

ONE

A Methodological Approach to 'Best Practices'

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- 'Best practices' is an ambitious term and for most purposes it would be better to lower our ambitions and settle instead for 'good practices'. In the notion of *best* practices lies the expectation that an intervention has been successful according to some criteria and that it is better than something else. More often than not these criteria and comparisons are not made explicit and the success is described in political rather than analytical terms. As a result, much of the valuable information on how a best practice has come about, and how it can be replicated elsewhere, is lost. At worst, knowledge from earlier learning becomes invisible and resources become absorbed in new periods of trial and error attempting to develop another best practice.¹

In everyday language, best practices comes across as a conglomerate of several phenomena. The term is not limited to a well-planned intervention to solve or ameliorate a social problem; best practices may be used also as a good idea, an inspiration, a discourse, a technical innovation or a new practice within a profession, to mention a few examples. As a matter of fact, it is within the last two uses of the term that most of the present literature is found (see Ch. 6).

In this chapter we shall try to reach a better understanding of what a best practice in poverty reduction is and the conditions under which it might develop. The complex realities of poverty and poverty reduction will be brought in only marginally. First, we ask what can be learned about best practices from the already existing literature on evaluation research; second, we discuss how the same practice may be judged differently at different times; third, we look at transferability and how to shift a best practice from one context to another without the

loss of those elements that make it a best practice; fourth, we discuss political variables and the impact of vested interests on the outcome and judgement of best practices; fifth, we ask who are the users and who are to be the judges of whether a practice is best; finally, we examine the impact of best practices on poverty reduction and offer some directions for those who want to identify a good practice and transfer it to another setting.

BEST PRACTICES AND EVALUATION

Evaluation research analyses the effects of specific interventions; some label it applied research.² The types of interventions to be studied vary from a small well-defined public programme, intended to reach a small well-defined target group within a limited time, to a broad programme reaching out to a heterogeneous group of people with a multiple set of desirable and not too well-defined effects to be developed over a long period.

The more variables involved in the evaluation of an intervention, the more difficult are the methodology and the theoretical work needed. It should be stressed that evaluation procedures are only a tool for developing a more systematic understanding of how an intervention works. An evaluation procedure is not magic. Only partial information can ever be ascertained, and the border between information produced by professional evaluators and information owned by non-professional participants in the intervention is diffuse and at times difficult to penetrate.

In some ways a best practices approach can be described as an 'evaluation-light'. The language of evaluation research may be used while the strict criteria of evaluation research are transformed into a more intuitive understanding of what is successful and why. Some will argue that only professional evaluators should be allowed to judge the quality of an intervention. Others will argue that non-professional evaluators who are close to the intervention should be also included to broaden the perspective.

For professional and non-professional evaluators alike, there are certain basic criteria that can improve the quality and credibility of a best practice approach. At least five elements need to be taken into account in the process of identifying and describing the evolution of a best practice.

At the outset, it is necessary to establish a starting point for the intervention and to identify the target group. What was the situation for the group before the intervention, both in general and in terms of those specific circumstances that the intervention is designed to change? What is the problem and how can the living conditions of the target group be described? Can certain indicators of the problem be identified and can they be monitored and followed throughout the intervention? Without a baseline at the outset it is difficult to establish a convincing case of progress from an intended good intervention to a best practice. This part of the methodology can sometimes be seen in the original argument for why an intervention was needed.

A second element in this process is to describe the goals of the intervention, however diffuse they may be, and the expected results. This is not a straightforward procedure. Goals may come in clusters and become even more difficult to describe when different parts of the bureaucratic and political system define different goals or criteria for success. Miller (see Ch. 3) provides examples of layers of goals defined by different actors who have different interests in the outcome of an intervention. Unanticipated effects, both positive and negative, are likely to develop along the way, and these in turn may change the original goal(s). A study by Berner (1999) shows how public interventions designed to help squatters gain legal access to the land they occupied took a wrong turn. Grand schemes with ambitious housing projects and legal regulations increased the price of land and eventually drove out the poor. The squatters would have been better off with a step-by-step implementation process, starting with a minimal infrastructure and limited services that allowed the users to steer the process themselves. Contrary to conventional wisdom and under certain circumstances, an illegal system of taking over land may actually provide a better practice in creating housing for squatters than a legal one.

A third element is to make visible the kind of instruments for change that are built into the intervention. What kind of principles and ethical considerations does the intervention build on? What kind of expertise is needed to fulfil the goals of the intervention? How is the intervention organized and financed? Who are responsible for its implementation? What is the role of the users? What kind of resources are allocated and what guarantees are given that the financing will be continued until the intervention has achieved its goals? Built into the organization of the intervention are features that will increase or decrease the probability

of the intervention ending up as a best practice. Joshi and Moore (see Ch. 2) stress the need for an intervention to be predictable for the users as well as for the other people involved. The officials in charge must establish their credibility before the users can trust them and their intentions. The intervention must be stable over time, in content and in procedures. Users must be given a formal right to benefits delivered through the programme. Joshi and Moore see these requirements as basic to the success of any anti-poverty programme.

A fourth element of significance for the evaluation is the political and cultural climate in which the intervention is launched. Are these surroundings positive or is there opposition to the intervention? From where does the support for the intervention come and who are antagonistic towards it? This is an issue that comes to the fore in interventions intended to reduce poverty. Poverty reduction is more than anything else a question of the redistribution of resources, whether it be land, water, power, or monetary, political, educational or symbol-laden resources. In essence it means that some groups have to relinquish their resources and privileges and turn them over to a group for whom they may not have much love. Poverty reduction needs to be analysed within a conflict paradigm if further understanding is to be gained (Øyen 1996).

A fifth element is discussion of the implications of different time horizons. At what point in time should the intervention be judged and defined? Why is a certain timing chosen to declare the intervention a best practice? Is it for reasons of a financial, political or professional nature? Is the money running out? Do those in charge need to show a success story? Have the original goals been achieved? What might have happened had a different timing been chosen? Is there an optimum time at which to judge the progress of a practice? Can something be termed a best practice only when it has attained its goals and thereby made itself superfluous?

The latter question stresses two features of an evaluation. One is that any intervention goes through different stages and the point in time at which the performance is judged reflects a stage rather than a final performance. The other is the dilemma posed by the starting point of the observation. When an intervention is initiated there is no way to guarantee that it will actually grow into a best practice.

The presentation above lays out some of the difficulties faced by those who engage in the evaluation of what leads to a best practice. For

some of those who do not have a professional background it may sound discouraging. Others can take it as a rough guide to some of the important issues they will face when entering the field.¹

BEST PRACTICES AS A PROCESS

A best practice in one time may not be a best, or even a good, practice in another time. What is 'best' is linked to a society's normative values about what is good and bad, and those values change. The welfare state programmes in the Nordic countries of fifty years ago would hardly be seen as adequate today. They have developed over time and the Nordic people have increased their standard of living and their expectations of the level of services that should be provided by the health-care system. At the same time, citizens of many poorer countries would welcome such outdated welfare state programmes if they were introduced in their own countries today. This example only proves that the concept of best practice is elusive and needs to be understood as a process that is tied to normative values and changes over time.

The historical development of a country provides a framework for any intervention and influences its consequent development. In the study undertaken by Mehrotra and his associates (see Ch. 4), a set of best practices is identified and the historical processes are traced to see if there are traits in the national history which led not only to increased public spending on health and education, but to an organizational form that also benefited the marginalized populations. While history cannot be changed, there is a large learning potential if crucial factors influencing the outcome of a best practice can be identified. The study challenges the widespread belief that wealth and economic growth are the most important variables in the development of mass education and reduction in child mortality and disease.⁴ The historical approach used in the study is labelled 'painstaking' by the author and calls for a large team and intensive research work.

This study, and studies by Joshi and Moore (see Ch. 2), Miller (see Ch. 3) and Cimadamore et al. (see Ch. 5) all emphasize *participation* as a crucial variable in the process of an intervention becoming a 'best practice'. It is interesting to note that they focus on different kinds of participation which in turn may yield different kinds of impact on the future of a best practice. Mehrotra stresses more formal participation through democratic systems, with multi-party systems and free and fair

elections. People in general, not only the poor, participate with their votes, or at least scope is given for them to add their voices to the decision-making process. Joshi and Moore point to the fact that 'even in the most participatory programmes, there is little interest in whether poor people are engaged in collective action to make demands on the state, to enforce their rights or to engage in political action for change'. The challenge is to design anti-poverty interventions in such a way that the users engage in collective action to benefit from the intervention and further improve their living conditions. Joshi and Moore emphasize the implementation phase as the most important stage in the process of an intervention. It is at that stage that the major decisions are made concerning design, organization and commitment. Once the intervention is under way it is more difficult to reorganize and increase the participation of the users. This is particularly true in poor countries due to the low level of infrastructure and formal decision-making. Miller shows in two examples how the participation of the ordinary members in a group and the absence of formal expertise contribute to the success of, respectively, a teaching programme and a voluntary organization for people with alcohol problems. Cimadamore et al. bring in the opinions of the users in their evaluation of interventions selected as candidates for best practices.

Although the results above may look contradictory, the participation of the users seems to be crucial if an intervention is to move on to become a best practice. However, it has to be the kind of participation which has a real content and the power to change the run of an intervention and influence the outcome of the process.⁵

Some interventions are launched within a harmonious atmosphere and all the major actors co-operate to secure a success. This is rarely the case with programmes aimed at efficient poverty reduction. More often than not, such programmes are launched within an atmosphere of conflicting interests. In such a context, those programmes that best fit the context survive, but they may not be the strongest or the most successful poverty-reducing programmes. Weaker programmes, with a limited impact on poverty reduction, are the ones more likely to survive because they are less challenging to their surroundings. Thus, the history of a best practice may only be the history of a second-rate practice since the best practice did not survive.

It is from this background that another crucial variable emerges. Since poverty-reducing programmes are not likely to be very popular

with non-poor groups, the interventions depend on many kinds of support to survive long enough to become a best practice. Miller stresses the need for a broad *constituency* for advocacy to make a programme sustainable, while Joshi and Moore find their major constituency for the programme among the programme users.

Many of the examples of best practices have not been observed from the beginning. More often, it has been stated retrospectively that a certain intervention has actually worked, so its history has to be traced and re-created. Written records are likely to be scarce and the memories of the people involved may have faded or become influenced by later events.

Cimadamore et al. take a different approach and pitch their study at the end of the long process that leads to a best practice. They look at the here and now and ask: out of hundreds or maybe thousands of interventions how can we find those that at present are the best? They develop a method in three parts. First, they try to identify those criteria that characterize a best practice. Then they ask experts, administrators and users to identify interventions that fulfil these criteria. Finally, they move into a complex analysis that can point to a select group of best practices. The approach is innovative and systematic in the way it proceeds to locate the best practices in poverty reduction in a country, and should be developed further and tried out in several other countries. In particular, the criteria characterizing a best practice need to be scrutinized to understand better their cultural variations and how far they can be generalized to suit different kinds of practices. The preliminary results of this study are likely to become an important base for discussions on what criteria should be established in the future for successful interventions in poverty reduction.

A question of a more speculative nature is what is going to happen to a best practice once it has been declared a best practice. Is it going to be sustainable, that is, will it survive to fulfil its present functions and will it be able to adapt to future needs and changes? What are the organizational, political, economic and normative features needed to make a best practice sustainable? Miller gives an example of a *perpetuum mobile* of peer monitoring which can involve endless learning for both the mentor and the mentee. It is 'relatively inexpensive, renewable each year as a new batch of possible mentors appears for students in lower grades'. Unfortunately, few anti-poverty interventions can be expected to boast such built-in qualities. If found, they ought to be framed and hung on the wall.

There are also those best practices that have become so successful that they have fulfilled their original goals and made themselves superfluous. These are also part of the history of best practices and can provide lessons for action. The reality, however, is that programmes come and go. Most of the programmes aimed at poverty reduction never seem to live long enough to reach a stage where they can be labelled a best practice. Much of the knowledge about such failures has been lost. Paradoxical as it may sound, such knowledge is just as valuable as, or even more valuable than, the knowledge of success we are now chasing.

REPLICABILITY AND TRANSFER

It is not obvious how a best practice in one place can be replicated and transferred to another sector or country and be just as successful there. The present literature does not give an answer to how a best practice can be implanted into a new body in such a way that the patient survives. This is an area rife with trial and error.

One of the transplanted best practices cited the most often is the case of the Grameen Bank. The Grameen Bank originated in 1989 in Bangladesh and provided a credit without collateral to poor women to initiate small-scale enterprises. The women guaranteed collectively for the loan and organized repayment between them. The scheme has been a tremendous success both in terms of new initiatives, low administrative costs and a certain poverty-reducing effect.⁶ The model has been implanted worldwide into so-called micro-credit schemes whereby small loans are extended to poor people for entrepreneurial activities and to help them obtain ordinary bank loans.⁷ The success has been mixed, in spite of high-powered micro-credit summits with heads of state to give the scheme legitimacy. It has been a success in the sense that a micro-credit scheme like the Women's World Banking Global Network can now claim over ten million clients who would never have been welcomed by the ordinary banking system, which shuns poor customers.⁸ However, the schemes have not become the expected cost-effective weapon for fighting poverty. It has been speculated that one reason is the curtailment of the '16 dogmas' built into the original Grameen scheme. These dogmas provide a set of cultural instructions linked to the use of money (for example, the loan could not be used for bridal dowry). Although the same instructions would hardly be applicable within another cultural

framework, the transfer of the best practice built into the Grameen scheme became incomplete. In micro-credit schemes in other cultures a similar sort of dogma tailored to the culture was left out, perhaps because such dogmas did not have sufficient cultural impact to have an effect on the use and repayment of the loan in different cultures; or because modern economic thinking does not appreciate traditional cultural values; or because the micro-credit schemes include other and more powerful agendas than just poverty reduction.⁹ As a result, the physical idea has been transferred, while some of the basic ideology has been left behind. The lesson from Bangladesh stresses the fact that an understanding of the social context is important for the successful transfer of a best practice.

The large databases on all kinds of interventions published on the Internet as 'best practices'¹⁰ and the 'Wall on Best Practices' erected at the UN Social Summit on Development in Geneva 2000¹¹ ignore this principle. Rather, they present the many interventions as a bank of ideas from which anybody is invited to draw inspiration (see Ch. 6). The World Bank 'Development Marketplace' invites global competition for 'testing new approaches that will advance the fight against poverty'. The criteria for a successful approach are that the practice addresses the issue well, is innovative, gives value for money and ensures sustainability.¹² There is no discussion of the problems raised in the transfer and replicability process and what the notion of 'testing' implies. The criterion of innovation in itself defies the hard-earned learning process that goes ahead of the development of best practices in efficient poverty reduction. Also, it bars former successful practices from being brought into the marketplace of ideas, cf. for example the many successful practices of the Nordic welfare states during the last century that eradicated poverty on a large scale.

When a best practice is transferred to another culture or sector, some of the methodology from comparative studies may be mobilized (Øyen 1990 and 1992). The crucial issue is to try to develop an understanding of what it was in the original culture surrounding an intervention that promoted it into a best practice. Once this understanding has been obtained the next step is to ask (i) if the new culture or sector receiving the best practice has some of the same decisive features, and (ii) if they will actually further a successful transfer of the best practice.

This procedure is seldom done in a systematic way by people who have the necessary knowledge to judge the process of a transfer. More

often the transfer starts out with a certain enthusiasm for the best practice somewhere else and it is implanted in its new environment through trial and error and adaptation. Little is known about this process. Even less systematic knowledge is available about the success or failure of the many transfers that have taken place.

Learning across borders of cultures and sectors takes place all the time, whether it is called innovation, imitation or transfer of best practices. It may be a futile exercise to follow these broader processes because so little is known about the crucial variables that affect their outcome. At the same time, unsuccessful implantations of best practices that do not obtain the desired effects, such as poverty reduction, do have a negative impact on the target group as well as on the waste of public resources. Such wastage speaks in favour of an approach that will decrease the number of unsuccessful transfers and increase the transfers of well adapted best practices.

One way to proceed is to describe the process carefully from the beginning to the point of judging a specific intervention a good, or even best, practice. The exercise is more or less the same as the one described above under the label 'evaluation light'. The same kind of understanding is needed, this time with a comparative perspective that includes both the context in which the present best practice has developed and the context into which it may become transplanted. Such a process can be carried out on several levels. Ideally it can take the form of a strict comparison, variable by variable and configuration by configuration, of phenomena considered relevant. More likely it will take the form of a 'comparative methodology light' where only certain observations are singled out for closer inspection.

One possible way to engage in such an awareness-raising exercise is to scrutinize the criteria for success. For example, did the crime rate in a certain poor neighbourhood drop as a consequence of the intervention, and if so what kind of crime and by how much did it drop? How much did it have to drop for the intervention to be defined as a success? Could the change be attributed to other kinds of phenomena occurring during the same period or to chance variations? In what context did the change take place? Was there something in the culture of the neighbourhood that increased the positive effect of the intervention? What kind of organizational set-up and choice of expertise influenced the successful outcome, and how? Were there specific cultural traits in the surrounding society that added to the success? Were there competing interventions

aimed at the same target group, and if so how did these interventions affect the outcome of the best practice?

The search for causes is like the work of a detective, the description of the possible causes is like that of technician analysing a sample under an electronic microscope, and the systematizing of data is like that of a librarian putting the books on the right shelves. One may not know what one is looking for and much creative imagination is called for. The scientific control of this creativity lies in a meticulous description of the observations so others can judge their validity and relevance. When these procedures have been observed it increases the likelihood that it might be possible to state whether the results of the intervention indicate a best practice only for the specific problem to which it was tailored, or whether it is a best practice that can be tried out in a another context.

The more limited and well defined an intervention is, and the less culture-bound it is, the more manageable a transfer is likely to be. The notion of a best practice may originally have come from technology where a technical innovation such as the use of a new drill can easily be evaluated and transferred to another area. Poverty reduction is a different matter. It is a complex process and the interaction of the many variables in the process is not well known. Besides, poverty and poverty reduction are likely to be culture-bound. Much creative imagination is needed to think in comparative terms before a best practice is transferred to a new area. For those concerned with genuine poverty reduction it may be a necessary exercise. The effect of the exercise may be enhanced if participants from the host culture/sector and participants from the adopting culture/sector do the exercise together. Also, for those concerned who have limited resources the exercise seems the best route to take.

VESTED INTERESTS IN BEST PRACTICES

Success has become a symbol of the modern world and those who can report successes are rewarded. When interviewing officers at a UN organization I was told they were discouraged from reporting failures to headquarters; it would go on their personal files and reflect negatively on their future careers. Some avoided this difficult situation by not reporting at all on an unsuccessful intervention, while others would redefine the outcome and present an enhanced result. The organization needed a display of 'best practices' to convince donors. This story is not unique. A display of best practices increases favourably the image

of politicians and the bureaucracy and can be used to increase the flow of goodwill and money in many organizations. Research literature on social administration, for example, has several studies that show how organizations redefine the composition of their clientele and focus on easier problems, which they can solve and display as successes, rather than face difficult problems with the hard-core clientele.

The call for increased stringency, systematization of data and documentation in the process leading to a 'best practices' approach serves another purpose besides the methodological considerations outlined above. Not only do such techniques help to screen low-quality presentations of best practices, they are also helpful in identifying some of the many internal and external interests vested in the process which leads to the implementation and outcome of what is later termed a best practice.

During the past couple of decades a major part of poverty-reducing interventions in poor countries has been donor driven. Donors have provided the moral basis for organizational and financial arrangements and flag expectations that some form of best practice should emerge. It has not been easy to implement donor-initiated interventions, for many reasons, and donors are in constant search for partners who can help deliver their initiatives in an acceptable form. In countries where the state is weak, corrupt or lacks the infrastructure to carry out pro-poor policies, donors have turned to civil society to implement poverty-reducing strategies. That is a strategy with many implications, including the sudden growth of seemingly best practices.

Donors need best practices to invest their funds prudently. The NGOs need best practices to legitimate or fund their activities. The political agenda needs best practices to increase donor funding and increase its standing in the global arena. The consultants who move rapidly around in the lush economic market created by the donors need best practices to show their worth and repeat their performance. The price tag for worst practices is not of interest in that market.

There is good reason to be cautious when such powerful interests coincide and become vested in the presentation of a best practice. Those who can display a best practice command at the same time a valuable political symbol and a highly priced commodity. For some it must be a temptation to deliver a product where little time has been devoted to stringency, systematization and documentation. As a result, low-quality products enter the literature on best practices without much control

since donors and users alike often lack the expertise with which to judge the quality of the product.

To complicate matters further, the vested interest in the presentation of a best practice may not be the same as the vested interest in the actual outcome of a best practice. All kinds of poverty reduction, small or comprehensive, have an impact on non-poor people, whether it be in financial or political terms, or simply in symbolic terms. Some of these non-poor people will resist changes brought about by poverty-reducing interventions. At times they will have a strong vested interest in keeping poverty reduction and transfer of resources to the poor to a minimum (Gans 1973). These forces have kept the poor down for centuries and there is little indication the picture has changed. The same forces are likely to influence which interventions can be initiated and how far a best practice can develop.

In Chapter 3 Miller discusses the need to create a constituency around an intervention that will protect it from being changed, limited or even destroyed by vested interests. If poverty reduction is to be successfully turned into a best practice it needs a positive social atmosphere to protect it (or, in Bismarckian time, an authoritarian decree) and forceful groups among the non-poor to promote it. Humanitarian groups, political parties, ideological societies and committed individuals have played that role since the French Revolution. At no time have efficient poverty-reducing measures come about without resistance from vested interest groups. History, including modern history, bears witness to these conflicts. The new notion of 'partnership' between poor and non-poor groups acknowledges the need to involve powerful non-poor groups such as the business community and community leaders in a joint effort to promote poverty-reducing interventions. However, the idea of partnership is presented within a model of harmony, as if the non-poor had the same interest in poverty reduction as the poor. The notion of vested interests and conflict of interests is played down in an attempt to be diplomatic. As a result the actual conflicts of interest are made invisible and left out in the difficult negotiations to create efficient poverty reduction.¹³

So far much of the discussion on obstacles to efficient poverty reduction has been concerned with the lack of available resources. While this is certainly true, attention also needs to be paid to the many interests vested in the outcome, or lack of such, in poverty reduction and the sustainable success of best practices. In order to develop efficient

poverty-reducing measures it is necessary to understand those forces that see poverty reduction as a threat to their interests. Strategies to block a poverty-reducing intervention are very often more powerful than new initiatives to reduce poverty. It means among other things that strategies to counteract those who fight for their vested interests may be just as necessary as actual poverty-reducing strategies.

WHO SHOULD BE THE JUDGES OF A BEST PRACTICE?

Against whose norms should a practice be judged 'best'? Ideally it should be the users who make this judgement. They are the ones who have to live with the consequences of a particular intervention and they are the ones who know their own needs. In practice the normative underpinnings of an intervention are derived from the administrators of the intervention, the financing agencies, the ideologists behind the origin of the intervention and other bodies who have a certain interest in the outcome of the intervention.

Much depends on who consider themselves the 'owners' of the intervention. Some interventions, although still a minority, are created in symmetrical co-operation between users and providers of administrative expertise and financing agencies. Within this model the users can voice their opinion on the functioning of the intervention with the knowledge that their opinion has an impact on the future course of the intervention. The users have the right to define the criteria for what is 'best' and whether the practice meets their expectations.

From a democratic point of view this is the ideal model. From a more future-oriented point of view the model is limited. Many of the poorest users do not have the knowledge to see their life situation within a larger setting and have a tendency to ask too little really to improve their life situation and the future of their children. In principle they have been given the ownership of the intervention and the right to use their own norms to define what is 'best'. In reality their criteria do not help make them full citizens.

The tradition has been that those who foot the bill are also the ones to set the criteria for what an intervention should achieve in order to be successful. Their norms have moral superiority and are accepted as such. The newer development is that 'experts' on poverty and organizational issues have been given space to define criteria for a successful intervention. Administrators are then delegated to execute the inter-

vention according to these criteria. However, in practice it turns out that even the most faithful of bureaucrats will, over time, also apply their own criteria for success in order to fit their comprehension of what the intervention ought to achieve or is able to achieve. Those kinds of adaptations happen all the time and are necessary for the bureaucracy to survive. Along the way all kinds of vested interests also try to impose their norms for what should be considered the right kind of criteria for the intervention.

It is this competing conglomerate of norms and pressures that need to be taken into account when a certain intervention is presented as a 'best' practice. In terms of efficient poverty reduction, it may not be such a good practice after all, while other practices that deserve the label 'good practice' or even 'best practice' may disappear in the maze of conflicting ideas about what is 'best' for whom.

In the chapter by Cimadamore et al. an attempt is made to incorporate several of these interests when judging an intervention a best practice. The researchers have developed an index based on criteria from practitioners, administrators, users and a major organization (MOST) that has tried to systematize a set of criteria needed to judge whether an intervention can be classified as a best practice.

MOST (Management of Social Transformations, a programme under UNESCO) brings forward thirteen kinds of criteria for an intervention to be classified as a best practice. They are the ones used in the study mentioned above. The emphasis is partly on the characteristics of the intervention, such as innovative aspects, sustainability, positive impact on the target group and potential for replication; it is partly on the characteristics of the organization involved with the intervention, such as efficacy, efficiency, organizational co-operation, political viability and the participation of beneficiaries – good management is the key concept here; and it is partly on the beneficiaries' perception of the intervention, such as their view on efficacy and their own impact on the intervention. At a later stage the MOST databank adds still another criterion: best practices 'are typically based on the co-operation between national or local authorities, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and local communities, the private sector, and academic communities'.¹⁴ It is difficult to understand the role of this last criterion. Rather, it might be read as a message directed to parties who are invited to make use of the databank. It can hardly be considered a viable criterion for a best practice.

One of the major actors in the poverty discourse during the last decade is the World Bank. As mentioned above, the Bank has for the second time called for a worldwide competition to identify new approaches that will advance the fight against poverty. These 'best ideas' are identified as 'empowering people to participate in development and investing in them; building a better climate for investment and jobs, and sustainable growth'.¹⁵ A further elaboration of the criteria for a best practice is given through a quotation from one of the judges of the competition who maintains that the competition looks for 'developing new products and for providing services in a more cost-effective manner, for finding new ways to do business, or simply for demonstrating a new way of working partnership'.¹⁶ The Bank criteria for 'best' are clearly located within the Bank's major ideology of economic growth and the belief that poverty reduction lies in increased small-scale production. The criterion of sustainable growth presented cannot be operationalized into any concrete criteria that can be judged fairly by a committee. It can be seen mainly as part of the rhetoric the Bank uses throughout its documents. The last criterion, that of a working partnership, is of a somewhat different character. It points to a wider understanding of poverty reduction and the discussion introduced above on the need to create a favourable climate around a poverty-reducing intervention if it is to become a best practice. In the Bank's programme Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) workshops are organized that promote 'interaction and exchange of best practices'.¹⁷ These PRSP programmes are likely to become one of the Bank's flagships in the next few years. To the extent that best practices are defined within the programme, the definitions are dominated by economic considerations.

The United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (UNCHS) Habitat has developed a Best Practices Database after a competition inviting submissions worldwide. It states that the 'database contains over 1100 proven solutions from more than 120 countries to the common social, economic and environmental problems of an urbanising world. It demonstrates the practical ways in which communities, governments and the private sector are working together to improve governance, eradicate poverty, provide access to shelter, land and basic services, protect the environment and support economic development'.¹⁸ In 2000 more than 700 new submissions from about 100 countries were offered (see also Ch. 6). In reaching its conclusions, the jury for the competition used 'tangible impact, partnership, and sustainability' as criteria. Furthermore, the jury

gave due recognition to 'leadership, the empowerment of people and their communities, and the promotion of gender equality and of social inclusion'. Also, among the entries the jury looked for 'effective responses to emerging issues and trends brought about by the challenges of globalisation and its influences on social change' and 'gave emphasis to the interdependencies of these issues with those of human rights, good governance and the empowerment of people'. The jury recommends 'the widest possible dissemination of Best Practices' and 'encourages all partners and relevant institutions in all sectors, to actively participate in, and contribute to the Best Practice'. These criteria have developed in the years since the UNCHS database was first created and just about any intervention or project has been accepted as a best practice and included in the database. There is no discussion of what 'proven solutions' or best practices mean. The poverty-reducing criteria disappear in a mass of competing criteria. It is as if poverty reduction as a goal in itself is not enough. However, in the course of the jury decision-making, a set of ideological elements focused attention on what a best practice ought to be. The criteria are not concrete enough to be useful as more than normative guidelines. The real impact of the competition lies in the positive attitudes towards underprivileged people signalled by the jury and those behind the competition. Although the database has a misleading name, the ideology is clearly in favour of pro-poor policies.

Experts on poverty and poverty reduction represent another set of judges trying to make an impact with their criteria on what constitutes an efficient poverty-reducing strategy. Experts working on the micro-level are likely to emphasize those strategies that directly affect poverty in the community. As such, their criteria for a best practice are more likely to be in tune with the users. Experts on the macro-level are likely to emphasize national or even supranational goals and the long-term reduction of poverty; as such, they are removed from the predominant norms among users.

In tune with present thinking, there is often a call for an evaluation of the functioning and outcome of interventions. This is a procedure that gives the experts an opportunity to define the criteria for a best practice. As might be expected, the experts make use of the professional and normative framework of the background in which they were trained, whether they are economists, anthropologists or something else. It is seldom the users who ask for an evaluation. Their calls for change or for the monitoring of an intervention taking the wrong course are

likely to travel through informal channels of communication only. More often it is the 'real' owners of the interventions who want to know the return on their investments in terms of increased poverty reduction or the proper use of money. The tendency in evaluations is to narrow down the indicators of a best practice to those that can be measured and compared over time. The choice of indicators can, at times, say more about the evaluators than about the intervention to be evaluated. The experts have the power, or are given the power, to define what is 'best'. At the same time it should not be forgotten that such evaluations make the criteria for a best practice more visible and lay them open for a public debate that may increase the likelihood of a practice developing into a best practice.

The notion of ownership of a practice has recently been brought out in another context. When the UNDP launched its new publication on Poverty Strategies Initiatives (2001), there was a major discussion on the need to create national ownership of the interventions. Donors were to let go of former conditionalities and leave decisions concerning organization, implementation and goals for poverty-reducing programmes to the countries receiving foreign aid. In the future the receivers themselves are to judge what are the 'best' means to obtain poverty reduction. Ideologically it seems to be the right position to take. However, it can also be argued that the donors wash their hands and forward the problems to a maze of different levels of decision-making and vested interests. National ownership may not reduce basic poverty any further; at least not in the short run. In the long run it may be the only way to go. It is interesting to note that the UNDP, which commands only limited funds, is willing to let go control over its resources. The World Bank on the other hand talks about empowerment of the poor but does not discuss national ownership or other measures that will give the Bank less control over its comprehensive resources.

The right to judge what is 'best' for millions of poor people carries with it ethical dilemmas and problems that so far have not been well exposed. Who has the legitimate right to judge what is right for others, for example, and who extends that legitimacy? Who has the right to pass judgements that serve only his/her own interests? What are the consequences of some people rather than others using their norms to make a judgement? It is important to address these questions when we know that in reality, deep down, a limited judgement of 'best' for some can mean that other people are sentenced to a continued life in poverty,

or at worst their children are sentenced to dying in early childhood. Non-interference in problems of that magnitude is likely to raise even more ethical issues than interference through interventions meant to reduce poverty.

BEST PRACTICES AS A LIMITED POVERTY-REDUCING MEASURE

Poverty is a very complex phenomenon and it takes complex interventions to achieve efficient poverty reduction. One single best practice, however comprehensive, is likely to make only a dent in those regions where poverty is deep. If any kind of sizeable poverty reduction is the goal, one of the basic lessons is the need for a diversity of poverty-reducing measures directed at the same population and organized in such a way that the interventions work in tandem and reinforce each other. In his discussion of successes in anti-poverty measures, Lipton gives an array of examples from different countries that demonstrate the power of co-ordinated practices in what he terms 'the principle of joint requirements' (Lipton et al. 1998: 4). A best practice may be successful within its own limited scope, but unless it forms part of a larger picture on how to reduce long-term poverty, it is only a best practice with a moderate impact.

There is a widespread need to think in larger terms and to develop a vision in which the different best practices are but a step towards fulfilling that vision. The current trend to display large databases with hundreds of entries and organize worldwide competitions to call for still more examples of best practices creates further fragmentation. The challenge is not to show an ever-increasing number of case histories that may or may not constitute best practices; success cannot be counted in sheer numbers. The challenge is to develop a framework around these many ideas that integrates them into a larger framework towards an efficient poverty-reducing plan that incorporates all poor people in a country.

Poverty eradication, not only poverty reduction, seems to be a key concept in the many practices presented. The truth is that nothing in a single best practice can possibly lead to poverty eradication in the true sense of the term. The ruling step-by-step model that sees a few best practices as the initial stage, followed by some other good practices towards a final stage of complete poverty eradication, needs to be

challenged. It needs to be clarified and defended by those who promote it. So far the model has not been spelled out theoretically and it suffers from the same shortcomings as the trickle-down model that used to be a core element in legitimating economic growth. The actual link between the different steps needs to be discussed, the ordering of the interventions and the expected progress of the process need to be outlined, and the principles of prioritizing the targets need to be made visible and inserted logically into the model. On intellectual grounds, the model is hard to defend.

It is easy to understand why the step-by-step model for best practices is favoured on political grounds. The model calls for only limited reallocation of resources and restricted intervention, and as such it diminishes the potential for conflict. We should be aware also that the step-by-step model has its ethical flaws. Not only does it favour certain categories of poor people, at the same time it excludes certain groups of poor people over an unknown period of time, maybe for lifetime.

Poverty eradication, in the wide understanding of the term, ought to be moved into the arena of more general politics. More often this responsibility is turned over to the bureaucrats or the NGOs. Both of these deal with their own limited area of responsibility and promote only those best practices that lie within their expertise or interest. As a result fragmentation increases while co-ordination is given low priority.

The good news is that many countries are now encouraged to develop pro-poor plans. Guidelines are being offered from donors, UNDP, the World Bank and different interest groups. One of the many challenges is to integrate the most successful practices already in existence in the overall plan and to develop a joint focus that enforces them mutually. Another challenge is to look beyond the many best practices and good advice of interest groups and search for more fundamental approaches. The framework surrounding human rights is one such lead. A best practice can, or should ideally, be defined as an efficient anti-poverty programme that incorporates all aspects of the UN Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989, the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights of Work and all the other covenants and international agreements that are intended to protect human beings against violations and sub-human conditions (Van Genugten and Perez-Bustillo 2001). There is little in the mass of best practices that comes even close to such a definition. The implementation of citizenship and the role of the state in caring for

all its citizens may be another lead, in spite of limited public resources (Wilson et al. 2001). The rights-oriented universal approach of the well-developed welfare states and the need to develop an inclusive vision before economic growth and an accumulated public surplus, not after, may also be a lead (Øyen 1997). Instead of developing still more free-standing best practices, the normative basis for a practice can be attached to such frameworks and the notion of 'best' be judged according to the norms within such a framework rather than left to self-appointed owners of a practice or vested interest groups.

An issue often raised is whether it is possible to create global criteria for poverty reduction. While it may be futile to develop global strategies for poverty reduction, such as for example the strategies embedded in economic growth, it may still be possible to obtain a broad global acceptance of the kind of sub-human conditions that no human being should be forced to live under. Slavery was abandoned through massive mobilization and is no longer accepted globally, although many people are still forced to live like slaves. Poverty is a modern form of slavery in which millions of people subsist on a minimum and have no control over their own lives. Faced with problems of such magnitude it can be asked if any of the many best practices presented, or even the sum of all those practices, are tailored to cope with such a challenge.

WHAT IS A BEST PRACTICE FOR POVERTY REDUCTION?

The answer is simple: a best practice is an intervention that reduces poverty. An intervention that reduces the worst kind of poverty to a sizeable degree is an even better candidate for a best practice. An intervention that keeps the gained poverty reduction at bay and ensures that none of the formerly poor slips back into poverty again is a still better candidate for a best practice. An intervention that manages to reduce several kinds of poverty rather than just one component in the complex pattern of poverty production, is a leading candidate for a best practice.

These criteria are the essence of a best practice. However, this fact is often lost in a myriad of other criteria and interests that take precedence. While some of those criteria may also be important, nothing is as important for a practice that aims at poverty reduction than just that: the reduction of the number of poor people living in sub-human conditions.

The dilemma occurs when limited resources force a choice between different kinds of poverty reduction. Should short-term and immediate poverty reduction be favoured over long-term investment in human capital formation? Is the building of a new school more important than a new well, or is inoculation against tuberculosis more important than participatory measures to increase democracy? The choices are many, and often restricted by competing interests. Educational experts will push for schools, health personnel will prioritize preventive health measures, NGOs with a participatory approach will want to invest in measures leading to more democracy, and interest groups will bring forward their special understanding of what is needed in poverty reduction. All will speak warmly in favour of their own strategy. Since there exists no scientifically based method to decide if one kind of intervention leads faster to comprehensive poverty reduction than another, the decision-making field is open to many interested players. The methodological challenge is how to measure and compare the amount of poverty reduced through different interventions.

How much poverty reduction is sufficient for people to claim that an intervention has been successful and should be classified as a best practice? Some countries have tried to solve this problem by establishing a poverty line or certain educational or housing standards under which no citizen should fall. Most best practices as outlined in the present databases (see also Ch. 6) do not operate with certain goals for poverty reduction to be filled. They just tell us that their interventions work, and even work well. Actual figures for how much poverty reduction has been achieved are usually absent, or we are presented with figures that make little sense. One of the examples shown is that of an Indian bank that provides credit at reasonable rates to self-employed women workers. A measure of success presented is that the bank now has assets worth USD 6.6 million.¹⁹ It is not clear why this figure is essential for poverty reduction and we are not told how these assets are invested.

When judging a candidate for a best practice it is not sufficient to say that poverty reduction has taken place. No practice can be considered best unless it is accompanied by a trustworthy monitoring system that gives a reliable picture of how much poverty reduction has been obtained through a certain intervention.

One of the often-repeated criteria for a best practice in poverty reduction is that it should demonstrate efficiency and efficacy. Phrased in simpler terms it can be taken to mean that available resources should

be used carefully and cost-effectively. This is a sound principle of good management that ought to follow all interventions financed by public (and private) means. Nothing is new here. But why are these criteria linked so closely to poverty-reducing interventions and what is their specific connection to poverty reduction? Is it due to a built-in fear of misuse by the poor? Is there an expectation of squandering money in favour of the poor? Is it due to an observation that many of those who are given responsibility for poverty-reducing interventions are appointed from among the less qualified part of the bureaucracy and so need to be better controlled?

Another criterion often put forward for a best practice in poverty reduction is that it should be sustainable. In some ways it can be said that sustainability in poverty reduction is a contradiction in terms. Sustainability presupposes that poverty is an infinite problem that needs interventions that go on and on. At the same time, poverty reduction is supposed to do away with poverty up to a certain level, that is, the success of a best practice is to make itself superfluous, not to be sustained. Therefore, it should rather be stressed that the *results* of the interventions should be sustainable, not necessarily the intervention as such. An intervention could hardly be termed a best practice if it needs to go on for ever in order to have an effect.

At this stage it is necessary to distinguish between sustainability needed for the kind of poverty that builds on still new cohorts of deprived people and the kind of poverty reduction needed for a stable population of poor people. The educational system, for example, needs to be sustainable because still new cohorts of students need it. Other poverty-reducing interventions need to be so flexible that sustainability will hamper their success and their ability to reduce poverty further. They need to change their goals and organizational structure as they reach their original goals. This is another of the many paradoxes built into poverty reduction. On the one hand an organization needs stability and predictability in order to be effective and to create trust among the beneficiaries and the surroundings. On the other hand the organization needs sufficient manoeuvring space to meet the complexity of problems inherent in poverty and the ability to move on when one kind of poverty has been sufficiently reduced or even eliminated.

The issues outlined above demonstrate the care that should be taken when transferring a concept from one arena to another. Sustainability has its roots in the environmental arena, and although disputed still

reflects both a methodological and ideological approach that is considered useful. It is not as easy to see its usefulness as a vital and indisputable criterion for a best practice.

Should a best practice always work within a democratic setting? A criterion often repeated is that an intervention should be based on shared decision-making and the participation of the beneficiaries and the surrounding community. The expectation is that over time a so-called participatory intervention will lead to the increased participation of the marginalized in political life in general as well as to a wide democratization of the country. The principle can be defended on ethical grounds and within the framework of long-term poverty reduction. Still, several critical voices have been raised on this account. One is methodological. The explicit links between an intervention and a broader participation in democratic life by the poor need to be spelled out and documented. So far the reasoning has been mainly of an ideological nature. It is assumed that participation in a community project over time will educate poor people to be part of democratic decision-making also on a broader scale. That may be true. But it is necessary also to take into account that poor people are marginalized in many other parts of society. Even well-established democracies such as the United States have not found a way of making homeless and poor people part of the democratic institutions; in the US poor people do not vote or make their voices heard. Another objection raised is that efficient democracy-building needs to find other outlets and not be mixed up with poverty-reducing interventions. Poverty reduction is a project of its own and so important that it should not be slowed down by other considerations, whether they be democracy building, the preservation of indigenous cultures or other important issues not directly related to immediate poverty reduction. It can be argued that a benevolent dictator might obtain as much poverty reduction through an intervention without democracy as a western beneficiary with woolly expectations of the broad participation of all parties involved (cf. the Age of the Enlightened Despot). Still another objection has been raised on the grounds that democracy has its roots in the western culture and does not necessarily suit a local community, or country for that matter, in the South. Donors are mostly from the West and the tendency is to make democratic measures part of their conditions for giving aid.

A practice is not an isolated phenomenon; it is created within a context that over time will make it grow or wither. Most practices that

aim at poverty reduction are likely to be vulnerable at the outset. The chances of survival are slim if the surrounding culture is negative. Actually, it looks as though a practice can become best only if it has a best context.

A practice needs backing by people who are willing to protect and defend it and, it should be added, are in position where their protection has an impact. Motives for defending a poverty-reducing intervention may not be relevant. Devotion to a certain cause, fear of contagion, display of expertise, political opportunism and sheer humanism are forces that may unite in defence of the intervention.

Where the surrounding culture is hostile to a certain kind of poverty reduction, it is less likely that a reducing effect will take place. And as we well know, efficient poverty-reducing strategies, not just symbolic practices with limited impact, are more than likely to meet opposition. The more effective they may become and the more built-in redistributive effect they have, the more resistance they are likely to meet. Little is known about how many potential best practices have petered out at an early stage due to a hostile context.

For those who initiate a new practice aimed at poverty reduction it is imperative to take into account those destructive forces. They need to be identified, and strategies to control vested interests ought to be part of the overall strategy for establishing a new practice. However, the control of such interests is usually located in arenas different from those where poverty-reducing strategies belong and is not seen as part and parcel of the same problem. Donors have come from the outside and have suffered from that experience, as have bureaucrats coming from the inside.

Much of the resistance to poverty-reducing practices is due not only to the antagonists' self-interest and the potential loss they may have from redistributive measures; much of their hostility stems from lack of concrete knowledge about poor people and the causes and consequences of poverty. Negative stereotypes about poverty flourish and creep into our images of who the poor people are and how their behaviour can be interpreted as asocial and deviant. An ideal best practice ought to have a pedagogical element that could impact positively on the surrounding culture and help change the ruling negative stereotypes. The non-poor need to be educated if poverty-reducing strategies are to work according to the intentions.

In order to understand better how to create successful practices we

need to learn more not only about the history of successful practices and the contexts that shaped them; we also need to know more about unsuccessful practices and the contexts that stopped them or transformed them into inefficient poverty-reducing strategies. Actually, there is a need for a database on all those practices that failed and why they failed. The learning potential from that kind of knowledge is as important as the knowledge derived from successful practices.

There are millions of practices out there. Some of them end up in a database and are called best practices. Other practices are less formalized and simply work, and work well, such as traditional ways of coping and redistributing surplus according to need. The anthropologists have given us many examples of how the surplus of a sudden catch of fish is distributed in the local community or how the extended family takes responsibility for its members in times of distress. Even much despised corruption may help to keep poverty at bay in an extended family. Voluntary organizations of many kinds flourish and reach out to poor people. Some make it into the databases, others not. International organizations like the Red Crescent and the Red Cross make invaluable contributions to poverty reduction without being visible in the discussion on best practices. The field is heterogeneous and no system has been established to decide what should be named a practice for poverty reduction. Some fish are caught in a net that has been cast widely. But the reality is that the lack of a precise definition of a 'best practice' leaves us without a tool to sort out and better understand the complexity of all those efforts that appear under the name of best practices.

NOTES

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1. The notion of 'practice' is likewise ambiguous. It points to something smaller than a social policy or an anti-poverty programme, it hints at something which has been practised and thus has a history, and it incorporates the traditions of medical and quasi-medical professions that carry out a professional and recognized activity. A 'practice' is a non-threatening concept, while a 'pro-poor intervention' or a 'policy to reduce poverty' carries a more powerful message, in particular when linked to the word 'best'.

2. The relationship between general social science research and evaluation research is close, in so far as they follow the same scientific rules and often target the same social areas. Usually, evaluation research has a more narrow focus.

3. Any good introductory textbook in evaluation research can take the reader further on these issues. See for example Feinstein and Picciotto (2000); Guba and Lincoln (1995); Mohr (1995); Posavac and Garey (1989); European Commission (1999).
4. See for example World Bank (2000). For a more nuanced discussion see Lipton et al. (1998).
5. This mode of thinking leads to the discussion of whether the poor are the 'experts on poverty', as argued in the April draft of the *World Development Report* World Bank (2000). While it can easily be agreed that the poor are experts on their own problems, it can also be argued that a major part of their problems is created outside their world and as such is 'invisible' to the poor. In this discussion it is crucial to make clear on which level the argument takes place.
6. For more information about the Grameen Bank see www.grameen-info.org
7. www.microcreditsummit.org/newsletter/best.htm and the Virtual Library on Microcredit.
8. Nancy Barry, 'Building Financial Systems that Work for the Majority in Middle Income Countries', paper presented at the Dräger Foundation conference on poverty in middle-income countries, Lübeck, June 2001.
9. See for example *ibid.*
10. UNCHS-Habitat Best Practice database; UNESCO MOST database at www.unesco.org/most/bpindi.htm, see also Ch. 6.
11. Also called 'Wall of Transformation for the Eradication of Poverty'. NGOs were invited to buy a brick at USD50 and place it on the wall with their best practice written on it. Responsible was the CONGO Facilitating Committee Working Group 'Best Practices'.
12. www.developmentmarketplace.org/html/evalcriteria.html
13. See for example World Bank (2000).
14. 2 June 2001, www.unesco.org/most/bphome.htm
15. 26 March 2001, www.developmentmarketplace.org/html/evalcriteria.html
16. *Ibid.*
17. 2 June 2001, www.worldbank.org/poverty/strategies/events/
18. 2 June 2001, www.bestpractices.org/
19. The Shri Mahila SEWA Sahakari Bank, figure quoted in MOST Clearing House Best Practices database, www.unesco.org/most/bphome-htm, June 2001.

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