Methodology:

Informing L2GP with insights from Anthropology

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Introduction

This paper takes as its starting point that there is nothing self-evident or anodyne in the process by which cultures communicate. It is not simply by calling an initiative 'Local to Global Protection' or wanting to represent 'local perspective on global protection initiatives', that institutionalised ways of seeing and representing the 'local' by 'global' actors can simply be turned upside down. In many ways, the LGP has been insufficiently bold in presenting a truly 'local' perspective, because of the need to feed back programmatic suggestions to the very 'institutional' actors that have shown such an interest in our findings. The process of carrying out the study also showed how difficult it is to capture genuine local voice. So, while such institutional actors have been extremely positive about the local perspective provided by L2GP, it is the role of this paper to show how we have scarcely begun to

expose the complex and ingenious ways that local agency operates. Nor should we get ahead of ourselves: our objectives were to communicate a common local perspective on protection to a humanitarian audience not to do long-stay participant observation on the multiple factors that influence individual decision-making and agency within local communities; for this reason the work was carried out by researchers who had extensive experience of the humanitarian system as well as long-term experience in their respective study areas.

This paper also sets out to show how humanitarians can extend their reach into local understanding by being explicit and honest about the cultural and institutional filters that may be preventing them from seeing things from a local point of view. But it also aims to show that there is a certain point beyond which humanitarian enquiry will not be able to go and this is the area where local agency dominates and global agency has little impact. Calling a research study 'participatory' or using aspects of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) is rarely enough to change the fundamental power dynamics and communications gap that exist between global and local actors. Most humanitarian enquiry assumes that local people and global actors share a universal humanitarian agenda and that 'humanitarian concerns' are also the concerns of local people. That is not always the case. Nor is it is always possible to find common ground between local models of rights and responsibilities and the inalienable private rights underpinning the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and hence much 'Protection' work. Such differences should be highlighted rather than being ironed out if we are to understand how local and global structures interact.

Lastly, the paper aims to show that there is no single 'magic bullet' that will give access to the local point of view. Going 'local' is often easier said than done. The L2GP used a variety of different methodologies to produce studies

that came out with similar conclusions[1]. The different studies shared something more intangible than a transferable methodology. It was more akin to a shared belief that local voice and local agency needed teasing out over a long period – often requiring researchers with long experience in the cultures involved and having local language skills. Similarly there was a shared sense that local voice would only be audible once the agenda of humanitarian agencies with their competing demands and ways of seeing had been toned down. The example of PRA as a methodology is described below to show that even the most considered methodology, once it has been co-opted as a tool to service humanitarian needs loses the simple element of 'learning from local communities' and becomes something more 'extractive' aimed at responding to pre-defined humanitarian needs rather than the everyday concerns that local people have. There is no quick-fix alternative to embarking upon such learning; local reality is complex and requires long-term commitment to develop the knowledge and insight that are needed – something particularly missing with short-term humanitarian contracts sending workers from one country to the next. But such learning builds up a healthy level of respect for the 'local interests' vis-à-vis the humanitarian division of labour, and that was perhaps a common feature of the methodology of all the L2GP studies with much in common with the long-stay ethnographic studies conducted by anthropologists.

Anthropology and the origins of Participatory Methodology

The current author, as an anthropologist, represents a discipline that has reflected a great deal about the way it sees, communicates and represents the peoples it studies. Anthropologists are experts at detecting 'misrepresentation' and have begun to do useful research on the way aid agencies misrepresent the local viewpoint in their own institutional interests

[1] The Jonglei case study was one of the two L2GP studies to have included an anthropologist in the research team, but 'local voice' can be accessed from so many angles that the other approaches added a healthy multi-disciplinarity to the studies.

(see Ferguson 1990 for example). However, this healthy self-consciousness about their right to be advocates or representatives of other peoples, has also led to academic ghettoisation for a discipline that could otherwise have much to offer. In addition, professionals from other disciplines have responded to the need to represent 'the local' anyway, borrowing ideas from half-remembered manuals of PRA as well as relying on 'key informants' from those societies without the necessary cross-checking that a reliance on key-informants requires. Anthropologists are no longer the gatekeepers to local cultures that they were in colonial times, nor are they the 'spokes-people' of exotic peoples - local people now have their own intellectuals to speak on their behalf. That does not mean, though, that anthropologists should stay detached for the sake of objectivity.

Anthropologists in the last 20 years made a conscious decision to focus an ethnographic eye on the practice of development professionals and the development process (see for example Robertson 1984). In so doing, they have been able to see things through the eyes of development professionals. By focusing on how the development machine works (Ferguson calls it the Anti-Politics Machine in his 1990 book), anthropologists have been able to explain why aid workers use the methods they use (eg a quantitative focus because quantities translate more easily into funding proposals) and the biases that result from such 'ways of seeing'. Such a perspective also explains why a technique such as RRA (Rapid Rural Appraisal), that was designed to produce more accurate information, came to be re-born as PRA (Participatory Rural Appraisal) because it was the process of participation that counted as much as the end results. In this, PRA as a technique reflected the increasing emphasis on getting the humanitarian process and policy right. While understanding the reasons that humanitarian professionals were first attracted to PRA, and then adapted it to their own needs, anthropologists have a responsibility to make sure that researchers are correctly using PRA techniques developed from anthropology (such as triangulation and avoiding

leading questions) and that there is a common understanding of what 'participation' actually means as well as honesty about how much local agency is actually involved in the research process.

Participatory Rural Appraisal

There is almost no contemporary piece of research in the Third World that does not give a passing nod to the methods of PRA/RRA (the techniques pioneered by Robert Chambers (1991:518) best known as participatory rural appraisal – a development of the anthropology-influenced RRA or rapid rural appraisal). The problem, though, is that it is only ever a 'passing nod' – an appropriation of the key terms rather than a conscientious and systematic use of the methodology. There are many different ways to gather social information for projects, but RRA had the advantage of trying to reproduce anthropological insight but more quickly and cost-effectively. The semi-structured questions of RRA differ from the long-stay participant observation methods of ethnography – methods that were designed specifically to be empirical and base conclusions on triangulated observation, experience and conversation in order to avoid the inaccurate generalisation of large-scale surveys (Lambert & McKevitt 2002:210).

The techniques Chambers borrowed from anthropology include semi-structured interviews (based on checklists rather than questionnaires) and triangulation (sourcing information from at least three different people, times or sources – including secondary data). In this way studies could be designed that avoid the biases inherent in using small numbers of 'key informants' or 'focus groups' rather a cohort of people answering standardised questionnaires. Within the range of techniques of RRA (as well as PRA later on), there was space for questionnaires, but only if they were 'devised late in the investigation' and 'kept short and simple' (Chambers1991:526). In general, however, the 'participatory' nature of PRA was better suited to the more 'conversational' nature of open-ended interviews though it requires a

much greater level of skill to make sure that such a conversation gets subtly re-orientated towards checklist topics without interrupting the flow of the conversation or ignoring the basic rules of conversation (such as making sure each party takes turns at asking or answering questions).

Due to their potential to address specific questions directly and within the time constraints that are imposed on research, questionnaires have continued to occupy a dominant place in humanitarian research including the L2GP studies. Even within anthropology there is a call for greater use of questionnaires capable of generating the kind of quantifiable data that is listened to by policy makers (Weller 1998; Bernard 1994:257). The technical limitations of either quantitative or qualitative methods though are rarely acknowledged.

Care must be taken to formulate interview questions in a culturally-sensitive way, but there is no accounting for the cultural misunderstandings that a questionnaire can unexpectedly expose when actually put into use (in the understanding of both enumerator and interviewee) or the multiple interpretations than can result even for a question that has been carefully translated and reverse-translated. Enumerators often just mechanically write the answer people have given as it is not usually them that have written the question and they may not fully understand what the question is seeking to establish. Even an entreaty to follow up unlikely answers is often ignored. The anthropologist Annika Launiala in her study made a daily check of the questionnaire results but even then it was not sufficient to avoid a huge discrepancy between the results of her questionnaire study and her ethnographic fieldwork. The main drawback with the structured questionnaire is that it does not have the flexibility to build in the necessary detours that cross-check a bizarre answer. In a semi-structured interview there is room to probe and ask additional questions to check whether the person has not misunderstood.

Bernard et al (1984:503) estimate that 'on average, about half of what informants report is probably incorrect in some way'[2]. That is why in anthropology triangulation and cross-checking plays such an important role – through asking the same question a different way, asking another informant, using secondary data, cross-referencing observation of behaviour with words. Such techniques are particularly important because data often comes from in-depth interviews with key informants rather than questionnaires with large sample sizes, so it is vital to establish that one is not being led astray by a single personal opinion. They are also important because there are often linguistic ambiguities when interviews take place in another language and problems often arise in translation. While semi-structured interviewing tries to get round many of these problems, the use of questionnaires in cross-cultural contexts has a very limited and specific function in which they are most effective (usually involving asking simple questions to a statistically significant sample of the population) and one needs to be constantly wary in interpreting their results.

Case-Study: The L2GP Jonglei Study

While in the project proposal, this study methodology, in the best tradition of PRA, was intended to be 'a collaborative process with empowerment and sharing', it ended up having to search for the 'local' using methods that were far from collaborative, and were sometimes more 'extractive' than participatory. The research started with a certain methodology (a questionnaire) which was then oriented in very specific directions by what the lead researcher (and current author) already knew from previous long-term ethnographic research – research that had been open-ended rather than depending on the various strengths and weaknesses of a questionnaire. Local researchers conducting the questionnaire were not considered uninterested

[2] Note even anthropologists revert to using figures to gain legitimacy even when such a figure is difficult to verify

observers, but educated local individuals with strong points of view that they would add unacknowledged into their reports[3]. They also needed to be regularly reoriented to recount verbatim what people were saying rather than the answers they thought their boss would want to hear. Also their reports would need to be triangulated with other information and observations on the ground[4].

Over the months that followed and with feedback for each monthly report, enumerators were encouraged to eliminate questions that didn't work and relax their dependence on the questionnaire as a crutch, but there are limits to how semi-structured one can ask secondary-school leavers to go without more formal training. The methodology did not need a threshold cohort-size to become statistically significant, nor did it need to have identical quality data from different areas to be assured of spatial 'representativeness', so the data from enumerators that 'did not get it' could be ignored and offset by the enumerators who did get it – and these enumerators were then kept on after the study period had finished to do further study on specific subjects that had been poorly addressed in the initial questionnaires or interesting topics that had been suggested by initial results. Then the initial results could be followed up with specific fieldwork from the current author and observations from the ground, and then be triangulated with published sources and interviews with institutional government and NGO/Agency individuals. Through this process of flexible and iterative learning, and through rigorous self-analysis of the quality of the data as it came in (mainly

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[3] One strongly held view is that any piece of social research is essentially a 'needs assessment' which must be conducted in each sub-region (payam) by enumerators from the payam who can go into bat for his/her payam and expose the needs in the population and thus ends up as a kind of shopping list. Local people always try to appear more vulnerable than they actually are for such needs assessments (as well as hiding some of the more confidential or illegal protection mechanisms for fear of compromising their effectiveness)

[4] Local researchers were also taught to cross-check and verify all answers both within and between different questionnaires, and if this could really be absorbed, together with the need to remain neutral while cross-fertilising different answers, iterative learning would be possible. But the art of using oneself as the canvas on which local people can paint an ever-more distinct picture without your input is elusive and probably requires extensive training.

by the lead researcher), the study was able to use questionnaires as an accepted entry-point, but subsequently to move to a more open-ended research approach.

Conclusion

There was never any reason a study that called itself the 'Local to Global' should end up being any more 'local' than the other 'bottom-up', 'grass-roots' 'locally-owned' studies done in the past, just on the basis of having a catchy title. As in most cases, local people generally will not read what is written in their name nor complain about any misrepresentation. This therefore puts a professional onus on the researcher to carry out honest self-policing. It is also necessary to be honest about the possibly unbridgeable communication gap that exists between the local and the global, about the donors and the aid agency that commissioned this study ultimately calling the tune - and about the per diem rows with local field enumerators. But it's also about acknowledging that without imagination and a professional approach to bridging that gap, any study of this kind will end up being either too local (using local terms, referring to events only local people would understand and with only local relevance) or too global (frightened of describing local particularities that defy generalisation), so the role of an outsider is necessary to complement the work of local researchers and provide analysis. This role is key and thus a potential source of considerable bias in the study.

Much of the deconstruction of humanitarian notions on 'protection' was done by this author, because local people are not aware of many of the debates that take place in humanitarian policy (in their name). Herein also lay the limits of a 'participatory' approach when trying to link up local views to global processes and discourse. It was necessary to supplement local knowledge of the humanitarian system with the author's own findings to bridge the often unacknowledged gap between 'them' and 'us' and without

that bridge there would be no way of claiming that this study had brought the Local all the way to the Global and somehow met in the middle. As we began by saying – there is nothing simple or self-evident in the way the local and the global communicate. A useful start can be made by admitting that this process is complicated and requires as professional an approach to methodology as is possible rather than just a passing nod at the manual of PRA.

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L2GP studies from Burma/Myanmar, Sudan, South Sudan and Zimbabwe are available at www.local2global.info

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