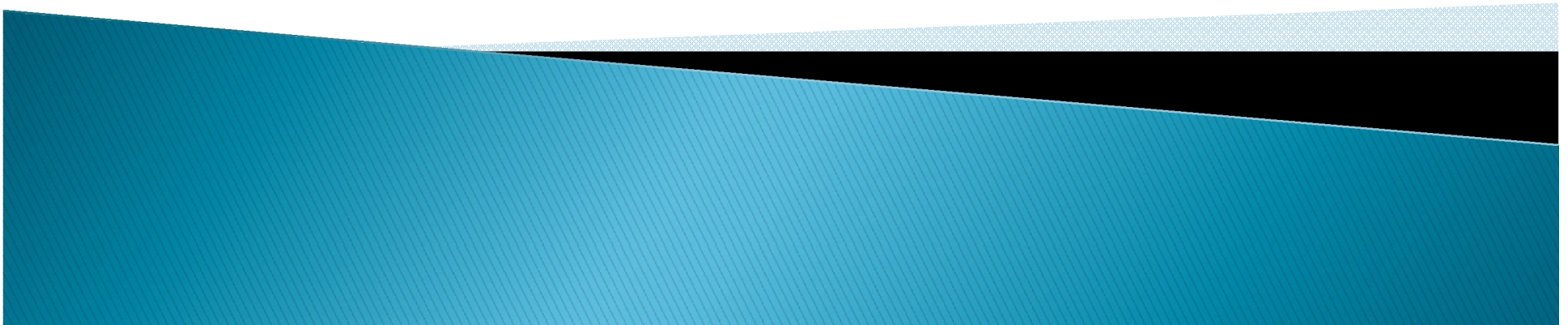


Illusion and disillusion in Irish development: Exploring the donors

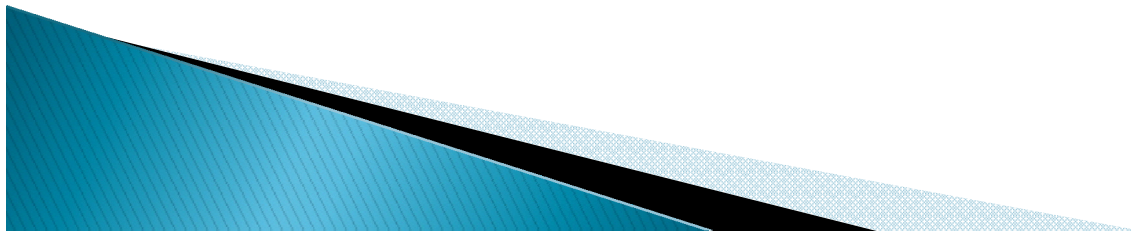
Dr Lorraine Mancey O'Brien, TCD/UCD



The Context

This research takes place in an Irish development donor organisation which, at the time of study, was based in Dublin, Ireland.

Irish Aid is a subsection of the Department of Foreign Affairs and is the Government of Ireland's programme of assistance to developing countries. This study was researched and written between 2005 and 2012.



The Research project

- ▶ *Despite a significant and internationally recognised history of Irish Government, missionary and NGO activity in developing countries over many decades, there have been few attempts to place this activity on a firm research basis and initiate new projects on organisational learning or evidence based outcomes...the creation of a system to collect information on such activity is crucial (Research project description, document to IRCHSS, April 2005: 1)*
- ▶ This 'system' was hoped to be a computerised archive ranging from qualitative accounts of individuals work to project reviews and longer term outcomes. At a theoretical level it was hoped that this project could explore factors influencing organisational learning. The objectives of this research stated that it was: To encourage learning across and within organisations by the sharing of programme experience and in doing so contribute to capacity development in the effective delivery of international aid (Research project description, document to IRCHSS, April 2005: 2).
- ▶ **The institutional arrangement with the LEARN project at TCD (2005-2008) provided financial sponsorship, access to field settings, and the sharing of experiences with other project contributors. After this period, I was self funded, and from 2009 worked as a Teaching Assistant in Gender and Anthropology within the Department of Sociology.**

Researching Development

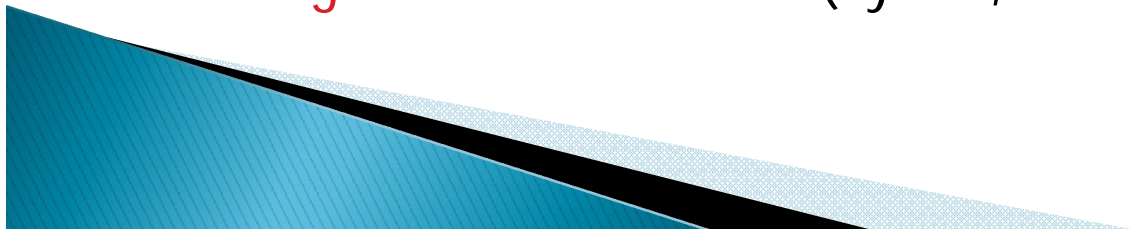
- ▶ Development had moved in the 1980s and 1990s from competing notions of political rationality to prioritising management driven techniques of developing goals and targets, which allowed policy to be measurable, accountable and filled with promises of learning and thus greater efficiency (Van Den Berg and Quarles van Ufford 2005: 203).
- ▶ According to these authors, the Millennium Development Goals were based on predicted futures for development planning which was reflected in this ideology. Yet often the development reality seems far from this, and disjunctures between these two points of intention and lived experience are endemic. Van Den Berg and Quarles van Ufford (2005) link this to development being conceptualised as a closed system:
- ▶ *Current development ideology may well be a closed system and instead of development being a concept which opens up outlooks, development is a form of secular fundamentalism...where hope is being closed down*

(Van Den Berg and Quarles van Ufford 2005: 206).

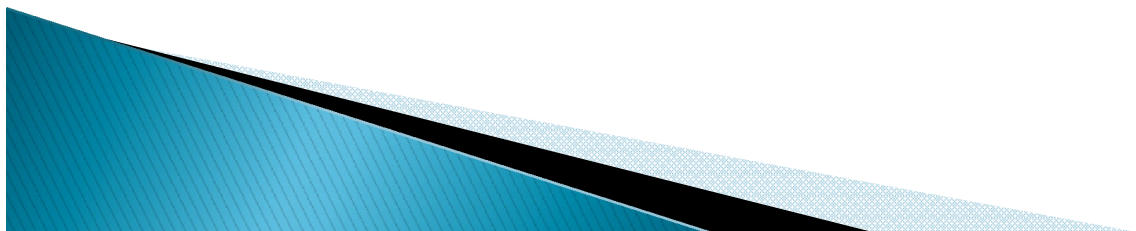


Exploring the donors

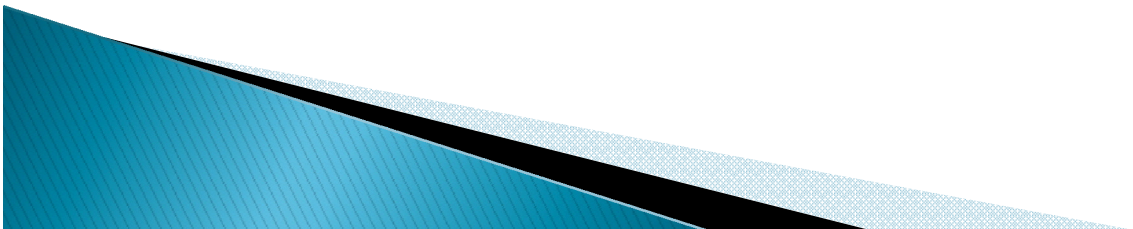
- ▶ The Elgar Companion to Development Studies calls for more research on cultures 'not of the weak, but of the strong' because of the many 'myths that legitimise their style of operation' (Clark, 2006: 100).
- ▶ Lewis states that rarely has anthropological work been undertaken on the inner workings of aid agencies and donors themselves (Lewis, 2005: 477).
- ▶
- ▶ So far, no official aid agency has been prepared to undertake a study that aims to learn about their staff's everyday practices – what they are doing, as distinct from what they report they are doing – and their effects (Eyben, 2010: 384).



- ▶ We hear a lot about 'voices from the field' but as of yet, nothing from the donor development workers at the other end, anthropologists have long concentrated on the field, perhaps now it is time to turn the mirror on development donors and ourselves (Escobar, 1991: 671).



- ▶
- ▶ Mr A, 43, Ireland
- ▶ Mrs AA, 51, Ireland
- ▶ Mr B, 57, Ireland
- ▶ Mrs BB, 38, Zambia
- ▶ Mr C, 54, Ireland
- ▶ Mrs CC, 53, Lesotho
- ▶ Mrs D, 52, Ireland
- ▶ Mrs DD, 32, South Africa
- ▶ Mrs E, 58, Ireland
- ▶ Mrs EE, 35, Ireland
- ▶ Mr F, 54, Ireland
- ▶ Mrs FF, 37, Ireland
- ▶ Mrs G, 46, Ireland
- ▶ Mrs GG, 56, Ireland
- ▶ Mrs H, 62, Ireland
- ▶ Mrs HH, 51, Ireland
- ▶ Mrs I, 43, Ireland
- ▶ Mrs II, 33, Ireland
- ▶ Mr J, 51, Ireland
- ▶ Mr JJ, 36, Uganda
- ▶ Mr K, 52, Ireland
- ▶ Mrs KK, 32, Uganda
- ▶ Mr L, 67, Ireland
- ▶ Mr LL, 37, Uganda



The Ordinary is Extraordinary

It seemed like a chance to do proper service work...I wanted to be involved with developing countries, that it would be rewarding, I wanted to be a small part of it, to help the specialists do their job but what's so frustrating is that I when I came in I had a conception of what it was and it wasn't that at all (Mr N, Interview, civil servant, HQ Dublin, 29 June 2006).

- ▶ The format of these phrases that start with the statement 'at first I thought X' (which is almost always followed by 'and then I realised Y') was remarked upon by Harvey Sacks (1992) in his 1967 'Lectures in Conversation'. He referred to these as the 'Thought/Realised' alternations that occur in what Gail Jefferson (2004) later termed as 'normalizing devices for extraordinary events.'
- ▶ This idea of the ordinary being extraordinary resonates strongly with my research work.



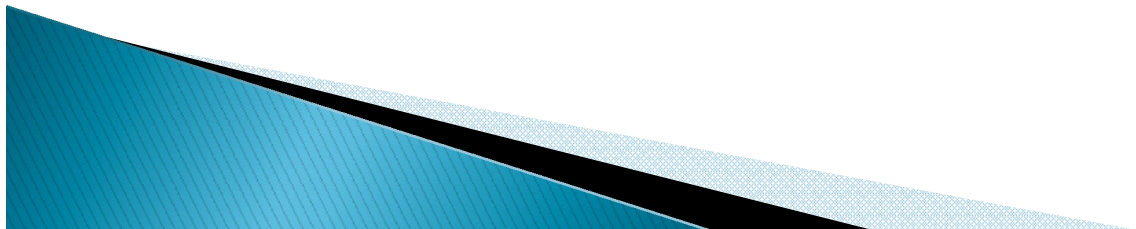
The Ordinary is Extraordinary

- ▶ Staff members told me that this was a method of ensuring that policies could be passed before formal meetings were attended. Due to these large and frequent meetings, it was mentioned to me that the only way anything ever got done there was to speak informally to those attending, either by popping into offices as you passed or by engaging them quickly outside the meeting before formal proceedings began, to ask them whether they were in agreement with the propositions that you were aiming to put through. As Mrs G put it to me:
 - ▶ *If I want something passed I have to make sure I see anyone who might oppose it before the meeting, usually I'll grab them in a corridor or if worse comes to worst I'll talk to them just before we go in, otherwise all the time in the meeting gets debating the issue with probably just the one person who might oppose it, so if you want anything done, that's the way you have to operate (Mrs G, 22 May 2007, Interview, HQ Dublin).*
- ▶ This informal and social way of navigating around a rigid and formal process was to become pertinent as I spent more time there. This is from 'confidential asides' told to me in July 2006 about the functioning of the organisation



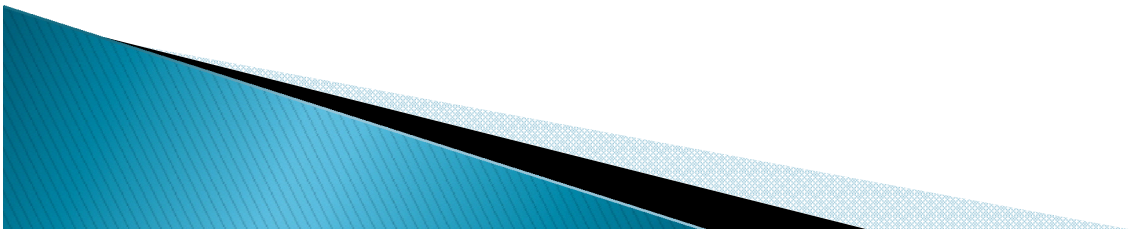
Illusion and Disillusion

- ▶ *I had an idea it was going to be a bit more glamorous, I spent sixteen years trying to get to foreign affairs, the idealised image of foreign affairs, I knew a few people, some diplomats, some general service staff and I had conflicting impressions of foreign affairs. When I heard it was Irish Aid I was coming to I had the impression I'd be involved with the programme countries, but that's for the technical section, you don't really hear a lot about them, it was a shock that it was admin, I thought I would be involved with the countries, that's what I wanted (30 June 2006, Interview, HQ Dublin).*



But the illusion was also mine ...

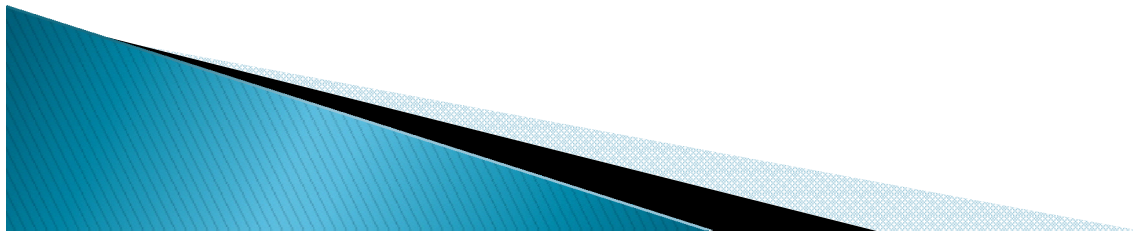
- ▶ That I could fix them .. Provide an OLS based on rationalised predictability and replicability, when development itself is messy and chaotic, even when operating within a bureaucratic system -
- ▶ *The core challenge in development work is in 'recognising the importance of mess to the research process' (Humble, 2012: 80).*
- ▶ So I looked at the chaotic – the messy reality – the ways people 'bucked' the system to manage on a daily basis, and the ways they 'coped' with what they saw as a rigid, impersonable and de-motivating organisation to work in



Studying 'Them' To Study the Self?

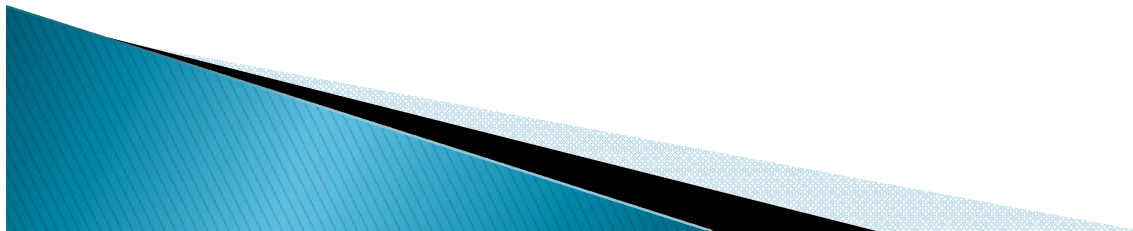
Autoethnography is a form of writing combining autobiography and ethnography that 'make[s] the researcher's own experience a topic of investigation in its own right' (Ellis and Bochner, 2000: 733).

- ▶ Ethnographers do not enter an organisation objectively.
- ▶ Ethnographers may study others to find out more about themselves (Rosen, 1991)
- ▶ By bringing both subject and object into the same space, I became an active participant in the process of meaning creation within the research process.



- ▶ *Emotions are an 'inevitable and unavoidable part of the research process' (Widdowfield, 2000: 205).*

Yet emotional knowledge, intuition and the subsequent series of epiphanies that I called 'pennies dropping' came as clarity from reflexivity and self analysis. This is a peripheral aspect of development research as it makes you challenge your OWN assumptions



- ▶ The use of emotions in organisational or development research may help us to move away from an objective, linear, causal and modernist approach, where rationality is based upon the premise that the organisational system and evaluation processes are linked to predictable and quantifiable results.



- ▶ Development workers are situated in a 'complex system with blurred boundaries' where knowledge is not objective or concerned with technical considerations alone.
- ▶ Consequently those involved with development need to find a way of understanding and reframing the unpredictable and messy nature of the work that they are involved with. I propose that reflection, and the analysis of emotion within development work can provide deeper insight into the issues we are exploring.



What next?

- ▶ I'm teaching the teachers HOW to teach development within secondary schools
- ▶ Challenging their own assumptions is a major part of this work
- ▶ Looking at ways of incorporating development into ALL subject areas
- ▶ Looking at our emotional engagement with aid and development to challenge development as something 'out there' and to see it as global interconnectedness
- ▶ To redefine development as social justice and diversity

