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Past, present and future: Long's actor-oriented approach at the interface

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Introduction

In the early 1980s development theory found itself at the crossroads of modernisation perspectives and more radical approaches. This created a theoretical imbroglio to which David Booth once referred to as the 'impasse' of development theory (Booth, 1985, 1994; Schuurman, 1993). The impasse applied to development sociology and anthropology, and this was as much the case in Wageningen as in many other sociology/anthropology departments in the world where this field is taught.

In his valedictory address in 1980, Norman Long's predecessor, Rudi van Lier, summed up what had 'gone wrong' but he was unable to show how to go beyond the impasse and to develop an alternative approach to understanding development processes. Van Lier spoke of '*praxeology*' (van Lier, 1979) and '*of a synthesising science of reality, which indicates the structural framework within which economic activities are possible*' (van Lier, 1980: 18). He maintained in a way that development sociology was not in an impasse and had to be an applied sociology (*ibid.*: 19-20). Illustrative for this is the use of the notion of '*stuurmanskunst*' ('*the art of steering*') in the title of his farewell address. The options debated were either concentrating on providing service to disciplines and groups like tropical agriculture, agronomy, tropical animal husbandry, mechanics in agriculture and what at that time was called 'extension studies', or analysing the social-economic and political contexts of development projects. In line with this, the activities of the staff of the former Department of Agrarian Sociology of the non-western Areas in the Tropics and Sub-Tropics focused at the time on the implementation of research projects that concerned the role of sociologists and anthropologists in agricultural research centres (Box and van Dusseldorp, 1992). Staff members also participated in inter-university exchange projects for the strengthening of education and research in a number of Third World universities. This period also marked the start of a project on local participation in planned development, with special attention to the role of NGOs (Frerks, 1991).¹

¹ For a summary of the research projects in the last days of van Lier's professorship and the start of Norman Long, see den Ouden (1997: 29-30).

Upon his appointment in 1981, Norman Long found a department that was heavily inclined towards the praxeology of development. Throughout the years he set out to progressively change the nature and direction of the scientific field of development sociology and anthropology and to reformulate this to fit his research agenda. This signalled the beginning of a revival of the 'Wageningen School of Development Sociology'. Although in the early years he had to accomplish this virtually on his own (due to a lack of resources to appoint staff to assist his 'project'), Long found in Wageningen a productive breeding ground for his dynamic perspective on social change as presented in his first major book on development, *Introduction to Rural Development Sociology* (1977).

Long's early Wageningen years were characterised by sharp debates on paradigmatic issues. These were held with rural sociologists, such as Hofstee (1937) and Benvenuti (1975) at the former Department of Sociology of the Western Areas, who were working on differential patterns of agricultural change in the Netherlands from modernisation and structuralist points of view. Debates also ensued with the members of the Extension Department (Röling c.s.) who favoured a hard-systems approach to the study of agricultural interventions. These paradigmatic issues played a role as 'contra points' (cf. Wertheim, 1971). This period was, however, also marked by close collaboration with Franz von Benda-Beckmann of the Department of Non-Western Agrarian Law and his notion of legal pluralism, and with Luc Horst - later Linden Vincent - from the Department of Irrigation and his ideas on organising practices. This unique configuration of chairs and ideas in the Wageningen setting of the early 1980s facilitated a further blossoming of Long's views on social change. Expanding his Department to include a number of newly appointed staff and young Ph.D. researchers, Long's ideas evolved into a solid 'School of Sociology'. The 'School' gained momentum when one of his staff members, Jan Douwe van der Ploeg, was appointed to the chair of Western Sociology. This school, which the American rural sociologist Buttel strangely enough characterises as neo-Chayanovian, was based on Long's actor oriented perspective (Buttel, 2001: 168). Also, the arrival of Paul Richards to the Department of Technology and Agrarian Development signalled the beginning of an anthropological perspective on technology that has interacted with the actor-oriented perspective of Long.

Development sociology and anthropology in Wageningen have moved on since then to become disciplines theorising and studying social transformations in the 'Third World'. Though considered of utmost importance in the application of its insights to the economic and technical fields in the domains of agricultural and rural development, the discipline itself abstains from being an applied discipline, or one that takes a leading role in designing development projects. Wageningen development sociology as conceived after 1981 is, however, not completely unique; it is part of a much broader wave of opposition and reaction to the earlier modernist, (neo-) Marxist and structuralist paradigms. But even among 'friends-in-science' there are differences. The following example clarifies this. While rural development sociology and anthropology in Wageningen means studying the broad field of social transformations, Olivier de Sardan (1995: 7) restricts this field to the study of the '*configuration développementiste*' (the 'developmentist configuration'), an in-depth analysis of the interactions between the multiple social actors involved in or influenced by the policy and projects that are designed to transform other people's ways of life. True, an important

part of the contributions of Long, his Wageningen staff and many Ph.D. students concentrated on the analysis of planned intervention and change, but their field of study is nevertheless wider. The merit of Long is that he broke through the theoretical deadlock in which Wageningen rural development sociology found itself at the end of the seventies. In the process he became a well-known and respected academic through his many publications that had placed the Wageningen group in a large international network. Wageningen rural development sociology and anthropology became one of the 'blue chip' sectors of Wageningen University. His name also resonates in dozens of Ph.D. students from all corners of the world who already have finished their thesis or who are still struggling to complete them.

Actors, networks and cultural repertoires

The world of development theory in the late 1970s and early 1980s was one that was characterised by a confrontation of, on the one hand, modernisation perspectives on social change, and on the other hand by *dependencia* and (neo-) Marxist frameworks. Modernisation theory visualised '*development in terms of a progressive movement towards technologically and institutionally more complex and integrated forms of 'modern' society*' (Long 2001: 10) and was increasingly rejected in the field of development sociology. The makeability of society through planning and the progress it would generate was seriously criticised. The nature and direction of processes of change were criticised as being linear and normative, and people in the so-called Third World were portrayed as being incapable of generating endogenous growth. The community development approach that strongly believed in village homogeneity and harmony arrived at a stalemate because of the naive and insufficient understanding and knowledge of local reality (Van Lier, 1980: 16-17). On the other hand, 'radical' paradigms and approaches, ranging from dependency theory to orthodox and neo-Marxist perspectives, lost much credibility because of their inability to explain differential patterns of development that were specific to a locality or region. Both modernisation and more radical approaches were '*tainted by determinist, linear and externalist views of social change*' (Long, 2001: 11) and had in common a strong belief in broadly determined stages of development (see also Booth, 1985, 1994). Ideas of development occurring in 'stages' (Rostow 1963) go a long way in academic circles, and can still be felt in the recent literature on development theory. As Long (*ibid*: 11) comments:

'While the shortcomings of earlier structural models – especially their failure to explain the sources and dynamics of social heterogeneity – are now widely acknowledged by political economists and sociologists alike, much current social theory remains wedded to universalism, linearity and binary positions. This not only applies to the analysis of development processes but also more generally to theoretical interpretations of contemporary socio-cultural change. For example, many writers on postmodernity succumb to a "stages theory" of history when they write of the transition from "Fordist" to "post-Fordist" forms of production (i.e. from mass production to flexible specialisation) as if this were a simple unidirectional process in tune with other socio-cultural changes. Implicit here is the ideal typical view of what is to be "postmodern".' (Long, 2001: 11)

Long occupies an original position in the debate on development perspectives, being a student of renowned academics such as Max Gluckman, Clyde Mitchell, and others who shaped the famous Manchester School through detailed anthropological case studies carried out in South and Central Africa (see Werbner, 1984, for an overview). The Manchester School is known for its methodological approach (e.g. the extended case method) and provided a unique focus and foundation for fieldwork, ethnography and data analysis. Long's doctoral fieldwork - resulting in *Social Change and the Individual* (1968) - is a good example of what the Manchester School is all about: through detailed ethnographic accounts of specific situations that spanned longer periods of time, Long 'discovered' and 'uncovered' the actors that were eventually to play a central role throughout his academic career. The title of his first book is telling in this respect, and shows that he was familiar with an approach that allowed the so-called 'researched' to voice their opinions and to enrol the researcher (or ethnographer) in the interpretation of the data collected

Trained in the Manchester School, Long elaborated his perspective in the good tradition of science: responding critically to existing paradigms in the field of development (Long, 1992). At least three, partly overlapping but crucial paradigmatic debates need to be briefly mentioned here to underpin this point. Firstly, he became involved in the debate about whether or not social change was to be seen as a linear process with homogenous outcomes, or rather as a non-linear process resulting in the creation of social heterogeneity. Secondly, he opposed structuralist interpretations of processes of transformation by actively engaging in the so-called 'actor-structure' debate. In so doing, Long countered those views that reified the importance of structure in the understanding of human behaviour (*Verdinglichung* as Marx called it) and proposed an actor perspective on social change that attributed 'agency' to people *and* institutions. After all, he reasoned, it was flesh-and-blood people who acted and changed the world they are living in: not abstract and reified notions such as 'capital', 'market', or 'labour'. Thirdly, his approach (like that of some of his contemporaries) is suspicious of preconceived ideas about the nature and direction of development processes. Arguing against teleological interpretations of processes of change, Long abandoned simple causative notions (such as 'the logic of commoditisation', 'the subsumption of the peasantry', 'capitalist development', 'modes of production') and moved beyond these notions by not taking them as his point of departure, but as concepts that needed explaining. The innovative and most important point in the work of Norman Long is the emphasis on '*methods of social research that centre upon an actor-oriented and interface analysis of rural development*' (Long, 2001: 1). An important methodological guideline of Long's actor-oriented perspective consists, in the first place, of identifying the relevant actors *without* starting from preconceived notions about actor categories or uniform classes. Once the relevant actors are identified, what follows is ethnographically documenting the situated social practices of these actors, and the way in which social relationships, technologies and other resources (such as discourses and texts) are deployed. Social actors, individuals and groups are considered '*(...) as active participants who process information and strategise in their dealings with various local actors as well as with outside institutions and personnel*' (*ibid.*: 13). As far as rural change is concerned, Long's actor-oriented approach stresses the importance of giving

weight to how farmers and other rural players shape development themselves. Although actors are often limited in their choices by a lack of critical resources, they should not be seen as passive recipients or victims of planned change, or as 'cultural dopes' who simply follow existing rules or conventions. Actors also create room for manoeuvre for their own interests so that they might benefit from, or - if need to be - neutralise interventions by outside groups or agencies. Central to this view is the concept of 'agency' which '*refers to the knowledgeability, capability and social embeddedness associated with acts of doing (and reflecting) that impact upon or shape one's own and others' actions and interpretations*' (ibid.: 240). The centrality of the notion of human agency arises from the need to locate actor's lifeworlds in the socio-cultural and political settings in which they manage their everyday affairs. Since they are not 'puppets on a string', actor's lifeworlds are not preordained by the logic of capital as implied in structural theories of development. Methodologically, this implies focusing on the organising practices and ordering processes that are relevant to the different arenas and institutional domains. The fashionable study of 'livelihood' i.e. the strategies and practices by which individuals and groups strive to make a living, is a concept that should capitalise on Long's notion of active social actors.

Another cornerstone in Long's work is the so-called 'interface analysis'. The elaboration of this analytical scheme was crucial for the understanding and conceptualisation of interventions as transformational processes in which a number of social actors play a role. Interfaces between the actors are '*characterised by discontinuities in interests, values and power, and their dynamic entails negotiation, accommodation and the struggle over definitions and boundaries*' (Long and Villarreal, 1993: 143). Long thus portrayed development interventions as processes of negotiation involving multiple levels, values and 'realities' – ranging from diverse local patterns of organisation and management of natural resources, to regional economic, political and cultural phenomena informed by the intervention of state and non-state institutions, as well as global market and political scenarios. At the core of this view lie central issues concerning livelihoods, organisational capacities and discourses, and intervention practices and ideologies. In short, as Long succinctly puts it, '*rural development represents a complex drama about human needs and desires, organising capabilities, power relations, skills and knowledge, authoritative discourses and institutions, and the clash of different ways of ordering the world*' (Long, 1997: 2). Development, then, is nothing more and nothing less than an arena of struggle where actors negotiate, compete and manipulate each other at the different interfaces.

It may be clear that this approach, with its 'room for manoeuvre' of social actors, heavily criticises any form of linearity in thinking and theorising about processes of development. Among the core themes and issues of Long's work we hence find '*differential outcomes of structural change*', '*variance and heterogeneity within economic systems*', '*differential impact of commoditisation processes*', and '*processes of globalisation creating heterogeneity*'. These themes and issues cannot be explained with reference to evolutionary or structuralist theories or to the various strands of neo-classical economics.

It is probably understandable that Long's actor-oriented approach is on strained terms with communication and innovation studies. Their initial focus on

system thinking may have changed under the influence of the actor-systems debate, but Long insisted that our guidance in this debate should be discontinuity and not linkage, transformation and not transfer of meaning, and knowledge being fragmentary and diffuse rather than unitary and systematised. This approach is always highly critical with regard to 'systems thinking' (cf. Long and Villarreal, 1993: 147).

The actor-oriented approach as conceived by Long and his colleagues should be regarded as quite different from actor-oriented rational choice models based upon the individualism of 'utilitarian man' (see for instance Long 2001, p.14). The thinking, behaviour and choices of social actors, whether individual or collective, are shaped by many factors. Cultural disposition, the distribution of power and resources, past experience, life style, emotions and feelings (envy for instance), individual concerns, personal habits and peculiarities: all these have an influence in shaping choices. To escape narrow rational choice approaches Long always has insisted to contextualise actors' 'behaviour'. All over his work he refers to notions such as cultural repertoires and social networks to show that, and how, social actors embed their actions, the strategies they devise and the choices they make in a social and cultural environment which is largely taken for granted but which, nevertheless, is shaped by actors themselves. What people say, do, and the language and symbols they use only have meanings when understood in context. Throughout his career and writings he consistently defines cultural repertoires as characterising the differentiated stock of cultural components that relate to differences in life styles, social values and rationales for living. Of course, cultural repertoires need to be understood as dynamic and constantly changing, rather than as static and 'stifling development'. The analysis of social networks, then, shows how actors link up with other actors to conduct their businesses or device a certain livelihood. As Long has shown in many of his articles, networks are characterised by flows, content, span, density and multiplicity (cf. Long, 2001: 242) and may embody sets of direct and indirect relationships and exchanges (inter-personal, inter-organisational and socio-technical) that usually transcend institutional domains and link together a variety of arenas.

The landscape of the book

Commenting on a book for a good friend and academic is not an easy task. Normally a festschrift is written - as the academic tradition prescribes - by colleagues and close friends. Keeping to this prescription would however have rendered a massive and unpublishable work. The editors - in their limited wisdom and knowledge - decided to keep this book within manageable proportions through the application of a surprisingly simple formula that entailed dividing the book into three sections. In the first section of the book, the chairholders from five Wageningen University departments with whom Long had close contact during his tenure, reflect and elaborate upon his work and how this was or still is useful for their own specific discipline and fields of interest. The second section consists of contributions by colleagues presently working at the department of Sociology of Rural Development. They comment on how they perceive Long's paradigm or wish to bring it further in their own separate fields

of interest and studies. The third and final section comprises contributions by four of Long's former Ph.D. students, who in some degree have 'applied' the actor-oriented approach in their work as practitioners. All these chapters provide ammunition for a critical and appraising review of Long's work. Some dissonance will be there as well, but the chapters provide a stepping stone for the development of a rural development sociology agenda for research and education in Wageningen University. The latter will be taken up in the last section of this chapter.

The first part of the book - *actors in rural development: translation to a wider arena* - begins with a contribution from Paul Richards. In his chapter, he links Norman Long's career to the rise and fall of the Green Revolution. Long's field work in Africa and Latin America, Richards tells us, has been carried out against a background of transformations and tensions sustained by Green Revolution seed technologies. Arguing that Long's 'Manchester School' approach deserves better than to be passed over by anthropologists as a faintly old-fashioned 'modernist' ethnography, Richards proposes that the struggles over land, machines, water, seeds, and the institutions of development are as performative a field as any of the complex rituals analysed by Manchester peers following in the tradition established by Victor Turner, and as deeply a matter of belief and culture as any religion. This tradition, in his view, thus deserves a better name - 'technography'.

Franz and Kebeet von Benda-Beckmann in their joint paper expand upon what they as legal anthropologists have in common with Long: a historical focus and the notion of struggle or arenas. The historical dimension is not treated here as a way of understanding the past, but as one for disentangling the present and looking at the future. They argue in their contribution that legal rules and normative frameworks are condensed ways of binding the future. Their paper elaborates how a multitude of actors operate in the political arena of decentralisation in contemporary Indonesia. This particular process has led to a re-assessment of local, ethnically informed legal orders. They show how actors in their struggles and negotiations with the 'traditional' legal repertoire, the *adat*, becomes differentially interpreted, and how though these processes state-society relationships are likely to become constituted differently.

Niels Röling and Cees Leeuwis confront the actor perspective with system thinking. Their contribution first explains how system thinking became infected by Long's actor oriented approach. Due to a productive and constructive engagement, system thinking moved from the naive and primitive to soft-systems thinking, taking most of the actor-oriented criticism on board. They argue, however, that from then on the paradigmatic differences between the two approaches become irreconcilable and so apparent that the 'bedfellowship' is now over. Rather than moving towards an arena of actors in struggle, they both prefer to follow the route of 'convergence' and 'collective' action. This is deemed necessary, particular in the context of a Wageningen University that embarks on a beta-gamma project that demands, in their view, a 'praxeology' rather than a retrospective and purely disciplinary perspective.

In her essay, Linden Vincent describes the interaction of the Irrigation and Water Engineering Group with Norman Long and his work as it has evolved over time. She does so by first discussing her first encounters with Long's views.

Vincent then goes on to narrate how a social dimension was built into the study of irrigation at Wageningen, and how this resulted in a focus on the struggles involved at the interface between technology and resource users. In the final part of her contribution, she explores the reasons why the language and ideas of Norman have reached mainstream agricultural research organisations like the CGIAR, but also discusses critically some of the problems arising from this success.

In the last chapter of this section Jan Douwe van der Ploeg reflects, in a somewhat unusual style of presentation, upon one of the strongholds of Long's perspective: the importance of context and local cultural repertoires. He argues that texts, accounts of local people and the symbols and language they use become meaningless when detached from their contexts. By annotating a letter to a grandfather, he shows the interrelations between two different contexts he has worked in himself i.e. Friesland and the Peruvian Highlands. In doing so, he also elucidates how notions mainly derived from Development Sociology, travel as it were, between contexts as well as between different historical periods.

The second part of the book - *broadening the research agenda* - opens with a contribution from Alberto Arce. He discloses some of the intricacies and the roots of the actor oriented approach. Long's intellectual journey is scrutinised with a focus on how he has captured people's experiences. Arce, who has worked closely with Long for the past 20 years and has inspired his thinking, focuses in his contribution on the work Long has done in the field of state planning and intervention. Karl Mannheim comes to play a role in the chapter when it comes to understanding modernity and planning. Long, so he argues, has gone further than Mannheim by arguing that we need to analyse the experiences of actors to understand modernity. In this way, Long's actor perspective has contributed to a theory of everyday experience, rather than a theory of consciousness.

Paul Hebinck's contribution aims to develop a framework to understand technological change. Long's work has affected such understanding with a serious analytical treatment of the knowledge encounters and processes that produce and reproduce heterogeneity. With reference to the maize landscape in Kenya, he underpins the notion of socio-technical regimes, a notion that requires actors to come to life. He shows how socio-technical regimes in the field of maize have evolved over time, how they operate, and whether or not there is continuity or discontinuity between them.

Monique Nuyten explores how the study of organisation should be rethought. Long's work, she argues, provides a good starting point for such an endeavour for its emphasis on understanding local forms of organisation 'from below'. Insights from recent organisation theories have much to offer as well, and they can very well enrich the actor-oriented approach to organisation. While locating her chapter in a Mexican *ejido* and taking local forms of organisation seriously, she elaborates an organising practice perspective that goes beyond the systems perspective of organisation.

Sarah Southwold-Llewelyn elaborates how Long's work on entrepreneurs compares with her own perspective. She shows how Long has studied entrepreneurs and how they draw upon, create and manipulate social networks to conduct their business. Examining and re-examining her own data collected

some 15 years ago and very recently in Sri Lanka, she elaborates these networks as providing a context to understand how entrepreneurs operate and why some are successful and others not.

The chapter by Pieter de Vries critically engages with current thinking about participatory extension methodologies and argues that approaches which stress the need for user's participation and front-line workers' discretion can learn a lot from the kind of contextualised ethnographies that have become the hallmark of the Wageningen School. Participatory extension methodologies, de Vries suggests, tend to reproduce naive notions of locality while holding to rational choice explanations of extensionists' commitment. Based on ethnographic material on an integrated rural development programme in Costa Rica, de Vries proposes that front-line workers not only have to cope with the contradictions of implementation but that they also have to come to terms with varying sets of pressures and demands which they, in constructing operational styles, internalise in differing ways.

In the last chapter of this section, Gerard Verschoor takes issue with the notion of 'heterogeneity'. He argues that Long's actor-oriented approach has misunderstood heterogeneity (that what holds the social together) for diversity (the outcome of bringing dissimilar and hitherto unrelated elements together). To make his point, he first outlines the character of their disagreement, and shows that what lies at the base of Long's misunderstanding is his reluctance to become *infected* by the flesh-and-blood actors who fill his books. Verschoor then goes on to propose - by way of three short cases - that in becoming infected by what one works with, one can indeed say original and exiting things about variation and diversity. The author closes the chapter by suggesting that there is much to learn from the people one works with during fieldwork, as it is they who can eventually 'authorise' one to say 'dangerous' things about the object of sociology.

The third part of the book delves into the issue of *the actor-oriented approach in practice*. The first contribution is from Ronny Vermooy. He reflects on the way in which he, as program officer at the International Development Research Centre in Ottawa, has mainly supported *others* in their efforts to carry out research. In so doing, he narrates how his emphasis has shifted from constructing development theory in an academic environment to contributing to social change outside an academic setting. Attempts to do this in a reflective manner, i.e., through critically informed (or grounded) development practice, have directed Vermooy toward the exploration of new conceptual and particularly, methodological paths. These paths include attempts to use insights from ecology, learning theory and participatory (action) research in people-centred, natural resource management research programs and projects. In a perfect world, he imagines, grounding development theory and shaping and reshaping practice walk hand in hand.

The next contribution by Roch Mongbo makes a threefold argument. Firstly, Mongbo argues that the decentralisation reform in Benin lags far behind local political dynamics and the actual decentralised and autonomous functioning experiences and practices of local communities. Secondly, he proposes that the power supposedly relinquished to local authorities for shaping economic processes with regard to the organisation of fair and equitable access to resources

at communal level appears quite unrealistic, especially if one considers the complete failure of the central state itself in this field since the end of the colonial period. Thirdly, he suggests that, given that both technocrats and politicians designing and/or voting on these laws, as well as donors supporting the reform are full stakeholders in the political bargaining process, it would be naive and misleading to assume that these actors are not aware of the realities involved in 'decentralisation'. This contradiction, Mongbo tells us, between policy and discourse on the one hand and experiences and practice on the other is functional to the reproduction of each of these social categories, and emphasises the marginality of the state's formal dispositions in the everyday life of local communities.

Horacia Fajardo - herself a medical doctor - opens with the case of a sick child suffering from what appears to be malnutrition. This helps to open the discussion of how contrasting knowledge and belief systems clash at the interface between, on the one hand, western medical practice supported by government health directives and rural development practices of the Mexican state and, on the other, *Huichol* healing customs that are carried out on the basis of existing cultural repertoires. In so doing, Fajardo situates health problems within a framework that takes account of living conditions, knowledge and beliefs, human agency and government practice. Given the 'expert role' assigned to Fajardo within an institutional health programme, an important part of the chapter addresses how she came to terms with the incongruities and conflicting interests and beliefs involved.

In the last contribution, Pieter van der Zaag, Alex Bolding and Emmanuel Manzungu delve into the entanglements of water networks in Zimbabwe. Their main argument in relation to Long's actor-oriented approach is that, if it treats human and non-human actors symmetrically, then the approach would have the potential not only to productively engage in some of the important sociological debates, but also to increase the relevance of sociology to the development practice. The authors apply this insight to a series of case studies on diverging water management practices. These varied practices, they say, emerge from existing and evolving relationships between and among resource users, the resource itself, the knowledge-base concerning that resource, the techniques used to develop the resource, and the economic circumstances of the various actors. When, the authors argue, in such complex situations new institutional forms are introduced from outside, then ingrained practices may become misfits to the new reality. The chapter closes with the argument that, in order to attain equitable and efficient management of water resources, decision platforms such as the sub-catchment councils in Zimbabwe are key. For such platforms to operate effectively, however, requires that all actors adapt their practices, since the legal and institutional reality which gave rise to these practices have changed dramatically, at least on paper.

New challenges for an actor-oriented approach to development

In this final section we provide some critical notes on the actor approach, and conclude with what we see as promising new avenues of engagement with development issues. We feel free to do so because Norman Long would be the

last person to believe that his thinking and latest publication represent the sole surviving paradigm or approach in the present fragmented field of theories of social change. We remember, for example, a lively debate in one of our Advanced Research Seminars during which Norman was criticised because of a particular view apparent in his earlier work. He answered: *'Yes, but that Norman Long does not exist anymore'*. Long thus realised perfectly well that his scientific thinking was not static, and that there was ample space to take the actor-oriented perspective into novel areas of critical inquiry.

Having said this, it is nevertheless clear that Long's approach can be associated with a number of difficulties. One of these relates to the added value that the approach may have for those (e.g. technical scientists, economists, communication experts) interested in managing or shaping development processes proper. What lies at the basis of this perceived difficulty is that Long's approach problematises a number of issues that were previously thought to be relatively straightforward. He added complexity to development processes, for example, by pointing out the entanglements of social actors, by criticising linear and systems thinking, or by depicting interventions as arenas of struggle. In so doing, Long and his followers probably created the image that reality was very complex and thus not easily managed by scientific 'experts' and 'do-ers'.

Another difficulty relates to the tension between action and structure or between the micro and the macro inherent in the approach. What is, for example, the available room for manoeuvre in situations where important decisions are taken outside the immediate arena on which we focus? It is clear that the laws of the capitalist market, cultural patterns, Muslim fundamentalism, budget cuts for universities or whatever factors limiting the room for manoeuvre of people, do not fall from heaven. They are all man-made, and result from the interactions, negotiations and struggles taking place at the interface between social actors who, each in his or her own way, try to push through their interests and projects. But how do these processes add up? Is an actor-oriented approach sufficiently equipped to study and understand the broader movements and changing patterns at regions or supra-regional level?

Long makes clear that the actor-oriented approach is most fruitful in the study of (global) commodity flows and linkages. It is able to analyse the interfaces between the many actors involved, from producer to consumer, including the cultural identifications and the specific language strategies and discourses involved (Long, 2001: 229). But the use of this approach in analysing broader cultural models or organising principles, movements and changes, and their causes and effects seems more difficult. Long (2001: 70) writes:

'It becomes necessary, therefore, to identify the conditions under which particular definitions of reality and visions of the future are upheld, to analyse the interplay of cultural and ideological oppositions, and to map out the ways in which bridging or distancing actions and ideologies make it possible for certain types of interface to reproduce or transform themselves.'

Is Norman Long thinking of clashes between ideologies, religious and ethnic groups here as well? Can we understand them completely by studying the 'local embeddedness of global phenomena' (Long, 2001: 223)? Or is it also necessary to approach and understand 'globalscapes: cultural flows, "imagined worlds" and changing socio-political identities' (*ibid.*: 221) and the linking of individuals to various 'imagined communities' throughout the world? Does this, in other

words, entail a lesser actor-orientation? It is clear that Long does not turn his back on these 'globalscapes' and indeed discusses broader patterns of change which entail, as he points out,

'...struggles against the national state and international institutions, but also within and between social groups mobilised on the basis of ethnicity, family and clan affiliation, gender difference, and membership of movements focusing upon specific concerns, such as environmental conservation, human rights and food risks.' (Long 2000: 184)

Clearly, more actor-oriented thinking and research needs to be carried out in the area of global social transformations, without of course taking on board *'...essentialist and reified interpretations of global change, which assume rather than demonstrate the force and uniformity of such change'* (Long, *ibid.*: 185). A final difficulty - perhaps more a warning than criticism - involves the notion of 'agency'. Referring to Giddens (1984), in several of Long's publications we find more or less the same definition of it. For example, the notion of 'agency' which:

'... attributes to the individual actor the capacity to process social experience and to devise ways of coping with life, even under the most extreme forms of coercion. Within the limits of information, uncertainty and other constraints (e.g. physical, normative or politico-economic) that exist, social actors possess "knowledgeability" and "capability".' (Long, 2001: 16).

It is clear that this interpretation of agency has a rather optimistic flavour as far as the room for manoeuvre of social actors is concerned. Of course, this can be seen as a reaction to the fatalistic and atrabilious views of (neo-) Marxists, but we would suggest caution here. The 'weapons of the weak' (Scott 1985) are often a reality, but this should not prevent us from seeing the serious limitations of the room for manoeuvre of many people, the sheer misery of distressed living conditions and the hopelessness for the future that we find in many places. This is worthy of attention because in a number of studies employing an actor-oriented approach, the reader could get the impression that the authors are dealing with people who are doing rather well in solving problems and monitoring their own actions. Not every author warns his/her readers that he/she is studying poor people who have limited possibilities to improve their situation. Norman Long, of course, is not unaware of people who are in trouble:

'But the downside (of particular technological and institutional changes) is the fact that much of this is achieved at the cost of those in the low-paid, work-less, or resource-scarce sectors of society, whose livelihoods and relative living standards remain extremely low and highly vulnerable to economic and political pressures.' (Long, 2000: 184)

One is nevertheless left with the feeling that this observation somehow curtails the 'agency' and 'room for manoeuvre' of people and groups. This in turn poses new challenges to Long's actor-oriented approach. Indeed, at the dawn of the 21st century, citizens all over the world are experiencing the effects of what may aptly be termed *globalisation*. In our everyday lives, globalisation means that we are now part of a complex, yet common world that is increasingly shaped by the modernising goals of the World Bank, the IMF, and a limited number of large-scale, corporate organisations. Supported by the WTO and the policies of the G7, market-led globalisation has brought unprecedented prosperity for many,

particularly in the developed countries. At the same time, however, an increasing majority of the world's population has found itself deprived of the accoutrements of modernity and globalisation. This is especially true for those who happen to live in rural areas of what were once called 'underdeveloped' societies.

Contrary to the promises and well-meant efforts of heads of state, bankers and industrialists, more and more rural dwellers are joining the ranks of the have-nots every year. This is often the direct result of market regulation, the collapse of state and societal institutions, and ill-conceived social policies designed on the basis of so-called expert knowledge. Dispossessed, disenfranchised and excluded, many rural populations have begun to object openly, and are trying - in an organised and co-ordinated way - to create their own space for change. Moreover, they now want to exercise their right to access markets, but not on the conditions dictated by global players. Instead, they are proposing to carve out sustainable livelihoods *on their own terms*. In so doing, endogenous forms of development are being engendered that can assimilate material well-being, while complying to local and extra-local values and notions of dignity and solidarity.

These social movements or counter-tendencies are becoming apparent in different ways. Participatory plant breeding, co-management of forest areas, communal water management, eco-certification, community-based conservation, slow food, fair trade, organic farming and so on are all indicative that something important is afoot. Yet these efforts, these counter-tendencies, face enormous challenges. There is no recipe for endogenous development, and each counter-tendency encounters its specific bottlenecks, creates its peculiar turbulence, and has a history of its own. We thus speak of counter-tendencies in the plural. Yet all counter-tendencies share a determination to renegotiate the terms in which they articulate with wider regimes of production, consumption, and exchange. This involves a new framework for using and managing local resources such as land, water, bio-diversity, labour, and so on. This invariably leads to a redefinition of the relationships between resources, (external) users, and managers.

Of central importance in this respect are the factors that mediate these relationships: knowledge, labour, institutions and technology. These renegotiations are often of a conflictive or controversial nature. This is because redefining the relationship between resources and their users/managers requires a re-negotiation of the type and level of expertise that is needed, the amount of labour implicated, the appropriateness of the technology involved and the institutions within which this redefinition needs to be embedded.

The renegotiations implied in the dynamics of counter-tendencies form the core of the new challenges facing an actor-oriented approach to development. We are convinced that we must keep the promises made over a decade ago (Long and van der Ploeg 1989) to exploit the full potential of the approach. This means that, next to sound analysis of development situations, an actor-oriented approach should become involved in the *practices* that shape the very processes it studies. Such an endeavour could encompass five distinct, but interrelated components. Firstly, by focusing on the different ways actors identify alternative pathways for development and on the conditions facilitating viable counter-tendencies. Secondly, by describing the way in which the different actors involved in these counter-tendencies manage to create space for, and make sense of, their own projects. Thirdly, by actively strengthening the learning processes

at stake in redefining the relationship between people and their resources. Fourthly, by creating policy proposals that support new alternatives for endogenous development. And finally, by reflecting on the different bodies of knowledge systems that attempt to define the relationship between technology and the institutions that regulate resource dynamics.

This 'turn to practice' is not devoid of problems and the path we need to follow is uncertain. We nevertheless wish to dedicate a few words on just how such an endeavour could be achieved. We believe the problems implicated in the counter-tendencies (or collective experiments) that we wish to concentrate on can no longer be solved by science or technology alone. This is sometimes suggested by a rhetoric of multi or interdisciplinarity (apparent in for example the proposed integration of beta-gamma research at Wageningen University) that echoes the spirit of modernisation. In the 21st Century, however, modernisation need not be modernised any further and this is precisely what counter-tendencies as we envisage them imply: an opposition to (the effects of) modernisation. There are no 'shortcuts to progress'. Scientism, the engine of the modernisation machine, which tends to view 'local knowledge' as superfluous, is certainly not one of them. This implies that one should be careful when proposing 'scientific' solutions to complex social problems. But being wary of scientism does not mean that one must turn one's back on science. On the contrary: one can turn scientism's weakness - the silencing of public discussion about technical controversies and the regulation thereof - into the strength of an actor approach. This can be done by contesting simplification on all fronts, and by introducing complexity at all levels. But we can only do so by becoming strongly involved with research, with engineering, with design, with innovation - as well as with the political choices that go along with them. Although we have no recipes for doing this, a possible first step in the right direction would be to question the inferences that we live in a world which - as some social scientists would have us believe - is becoming increasingly culturally homogeneous. Instead, we should join forces with those who demonstrate the contrary and who, in so doing, subvert the very notion of what it is to be global and what it is to be local (e.g. Appadurai's 'globalisation of differences'; Long and van der Ploeg's notion of 'social heterogeneity'). A possible second step would be to question the way in which the different sciences *frame* collective experiments and counter-tendencies. This could be achieved by bringing together - through detailed, anthropological description - that which the "framers" separate and thus render incomprehensible. A third step would involve a critical look at the way in which scientists (e.g. economists) simplify internalities (for instance, by not appropriately describing what it is that people do when they become practically entangled with goods, new technologies, or collective experiments) and by calculating, *together* with those negatively affected, the externalities involved in scientific solutions to their problems. Finally, we would need to become more sensitive to the social projects of future recipients of scientific 'products', and help advocate what they deem the adequate social, economic, or political optimum. This means that one needs to go beyond naïve forms of social engineering (apparent for example in simple notions of 'participation' or 'community') and devise alternative forms of intervention, without of course becoming overtly populist or uncritically glorifying local knowledge.

In summary: we favour an actor-oriented approach that is aware that it can 'make a difference' by improving the visibility of collective experiments and counter-tendencies. In this respect, we think that we must, as social scientists, consider ourselves as fortunate to be at work within a technical university. Working together with scientists in the natural and biophysical sciences could facilitate our future plans - even if communicating with the so-called *bèta* sciences may prove difficult at times. This task may also be somewhat ambivalent because one first needs to get one's own discipline right before being able to embark on a 'project' that can potentially compromise one's own disciplinary foundation. Nevertheless, a self-complacent 'splendid isolation' would be most dangerous in times of (continuous) budget cuts, and within a (Wageningen University) setting that forces the formation of 'Knowledge Units' or *kenniseenheden*, which in the case of the Social Sciences, envisages co-operation between the Agricultural Economic Institute (LEI) and the Department of Social Sciences, strangely enough jeopardising the linking of *bèta* and *gamma* sciences. Whatever the near future holds for us, we have to bear in mind that an actor-oriented approach to development is not especially interesting in or by itself. It can only become interesting and worthwhile when it resonates with other views within and outside our discipline.

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