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## Beyond Redistribution: Relational Perspectives on Economic Justice

To successfully address economic injustices, redistribution policies must be designed to recognise the webs of societal relations that influence people's economic choices. Such relational webs shape and are shaped by the diverse ways in which goods and services are procured – a process that can severely limit the ability of some people to lead fulfilling and decent lives. Frequently, policy approaches treat people as autonomous individuals, ignoring how relational power shapes and constrains their choices. This brief puts forward an alternative approach. A relational perspective can help policy makers and activists better understand the social processes that can hinder progress towards equitable outcomes. Unlike conventional approaches to economic analysis, a relational approach highlights the voices, views and experiences of those whose relational lives are largely unknown to those setting economic policy. This briefing highlights the value of such an approach and of the importance of 'recognition' and 'representation' for successful redistribution policies.

Economic injustice exists when enjoyment of goods and services by some is dependent on institutionalised relational processes from which the privileged benefit to the detriment of others.

Economic theories have tended to dominate the way we think and debate about how to do good development. Such theories derive from a perspective that understands the world in terms of entities and categories, which can result in limited understanding and limited policy choices for greater economic justice.

A relational perspective challenges this approach. Relational perspectives illuminate the social processes that shape the production, distribution and consumption of goods and services.

Making these relations visible can help development policy actors better understand the connections between inequitable power relations in society and economic injustice.

This *In Focus Policy Briefing* describes relational perspectives and focuses on one particular approach – the provisioning system – and its value for policy research, due to no prior assumptions being made about the extent to which markets are the most common pathway of production, distribution and consumption. The briefing then explores concepts of recognition and representation and argues the importance of making visible and responding to alternative perspectives on the complex problems of global inequities.

### Relational perspectives

Relational perspectives can help policy actors to better understand the social processes that constrain the possibilities for people to improve their lives. A relational perspective is one in which individuals are in the first instance understood and observed as they relate to each other. Society is understood primarily as not about pre-constituted individuals but as historically generated systemic patterns of relationships imbued and shaped by operations of power.

A study by du Toit of women workers in the South African fruit export industry (du Toit 2004) highlights the social processes that only a relational perspective approach can reveal (see Case Study box 1). In contrast to the methodological individualism that

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informs much current economic policy research, du Toit's relational perspective understands farm workers as embedded in webs of social relations that severely constrain their possibilities for improving their lives. Similarly, in a case study of Yoruba women, Cornwall demonstrated that their capacity to be successful in the market place is affected by other relational domains of their lives (Cornwall 2007). What Cornwall describes as 'affective relations' – with husbands, siblings, children, fellow traders – play an enormously significant part in what people do and what choices they are able to make.

## Case study: Understanding economic injustice through a relational lens

Using a relational perspective, du Toit explored the intimate and mutually reinforcing links between low income and a poor household's lack of social power. He found that women workers in the South African fruit export industry are embedded in a patriarchal system which is reinforced both within the household (by fathers and husbands) and in the work context (by farmers and managers). These patriarchal values heavily influence how workers are treated. Women labourers' lack of the basic assets necessary for household food production or entrepreneurial activity, and their consequent dependence on insecure paid jobs and on networks of patronage renders them profoundly disadvantaged in relation to those who, at European breakfast tables, consume the orange juice those workers produced.

It has been argued that there has been a global historical shift from a situation where production and exchanges of goods and services were subordinate to and expressed through social relationships, to one in which social systems are driven by the market economy (Stewart 2007). Both Du Toit and Cornwall demonstrate that reality is more complex than that because of the interplay between the two.

Bourdieu's work on *fields* helps us understand why this is so. Instead of doing research in terms of pre-determined categories such as markets and states, we look for relational patterns that become habitual over time. Thus, an *economic field* is a sustained pattern of relations involved in producing, distributing and consuming goods and services for culturally-

determined material needs. Fields are nested within or overlap with other fields. The extent of overlap between fields explains how relational processes in one field impact on those in another. A provisioning system approach, explained below, incorporates the notion of fields by illuminating the extent to which the character of an economic relationship both influences and is influenced by other kinds of relations.

## A provisioning system approach

This is a research approach in which the extent to which markets are the most common pathway of production, distribution and consumption is not assumed in advance of enquiry.

An aspect of this perspective is that it takes into account the simultaneous provisioning of particular goods through different paths – market, state, community, domestic group – and the articulation of market and non-market regimes along each path. Indeed, most goods shift through different phases along their path and most goods and services can be obtained through market and non-market ways. The interaction between these factors will affect both the symbolic and the economic value of the goods and services available in a society.

(Narotzky 2005)

## The value of a provisioning system approach

The overall conceptual appeal of a provisioning system approach derives from connecting modes of social relations in the field of consumption with those in associated fields of production and distribution (Fine 2002). Much recent thinking using this approach has been associated with an interest in global inter-connectedness between different local webs of relations, for example, through studies of consumer society (*ibid.*), global commodity chains (Barrientos *et al* 2003) and the social life of things (Appadurai 1986). However, the approach is equally insightful when looking at relations of production, distribution and consumption within just one locality.

In any social context a similar good or service may be provisioned through different fields of relations (although our modern focus on the dominance of the market leads us to downplay or ignore those relations operating outside it). The field is both influenced by and influences

the character of the good or service. Narotzky's look at child care arrangements in the UK illustrates this (See Case Study box 2).

## Case Study: A provisioning system approach to understanding childcare arrangements in the UK

Using a provisioning system approach Narotzky explored childcare arrangements and the various possibilities that might be available depending on the local historical and cultural context. In the United Kingdom for example, childcare provisioning can be through state services, regulated and unregulated markets, relatives, friends or neighbours. Options will be influenced by income, cultural values concerning letting children be looked after by strangers, the existence of a social network and the availability of willing relatives. Thus childcare is not just a service for which one pays or does not pay, but is imbued with values and meanings that shape the character of its provisioning. Narotzky's argument is that goods and services appear different and are materially different (care from a grandmother is likely to differ from care in a crèche) according to the social relations that have been involved in their production, distribution and consumption.

A provisioning system approach can help make visible much of social life that impacts on material wellbeing and that more conventional approaches to economic analysis ignore. Narotzky argues 'If we focus on the entire process of making goods and services available, we can see how the different social relations existing at the different stages of the process, in different locations and historical moments, are crucial to the understanding of who gets what'

(Narotzky 2005)

The different pathways in which goods and services are provisioned and the relational webs of power associated with these pathways determine the symbolic and the economic value of different goods and services. This explains why the monetary value and status of goods and services cannot always be explained by the law of supply and demand. Society can recognise that a service, such as social work, is badly needed yet at the same time the demand for such a service may still not lead to it having a high monetary value.

“ Redistribution policies that have underplayed the significance of society, culture and power [...] may temporarily satisfy material needs but will fail to build lasting social justice. ”

Inequitable power relations and the invisibility of much of the provisioning system to policymakers mean that those suffering most from economic injustice are being mis-represented. Their lives are being interpreted differently from how they might themselves interpret it, if they were able to be heard – to be recognised on their own terms.

### Re-framing: why recognition and representation matter

While the old politics of redistribution waned from the mid-1970s, there was a growth in political movements whose claims for justice have been based on forms of identity other than those associated with class. Whereas class-based claims were based on the inequity of the capitalist system and the exploitation of labour, these new claims were based on structural inequities of status – for example, around gender or race. These claims for ‘recognition’ were about the right to be recognised on one’s own terms – the right to be different. In her seminal work, Nancy Fraser argued that justice could only be achieved if redistribution and recognition stayed coupled together as mutually supporting elements of a progressive political agenda that avoids essentialising group differences (Dahl *et al.* 2004).

### Recognition and redistribution

Redistribution policies that have underplayed the significance of society, culture and power as forces that shape history and individual lives, may temporarily satisfy material needs but will fail to build lasting social justice. An agenda of recognition brings relationships to the foreground – both as explanatory concept and as desirable practice. It shifts the focus from how to allocate perceived scarce resources among differently labelled categories of people to how best to support equitable relationships between people without any prior need for essentialist classification by the state or other authoritative actors. The relational emphasis is about building a socially inclusive society based on a diversity of identities and interests. It speaks to the representation agenda through a concern for creating the space and opportunity for different groups within society to find and build voice. Representation privileges the democratisation of knowledge and agency. Successful redistribution policies would be achieved not through top-down planning and essentialist categorisation based on collecting and managing the control of ‘objective evidence’ but by building trust through active participation in collective action and problem solving and providing space and resources for open-ended and challenging agendas to enter the debate.

As Fraser stresses, mal-distribution and mis-recognition are inequities that require political action for institutional as well as personal change. Her later addition of a third ‘R’ – representation – is an argument that such change cannot be achieved without parity of participation in debating how each of us understands what is our social world and therefore what needs to be done to make it more just. Everyone has the right to represent their own situation – their self-image and sense-making of the world, rather than be represented through others’ sense-making. Thus the notion of parity of representation challenges the deeply-embedded thinking of most current policy approaches, which are based on an idea of ‘objective’ knowledge that ignores how power shapes whose representations count. However, bearing in mind simultaneously two or more different ways of viewing the world is extraordinarily difficult. To shift to an acceptance of multiple paradigms means asking questions about who we are and why we understand the world in a certain way because of who we are.

While parity of participation in representing the world is challenging, it nevertheless offers a solution to the failure of policy to grapple with complex problems of structural poverty. Complex

problems are characterised by there being no clear agreement about what exactly the problem is; by uncertainty and ambiguity as to how improvements might be made; and by being unbounded in terms of the time and resources they could absorb to solve. With such problems, any decision taken from just one class or status position is necessarily informed by that perspective and is unavoidably partial. Different frames are required to illuminate different parts of the complex whole.

### The effects of mis-recognition

The sustainability of human society would be strengthened if greater parity were to be achieved through changing the culturally valued institutional arrangements that perpetuate mis-recognition. Because institutionalised power shapes what is produced and valued, some kinds of work often disappear from the context of economic analysis; those involved in care, and in other forms of unpaid work, become invisible. As a result, the depletion of human resources goes unnoticed and unmeasured, with serious implications for sustainable economic development and wellbeing. While mainstream economics talk of the depreciation of machinery, and, more recently, are becoming concerned about the environment, they rarely consider depletion in terms of human resources, households and social reproduction.

(Fontana 2009)

Much current thinking concerning economic justice focuses on the requirement to change the politically shaped and culturally imbued institutional arrangements that perpetuate inequity, marginalisation and deprivation. The added value of the provisioning system approach, when wedded to the notions of recognition and representation, is that it helps make visible elements of such arrangements that power keeps hidden and that may be ignored by those seeking to change power relations.

“ A relational approach highlights the voices, views and experiences of those whose relational lives are largely unknown to those setting economic policy. ”

## Key messages

- Mainstream economic theories dominate the way we think and debate about how we do good development, constrain the imagination and limit policy choices for greater economic justice.
- Relational perspectives are ways of understanding the world through a focus on systemic connections and processes, and the values and meaning that people give to these.
- Development policy tends to be debated within conventional spatial and analytical categories. Relational perspectives are an alternative approach that would serve as a useful complement.
- A relational approach emphasises the importance of parity of recognition and representation, highlighting the voices, views and experiences of those whose relational lives are largely unknown to those setting economic policy.
- International activist organisations concerned about economic justice already use relational perspectives when they seek to demonstrate the effect that we all have upon each other through our actions, but they could usefully bring such perspectives more to the forefront when engaging with policymakers.

The current global economic crisis could offer a significant opportunity for looking afresh at how we understand our collective economic lives and how we can contribute to creating more just and sustainable societies. This requires making explicit the assumptions that shape our visions about interventions, and how we judge their 'success'. Above all, it requires exposing the operations of power that keep some perspectives dominant and others invisible.

## Further reading

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## Credits

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For other briefs on 'redistribution and beyond' see: [www.ids.ac.uk/go/infocus11](http://www.ids.ac.uk/go/infocus11)

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