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**WELL-BEING IS A PROCESS OF BECOMING:
RESEARCH WITH ORGANIC FARMERS IN MADAGASCAR**

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WeD is a multidisciplinary research group funded by the ESRC, dedicated to the study of poverty, inequality and the quality of life in poor countries. The research group is based at the University of Bath and draws on the knowledge and expertise from three different departments (Economics and International Development, Social and Policy Sciences and Psychology) as well as an extensive network of overseas contacts and specific partnerships with institutes in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Peru and Thailand. The purpose of the research programme is to develop conceptual and methodological tools for investigating and understanding the social and cultural construction of wellbeing in specific countries.

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A large print size version of this paper is available on request.

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Well-Being is a Process of Becoming: Research with Organic Farmers in Madagascar

SUMMARY

Malagasy players see in export-orientated organic agriculture a way for the island to build upon its historic export strengths - spices, essential oils, medicinal plants and tropical fruits. They point to the *de facto* organic status of most farming in the country and view organic production strategies as a means for Malagasy farmers to differentiate their produce in the highly competitive world market. However, producing for the export market poses significant challenges for Malagasy farmers. Despite its apparent 'fit' with existing farming practice, 'true' certified organic practice does not necessarily offer a means towards achieving a Malagasy farmer-defined 'good life'. Smallholders can be disempowered through their incorporation into wider systemic relationships whose more powerful actors – such as buyers and consumers – and their 'rules' about what 'organic' is, for example, are necessarily unfamiliar. Yet farmers are very interested in the significant opportunities for much-needed cash that organic farming offers.

This paper argues that strengthening farmer agency, and thus their presence as actors in international food chains, can be partially achieved if farmers are involved in devising the rules for organic and social certification. I set out nine principles that I have developed which seem important when trying to capture and measure 'quality of life' for the purposes of social certification. My theoretical and empirical work, detailed here, is set within a methodological discussion on how to best ensure that research is 'respondent-led'. Respondent-led research is, I argue, critical for ensuring that an understanding of the components of 'quality of life', and their operationalisation as standards and indicators, is truly meaningful to the target group

Key words: gender, well-being, methodology, Madagascar, organic farming, certification

Key readings: Ballet et al. (2003) *Le Développement Socialement Durable: un moyen d'intégrer capacités et Durabilité*, Communication for the Third Conference on the Capability Approach, University of Pavia, 6-9 September 2003.

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SOCIAL CERTIFICATION IN ORGANIC FARMING: AN OVERVIEW

Although producers and consumers in food chains are linked by a physical product, for example potatoes, the broken-up nature of the production chain means that consumers and producers tend to inhabit different realities, with little knowledge of each other's lives and aspirations. This is all the more so when the material commodity chain spans continents. A German focus group respondent – an organic consumer - told me, 'I have never thought about the [Southern] farmer, and I cannot believe that anyone thinks about the farmer' (male, Hamburg, 2003, in Farnworth, 2004). As this quotation illustrates, people in the chain can lack physical and conceptual presence for one another. This lack of connection is important, because decisions taken by people in one place, for example by consumers in the North, do in fact have a real impact on people in another place, for example by influencing whether smallholder farmers in the South can make a reasonable living from production for export. The international commodity chain is a system with complex feedback loops that links people as well as products.

In recent years, a number of organisations, such as the International Federation of Organic Agricultural Movements (IFOAM) and the Soil Association in the UK have begun to examine how to certify the organic production chain not only for its organic properties, but also for its contribution to producer well-being[1]. Indeed, social certification is likely to become an integral part of certification on organic holdings. Just as organic certification defines, more or less, what the term 'organic' means, social certification will come to 'officially' express the humane values which organic farming espouses. Decisions about what the standards for social certification will include, and what process might be used to formulate them, are therefore central issues.

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[1] According to the *'Principal Aims of Organic Production and Processing'* in the IFOAM Basic Standards 2002 [which was valid at the time of research], IFOAM aims (1) to recognise the wider social and ecological impact of and within the organic production and processing system, (2) to provide everyone involved in organic farming and processing with a quality of life that satisfies their basic needs, within a safe, secure and healthy working environment, and (3) to support the establishment of an entire production, processing and distribution chain which is both socially just and ecologically responsible.

My theoretical and practical work was propelled by the urgent sense that standards and indicators for social justice could be introduced by actors high up in the chain[2] that are simply irrelevant at best, or at worst harmful, to the smallholders and plantation workers whose quality of life is supposed to be protected or enhanced by the application of these measures. The aim of my research was to find out, first, what 'quality of life' actually means to farmers in Madagascar, and second, how to find a way of ensuring that these understandings could be formally recognised – and promoted - in the procedures of social certification. In sum, I wanted to contribute a bottom-up methodology to the 'social certification toolkits' that representatives of the organic movement could consider.

The remainder of the discussion is divided thus: Part one discusses how to ensure that one's research methodology is conducive to respondent participation. Part two explores the development of the quality of life toolkit that I developed for the purposes of social certification, covering both conceptual and empirical aspects. Part three presents and analyses some of the empirical data thus produced, with a particular focus on respondent relationship to land, since this emerged as a key component of wellbeing. I do not discuss how, on the basis of the baseline data thus produced, standards and indicators for the purposes of social certification could be developed. For a discussion please see Farnworth (2004).

PART ONE: DECIDING ON A METHODOLOGY

Why am I doing this? What, and who, is this research for? Who is going to be involved, and how? These questions should be addressed in any research project. The background to all these questions is the query *whose reality counts?* (Chambers 1994). To help us think about this it is useful to ask a further, underlying question: *What is reality anyway?* It makes a great difference to our research project whether we believe that reality is found, or whether we believe that reality is created. The first belief places the researcher in the role of discoverer; the second belief places her, partially, in the role of creator.

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[2] Horticultural commodity chains are typically 'buyer-led': retailers exert significant control over all aspects of the chain. See Gereffi, 1999 for a conceptual framework of global commodity chains, and Barrientos *et al.* 2003 for a discussion on how just-in-time production methods, adopted by retailers, pass the costs of demand instability to producers. This drives labour costs down and avoids many of the non-wage costs of employment. Informal, highly gendered work arrangements are the norm in many horticultural chains.

I suggest that the researcher's understanding of reality plays a decisive role in her selection and use of research tools, and the way she analyses and interprets the results of her research. I suggest further that a research approach premised on the idea that 'reality can be found' has the potential to sideline research respondents, who might be viewed as 'means to an end'. In other words, the unspoken assumption may be that by questioning respondents, the researcher is able to 'get at the truth'. But on the other hand, if the researcher considers that reality is co-created by her interaction with respondents, it may be possible to move towards achieving truly 'respondent-led' research because the respondents are understood to be actors. As a consequence, the research process itself may have the potential to empower women and men, because it will address *their* questions, rather than just those of the researcher. In addition, if respondents then go on to participate in devising development strategies based on the findings of a shared research process, this process can itself be said to play an integral role in assisting respondents to work towards achieving improvements in their own quality of life.

Deciding upon a methodology, or the way in which theories are translated into practical tools for 'doing research', is far from straightforward. Coffey *et al.* (1992 in Beyene 1999, 20) argue 'We cannot remain innocent about the methods of data collection for social and cultural exploration, or the methods we use to reconstruct and represent social worlds.' The positivist-realist approach to research considers that reality is something 'out there', to be collected, analysed, interpreted, and presented as objective knowledge about the world. In contrast, social constructionism - the approach I followed - suggests that knowledge about the 'world out there' is produced in a complex process of interaction. Maturana and Varela (1987, in Capra 1997) argue, on the basis of their biological studies, that all creatures - including people - pattern the world continuously as they process signals from it in a manner significant to each organism. However, rather than saying that 'no things exist' independent of the process of cognition, Maturana and Varela argue the map-making itself brings forth the features of the territory. Since individual organisms within a species have a similar structure, they bring forth similar <u>but not identical</u> worlds. Maturana and Varela further argue that, by virtue of their abstract world of language and thought, humans can bring forth their worlds together. If this is so, the research process can specifically aim to work with people to achieve a shared, workable understanding of a particular reality. The manner, therefore, in which data and are produced

during the research process, analysed, and shaped into knowledge, is critical to the robustness and claim to validity we may make as researchers.

The practical tools the researcher selects will, or should, depend on the kind of understanding she has about reality. Quantitative approaches lend themselves readily to positive-realist understandings, whereas qualitative approaches seem suited to constructionist approaches - though the methods themselves are of course not mutually exclusive to one methodology or another. Questions posed in quantitative research are 'etic', outsider questions (Rapley 2002). For example, the researcher could ask: 'Is the quality of life of people in Madagascar *better* than that of people in Germany?' Quantitative methods seek to measure the 'amount' of something, using (apparently) objective indicators. Typical quantitative methods include closed questionnaires, weighing and measuring - for instance to assess the physical development of children, and counting. In contrast, qualitative methods foreground the insider, 'emic', perspective. The researcher may be interested in learning: 'What do Malagasy people understand by a good quality of life?' Qualitative methods are often participatory in character. They invite the involvement of the respondent. In the best participatory work, there is an explicit acknowledgement that the researcher and the researched are partners in the co-creation of 'reality'.

In addition to deciding upon the methodological approach, it is important to decide what you need to know - and do not need to know - in order to select the right research methods. The world is very complex, and the interactions between different components are very difficult, if not impossible to capture. Heterogeneity in methodological approach and in the methods you choose - the methods toolbox - might seem to be one way to unpack the complexity of the real world. Ashley and Carney (1999) argue for instance, in the context of research into livelihoods, that heterogeneity in the methods toolbox improves understanding. Yet, as Salmon (2003, 25) warns, 'it is a rare researcher who thinks through an epistemological position before choosing a method ... in reality researchers … use the methods they have learnt to use and that they *can* use'. The problem with this is that a failure to think back to methodological principles means, on one level, that there can be a lack of coherence between methodology and method. On another level, understandings of 'reality' are not explicitly expressed. Salmon points out that qualitative methods, for example, can 'serve a researcher who believes that research discovers underlying reality as easily as they serve one who believes that researchers' interaction with research participants *constructs* reality' (ibid: 24). In other words, the profound implications of

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following the positive-realist approach or the constructionist approach are not acknowledged.

What about the analysis and interpretation of research results? Farnworth and Jiggins (2003: 12), discussing participatory gender analysis, comment that

> *'it is [-] the mingling of 'pure' data with users' own interpretations that worries many who come from a natural science tradition, in which the power and right to give meaning to data through interpretation belongs to the scientist. It is not uncommon for research teams to seek to 'validate' the results of participatory gender analysis by demanding they be cross-checked by statistical research. However, this demand would seem to conflate the purposes for which each approach is most suited. Participatory gender analysis can describe what a sub-population does, and can explain why the sub-population does what they do; statistical approaches to gender analysis can describe what the whole population does and correlate associated behaviours in the whole population.'*

The authors (ibid: 22) go on to suggest that the reason for this is that participatory research methods have been transferred to the biological sciences without adequate explanation of the research principles within which each method is lodged, or of the disciplinary histories from which participatory methods derive. For more discussion of this point, and case studies, please see Farnworth and Jiggins (2003).

Power dynamics within the research process

Researcher-respondent relationships are laced with untidy power dynamics and the fallibility of the researchers themselves. Cook (2004: 6) comments that, ''researchers' identities and practices make a big difference. They can't hover above the nitty-gritty power relations of everyday life. Research can only emerge out of them. Tainted by them. Reproducing them. Perhaps. Wealth. 'Race'. Nationality. Class. Gender. Sexuality. Age. (Dis)ability.' Researchers are not only irredeemably 'situated' in these socio-economic ways; they also have thoughts and feelings about the research topic.

As a researcher, then, you cannot fully escape your own mutable and immutable characteristics and the way the signals these send are received and interpreted by the people you are working with. And only with great

difficulty can the researcher escape from his or her perceptions of the 'other' (Said, 2003). In Madagascar, for example, it is impossible not to be aware of the legacy of colonialism and the struggles of the post-independence governments to define an 'authentic' Malagasy way forward; this is just another layer of complexity and interruption to add to the list produced by Cook above.

A very interesting question in gender-focused research is the degree to which the worlds of men and women can be considered analytically distinct. It is absolutely fundamental to gender analysis to recognise that the relations between men and women are undergoing constant change, in response to interaction with emergent opportunities and threats in the wider environment, such as climate change, incidence of disease, or new market opportunities, as in the case of organic farming. But it is also important to recognise that identities themselves mutate constantly. Gender-focused research seeks to pin down for a moment the shifting, relational nature of gender, and the active role of men and women in constructing their identities, in 'doing gender'. It involves pinning down what it *means* to be a man or woman in a specific place and time (Grown and Sebstad, 1989).

Gender analysis is of itself neutral (though its practitioners may not be). It does not *necessitate* a political stance in favour of one course of action, or another. Yet the information gender analysis provides, and the knowledge it builds, can provide the basis for policies that specifically aim to redress the balance of power, to 'empower' those who have little control over their lives. One way of thinking about power is in terms of the ability to make choices: to be disempowered implies to be denied choice (Kabeer, 2000). Empowerment thus implies a process of discovering new ways of exercising choice, or new domains in which choice might be exercised. Choices need to be 'meaningful': having the right to education means nothing if one does not have enough time to go to school, or cannot pay for it.

The concept of agency is integral to that of empowerment. Agency can be defined as the ability to define one's goals and act upon them. It can take the form of decision-making, of bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion and resistance, as well as the processes of reflection and analysis (ibid. 2000). If we accept that reality is co-created in a research process, actions on the part of respondents, enumerators and the researcher herself will play a major role in determining the type of 'reality' that is produced.

Attempts by an external researcher to outwit what may seem to be manipulative or deceptive respondent agency, for example through the use of local researchers to create trust, raises important ethical questions. Does the use of 'embedded' researchers allow external researchers to gain access to ideas and information that would otherwise be deliberately hidden from external persons? How can this be justified? And how far do locally-embedded researchers resist incorporation into the agenda of the research project?[3]

PART TWO: THE DEVELOPMENT OF A QUALITY OF LIFE TOOLKIT TO DEVELOP AND CAPTURE CRITERIA FOR WELL-BEING AMONG ORGANIC SMALLHOLDERS AND PLANTATION WORKERS.

A quality of life toolkit needs to have considerable explanatory power if it is to contribute to the methodology and practice of social certification in organic farming. To achieve this objective, it needs to be capable of producing quality baseline data in order to report on 'how it is'. The norms, and aspirations, of the producers need to be captured in this first step. The second step requires the conceptualisation of standards, and the development of indicators, that will provide the producers with the necessary framework conditions to help create the world they want to live in. This involves thinking about how it 'ought to be'. In order to do move through these steps, I developed nine principles that I felt should inform the construction of a quality of life toolkit. To situate the nine principles appropriately I summarise some important areas of contention in quality of life debates below. This summary is followed by a presentation of the nine principles themselves. I then outline the toolkit itself and explain how research was conducted in the field.

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3 My research in the UK with a community group showed how swiftly a particular group grasped the potential of chapatti (venn) diagrams to indicate their perceived exclusion from decision-making processes. They also clearly understood that they could use us, the researchers, to convey their grievances to other parties rather than having to speak for themselves – simply because they realised we would present our 'findings' at some point to various decision-makers (Farnworth, 1998). This experience strongly influenced my desire to employ local researchers in Madagascar, but as shown this decision raised new issues.

Understanding and measuring quality of life

Over the years there have been many attempts, including measuring gross domestic product, devising genuine progress indicators, a women's empowerment measure, and the human development index (see Neumayer, 2000; Kabeer, 2000; Hamilton, 1999; Murray, 1991 for comments). Work has also been done at the micro-level. Nazarea et al. (1998) aimed to correct the biases, as they saw it, of most mainstream development projects in the Philippines by measuring the target population's internally defined standards, many of which turned out to be qualitative, non-monetary, non-material, and long-term. Gender, age and ethnicity of the respondents significantly structured the responses.

Eckermann (2000), in a study of the Australian health sector, discusses the seemingly puzzling discrepancies between objective conditions of well-being and subjective perceptions. Eating disorders, high rates of suicide, and drug abuse among people having all the objective conditions necessary for 'good health" point to the reality of people feeling deeply unhappy with the way the world is organized. She concludes that quality of life indicators need to reflect people's lived experience more accurately, which can only be achieved by abandoning universalistic assumptions. These and other studies (see Richmond et al., 2000; Ahluwalia, 1997; Farlinger, 1996; Shepherd, 1995) demonstrate that subjective perceptions of well-being sometimes have little to do with the provision of 'objective' conditions of well-being.

However, there are two frameworks, the functionings framework devised by Sen (1985 in Saith and Harriss-White, 1998) and the capabilities framework devised by Nussbaum (2000) that plead the need to assess basic levels of functioning and capability according to indicators everyone may agree are valid, below which truly human living is not possible. The functionings framework argues that it is not possession of a commodity or the utility it provides that is a proxy for well-being, but rather what the person actually succeeds in doing with that commodity and its characteristics. Saith and Harris-White (1998) use Sen's framework to discuss three basic functionings: being healthy, being nourished, and being educated. They assert that in developing countries, gender differentials may exist even at the level of such basic functionings. Their assumptions are first, that these three functionings are so elementary as to be necessary for well-being, and second, that a differential in any one of these functionings will result in a differential in well-being.

Nussbaum's (2000) capabilities framework promotes a cross-cultural normative account of human capabilities. This approach asserts that there should be basic constitutional principles respected and implemented by all governments. Such principles should focus on human capabilities, that is, what people are actually able to do and to be. These principles are informed by an intuitive idea of a life that is worthy of the dignity of a human being.

Acknowledging the validity of all these insights made by researchers seeking to understand and measure well-being suggests that a quality of life toolkit capable of eliciting subjective perceptions and also levels of basic functioning and capability through the use of objective indicators could be very powerful.

Principles for a Quality of Life Toolkit

I devised, on the basis of the material above and wider reading on quality of life, nine principles for forming a quality of life toolkit. They are presented here. The principles are interlinked and aim to be mutually supportive. The numbering does not indicate the priority of any principle. The aim is rather to create a flow of logic between each one.

1.   Quality of life research means thinking about real lives
In the morass of theory it is easy to forget, sometimes, that we are talking about real people living real lives. Thus the endeavour to measure quality of life is not just about objective indicators such as the state of housing. It is also about appreciating human emotions like hope and aspiration, poverty and desperation, anger and pleasure.

2.   Assessing quality of life is an ethical issue
Des Jardins says (2001: 18) *'One of the first and most serious challenges in any study of ethics involves identifying an issue as an ethical issue. We all need to practice this stepping back in order to recognise ethical issues in our everyday experience.'* Kavka (1978) presents two fundamental ethical guidelines against which, the author argues, assessments of quality of life must be made:
- There cannot be degrees of membership in the human moral community
- Substantive concepts of the good life need not be shared.

There is plenty of evidence to suggest that these guidelines are frequently flouted in the real world. For one reason or another, particular categories of

people suffer severe disadvantage. Researcher ignorance of these two principles, whether conscious or not, can compound such disadvantage. This is why it is imperative therefore to 'step back' and recognise everyday issues as ethical issues. Ballet et al. (2003) take this view to a logical conclusion, saying that actors connected in one way or another to poor people are placed under an ethical obligation not only not to harm, but also to enhance the effectiveness of the poor's capability sets.

Recognising quality of life as an ethical issue takes us closer to understanding what is necessary for people to achieve their 'maximum selves' (Ho, 2000). Ho's concept of maximum selves shares ground both with Kavka's (1978) injunction that there cannot be degrees of membership in the human moral community, and with Sen's (1990 in Clark 2002) insistence that people be viewed as ends in themselves. The ethical concept of intrinsic value is embodied in these three approaches. A person's gender, among other markers, can affect the likelihood that he or she is seen as a bearer of intrinsic value.

3.   People's subjective understanding of their life-worlds is important
There are a number of difficulties with actually capturing the way in which people subjectively experience their 'life-worlds.' However it is nonetheless necessary to recognise that people experience their particular situations in myriad forms, and from this basis aspire to different goals. This insight should be built into the research project. The aim is not to correlate provision of certain material conditions with satisfaction with those conditions, but rather to gain a rich picture of what actually matters to people. We are speaking fundamentally about trying to understand how people create 'quality relationships to the world', and the ingredients necessary for this endeavour. Blindness to that *'flash of revelation at what we are from the inside out'* (Firouz 2002: 288) will lead to a profound disconnection between internal and external appraisals of the same situation. Indeed such disconnection could lead to unwitting removal by policy makers of the conditions necessary for a subjective sense of well-being to thrive.[4]

It is possible to establish some degree of correlation between markers such as gender (others include race, disability etc.) and how people experience their world. At the same time acceptance of 'puzzle' and 'strangeness' is

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4 This has tremendous implications for social certification and social labelling initiatives, among others.

vital. It is not possible to fully know *'the unique random blend'*[5] of other human beings. Furthermore, acknowledge of the fact that many values are incommensurable is crucial.

4.   *All indicators are proxies*

Indicators are signs trying to signify something. There will be always be a gap between 'what is', and what we think 'is'. The aim of research can only be to seek a reasonable approximation.

5.   *The naturalistic fallacy must be avoided*

Ethics is concerned about how we should live, how we should act and the kind of persons we should be (Des Jardins, 2001: 132). We need to acknowledge that although quality of life is fundamentally concerned with ethics, we have to be particularly concerned about committing the naturalistic fallacy, that is reasoning from facts (what is) to values (what ought to be). Descriptions of the world do not commit one to particular conclusions about how the world should be. It is also possible to commit another kind of error, based on an inability to recognise that substantive concepts of the good life might not be shared, namely reasoning from value to fact. In combination, these two errors set up a self-reinforcing feedback loop admitting of no new knowledge.

6.   *The concept of agency and meaningful choice is critical*

The ability to shape one's world depends on the ability to make meaningful choices and thus to move forward. Developing new preferences depends on a person being able to imagine and experience alternatives. It is here that the concept of agency arises. Agency, it has to be pointed out, does not only have an explicit functional character. It is also about disruptive, boundary-skipping, elusive, hard to capture behaviour.

7.   *Quality of life is not only a state of persons, it is a process*

An understanding quality of life as a process is crucial to any robust concept of quality of life. As Ho (2000) suggests, people are not themselves coherently bounded entities. Naess (1973) argues for an appreciation of human embeddedness in the world, the idea that <u>relationships</u> constitute who we are.[6] The author adds that one can conceptualise people as being

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5 Quote from a poem 'Ambulances' by Larkin, P. (in Jones, ed. 1999: 134)

6 Naess (1973) bases his ideas in part upon gestalt theory. He insists upon 'rejection of the man-in-environment image in favour of the relational, total field image. Organisms as knots in the biospherical net or field of intrinsic relations. An instrinsic relation between two things A and B is such that the relation belongs to

in a state of flow. They are in dynamic interaction with their world, which is itself ever changing. A consequence of this perception is that concepts of what constitutes 'the good life' will likewise be in a state of flux.

The concept of process is of course ineluctably bound up with the concept of time. Inter-generational and intra-generational processes need to be considered. Other time processes relate to seasonality and the pattern of daily activities. Understanding how time is conceptualised in a particular place enables a better insight into how concepts of the good life are transmitted, and also how to break poverty cycles through strengthening the capability sets of poor people.

8. The material conditions of existence form an important platform for a good quality of life
The functionings and capabilities framework, and the so-called Scandinavian approach (see Rapley 2003), both overtly proclaim the necessity of providing certain material conditions in order to allow people to achieve basic functionings (such as being healthy, being nourished and being educated). Enabling 'people to live really humanely' (to have) is a prerequisite for them 'to be' and 'to do'. The necessity of a reasonable standard of life is also acknowledged in the American tradition (ibid.). This tradition emphasises the importance of subjective appraisals of well-being.

9. Bounded thinking is of limited value
Quality of life is a multi-dimensional concept which can be analysed across a series of subjective and objective domains. Correlations between subjective and objective axes may or may not be sought. Yet category-based models run the risk of binding and limiting what we understand. Perhaps, and also, they bear little relation to the ways that real world people actually think and behave. The researcher runs the risk therefore of 'making sense' of complex information by slotting it into a particular category whilst at the same time snipping away at the links which give this information meaning. The researcher therefore needs to pay attention to the effectiveness of category thinking and to consider whether, and when, it might be useful to blur the boundedness of the concepts he or she is using.

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the definitions or basic constituents of A and B, so that without the relation, A and B are no longer the same things.'

PART THREE: QUALITY OF LIFE RESEARCH IN MADAGASCAR - AN ATTEMPT TO BE RESPONDENT-LED

Although the theoretical considerations might be complex, the tools selected for the fieldwork in Madagascar had to be simple to use. This is because the quality of life toolkit has to be flexible enough to be used anywhere, specific enough to produce unique meaning in a particular situation, and yet universal enough for the results to be understood and operationalised by other stakeholders. As mentioned above, the aim was to contribute a bottom-up toolkit for social certification in organic commodity chains for presentation to organic players like IFOAM. My objective was to demonstrate that approaches to certification foregrounding local understandings of 'what matters', obtained through a respondent-led process, can provide robust standards and indicators that other stakeholders in international commodity chains, such as certifying bodies, buyers, and consumers, can accept as valid.

The toolbox did not seek to produce 'objective data' on the respondents' quality of life, by directly measuring the health status or checking the educational qualifications of the respondents for example. Rather, the aim was to capture the respondents' perceptions of their quality of life, in other words to gain some kind of insight into their lived and experienced world. To illustrate the respondent-led nature of the work, I now turn to a discussion of the research methods that I chose to use. For reasons of space, I limit the discussion to those used to explore attitudes and issues around land since land, for reasons explained below, was an important quality of life indicator.

Research was conducted first with smallholder organic farmers in an isolated region near Brickaville on the east coast of Madagascar. They harvest plantation and wild-sown cinnamon for Phaelflor, a small private Malagasy-owned organic company exporting essential oils to the USA and Europe. First order distillation of the cinnamon oil takes place locally with further refinement in the capital Antananarivo. This endeavour is supported by USAID, since it is seen as a way of preserving important forest biodiversity by encouraging economic use of the buffer zone between the forest and farmland. Research continued with plantation workers at Plantation MonDésir (PMD), which is located close to urban centres and tourist resorts, also on the east coast. PMD produces organic oils, spices and black pepper for use in European pharmaceutical and meat processing industries.

Permission to move around the smallholder communities was sought from the male village heads – the *Tangalemena*. These meetings were crucial in establishing rapport and in providing initial insights into the constraints facing each community, into locally relevant quality of life components, and beyond this into the quality of life aspirations of the smallholders and plantation workers. Almost all the research activities were conducted with separate groups of women and men by a Malagasy researcher of the same gender (I usually accompanied the female researcher, though occasionally I was present at activities dominated by men).

The methods used in a particular situation were not decided upon in advance. Rather, through extensive discussions with the Tangalemena, and then women and men farmers in each community, *themes were permitted to emerge*. Methods that seemed appropriate to further investigation of the theme were then selected. In addition to participatory mapping (where respondents make their own maps of their environment), transects (a walk with respondents across a representative section of land), a variety of historical and seasonal calendars (to illustrate changes in health, for example) and key informant interviewing, a camcorder was used with the plantation workers to record their discussions on quality of life[7]. A particularly useful method proved to be 'Thematic Apperception Tests' (TATs). TATS were devised by Murray (1943 in Nazarea, 1998: 161). In its original form cards with ambiguous representations are presented to respondents. The respondent is asked to tell a story about each card and

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the account is recorded verbatim. The premise behind this is that informants identify with some of the figures. In the process of story telling the respondents reveal their own self-concepts and deep wishes. The method, adapted for use in the Malagasy study, is described in Box 1. The TAT was chosen as it explicitly allows for complexity and emergence.

Box 1: Thematic apperception test

1) Photos of common local scenes are shown to the respondent.
2) Respondents are individually asked to 'tell a story' about each photo.
3) The stories are tape recorded, transcribed and translated into French.
4) These stories are then read by the evaluation team.
5) Dominant themes emerging from stories relating to contextually sensitive definitions of quality of life are identified.
6) The themes in each story are then scored by three individuals from different cultures and disciplines.
7) A score 0-1 is given depending whether a particular theme absent or present in a story.
8) Thus the maximum score per theme = 8 (according to frequency of citation by respondents, not frequency of repetition by particular respondent).
9) Statistical Analysis System is then used to calculate mean and standard deviation of total scores.
10) Analysis of Variance (General Linear Model Procedure) is carried out to determine statistical differences in score means of themes across gender, ethnicity and age.

Source: Adapted by the author from Nazarea et al. (1998)

The main consideration when adapting the TAT in the Malagasy study was the number of photos to be used: eight were selected in contrast to the twenty in the original Philippino study. This decision was taken to avoid tiring the respondents and to make the data set manageable. The author took the photographs in consultation with research colleagues after several days in the research area[8]. The intent was to capture everyday, yet slightly defamiliarised, scenes in a familiar landscape. In actual fact the process outlined in the box was not carried through to completion – the last four

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8 It would be interesting to compare the thematic apperception test approach with that of photo elicitation interviews (Epstein *et al.* 2006 for a useful sample text).

steps were omitted. This is because one member of the research team had difficulty transcribing and translating the tapes due to their unfamiliarity with the local dialect, thus slowing down the process. Comprehensive interviews were therefore only carried out with four people – a young man/ older man, a young woman/ older woman. Although statistical rigour was not obtained, the information the respondents gave was some of the most richly textured of the entire fieldwork. Importantly, the multi-cultural nature of the research team greatly aided the discussion and analysis of the TAT findings.

No quantitative work was undertaken. However, in order to study 'objective' quality of life indicators, statistical reports from the Malagasy Ministry of Agriculture were analysed (Ministère de l'Agriculture, 1998). The purpose was to add to the rich texture of the data being produced from work in the field, and to point up any discrepancies in how people evaluated aspects of their own quality of life (the insider, emic view), and how outsiders evaluated the same aspect (the outsider, etic view). It was fascinating to observe that the smallholders, for example, considered themselves to be very healthy compared to town-dwellers as a consequence of eating only their own produce. 'Even though our work is very tiring', said a woman smallholder, 'we enjoy it because we are proud of producing all we need … and all that we eat is fresh' (July 2002, Brickaville, in Farnworth, 2004). In contrast, health professionals from the local health centre thought that the smallholders were in very poor health, asserting that they suffered widely from malnutrition, sexually-transmitted diseases, malaria and bronchial infections (in ibid). According to the statistical data, the child mortality rate in the age band 0-5 was 10 per cent (Ministère de l'Agriculture, 1998).

It was also interesting to note that both the smallholders and the plantation workers spent much time discussing their mental health, a topic not touched upon at all by health professionals. The smallholders treasured the quiet, calm nature of their lives, far from the town and the interference of central government. 'Here, there aren't many social rules. One feels free', explained one male smallholder (July 2002, Brickaville, in Farnworth 2004). The plantation workers, however, argued that they were in a poor state of physical and mental health due to the precarious nature of their livelihoods (Farnworth, 2004).

The meaning of land for wellbeing

At the outset of the research several *Tangalamena* had mentioned the fraught question of land ownership. We learned that former French

occupiers still hold land title - much to the farmers' concern - and that the state has considerable holdings. It became clear that access to, and control over, land was a 'live' issue, contrary to my unexamined starting assumption that the smallholders' access to land was secure, since they were involved in business partnerships linking them straight into the international organic commodity chain.

We thus developed a 'well-being transect walk', not known to me from the literature on transects, to try and capture multiple perceptions relating to land. It was during such a transect walk with male smallholder farmers that we first became aware of the temporal nature of their relationship to land. They set aside land for their ancestors, since 'One feels a link with the ancestors here. That pleases us' (male smallholder, July 2002, in Farnworth, 2004). Equally important was the ability to set aside land for future generations – their children – to use.

Yet the farmers appeared to *live* a concept of land ownership that fails to protect their long-term needs in the face of stronger, legally-backed, 'etic' definitions. They felt obliged to permit anyone to purchase uncultivated land surrounding their village, even if in so doing they recognised that the future wellbeing of their own descendents was being eroded. Women smallholders were disadvantaged further. In the smallholders' view, the right to land depended on the ability to actually cultivate it, and as land cultivation was considered to be 'men's work', women had to depend on men to open and plough land for them. According to the statistics, female headship of households in this community was high (Ministère de l'Agriculture, 1998). However, male farmers contradicted the official statistics, commenting that if women separated from their partners, or became widows, they would quickly seek out new male partners, 'to be able to live' (male smallholder, Brickaville, July 2002, in Farnworth, 2004). In one interesting exception to this trend, one woman negotiated her access to land through adopting two boys to help her with agricultural tasks. She told us that she did not care to remarry (ibid.)[9].

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9 Ekejiuba (in Bryceson, ed. 1995) discusses a range of studies elsewhere in Africa that show how women manipulate the gender of division of labour in their own interests. She describes the case of her maternal aunt in Nigeria who emerged from a 'failed' childless marriage. The aunt was discouraged from remarrying, but in time she married another woman, who, in time, produced four sons. The aunt also produced a son of her own. In this way the women's access to various resources was enabled.

Participatory mapping with plantation workers

A particularly important method to further understand the relationship of the farmers and smallholders to land and the environment proved to be participatory mapping. Both the smallholders and the plantation workers, at our request, drew maps on the ground, using materials and drawing tools they selected from the environment immediately at hand. We told them that we would like them to use their map to tell us about their area, and beyond this did not give them any further guidance. It was fascinating to see the different ways in which each group tackled this task. Here I describe one of the most notable mapping activities, which reveals the very different ways in which women and men plantation workers viewed their environment. I then attempt to interpret these findings, based on my wider understanding gained from preliminary analyses with the research team, other fieldwork, and a variety of literary sources.

The plantation workers were landless and found it much harder to avoid, or control, interactions with people outside their immediate community than the smallholders did. They led high-risk lives, vulnerable to immediate unemployment and homelessness, in the midst of what seemed plenty: the tourist area of Fénerive.

Figure 1: The women plantation workers' participatory map

Carte participative des femmes PMD
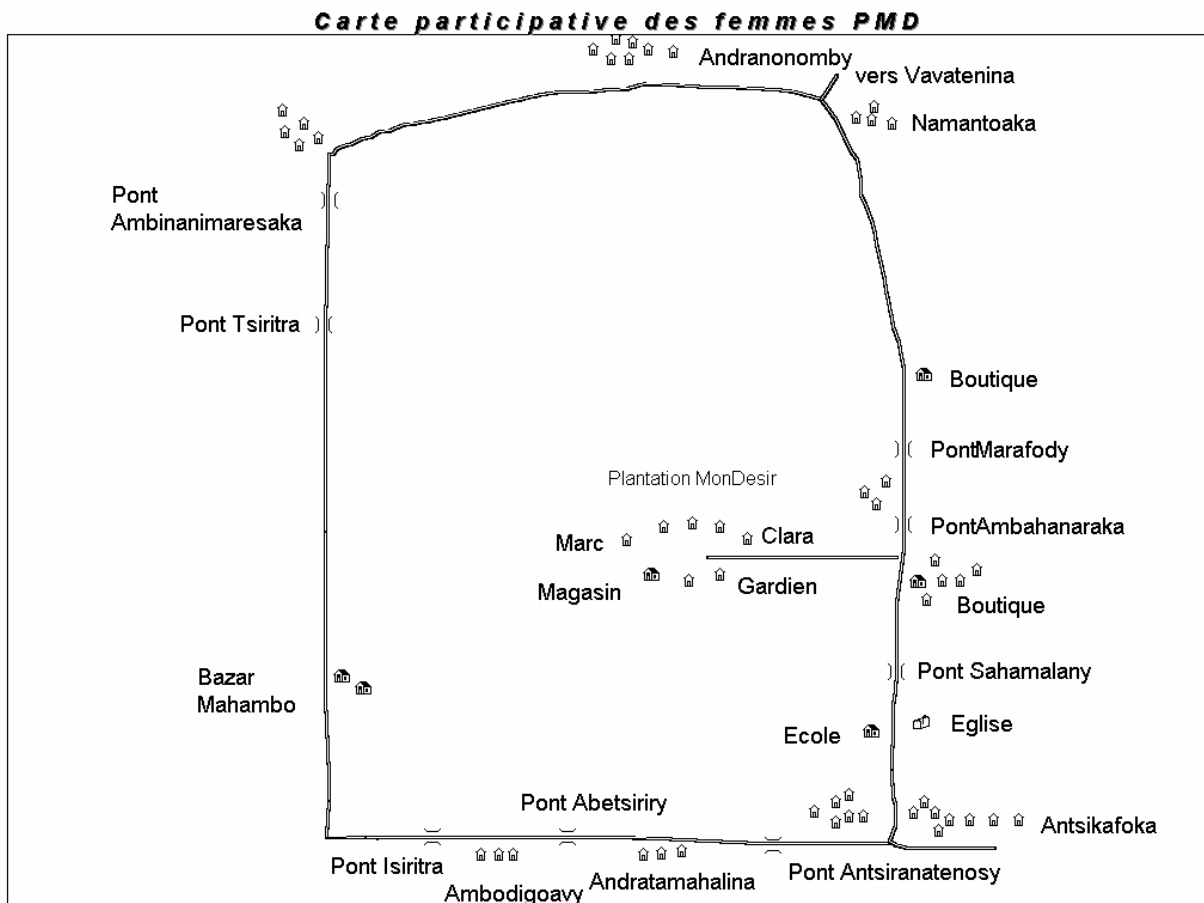
Language key: Pont = bridge, Eglise = church, Ecole = school, Magasin = shop; Gardien = guard, Bazar = Market

On the basis of fieldwork and discussions with the respondents and the research team, I came to consider that the women in particular lived in, and tried to create, a geographically-bounded world that they owned 'in the mind'. Their participatory map (Figure 1) shows circles within circles. The outer rim is constituted of roads and footpaths, which are depicted the same size, regardless of whether they are main roads or not. Important points of social contact like churches and shops, and key reference points like bridges, are highlighted. Meeting friends on a road or pathway whilst on errands was the main way women socialised: 'I go up to people, I sit down with them and chat' (woman plantation worker, PMD, August 2002, in Farnworth, 2004). The inner circle shown on the map is Plantation MonDésir itself.

Figure 2: Maru explains the women's map

The fact that the women tried to delimit their geographical space is clearly
associated with the local gender division of labour (which had been
described to the research team through other participatory activities).
Women were trying to reduce the complexity of their lives by confining their

multiple tasks to a small geographical area. They were not challenging their ascribed roles, which could be construed as excessive in number and oppressive in character, but rather were attempting to do what they were required to do more effectively. It can be argued, on the basis of our evidence, that the women workers strove to create a defined and limited space within which they could meet their ascribed roles effectively and efficiently and, the author contends on the basis of discussions held with the Malagasy team, *perhaps* very happily. Nussbaum (2001: 2) acknowledges that lives devoted to the service of others can be laden with positive value. However, she generally regrets their instrumental nature. Here, I argue that for the plantation workers one way of increasing social standing involves meeting the challenges of ascribed gender roles, of being fully 'woman' (or man, indeed. We did not research this sufficiently). One requisite ingredient of this effort is the ability to structure space effectively. As one woman said, 'We almost never go out. Our life revolves around the plantation, the shop and above all our home' (woman plantation worker, PMD, August 2002, in Farnworth, 2004).

I suggest also that women 'lived within the familiar'. It can be argued that the women, as a consequence of the gender division of labour, were profoundly rooted in a 'felt and experienced world'. Their map depicted a known world. All points on their map were accessible on foot. Bridges formed key reference points. Places where the women could meet and chat with others were highlighted, like shops, roads, and the market. In other words, the map depicts a social network aligned with geographical space: the women produced a *lifescape*. The women's map is a visual realisation of Cooper's (1992: 167) proposition that people do not live *in* an environment, they *have* an environment. He argues that it is the active engagement with, and knowing of, the environment that it is important. Items within the environment 'signify or point to one another, thereby forming a network of meanings.'

Interestingly, the men's map was entirely different. Without boundaries, it spread over a carpark, necessitating the removal of a vehicle. The men's map depicted distant towns, scarcely known to them. It would be fair to say that the men's map was an aspirational map, moving beyond the known world into the unfamiliar.

Later, a dream map was developed on the basis of the participatory map with the aim of discovering some of the chief aspirations of each gender in terms of concrete change in their immediate environments. The women

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settled on three components that would add to their well-being: a shop, a school, and a health centre – all to be located on the plantation. They stressed that a local shop selling basic necessities like salt, oil, rice, soap and sugar (but no alcohol – they were very clear on this point) would save them a considerable amount of time. A school was seen as important not only for the safety of their children (who currently have to walk along a main road) but also for themselves. All the women wanted to attend literacy classes, if only to learn how to sign their name. Some also wanted to learn French. Finally, they argued that a medical centre was needed to manage everyday ailments like malaria, parasites, fits and diarrhoea which afflicted above all their children.

It is interesting to note that the women did not change elements lying outside PMD. One might see the limits to their agency here. Perhaps they hoped that the research team would convey their dreams to the plantation management. If so, this could demonstrate that their decision-making power in their own social networks was weak - or powerful only within strict boundaries. They might have conceptualised the plantation, lying outside their normative decision-making structures, as a place where they would be able to make change happen. Their interest in literacy supports this argument – illiteracy and 'not understanding' (in this case not understanding French) marginalised the women along a number of significant axes.

The men wanted to locate the following features at PMD: a medical post, a processing plant for agricultural products like lychees, a football field and a wood lot with a workers' association to manage the sale of wood. They also considered ways of aligning the local environment close to their homes in Sahamalany in new ways. For them, a better quality of life would be ensured by a school, a dance hall, a video salon and an improved road for exiting their agricultural products.

CONCLUSION: DID THE RESEARCH SUCCEED IN BEING RESPONDENT-LED?

In the introduction to this paper, I argued that respondent-led research is critical for ensuring that an understanding of the components of 'quality of life', and their operationalisation as standards and indicators, is truly meaningful to the target group. In my final remarks to this paper I limit myself to a discussion of how far I succeeded in ensuring that the research was in fact respondent-led. A wider discussion of how to employ the results

of the research for the purposes of social certification can be found in Farnworth (2004) or through contact with me.

To a degree the research did indeed succeed in being respondent-led, wittingly and unwittingly. For example, the respondents actively worked with the methods to create data that they thought might change their lives, using the research team to try and send signals to their supervisors (PMD) or to their business partners (Brickaville). Through observing and analysing the respondent agency that these actions illustrated, it became clear to me as the study progressed that the real questions to be answered were not: *are people happy?* Or *what conditions provide the basis for happiness?* Rather, the questions came to be: *do people have meaningful choice? How much scope do the respondents have to 'be this or to do that?'* (Nussbaum and Sen, 1993: 1-2).

The most important result overall of the research was the fact that through their participation in the research activities, the respondents were actively searching for new domains in which to exercise meaningful choice, and also new ways of exercising that choice. Acknowledging the emergent question of meaningful choice was an important research outcome, for it permitted a rapid change in focus whilst still in the field, which was carried through to analysis and interpretation. This was the greater challenge, for while it is simple to observe that the realms and boundaries of meaningful choice differ for women and men, it is much harder to analyse and interpret the data in a way unfettered by conventional analyses and interpretations.

The research approach was generally effective in finding out about 'what mattered' in people's lives. The respondent-focused nature of the process enabled issues significant to participants to emerge and be discussed. Some methods were particularly conducive, in particular the thematic apperception tests, in provoking people into revealing some of their personal preoccupations. These could then be followed up with other activities aimed at developing a richer understanding, and providing some degree of triangulation, i.e. correlating one data set against data sets obtained using different research methods, in order to obtain a clearer, more robust picture.

Daily discussions with the Malagasy research team on emerging findings challenged my preconceptions of what might constitute 'oppression' of one gender by another. These discussions allowed me to see that each gender might construct a notion of happiness that is gender-specific, and no less

valid for that. Nonetheless, the research revealed anomalous findings that were not related to a failure to triangulate appropriately. I feel that it is necessary for researchers not to lose or iron out findings that do not, on the face of things, 'make sense', but rather to acknowledge, describe and work with such findings when analysing and interpreting the data. It can be good enough for the researcher's purposes to understand what might be important to the respondent, without properly understanding *why* it is important.

Yet, despite my attempts to break my own bounded thinking through permitting the respondents to determine the research agenda, my limitations proved a constraint to achieving some important understandings. For example, despite the focus on allowing themes to emerge, my ability to investigate these themes was contingent on my ability to employ suitable methods. Despite my wide-ranging experience in participatory approaches, gaps in my methods toolbox, and in my ability to actually understand the sinews of some of the emergent themes resulted in important data gaps, for example with regard to the well-being of children.

Although the research attempted to be gender-sensitive, and much useful and fascinating information was produced, it was not possible to arrive at a deep understanding of what it 'means to be a man or woman' within the respondent groups. More attention should have been paid to the experience of men, as a gender (as opposed to seeing 'them' as key informants / conduits of important information). Furthermore, particular and sustained inquiry into the dynamic interrelation between men and women across the lifecycle would have led to deeper understandings.

With respect to my aim of contributing a bottom-up methodology to the social certification toolkit, one of the most important lessons I developed, based on my 'respondent-led' research, was the concept that standards and indicators had to be aspirational in character, rather than merely meet fixed norms, such as the age at which children can work. New standards and indicators need to be continually developed by the respondents as their quality of life improves, and as their realm of meaningful choice expands. Well-being is not a fixed state, it is a dynamic process of continual development, a process of 'becoming'.

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