the “appalling conduct of some contractors” (House of Commons, 2017).

³ New approaches to evaluation have begun to pay more attention to equity issues (see for example Segone 2011).

⁴ This can be distinguished from two other modes of anthropological engagement: (i) critical “deconstructivist” approaches, such as Arturo Escobar’s (1995) view of development primarily as a discourse of power imposed by the West, and (ii), “instrumental” approaches in the form of conventional applied development work (Mosse & Lewis 2006).

⁵ Lewis (2012b).

⁶ An independent evaluation of the project was undertaken at the end (Pain et al., 2013).

⁷ A related approach is found in Hakan Seckinelgin’s (2017, p.xiii) study of HIV/AIDS and policy processes in which he suggests that “policy thinking should start from the way in which the disease is experienced by real people in different contexts of their lives”.

⁸ A new anthropology of policy connects policy to wider structures of power, and addresses the messiness of policy worlds, based on critical rather than applied approaches (see for example Wedel et al., 2005; Shore, Wright & Però, 2011). Neilsen’s (2011) work on “subjectivities” analyses how various social actors think about and experience policy differently, and I have borrowed her term “peopling policy” for this paper. I use it here to draw attention to two related but different themes: the populist idea that people on the “receiving end” of policy matter; and the need to challenge the techno-managerial logic of policy within a humanistic perspective.

⁹ See Lewis and Mosse (2006) for a more detailed discussion of the issue of “disjuncture” in development.

¹⁰ Responses to these initiatives varied. An Oxfam review praised *Time to Listen*’s finding that communities wanted aid workers to be more rooted and ‘present’ in local communities, and for its focus on examining longer term aid impacts beyond

transitory projects (Green, 2013). Cornwall and Fujita (2012, p.1761) wrote less positively of the World Bank study: ‘voices are editorialised so as to tune out any discordant sounds and present an overarching narrative that is in perfect harmony with the World Bank’s own policies’.

¹¹ Unlike this study, the reality check was not primarily designed to understand people’s views of international aid, but simply to gain insights into how people experienced the unfolding implementation of policy reforms in the health and education sectors.

¹² The reality check suggests it is unwise to separate “pure” and “applied” work too strictly. What was originally conceived as an applied intervention provided wider conceptual insights (see Gardner & Lewis 2015).

¹³ See also the related ethnographic study of aid organizations that has become known as “aidnography” (Gould 2004; Mosse 2009).

¹⁴ For example, public administration scholar Rod Rhodes’ (2005) work on “everyday life in a public ministry” focused on the interests and behaviors of elite policy actors in the UK. See also Gains (2011).

¹⁵ In retrospect one of the distinguishing features of the project was that it did not have an explicitly formulated “theory of change”. This was a criticism later made by the Pain et al. (2013) independent evaluation.

¹⁶ Of the nine field workers recruited, all were local except for two. Some were Masters level anthropology graduates, others development professionals working within participatory traditions. The two international staff had extensive experience of fieldwork in Bangladesh.

¹⁷ For a more detailed reflection on the approach and methodology in practice, see Arvidson (2013) and Lewis (2012b).

¹⁸ The approach supported the idea that “stories” can be seen as valuable in generating potential useful data that is “in need of corroboration” (Gabriel, 1998, p.137).

¹⁹ The reality check teams found that the resources allocated for this initiative simply disappeared in most of its schools. In the one or two cases where a motivated head teacher decided to use these resources as intended and operationalize the scheme, it provided the schools with a decentralized platform that was useful for upgrading local facilities and teaching environment.

²⁰ Although there is now more recognition of the problems created by curbing the use of TBAs in favor of “skilled” alternative service providers, this was a controversial finding in Bangladesh at the time. For continuing concerns in relation to the enforced use of biomedical midwifery services to women in support of development targets in Malawi, where the use of TBAs have been restricted, see Danielsen (2017).

²¹ The evaluation was also critical of the reporting and attribution of some reality check data, and to a lack of precision around arguments and claims made in the reports.

²² In recent work, Copestake and Remnant (2015) seek to address these types of general criticisms in relation to people-centered forms of qualitative evaluation.

²³ In the context of social science methodology, stories can be understood to derive their “truth” from meaning, not necessarily from accuracy (Gabriel 1998, p. 136). This poses challenges for their role in research, and by extension, policy.

²⁴ The framing of the reality check data as discursive and messy - rather than linear and solution-focused - created a disjuncture that was at odds with the more systematically ordered forms of quantitative knowledge that structured the program monitoring systems. Both framing and filtering were strategies used by policy makers to diminish the value of the reality check information. The practice of filtering is one way that policy makers seek to manage the flow of evidence by prioritizing or discounting.

²⁵ Following the original Bangladesh initiative, the reality check approach has been adapted and used in a variety of contexts (including Nepal, Mozambique and Indonesia). See for example the Swiss Development Cooperation’s (SDC) use of the approach in Nepal (SDC 2015). This wider replication signals its relevance and perceived value to some development agencies, but also perhaps to its vulnerability to commodification and assimilation.

²⁶ For example, one enthusiastic advocate of the reality check approach was from a bilateral donor that was not involved in the SWAPs.

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