The Power of Labelling in Development Practice

We all label ourselves and others to signal different aspects of our identities. Labels are a means to construct our social world: they define norms in relation to others who bear similar or different labels. Similarly, labelling is commonplace within development practice. As policymakers, practitioners and researchers, we use 'frames' and 'labels' to help our analyses and to describe to others what we do. We quantify and measure categories of people to define needs, justify interventions and to formulate and channel solutions to perceived problems. While they may be efficient, such labelling processes are also dynamic and political. Therefore, they can produce unintended, and sometimes, unwelcome consequences. For example, labelling may shift – or sustain – power relations in ways that trigger social dislocation and prejudice efforts to achieve greater equity. This *IDS Policy Briefing* highlights key dimensions of the power of labelling in development, recommending greater self awareness from policy actors and more sensitive and nuanced responses to local political contexts.

Labelling – of ourselves and of others – is common to all societies. We may accept the labels society ascribed to us in childhood, for example 'female', 'black', 'middle class' but might also reject some of these or add to them. We use labels to describe our expectations concerning the quality of our relationships with others, defining commonalities and differences. Labels impose boundaries and define categories.

Since the Age of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, the labelling of people by public institutions in Europe and North America has been part of a wider intellectual paradigm, which considers categorisation, measurement and quantification integral to rational and objective decision-making. The bureaucratic forms of government that developed alongside the scientific revolution used social statistics to provide the evidence necessary for rational choices in the allocation of resources. These 'official' labels were generally portrayed and

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A census or survey is often used to classify people in abstract ways

accepted as objective facts, though many were rooted in intensely political processes. For example, bureaucracies frequently used racial and other group classifications that were created in the imperial and colonial periods, when authorities counted, categorised, taxed and deployed slave, servile and forced labour, often over vast geographical areas. By adopting these very labels, bureaucracies have – both deliberately and inadvertently – supported social hierarchies. Thus, for some, such as the Brahmins in India or the Tutsi in the Great Lakes region of East Africa, social privilege was reinforced, while for most others, such as those given the blanket colonial label of 'Indian' in the Americas, servile or subordinate status was emphasised. Bureaucratic labelling instigated other political processes as well: in some places, people used labels to gain and manipulate political capital; in others, they contested labels and set about counter-labelling. Such is the power and politics of labelling.

Key issues

- Why do labels such as 'the poor' matter so much in development practice?

- Is categorisation and labelling integral, or necessary, to the allocation of scarce resources?

- How do externally imposed categories trigger unintended changes in social relations?

- Do policymakers sustain the relations and structures that underpin inequalities when they adopt or work within pre-existing categories?

- How would rethinking the labels we use contribute towards shifting power relations in favour of people living in poverty?

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Labelling in development

In the 1980s, much development policy and practice was concerned with defining and reaching 'target populations'. Effective 'targeting' involved categorising across and within 'needy' populations in order to prioritise assistance. It also required convincing both those selected and those excluded from the target that (a) the criteria used were legitimate and (b) the assigned labels should be accepted. A seminal collection of papers, *Labelling in Development Policy,* published in 1989, challenged the policy and practices of targeting. The authors were interested in the unasked questions about how the state might serve the interests of some to the exclusion of others.

Since that time, ideas which were just emerging and evolving have entered mainstream development thinking. There is now increasing acceptance that knowledge — how we understand and describe the world — is at least partially contingent on our time and place and the relations of power that shape our lives. Yet, many involved in the world of aid policy and practice appear to remain unaware of these ideas or have ignored their more radical implications.

The label "refugee" homogenises the needs and identities of this diverse group of people

Do people accept the labels given them by the state?

In a follow-up to his 1989 work on labelling, Geof Wood observes that the model of bureaucratic rationality characterised by authoritative labelling only applies to successful societies where the state is sufficiently legitimate to classify people in relation to needs and can target resources to those needs. In many situations, this is not the case. At one end of a range, the state is struggling but failing to establish the authority of its labelling over the rest of society — leading to various forms of contestation and subversion. At the other end, the state is more obviously obliged to compromise with a hierarchy of intermediary actors who, through patronage relationships, informally manage the prioritisation of needs.

Apolitical understandings of social reality: implications for labelling

Despite notable transitions, apolitical 'rational choice' views of society still have undue influence on development thinking and aid practice, and are seemingly ingrained in bureaucratic cultures. According to these views, societies are comprised of autonomous individuals, who have characteristics and associated needs that can be measured and compared. Correspondingly, 'inequality' is defined in terms of measurable differences or disparities between categories of individuals, as these are perceived and labelled by observers. Arguably, there has been an upsurge in categorisation and labelling, as demands for aid effectiveness and concerns with equity increase (see, for example, the 2006 *World Development Report*). Constructing categories of people and labelling them is regarded as an efficient means for managing resource allocation and for tracking whether disadvantaged people are benefiting from the development process.

Alternative — political — understandings of social reality contend that labels and identities are created through different historical processes and are shaped by power relations. Observable disparities between classes of individuals are often signs of these operations of power at work. Therefore, international aid agencies will find it difficult to achieve the goals they have set themselves if they seek to do something about measurable observable differences without addressing the power relationships of which these disparities are symptoms. We need to understand the politics and power of the categorisation processes we employ since, despite its advantages, labelling can thwart intended goals and result in undesirable consequences.

Some consequences of labelling

To understand the effects of labelling we must explore the connection between how policy actors frame a problem and the labelling of people that accompanies such framing.

Reduction: In some cases, people's whole life-stories, their multiple identities, are reduced to specific cases/problems. Lyla Mehta and Jaideep Gupte's research on forced migration shows that the almost arbitrary categorisation of who constitutes a 'refugee' or an 'oustee' can lead to systematic exclusion of large groups of people who may be in an equally precarious situation. Such categories have often proved inadequate for informing the precise strategy or method of intervention. There is also a danger that such labelling inappropriately presupposes conditions of vulnerability that justify top-down, needs-based interventions. It blinds the aid administrator to the resilience and resourcefulness of the forced migrants and, therefore, limits livelihood and reconstruction options.

Misinterpretation: People are often labelled in ways that convey particular interpretations of the underlying problem.

> ## "The issue is not whether we label, but which labels are created, and whose labels prevail to define a whole situation or policy area, under what conditions, with what effects. "

Such external definitions and labels can entirely misrepresent the problem or present a partial view of the issues. Again, this type of top-down labelling risks responses that can fuel conflict. In a study of the impact of religious labelling, Cassandra Balchin argues that the current donor emphasis on framing religion as a central development issue may help to narrow the spaces for secular alternatives, which is preferred even by many believers. While religion is undoubtedly important for many women and is certainly part of public political discourse in Muslim countries and communities, it may not be the most significant factor determining the parameters of women's everyday existence. Balchin argues that development initiatives and donor support need to recognise this point if they wish to avoid harming local struggles for gender equality. Privileging financial and other support on the basis of the religious label can create a breach between women's organisations which, until then, were sharing a common platform on many issues.

Labelling in Nigeria

Steve Abah and colleagues are exploring how local government reproduces and reinforces stereotypical labelling. Every major ethnic group in Nigeria has a stereotype, which influences and can even determine cross-group relations. These labels have played major roles in the governance system in Nigeria. Decisions about who should occupy certain sensitive positions are sometimes based on the stereotype. Another dimension of the label is the 'son of the soil' syndrome. The exclusion resulting from this means that some Nigerians who live in parts of the country away from the place of their ancestral origin are labelled and treated as foreigners in public policies.

Stigmatisation: Development agencies can reproduce labels that stigmatise. Joy Moncrieffe argues that many, including some development practitioners, regard Haiti as a beggarly society, afflicted by voodoo and well nigh impossible to transform. These perceptions may partially explain the

dictatorial rather than participatory approach to policymaking that is evident in some development agencies; the discrimination against Haitians that is prevalent in a number of countries within the region; and the frequent expressions of futility, particularly from members of the Haitian public. Moncrieffe's case study of labelling and child poverty in Haiti emphasises these points. Children, on the whole, have little priority in the government's agenda and some are labelled in ways that prejudice their life chances. For example, 'street children' are among the most reviled in Haiti. They are reputedly violent and are avoided, even by some of the prominent development agencies. Interviews among children revealed gross abuse by the security forces, paedophiles, various service providers

Claiming labels

Because labelling defines access to many resources and services, people often organise around a perceived common identity and seek to make themselves visible to the state or aid agencies by using a label that fits within a wider pre-established category. For example, in some South American countries, people have used the label 'citizen' to claim their right to an identity card and the services and status that flow from this.

In contrast, those with less capacity for collective action may stay invisible, with their claims ignored.

and community members. While some children reject the label, others confessed to acting in the violent manner expected and some consider themselves as deserving of abuse. Aid agencies must be aware of the 'meanings' of the societal labels they adopt.

Benefitting from labels: Labelling is a dynamic process. People may disagree with each other about the meaning of a label. Where they have the space and opportunity to contest, groups and individuals may successfully redefine and eventually give new meanings to old labels.

People may also use labels to gain political capital. Arjan de Haan shows that in the case of India, labels of 'caste' and 'tribe' are deeply ingrained in public policy responses,

and are closely associated with privileged access to resources. These labels have not been static; they evolved during the colonial period and with the build up of the Indian administration after Independence. Policies of targeting groups using these labels – through programmes of socio-economic development, and affirmative action ('reservation') – have reinforced the way people label themselves and how they are labelled by their community, and has contributed to the reaffirmation of caste identities in the political sphere. This, in turn, has led to further development and refinement of the labels, in particular through extension of programmes to other groups, and the creation of sub-divisions within labels.

Conversely, labelling processes can generate negative politics when they are associated with access to resources and services. They can for instance, lead to changes to existing patterns of social relations, which may, in turn, drive a wedge between neighbours and instigate conflict, particularly in situations of deprivation and exclusion.

Limiting accountability: Finally, bureaucratic labelling can impede accountability. Although, labels are used to indicate diversity, they may homogenise people into stereotypes. Individual differences and rights claims that do not match the stereotype risk being ignored.

Labelling in the World Development Reports for 2000/01 and 2006

In its 2000/01 report on poverty reduction and the 2006 report on equity, the World Bank labels 'the poor' and other categories of excluded and marginalised people. It constructs the labels within its own categorical view of society, even when, as in the case of the WDR 2000/01, the report was informed by a lengthy process of 'participatory' inquiry. As the reports show, World Bank policies focus on changing the pattern of distribution between labelled categories and pay little attention to transforming the relational processes that are generating poverty.

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Recognising and responding to the politics and power of labelling

That the 'what', 'why', and 'how' of labelling is still so rarely examined raises important issues concerning the aid policy process and the perspectives of those who influence the theory and knowledge that drive it. The implications for development practice include the need to:

- **Reflect on and respond to the political impact of labels**, which involves continually checking that the labels used will support empowerment.

- **Acknowledge the significance of labelling for resource allocation**, which requires encouraging cross-identity understandings of citizenship to respond to situations such as those Steve Abah and colleagues describe here. Agencies need to respond to the claims of politically marginalised groups without creating perverse outcomes.

- **Identify practical strategies to tackle labels that stigmatise** by stimulating changes to the (negative) meanings of labels and promoting the use of constructive symbols. In order to facilitate these, agencies could encourage self-labelling, facilitate community-based dialogue between differently labelled people, encourage educational initiatives, and prioritise support to those working with children and young people.

- **Create spaces for deliberation** by enabling multiple voices to debate how problems are framed and to challenge the way people are labelled in association with that framing. This requires acknowledging the labels that people give themselves and encouraging substantive participation, guided by a deeper understanding of how power influences group dynamics.

- **Facilitate policy responses that reflect people's own stories** rather than limiting individuals and groups to 'cases' that can be categorised.

- **Encourage a diversity of ways to frame problems**. This is being helped by the current emphasis on country-led approaches, which can provide opportunities for a plurality of understandings.

- **Respond to the shifting complexity of identities,** which entails tracking societal dynamics. This could be achieved by building on existing tools such as 'drivers of change'.

- **Resist the temptation for neat categories and easy quantification** by deliberately spending time exploring everyday life at the grassroots, for example through an immersion programme (see *IDS Policy Briefing* 22).

- **Expand timeframes** to accommodate people's own efforts to define and explain their situation, identifying the labels that best suit them as part of a wider political process of building social solidarity.

In brief, development practitioners and policy actors need to be constantly vigilant as to the effects of their labelling.

Further reading

Rosalind Eyben (2004) *Social and Political Inequality: A Review Essay*, IDS Development Bibliography 20, Brighton: IDS. Available at: www.ids.ac.uk/ids/bookshop/db.html

Naila Kabeer (ed.) (2005) *Inclusive Citizenship: Meanings and Expressions*, London: Zed Books

Joy Moncrieffe (2004) 'Beyond Categories: Power, Recognition and the Conditions for Equity', Background Paper to WDR2006, available on the World Bank WDR 2006 webpage (www.worldbank.org)

Geof Wood (ed.) (1989) *Labelling in Development Policy*, London: Sage Publications

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