

**Towards a Local Socio-Institutional
Analysis of Anti-Poverty Interventions:
A Critical Review of Methods and
Researchers**

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Abstract

We try to construct a bridge between an institutional perspective on poverty and poverty interventions (Bastiaensen, De Herdt & Vaessen 2002) and a more operational screening instrument to be used for a local socio-institutional analysis of anti-poverty interventions (LSIA). While reviewing existing research approaches, we discuss three fundamental issues that need to be taken into account in order to develop a more operational instrument for a socio-institutional analysis of development interventions. The first point is that poverty analysis should focus on the local level, since the final poverty effects of intervention clearly play at this level. This requires an appropriate understanding of what is meant as ‘the local level’, an issue we will deal with in both economic and sociological terms. Second, we must acknowledge that a locality is a pluriform social landscape whose dynamics are co-determined by interdependent but autonomously deciding actors of different kinds and with different interests and worldviews. The third and final issue is that one should be sufficiently aware of the role and position of the researchers. In the process of generating and interpreting information, researchers are ‘discursively’ interacting with local actors in their institutional environments. As we will see, the problem for the researchers is not unlike that of the development experts.

Résumé

Nous essayons de faire le pont entre une perspective institutionnelle de la pauvreté et des interventions de pauvreté et un instrument de recherche-action opérationnel qui peut être utilisé pour une analyse locale socio-institutionnelle (ALSI) des interventions dans le cadre de la lutte contre la pauvreté. En passant de revue des approches de recherche existantes, nous examinons trois enjeux fondamentaux à prendre en compte au moment de développer un instrument plus opérationnel pour organiser une analyse socio-institutionnelle des interventions de développement. D’abord, l’analyse de la pauvreté devrait prendre la localité comme unité d’analyse, comme c’est à ce niveau-là que les détails du mécanisme d’interventions entrent en jeu. Nous essayons de mieux préciser ce que nous entendons sous ‘local’ et ‘localité’ –en termes économiques et sociologiques. Ensuite, nous devons prendre au sérieux le fait qu’une localité est un paysage institutionnel pluriforme dont les dynamiques sont co-déterminées par des acteurs interdépendants mais autonomes et de type différent, avec des ‘univers de vie’ (worldviews) différents. Finalement, on devrait être conscient du rôle et la position sociale des chercheurs mêmes. Dans le processus d’assemblage et d’interprétation de l’information, les chercheurs sont en interaction discursive avec les acteurs locaux dans leurs environnements institutionnels. Comme nous verrons, le défi pour les chercheurs n’est pas trop différent de celui des ‘experts’ de développement.

1. Introduction¹

This paper is a second output of the BVO-research project ‘Poverty and Social Divisiveness: an institutional perspective’ and builds further on the conceptual paper “Poverty, Institutions and Interventions: Clarifying Concepts and Issues” (Bastiaensen et al., 2002).

Drawing, among others, on Sen’s work, we understand poverty as pronounced deprivation in individual well-being rooted in a deficient institutional environment.

The ‘institutional environment’ has been analysed in three layers: (a) the social networks and organisations to which people belong, do not belong or are not allowed to belong; and (b) the formal and informal rules (as they are or are not enforced) that determine the access to resources and exchange opportunities as well as the conditions to participate in the relevant socio-political arenas where the rules are continuously (re)negotiated, and (c) a ‘cultural’ level which maps the way in which people perceive their world, including others and themselves, and what they find valuable. This analysis also brings us to understand that anti-poverty interventions inevitably articulate with the (local) institutional dynamics that are often at the very heart of the poverty production process. The crucial methodological issue then becomes how to facilitate or even generate beneficial institutional change from the interface between local institutions and external intervention.

In the present contribution, we try to construct a bridge between this institutional perspective on poverty and poverty interventions, and a more operational screening instrument to be used for a local socio-institutional analysis (LSIA) of anti-poverty interventions². The latter will be intended to generate useful inputs for on-going policy reflections of anti-poverty initiatives. The building blocks of this screening instrument are presented in the annex to this paper.

In what follows, we discuss three fundamental issues that need to be taken into account in order to develop a more operational instrument for a socio-institutional analysis of development interventions. They follow logically from our conceptual paper and must therefore be taken into account in the research methodology. The first point is that poverty analysis should focus on the local level, since the final poverty effects of intervention clearly play at this level. This requires an appropriate understanding of what is meant as ‘the local level’, an issue we will deal with in both economic and socio-logical terms. Second, we must acknowledge that a locality is a pluriform social landscape whose dynamics are co-determined by interdependent but autonomously deciding actors of different kinds and with different interests and worldviews. As a corollary of this argument, development interventions, which are by definition external and time-bound, can better be analysed as specific social arenas that emerge around the costs and benefits of the often-

¹ A first draft of this note has been extensively discussed and amended during a 10-days research seminar where we invited all concerned field workers, together with local researchers interested in the methodology for other reasons. Participants besides the authors: Miguel Aleman (NITLAPAN-Nicaragua), Edward Mathias (ISI-India), Kamavu Ndungo (FCK-Kinshasa), Séverin Abega (UCAC-Yaounde). Evidently, all remaining errors are our responsibility. The authors also welcomed helpful comments by Thea Hillhorst and Nadia Molenaers on the next-to-final version of this discussion paper.

² Our focus will be on the analysis of rural poverty, but with minor adjustments most arguments also do apply in urban contexts. The reason for this focus on rural poverty is that the BVO research project envisages two field exercises of local institutional diagnostics in a rural context (The results of this field research are summarised in two papers that constitute an additional output of the BVO-project).

discontinuous external interventions. Their impact is to be assessed relative to the already unfolding dynamics inherent in the local institutional environment. The third and final issue is that one should be sufficiently aware of the role and position of the researchers. In the process of generating and interpreting information, researchers are ‘discursively’ interacting with local actors in their institutional environments. In this, they are inevitably informed by specific scientific paradigms (such as our institutional approach) as well as previous experiences that focus their attention and shape their capacity to see and listen. As we will see, the problem for the researchers is not unlike that of the development experts.

2. Why focus on the local institutional environment ?

*This paper focuses on the **local** institutional environment. There is a pragmatic reason for this: it is here that poverty- or development interventions are realised. But we also think that it is here that poverty interventions are to be planned, implemented and evaluated.*

Given that people’s livelihoods are decided at different levels and types of decision-making, we need to go beyond private household income generating activities at the enterprise level (production), the workplace or the markets (commerce). As is by now fairly well recognized, rural livelihoods strategies involve much more than finding the right combinations of crops, livestock, labour allocations and other income-generating activities at the household level. Indeed, approaches stressing such micro-level optimization issues overestimate both the importance of private income as well as the taken-for-granted character of the institutional framework within which farm households are operating.

“Where access to land and other productive resources depends partly on non-market criteria, accumulation of cash and of the fungible assets may not be a sufficient condition for securing access to the means of production. If access depends on social identity, producers will use resources to establish or reaffirm advantageous identities and connections for themselves” (Berry, cited in Gore 1995: 112).

Yet, as Ellis points out, the appeal of continuing to stick to “households as the social unit that is most appropriate for investigating livelihoods and for advancing the understanding of the policy implications of diverse livelihoods” is that

“the household is a site in which particularly intense social and economic interdependencies occur between a group of individuals. This is regarded as a sufficient reason for the household to be a relevant unit of social and economic analysis, since the view is not taken that individual action (i.e. that of women or men on their own) can be interpreted separately from the social and residential space they inhabit” (2000: 18).

Ellis' argument is well-taken. However, implicit in his approach is the option to downplay the intense social and economic interdependencies which occur beyond the household level and consider non-household social relations, networks and organisations only as the constituents of a fairly stable institutional environment within which households carve out their livelihood strategies (2000: 37-9).

To be sure, we acknowledge that households are among the principal decision-making units that determine people's livelihoods. A household is a specific social structure that connects different household members (parents, brothers, sisters, children, grandparents, housemaids, etc.) to each other. Specific (informal) rules will determine the content of these connections as well as the relative authority and power of the different household members over the realm of household activities. Some activities are undertaken and managed individually while others are carried out jointly by the household members. The role of household members and the rules governing their interactions are evidently also informed by cultural values and role models that to a large extent determine the identities of 'men', 'women', children and other household members. Anthropological literature and more recently gender research have underlined the existence of specific domains of activities and resources controlled by men and women or controlled jointly.³ Besides intra-household divisions on the basis of gender, there are other divisions on the basis of age, parental status, health status, etc. All of these divisions have consequences for the distribution and control over resources and activities within the household.

³ See De Herdt (2000: 114-27) for an overview.

BOX I. Gender differentiated participation in local networks

Women definitely do not always participate in the same networks as men. As to the networks around external interventions we have observed in both the Cameroon and the Nicaraguan case study that it is almost exclusively men that are attended by poverty interventions. This is related with the identified causes of the biased outreach of these poverty interventions.

Individual land property and being organised were identified as the main conditions that determine access to the poverty interventions in Quilali, Nicaragua. As to land property gender roles determine that it is almost exclusively men that possess private land property. According to common inheritance practices in the Nicaraguan rural society land is left to sons and houses are left to daughters. However, for women it is difficult to put their house as guarantee to support a loan. Losing your house in case of calamity has disastrous consequences. Moreover, in most cases it would not even be possible to put their house as guarantee as most women do not have any individual legal document of their houses. Several women have built their house on public or collective land and do not possess any legal claim on its property. Also, being organised is not evident for women who have a high workload, especially when they are single as is the case of a considerable part of the female rural population in Nicaragua. Single women are also stigmatised in Nicaraguan society, raising the barrier for participation in local networks. In the case of the San Bartolo village the only two existing cooperatives of women demand a lot of conditions. Members have to deposit monthly a fixed amount of money on a bank account. As a result, only women with a constant salary income – such as teachers and nurses – have the capacity to become a member of these cooperatives. In the same San Bartolo village, however, we identified a promising exception. Within the steadily increasing socio-economic inequality of the Valley the IQUS-PECAC intervention has correctly chosen to support patio cultures. This is a promising alternative for land-poor families, and thus also for women. At the moment this intervention has organised four groups of single women for textile production and one women group that runs a collective bakery.

In Cameroon, the characteristics of the product around which the intervention was built, onions, already determine its gender bias. Onions are a cash crop comparable to cotton, or, in other regions, cacao, and women are not supposed to be publicly operating either in the 'input' (land, labour, seeds and fertilizer) or in the 'output' (onion) markets connected to these crops. However, besides attending religious activities or visiting the local market place, women have recently found a third 'public space' which allows them to exit their homesteads: savings- and credit associations. Initiatives directly or indirectly related to this type of organisations might succeed in bridging the gender gap faced by common poverty interventions.

Different household members have, indeed, both different preferences and possibilities to take decisions. Moreover, individual interests do not always coincide with what is best for the household as a whole. Negotiation and possible conflict are therefore quite common within households. This leads to continuous changes in the intra-household interactions and roles, as household members' identities constantly evolve through the (implicit) bargaining in the repeated interactions with other members.

This process does not stand on its own, however. In the conceptual paper, we described the social landscape of third world countries as *pluriform* or *polycephalous* spaces. Reflecting the pluriform character of society, the household is only a specific political arena, embedded in a social structure of other political arenas in which household members are participating. Similar bargaining processes over control and allocation over resources are taking place outside the sphere of the household in wider social networks. The poor are individuals, part of a household, part of groups (family, clan, ethnic group, membership organisation), part of a community, part of a locality, etc. At each level the exchange of information, resources, services and the implementation of activities is negotiated between different individuals with their own specific livelihood strategies. A variety of cultural discourses can be mobilised to challenge the existing cultural role model.

Thus, as household members are involved in other (more encompassing) social structures as well, the way in which a real household ‘works’ depends both on the way it is regulated by other institutions and on the projects and strategies of its constitutive members. All of these factors together determine how the household and its members will exchange, control and allocate resources. All this suggests that “the social unit that is most appropriate for investigating livelihoods and for advancing the understanding of the policy implications of diverse livelihoods” should clearly exceed the household level. On the other hand, we think there is an upper limit too, even though it is perhaps difficult to define its boundaries independent from observed reality. In the literature the *village* or *community* and the *locality* are proposed as alternative ‘units of analysis’. The interest of each of these alternatives lies in the arguments advanced to promote them, of course.

The argument that social interaction at the *village* level is quite distinct from other, higher levels of decision-making (district, region, nation) shows up in various guises and may rest on different assumptions. To begin with, ‘village life’ may be distinct in that it is the result of **face-to-face** contacts. The immediacy of the interactions causes them to be highly influential on individual behaviour (Sally, 2000). Further, at the local level, people also get to know each other at different occasions. They “are likely to have **multi-stranded** connections – as members of a common church, as buyers at the same market, as relatives through extended families, etc. This provides a better basis for collective action than found above or outside these levels, say at district and sub-district levels” (Uphoff, 1993: 609). The potential benefits of multi-stranded relationships have been highlighted also by game-theoretic accounts (Abraham and Platteau, 2001). But the multi-stranded character of local-level interaction may also explain why conflicts in one field may risk to spill over to another, with an ensuing tendency to nurture rumours and accusations of different sorts. Ultimately, the outcome could be a segmentation of society (Bierschenk & Olivier de Sardan, 1998: 41; Abraham & Platteau, 2001: 12). Alternatively, conflicts are suppressed and begin to feed the twilight zone of unverifiable rumours. A clear example of this has been found in the Moskotà

study, where a conflict in the political domain was spreading towards other domains at the moment we were doing our research.

Yet, we would argue that this argument can also be used against considering the village as the most appropriate unit of analysis. Indeed, given the above-mentioned within-village tensions, rumours and segmentations, it would be erroneous to assume the community to be a homogeneous and a-historical whole, qualitatively distinct from what happens outside its boundaries. Besides, these boundaries are themselves also social constructions, they may be a part of the problem rather than the neutral frame within which we are looking after a solution: “What characterizes a locality is a somewhat shared and at the same time often contested understanding of what belongs to it and what does not” (Engberg-Pedersen and Webster 2001: 22) As a case in point, we can refer to the village of *Mandoussa*, nearby *Moskotà*: during the sixties, a parish was built in Mandoussa, but it carried the name of the village of *Ouzal*. Indeed, the village chief of *Ouzal* was the one who attracted the priests to found a parish in the region. He managed to misuse their ignorance of the locality to have them build the “parish of *Ouzal*” on *Mandoussa* territory. Finally, what must interest us is not so much the qualitatively distinct way in which people interact at the local level per se. It is rather that this qualitatively distinct way of interacting makes it so important to study the specific way in which local markets, local state administration and the local civic society function in a given historical context.

This brings us to Uphoff’s focus on what he calls a *locality*. According to Uphoff, the most important decision-making levels for the poor are, besides the household-level, the level of the group, community and locality, the latter being defined as “a set of communities having social and economic relations, usually with interactions and centred around a market town” (Uphoff 1993: 608)⁴. Thus, Uphoff’s argument for local analysis parallels Ellis’ argument for household analysis: the importance of social and economic relations at that level of analysis. To be sure, we understand Uphoff’s focus not so much as an argument that can be used *against* the analysis of markets, states and civic society at regional, national or international levels. Rather, we read the focus on local institutions as a critique of analyses who limit themselves to these supra-local structures at the peril of neglecting the way in which ‘outside’ ideas and arrangements are interpreted, renegotiated and incorporated into local strategies in the local arenas.

Indeed, the combination of the pluriform character of society with multi-stranded relationships results in an institutional landscape with institutions that are not necessarily what they *seem* to be. Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan observe for instance that “the political power is not uniquely exercised by the official or informal political authorities but also through institutions that would in the first instance never be considered as political... and which belong rather to the sphere of what is the alleged ‘civil society’” (1998: 39). Likewise, “the local representatives of the State are more and more solicited

⁴ The levels of group and community are respectively defined as “a self-identified set of persons with some common interest; such as occupational, age, gender, ethnic or other grouping; it may be persons in a small residential area like a neighbourhood” (Uphoff, 1993: 608) and (community) “an established socio-economic residential unit, often referred to as the village level” (ibid.: 608).

by conflicting parties to play the role of the judge”. The combined fact of pluriformity and multi-strandedness results in a flexibility and plasticity of these institutions and their interrelationships and thus leaves an important margin of negotiation, often informal, to the different local actors, to fix their competency and the rules of the game (Bierschenk et al. 2000: 10).

To conclude, both the possibility of face-to-face communication and the existence of multi-stranded connections cause the public spaces in the village to evolve in a relatively autonomous way vis-à-vis the wider political, economic and social landscape. Local actors’ behaviour can only be explained as a response to an environment that consists of other local actors responding to their environment, which consists of local actors responding to an environment of other local actors’ responses. Such a picture of the locality has much resemblance to Karl Mannheim’s concept of a *field structure* (see also Schelling, 1978: 14; Dimaggio & Powell, 1993; Warren, 1967). Thus, external events and interventions will to a large degree be re-appropriated by the local meaning systems and the socio-political context of that moment (Long, 2001; Bierschenk et al. 2000: 10). This points to the pivotal role played by persons finding themselves at the *interface* between the village politics and the higher-level politics. Bierschenk et al. (2000) describe this interface as a political force field where “political entrepreneurs” engage in active competition with each other. A central part of their strategy is to present themselves as a double gatekeeper, guarding the entrances at both ends of the interface. In a sense, this situation might be compared to the way in which anthropologists have been describing economic entrepreneurs in markets pervaded by information problems (Geertz, 1978; De Herdt, 2002). In any case, it is important *for our purposes* to recognize this reality as part of the research area under study. Since the privileged sphere of action of these brokers is “not so much the village as the intermediary zones between districts and the administration of the province”, we should broaden the unit of analysis to include what Bierschenk et al. call the “local politico-administrative system” (2000: 14)

We think that this carries two operational implications. First, in our analysis we should give special emphasis to the actors operating at the interface, the “intermediary zones” between the local and higher-level institutional spheres. Second, whenever the need arises to delineate the precise boundaries of a “locality”, we should keep in mind that such a specification will not be politically neutral and at best correspond to a very temporary local agreement on what a “locality” means in the eyes and thoughts of its inhabitants.

BOX 2. Communities and localities

A 'locality' is essentially a sociological concept, not to be confused with, and not to be constrained by any geographical or political boundary.

In Nicaragua, we decided to test the LSIA instrument in the southern Valley of the Quilalí municipality. As a locality, it hosts several communities, which intensely interact among themselves and with the urban centre of Quilalí. While the northern mountains too depend on the same urban centre and are part of the Quilalí municipality, their communities do not have frequent social and economic interaction with communities of the Valley.

We started our analysis for the locality as a whole, where a first sketchy institutional map was made. To deepen the institutional map in a second phase, we selected four villages or residential units within this locality. It is in this residential unit where group size is not too large that frequent and continuous interaction between people takes place⁵. Moreover, much of the relevant institutional translation of outside interventions into access to resources takes place at this community level. So, it is here that political arenas around poverty interventions are most evident. It is at this level that local 'leaders' obtain a pivotal role within the local political arenas, as they become the inevitable entry-points to the communities.

How was the selection of the villages made? During the first assessment of the institutional landscape, visits were made at several villages. Based on the information obtained, villages were selected in such a way as to maximize differences as to their historical background and the current constellation of political arenas around poverty interventions. In all the four selected villages the FDL program – the studied poverty intervention – is present. In two villages the dominant political colour is different from the other two villages. Two of the villages were selected because of an interesting struggle between the local elite and land-poor sectors. One village was also interesting for its high presence of vertical patron-client relations.

In Cameroon, the locality was defined as one of the two central places of public life in the village of Mayo-Moskotà plus the relevant arenas in which actors, living in Moskotà, have been involved. In practice, this meant that the locality was extended to neighbouring residential units, where the inhabitants of Moskotà went to rent land, recruit workforce, contact political and religious leaders or merchants and sell their onions. In the last instance, this meant that the 'locality' included Douala, a port town at 2000 kms of distance from Moskotà. If time and resources had allowed it, we would certainly have extended our fieldwork to these arenas as well. Especially the element that virtually all onion producers of Moskotà were *in fact* producing onions elsewhere is an intriguing invitation to visit these other villages and introduce a comparative perspective. However, we decided to bet on deepening already existing contacts rather than on broadening our view to another centre of social interaction.

⁵ The participation in social networks depends partly on the capabilities of local people. Poorer peasants are more dependent on local networks, while large farmers' networks often stretch far beyond this locality level. However, as poverty is high in rural societies, it is this community level that is important for the survival strategies of most peasant households.

3. Analysing a pluriform space

The unit of analysis we have thus delineated is by definition pluriform, where the final outcome is the result of the discursive struggles between multiple decision-makers whose claims are based on different and partly contradictory sources of legitimacy. At the same time, the interlinked character of social interaction at the local level, which provides the setting for local exchange of resources and local power dynamics and hence people's livelihoods, makes strategic social interaction at the local level complex to grasp and therefore difficult to analyse.

We could of course ignore this pluriformity and make abstraction of it. Such a methodological strategy will in most instances also involve the use of collective entities as if they were intelligible social actors (e.g. 'the household', 'the community'). After having limited the relevant social unit to the household first, Ellis (2000: 31) for instance can rather easily take the step to abstract from complex intra-household processes and treat the household as one *unitary* decision-maker, "observed to alter its mix of activities according to its evolving asset position, and the changing circumstances it confronts". Whether or not such a simplifying methodological strategy is justified should be related to its consequences for policy relevance. Simplification is certainly not a value in itself, but in a policy context it may be warranted to focus on a limited set of variables and to make abstraction of a much wider set of other phenomena. Policy relevance indeed requires accuracy up to a certain point, but from that point onwards a trade-off between relevance and the complexity of detailed completeness emerges. However, given the crucial importance of local institutional processes for people's access to resources and opportunities (Bastiaensen, et. al., 2002), a strategy of collapsing the diversity of local political arenas into one single black box (say 'the local community') cannot be warranted. It would indeed inhibit the analysts to focus on essential processes of local poverty dynamics.

In the remainder of this section, we will now scrutinize the degree to which different research methodologies are consistent with, or able to take into account, the assumption that real-life localities are fundamentally diverse and pluriform.

3.1. Participatory methods

This is not the place to summarize participatory approaches to gathering and systematizing information and knowledge: we can refer here to the excellent overviews presented in Thomas et al. (1998) and Lavigne-Delville and Mathieu (1999). Instead, we want to focus on the way in which participatory approaches take local pluriformity into account, or the way in which they do not. In fact, the pluriform character of the local institutional landscape is underestimated in at least *two ways* by various participatory research methodologies.

First, participatory methods of gathering information for community-level planning seem to over-estimate the extent to which the community is able to express a common view on issues, problems and priorities. Often, rural communities are better characterised as *back-to-back-societies* (Bierschenk & Olivier de Sardan, 1998: 41). A well functioning (non-conflictive, coherent) set of political arenas could be an outcome of the intervention but it can hardly be a pre-supposition. Thus, it would be wrong to bet on the capability of different stakeholders to distance themselves from their social positions as they engage in a free and open communication between themselves in a process of participatory planning. As a result, participatory methods risk ignoring the essential problem that “some actors, for a variety of reasons, are simply not willing or able to take a serious part in communicative platform processes” (Leeuwis, 2000: 939). To be sure, it may be argued that the construction of a community consensus around certain problems and policies is precisely one of the main results of the investigation. In that respect, the accuracy of the research output is less important than the local political correctness of the outcomes, as it is indeed the latter which will determine the political feasibility of the policy prescriptions. However, such “political correctness” is not necessarily completely guaranteed by a participatory planning session, as we allow for the fact that some local actors will only ‘participate’ through their practices (e.g. resistance through non-compliance of agreements), not through their voice (cf. *infra*).

Secondly, and related to the last observation, a participatory planning session should in itself also be considered as a political arena in its own right. “The occurrence and outcomes of interactions that in themselves might well be termed ‘communicative action’, can only be adequately understood if one recognizes that they are at the same time strategic actions *vis-à-vis* other communities of actors” (Leeuwis, 2000: 939). More particularly, it is very probable that the “community” presents itself as a harmonious unity just as this would enable it to capture the “development rents” (Bierschenk et al. 2000, Abraham & Platteau, 2001: 27). This is not to deny the importance of participatory methods. However, these methods should not be considered as the only valid strategy, but as part of a broader methodological toolkit. More particularly, the participatory researcher’s toolkit should also include instruments enabling him or her to obtain a multiform picture of the locality under study.

3.2. Social Capital Assessment Tool (SCAT)

A review of the World-Bank-assisted research projects on social capital by Anirudh Krishna and Elisabeth Shrader is one of the most important efforts to engage in institutional analysis in the era of social capital. Therefore, it may be worthwhile to discuss the Social Capital Assessment Tool more in detail.

The authors define SCAT as “a field tested set of indicators and methodologies that measure levels of cognitive and structural social capital in communities designated as beneficiaries of development projects” (Krishna & Shrader, 1999: 8). Cognitive and structural social capital refer roughly to “culture” on the one hand and “structure and rules” on the other, within our *own* conceptual framework. A SCAT uses three points of observation. First, a community profile is made up, roughly by making use of ordinary participatory tools like focused groups methods. Second, a household-level survey can provide for ‘representative’ information on social capital. Third and finally, organisational profiles allow us to obtain more detailed knowledge on the organisational capacity available in a given locality. The authors favour such an unusually broad survey design as they define their research subject as a field of knowledge rather than as a well-circumscribed theory with ready-to-test hypotheses⁶.

However, the broader context of SCAT is the context of monitoring/evaluation of (World Bank)-projects (Krishna & Schrader, 1999: 12). Consequently, one of the end-results of SCAT is a list of (perhaps tailor-made, context-specific) indicators of the level of social capital available at a given moment for a particular community or region. Though there are three points of observation, all three of them do only throw a different light on one and the same homogenous entity, namely the “community” as the relevant “container” of social capital”. As SCAT allows to “measure” the content of this container at two points in time, it allows to evaluate the impact of a project intervention on this content –on social capital. Hence, the methodological diversity embodied in SCAT seems to be a methodological tactic rather than the logical outcome of recognizing real-world diversity. This is most obvious when it comes to measuring the “level” of “cognitive” social capital. What is the policy-relevance of knowing the average level of “trust” and “solidarity” in a community, especially if the authors specify themselves that it is much too early to understand the field of social capital as a testable and operational theory?

As a result, the SCAT-procedure allows to make comparisons over time and place, but it is less sure in what way it may inform policy makers on what route to travel if one wants to go from one “time” or “place” to the next. Additionally and more importantly, if there does not seem to be –as yet?- a one-to-one relationship between social structure and more ordinary indicators of poverty and well-being, the latter type of variables should be included and operationalised during the field research as well. Finally, and perhaps even most importantly, it is well probable that, “poverty and well-being” being partly debatable and partly conflicting concepts, there is not necessarily a consensus among the different key actors operating in the locality (Warren, 1968). These debates and conflicts should be another focus for investigation. According to Warren, it would already be an improvement in itself if the actors “could retain their present relative autonomy, but through more comprehensive knowledge of each other’s policies, plans, and programs, could better

⁶ Interestingly, the authors conclude the theoretical part of their paper with a certain tone of disappointment: “to retain social capital as a useful concept, we need to empirically test whether social capital is a universally measurable phenomenon, or whether we have to restrain its usage and make comparisons only among social units that are culturally not too dissimilar” (Krishna & Shrader, 1999: 8).

influence decisions where their respective values reinforced each other, and perhaps even reduce some of the value conflicts” (Warren, 1968: 417).

To be sure, most of the “intermediary results”, produced by the SCAT-procedure in each phase, could generate very valuable contributions to these latter questions. In this sense, the “annexes” of SCAT, containing the questionnaires, interview methods and overview of PRA-techniques, could also be considered legitimate annexes to this text –see also below, though.

Components of the Social Capital Analysis Tool

	Community level	Household level	Organisational level
Objectives	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. familiarize research team with community characteristics 2. establish consensus definition of “community” 3. rapid assessment of social capital at the community level 	generate quantifiable indicators for the structural and cognitive dimensions of social capital	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - delineate relationships and networks, existing among (in)formal local level institutions - assess the organization’s internal characteristics that may promote or hinder the building of social capital in a given community
Research instrument	group interviews	representative household survey	semi-structured interviews with organizational leadership, membership and non-members, for 3-6 organisations
Intermediary results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community maps, indicating location of community assets and services • Observational notes of group process and summary of issues discussed • List of positive characteristics of community assets and services • List of negative characteristics of community assets and services • List of all formal and informal community institutions • Case study of community efforts to access social capital • Institutional diagrams (Venn) of relative impact and accessibility • Institutional diagrams (web) of institutional network relationships and density 	Set of closed questions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - On household characteristics - To assess household members’ institutional affiliation - To assess (household level) aspects of “cognitive” social capital, including ‘solidarity, trust, reciprocity and cooperation’ 	field notes
Final result	Community profile, representable in SC index	Social capital indices	close-ended questionnaire to yield a comparable index across institutions.

Source: own summary of Krishna and Shrader 1999: 12-16.

3.3. Stakeholder analysis

The British Overseas Development Administration defines stakeholder analysis as “the identification of a project’s key stakeholders, an assessment of their interests, and the ways in which these interests affect project risks and viability” (ODA, 1995b: 2).

As it appears, there is no specific *research method* to perform a stakeholder analysis. It can involve interviews with key persons, daily experience, focused groups, etc. All this information can be useful to (i) construe a list of key stakeholders, (ii) to assess their interests, (iii) to evaluate the compatibility of these with the project objectives and (iv) to take a decision on how to relate to each stakeholder.

Over the years, stakeholder analysis has been severely criticized for being too narrow-minded in its view of the “institutional environment” of the project (e.g. Bierschenk et al. 1989 and the literature cited therein). It has been modified in response. More in particular, we highlight the following nuances:

- It is useful to distinguish between primary and secondary stakeholders. The former category is positively or negatively affected by the project outcomes, whereas the latter category plays an intermediary role (e.g. as a provider of crucial inputs, necessary signatures, etc.). The importance of the latter category in determining project effectiveness and sustainability should not be underestimated (ODA, 1995a).
- It is useful to distinguish between several *sub-categories* of stakeholders with differing interests, which they may or may not be prepared to subsume in the general collective interest of *the* stakeholder (defined as a social category with an objective stake vis-à-vis the project).
- A more general and more important issue is the recognition that stakeholders can widely vary in their ability to negotiate with each other and with the project organizers, and exert *real voice*. Not being organized as a political group, not being informed, not having the time or lacking other means, not being viewed as having a legitimate say, not seeing an interest, all these factors can be crucial constraints on stakeholder participation. As follows from our conceptual framework (Bastiaensen, et al., 2002), this situation will often be the consequence of processes of social exclusion. In this perspective, “(t)he principal output of a project’s first phase may be the development of representative, decision-making institutions” (ODA, 1995a: 7) However, contrary to what ODA seems to suggest, the creation of such representative institutions is far from easy or evident. It is not even evident that all of these ‘non-stakeholders’ will be represented in an institutional research of the kind we are envisaging. During the fieldwork in Nicaragua e.g., we had identified some poor and unsuccessful sharecroppers of a local patron-landlord. Even though this landlord sent us to one of these sharecropper-workers, the latter was highly distrustful of our research team and not prepared to talk with us. The fieldwork in Cameroon was also clearly incomplete, precisely because the short time span of the study did not allow going far beyond the elite- and project-related networks.

Though the definition suggests that stakeholder analysis could be interpreted as the rather practical issue of mapping potential allies *and* enemies and how to cope with both, stakeholder analysis also involves the intrinsically important issue of participation. Indeed, “how to relate to each stakeholder” implies different degrees of stakeholder participation in the project. More particularly, from any stakeholders’ perspective, participation can be seen as a **spectrum model**, ranging between:

- being in control and only consulting, informing or manipulating other stakeholders;
- partnership (equal powers of decision-making) with one or more of the other stakeholders;
- being consulted by other stakeholders who have more control;
- being informed by other stakeholders who have more control;
- being manipulated by other stakeholders (ODA, 1995a: 7).

As such, stakeholder analysis is primarily a means to analyse not only the opportunities and constraints in enhancing a project’s effectiveness and sustainability, but also to assess the opportunities to develop the participatory character of the intervention.

At the same time, it must be added here that some limits to participation are inherent in the instrument used, i.e. the development project.

To begin with, at the moment of “writing” the development project – and at the moment of getting an approval by a donor organization –, often only the “higher” stakeholders are involved: the ‘northern’ stakeholders always move first. Long calls this the *central dilemma of development planning*: “no matter of how firm the commitment to good intentions, the notion of ‘powerful outsiders’ assisting ‘powerless insiders’ is constantly smuggled in” (Long, 2001: 89).

Further, more often than not projects are approved together with a strict agenda, whereas real participation implies per definition that other actors can also have a say on the speed and timing of a development initiative. Ultimately “*complete participation results in complete inertia*. The longer term benefits of participation must be calculated against the short-term costs” (ODA, 1995a: 11). Though, in the literature, one finds an emphasis on the correlation between project effectiveness and participation, from some point onwards there is also a clear trade-off between participation and efficiency. In anti-poverty intervention, the problem is however that enhancing the deficient or non-existent participation of the above-mentioned ‘non-stakeholders’ should be the crucial objective of the intervention. Taking short-cuts in terms of participation may result in greater project effectiveness, but will usually imply a more rapid negotiation of the project’s agenda between ‘powerful outsiders’ and their immediate ‘(powerful) inside counterparts’, and will thereby tend to leave more marginalized groups out of the picture.

Finally, some authors emphasize the difficulty to provide outside “aid” to stakeholders in organizing themselves as a group from outside: “Community building requires that citizens work hard, that they commit themselves to activities which have few clear payoffs, that they identify with an area and with fellow residents, and that they have experiences running organizations or putting together movements. These are difficult things for people to do. Given an alternative we avoid doing them.” (Milofsky, 1993: 211). This connects to the observation that each project “creates” its own local interlocutor (Olivier de Sardan, 1999a), so as to recreate the *illusion* of participation rather than anything else. As a result, it is in all probability too ambitious to suppose that, at the end of a first project phase, some “representative” decision-making institutions can be established.

These critiques can be considered, pragmatically, as mere limitations on and difficulties for realizing participation. They can therefore also be read as a list of excuses for low participation in practice. In our view, however, the participatory character of planned interventions is neither a necessary nor a sufficient element to judge their effect on local democracy. To begin with, the requirement that interventions must be headed by representative decision-making institutions reflects the rather naive idea that power is reduced to the mere capacity to make oneself heard during a meeting (Lavigne Delville, 1999: 525). As emphasized in the conceptual paper, there are different ways to express power and to contest dominant parties, many of them not requiring verbal expression (Scott, 1990). It is only in the action itself that actors will find out about the bargaining space they have and that the real issues will become clear (Lavigne Delville & Mathieu, 1999: 513). Giving the public floor to the ‘dominant’ party and excelling in cunning and treachery afterwards is a well-documented strategy to get a better deal oneself (Scott, 1990: 36-8; De Herdt, 2000; Thorsen, 2002). Thus, representative decision-making institutions do not necessarily tell anything about the effective margin of negotiation each actor has with respect to the intervention. Further, the ‘democratic character’ of the intervention should be judged by looking at its effects on the local institutions more generally. In this respect, it is important to draw attention, again, to the ‘unorganised’ stakeholders, those who will in all certainty be almost impossible to integrate into the process of decision-making. One of the paradoxes of a poverty-intervention is precisely that its success should partly be measured in terms of the increased bargaining space of those agents it cannot directly reach. Consequently, the aim of local governance analysis is not so much to analyse the key local actors with reference to the intervention, it would rather be to analyse the intervention with reference to the key local actors. Since poverty is understood as being the outcome of the way the local institutional environment is configured, it is important to know how an (existing) intervention can and does influence this configuration, and how an (existing or new) intervention can change it so as to reduce poverty.

In practice, this means that the project or development initiative should be seen less as a central actor who is able to “organize” an indeterminate

variety of other actors according to the above-mentioned spectrum of participation in function of his own objectives, than as a space where the local (key) actors confront themselves. When local actors look at a development project, they see a bundle of opportunities they can exploit and constraints they have to deal with in the process of realizing their own agenda. Two methodological implications follow from this: First, it pays to begin analysis in the locality itself: “one must go where people are already engaged in interactions, problem-solving activities or routine social practice” (Long, 2001: 90). Second, given that ‘participation’ is broader than merely having a (formal) presence or presentation in a workshop, the position different (types of) actors occupy in the political space constituted by the project can only be assessed once the project is already “put into practice”⁷.

⁷ Séverin Abega illustrates this with a credit scheme for pygmies, a project that failed since their ‘Bantu’ patrons intervened to collect their debts precisely at the moment the credit was granted to them.

3.4. Historical conflict analysis / Interface analysis

Social capital analysts would find it quite natural to start and measure the level of social capital by quantifying and qualifying the density of organizational life and the degree to which the community can be considered as a “whole”. Likewise, standard PRA-instruments like “focus groups” and “participatory ranking methods” presuppose the existence of a within-group consensus. Conflict analysts start at the other extreme: They analyze the wounds left by previous conflicts and the central dividing lines determining actual organizational life of communities. This strategy is in part sustained by the working hypothesis that all societies are permeated by conflicts, in part also by mere tactical considerations.

Studying conflicts instead of cooperation is in the first instance a *tactical* response to a presumed tactic used by local villagers: In contexts where “any inquiry is seen ... as the putative beginning of an aid flow, and people are trying to play to the research team the fairy tale of a united and dynamic village, the needs of which are exactly what one thinks the foreigners are ready to offer” (Bierschenk & Olivier de Sardan, 1997: 240).

The working hypothesis that societies are pervaded by conflicts is in itself consistent with the above-mentioned idea of a pluriform society, a society which lacks a central core, a unifying set of values, or where different actors would define such a central core in a different way. We think such a working hypothesis is especially important if we set out to study social exclusion, which may itself be partly produced by a belief in the existence of such a core (De Herdt, 2001).

We would like to emphasize, however, that the working hypothesis of a community permeated by conflict *can* but *does not need* to imply that there is nothing but conflict.

As is implied by our adherence to Picciotto’s (1995) analysis of several

types of goods, presence of and access to goods involves sometimes complex combinations of cooperation and conflict (see annex of conceptual paper). The “community” we meet, beyond mere appearances, is a temporary settlement (an ‘entente’ as it has been called in Burkina Faso (Laurent, 1996)), a workable compromise between different parties. This settlement is the supposed product of the tensions generated by an old “issue”. Likewise, every new “issue” supposedly also carries the potential risk of upsetting the existing social order, as it will generate new opportunities for some and block old opportunities for others. Thus, the study of historical conflicts and their resolution reflects the way in which key actors act and how institutional arrangements do re-construct the community. Likewise, a development intervention will be constituted, negotiated and contested within the existing framework of local power structures.

The methodology of conflict analysis bears a very close resemblance to Norman Long’s proposal of *interface analysis*. Interfaces are defined as

“points where different, and often conflicting, lifeworlds or social fields intersect, or more concretely,... social situations or arenas in which interactions become oriented around problems of bridging, accommodating, segregating or contesting social, evaluative and cognitive standpoints. Social interface analysis aims to elucidate the types and sources of social discontinuity and linkage present in such situations and to identify the organizational and cultural means of reproducing or transforming them.” (Long, 2001: 65).

Both methodologies also express a very pragmatic and “middle-ground” view between micro and macro theories of social change, by focussing on the dynamics of the interactions between ‘intervening parties’ and ‘local actors’. These dynamics will, in this view “shape the outcomes of particular intervention policies, often with repercussions on the patterns of change at regional, national and even international levels” (Long, 2001: 66).

At this point, it should be repeated that such local arrangements are likely to be very idiosyncratic. It may be the case that several villages are confronted with very similar issues. In the case of Rwanda, for example, one does not need to be too informed about local village politics to know that the scarcity of agricultural areas must be a severe problem and a source of conflict between the owners and non-owners of land (André & Platteau, 1998). However, the way in which each of these groups is able to manifest itself to safeguard its interests or evade damage is bound to differ significantly between several local contexts, as these abilities depend partly on the way previous issues have been won, lost, and settled. This is the logical concomitant of the phenomenon of *path dependence*. In its turn, an identification of the direct victims of the Rwandan struggle over land resources requires an analysis of the real interactions taking place at the interface between the local and the external actors.

An alternative but complementary research strategy would be to focus not so much on the institutional dynamics around historical conflicts or a

planned intervention but rather on what Veena Das described as a critical event (Das, 1995). In the conceptual paper we already pointed out that “fundamental institutional changes over short periods of time are likely to occur in times of *unplanned disaster*, when the ‘normal’ ways of doing things seem clearly insufficient to resolve the urgent challenges ahead” (Bastiaensen et al. 2002: 23). A disaster like the Bophal tragedy produces a “residue” of suffering which cannot be accounted within existing ‘normal’ discourses. Das analysed in detail how the disaster victims, already destroyed by disease, were further victimized in the process of acquiring appropriate certificates to satisfy bureaucrats –so as to obtain due compensation in court. Eventually, the state stepped in, and doing so it transformed the victims “from incompetent irresponsible people to those whose needs were of paramount importance, even as the government acted as surrogate for them on account of the enormous legal complexities of the case” (Das, 1995: 172). In this way, the Bhopal tragedy was analysed as a critical re-positioning of the state vis-à-vis other institutions in the institutional landscape.

4. Analysing the analysts

Up to this point, we have delineated the relevant unit of analysis and discussed the compatibility of several research methods with the theoretical view of the locality as a multiform political space. In what follows, we focus on the role and limitations of research and the researchers themselves. In this, it is of course important to acknowledge that research and -especially policy-oriented research- plays a crucial and powerful role in the discursive arenas where the realities upon which to collectively act are socially constructed. Like for any other actor, the inherited perceptions as well as the social position of the researcher are partly determining her/his capacity to act and thus also to engage in research. In a first section, we reflect on the research process itself and particularly on the kind of rapid diagnostic (field) research envisaged here. Subsequently, we review and comment on a number of more technical methodological issues related to the measurement instruments that are used to gather and systematise information. In the last section, we briefly reflect upon the contribution of the research process in the policy process of development interventions, including the difficulty to make unequivocal normative statements.

4.1. Conceptual boundaries and the capacity to know

A first element to take into account when reflecting on the research process is that research is inevitably informed by a particular theoretical conceptualization of issues, problems and causal relationships. This includes the definition of conceptual boundaries (e.g. the geographical concept ‘locality’-‘community’; ‘conflicting’ strategic groups; etc.) that afterwards

exert influence on the ‘capacity to see’ of the researchers, since they tend to structure issues and problems in particular ways. Scientific research (and researchers) is strongly influenced by particular paradigms that focus upon particular issues, relevant actors and develop theoretical views on relationships and causalities. These scientific paradigms clearly enable researchers to grasp complex realities in a more subtle and profound way. However, this increased ‘knowledge’ comes at a price, since it is achieved by making abstraction from a number of other dimensions of reality not covered in the paradigm. Scientific paradigms enable more sophisticated thinking, but at the same time constrain it in particular ways.

In the present research project, the field work will be informed by our institutional perspective on poverty (Bastiaensen, et.al., 2002). Inevitably, this introduces a potential bias in our research endeavour, since we tend to emphasize conflict, tensions and cleavages. We should be aware of this, as we are also aware that we do strive to do an honest, but not a neutral research. Our framework for research is intended to verify claims of poverty alleviation made by development interventions. Such verification also includes confrontation of the project’s poverty definition with those of the (non)stakeholders, and thus goes beyond the mere evaluation of impact in terms of the project’s views and documents. Given its focus on the poor, it also sides ‘methodologically’ with the excluded in the interpretation of the reality of poverty and poverty alleviation. In fact, as we argue below, the validity of knowledge in development arenas is obtained during an on-going inter-subjective process –of which the research is a part. The ‘poor’ do by definition occupy only a marginal position in this process of knowledge-creation. This warrants a research bias towards viewpoints which would normally be excluded.

Given our conceptual starting point, the objective of the (rapid!) research process is to grasp and map the complex institutional mechanisms and political arenas around resources and opportunities. We have emphasized that local societies are involved in permanent, on-going discursive struggles and (formal and piecemeal-informal) negotiation processes between local actors and between local and external actors. This implies that the discursive shaping of ‘realities’ is a major strategic device in this ongoing struggle. A major question is therefore whether and to what extent (rapid) research is able to systematise information and knowledge about these politico-institutional processes. Can we claim ‘objectivity’? Can we grasp the complexity of the institutional reality? Does such a multifaceted institutional reality ‘exist’ objectively, outside of subjective and thus differentiated perceptions?

The position one adopts with respect to these questions at first sight depends on whether one subscribes to the opinions of post-positivists or to those of the relativists or neo-positivists. The latter believe that “there is no ‘real’ world to discover, science aims to make sense of the world for us in terms which are relative to our place and time in history. You can do science in many ways, the important thing is to find the right way for doing what you

want to do” (Gabriel, 1990: 509). They would agree that it might be important to arrive at a consensuated definition of “reality” in order to get a collectivity to do what it wants to do: a theory’s value is measured by its utility. Post-positivists do not agree that there is no ‘real’ world to discover. However, they do not share the rather naïve, “old” positivist illusion that researchers can aspire to capture ‘objective’ truth. In the end, and certainly within the framework of research that we are developing here, the practical consequences of both theoretical stances are however not all too dissimilar. Given the complexities and limitations of the research process, both approaches indicate that subjective judgements and incomplete, contestable representations inevitably creep into the research process. The simple flow chart in figure 1 can illustrate this (see also De Herdt, 1994).

This chart is the schematised version of what has been called the hermeneutic circle, in qualitative research theory (Gabriel, 1990). Starting from an initial theory H^0 , several new sources of information are deduced, on the basis of which the initial theory is gradually reviewed. Towards the end, the initial set of hypotheses is, or is not, empirically validated. But this process is not entirely waterproof; even in the most careful scientific research the hermeneutic circle cannot guarantee that (social) reality is described and analysed in a correct and uncontested way. Whether we accept or do not accept that an ‘objective, true reality’ exists ‘out there’, it can never be approximated in an unequivocal, definitive way (and certainly not in a rapid diagnostic research), even when scientifically generated and carefully validated knowledge clearly contributes a specific value added.

To begin with, the quality of the research depends to a considerable degree on the “background knowledge” that the researcher has or thinks he has on the research object, which will determine the set of initial hypotheses H^0 . It is this background knowledge, informed and coloured by specific scientific paradigms as well as by subjectively interpreted, past experiences, which will guide the researcher to identify his sources as well as the types of relevant information, to interpret the answers given by the respondents and, ultimately, to determine the end result. This insight provides a clear motivation to strive for working in multi-disciplinary, cross-gendered and multi-cultural research teams. Including researchers that are ‘experts through experience’ because those who share or have shared the socio-economic status and reality of the communities that are studied can also be useful.

An additional motivation for this diversity in researchers is the need to gain access to a diversity of informants, necessary to capture the diversity of the social networks and ‘worldviews’ in the local political arenas. Given the focus of our research, the rule is indeed that we don’t look so much for confirmatory evidence for one or another ‘truth’, but rather for contrasting discourses that highlight variation rather than make abstraction of it (Webb et al., 1981: 86; Olivier de Sardan, 1999b: 435). In practice, this not only involves taking the ‘political risk’ to visit people deemed ‘untrustworthy’ by

informants you already know, but it is also necessary to strive for variation in the research team so as to have an appropriate ‘rapport’ to different entries into the same reality. Different researchers-persons have variable capacities to develop loyalties to different spokesmen (Bierschenk & Olivier de Sardan, 1997). During the two field investigations, it was in this respect an advantage to count with both local and outside (Belgian) researchers and a clear disadvantage that no female researchers participated.

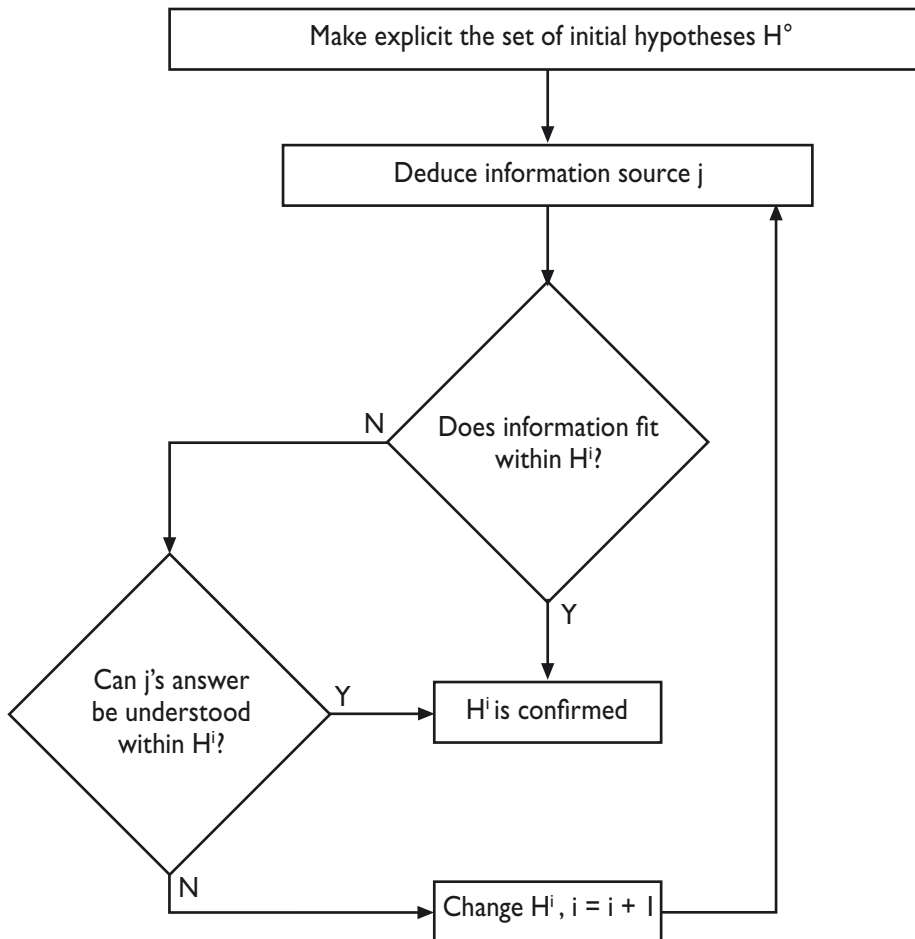


Figure 1: The hermeneutical circle

Another element of subjective valuation enters the research process when it has to be decided whether the hermeneutic “circle” can be ‘closed’. In fact, the research effort does not ‘end’ automatically. In practice, it is often so that a point is reached beyond which the value added of additional informants is deemed to be so insignificant as to render an investment in further research efforts fruitless. This point occurs when additional interviews just tend to confirm information and knowledge that has already been collected. However, the determination of this point at each research site necessarily involves a subjective judgment, and thus a possible source of error. In particular, when new lines of information are overlooked by researchers that are ‘locked into’ their own (paradigmatic) views.

BOX 3. Complexity and the hermeneutical circle: the search for an organizational profile of Moskotà

In social capital research (see discussion of SCAT-tool above), it is generally believed that the identification of the organizational profile of a locality is one of the most straightforward, less problematic research themes. The field work in Cameroon however showed that even this can turn out to be quite complicated. Most of our informants indeed cited a host of associations they were members of. At first sight, the sheer number of associations and intensity of membership seemed to reflect a vibrant local civil society in Moskotà. However, some elements incited us to take issue with this initial interpretation. Up to the last day of our fieldwork, it has been impossible for us to elaborate an unequivocal list of associations in the village. Each interview brought new information which required an adjustment of our list, some groups were not found or were part of others, had disappeared, were confounded with others, etc. Furthermore, many groups are known rather by the name of their president and thus suggest that 'civil society' is composed of 'groups' around a few key persons.

All this contributes to the conclusion that the analyst's knowledge and social position does not allow her to make unambiguous statements about the world she observes. She is in fact too human to pretend to attain "objective" knowledge. But this is of course a far cry from "anything goes". The quality of her work can be considerably increased by her theoretical background –the so-called set of initial hypotheses-, her experience, and the multiple checks she continuously builds into her research to control for reliability and validity. This is what scientists are with reference to applied research: they are the experts in validity. This is however not the same as being experts in truth and legitimacy. Truth claims, as the basis for legitimate (development) action, can only be warranted by returning them to the political arenas of local development. For the research, this means that its results should go back to (non)stakeholders around the poverty intervention (usually indirectly through the policy process of the development intervention, which can indeed be quite problematic). This implies that the communication of research results, i.e. the feedback to (non)stakeholders and policymakers, is an important dimension of the role for the kind of policy-oriented diagnostic research that we propose here. Before analyzing this theme (see below 'research and action'), we first review and comment on a number of additional technical methodological issues concerning reliability and validity.

4.2. Reliability and validity of reactive measurement instruments

Reliability has to do with the consistency of the measurement instrument over time and place. A measurement instrument becomes *invalid* whenever what we have measured does not correspond to the theoretical concept we hoped to measure.

Webb et al. (1981) define all measurement instruments from the 'closed answers questionnaire', over the interview guided by a checklist, by graphical tools like transects, genealogies, Venn diagrams and the like, to focused-group sessions and up to open interviews, chatting and mere participatory observation, as *reactive measurement instruments*. They all imply a process at the interface between the respondents' lifeworlds and the researchers' conceptualisations. All these instruments have in common that the respondents' answers can be influenced by their reactions on both the measurement situation and the researcher him- or herself. Thus, some additional validity and/or reliability problems are to be taken into account in order to arrive at a plausible representation of reality. As in development work itself, it is important to try and manage these knowledge encounters at the interface in an appropriate way.

Among the elements belonging to the 'context' of an interview, and which might significantly influence the interview situation, we classify, first, the degree of connection the respondents believe there to be between the research and a development intervention. This perception is only logical in contexts where the 'development rent' has become a structural part of the economy and has become integrated in peasant strategies (Bierschenk et al., 1997). The fact that interviews are carried out by foreigners might in itself already suggest a particular foreign 'interest' –to plan a development intervention (De Herdt, 1994). This will of course often create an unwanted and counterproductive bias in knowledge creation, which becomes more of a *mise-en-scène* to match suspected outside expectations. This is seldom an appropriate basis for an effective 'encounter at the interface' between intended beneficiaries and anti-poverty intervention.

BOX 4. Dealing with the expectations problem induced by the 'development rent'

To make this rapid institutional diagnosis the researcher has to resort to local informants. By doing so the researcher inevitably becomes part of the local institutional landscape. To minimize the probability that information that is transmitted by local informants is strategically changed, the researcher should try to maintain a neutral position towards all external poverty interventions. That is why in the Nicaraguan case study we cautiously concealed our relation with the poverty intervention on which the study was focused.

Despite this caution, it is unavoidable to be perceived as potential donors, as most poverty interventions resort to similar techniques to capture local information. Many informants asked us what we would contribute to combat poverty. To justify our study towards local people we explained them the results of this study would be an important input for the policy decisions of all present poverty interventions. This would emphasise our neutral position. But also ethically, this would justify why their cooperation was important for the output of the study.

This expectations problem is important as it can directly influence the information that informants transmit to the researchers. A certain level of critical attention is necessary for this kind of problems. The dynamics of a focus group we organised with a group of poor women was especially illustrating. When we asked them for their specific demands on support of the poverty interventions, several women explained to us they wanted to form a collective group to start a bakery enterprise. However, when we asked them if this collective way of working would not cause coordination problems, all women confirmed this. At that moment their discourse immediately and radically changed. They told us that they do not like this collective way of working at all. However, they feared that if they did not express a desire to organise themselves collectively, poverty institutions would not even consider their project.

Further, it must also be emphasised that the increasingly popular strategy to work with group interviews carries its own particular dangers. Rapid Appraisal methods as well as ZOPP or PIPO-sessions put this kind of measurement instrument at centre stage. However, the 'usual' laws of social psychology cannot be ignored: The pressure of conformism can seriously endanger the reliability of this research instrument (Kozakaï 2000). Furthermore, groups are in themselves opportunities to demonstrate one's leadership and to demonstrate one's allegiance or contest it. As a paradoxical outcome, the researchers' intention to increase the participatory character of the research might result precisely in a highly ritualised confirmation of existing local power inequalities (Lavigne Delville & Mathieu, 1999). As we indicated above, especially for our endeavour to reveal diversity and conflict, such over-all group instruments are to be avoided.

The use of graphic devices like maps, transects, genealogies, and the like is another popular research instrument among Rapid Appraisal experts. It is thought that such instruments can serve as appropriate guides in contexts where language and other cultural differences make communication difficult. Such instruments do also produce visible summaries of an interview, allowing easy communication and comparison with other interviews. In this sense,

graphic displays are comparable to, say, a regression equation, in the field of quantitative research (Miles & Huberman, 1984: 79-80). However, it must be noted as well that, like any other means to summarize the data, also in this case do graphic instruments reduce reality in a specific way (Blackmore & Ison, 1998). The summary results filter those elements that are deemed important by the researchers, and thereby they “reflect” the theory implicit in the research instrument rather than the informants’ opinions. Mathieu for instance complains that the use of Venn diagrams, conceived to explore the organizational problems of the village and its outside relationships, is “particularly destructive” in that the networks of alliances and clientelism totally disappear from the picture:

“The individuals are not anymore identifiable, nor their status, neither in the social resources they are able to activate in these groups, neither in the weight, the latitude that the group gives them to act in its name vis-à-vis outsiders. Informal interest groups are completely invisible. The Venn diagram works as an “eraser” on the conflictive relationships who necessarily exist in each community and who play a considerable role in what has to (or can) and cannot (or should not) be done” (Mathieu, 1999: 345).

Besides the interview-situation, also the presumed identity of the interviewer himself can and does play a considerable role (*interviewer-effect*). Whether the interviewer is male or female, black or white, and from this or that region, can significantly determine the respondents’ answers and potentially result in totally different research results. Moreover, the initial background knowledge of the researcher does play a considerable role (see above: on the need to count with diverse research teams).

Finally, it must be added that the same researcher does in fact also change during the research. Consciously and unconsciously influenced by the field situation and getting to know the research subject better, he will be able to conduct a much more informed (and valid) interview by the end of the research period and thus probably trigger other answers. This phenomenon is known as the *instrumentation problem* (Cook and Campbell, 1979: 82)

During our research in Cameroon, we noticed that this problem should be considered very carefully, as it touches the heart of the methodological problem. The research setting is by itself per definition an interface exercise. Even in the case of ‘mixed’ research teams, where at least one of the researchers is from the South, it is not evident to accommodate ‘external’ views and local perspectives. The instrumentation problem comes in three forms.

First, an interview is a new social relationship, it takes time to unfold. The time it takes to develop mutual respect and trust, *rapport*, depends on both the actors’ experience and on their personal constitution. As a result, the quality of the output of an interview may vary considerably. We tried to cope with this problem by visiting some important actors twice, by checking some answers during an informal conversation, or by repeating the interview with

another interviewer. Eventually, however, time is scarce. The value added from a lengthier research period will probably be generated rather by *better* interviews than by more interviews.

Second, the 'classical' way to give currency to the instrumentation problem is to keep track of your initial hypotheses, and how you have come to change them on the basis of further interviews. This is indispensable, of course. We have come to notice, however, that it is impossible to draw a complete list of the 'initial hypotheses'. The problem is well-known among people experienced with intercultural communication: only 'in the process', and after some necessary stumbling, irritation and incomprehension, does it become clear what either side's assumptions are. In our case, the main sources for making explicit initial assumptions are non-local, they vary from the researchers' previous experiences (in the best case) to secondary literature and NGO-documents.

BOX 5. An illustration of the instrumentation problem: Delineating strategic groups: on what knowledge base?

In the case-study of Moskotà, we identified, land ownership and the possession of a motorised water pump as some of the main indicators to constitute a sample of persons to be interviewed. However, after some weeks, it became clear that neither of these criteria was without its problems.

The indicator of the motorised water pump was the reflection of a rather strong debate, in the 'grey literature' around the intervention, over the relative advantages of a motorized pump versus a manual system. A French agricultural engineer had even visited the region to perform a simulation of both systems in order to measure their appropriateness in the context of prevailing farming systems. Even though the cost-benefit-analysis gave a slight advantage to the motorized pump, it was questioned whether the farmers would be able to repay the pump in only two years, the onion production would not allow such a tight schedule. This issue caused a serious conflict between two of the intervening organisations. In practice, however, it turned out that the importance of a motorized pump is to be judged not only in terms of the pump proprietors' *production* system: in most cases, he also rents his pump out to (two or three) others. This rent is already sufficient to repay the pump he acquired on credit.

The grey literature did also make extensive reference to the issue of property rights. As most producers of onions were renting the land they cultivated, this was deemed a serious problem, and a reflection had started to stimulate private property. In practice, however, it turned out that the only land title that existed was given to the family of a former customary chief who was also MP. Though the case was brought to court regularly since 1992, this formal title did not protect the official owners: the land was now occupied by the actual customary chief. Further, it appears that 'private land' in customary terms is not secure either: one's effective control over it depends on one's relationships with other (potentially contesting) family members. Third, we discovered that there was a rather unique 'third alternative': proprietors could, if short of money, temporarily exchange their land for money. In earlier research in the same region, Been found that this third type of contract provided for most security since 'it includes a long term perspective' (Been, 1995). Our own respondents did not agree; they preferred to rent. In any case, even the richest producers were renting land in this region. Renting is a logical first step in the process of migrating towards another zone.

This form of the instrumentation problem is an important determinant of the research as we undertook it in Cameroon, since it's the initial (external) view that will determine how the 'strategic groups' will be defined, and thus how the persons to be interviewed will be identified (see box 5). The instrumentation problem clearly illustrates the need to consider this kind of rapid research as fundamentally exploratory in nature: a useful initial input in the policy-learning process of development interventions and often fruitfully followed by further and more detailed research, so as to broaden the cycle of iterations of the hermeneutic circle.

There is a simple answer to the above-cited list of reliability- and validity problems imported by reactive measurement instruments: include

non-reactive measurement instruments in the analysis. Archives and simple observation of behaviour e.g. may evidently serve as useful complementary sources of information. Such information can certainly be a useful addition to data obtained from reactive research instruments, but it is less a solution to the danger of biases in research than one might presume. Indeed, data in archives will also be informed by theoretical concepts that highlight certain aspects of reality and ignore others; often information is only available on a limited number of variables; and it will still be the researcher who has to choose which data to use and how to present them.

Triangulation is another important remedy to reliability and validity problems. More in particular, the reliability of an instrument can be considerably enhanced by repeating the exercise in different contexts and by changing interviewers. Validity can be increased by ‘testing’ one instrument’s findings against those of another one. Venn diagrams e.g. *do* contain information, but the information they reveal will be appreciated better by complementing it with some interviews on recent social conflicts. Another interesting strategy, according to the same logic, is to do a collective research where interviewers are rotated between functions or specializations. In the ECRIS-procedure e.g., it is proposed that a team of researchers visit different villages, but that e.g. the researcher who studied the position of women in village A would come to study the position of the shepherds in village B. All such triangulation strategies certainly contribute to produce more thoroughly corroborated observations about reality (as it is perceived).

But triangulation can of course not remedy the instrumentation problem, in fact it is compounded by the instrumentation problem. This is why qualitative research handbooks usually propose to make careful use of field notes and a logbook. The former consist of (1) explicitly formulated initial ideas about the interview situation (2) an accurate transcription of the interview itself, together with (3) the researcher’s own observations made during the interview. The latter makes explicit the initial hypotheses and the gradual reformulation of them during the research. Though research in ‘real-life’ social contexts is per definition impossible to repeat “in the same conditions”, the field notes and the log book allow in any case to re-view the whole research procedure at a later moment or by another researcher –and as such can be considered as a virtual kind of triangulation.

4.3. Research and action

As we indicated above, the final validation of policy research, and especially the rapid diagnostic research we envisage in our project, takes place within the real political arenas, in particular the arena around the development intervention whose institutional embeddedness and impact we will be trying to analyse. This implies that (scientific) researchers cannot, nor should remain at a safe distance from the development intervention itself (see also

box 6). Rather, they should assume their responsibility as experts in knowledge creation in an appropriate way. Their potentially positive role seems self-evident.

BOX 6. Poverty research and the ethical demand for action

Nowadays, multilateral institutions like OECD, World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, have put the issue of world poverty at the centre stage of their preoccupations. Meanwhile, they increasingly favour a 'participative' and 'democratic' approach, not only at the national, but also at the project level. This new Washington Consensus is partly contradictory, perhaps, since the 'evident' indicators of poverty like the famous 1\$-frontier, illiteracy, malnutrition, etc. do not necessarily reflect the priorities set by "the people themselves". But whatever the source of the 'final objectives', once they are defined, fighting poverty can now be considered as a technical problem. Just as they would have been looking at the economic payoff before, the World Bank officers must now evaluate their performance in terms of poverty reduction.

Interestingly, however, one of the authors who stimulated the debate leading towards this new consensus, Amartya Sen, has been keen to point out that any definition of poverty –and any kind of poverty intervention- explicitly or implicitly builds in three kinds of value judgments (Sen, 1992, 1999). To begin with, the amount of dimensions, and the weight they have in any definition of poverty, is undoubtedly a matter of judgment and not something which can be settled by "experts". To be sure, different (causal) interrelations clearly exist between different dimensions, and in this sense the "experts" do have valuable contributions to make. But even then, a significant margin of debate remains once the experts have delivered their reports. Further, the specification of a poverty index is non-neutral –and involves judgment- on the way in which individuals are compared against each other. From this perspective, for instance, average life expectancy at birth is more sensitive to the poorer layers of society than GDP/capita. Finally, as must be clear by now, there may be a potential trade-off between the capability-aspect of freedom and the procedural aspect of freedom (Sen, 1999). Say, between the OECD-list of poverty indicators and the democratic character of the processes to be adopted to obtain such a reduction. Thus, there is no 'scientific' basis to define poverty in an unambiguous way, readily usable as a "target" the development experts should now try to hit with the utmost precision. On the other hand, the search for a consensus on development priorities among the poor themselves would be another vain search for the holy grail. Besides being fraught with the reliability and validity problems we highlighted above, such an exercise is also self-contradictory: "the poor themselves" have already been defined from the outside as "needy". This internal contradiction highlights what poverty is really about: it is a moral and political concept, pointing towards immediate action. In the face of abject poverty, it seems nothing less than immoral to refuse action, sit down and take a detached (researchers) look.

To begin with, it is in itself already valuable to warn development workers that in their attempt to remain "neutral" vis-à-vis the value judgments contained in any definition of development, they convert their project into a space local social actors can recuperate and manipulate in favour of their own political and social strategies (Lavigne Delville & Mathieu, 1999: 523). But further, and more importantly, researchers can play a role in stimulating development workers to take a distance from their work and to analyze the 'action' of poverty reduction. Destined to be non-neutral, development agents

“have to promote and to organize the selection of priorities among the several contradictory (or at least competitive, in terms of means and time) aspirations and revendications, each of them being equally legitimate in themselves. They have to manage the contradiction between the ambition to incorporate all the actors (including and above all the marginalized social groups) and the unequal social logics of their interlocutors” (Lavigne Delville & Mathieu 1999: 529). Thus, these authors require the development workers to engage fully in the local political game and negotiate their own agenda in the local arena. The role of research would then be to help the development worker in analyzing the development action as a micro-political process where strategic groups meet around of a set of issues.

Yet, we would hasten to add here, that just as the development project should be contextualized, so should the researcher, not only struggling to transform “reality” into “knowledge and information” but also struggling with the actors themselves. Research output is not to be viewed as the result of an outside process performed by indisputable experts that must just be transmitted to policy makers, which are then supposed to apply the proposed technocratic recipes. Given the value-laden content of any (scientific) knowledge, we should never expect such a simple relation between research and policy to exist, and of course especially not in the context of the kind of rapid diagnostic research that we are talking about here. Research output, even when partial, incomplete and tentative, can and must however provide crucial critical impetus to the policy process of (and thus the political arenas around) the development intervention.

BOX 7. Policy research and action in poverty intervention

To generate a positive impact, communication with the promoters of the studied poverty intervention both before and after the study is very important. In Nicaragua we benefited by the special relationship with the local partner. Before the study willingness to cooperate was very convincing. The Fondo de Desarrollo Local (FDL) and the Instituto Nitlapán that lies at its origin have always emphasized the importance to link practical policies of development interventions to applied research of this and other kinds. The development program has ample experience with research and how to deal with its often-critical results.

Also after the field study the feedback of research results to policy makers (e.g. donor agencies and their counterparts) as well as local (non) stakeholders was satisfactory. The good timing of the study permitted a fruitful articulation to the internal discussions in the framework of the strategic planning process for the next five-year program of the FDL. Although we did not initially plan it in this way (but the directors of the FDL did), this coincidence made that our exploratory study indeed functioned to provide fundamental inputs into the strategic policy discussions. In fact, it served to further demonstrate already existing concerns about the social exclusion of poor and female (potential) clients of the FDL. In this way, it made a contribution to shift the balance in the ‘political arena’ of FDL policy making in favour of those demanding affirmative action for this excluded category of clients. Furthermore, the study yielded tentative ideas on who should be targeted and how this could be achieved. We believe this policy process around the Nicaraguan case study illustrates the role that could be played by this kind of exploratory institutional research.

This implies that the role of the research should from the start be conceptualised (and negotiated with decision makers) as a critical outside input into the learning process of the anti-poverty interventions. Attention should therefore also be dedicated to the feedback of research results to policy makers (e.g. donor agencies and their counterparts) as well as local (non) stakeholders, i.e. to the political arena of the anti-poverty intervention in the context of the broader institutional dynamics. Follow-up research organised both from within or from the outside of the development intervention, must often be envisaged. This and other kinds of applied research should in fact become part of the ‘on-going negotiation process of the poverty intervention’.

One should not expect that this is always a smooth and unproblematic process. By analyzing how a development intervention works ‘in practice’, we often find out about underlying power asymmetries, both within local communities and inside of the development organisations, often causing inefficiencies or outright ineffectiveness in the alleged fight against poverty. Revealing such sensitive realities is of course not always self-evident. Information and knowledge are not at all politically neutral goods. Information is “part of the agent’s private endowment and an important source and instrument of power in economic transactions; for their own benefits, agents seek to influence the other’s decision by hiding, partially revealing, distorting, or manipulating the pieces of information relevant to them” (Baland & Platteau, 1993: 16). This conclusion is even more true for knowledge: the structured whole of insights that determines what issues are relevant and real, which actors are trustworthy and what the fundamental underlying causal relations are. Knowledge is indeed power in the arenas of discursive struggle. Of course, the researcher will to a large extent depend upon the opportunities allowed by the power constellation in the political arenas, in particular in the chain of decision-making actors within the anti-poverty interventions. Interventions claiming to contribute to poverty reduction, especially when sponsored by aid resources, should of course be willing to be critically scrutinised, especially when this is done in a constructive perspective. In this way, a positive dynamic can be created between development workers and (outside) researchers, resulting in a faster learning process fuelled by critical research inputs. However, the researcher must of course be careful in her presentation and communication of research results. In particular, she must be aware of the tentative and potentially biased nature of her own attempts to make sense of an inherently complex reality and therefore present results and hypothesis in a firm, but modest way. It is seldom possible to make unequivocal normative statements about realities or policies. A provocative and challenging style must therefore be avoided, unless it is clear that no room for future improvement exists (e.g. because of unequivocal bad intentions). In this sense, the tension between scientific validity and policy relevance is quite real, and in making his or her judgments, the researcher should take this tension into account, too (Mosse, 1998).

5. Conclusion

We can now summarise the main conclusions of our methodological reflections in view of performing a rapid local socio-institutional analysis (LSIA) of poverty interventions.

1 The central focus of the local socio-institutional analysis should be the locality, and often even the community, where most of the institutional mediation processes that transform outside resources and opportunities into local entitlements take place. This does not exclude the possibility that concrete political arenas often stretch far beyond the community and locality, thereby implying that they be studied at both sides of the interface between the local and supra-local realms.

2 Central components of a LSIA are an inventory of the crucial resources and their links to livelihood strategies of different groups, an organizational profile, important networks and rules (linked to access to resources, markets, public goods, project resources, etc.). Special focus is laid on the realm of the development intervention as a source of material resources and opportunities.

3 Since the LSIA focuses on diversity and conflict, the researcher should look for excluded groups and give priority to individual interviews and possibly focussed strategic group interviews (limited to specific 'interest groups'). Cross-cutting group interviews and events, with a high public exposure of participants, should be avoided. Special attention must be given to reach a 'representative' sample of the local population. Besides the highly visible local key persons, efforts must be done to find and obtain information from 'ordinary people', and especially from representatives of the more invisible groups, which are by definition difficult to reach, also for researchers. Especially, the latter group must be approached in a safe (home) environment. A gender, scientific, cultural diversity in the research team can be very useful to have a more diversified capacity of entry and 'rapport' to different persons.

4 Given the complexities and diversity of the local institutional mechanisms, it is an advantage to work in multi-disciplinary teams. The research team must also adopt an open attitude and be prepared to adjust initial hypotheses and views during the research process, trying to accommodate their frameworks of interpretation as much as possible to local realities and worldviews. A variety of research tools can be used.

5 The final aim of the output of a LSIA is the policy process of the anti-poverty intervention in its relation to broader local institutional processes. I.e. it must be viewed as a constructive critical input in the learning process of the development intervention within the complex processes and interactions in the local political arenas (including of course the political arena around the resources and opportunities delivered by the intervention itself).

By definition, a rapid LSIA as it is envisaged here (a one month field study), is exploratory in nature and intended to provide inputs to advance the knowledge process in the intervention and the local community.

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7. **Annex: Some guidelines for an exploratory local socio-institutional analysis (LSIA) of anti-poverty interventions**

The objective of this note is to elaborate some guidelines that can be used to perform a relatively rapid exploratory diagnostic of local institutional dynamics in the context of development interventions that aim and claim to be poverty reducing. The conceptual framework behind this instrument is an institutional perspective on local poverty (Bastiaensen, et al., 2002). This institutional perspective on poverty explains that real and substantial poverty reduction can only result from a durable change in (local) socio-institutional mechanisms. It therefore obliges us to engage in a 'deconstruction' of the development intervention, i.e. an attempt to grasp its interaction with and social embeddedness in local institutional mechanisms and processes. These mechanisms constitute the root causes of poverty and therefore contribute to the complexity and difficulty of poverty reduction interventions, which paradoxically must aim at changing the existing exclusionary institutional mechanisms.

The institutional approach defines the following general challenges for (evaluation) research in poverty reduction intervention:

- 1 make the interaction between the broader institutional dynamics and the intervention explicit;
- 2 evaluate the effect on the perspectives for durable pro-poor institutional change and
- 3 design strategies to use the obtained information to enhance the 'on-going negotiation process in the political arena around the intervention' in a pro-poor way.

In the face of this challenge, the guidelines for evaluation research in an institutional perspective that we present here have a somewhat limited ambition, i.e. to contribute to an **exploratory** LSIA. There are two reasons for speaking of an exploratory research. The first is pragmatic. We wanted to develop guidelines that have some possibility to be used and to be integrated

in the practise of ‘policy development’ of development organisations (governmental or non-governmental). This implies limited availability of time and resources: our instrument is designed to be used in a ‘typical’ consultancy research of about one month, involving two or three researchers. Given the complexity of the local institutional landscapes and the difficulty of discerning the relevant dynamics and interactions, this timeframe does not permit strong claims of completeness and strong scientific ‘validity’.

The second argument to call the research ‘exploratory’ is more fundamental. In fact, even in the hypothetical absence of time and resource constraints, the final criterion of ‘truth and validity’ is not decided by the researchers or the ‘scientific experts’, but by the interacting social actors in the realms of the political arenas themselves. As we have indicated, a particular research is always informed by the specific identity and experience of the researchers, of course including a certain scientific paradigm (in our case: the institutional approach), and thus politically ‘contestable’. This is evidently so in this case, since we deliberately subscribe to a pro-poor focus in our approach. As a consequence, the research output cannot be more than a well-informed knowledge input in the ‘on-going negotiation process around the development intervention’ as a part of the broader dynamics of political arenas that determine development. However, such inputs – in the form of attempts to make dispersed information and viewpoints explicit and to systematise these – are crucial contributions to the policy process of development interventions⁸.

Preceding these guidelines is a methodological document that reflects upon the role of evaluation research from an institutional perspective and reviews a number of possible methodological approaches to be used in the (field) research. This document led to a number of central methodological options that are integrated in the present guidelines. The most important of these options are the following:

- Focus upon diversity and divergence, search for conflict and tensions.
- Look hard for ‘non-stakeholders’, i.e. groups/viewpoints that do not participate, are not heard and not seen (also in research if care is not taken).
- Use multiple entries to the research domain.
- Work with a diversified research team (insiders/outsideers, multi-disciplinary, gender differentiation, etc.).
- Contact a large diversity of respondents (leaders, rank and file, types of livelihood systems, political diversity, gender, race, etc.).
- Don’t have too much confidence in ‘public’ interviews and meetings; give priority to person-to-person contacts and try to overcome distrust (especially with respondents that do not generally speak in public). Privileged research instruments are personal interviews (in a safe environment: generally ‘at home’), case

⁸ For this reason, we included above the third challenge of designing strategies to use the acquired information in the policy process of development interventions. Of course it is often also actors linked to the development intervention ‘chain’ which will take the initiative to commission this kind of evaluation research. Our hope and expectations is of course that the framework of analysis and the guidelines that we develop here might provide useful inspiration for development organisations and researchers/consultants to engage in this kind of exploratory socio-institutional analysis to inform their policy-making in pro-poor interventions.

studies and possibly small focus groups with selected, homogenous participants (avoid mixed groups and groups with community leaders).

- Better make short multiple visits than one long visit to each informant, as this reduces distrust and makes informants more cooperative. At the same time this gives you the time to structure information and fill up information gaps.
- Be wary of strategic talk; try to discover the 'real' reasons why informants want to communicate a certain vision to us.

In the remaining sections we will give some guidelines for the definition of the research questions and the elaboration of the procedures (including the variables that should be captured, with some suggested questions that can be used to capture these variables) that should be followed during the fieldwork.

1. Definition of the research questions

In this section we will present some general research questions that should be addressed when an institutional poverty analysis is realised. A fundamental part of an institutional poverty analysis consists of the elaboration of a kind of institutional 'map' wherein the social exclusion dimension of poverty and the related functioning of a development intervention are assessed.

Following our conceptual framework, the local institutional landscape can be seen in three complementary ways. It can be interpreted as a political arena⁹, an allocation system and a production function. Ideally, an institutional poverty analysis should address all three dimensions. Therefore, such an analysis should assess the participatory/democratic character of the political arenas that exist around some of the key resources in the locality. The analysis should also assess the institutional landscape in terms of the way in which it (re-)distributes entitlements/capabilities to different (kinds of) socio-economic classes and categories. And finally, when looking at poverty in terms of a weak productive basis, efficiency and sustainability issues should be focused on. These three dimensions are closely interrelated and should all be addressed in every institutional poverty analysis. The 'political arenas' dimension, however, is fundamental, since the key political arenas will determine both the efficiency of the local production function and the distributive and participative (a capability to be valued also for itself) justice.

⁹ An arena is a "social location or situation in which contests over issues, resources, values, and representations take place. That is, it is a social and spatial location where actors confront each other; mobilise social relations and deploy discursive and other cultural means for the attainment of specific ends, including that of perhaps simply remaining in the game" (Long, 2001). In each arena there exists a space to negotiate depending on the capacities and preferences of each person but also on how the arena is structured. A development project is also a political arena.

For each dimension we can present some basic questions that should be answered, referring to both the local institutional environment and how the intervention is related to this institutional environment.

1. The participatory/democratic character of the political arenas that exist around some of the key resources in the locality.

General questions:

- What are locally important political arenas, i.e. those arenas around the most important economic resources (factors of production-opportunities to transform them in incomes) and arenas that are crucial for social and political exchange and cooperation/conflict?
- What actors participate in these political arenas, what actors are excluded? What is the nature and depth of 'participation'? Who are the leading figures (are there brokers? What is their role?) ? How is their relation with common community members? What is the history of these relations? What factors determine the participation and exclusion of certain political actors?

Intervention related questions:

- The political arena around the development intervention: What actors are attended by the intervention? What are the selection criteria and how are they implemented? Do they coincide with the targeted actors? What actors are excluded? How is the nature of the interface between the intervention and the target groups? How are they considered: clients-beneficiaries-...? Is contact direct or mediated by local leaders? In what ways?
- What are the consequences of (the nature of) attending certain actors for the local institutional environment? What are the possible effects on the local mechanisms of local governance, in particular on processes of social exclusion (of other important political arenas)?

2. The (re)distribution of entitlements/capabilities to different (kinds of) socio-economic classes and categories.

General questions:

- What capabilities are certain local actors highly deprived of? Indicate the most crucial categories (economic capabilities, be able to participate, to be self-confident and respected, etc.)
- Which entitlement deficiencies cause specific capability deprivations?

- How are these entitlements allocated over the different local actors?
What institutions determine the allocation of these entitlements?
- How has the inequality of capabilities evolved over time?

Intervention related questions:

- How can external interventions influence the distribution of entitlements directly (by means of offering additional external resources and relations) or indirectly (by inducing changes in the political arenas that establish entitlements over the existing resource base and in social and political networks)?

3. Efficiency and sustainability issues.

General questions:

- Are there other feasible ways of allocating and mobilizing the local resource base? Could they improve the efficiency and sustainability of the local institutional environment in one of the three following ways?
- First, is the present distribution inefficient because it deprives certain potentially capable actors of necessary resources that are controlled by other (rich) actors who do not put them to a good use?
- Second, are there margins to improve economically by improving local cooperation (enhance local public goods provision, including reduction of transaction costs in economic and social exchange).
- Third, is the mix of local institutions adapted to the types of goods that are managed?

Intervention related questions:

- How does the intervention fit into the potential opportunities for improving individual and social efficiency?
- What [f]actors are important for the functioning of the studied development intervention in terms of its efficiency and sustainability? What are the consequences of attending certain actors for the functioning of the intervention?

2. Procedures and checklist

After presenting some general questions that should be addressed when an institutional poverty analysis is realised, we present a checklist. It contains the procedures that should be followed and the variables that should be captured and systematised if we would like to be able to give a satisfying answer to these general questions.

2.1. Information sources

The questions that were highlighted in the previous section should be analysed using information from all available information sources. Since there exist several visions on reality, it is important to capture these various existing visions, because they may be the result of the exclusion/inclusion of certain political arenas where knowledge is created and distributed, which in itself is a very important characteristic of the institutional landscape. Therefore, in this exercise it is not only important to capture the opinion of each actor on each dimension but also to assess the socio-economic position of the informant in/towards the locality (Participation in the locality, access to external interventions, personal history, access to economic resources, etc.).

We distinguish between secondary information and primary field data that we should gather in the fieldwork. As to secondary information we think about all available documents that give information on socio-economic themes in the locality. The analysis of official information on the development intervention should give us insights in the leading hypotheses and ideology on poverty and poverty reduction that are present in the organisation. Being aware of the limits of this type of official information, we have to confront it with field data.

As to the field data, we identify 4 important information sources with possibly different visions on reality. First, the personnel of development interventions (including the development intervention under study) with presence in the locality, second, local people that have a key role in certain local political arenas. Third, people that are excluded from certain political arenas¹⁰ and fourth, ordinary people, who do not have a key role but are not excluded from political arenas.

¹⁰ As a large part of local people is excluded from all political arenas we deliberately include a consultation phase of these people as well.

2.2. Procedures and variables

For the organisation of the exploratory empirical study, it seems appropriate to work in three phases. The first research phase consists of a rapid appraisal using secondary information and informants such as personnel of development interventions and local key-informants (most of these informants take a leading position in certain political arenas). In this phase a first sketchy institutional map of the locality will be made. After this phase, information will be systematised and more detailed research hypotheses on the specific development intervention will be elaborated, to be tested during a second 'in depth' research phase. In this second phase the institutional map will be deepened focussing on the development intervention, and tentative answers will be given to the research hypothesis that were formulated. In a last phase the research output will be transmitted to the stakeholders of the poverty intervention. In this way it is used as an important input in the 'on-going negotiation process around the development intervention' that forms part

of the broader dynamics of political arenas that determine development. In the rest of this section we will give more details on each research phase.

A. First phase: Institutional profile

Objectives

In this phase a first sketchy institutional map of the locality will be drawn using the available secondary information and some field data. All secondary information of previous studies on the social, economic, political and cultural characteristics of the locality where the intervention is operating can be valuable to complement the field data.

Organization

For the field exercise we make use of *interviews* with several accessible and trustworthy *key informants*, which are defined as alleged key actors of important local institutions, including local personnel of important development interventions that are working in the locality. The fieldwork should start with *interviews with personnel* of the development intervention that is co-operating with the study. This may facilitate the identification of the other key informants. Moreover, it is important to enter the community backed by a recommendation of confident external or local actors, since this may increase the willingness of informants to offer valuable information. They will also be asked to recommend other trustworthy informants. In this way a *chain of informants* is formed, whereby the social position of each informant is accurately recorded, as this may importantly affect the informant's vision on reality.

Although these informants are deliberately selected it is also recommended to realise some interviews with persons that are accidentally found 'along the way' or during the *several transects* that are made through the locality that enable us to observe geographic characteristics of the locality. *Small informal 'group' interviews* may *spontaneously* arise and can give additional valuable inputs. In order to have a minimum control, field reports should be kept in order, to make mention of someone passing by, watching and commenting an interview which, on the spot, may happen to be transformed into a group interview.

Variables that should be captured:

- Physical characteristics of communities that constitute the locality¹¹:

Interviews with key informants and the realisation of transects enable us to capture physical data on the locality such as the location of population concentrations, soil characteristics, road infrastructure, rivers, relief, etc. Also the definition of the boundaries of the local communities should be captured. This variable may be very important since this determines the vision of the informants on all other community variables. Therefore, if in this first phase

¹¹ See the main text for a definition of the concept "locality". A locality consists of several communities, which are smaller residential socio-economic units.

the fieldworkers observe that there exist several significantly differing definitions of the boundaries of the locality, during the next field data gathering this variable will have to be captured systematically from each informant.

- Histories on the locality:

Important questions that should be answered are: When and how the communities have been created (migration, employment opportunities, security, agrarian reform, etc.)? What families have been historically involved in this process? On which issues there is least consensus?

- Principal socio-economic characteristics:

- What are the principal social, economical and political actors in the locality? How are they organised? What are the different organisations (board of the community, committee of parents, health committee, water committee, religious groups, sport groups, labourers union, production co-operatives, credit groups, committee of a project, etc.) and networks (kinship, religion, politics, finance, production, sales, etc.)?
- What resources (infrastructure, land, capital, etc.) are present in the locality and how are they distributed?
- What are the principal economic activities in the locality? What are the factors that limit the profitability of these economic activities?
- Have there been important changes in the socio-economic structure in recent history?
- How are local economic actors integrated in input and output markets?

- Basic information on the development interventions present in the locality:

- What are the principal objectives of development interventions that are working in the locality?
- What are the activities the development interventions are realising to achieve these objectives?
- With which local socio-economic actors are they working?

- The identification of basic issues linked to the development intervention under study:

- We identify the maximum possible number of conflicts and contradictions in the locality that in some way are related to the development intervention under study, such as land problems, rivalries between certain families, the exclusion of external development support, conflicts between certain groups, etc. Around each issue the respective arena and provisional strategic groups are identified (necessary if in the second research phase a conflict analysis is realised).
- We identify the maximum possible number of relevant clusters of cooperation in the locality that in some way are related to the

studied development intervention (necessary if in the second research phase an analysis of the clusters of cooperation is realised).

B. Intermediary seminar: Systematisation and elaboration of hypothesis

Objectives and procedure:

After the first phase of fieldwork, information is systematised and research hypotheses are formulated. For this, the institutional map that was drawn in the previous phase is used, with focus on the position of the studied development intervention. These hypotheses should be related to the functioning of the development intervention and its relation with changes in the over-all efficiency, inequality and empowering character of the local institutional landscape. Accordingly, specific research instruments will be defined and planned to test each, or the most important, of these hypotheses.

C. Second phase: Deepening of the institutional map

Objectives:

In this phase the institutional map is deepened with a focus on the development intervention under study. The research hypotheses that were formulated in the previous phase will offer a general guideline for this phase.

Organization:

To structure the research we elaborated several thematic research modules that are related with one or several of the institutional dimensions of which the research should take full account, i.e. empowerment, allocation of resources and efficiency. These research modules are thematic units that may be relevant to test the elaborated hypothesis about the functioning of the development intervention and its relation with the local institutional landscape. The list of research modules that is presented in the following table is considered to be a list of which the researchers select the modules that they expect to be most appropriate for the testing of the elaborated hypothesis. In the table we also indicate how we expect the modules to be related with the three dimensions of the institutional landscape. One of the aims of the research consists in relating the results of the analysis of the selected research modules with the three institutional dimensions.

Research modules and institutional evaluation criteria¹²

	I. Empowerment	2. (Re)distribution	3. Efficiency
Research modules			
Critical event analysis	X	X	X
Conflict analysis	X	X	X
Cooperation	X	X	X
Local leadership	X	X	
Informal networks	X	X	X
Local embeddedness of the intervention	X	X	X
Knowledge interface analysis	X	X	
Poverty perceptions and diagnosis		X	
Economic inter-dependency			X

After assembling a package of research modules, informants should be selected. Researchers should lead themselves by their judgement on the information management of informants that were interviewed during the fieldwork in the previous phase. This means that they should go *back to some of the key informants*. *New informants* are also identified based on a personal assessment of what information important local actors are expected to manage.

¹² The criteria that are used to evaluate institutions – i.e. empowerment, (re)distribution and efficiency – correspond to the three visions on institutions that are respectively institutions as political arenas, institutions as allocation systems and institutions as production functions

In this research phase it is important to be aware of the different visions on reality and in some cases it may be recommendable to confront the several informants with the differing vision of other social actors. Taking into account the social position of each informant, the researchers may be able to understand why different visions on reality co-exist. In some circumstances *group sessions* may be organised such that direct but controlled confrontation and discussion is induced. Given the hypothesis on the nature of the local institutional environment very often the appropriate choice would be to do group sessions with the identified ‘strategic groups’ in order to catch different views/opinions. In some cases, however, it might be interesting to do cross-cutting groups to capture ‘joint dynamics’, possibly in contrast to ‘separate dynamics’ (individual – strategic group sessions).

Variables that should be captured in each research module:

Critical event analysis

A critical event is an exogenous occurrence that disrupts normal life and relations in the community. If a critical event is identified, it may be used to highlight a number of crucial networks, authority structures, leadership-loyalties, internal and/or external relationships.

- A brief characterisation of the critical event and those that were affected by the event.
- How did the community react to the critical event? Who were the different leading persons and what networks/groups did they represent? Who established and managed relationship with relevant outsiders (if this applies to the event: e.g. a disaster requiring outside aid)? What were the different discourses? Did the community react in unity or divided? Was there a lot of rivalry or not?

- Were/are people satisfied with the way the community reacted, why, why not? (Slow, lack of collective action, lack of confidence in leaders (capacity-corruption), lack of participation, lack of access to resources, divisions, etc.).

Conflict analysis

- What are the different present or past conflicts in the locality? Who/what are the principal [f]actors? Do they correspond to existing divisions?
- What was done to manage the conflict? Did some actors intermediate? Has it been resolved? Did the conflict cause new or more division and conflict?

Cooperation

- Have there been certain experiences of co-operation in the locality?
- Who are the principal actors? Did some actors intermediate? Who did participate, who did not?
- What have been the grounds and the structure of this cooperation?

Local leadership

- What are the socio-economic characteristics of the local leaders? Curriculum vitae (short history) of some local leaders.
- How do the local people evaluate the work of the local leaders in terms of accountability, representation and transparency? Are there important differences according to certain local divisions? Is there consensus among the elite?
- On what do local leaders think their legitimacy is based? What persons are important to them?

Informal networks

- What exchange networks are present in the locality: Solidarity networks in case of adversities; productive resources such as land, capital and finance;
- Who gets access? What are the rules of the game? What is the structure of these networks (horizontal-vertical; dense-loose, etc.)?
- Collective action: Division within the community; There are groups within the community that do not want to have any relation with other groups.
- Vertical authoritarian structures?

Local embeddedness of the intervention

- What have been the mechanisms to enter the territory (local intermediation)? What local intermediation scheme is used by each intervention?
- What are the contract terms? Who has influence on the determination of these contract terms (Who can change the rules of the game)?

- Why are they operating in the communities where they are now (selection criteria); years of presence in the locality?
- What are the criteria used to select individual families to attend? Number of attended families in the locality; in which activities; portfolio. What are the intended and the real beneficiaries?
- Space and time: With what frequency during what time and where exists communication with whom?
- Does the development intervention fulfil its promises towards the people? Does the project's activities benefit all people of the community? Why (not)?

Knowledge interface analysis

- Do there exist important differences between local knowledge/hypothesis on local socio-economic problems and external diagnosis?
- How is the interface where the "battlefields of knowledge" are situated?
- Which local [f]actors take a leading role in the creation of local discourses? Do there exist important local differences?
- How is local knowledge created? Relation with outside actors; How are local diagnostics realised by development interventions?

Poverty perceptions and diagnosis

- What do (different) local actors think about the causes of (their) poverty? How do they think poverty can be reduced?
- How many people of the community are poor?
- When is someone poor? What capability deprivations are most linked with poverty? What capabilities are seen as essential, by whom?

Economic inter-dependency

- To what extent can/do local people rely on other local economic actors/activities?
- What are important obstacles for local economic integration?
- What kind of economic contracts exist?

D. Third phase: research output as input in the political arena of the poverty intervention

In a last phase the research output will be transmitted to the stakeholders of the poverty intervention. Depending on the capacity of the poverty intervention to deal with the often-critical results of these local socio-institutional analyses, the results can form an important input in the 'on-going negotiation process around the development intervention'. If openness to debate is sufficiently high, it is recommended to present and debate the results publicly with participation of all stakeholders. This would not only maximise its effect on the political arena around the poverty intervention but this could also reveal additional elements about the functioning of this political arena¹³.

¹³ The present study did not go deep into the challenges and problems of this necessary last phase of policy research in the context of anti-poverty intervention. Further research could certainly generate additional views on how to proceed with this crucial feedback process.

