

Introduction

*Pamela Thomas, The Australian National University; and
Gillian Fletcher, La Trobe University*

Evidence, practice and inequality

The issues discussed in this *Development Bulletin*—evidence, practice, and inequality—are anything but new as previous publications in this series show. From the time of the Marshall Plan onwards, international development has struggled with how to generate change in levels of inequality and how to assess and build on changes that have occurred.

This *Development Bulletin* presents work from some of the 150-plus practitioners and academics who presented papers as part of the Evidence and Practice in an Age of Inequality conference held in Melbourne, Australia in 2015. Organised by the Australian Council for International Development University Network (an organisation now known as the Research for Development Impact Network, or RDI Network), the conference is widely recognised as one of Australasia's most important international development knowledge exchange events.

One of the conference's key achievements is to highlight the productive nature of collaboration between NGOs and academia, and strong evidence of that collaboration can be found within these pages. The 23 papers presented here come from representatives of Australian, American, New Zealand, Pacific Island and Vietnamese universities; major international non-governmental organisations; local non-governmental organisations; and advocacy groups. There are reports on research and practice from Aboriginal Australia, Cambodia, Cook Islands, India, Indonesia, Mozambique, New Zealand, Nigeria, Palestine, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Uganda, Viet Nam and Vanuatu.

Together, they consider issues of evidence, practice and inequality from a range of perspectives: economic; access to basic resources and services; the ability to have a voice in community and government affairs; and the effects of climate change. As in earlier issues of the *Development Bulletin*, several papers draw attention to issues of inequality as experienced by people with disability.

Assessing poverty

The journal's starting point raises the question of how 'poverty' is assessed. As Martin Ravallion shows, there is more than one way to measure progress against poverty and different methods of measurement can achieve different results. Are the poor being left behind? Or, is the level of poverty changing and are the poor, in Ravallion's words, 'breaking through the lowest level of poverty'?

While empirical research indicates considerable progress against poverty Ravallion suggests that if overall economic progress is not to leave the poorest behind then it must raise the lower bound of the distribution of permanent consumption in society. The lower bound can be called the consumption floor and the numbers of poor people can fall without the floor rising. Ravallion states that 'the most widely used poverty measure, the "head count index", attaches no value to success in raising the lowest level of living'. He discusses social welfare and the attempts to raise the consumption floor within a nationally defined set of basic social security guarantees. He concludes that household surveys using the counting approach show considerable progress against poverty and that mean consumption per capita has been growing. However, he suggests there has been little absolute gain for the poorest. Most of the developing world's progress against poverty has been in reducing the number of people living close to the consumption floor rather than raising the level of that floor. It can be said, therefore, that the poorest have indeed been left behind.

In the second keynote paper, Yen Vo discusses inequality and disempowerment in Vietnam. As in many countries, in Vietnam, inequality is at its most extreme

among those with disability. A 2006 survey shows that 13 million people or 15.3 per cent of the Vietnamese population had a disability and one-third of these lived below the poverty line. Less than five per cent of those with disability receive rehabilitation support and less than one quarter have access to education. While the Vietnamese government has introduced legislation to support those with disability it has had very limited implementation. Disability related policies are not widely circulated, people have no knowledge of where to get help, there are no financial mechanisms to assist those with disability, no monitoring tools or guidance to support people with disability and little collaboration between disability agencies and social organisations.

Evidence and equity

In this section, Lansley together with NGO and university colleagues, discuss the increasing pressure on development NGOs to provide evidence of the effectiveness of their work. Case studies from three major Australian NGOs demonstrate the challenges NGOs face in an ‘evidence hungry age’ including the difficulty of producing relevant and useable evidence. As they note, ‘collecting effective evidence has significant economic and workplace implications for how NGOs operate’ and does not necessarily mean better outcomes—how evidence is utilised is equally important. The greatest challenge is determining just what is needed to achieve better evidence. The authors found that:

NGOs need to better communicate the realities of producing better evidence...they need to be open...about the complex nature of development work, the risk of failure, and the constant presence of equivocal outcomes.

Better evidence, they conclude, requires greater emphasis on the value of program outputs to primary stakeholders and communities in addition to the more usual focus on the aims of program designers and implementers.

Wilson et al., whose work picks up on questions raised by Lansley et al. as to whose evidence counts note that ‘people with disability have been routinely excluded from...evidence and knowledge production’. This applies in particular to the situation of children. Children with disability have been the subject of research rather than being involved in it. Taking a human rights approach, the authors maintain that to include children with disability in research they need to overcome the assumptions of parents, carers and teachers of the child’s incapacity to participate. In their *Voices* project they use a variety of data collection tools designed to enable children with disability to ‘self-report’ by offering alternative modes of communication—visual, audio and tactile which did not require literacy. The paper provides examples of evidence from children with disability including what they would like to do in the future, what jobs they would like to do. Overwhelmingly children expressed their wish for education.

Carroll, Devine and colleagues continue the human rights theme considering the marginalisation of people with psychosocial disability. Discrimination and lack of understanding of psychosocial disability is, they state, a major factor contributing to their exclusion. Despite negative

attitudes being widely acknowledged as a barrier to inclusion, discrimination has been poorly documented. Existing research provides evidence of high levels of abuse against those with psychosocial disability. The authors outline the situation of those with psychosocial disability from a legislative, economic and social context and present a case study of the W-DARE project—a three year participatory action research aimed at improving access of people with a psychosocial disability to quality sexual and reproductive health programs.

Equality in access to safe water is included in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Grant et al. question whether private water enterprises in rural Vietnam reduce or increase inequalities. While private enterprises perform a critical role in increasing access to safe water in Vietnam, research undertaken by the authors found that poor households sometimes paid higher fees, connection fees were a barrier to accessing services, piecemeal coverage disadvantaged the poor and support mechanisms were unevenly applied.

Evaluation experts Peersman and Rogers consider equity issues in monitoring and evaluation (M&E). They pose a number of questions that help determine the extent to which M&E can disadvantage the poor. These include whose values are taken into consideration in determining evaluative criteria and standards; who decides what success looks like; should ‘success’ be considered an overall improvement or a reduction in equity gaps; if a program is good for some people and harmful for others, how should it be judged overall? They recommend strengthening M&E capacity to help reduce inequality.

While we believe that there is genuine interest and willingness in achieving equitable development results, M&E often fails to address equity issue in its findings and processes. In doing so, it fails to adequately inform effort to improve equity and, worse, can undermine them.

Voice, choice and collectivity

Kennedy raises the issue of the Indigenous voice amongst remote Australian communities and argues that without a voice in policy and service delivery, Indigenous people lack the capability to participate in discourse about what is important for their development making it impossible for them to influence decisions. The paper provides a case study among a small community in the remote Central Australian Desert during an Australian Government Intervention. The study found that during the Intervention Indigenous voices were silenced and the Western Aranda people spoke of their despair and frustration about not being heard and the inability to have a voice in the events taking place. The study found that Indigenous voices are muted and silenced by our failure to understand and accommodate the conditions that permit remote peoples to have a real say in deliberations.

Conn and colleagues note that:

The health, wellbeing and socio-economic participation of youth from Auckland communities experiencing inequalities, including Maori, Pacific Island and refugee communities, is a particular concern.

The paper presents findings from a collaborative action research project in which academics and youth leaders started ‘a critical discussion’, which sought to promote youth participation and ownership. This was well-received by the youth leaders engaged in the project, but in the following paper, Hutchison presents compelling evidence of the ‘burdens and risks’ that development project participation expectations can inflict on the poor. Using a case study from the Philippines, she demonstrates that ‘Their structural disadvantage means that poor people can find it hard to comply with the development aspirations of even their long-term allies and advocates’, and concludes that ‘politically informed programming needs to take account of the poor by fully appreciating what is hard for them to forego under their current circumstances’.

Gendered inequality

Unsurprisingly, issues of participation are also raised in the papers related to gendered inequality. Fernandez, ‘undertakes a systematic review of case studies of collectively owned and managed livelihoods initiatives in India, to investigate whether they offer women opportunities to improve their ability to re-negotiate gender inequalities and oppressive norms, and to control productive assets’.

She found that, while gains were reported in the public sphere, ‘gender and caste-based barriers continue to constrain women’s ability to benefit from collective livelihood interventions’. Based on research in Papua New Guinea (PNG) Spark provides a different view of the intersections of class and gender. She acknowledges that PNG’s Business and Professional Women’s (BPW) Club functions ‘in the context of a society increasingly stratified in terms of class’, but argues that ‘my analysis of BPW provides evidence that being middle class in PNG does not necessarily involve shoring up individual privilege at the expense of the “grass roots”’.

Cosijn examines the seven-year Sustainable Effective Economic Development (SEED) project in Mozambique which is implemented by CARE Canada and CARE Mozambique in partnership with IrishAid and the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI), in close collaboration with the Government of Mozambique. The project ‘aimed to reduce poverty and to strengthen the agriculture sector through value-added chains that were sustainable and competitive’, with a focus on women’s economic empowerment and gender equality. The project, which Cosijn credits with having ‘a large impact on women’s empowerment’, used an adaptive learning process that used dialogue and reflection to guide adaptation throughout the project cycle. ‘Without this learning process, it is unlikely that the project would have had the successes it had’, Cosijn states.

A slightly different take on value chains is provided by Nicholas who reports on value chains and women’s economic empowerment in Cambodia, Palestine and Uganda. Nicholas argues that ‘economic empowerment is more than a question of money’ and requires a ‘focus on power’. She states:

Without considering issues of power, [there is the potential that] poor female farmers gain skills and increased

production, but without control over income. Chain empowerment occurs when participants add value to their products and also increase their control over income, relationships and the processes involved in value creation.

Nicholas reports on work to assist women to develop three forms of power: power within [themselves], power with [each other], and power to [act].

The final paper in this section addresses menstruation; a natural bodily act that has been subverted and judged in such ways that women across the world face,

Taboos and socio-cultural practices include[ing] food restrictions, segregation from the household and... restrictions on daily activities such as washing, cooking and involvement in religious and social activities.

Huggett and Macintyre argue that ‘Such beliefs and practices drive a culture of secrecy and silence and reinforce gender inequality’, and call for attention to be paid to ‘the gender inequality dimension of harmful practices in managing menstruation’. This, they say, will require ‘gender, SRHR and WASH actors to challenge their traditional ways of working and co-develop joint ways of working and taking action’.

Intersections of inequality

The papers in this section examine the ways in which certain systems come together to compound inequality. James et al. examine the links between disability, poverty and inequality, ‘and the particular importance of collecting and using accurate data to better understand its impact and to guide good practice’. The authors argue for:

...a sharper focus on evidence—not only in terms of collecting evidence on the interrelationships between disability, inequality and development to inform practice, but also in terms of evaluating and documenting the approaches and methods that are used to collect evidence.

They offer a set of principles for disability inclusive data collection.

Fletcher et al.’s paper provides a brief overview of ‘research undertaken by the authors and sexual health and rights practitioners in a Southeast Asian country examining the intersections of gender, sexuality, disadvantage, and how that plays out in reality for practitioners’. It then describes and discusses the outputs of a workshop on the intersections of gender, sexuality and disadvantage as part of the 2015 conference. Workshop participants were asked to consider three questions:

1. Do you think using a more intersectional understanding of gender, sexuality and inequality might help us to help us tackle disadvantage more effectively? Why, or why not?
2. What might a more intersectional approach look like? What could we change? and
3. What are the challenges in taking a more intersectional approach? Would anything be lost by doing so?

Responses to these questions reminded all present, once again, that ‘we function within systems that do not cope well with such complexity and intersection’.

Meribe examines the intersections between poverty and climate change in a rural Nigerian community, reporting on farmers' lived experiences of climate change. He notes that:

The people of the community continue to experience crop failure, dwindling income and hunger and generally lack the specialised knowledge needed to understand the changes they are experiencing to try and adapt.

He argues that:

...using new media in tandem with informal local communication networks could engage rural communities to address this 'poverty' of communication and allow rural farmers to share knowledge to obtain better understanding of impacts such as climate change on their livelihoods.

The aid industry

The final section of this journal is intended as a provocation for all academics and practitioners engaged in international development. Medica raises questions regarding the allocation of aid money and, specifically, whether or not the Australian Awards (AA) are 'a sacred cow' that are supported at the expense of other programs that have been well evaluated (for example, Australian Volunteers International). She concludes:

The study of the AA program shows that while it is meeting output requirements, it is remiss in assuming the delivery of awards will in turn contribute to nation building. Issues such as a poor enabling environment appear to be largely ignored.

Rhodes et al. focus on the practitioner level of international development, in a report of a conference workshop that asked attendees to consider: 'What is our role? Why are we doing this?' and, importantly, How do we cope? Themes arising from group work are reported as: Understanding one's own values, beliefs and strengths; emotional resilience and self-care; brokering, translating and interpreting between diverse worlds; balancing adeptness in complex and dynamic contexts; and leadership skills. During the workshop, participants spoke of tensions between their own, and organisational or industry values; the emotional

challenges of these tensions; the pressure of dealing with change within non-adaptive systems; and the struggle to lead. In conclusion, Rhodes et al. note:

The experience of the workshop leads us to ask whether the current development system is the right one to address the complex reality of inequality, particularly if it is not reflecting and accommodating the lived experiences of those who navigate this work every day.

All of the above needs to be considered in relation to the context provided by Gilbert and Spratt, in the journal's final article. Written as an opinion piece, the article sets out the current Australian aid environment as one of uncertainty and change, which 'is unsettling for those of us who identify as part of the sector, and feel that the ways of working established over this last decade of growth are under threat'. Drawing as they do on the plenary session at the 2015 conference (titled 'Creating a healthy environment for Australian aid in times of inequality and austerity'), as well as outcomes of discussion sessions held with practitioners in 2013 and 2014, Gilbert and Spratt suggest that there is a:

...fundamental tension between the values to which both individual professionals and organisations subscribe, and the extent to which these values are compromised in practice by organisational imperatives.

They call for the establishment of a professional association for development workers, and suggest a primary task for such an association as articulation of 'principles of practice' and that this, in turn, 'would give us greater capacity to challenge poor practice and decision making in the organisations in which we work'.

They conclude:

...a profession that seeks such radical change is never going to be an easy one. We are responsible for shaping our sector and our identity as professionals, so we need to take responsibility for the health of our sector and the integrity of our practice.

We trust that Gilbert and Spratt, along with all of the contributors to this journal, have given readers something to think about.