Biting the Bullet: Civil Society, Social Learning and the Transformation of Local Governance

HAZEL JOHNSON and GORDON WILSON *

Summary. — This paper focuses on how three actors of development interventions negotiate and manage their interrelations, interests, goals and outcomes of action in contexts of social inequality and relative power. The research takes an action-oriented approach to analyzing the structured and active representation of roles and interests in development initiatives. The key question is how socially hierarchical structures and processes might be managed to create a positive change in the status of hitherto excluded or marginal groups. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Key words — Africa, Zimbabwe, waste management, institutional sustainability, partnership, participation, community

1. INTRODUCTION

The current concern with the role of civil society in public action on development and social provisioning 1 raises many conceptual and practical questions. Among them is whether the concept of civil society inherently homogenizes social divisions which instead need actively to be confronted and negotiated. In this article, we use the term state-civil society, taking civil society to be associational life outside the state. Such associational life is often highly fragmented in organization and action, and increasingly so with the growth of non-governmental organizations (NGO). Calls for partnership and synergy may attempt to address fragmentation, as well as establish new state-civil society relations. If underlying social divisions (and their causes) are not addressed, however, partnership and synergy are likely to be extremely fragile or nonexistent.

Section 2 provides a preliminary discussion of some of the ideas and framework which inform this research. Section 3 outlines the context of an embryonic waste recycling project in Bindura, Zimbabwe and discusses the approach to the research of this case study. In Section 4, we analyze the outcomes of a workshop in which the framework was applied. Finally, we reflect on some of the implications of the process for institutional sustainability in the Bindura case.

2. PARTNERSHIP, PARTICIPATION AND INSTITUTIONAL SUSTAINABILITY

A key (and first) hypothesis for this research is that social divisions have to be overtly recognized, actively negotiated, and represented if there is to be (a) greater coherence of action, and (b) inclusion of hitherto excluded groups in development interventions. In this respect, there are several main concepts which inform the basis of our research.

First, the concepts of participation and partnership are of particular concern. Participation and partnership are seen as embodying positive norms and practices in the current development literature, including the potential to transcend social divides. They are nevertheless value-laden terms, each with a wide range of meanings that are often contested. Thus, Harriss (2000, p. 227) points out that partnership is a term which has come to be used very loosely, to refer to almost any kind of relationship between individuals and groups... [where]... straightforward contracting relationships are quite often described as “partnerships”... or asymmetrical relationships between northern and southern NGOs, in which the language of partnership thinly veils direction based on power differences...

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In a similar vein, participation by those affected by an intervention can range from simply consulting them while the decisions concerning the intervention are made elsewhere, to their participation in its exact form after the principled decisions have been taken, to their full participation in the intervention’s definition and implementation.

Pragmatic arguments in favor of partnership and participation in development interventions center on improving their effectiveness. Thus it is claimed that partnership and participation:
—lead to more effective interventions because they are inclusive processes where all actors or stakeholders can indeed take a positive stake in their success; they thus avoid problems of exclusion and fragmentation;
—lead to more effective interventions because they reveal the complex social dynamics that surround them and thus enable intervenors to take these into account when planning and implementing interventions;
—specifically improve cost effectiveness of social development because they bring on board civil society actors who take ownership of interventions and are an added resource in their implementation.

This last is a strong argument in the current literature on welfare pluralism, where new institutional arrangements of partnership between state, private and civil society actors are seen as ways of both sustaining and improving the effectiveness of social provision while making it cheaper, and of avoiding problems of social exclusion and fragmentation that are associated with purely private provision (Mwabu, Ugaz, & White, 1998; Robinson & White, 1998). It is now accepted that no country in the world can sustain a system of social provision that is solely state-run, but this argument is particularly pertinent to cash-strapped developing countries which are liberalizing their economies and trying (sometimes desperately) to reduce their public budget deficits. The argument is applied even though non-state resources are substantially fewer in developing than developed countries.

While the claims for partnership and participation are similar at the pragmatic level, a further, strongly normative, claim is often made for participation: that it can lead to “empowerment” of disadvantaged and hitherto “invisible” individuals, groups and sectors, and organisations. Partly, such empowerment can be seen as “power to,” meaning increasing the capacities of individuals to make decisions that affect their lives, and partly as “power over,” meaning increasing the power of some individuals and groups who are stakeholders in an intervention process, while decreasing that of other, traditionally dominant, stakeholders (Johnson & Mayoux, 1998, p. 149). These authors also point to the possibility of “power with,” where power is not zero-sum, but where it is possible to negotiate joint action with others that does not lead to the diminution of anybody’s (or group’s) power (Rowlands, 1995, p. 102).

If the above represent the claims for participation and partnership, what are the counter-arguments? These revolve around the following:

—Power relations between different stakeholders cannot simply be wished away. In particular, the unequal power relationship between outside agency and project beneficiary makes it difficult to obtain participation because this relationship is subject to manipulation and dependency (Michener, 1998). Thus, the more powerful may exert and extend their “power over” during participatory and partnership processes, and this may be aided by the internalization and acceptance of those power relations by the less powerful. The tendency of participatory (and by extension, partnership) processes to seek consensus may only conceal that such consensus is more apparent than real, and actually represents the wishes of the most powerful players (Johnson & Mayoux, 1998, pp. 165, 166).
—The complex social dynamics are not necessarily revealed. Indeed, the least powerful actors are not necessarily represented, or even known about by intervenors, in participatory and partnership processes precisely because they are the least powerful. Thus they tend to be less literate, less able to articulate their interests, or, because of their socio-cultural position within local social dynamics, excluded from taking their seats at the participatory/partnership tables (Johnson & Mayoux, 1998, pp. 163–165).
—Empowering outcomes cannot be assured. The deeper power relations between women and men, for example, may prevent women from communicating their key concerns for fear of the consequences (Johnson & Mayoux, 1998, pp. 165, 166).
—With respect to the cost effectiveness argument, civil society actors end up paying
twice for social provisioning. They not only pay for social services out of taxation, rates or through cost recovery measures, but they are also asked to provide resources of their own for this provisioning.

At a different level, a critique of participation (but which in our view can equally be applied as a critique of partnership) is that it is often predicated on voluntarism, in other words it depends on more powerful individuals, groups, organisations and institutions voluntarily giving up some of their power within the participatory processes. Such voluntarism, at an individual level, is particularly espoused in the writings of Robert Chambers (1997), where he argues that development professionals should put themselves last (“reversals”), and hand over the stick to the least powerful, usually the beneficiaries of development interventions. Thus:

... the question “Whose reality counts?” can be answered more and more with “Theirs”. The issue is whether we, as development professionals, have the vision, guts and will to change our behaviour, to embrace and act out reversals...

We can all think for ourselves, use our personal best judgement, and help others to do the same. We can all define responsible well-being in our own ways for ourselves. We can all celebrate local and personal diversity... And most of us have ways to empower others, the weak, poor and vulnerable, to express their realities and make them count.

Good changes flow from personal decision and action... (Chambers, 1997, p. 237).

Other writers, however, argue that the above sentiments can be no substitute for institutional arrangements of transparency and accountability (in other words, an institutionalization of participation), as in the following critique of Chambers:

At the end of the day, public participation (and the participation of the poor) are not normative questions but democratic rights. These rights need to be enforceable regardless of the values and attitudes of either the public or those who seek to champion them. To argue otherwise is to risk a situation in which the right of participation becomes contingent on certain values and attitudes. (Brown, 1998, p. 149)

Linked to participation and partnership is another conceptual arena: that of the sustainability of the outcomes of interventions and the processes and structures required in any given instance for sustainability to be realized. Indeed, drawing on both the normative and pragmatic arguments in favor of them, participation and partnership are often listed as preconditions for sustainability.

Of the many debates and approaches to sustainability, we are concerned with two main threads. One is how direct intervention can lead to sustainable development. The concept of sustainable development both as a set of means and ends is debated within environmental, economic, and socio-political perspectives. Concerns frequently mentioned are whether there is sustainable resource use and whether development processes reach, involve, benefit and empower the poor and excluded and are not simply concerned with economic growth. These and related concerns focus on the range of issues involved in sustainable livelihoods. But the technical and social relations which govern the control, access, and use of resources, and distribution of output, are formalized and embedded in institutions. New technical and social relations (including those that embrace participation and partnership) thus involve changes in institutions, and new institutions also need to be sustainable.

The other main thread which concerns us about sustainability is thus institutional. Given the fragmented, multiple actor world in which development interventions occur, how can different actors establish norms, rules, behaviors that give substantive meanings to terms such as participation and partnership and which enable them to work together not simply in a given, bounded project arena but on a longer-term and more sustained basis? This second thread, that of institutional sustainability, has some elements of the synergistic approach now being promoted by the World Bank (1997) among others, and debated extensively in literature on co-production. The rhetoric of synergy can, however, easily ignore social differences and problems involved in participatory approaches to development outlined above. A particular sticking point is the role of social capital, the debates about its definition and value as a concept (as well as a tangible set of practices which can be observed and measured), and the extent to which it is considered historically present or requires construction.

Thus, how can different social groups with different interests, values and concerns, differing command over resources, and potentially different stocks of social capital within and between them, work together over time in common programs of action? Our starting
point is to focus on the interventions themselves, given that most development activity is organized in projects and programs. Projects and programs are artificially bounded arenas of activity which in practice reflect the social relations of which they are part (even if they are seeking to change them). Thus, we suggest looking at projects or interventions can reveal the dynamics of state-civil society relations. Projects and programs can also be a site for the potential construction of partnership and participation which persists after the life of the projects and programs, in other words, the construction of institutional sustainability.

From this starting point, we go to the second key hypothesis of this research, which is that action-learning practices (where the lessons learned are collectively interpreted and agreed) can assist the expression and accommodation of social differences in development programs. Furthermore, such practices can help establish norms, values and behaviors that provide a basis for institutional sustainability (Johnson & Wilson, 1999, 2000).

Over the past two decades, a considerable amount has been written about social learning in development programs (for example, Korten, 1984; White, 1987; Rondinelli, 1993) and about organizational learning (for example, Morgan, 1986; Argyris & Schön, 1978). As with participation, partnership and the role of social capital, learning, and particularly organizational learning, has become a keystone of much development rhetoric. Over 10 years ago, Hulme asked why learning from experience in development was such an elusive process (Hulme, 1989) and supported the proposals by Korten and others that development interventions should involve community organizations and should experiment rather than prescribe. There remain, however, questions about who learns, what is learned, how it is learned, and how the learning is used. These questions are particularly pertinent in multiple actor partnerships where social hierarchies are involved, and recent research and writing has grappled with some of the issues raised. For example, Alsop and Farrington (1998) have suggested how monitoring systems can be “nested” within given groups of actors but combined with mechanisms for sharing information and knowledge with “linked nests” in contexts where there are multiple stakeholders; while Thompson (1995) has looked at how training can assist participatory approaches to action within bureaucracies and between bureaucracies and other organizations in areas of intervention and can help promote institutional change.

Arising from the second key hypothesis above are thus some further foci for the research: (a) whether and how is it possible to bridge social divisions and inequality through action-learning processes, and (b) whether and how new, inclusive, norms and practices can be generated and sustained over time such that new forms of local governance result. This research tests a framework to enable social learning as well as investigating actors’ goals, norms, values and practices. In other words, it engages with “soft technologies” (Evans, 1996) as well as with institutional settings, structures and actions.

The basis of the learning framework is the feedback loops generated by mediated negotiation between different actors over critical aspects of defining, organizing and implementing interventions. It is suggested that mediation is an essential requirement, and certainly beneficial when there are differences of social position and power (Blauert & Zadek, 1998). But such negotiation can neither be mediated nor have systematic feedback loops unless there is some conscious and a priori setting of agendas. This is because all negotiations have agendas, whether explicit, implicit or deliberately disguised. Thus different actors associated with an intervention bring to negotiations a range of assumptions, understandings of the rules of engagement, views of their own roles and responsibilities, and interpretations of events as the intervention unfolds. These processes in turn reflect (and may even reinforce) the social differences and inequalities between actors. They also have the potential to begin bridging social inequality and working toward a different social order.

A sub-hypothesis of the research is that agendas for negotiation have to be made explicit if participants are to begin to bridge social divisions and sustain joint action. Our action-learning framework is intended to structure and enable explicit and iterative processes by which such agendas are set. It focuses on three key aspects of project definition, organization and implementation of concern in the development management literature. They are:

(i) individual and collective assumptions (Bell, 1998; Johnson & Wilson, 1996); this aspect can enable actors to examine and re-examine their values and expectations be-
hind proposed goals, actions, forms of organization, generation, control and use of resources, and so on;
(ii) agreements over accountability in the sphere of action (Edwards & Hulme, 1995, pp. 9–14): accountability is a highly contentious and political dimension of any form of joint action, and all the more so in contexts of deep social inequality where the interests of poor or deprived people have little representation; the norms and values that inform social differentiation can become even more explicit when access to, control over and benefit from new resources becomes a possibility;
(iii) investigation of intervention processes in order to attribute outputs and outcomes over time (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Fowler, 1995; Johnson & Wilson, 1996): this aspect is particularly critical to any learning process but is also the most difficult technically to achieve, given the requirements for monitoring and evaluation; however, a jointly constructed analysis and interpretation of perceptions, processes, outcomes and outputs (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) can be a rich source of building the skills and capacities needed for institutional development.

These aspects are sufficiently broad in scope that they can be used iteratively to structure negotiations over many aspects of intervention definition, organization and implementation. Moreover, they can help actors to:
—begin to accommodate their different interests and find ways of managing imbalances of power and other social inequities;
—set parameters for performance assessment and feedback processes which lead to sustained action-learning cycles;
—begin to institutionalize norms and practices that contribute toward sustainable development in the longer-term.

There are some important elements to this process, aspects of which are present in the research analysis below, and which are subject to further investigation over time. First is the critical role of feedback loops and how they are managed. In the analysis below, providing feedback and “facilitating” discussion and further learning around it was the subject of a workshop. Such a process, and any form of structured agenda-setting and negotiation requires mediation as suggested above. Second, the idea of focusing on assumptions, accountability and attribution (the “3 As”) as outlined above is a structured way of enabling other concerns and issues to emerge. This may result in “correcting errors,” bringing new elements into the picture and changing the intervention (or norms and values) accordingly, or even a redefinition of the intervention altogether or a regrouping of actors. These processes are intimately linked to ideas of single, double and triple loop learning (Morgan, 1986). Third, the application of the action learning framework may well result in changes to it as an early “model” of how an action learning process might take place and even be used in other contexts. This process we have called “annotation,” a process that might occur among direct actors and researchers alike.

Finally, why should such a process help bridge social divisions? It could be argued that making negotiation an explicit process either involves a change of norms and values from the start or an initial assumption of trust. After all, it may not be beneficial to subordinate groups to be explicit about their perceptions and intentions, a point that has been often discussed in the participation literature. If the starting point is a context of social inequality and the role of power relations and relative access to resources in structuring (or influencing) values, behaviors and their outcomes, then the mediation process is critical, particularly in the initial stages. It also suggests the need for other “champions” of the learning process among the direct actors, which may take time to emerge.

3. ACTION RESEARCH IN BINDURA

The learning framework outlined above was given an initial test in a recent pilot project involving participatory research into a multiple-actor intervention on waste management in the mining town of Bindura in Zimbabwe. The authors spent one month working with key actors from a Zimbabwean environmental NGO, the Environmental Health Department of the Town Council in Bindura, and other state, private sector, NGO and local entities who were developing a partnership to set up a recycling scheme that would both resolve some waste management problems and provide livelihoods for the widows of AIDS victims in one of the local communities.

(a) The case

The focus of the research was an initiative to resolve some of Zimbabwe's urban solid waste
management (SWM) problems in a given locality. Urban SWM in Zimbabwe suffers lack of infrastructure and resources to meet the growing waste from growing urban populations. In addition, there are environmental concerns about how waste is disposed of, most vocally represented by the environmental NGO.

Both nationally and locally, there has been a call to involve the “community” in the resolution of these waste management problems (Government of Zimbabwe, 1995). In Bindura, this suggestion was given serious hearing when a local church-based group approached the environmental NGO to assist them in setting up a recycling project designed to provide livelihoods for the widows and orphans of AIDS victims. When the church-based group then took its idea to the Environmental Health Department of the Town Council, the initiative was transformed into a wider project of setting up a steering committee to establish an Environmental Action Group (EAG). The committee comprised a cross-section of public and private sector interests as well as voluntary associations and local NGOs. The first project of the embryonic EAG was to set up the proposed recycling scheme. This scheme was also seen by the Town Council and other public sector Environmental Health representatives in natural resources, health and education as a means of involving the participation of “the community” in SWM.

Our own involvement was established in a meeting of the steering committee of the EAG in which the committee sought help to write a project proposal to set up the recycling scheme. The committee agreed that we could investigate the activities of the group and carry out a workshop which would both allow us to test some aspects of our framework by focusing on a desired outcome of the group (i.e. assist it in exploring the ramifications and organization of the proposed project, and create the basis for members to write a proposal). It is important to note that the supposed beneficiaries of the project, the widows of AIDS victims, were not involved in the steering committee nor in discussions of the organization of the project at this stage. The subsequent role of the widows is discussed in Section 4.

(b) The approach

Our study broadly followed the ideas of participatory action research. We were not only in the position of observing and trying to understand social processes in development interventions but we were also ourselves intervening in the process by suggesting that actors test a framework. Furthermore, the research process involved ongoing “annotation” of the framework—by us in terms of people’s response to it and its appropriateness to a given situation, and by actors/stakeholders in the intervention as they adapted it for their needs and interests.

Although there was overlapping activity, in broad terms the research sequence involved us in:

—reading reports, surveys and minutes of meetings;
—carrying out interviews or having group discussions with key actors;
—carrying out a matrix analysis of values, interests and goals of the key actors derived from the interviews and discussions;
—preliminary testing of a process design based on our framework for the proposed workshop;
—carrying out the workshop;
—debrief of the workshop outcomes and framework with facilitators;
—discussion and agreement about follow-up with the mediating environmental NGO.

In practice, the research process and devising ways of testing aspects of the framework through the workshop was considerably more iterative and non-linear than this sequence suggests. The workshop enabled participants to engage with an agenda structured around the “3 As” of assumptions, accountability and attribution outlined in Section 2 above. The activities at the workshop were highly structured, using a set of questions based on the “3 As” (see Table 1). Stakeholders worked through them in four small groups over a day, each group facilitated by one of the researchers or members of staff of the supporting environmental NGO. One group was consciously selected to include members of a widows association present, and people known to them, so that they could work entirely in Shona. The other groups were formed by giving every person a number. In this process, one proved to be predominantly professionals from local government and state bodies, which, although unintended, enabled an interesting comparison of positions on the project and on views of the social relations involved. The other two groups were more varied in composition.
There are some similarities between some of the questions in Table 1 and “logical framework” (or logframe). Logical framework consists of a four by four matrix, with the left-hand column consisting of a narrative summary, with boxes for “overall goal,” “specific goals or purposes,” “activities or outputs” and “inputs.” The right-hand column of logical framework is for assumptions associated with each of these boxes, and the middle two columns are for indicators of success and means of verification respectively.

There are several differences, however, between logical framework and the questions asked in the Bindura workshop. Given that this was the first attempt to bring all stakeholders together in such an exercise, it was important to preserve a degree of accessibility in the exercise and to enable the widest discussion by not trying to cover too much ground. An even more important point, however, is that the agenda used formed the starting point for a dynamic process of negotiation and learning, not a linear exercise. The questions used in the workshop were for the group to explore its own internal dynamics, values, interests and expectations. As will be seen below, there were surprises for some participants as their assumptions about the project and its organization came into question. At a deeper level, assumptions about the nature of community, and state-private sector-civil society partnerships, were tested and social hierarchies and differences made more explicit. The process also gave the stakeholders a handle on their own interrelations and the basic issues for negotiation.

(c) A comment on participatory action research as a process

In carrying out the workshop, in particular, we discovered some critical lessons for action research about the heterogeneity and roles of...
experts. We identified at least four kinds of expert: international “open learning” experts (i.e. ourselves); national experts (staff from the environmental NGO); insider/outsider experts in Bindura (environmental health officers and technicians from government and private companies, and officials from ministries); insider experts (different civil society individuals and groups: church leaders, members of voluntary groups such as religious groups, an HIV support group, a widows association, and an informal traders’ association—all of whom had specialist knowledge to bring to the workshop dynamics and to the project).

Furthermore, there was complex interaction between us as researchers and other participants in the workshop. At times we “handed over the stick” and listened. At times we intervened quite deliberately to enable something to happen (as did others). One example of such an intervention was our determination to engage the participation of members of the community where the project was to be carried out, in particular the presumed enactors of the project, the members of a widows association. Thus we aided the environmental NGO in raising the profile of the widows by including them in our interviewing process. With the NGO, we agreed that there should be a Shona-speaking group in the otherwise English language workshop so that the widows would feel able to discuss the agenda in their own terms, as long as they worked through the structured activities of the workshop. In addition, both we and the environmental NGO, as joint facilitators of the workshop, asked questions, made suggestions, and provided frameworks for discussion—all legitimate things that facilitators do, but nevertheless having an effect of pushing (or at least suggesting) certain thought processes and ways of negotiating and accommodating interests within the context of the proposed project.

4. PARTICIPATION, PARTNERSHIP AND DEVELOPMENT INTERVENTION IN BINDURA

As indicated in Section 3, the impetus for the Bindura intervention was premised on partnership between the Town Council and different state and civil society actors, and participation of the community with respect to SWM in the town. These arrangements, moreover, were envisaged at multiple, overlapping levels, involving individual residents, societal groups and sectors (e.g., the private sector, church-based actors, widows of AIDS victims), and organizations (e.g., the environmental NGO, the widows’ associations, the embryonic Environmental Action Group).

The workshop in Bindura was thus an attempt to address many of the issues concerning participation and partnership that were discussed in Section 2. Thus it sought to involve the weakest stakeholders (the widows themselves), to reveal and take account of the complex social dynamics, and to bring on board a wide section of civil society actors. Its broader aim, however, was to start a process of institutionalizing participatory and partnership norms and practices for the design, implementation and learning from the project.

(a) Waste management and income generation: partnership

Waste management issues in Bindura are framed within the Zimbabwean national debate of how to sustain and develop systems in a country where the infrastructure is rudimentary, as manifested in inadequate collection and disposal on open dump sites, and where key exacerbating factors are rapidly growing urban populations and cash-strapped local councils. Two possibilities emerge: subcontracting and/or privatization of waste services; or community participation in waste management (Government of Zimbabwe, 1995, pp. 42–46).

Within Bindura Town Council, the second option is at present the favored route, although the first has not been ruled out. Concerns voiced in interviews suggested that, where privatization has occurred elsewhere in Zimbabwe, it has not been a success. Contracts have been given to firms that do not have the capacity to do the job effectively and effective regulatory mechanisms have not been created by local authorities. In several cases privatization experiments have been such failures that waste management services have returned to council control. All in all, it was thought better to wait and learn from the various privatization experiments before trying them out in Bindura.

In contrast to this skepticism over a privatization solution, there was, however, a strong belief in community involvement in, and responsibility for, waste management, a view echoed by all the professional stakeholders interviewed in the town. Furthermore, this community involvement is strongly linked by
the professionals to the need for education and a culture change among the residents, while acknowledging that at present waste management is viewed as the responsibility of the Council (the residents pay for the service out of their rates).

In other words, the professionals clearly see the way forward in terms of new norms and practices on the part of “the community,” and in new institutional relations of partnership between the Town Council and “the community.” Although there were slight differences in emphasis between the different professionals interviewed, their common belief in community involvement that is predicated on culture change and education amounts to a waste management paradigm for Bindura.

The repeated use of the word “community” by the professionals during their interviews raises the issue of what they understand by the term, in other words, especially who they would include under its umbrella. The definition of “community” is never easy, however. The New Oxford Dictionary of English, for example, lists at least three that are relevant: (a) all the people living in a particular area of place (e.g., the town of Bindura, or, even more locally, one of its high density suburbs); (b) a group of people having a religion, race, profession or other particular characteristic in common (where examples in Bindura might include the environmental health professionals, the church-based group, the widows, and the poor); (c) the condition of sharing or having certain attitudes and interests in common. These definitions overlap: for example, the people living in a high-density suburb of Bindura might all be “poor” (although this raises a further difficulty in defining “poor” and the extent to which some residents are more poor than others) and they will undoubtedly share some (but by no means all) interests. Thus, although the word “community” implies an identity between people by virtue of where they live, and their common characteristics and interests, it also hides their diversity. The question of who is included is often the most difficult to answer. It is not surprising therefore that the question is usually glossed over, and “the community” is defined more by implication than explicitly.

For the professionals concerned with SWM in Bindura, “the community” includes:
— all residents, particularly those who live in the relatively cramped and growing high-density suburbs and who have to be educated to take greater responsibility for the waste they generate;
— the professionals themselves, who generally see themselves as being both a community in the sense of belonging to the same profession and therefore sharing the same concerns and interests, and personally as residents of the town of Bindura.

Clearly, each of these communities is more complex and diversified than identified. Within the private sector, there are the nickel and gold mines with their potentially polluting impacts from airborne emissions and, in the case of gold mines, ground pollution. Then there are service industries, extending from the larger shops to informal traders, which generate potentially recyclable waste—paper, plastic and glass. Sugar cane processing, a relatively new development in the area which is leading to a large increase of organic waste on the streets, was also singled out.

Differences among the professionals (plus their relations with “the community”) are discussed in Section 4(b), but as this particular project is aimed at recycling waste collected from a high-density suburb, it is the social divisions among its residents that are of immediate interest. The common assumption among the professionals interviewed before the workshop was that “the community” could be treated as a largely homogenous mass which needed educating to separate its waste so that a needy group, the widows, could collect the recyclable components, and generate income from sale or re-use.

An important outcome of the workshop, however, was to challenge this assumption of homogeneity and thereby begin to examine the complex social context in which the project is conceived. The key initial assumptions recorded by the four workshop groups are shown in Table 2, but it was the debrief of facilitators after the workshop was over that produced interesting elaboration, particularly from the group that had conducted its business in Shona. It will be seen from Table 2 that this group largely comprised the widows who were primarily and understandably concerned with the income-generation potential of the project.

One of the Shona-speaking group’s (Group 4) written assumptions was that waste would be available and another that the Town Council would pass a by-law recognizing the widows as
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group composition</th>
<th>Project aims</th>
<th>Selected key assumptions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Group 1</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>— Environmental health officer, Bindura Town Council</td>
<td>Long term — Cleanliness, hygiene, combat diseases, help</td>
<td>Long term — Project will set a good example and will spread</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Environmental health technician from a local mine</td>
<td>Bindura Town Council in Waste Management</td>
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<tr>
<td>— Environmental health technician, Ministry of Health</td>
<td>— Education of the community</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>— Environmental health trainee, Bindura Town Council</td>
<td>Short term — Help widows improve income</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>— Home-based care project representative</td>
<td>— Practical education of the community</td>
<td>— Sufficient support from the residents</td>
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<tr>
<td>— Facilitators: UK researchers</td>
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<td>— Widows will prioritise</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>— Funds available for start-up</td>
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<td><strong>Group 2</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>— Home-based care project representative</td>
<td>— Educate people about waste problems</td>
<td>— Community will work together and will feel that waste management is not just the Council’s problem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Informal traders association representative</td>
<td>— Employment creation and income generation, especially for the needy people</td>
<td>— Project will show fruits and the running costs will be covered</td>
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<tr>
<td>— Church-based group representative</td>
<td></td>
<td>— Funds available for start-up</td>
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<td>— Environmental health technician, Bindura Town Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>— Facilitator from environmental NGO</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Group 3</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>— Home-based care project representative</td>
<td>— Poverty alleviation through job creation and income generation</td>
<td>— There is a market</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Informal traders association representative</td>
<td>— Clean, healthy environment</td>
<td>— Standards of living will improve</td>
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<tr>
<td>— Education officer, Ministry of Education</td>
<td>— Community participation and awareness</td>
<td>— Community will participate and people want to learn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Extension officer, Forestry Commission</td>
<td>— Human and other resources for training available</td>
<td>— Local authority supports the project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Local NGO representative</td>
<td></td>
<td>— Funds available for start-up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Facilitator from the environmental NGO</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Group 4</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Church pastor, member of church-based group</td>
<td>— Keep houses clean</td>
<td>— Bindura Town Council makes a bye-law to ensure that residents give waste for recycling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Minister, involved with widows association and home-based care project</td>
<td>— Generate income</td>
<td>— Transport, site, tools and equipment available from council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Widow</td>
<td>— Create employment</td>
<td>— Waste available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Widow</td>
<td>— Stop air pollution</td>
<td>— People willing to join in (churches, social welfare, companies)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Widow</td>
<td>— Stop diseases</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Facilitators from the environmental NGO</td>
<td>— Less illegal dumping and potential hazards</td>
<td>— Commitment from all participants</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
the only authorized collecting agents. These concerns turned out to be connected to a further set of assumptions around the value of waste to other members of the community. Thus, the assumption that sufficient recyclable waste could be collected was challenged by the widows on three grounds:

—there is already a significant amount of waste recycled for private purposes in the high-density suburb. Paper is used for toilet paper. Plastic is often melted in paraffin to create a floor polish;

—local schools collect recyclable/re-usable waste both for direct use in classrooms and for fund-raising activities. This was clearly perceived as direct competition and, moreover, the schools are already established in these activities;

—if the widows were to demonstrate that waste recycling is a viable business, their monopoly within the high-density suburb would be unlikely to last long, as other groups within the community would spontaneously establish businesses to exploit the opportunity. This last was the basis for the Shona-speaking group's advocacy of a by-law in order to maintain the widows' monopoly.

The workshop, therefore, through its discussion of assumptions, served to highlight the actual and potential divisions within the residential community targeted and the likely impact of these divisions on the immediate project, and more generally on the notion of local state-community partnership on which it is predicated. This came, moreover, from a particular group of stakeholders at the workshop—the “beneficiaries”—for whom the income-generation part of the project is anything but a “pilot.” The concern of the widows can be contrasted with the broad and rather diffuse vision of community involvement taken by the other groups (see column 2 of Table 2). The widows' view of community involvement (and of partnership) was more focused than that of the other groups, as they wanted both firm commitment of the residents to release their recyclable waste and support from other forms of association (churches, local government offices and the private sector), some of it quite precisely formulated (for example, technical inputs from the council).

The workshop also revealed differences in emphasis in the aims of the project. Another group comprised mainly environmental health and allied professionals, and to these the project was clearly seen as a pilot that would begin the process of changing attitudes and practices among the community toward waste management, and which would hopefully serve as a model to be replicated elsewhere. The income generation for a needy group, while clearly felt to be beneficial and important, was to this extent a secondary aim.

More differences were revealed when the workshop tried to identify who exactly the project beneficiaries should be, which in turn served to highlight further that “civil society” cannot be perceived as homogenous and that there is therefore no simple civil society-state relationship. Within the workshop, one stakeholder implied that the beneficiaries should be drawn from “needy people” in general and not restricted to widows. Even among those groups who assumed that only widows would be beneficiaries, a division emerged between those who felt that all widows were potential beneficiaries, and should be selected on need, and those who felt that only widows linked to churches should be selected (some of the widows are aligned to church groups). Yet another stakeholder felt that selection should not simply be based on need but also on potential to make the project work (this stakeholder stated that the selection criteria should include possession of the right attitude and a willingness to work hard).

In summary, the workshop revealed therefore that state–civil society partnership is not a, relatively simple, bipolar affair, as civil society has many poles!

(b) Waste management and income generation: participation

The Bindura workshop was both itself an attempt at a participatory exercise and part of a wider participatory process which had seen two previous broad-based workshops result in the setting up of the Environmental Action Group Steering Committee. It is pertinent, however, that the widows were only brought into this wider process after insistence by the environmental NGO at a meeting of the Environmental Action Group steering committee 18 days prior to the latest workshop. It is also evident that having the widows form the majority of a Shona-speaking group at this workshop was effective in that the group discussed concerns that were not raised by the other groups and which probably would not have been raised at all if the groups
had been more randomly composed and/or all conducted their business in English. At least the forum enabled these concerns to be put on the table as requiring discussion, negotiation and clarification.

Having one of the four groups comprised mainly of widows and a second mainly of professionals meant, however, that laying issues on the table was probably all that the workshop could achieve. Their negotiation between stakeholders is a matter for the on-going process, but one particularly important issue that the workshop revealed concerns the structures for carrying the project process forward and the processes of continuing participation and accountability that they imply.

These suggested structures emerged from a rudimentary stakeholder analysis, which asked groups to identify stakeholders and also specify what their roles might be. One interesting aspect of this analysis is that only two of the four groups mentioned the residents as a stakeholder, and only one of these suggested that they might have a role—alerting the management when things were not working properly—beyond the sorting of waste in their houses.

A second important aspect concerns confusion over the management and accountability roles revealed by the stakeholder analysis. The widows’ association, the church-based group, the Environmental Action Group and the Town Council were each promoted by different groups as having a management role, with most confusion centering on the role of the Environmental Action Group. This was felt to be a key player by three groups, but there was no consensus regarding whether it should play a “hands-on” day-to-day management role or a more strategic role, or both. What was clear, however, was that nobody, including the widows present, felt that the widow-beneficiaries should have exclusive management control, although the group comprising largely professionals did suggest that day-to-day management be carried out by a subcommittee comprising both widows involved directly in the project and EAG members.

The workshop therefore highlighted management and accountability issues which have to be resolved. Their resolution, moreover, is a major determinant of the terms of participation of the different players. These issues bring us back to the Brown critique of Chambers reviewed earlier.

At first glance the workshop discussions supported Brown and revealed some of the weaknesses in the Chambers approach to participation. Certainly they highlighted the need for proper accountability mechanisms, which would institutionalize the terms of participation of the different stakeholders, to be put in place. The workshop (and indeed the whole process so far) also served to highlight the fact that the experts are not themselves homogeneous either professionally or personally, bringing together environmental health professionals, local educationalists, a forestry extension worker, members of a national NGO (themselves with differing backgrounds) and two researchers-cum-educationalists from the United Kingdom. It would be strange indeed if such a diverse set of people did not differ in how they decide to act if voluntarism were the guiding principle.

Thus, in general, the environmental NGO members and the academic researchers showed at various points empathy with the Chambers position, while the other professionals in varying degrees had a predominant concern with hierarchy and/or a need to educate the community. Staff from the Town Council Environmental Health Department have very good reasons, however, for not putting themselves last because they are responsible for waste management in the town, are expected to be accountable for this responsibility, and have therefore both a personal and professional interest in the successful development of waste management systems.

All the above supports Brown’s critique, but, having said that, introducing management and accountability is also about building norms and practices, that is, it is about institution-building. These norms and practices have to be accepted by stakeholders—they cannot simply be imposed rules that rely on coercion for compliance. In other words, there is a voluntaristic element in institution-building. Thus, members of the Town Council Environmental Health Department and other local professionals did not accept the involvement of the widows only in response to pressure from the environmental NGO (tacitly supported by the academic researchers). The interviews prior to the workshop made clear that they supported community involvement (and by extension, involvement of the widows) both in principle and as a way toward helping solve environmental issues, including diminishing rather than increasing the burden of responsibility of
and provision of resources by) the Town Council. They were receptive, therefore, to ideas of how this might be operationalized, and it is instructive that the suggestion for a project management subgroup comprising widows’ and EAG representatives came from the workshop professionals’ group.

One conclusion, therefore, is that proper management and accountability mechanisms have to be negotiated and established between stakeholders in order to entrench terms of participation, but the institution-building that this requires starts to a large extent with persuasion and voluntaristic effort. There has to be, for example, some readiness on the part of the experts to entertain the idea of extending accountability mechanisms so that the “beneficiaries” of an intervention can become part of the management structures. These reflections put a different perspective on the Chambers-Brown debate.

5. INSTITUTIONAL SUSTAINABILITY AS A PROCESS AND AS AN OUTCOME

An important step in institutionalizing multiple-actor learning is investigating and making explicit (a) stakeholders’ assumptions and perceptions about what the success of their activities will depend on over time, and (b) what they will separately and jointly need to do in order to keep track of what is going on as the intervention unfolds. The latter in turn requires forms of monitoring and evaluation in ways that all actors are able to participate in the understanding and interpretation of processes and outcomes. Institutionalizing multiple-actor learning thus requires a framework for negotiation that seeks accommodation and agreement but which does not attempt to hide plurality, social difference and hierarchy. We suggest that our framework might provide some of the procedures and mechanisms to carry out (a) and (b) above and lay the foundation for an ongoing process of action learning.

Such a process might well be conflictive. For example, in the Bindura recycling project, inasmuch as there were different views about partnership, community, aims, beneficiaries, organization, responsibility and accountability analyzed in Section 4, there were also different assumptions about what needed to happen in the longer term (Table 3). While the “professionals’ group” (Group 1) was predominantly concerned with how the project would be managed and about forms of accountability, the “widows’ group” (Group 4) was more concerned with how livelihoods would be sustained and developed. Among the latter there was also a concern about their own

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group 1 (“professionals”)</th>
<th>Group 2</th>
<th>Group 3</th>
<th>Group 4 (“widows”)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mechanisms for profit sharing</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Publicize profits</td>
<td>Recruitment of new members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transparency of accounting</td>
<td>Text is missing</td>
<td>Getting more (needy) people on board</td>
<td>Contracts needed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechanisms for recruiting new people “Avoiding politics”</td>
<td>Text is missing</td>
<td>Expand more recycling co-operatives</td>
<td>Alternative income-generating projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contractual arrangements needed</td>
<td>Text is missing</td>
<td>Review meetings and reports</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Continuous public education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Town Council should have contract with the project</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Creation of other projects</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Markets for recyclables available</td>
<td>Secure markets; market information needed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ongoing training of project members; building capacity</td>
<td>Participants must abide by constitution</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Selected assumptions about the project longer-term
internal dynamics and “abiding by the rules.” More generally across the stakeholders, there was some agreement about the need to recruit more people into the project, have proper contractual arrangements with the Town Council for carrying out the recycling, and continue expanding activities.

To some extent, these assumptions about the longer-term progress of the recycling scheme mirror the different perspectives of the professionals and the beneficiary/enactor widows outlined in Section 4. This tension could be the source of a partnership (on the basis of ensuring organizational probity and transparency in return for security of employment and incomes) or it could be grounds for a struggle over control of the project. Acknowledging the different perspectives is a source of learning between actors. Managing the differences well would be another learning point. But, thinking about the project in the longer term proved to be the hardest part of the agenda in the workshop.

A key issue at this point in the agenda-setting and negotiation process was the recognition that monitoring and interpreting the progress of the activities was an essential part of the project partnership. In spite of the difficulties of thinking ahead, all the groups had ideas (some of them very ingenious) about how they would monitor processes and “measure performance.” Many of their ideas also had implications for skills development and capacity-building within and between the partners. Much more difficult at this stage was thinking about the dynamics of partnership and participation over time. The most searching question that groups had to answer in that respect was how they would deal with problems that might arise. For example, groups were given the hypothetical problem of non-cooperation of households in sorting waste for recycling, and the discussion which ensued revealed interesting differences in emphasis about what could be done. While the group of professionals concentrated on processes of discovery (the need to talk to the collectors, have a meeting with the residents, hold discussions within the EAG), the group involving the widows was more concerned with practical incentives (and sanctions): how to induce the households to sort their waste, how to handle the possible competition from other waste collectors and recyclers, and what alternative projects might be established. Although such differences are reflections of the social worlds of the actors, they also have implications for the dynamics of the partnership and decisions about future action. In particular, they raise the extent to which action could be taken independently by particular groups within the partnership if they saw their interests being threatened by processes and events in the wider environment.

Thus different emphases were evident at this point: for the professionals, the main ongoing concern was the overall management, accountability and transparency of the activities; for the widows, the dynamics of involving the community of which they were a part and realising adequate livelihoods were central issues. The question for the future is whether there will be separate learning processes taking place in parallel and focusing on different concerns, or whether and how such learning processes can be “nested” and linked to reinforce the partnership.

6. INTERIM CONCLUSIONS

At this point, we enter the speculative realm. The pilot study has given way to follow-up research and action which is still in progress and in which the environmental NGO is a key participant both as stakeholder and mediator. Some open conclusions and reflections can, however, be suggested. First, initial reactions to the framework by the workshop’s participants and the local facilitators were positive because, through an a priori agenda, they had been able to identify quickly key commonalities and differences. At the same time, the hitherto excluded but critically central group of the widows was now on board in the project. There was general excitement but also some anxiety at the prospect of trying to build a state-civil society partnership based on participation and a rather more differentiated view of “the community” than had previously been envisaged. The potential for changing local governance in waste management had been created with both a professional and a community interest in its success. Second, the framework behind the research had itself been piloted in our interaction with the state actors, NGO and private sector representatives. The environmental NGO is continuing to use the framework in Bindura and with other embryonic partnerships, adapting (annotating) it in relation to different needs and dynamics. Finally,
we are aware that the process and argument that we have analyzed is just the beginning of exploring how and whether institutional sustainability can be actively constructed in conditions of social inequality, and the role that might be played by researchers.

NOTES

1. We talk about development (or development initiatives, or public action on development) and social provisioning in the same context for the purposes of this article.

2. Lélé (1991) provides an excellent synthesis of some of the main arguments and tensions in these debates.

3. See Evans (1996) on co-production and synergy, and White and Robinson (1998) for a further useful contribution to this debate.

4. The concept of social capital both contributes to and raises a number of questions about state-civil society relations. One question is whether social capital can help to oil the wheels of such partnerships. Another is whether such partnerships are necessarily dependent on the existence of social capital. A further question is whether social capital can be consciously constructed. Is social capital only relevant within given groups (however defined) or can it be created between groups, even when they are socially hierarchical? Inevitably, there has been some concern with the vagueness of the concept (is social capital about relations between individuals or groups?) and some circularity of argument about the role of social capital (see, for example, Portes & Landolt, 1996; Harriss, 2000).

5. Understanding what may cause or influence what, and interpreting processes and outcomes, are key but difficult aspects of learning from interventions.

6. EAGs are the brainchild of the environmental NGO; several now exist across Zimbabwe.

7. The concept of community is addressed in Section 4.

8. Nevertheless, most local councils in Zimbabwe recover the full cost of SWM services through tariffs, but these tariffs go into centrally-controlled budgets where any surplus is used to crosssubsidize other council services (Government of Zimbabwe, 1995, pp. 4–6).

9. The re-use and recycling of waste for private purposes was mentioned by widows during interviews with them, rather than at the workshop itself.

REFERENCES


