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The role of agency in development planning and the development process

Introduction to the Special Issue on Agency and Development

Agency in the context of a complex social world

This article introduces ‘agency’ and its role in development debates and development planning. Our main aim is to set out the context for the papers in this collection, which we also introduce along the way. In the first part, we define and discuss agency; in the second part, we contextualise the case study examples in this Special Issue of IDPR with examples of gender and autonomy; in the third part, we raise the difficult issues of democracy and reflexivity and conclude with further examples. The theme is a huge one, but our main focus is on what our collected papers have brought to the table of the agency debates. We also have our own axe to grind, arguing the case for a scientific realism that acknowledges the complexity of agency at several levels in society. The agency argument, embedded in scientific realism, is developed here as a review of some basic issues that often arise because of competing paradigms within development studies.

Agency is the capacity to act. But the question of ‘who’ or ‘what’ are the agents of social change has been contested both in philosophy and in development studies (in this issue, see De Herdt and Bastiaensen, and Sumner and Jones). The philosophical debates tend to focus on two deeply polarised views of agency: the structuralist view and the atomistic view (Archer, 2000a, Chapters 1 and 2). Structuralism takes many forms, and the lines of argument need to be modified to allow for agency and the absence of deterministic causation. In the extreme, for a structuralist (described explicitly by Fay, 1996), macro-structures (like governments, cultures and perhaps social class relations) dominate. Development agencies, whether governmental (such as urban or rural planning agencies) or non-governmental (both national and international), are included among these macro-structures. Taken as a whole, these structures seem to determine every act within that world. According to the structuralist position, humans are just powerless dupes acting out the inevitable ‘normal’ behaviour of their social location, in the face of the overwhelming forces of structures and external ‘agencies’.

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The acceptance of this view would imply that development agencies may be incompetent at or inappropriate for supporting, galvanising and enhancing human agency. Philosophers have criticised this view on the basis of the incoherence that it brings to empirical research. For instance, a structuralist approach would be inadequate to deal with certain questions: What is choice? What if someone is structurally poor but educationally rich? Which structure will dominate if there are several main structures? Why ignore the diversity of human agency? What about development agencies that strive for progressive change via the agency of the people at large?

To development theorists, there are also dangers of state-ism in an excessively structuralist approach to development (for an overview, see Thomas, 2000a, Chapter 2; and 2000b). The power of states or governments to dominate action through the activity of the state and its agents is limited by the diversity of actors and their capacity for original, transformative and unexpected action. A further issue with structuralism is its apparent functionalism. Does every act simply function to reinforce and strengthen the structures? If so, then how does society change? Structural functionalism is now disregarded, but it offers a polar view in situations where it is difficult to differentiate outcomes at the local level because of the absence or suppression of human agency (as may be the case in planned economies).

At the other extreme, if we assume a whole variety of atomistic actors making free choices, then we will raise other deep problems. The assumption of methodological individualism assumes away the cultural, institutional and social structures, including development agencies, that are the focus of structuralism. Furthermore, the very nature of an 'organisation' or a 'government' as an agent cannot be developed or explored if we assume that we should reduce these large actors to a series of individual personal agents. So reductionism to the individual is not going to be a good starting point for understanding agency.

It was to address these and other related issues that a conference on 'The changing role of agency in the development process' was held in the Management School of the University of Liverpool in June 2008 (see www.liv.ac.uk/agency conference). This attracted a wide range of specialisms, including development and welfare and a focus on India, and participants from the whole range of social and policy science disciplines. Sixteen papers were submitted, six of which are offered here because their key themes of agency and development planning are among the primary concerns of the readership of IDPR. We gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the Research Investment Group of the University of Liverpool.

In the place of the two extremes outlined above, the debate about social structures and agency in this conference and elsewhere has been replaced by a tendency for authors to find a middle way between holism and atomism (in this issue, see Mdee, Cabello and Assan). For instance, in some of Giddens's (1984) work he considers a simultaneous coexistence of structure and agency as a way of studying both. Archer

(2000b) rejects this idea on the grounds that without a separation of the two and clarity about the ontological differences between structure and agency, the concept of structuration offered by Giddens was likely to cause problems and to risk being un-operationalisable. Critical realists have tried to solve the problem by offering very clear and different definitions for structure and agency (Sayer, 1992; 2000) and by doing empirical research about agency. Archer's (2003) work illustrates the latter. Stones (2001) rejects the problem of separation itself, and paves the way for the middle road for all.

Archer (1996; 2000b) in fact provides a useful review of how the debate evolved. She suggests that in the middle we have a coherent ontology of how all the parts of society interact with each other in regular, but ever-changing, social relationships. Characterising these parts, she says, requires the ontological process of describing what *kinds of things* are typically found in social reality. She further suggests that some social practices are pre-cognitive habits, and structures of class can be integrated into the analysis without extending our assumptions too far towards holism or the errors of determinism. Combining Archer's work with Sayer's (1992; 2000), we can reach some general claims about agency.

Agency is the capacity of any social actor to act; agents behave according to their internal composition and history, and their external relations. Agents do not always conform to norms of behaviour, although they often do (in this issue, see in particular Assan and Mdee at the individual scale, and Jha-Thakur and Fischer at the institutional scale). History often gives us strong reason to expect agents to be somewhat predictable. Specialists in ontology, however, suggest that there are three main reasons why individual agents may be unpredictable:

- 1 they do not exist in isolation, and the outside influences can permeate or change the agent;
- 2 they are internally organic, so they can change themselves; and
- 3 they are often able to contemplate the situation and decide on strategies using planned consequences, ethical guidelines and other complex decision-making methods.

As a result, the behaviour of an agent, although largely predictable, is likely to have unpredictable components.¹

¹ For a survey of these issues, see Sayer's (1992, Chapters 1–3) discussion of structures and agency; Danermark (2001, Chapters 1–2); Layder's (1993) advice on the layering of society into psychological, individual, organisational/institutional and macro components; and other commentaries on the complexity of the world (Byrne, 1998; 2002), which offer useful starting points for social research on development planning and agency.

Agency and development

Two broad examples of general themes in development research help to illustrate the serious impact that the agency debate has had. These two areas of development studies – one concerning women, the other concerning autonomy – are very contested. The study of women in development was long dominated by woman-focused research. Looking at 1975–90 retrospectively, Moser (1993) calls the study of women's marginalisation the 'women in development' (popularly known as WID) school. The studies in this area have exploded both in quantity and quality over a 35-year period. Within the WID school, it soon became clear that women were not the only agents who were important in changing women's conditions of life, but that there were other crucial players like non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and governmental state or development agencies. Rather obviously, there are agents of development at several levels of the development process (Harvey, 2002).

But when the WID school began to explore the role of men as an agent in women's progress, the school became transformed. The research began to imply a dynamic interaction between different individual agents (e.g. Mayoux, 1993, compared with Mayoux, 1999). The capacity for NGOs or official development agencies to improve women's conditions was now shown to depend crucially on the response of men to the agency of women and the NGOs or government. In response to the problem of the apparent separateness, marginalisation and defensiveness assumed by the WID focus on women, a new school of thought began to develop, led by Moser. This school is now widely known as the 'gender and development' (GAD) school, and has many proponents. The GAD school argues that men must be included in gender studies. Some GAD specialists study stereotypes about men, such as machismo; many others study the relationships of married couples, adults with children, and so on, rather than studying just one sex.

Three additional non-atomistic contributions have been made by GAD theorists. Firstly, they recognised the role of social classes in affecting the differentiation of women (e.g., Olsen and Ramanamurthy, 2000; Garikipati, 2008). This was an important step forwards, although age groups and intra-family roles had always been important sources of further diversity among women (Chant, 2007, provides a good overview of this literature). Secondly, the GAD researchers began to argue that the separate conditions experienced by women are not as important as the relationships between men and women both inside and between households. The third change was that GAD researchers gradually integrated into their studies a series of structural characteristics (such as ethnicity, colonial oppression and sexual orientation) and the patriarchal assumptions of many of the agencies of the state (e.g. Dreze et al., 1996; Risseuw, 1991). In general, today, we think of gender studies as inherently invoking knowledge about both men and women as well as about the relations between them.

But we have only got this far through a critique of the individualism, the lack of relational thinking and the assumption of homogeneity of women which was very common in WID.²

In the case of gender and development we have seen that the study of agency must recognise agents in relational terms at several levels: personal agents, households, intervening agencies or organisations, and states. The neglect of the relational context within the WID school is brought out very clearly in the debate between WID and GAD. Neglect of the relational context, although present, is somewhat less apparent in other areas of development studies. De Herdt and Bastiaensen's paper in this issue examines one such area. They argue that the notions of freedom and poverty as understood by the development literature have been conceptually devoid of their relational contexts. It is therefore relevant, if not essential, to reconceptualise these notions in relational terms. They provide a relational framework for reconceptualisation that makes local political processes key in both the creation and the reduction of poverty. Their main concern is that theory has incorrectly focused almost exclusively on sectional issues of individual wellbeing and has neglected people's agency, which is arguably the biggest vehicle of transformative change in practice. The debate between WID and GAD is ontological in the specific sense that it has focused on what we think exists. In other words we had to reassess the nature of the social objects, including development agencies and assumptions made by the state and society in general, to which the empowerment theories were referring.

Our second field of concern, from the narrower area of autonomy, reinforces this point. Since autonomy is one aspect of human agency, it makes an interesting case study for our introduction of the ontology of agency. The measurement of autonomy has been taking place in various spheres of life, including autonomy at work and autonomy in decision-making (e.g. Jejeebhoy and Sathar, 2001, examining the autonomy of married couples; Iversen, 2002, and Fyfe et al., 2003, examining that of children). When we study autonomy, whose autonomy is it? Should we assume that autonomy is a characteristic of individuals? This would imply a form of individualism. The measurement of autonomy usually involves surveys, which tend to be quite individualistic. To give one example, women in India and three other countries were interviewed with a structured questionnaire regarding their autonomy in decision-making and in their marriages (Morgan et al., 2002; Ghuman, 2003). The questions asked included the woman's view of her physical freedom to move between the household and various other locations. It was assumed in these studies that the woman's subjective view of her autonomy would be a sufficient indicator of her real autonomy. The validity of this assumption could be questioned. But, more importantly, the exclusion of men from the study and the assumption that what matters is for the woman to

2 The UK government has developed a strong commitment to helping women in the context of an awareness of the gender and structural context: a twin-track WID/GAD approach.

go alone is a very particular and rather Western approach. For some Muslim women it is quite acceptable that when they go outside the house, a man of a family normally accompanies them. They might say that they have autonomy, but that they prefer not to go out alone. Here the social construction of the word 'autonomy' was individualistic in the survey, but is non-individualistic in a certain cultural context.

In short, a study of autonomy cannot be simplistic. There may be an important difference between recognising the reality of individual autonomy, and methodological individualism as an ontological commitment. Perhaps in some cultures it is right to enquire about the autonomy of an individual. One might carefully reject methodological individualism at the same time that one makes this enquiry at the individual level. In this case it is important also to study social institutions (including development agencies), social structures that influence autonomy (such as social class), and macro-factors affecting people's autonomy in a non-individualistic ways. A classic example would be in China and Cuba, where long-distance labour migrants are required to register at their destination city. This macro-regulation affects autonomy but would not appear if we conducted a rural household survey questionnaire and applied it to rural women workers. The research methods are more complex than in the past, when social atomism was a widely accepted assumption. Since individualistic atomism tends to be a Western, modern ontological assumption, it is especially important for development studies to open itself up to the possibility of questioning individualism. Individualism can be a characteristic of any society, but that does not mean that it must be a characteristic of our theories when studying it, or of development practices when we seek to enhance it.

So far, we have pointed out that autonomy can be a characteristic of individuals, and that it may sometimes be construed in very different ways at the level of the couple, or as a general feature of a migrant population who are regulated to some extent by the state. To bring this argument together, then, it is important to realise that the study of agency needs to look at social formations and social institutions, not just personal or subjective views of individuals about individuals. Three papers in this collection contribute to this idea through the lens of very distinct examples. The paper by Anna Mdee attempts to theorise patterns of individual participation in collective development activities with reference to such activities in a village in Tanzania. The article by Joseph Assan examines long-term out-migration as a strategy to diversify livelihoods in rural Ghana. The article by Mateo Garcia Cabello takes the view that policy is an ongoing process where choices made by agents are heavily influenced by contextual factors. This idea is explored with reference to the case of micro-finance regulations in El Salvador. All three articles understand the significant influence that contextual and structural factors, including development agencies, can have on individual agents' behaviour.

Mdee uses ethnographic research from Uchira to construct a dynamic structure-

agency framework with which to understand participatory action. She plots the different ways in which individuals participate in relation to structures such as gender, wealth and age, and considers participatory outcomes in the light of local norms, personal motivations and relationships. Her particular hope is that such a framework could provide a guide to the differential agency of individuals that might in turn help us to appreciate the specificities in patterns of collective participation.

Assan's paper relies on interview methods to examine motivation and patterns of migration across gender and age groups, identifying the impact that migration can have on any household's livelihood structure. The article argues that variations in migration patterns cannot be entirely attributed to individual agency, and that demographic structural factors matter. Although it is usually younger members who migrate, this does not necessarily achieve greater diversification or income sustainability for the migrant household. The influence of structural factors seems to be endemic, rendering the individual's agency somewhat powerless.

Examining the evolution of micro-finance regulations in El Salvador, Cabello argues that policy is an ongoing process where choices made by lending agents and regulatory agencies are governed by contextual factors. An understanding of these factors is essential to understand why and how policy evolved to take its current form. He argues that a lack of political incentives has resulted in a regulatory framework that is rather limited in its scope. The regulations that have evolved in fact help to maintain the financial exclusion of the very people that micro-finance aims to serve. An appreciation of the role of the political players in the policy process could have avoided such constraining regulations.

Important recent contributions to the study of agency have introduced at least two new areas to development studies: happiness studies and research into human capabilities. The study of happiness is considered to be a new departure in research on human agency, and is usually focused on how groups of individuals answer a question about how satisfied they are with their life overall (Layard, 2005). There are also studies of happiness in particular domains like finance, education and housing. One can see that the level of satisfaction with health, for example, may contribute to one's overall life satisfaction. A second new area in the study of agency is research into capabilities and wellbeing. Research in this area has been led by several innovative authors. Nussbaum has theorised about the fundamental nature of capabilities (1999). Alkire and Black (1997) have also explored how capabilities contribute to development through either freedom or functioning, linking with earlier work by Sen (e.g. 1990; 1992). Studies of wellbeing have expanded, with one recent project covering four countries and using personal, household, community and national units of analysis simultaneously (Macgregor and Little, 1998). In both cases, the emphasis is on human agency in moulding and creating the contexts of lived experience, well beyond the direct concerns of governments and development agencies.

The impact that Sen's work has had on development studies is legendary. His work on human development has given us the celebrated 'capability approach', which allows poverty to be separated into different components assigned by personal capabilities. This idea of poverty seems to fit well with the recent Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which assign internationally agreed yardsticks by which to assess countries' performance, and to which development agencies and governments have been attracted, since they seem to offer the ability to target achievement and thereby operationalise the agency of the agencies. The article by De Herdt and Bastiaensen examines the extent to which the MDGs can be seen to operationalise Sen's capability approach. They argue that while the MDGs represent some real concerns, the current paradigm on poverty has fixed a list of objectives to be reached at the cost of depoliticising the entire process of development. Sen's emphasis on the political process to determine the objectives that people value is pre-empted by the international consensus on using an *ex ante* list of objectives and targets. The MDGs are therefore a somewhat condensed version of the capability approach, and are ill-equipped to represent 'what people want' from the process of development. Furthermore, in their contribution to this collection, De Herdt and Bastiaensen take issue with the ideas of freedom and poverty propounded by the capability approach itself. They argue that while Sen considers the primacy of politics in defining development, his approach is too static and fails to conceptualise the evolving nature of the political process in the context of development, as expressed in government and international targets and objectives. They take an alternative, relational perspective on freedom, which they consider better suited to internalising a changing political scene. The article by Cabello in this issue provides a case study that brings out the importance of not taking the 'politics' behind development for granted.

Two difficulties with the study of agency

Several controversial issues arise in the study of agency, and here we will comment on two of them: democracy and reflexivity.

Research on agency is compromised by the difficulty that agents – individual and institutional – can have in trying to express their situation in a way that will be deemed accurate. If an agent is oppressed and has been enculturated into thinking that their situation is normal, then that agent is not going to express the very criticisms that the development researchers might want to know about. Even if they feel critical of the existing system and wish to voice some of this criticism, many people will consider this dangerous. Poor people, migrants and people from ethnic minorities rightly calculate that there are risks in voicing criticisms. Therefore, through these two mechanisms, empirical research about the agency of people is likely to develop a conservative bias. If development studies is to be progressive, how are researchers

going to discover empirically the progressive changes that people want?

There is also a secondary issue, arising in part from the question of expression, about the democratic context in which pronouncements about agency are made. If the researcher disagrees with the respondent, which voice is supposed to dominate? This is partly an ethical question and partly an issue of epistemology. We could seek to represent the voices of all, without imposing our own voice on the data. It also seems especially difficult to do research about development organisations without beginning to intervene in these agents' discourses. We are intervening at the same time that we are doing the research.³ In such a situation, again, traditional concepts of the value-neutrality of the researcher are left for other disciplines. An awareness of the issue of democracy and voice leads us toward epistemological relativism. We do not advocate relativism in general, but we must be aware that there are many standpoints in each society. For the study of agency, an awareness of the likelihood of the silencing the voices of the poor is critical.

An important issue for development planners and development planning related to expression has been examined in this issue by Andy Sumner and Nicola Jones. It is to do with whose voice takes precedence in the process of pro-poor policy making: is it the voice of the expert or that of the people themselves? The expert-led policy, characteristic of the practice of most development and planning agencies, might work if the experts know best how to reduce poverty, but the participatory policy process could work well if the poor know what is most likely to improve their situations. There seems to be an ideological polarisation between these two views and there is little effort in the literature to bring them to talks. Sumner and Jones's article attempts to bridge this gap. Their central focus is on the changing nature of power in the policy process. It is power relations between the different stakeholders that determine whether either modality of policy formation is pro-poor. Indeed it cannot be assumed that either modality is necessarily pro-poor, whatever their names may suggest. The article explores the preconditions under which each modality can result in a policy process that is truly pro-poor. The undertones regarding how policy evolves, whether through top-down, expert-led initiatives or bottom-up, people-led initiatives, can also be found in Cabello's contribution to this issue.

The second issue concerning some of our authors is the reflexivity of agents in development (see especially Jha-Thakur and Fischer). The word 'reflexive' means 'referring back to', reflecting upon actions taken and taking further action as a result (see Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000). We noted in the introduction that organisations

3 A related issue is that of value judgements made by the researcher. For instance, it is widely assumed among feminists that increasing women's autonomy tends to empower women. The value judgment is made that more autonomy is good for women. There may be a limit beyond which more autonomy is not good for women as well as men in the context of a family. This is an empirical question (Fay, 1987). In development research it is quite common to invoke value judgements both during and after the research process.

and other agents undergo organic change. The origins of this change can be found in people reflecting upon their own behaviour. We can try to resist our habits and create new ones. At the higher level of the institutional agency, we find reflexivity again; the organisational processes of dialogue and planning can result in a reflexive organisation continually reviewing its own aims and procedures. When they are reflexive, all agents have the possibility of improving their effectiveness. The capacity for strategic action can be increased by a self-aware agency. In this sense, the study of personal and individual agency can be very closely linked to the study of organisations and other large-scale agents in development: for instance, when planners and development officials exercise their 'individual' agency through the 'institutional' agency of the state or NGOs.

The notion of reflexivity in the context of development agencies is explored by Jha-Thakur and Fischer in the context of coal-mining regulation in India. The regulators discussed in the article include the state pollution control boards, but the important thing to realise is that the government, in its federal forms (state- and national-level ministries) and its elected representatives, along with its officers, regulates the regulators. While this is not the same as self-regulation, this set-up clearly relies on an element of reflexivity. This guidance is a form of agency, just as the resistance offered by coal-mining companies is also a form of agency. Jha-Thakur and Fischer stress the interactions among these different agents, along with their interests and their capabilities as they change over time. They examine three coal mines from three different states in India to reveal the inherent weakness of the regulating structure. Because environmental assessment is state-driven, it causes the balance of power to always favour the developer, at a heavy cost to the environment. A reliance on the reflexivity of agents alone has proved to be inadequate in this particular case study.

The collective idea that the articles in this special issue put forward is that an accurate study of individual agency or institutional agency will require transcending the conventional boundaries within which such agents are expected to function. So if we want to fully appreciate the role of human agency in decisions like migration and grassroots collective action, we cannot do this without an accurate understanding of the role of structural and institutional factors. Similarly, if we want to understand the evolution of regulation surrounding developmental initiatives like micro-finance or environmental regulation, then it is important to appreciate the functioning of the human agency of planners and politicians behind the institutional agency of the state or the NGOs. In order to understand the agency of agencies it is also important that the power relations between the different stakeholders are explored. In other words, there is a far deeper connection between human agency and institutional agency than has been suggested in the literature at large. Ignoring this connectivity can lead to serious shortcomings in the empirical study of agency, but may equally seriously contribute to a partial understanding of fundamental concepts like poverty and development.

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