CHAPTER 4

Debating Empowerment: A Case Study of Knowledge Practices in the Development Assistance Committee

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Introduction

‘Perhaps never before has so much been made of the power of ideas, right theory or good policy in solving the problems of global poverty’, observes David Mosse in his edited collection (2011a: 3). Anthropologists, he suggests, have either analysed the material effects of these ideas as weapons in the battlefields of knowledge in development programming, or, from a Foucauldian perspective, have examined how discourses create development subjects. But until recently there has been little interest in ‘knowledge practices at the top’ (ibid.: 2) – head offices of development organizations with a global reach. One can offer various explanations for this. Arguably what goes on at the top is less interesting to study. The tedious nature of what happens in committee rooms – admirably described by Green (2011) – compares unfavourably with the excitement and colour found at the interface of international development professionals, government officials and citizen groups in an aid-recipient country. Compared to what happens in the process of programme implementation, policy texts are constructed with relative ease (Bebbington et al. 2007). Furthermore, access to the top is difficult and it is hard to protect anonymity in analyses that describe what people do and say (Bebbington et al. 2004). Notwithstanding this, the last decade has seen the publication of several insider accounts of knowledge practices at the top, including in the World Bank (Bebbington et al. 2004; Broad 2007; Mosse 2011b) and in government aid agencies (Eyben 2004; Gastel and Nuijten 2005; Green 2011). All of these analyse the recursive connections between discourses, politics and practices, and render visible the actors and the spaces in which discourses of aid are constructed and contested.

This chapter offers a case from a rather different organizational context, the Development Assistance Committee (DAC).1 Unlike the World Bank or

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the Dutch or British aid ministries, the DAC – the donors’ club – is not an implementing agency. As a constituent part of the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), it seeks to influence how the world thinks and acts by identifying and finding ‘good practice’ solutions to problems; these become standards against which member states’ actions are scrutinized through peer review processes (Mahon and McBride 2009). Whether this influence happens depends on the wider political environment in the member state’s agency and on the skills of those using DAC guidance to exert pressure on their own management. Overall, the DAC has reflected the mainstream thinking of its time – for example, as one of the sites that produced the Washington Consensus (Zimmerman and Smith 2011). Because OECD staff – the Secretariat that supports the work of the DAC committees – broadly see their task as securing agreement, they worry if the group they are shepherding strays too far from what the Secretariat perceives to be the mainstream. This risk has been greatest among the policy thematic networks in the DAC’s subsidiary bodies – governance (Govnet), gender (Gendernet) and poverty (Povnet). Because such spaces have attracted the radical fringe of non-economists, struggling for a voice in their own organizations and finding strength in numbers in the DAC, Ruckert (2008: 111) suggests that the DAC should be conceived of as ‘a condensation of antagonistic social forces’. The present paper is an ethnographic observation of one such ideological struggle that occurred in a sub-committee – a ‘task team’ – composed of some 15 officials from the head offices of bilateral and multilateral agencies that met at regular intervals between 2008 and 2011 to produce three sets of texts, advised by the author in the role of ‘expert’ consultant. Our task was to produce guidance on the link between poor people’s empowerment and pro-poor growth.

Batliwala (2007: 557) proposes that, of all the development buzzwords, ‘empowerment is probably the most widely used and abused...coined to represent a clearly political concept, it has been “mainstreamed” in a manner that has virtually robbed it of its original meaning and strategic value’. Initially taken up by the social movements of the second half of the last century, empowerment was co-opted by mainstream development practitioners and converted into a neo-liberal and consumerist discourse that, Batliwala argues,