

# Interpreting institutional discourses



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In policy-oriented research, we rarely choose our own topic; we are assigned it. In the course of our research, however, we often come to challenge the terms or boundaries of the topic we were given. We construct our own account, and then decide how to present it to the policy makers or activists who commissioned the research, or how to reach a wider audience. The production of policy documents, our reading of them and the construction of our own accounts are shaped by the politics of the policy-making process. What policy-oriented research tells us is not self-evident; it has to be interpreted politically to be understood.

In this chapter we will be looking at how, in the process of constructing and presenting our own account, we can get the most out of *grey materials* – unpublished or semi-published documents that are often short-lived, have not been through academic review and are not commercially available. It was once difficult to find such documents, but since the advent of the internet and powerful search engines the problem is sorting through them to identify those that are useful. We will be looking particularly at policy-oriented reports on development issues written by trained researchers working either as employees or consultants for governmental or non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The examples used here derive mainly from my own experience as a researcher on development issues in two different contexts: first in a research and teaching centre within the national university in Mozambique, then in a development institute in the Netherlands, looking at research on poverty, gender and health in Africa. The issues raised here apply, however, to using grey material from other regions and on other topics as well.

This chapter should be read as a complement to Chapter 5 on literature study. Whereas Stephanie Barrientos stressed the importance of locating an author within a particular school, here I am emphasizing the importance of locating research reports

within particular institutional discourses. Research reports are often written anonymously so that their author becomes the agency that commissioned them. But, even when signed, such reports must be located institutionally. They are the product of an explicitly political process – though often couched in technical language. The final report is the outcome of a process of negotiation between researchers and the commissioning institution. To use this material well, we must locate the choice of questions and conclusions within this political process. We must recognize key words and interpret both messages and silences as part of socially constructed institutional discourses.

### 6.1 Problems in using grey materials as sources of information • • •

The politics of producing grey materials is an explicitly political process, which can compromise their usefulness as sources of information in some persistent ways. The first is censorship – either explicit or implicit. Agencies that request reports can simply refuse to accept conclusions they do not like, assigning drafts to the dustbin or negotiating bland and uncontroversial conclusions. The World Bank, for example, disagreeing with an outside evaluation of its own assessments of poverty programmes in Africa, simply withheld it. In a study of the poverty impact of an increase in the fuel tax in Mozambique, the IMF wanted the final report to point out that, ultimately, the impact would depend on how increased government revenues were used, a point that is obviously true but which minimizes the immediate impact of an increase in transport costs on the livelihoods of urban workers.

To avoid censorship, researchers often exercise self-censorship, since they wish both to have their research reported, and to be commissioned to do further research. In practice it is very difficult to write a definitively negative report on any on-going project supported by those who commissioned the research. Motives may be political as well as financial. In researching agrarian issues during Mozambique's socialist period, for example, we deliberately put little emphasis on class differentiation of the peasantry; we were concerned that evidence of differentiation would be used by certain voices in the ruling party as a justification for forced collectivization. There is thus a drift toward consensus in grey material, often at the cost of coherence. The conclusions drawn and executive summaries do not always reflect the findings and information presented in the body of the report.

Not only conclusions, but even the general premises of research, may be subject to implicit assumptions about suitable solutions. Ferguson (1990) has noted that development institutions have preconceptions about acceptable policy options for rural Africa. There is a standard package of projects – usually emphasizing greater integration of traditional peasants into the market – that they are prepared to implement across a wide range of situations. He also argues that these packages tend to be technical – removed from the different political situations in which they must operate. In the case of Lesotho,

an independent country located in the heart of South Africa and long a source of migrant workers, this package included technical measures such as rural road construction and improved livestock production. This was intended to improve commercial smallholder production. Ferguson argues that for this package to look like a solution to Lesotho's problems, World Bank research on Lesotho had to rewrite its history and political economy to present it as 'a nation of farmers, not wage labourers, a country with a geography, but not history, with people, but no classes; values, but no structures; administrators, but no rulers; bureaucracy, but not politics' (Ferguson, 1990, p. 66). The migrant workers moving constantly back and forth to South Africa thus became traditional peasant farmers, isolated from the market.

Preconceptions about solutions may also explicitly figure in negotiation of research questions between researchers and those who commissioned the research. During my time with the research centre in Mozambique we were asked to investigate worker absenteeism in the harbour of Maputo, considered by management to be the principal cause for the long turn-around time in ship-handling. Preliminary research convinced us that low productivity in the port was rooted in the organization of the work rather than in the recruitment of the workers. It took hard bargaining to extend the terms of our research to the operational zones of the harbour.

The focus of much grey material is on 'problems' and this in itself leads to some predictable silences, even without political censorship. Neither space nor time is sufficient to locate the problems within their relevant historical and social context. These contexts are often assumed to be understood by both researchers and readers, sometimes, as Ferguson (1990) points out, most inappropriately so. The immediate political context that made certain points fundamental may no longer exist, and thus make the concerns of a particular report unintelligible or even trivial to the reader. For example, in reports produced by the research centre on co-operatization in Mozambique, we included what may now seem to be disproportionate detail on the ownership and cultivation of cashew trees. This was because forced resettlement in communal villages was still an option preferred by some within the ruling party. We wanted to make it clear why disputes around ownership of cashew trees had become a symptomatic focus of opposition to resettlement.

The politics of the policy process leads to a dichotomy in the types of grey material it produces: (a) reports with a national focus, of the sort that ministries and large international agencies tend to commission; and (b) project reports, commissioned by NGOs wanting to know how their money was spent, often focused on a particular community or region and concerned with issues such as the competence of individual project staff. The critical analytical space in between these two types of reports – the links between macro or sectoral policies conceived at a national level and their disparate effects at local and regional levels – is rarely covered in grey material.

Finally, the unequal power relations that dominate the policy process in turn dominate the production of grey materials. The voices of the poor, the oppressed, and the exploited are under-represented in grey material, and the voices of the powerful

echo loudly. In their review of studies of malnutrition in India, for example, Kumar and Stewart (1992, p. 278) observed that the discussion on targeting has tended to focus exclusively on leakage of benefits beyond the target group, ignoring failure to reach all in the targeted group. They note that narrowly targeted interventions often show apparently favourable cost–benefit ratios, of great importance to officials, but this does not tell us the costs incurred by leaving out groups in need of nutritional supplementation. The voices of the latter group are not so easily heard as those of officials concerned with showing the efficiency of their work.

To respond to this problem, many policy studies on poverty now include material drawn from participatory poverty assessments, as mentioned in Chapter 8. The research agenda, decisions about what material should be included in the report, the interpretation of the voices and the drawing of policy conclusions still depend, however, on the authors and sponsors of these studies. Take, for example, Narayan-Parker's (1997) study in Tanzania. The report chooses some of the many things village focus groups said:

In Arusha and Kilimanjaro regions the poor said: 'We have land but nothing to work it with. All I have is a small hoe. You have to bend your back to work with a small hoe and after two hours you are tired!' 'The land is exhausted from overcultivation. Ten years ago, I got eight bags per acre; today I get two bags.' 'I cannot afford fertilizer or hybrid seeds, and I do not qualify for credit. Without fertilizer, the land does not produce even enough to feed the family' (Narayan-Parker, 1997, p. 10).

In drawing out the policy implications of such statements, the report concludes that 'The poor do not advocate a return to government subsidies. However, they cannot afford to buy farming inputs at current prices without access to credit and other non-farm income-earning opportunities' (Narayan-Parker, 1997, pp. 16–17). Actually there is nothing in the report that shows that the poor would rather have credit than subsidized inputs. Only two percent of village groups mentioned lack of credit as a cause of poverty though 17 percent mentioned lack of farm inputs and implements (Narayan-Parker, 1997, p. 16). Under the neo-liberal regimes of the 1990s credit was an acceptable policy option whereas subsidies were not.

The dominance of the discourse of international consultancy in grey materials on development issues reflects unequal power relations between countries that are the focus of development studies and the countries that commission such studies. Problems of reliability that arise in the politics of the policy-making process are exacerbated by the prevalence of short-term consultants who must couch their reports in funders' fancies. In discussing possible research on the consequences of sharp cutbacks in the recruitment of Mozambican miners in South Africa with a staff member of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), researchers from the Centre for African Studies tried to explain that the principal problem was not unemployed miners, but

rather the young rural unemployed men in Mozambique who needed wage-income but had never been employed in the mines. The staff member from UNDP understood the point, but explained that unemployed miners were a 'sexy' issue, whereas rural unemployment was not.

Short-term international consultants are prone to characteristic defects in research practice; the quick and dirty methods described by Chambers (1980), which this book is designed to counter. They rely for background information on previous consultancy reports, often furnished by the commissioning agency, so that the same stereotypes are passed on from one report to another, acquiring the appearance of truth, the well-known fact, with each telling. They tend to concentrate their attention on centres of power, speaking with those who can rapidly mobilize facts and information: ministry officials, embassy desk officers, technical staff of international agencies. While we can learn from the best of such consultants (see Chapter 3), they all too often play the role of the 19th century sociologist Georg Simmel's stranger – the outsider brought in to hear contradictory and conflicting accounts, order them, and present back to the people in power what they themselves said in a more orderly and acceptable way. Such consultants may also try to find sources of hard quantitative data which will give an appearance of substance to their reports, although the methodologies used to collect these data are often illusively presented. The methodological basis of qualitative information is typically even less rigorous. Short-term consultants tend to rely on gossip and anecdotes acquired in the corridors of the capitol and in semi-social encounters with other international personnel.

## 6.2 Why use this material at all? • • •

If there are so many problems of interpretation in institutional discourses, why would we want to use grey material for finding out fast? Why not just put it aside and look exclusively at measured and critical academic research on our topic?

The most important reason for finding and interpreting grey material is that it is itself an important part of the world that we are studying. It tells us the ways in which important institutions in the politics of development, such as the World Bank, UNICEF, COSATU (the South African trade union federation), and national governments view problems and solutions in the domain we are studying. When Ferguson (Ferguson, 1990, p. 66) noted that World Bank research on Lesotho erroneously presented it as a nation of farmers not wage-workers, he showed both why the Bank policy favoured smallholder agricultural development to alleviate rural poverty in southern Africa and why the policy wasn't working. Similarly, a 1989 poverty study on Mozambique argued that 'the prospects for off-farm employment in Mozambique as in much of Africa have never been very bright' (World Bank, 1989, p. 102). This was in line with the policy consensus of the moment that saw promoting the development of smallholder

marketing as the key to poverty alleviation in Africa. As long as we remember that what we learn from such studies is not the truth but the representation of particular points of view, they can be ideal key informants in the sense used by Chambers (1980): knowledgeable, interested, anxious to inform – and open to interpretation.

Analyzing such reports as part of a political process clarifies the context of policy formulation. This in turn helps us to think about how we want to write up or present in our own study. We can sound out the audience and determine what is likely to be assumed, what is likely to be contested and what is politically acceptable to different institutional actors in the policy context within which we are working. When South Africa was debating restructuring the mining industry in the 1990s, for example, all policy actors agreed that raising productivity was important. But, whereas reports done for the mine workers union, the NUM, emphasized greater stability and equality of employment as ways of improving labour productivity, research published by the Chamber of Mines, the owners' cartel, saw high labour costs as the principal problem of the industry. Knowing both positions would help us to read the African National Congress (ANC) government's Green Paper on restructuring and to locate its strengths and silences.

Grey materials can also be a source of information about the topic we are studying that academic literature may not yet be able to provide. Consultants often have access to recent statistical information, registered either by governments or by the agencies for which they work, which is not in the public domain. Their interventions must be timely, thus reports are finished much more rapidly than are academic studies. Consultants may also work in situations where conventional academic research is difficult or unauthorized. For many years, for example, information on Mozambican refugees came mainly through people working with agencies involved in refugee work.

Finally, there is a high moral and political cost to be paid for repeated research on the same topic and in the same areas, particularly when this involves surveys, even though we may be able to detect many methodological and conceptual problems in previous studies. Research is always an approximation, never a reproduction of reality. Critically reading, cross-checking, and recasting a series of fragmented, incomplete or even biased reports on our topic can contribute to giving us a reasonable understanding of the policy area we are studying.

### 6.3 Where to begin? Not with grey material • • •

How then do we undertake this critical reading? As Barrientos (Chapter 5) observes, the way we read and take notes depends on the phase of our research. Initially, to find the topic, or to develop alternative approaches to the topic we have been assigned, we survey the literature. The literature survey makes it possible both to define the topic more clearly and to identify material which is worth reading closely and analytically in the

literature study. In both survey and study phases, grey material is not the place to begin. Just as we would never try to conduct a key interview without first having thought carefully about the topic and identified the social and political position of the person we are going to interview, we must also prepare ourselves before reading grey material. General historical information about the place we are studying and similar studies from other areas sharpen our awareness of alternative theoretical and political approaches to the topic under investigation.

It is easier to spot assumptions and incomplete arguments if we already know something about the history, geography, and political economy of the region under study. It was easy for Ferguson (1990) to recognize the absurdity in the Lesotho *Country Economic Report* (World Bank, 1975) of characterizing the peasantry as traditional subsistence cultivators, because he had read work such as Murray (1981) that traced the consequences of a long history of labour migration and the decline of marketed peasant production.

Reading key sources on the issues and areas under study also makes it possible to recognize and evaluate the original sources of hand-me-down data. In Mozambique, Wuyts (1981) used data from colonial agricultural censuses to estimate regional differences in the proportion of peasant production that was marketed, thus making it possible to estimate total peasant production. Ten years later, these estimated proportions had become facts, and were used to estimate the impact of structural adjustment on peasant production. Total peasant production was inferred from registered marketed surpluses, producing a remarkable increase in estimated GDP. If one has read the original work by Wuyts and is also broadly familiar with the history and political economy of Mozambique, one doubts that estimates based on conditions of production and marketing in the 1960s could be carried over to the late 1980s in the midst of a destructive war and after prolonged scarcity of consumer goods in rural markets.

#### 6.4 Identifying grey material for interpretive analysis • • •

Chapter 5 shows you how to approach the literature in different ways in different phases of your research. In the literature survey you are still defining your topic and locating the directions of future study. In the literature study you are developing your own argument. Since grey material is just a sub-set of the literature in policy-oriented research (though a particularly important and distinctive kind), you should approach it in the same way. However, I will distinguish between two ways of reading – the structured skim, and a more thorough analytical and interpretive reading. The former is particularly useful in the literature survey whereas literature study demands the latter. The deeper interpretive reading always depends, however, on the structured skim having first identified what is useful for study.

### 6.4.1 Finding possibly useful grey material

The first problem to be solved in identifying grey material for finding out fast is obtaining access to it. The second is separating the wheat from the chaff. The advent of the internet has simplified the first task but made the latter much more taxing. Many development actors, from the World Bank, to SIDA to national AIDS councils or local NGOs post 'publications' (usually grey material) on their websites. None the less, it is still very difficult to obtain many current research reports, particularly if findings or topics are controversial. Some consultancy firms do not distribute their reports widely, as these are the only product they have to sell. Government officials continue to be suspicious of researchers and reluctant to share previous reports, particularly those that are critical of government.

Finding out that an important report exists is usually the first step to obtaining access. Locally based researchers often know about useful grey material. Some grey materials are covered by bibliographic data bases. ELDIS (<http://www.eldis.org>) and the British Library for Development Studies (<http://blds.ids.ac.uk/blds/>) cover grey material related to development issues, much of it directly downloadable. The local World Bank offices and NGOs keep copies of reports they have commissioned and often have access to government reports that are not in the public domain. Copies of consultancy reports can sometimes be obtained from their clients, particularly the development-oriented NGOs. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and central planning ministries generally have documentation centres for the use of their employees and consultants. Specialized government agencies are sometimes willing to allow researchers access to material in retired archives, though reluctant to release current studies for research they do not control.

### 6.4.2 Sorting the wheat from the chaff: the structured skim reading

After obtaining access to grey material, the second major problem is deciding what is really useful and well worth reading in our literature study and putting aside the rest, much of which is weighty but useless. The abstracting services provide good help for deciding whether a report is worth looking for, but they are not usually a sufficiently reliable guide to their content. A structured skim reading helps us sort out the material we have accumulated. It is particularly important for grey material, because sometimes it turns out to be our only reading – we may not have another opportunity to look at a report. Government or agency officials may allow you to look at reports but not to take them out of the office or perhaps not even to photocopy them. On a return visit a report may no longer be available to you, or even its existence recognized. Thus the steps summarized in Box 6.1 and expanded below are useful in carrying out an effective structured skim reading.



### Box 6.1 The structured skim reading: 7 steps

- Step 1 *Register the complete reference.* You may not gain access to the material again.
- Step 2 *Note and identify the source.*
- Step 3 *Study the title page.* Note down the title, date of publication, institutions, etc. All this information helps to locate the political, social and institutional context of the report.
- Step 4 *The executive summary.* This is good for reconstructing policy discourses and debates on the issues, but may not reflect the body of the report.
- Step 5 *Skimming the substance.* Differences between the body of the report and executive summary indicate areas of controversy and negotiation.
- Step 6 *Survey the quantitative data.* For all useful data note the source, years, types of data and method of data aggregation. Copy any useful primary data – it may be your only chance to do so.
- Step 7 *Review the bibliography.* This may provide useful references or give an indication of the depth of the research.
- Step 8 *Note taking.* Make notes about the report itself, about any useful information, and of any points you think are important to verify or deepen in further reading.

#### *Step 1 Register the complete reference*

The first look at possibly useful material should be done with pen (or pencil or computer) at hand. For anything that is even remotely relevant to your study, note the complete reference. Much grey material is not catalogued by library systems and has limited or restricted circulation.

If you don't record the complete reference now, including the URL if they are web-based, there may never be another chance. Reports that seem useless in one phase of your research may become important later on, and you have to know the titles and authors to find them again. Further, grey material often circulates in different drafts, with wording and even conclusions under debate. Documents that were downloadable from a website suddenly disappear. Note carefully the date of the particular draft in hand. Even if you discard a report, it is useful to note the complete reference and to add a note as to why it is not useful, particularly if, like mine, your memory sometimes fails. When a title sounds particularly relevant to my study, I am more likely to forget that I have already chased down a reference and found it unhelpful. This can be time-consuming and embarrassing, especially if you must formally request authorization or have hounded a ministry official to see a particular report.

*Step 2 Note and identify the source*

Include a short note on where you found the report. This may be a person – someone working in a ministry or NGO – but increasingly it is a website. If the material proves to be useful, you may want to go back to check on the reliability of the source or to see if you can get other good documents there.

*Step 3 Study the title page*

The next step is a close look at the title page. Consultancy reports are not sold commercially, and so they don't depend on catchy titles. The title is often a long and accurate guide to their content, as for example: *State Farm Divestiture in Mozambique: property disputes and issues affecting new land access policy – the case of Chokwe, Gaza Province*. Key words in titles sometimes indicate the institutional discourse in which they are rooted. Following the study by Cornia *et al.* (1987) *Adjustment with a Human Face* (which criticized some of the dimensions of structural adjustment programmes) for example, a rash of reports with 'human face' in the title appeared, generally concerned with alleviating poverty and minimizing the decline of social services under structural adjustment programmes.

The title page often bears the names of the agencies who commissioned the research, and sometimes an indication of their relative importance to those who wrote the report. The report on state farm divestiture mentioned above, for example, was carried out by researchers from the University of Mozambique, Land Tenure Centre for USAID, and the Government of the Republic of Mozambique, Ministry of Agriculture, listed in that order on the title page. If, on further reading, the report proves interesting, you might want to investigate whether there were points of dissension between the two agencies, whether these were suppressed in the final report, and whether the viewpoint of the prime financing agency dominates the report. Reports are often parts of a series, so noted on the title page.

The date of publication can be an important indicator of whether or not the report will be useful for a particular study. Mozambique's structural adjustment programme was introduced at the beginning of 1987. A national household income and expenditure study, based on surveys carried out in 1981, was published in 1984. Although this study may help us to understand change (since subsequent household surveys, using similar methodology, were carried out in 1994 and 2004), we cannot use the 1981 data to establish rural/urban income and expenditure gaps for a study of the immediate consequences of structural adjustment for urban poverty.

*Step 4 The executive summary*

After inspecting the title page, move on to the body of the report. One of the particularities of grey material is that most consultancy reports prepared for international agencies have an executive summary on the main findings and arguments of the report. The prevalence of the executive summary is based on the realistic assumption that many of the policy makers for agencies that commission consultancy studies will not have the time, interest or technical background necessary for

reading the entire report. The executive summary is thus a particularly good source for reconstructing policy discourses and current debates on the issues we are researching.

The executive summary may not be, however, a very good guide to the actual content of the report or a summary of its findings (see Chapter 3 for some reasons why this may have been done deliberately). Assumptions easily become conclusions when the evidence and argument to support them is compressed in a summary. An executive summary may conclude, for example, that in the country under study poverty is principally a rural phenomenon. We cannot understand the meaning of this statement without reading the body of the report. It could mean only that most of the population live in rural areas and hence that most of the poor also live there, i.e. not a very interesting finding. Or it could mean that a higher proportion of people in rural areas fall below the poverty line than do those in urban areas. In this case we need to know how poverty lines were defined in rural and urban areas. Or, if we are dealing with a migrant labour system, the body of the report may show that rural incomes are dependent on remittances from urban areas and hence that the conclusion that poverty is principally a rural phenomenon is deceptive. Thus, we use our background reading to note questions and issues raised by the executive summary that should be carefully examined in the body of the report.

#### *Step 5 Skimming the substance*

Given that the executive summary can be a polemical document with a message different from that of the body of the report, your skim reading should not stop with it. A quick look at the table of contents (or skimming through chapter sub-headings in the body of the report if there is no table of contents) may reveal that there is information not covered at all in the executive summary. Introductions and conclusions to chapters sometimes phrase policy issues and summarize findings in language different from that of the executive summary. Differences may give us indications of areas of controversy and negotiation.

#### *Step 6 Survey the quantitative data*

In your first structured skim of a report, check the list of tables, figures, and appendices, to see whether the report is likely to have quantitative data which will be useful in your study. If you see that there are data that are definitely useful, it is worthwhile to note the source, years, types of data and the way the data are aggregated. If the source is primary, you may not be able to find the data elsewhere. If the data come from a secondary published source, it is more reliable to obtain them from that source. If you have access to a photocopier, you can copy relevant tables, but often you must transcribe the data yourself, an arduous procedure.

Some reports include lots of graphs, but not the source data. Note whether quantitative data are included in tables and appendices within the report. If there are only graphs, we can reproduce or interpret them in our own report, but we cannot verify the data nor analyze them in different ways. Authors of grey material use graphs because their readers can understand images quickly, but do not have the time or capacity to see

patterns in quantitative data. Sometimes, however, motives are not didactic. The data may come from restricted sources and cannot be reproduced, or authors may know that in quality terms the data are not very reliable and should not be reproduced. And sometimes consultants withhold quantitative data because they consider them their intellectual property, to be used in future publications.

### *Step 7 Review the bibliography*

Even in a quick skim of a report, it is useful to look at its bibliography. In our initial phases of research, it may provide references that we can follow up. Later on, when we ourselves know more about the topic, it may help us to determine whether the report was itself based on a good mastery of existing studies. If, for example, in reports on Benin or Mozambique, most references are in English, we can infer that the researchers did not speak French or Portuguese, the respective official languages, and thus that their understanding of local issues may be superficial.

### *Step 8 Note taking*

After this first structured skim reading, you should know whether a report is useful and should be put aside (or photocopied) to be read again more carefully. At this point, stop to take three different kinds of notes.

- 1 Notes about the report itself. Thus, the fact that a poverty study on Mozambique sponsored by the World Bank observed that prospects for off-farm employment have never been very bright is important information in itself, whether or not we think that observation is correct. To determine whether the evidence of the report supports the conclusion, we have to dig into the report.
- 2 Scraps of relevant useful information that we have noted in passing, quite often quantitative data, in a report that will not merit further close study. A detailed study of a women's micro-credit group, carried out for an NGO that sponsored the scheme, may, for example, contain data on overall credit coverage in the region. For both these first two types of notes exact citation and complete references to page numbers are important.
- 3 Perhaps most important in interpreting institutional discourses, are the preliminary notes to ourselves about points we think are important to verify or deepen in further reading. These notes reflect what we bring with us to our reading – our theoretical baggage and what we have already learned about our topic and the area under study.

## **6.5 Locating the report institutionally • • •**

To interpret institutional discourses, we have to locate a report institutionally. This means placing it in its political and historical context, establishing the institutional identities of its source, authors and audience, and attending to the objectives and scope of the study as defined by its terms of reference and the ways in which research was carried out.

Before beginning the substantive reading of the report, try to recreate the context in which the research was carried out and the report written. The date should serve as an indicator if we have already constructed a rough chronology of the recent history of the place we are studying in our minds, and reviewed recent policy debates around the topic under research. In development discourse around the position of women in African agriculture, for example, it was commonly assumed until the 1980s, following Boserup's (1970) work, that women were subsistence producers. In the late 1980s, following work by Mackintosh (1989) and others, the importance of women's work in cash-cropping, even though men often controlled the cash, began to be recognized. If we are looking at a report on rural poverty in Africa, we can check to see whether the researchers simply assumed the subsistence role of women or actually looked at intra-household organization of both labour and income.

Similarly, political issues can shape the language of the report, its silences as well as its focus. In Mozambique, for example, a gradual collectivization of agricultural production was official policy for many years. At the research centre where I worked at that time we argued that voluntary co-operativization would depend on the improvement in marketing position provided for the broad mass of peasants. Research reports written later under structural adjustment take the need to improve the marketing position of family farmers as a given fact and devote little attention to co-operativization. Today the focus is on 'smallholder associations' – but many of their activities are the same as those organized through co-operatives.

Gaps between the dates of publication of different versions of reports and policy documents are often good indicators of political controversy and hence contested drafts. Identifying differences between the Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper and the full version accepted by the World Bank and IMF as the basis for Highly Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) funding may point to areas of disagreement between national governments, the Bank and the Fund. Locally based researchers often know about the existence of such controversies and are thus able to reconstruct the political context of a final report by locating omissions from it.

If we have learned (from the title page or terms of reference) that the report is part of a particular series, we then think about where it fits and how that may affect its language and concerns. In the first round of poverty studies emerging from the critique of structural adjustment in Africa, for example, almost all reports took care to propose how well-defined and restricted groups should be targeted for special assistance. Hence, there was a great deal of attention to the issue of whether or not it would be possible to identify and subsidize a staple (generally one in glut on world food markets), which the poor and only the poor eat – such as sorghum or yellow maize. A later World Bank report on structural adjustment in Africa concluded that poverty was so widespread that tightly targeted measures probably would not satisfactorily reach the poor (World Bank, 1994). Today food markets in most African countries have been liberalized and privatized. The World Bank's PRSP Sourcebook (World Bank, 2002) now recommends

that ‘They [governments] can mitigate the effects of low income on health outcomes by reducing the price poor people pay for health and other key goods and services, through, for example, health insurance, fee-waivers, and targeted food subsidies’ (p. 203). Interpreting what particular country studies say about targeting means locating them within the shifting terms of this debate.

The questions and conclusions of a particular report reflect the political context within which they were written. Some of the most extensive work on poverty in Southern Africa was done in the series of Carnegie studies on poverty in South Africa co-ordinated by SALDRU, a research centre located at the University of Cape Town. In the early 1980s, these reports were written by researchers opposed to the apartheid regime, but their language reflects the context of political repression in which they were written and their recommendations show that few thought that by the end of the decade the regime would be politically ruined. Similarly, research on agrarian issues at the Centre for African Studies in the first decade of Mozambican independence was focused on the importance of understanding peasant production within an overall strategy of socializing production. In both cases the information contained in the reports continues to have relevance today, but some of their immediate concerns now seem anachronistic and limited.

### 6.5.1 The institutional identity of the source

Organizations differ in the kinds of studies they consider worth circulating, and that applies to the information they post for download on their websites as well. Both the World Bank and Oxfam, for example, post research reports on land policies in Africa on their websites. Though there is some overlap between them, Oxfam focuses on land rights for the poor. We would not expect to find comparative studies of agricultural productivity under different forms of tenure there as we would on the World Bank site. Though the World Bank has become much more interdisciplinary in some of its research, economists still predominate in the papers posted on its site.

What about organizations that are not so familiar to us as the World Bank or Oxfam? How can they be placed institutionally? Let’s take, for example, The Corner House ([www.thecornerhouse.ac.uk](http://www.thecornerhouse.ac.uk)). We can see from its URL that it qualifies as an academic site, but what areas does it cover? Like many sites, it provides an ‘About us’ section:

Since its founding in 1997, The Corner House has aimed to support democratic and community movements for environmental and social justice. It is motivated by the concerns of such movements, whether they be locally-based struggles for land or water rights or better health care; campaigns against destructive mining, dam or forestry projects; or struggles against racial discrimination. We aim to pay constant attention to issues of social, economic and political power and practical strategy. We try to take a ‘bottom-up’ approach, filled with examples, to issues of global significance which are often handled in a more abstract way. As part of our solidarity

work, The Corner House carries out analyses, research and advocacy with the aim of linking issues, of stimulating informed discussion and strategic thought on critical environmental and social concerns, and of encouraging broad alliances to tackle them.

Here terms such as ‘social justice’, ‘locally-based struggles’, and ‘solidarity’ indicate that this is probably a left-wing site. We would expect its postings to overlap with some of those on the Oxfam site, but very little with the World Bank. Many websites provide the names of staff or of a board of directors. Searching on their names can give us further information about the orientation of the site. In the case of the Corner House, for example, staff publications indicate that they have particular competence on environmental issues, a fact confirmed by a rapid review of the titles of publications. The list of funders also gives some idea of what kinds of positions are likely to be advocated by a particular source. It is always risky of course to rely only on what people say about themselves, so it is also useful to return to the net to see what other sources are saying about the organization, its staff and its funders.

### 6.5.2 The institutional identity of the researchers

To interpret the report, we have to think about the institutional identity of the authors. Are they employees of the agency that commissioned the research or are they specialized researchers or academics contracted especially for this research? Are they locally based researchers or were they part of an internationally recruited short-term consultancy team? If the authors are named, what do we know about their disciplinary background and their previous research experience?

The name of Harold Alderman, for example, appears on several studies done on poverty and food-security related issues under structural adjustment in Mozambique. A quick internet search can tell us a lot about his probable research orientation. He has done previous work for the World Bank and for the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) and was affiliated with Cornell University when he did the studies in Mozambique. He did research on food issues in Pakistan and now works in various African countries. He is a neo-classical economist whose work is generally concerned with making markets work better. The solutions he recommends, such as the introduction of food stamps, are marked by the institutional world of the United States; they would not be envisioned by Mozambican academics (unless trained in the United States), nor even perhaps by consultants from the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) in Sussex. His work tends to differ in its language from that of consultants from the Wisconsin Land Tenure Centre (LTC), another university-based applied research centre in the United States, which also worked in Mozambique. LTC researchers were of course more specifically concerned with agriculture, they had varied disciplinary backgrounds in the social sciences, and they tended to be more critical of strategies of market liberalization than do those from Cornell.

A close study of the bibliography can help us locate the institutional identity of the authors – telling us something about both what sources were consulted and which sources were thought important to record. Work undertaken in the framework of Social Dimensions of Adjustment (SDA) more often referred to the work of anthropologists and sociologists than did previous World Bank studies – although arguments need not have changed. The critique by Ferguson (1990) of the 1975 World Bank *Country Economic Report* on Lesotho appears in the bibliography of a much later World Bank poverty assessment of Lesotho, even though its conclusions bear a much stronger resemblance to those of the 1975 report than to Ferguson. Since we approach grey literature already armed with a good control of the field, we can also note significant gaps or silences in sources. Reports done by the Centre for African Studies on agrarian structure in Mozambique are rarely cited in consultancy studies done under the aegis of the World Bank, in part because this work is associated with Frelimo's discredited socialist period.

### 6.5.2 Identity of those who paid for the study and their interests

Attending to how a study was funded helps to identify the audience the report was intended to reach and thus to interpret its findings and its silences. At one extreme are confidential reports commissioned by a specific agency that controls the choice of researcher and terms of reference of the study and has right of veto over acceptance of its results. In the research centre in Mozambique, by contrast, our salaries were paid by the university, and our research funded mainly by long-term grants from the Nordic countries. Although we responded to research requests from government agencies and always required authorization from both national and provincial authorities to carry out research, we did not have to submit drafts to government agencies before publication. This did not mean however that there was no self-censorship. We were careful to weigh what was said against probable reactions; we did not want to be excluded from key national debates on agrarian strategy. We saw our audience, however, as much larger than a particular government agency; we tried (not always successfully) to write in a style that would be accessible to most educated Mozambicans and to produce reports that would introduce information about Mozambique into university teaching.

### 6.5.3 Institutional constraints in carrying out research

We can often tell a lot about the limitations of a study by analyzing the terms of reference and what is said about when and how the research was carried out. There are usually references to the locations that the research team visited and a list of people who were interviewed. Even expressions of thanks may give us information about the scope and limits of the research.

Sometimes the terms of reference of a study will show us that there is a link between a study and an ongoing project. This tends to affect the conclusions of a report and



sometimes even the questions it asks, particularly if those who have commissioned or execute the research are also responsible for the execution of the project itself. Schubert's (1993) evaluation of a cash-transfer scheme for the alleviation of urban poverty in Mozambique, for example, has to be read with care since he was involved with the conceptualization and earlier evaluations of the scheme.

Some actors have much more institutional presence than others in grey material, a fact which may already be clear from the terms of reference and sources of a study. Reports on international migration policy in Southern Africa, for example, tend to deal with the situation of documented workers, such as miners, whose movement back and forth from South Africa is registered. Solid quantitative data on formal migration can be obtained from the Chamber of Mines and from the governments of labour-supplying countries. Undocumented migration, which for countries in the region exceeds legal migration, is notoriously difficult to research and hence its extent is not reliably estimated in most reports. Looking at the terms of reference and sources consulted in research will tell us quickly whether or not the report has attempted to grapple seriously with the issue of undocumented migrants. The institutional presence of research projects varies with the consistency of their funding. The Canadian-based Southern Africa Migration Project (SAMP), for example, continues to make reports and briefings on undocumented migration available on its website, but most of its research was done when migration reform was a more openly debated topic in South Africa.

Locating where the research was carried out helps us to determine whether its findings are generalizable at a regional or national level. Reading a study on peasant marketing in a war-torn country like Mozambique with a good map in front of us, for example, we try to reconstruct the experiences of those rural communities studied during the war. Areas visited by consultants tended to be close to urban areas or to complexes with military protection; they did not visit regions where they could not be protected from attack by Renamo, the armed opposition movement.

## 6.6 Interpreting institutional discourses in construction of argument •••

Grey material can be a privileged direct source of information about the ways in which policy issues are posed in our area of study – a good informant – persuasive, sometimes deceptive, with fixed ideas not always revealed. Hence, when we have identified grey material useful for our literature study and located it institutionally, we approach it in the same critically constructive way outlined by Barrientos in Chapter 5. Here, then, we will look at some specific issues in the interpretation of grey material in the construction of our own arguments. Box 6.2 summarizes problems in the interpretation of grey material that we have discussed in this chapter and what we do about each in the process of our literature study (steps 1 to 6).

**Box 6.2 Overview of interpretive tasks**

Since grey material is predictably limited because of:

- questionable but unstated underlying assumptions
- the questions it asks
- a tendency to simplify opposing arguments or alternative answers
- illusive methodology
- the conclusions it finds acceptable
- the audience it intends to reach

Use of this material requires:

- identifying and rethinking assumptions (step 1)
- formulating alternative questions and extending the range of possible answers (step 2)
- reading both sides of key debates (step 3)
- confronting the data: how well they answer old and new questions (step 4)
- rethinking conclusions (step 5)
- rethinking the audience (step 6)

In the following sections, we will move through each of these steps in interpretation one by one, with examples of each. In reality, however, this process is never a linear set of sequential steps – it is an iterative process. Rethinking the answers helps us to locate and criticize implicit assumptions; alternative interpretations of the data help us to locate methodological weaknesses in the analysis of the data, and so on. As your own argument takes shape, what you find, and reject, in the report will change.

### *Step 1 Identifying and rethinking assumptions*

Background reading in the history and political economy of the place we are studying helps us to uncover and rethink assumptions. We have discussed how Ferguson's (1990) previous reading on Lesotho, for example, led him to challenge the assumption of the World Bank (1975) study that peasants in Lesotho were subsistence peasants weakly integrated in the market.

Background reading on different theoretical approaches to our problem can help us uncover and recast assumptions. Some reports on rural poverty, for example, make general statements about what peasant households or smallholders do. There is an implicit assumption that the interests, attitudes and behaviour of all within the household are reducible to those of the male head of household. Feminist criticism of this assumption has led us to recognize that men and women often have different and contradictory interests within households. Recent studies of households in Africa in particular

emphasize that, despite co-operation and male dominance within households, there are domains controlled by women.

### *Step 2 Formulating alternative questions and extending the range of possible answers*

Once we have recast underlying assumptions, we will also find alternative questions. Studies like that of Ferguson have led us to question the presumption in studies of rural poverty in Southern Africa that rural problems have agricultural solutions. In other words, we no longer accept that if poor people live in rural areas the way to improve their incomes is necessarily by improving their farming. Thus we may recast the questions in our study to focus on how to improve off-farm employment and non-agricultural activities in rural areas. Or, if we refuse to assume that the household is a basic unit of analysis, we may choose to ask specifically how gender differences shape or express the experience of poverty. Posing new questions means extending the range of possible answers or working hypotheses that we bring to interpretation of data.

### *Step 3 Reading both sides of key debates*

When the question we are considering is highly contested, it is important to find the strongest arguments for the main positions, even those with which we do not sympathize. In developing an argument it is easy to simplify or even stereotype the arguments with which we do not agree. Most websites provide us with grey material written from a particular point of view. On the Corner House site ([www.thecornerhouse.org.uk](http://www.thecornerhouse.org.uk)), for example, you can download a briefing paper, 'Too Many Grannies? Private Pensions, Corporate Welfare and Growing Insecurity', by Richard Minns with Sarah Sexton. According to the introductory blurb on the website, this paper 'summarizes and critiques the main justifications given for expanding private pension schemes, and analyzes the motivations of the groups that perpetuate this model'. The paper is well-argued and informative, but it is clear that the authors are opposed to private pension schemes and we know we can rely on the Corner House to provide briefings that make a robust critique of corporate interests. We should, however, also look directly at the arguments made by advocates of private pensions, not just at critical summaries of their positions.

### *Step 4 Confronting the data: how well they answer old and new questions*

Once we have recast our questions, we can confront the data to see if they provide information on a new set of questions. Quite often, however, when we confront the data to see whether they allow us to answer the questions posed by the report and support its findings, we will also think further about assumptions and questions. This process is discussed by Mukherjee and Wuyts (Chapter 10). Here I will only signal some of the specific things to look for in confronting data presented in grey materials.

First, attend carefully to the original source of the data and return to it if possible.

Most World Bank studies (and many others) depend on the economic data collected and assessed by the country study team. In the country study you will usually find an explanation of how the data were collected, what the limitations were, which figures are based on estimates, etc. – information that tends to disappear in successive reproductions of data.

If you can locate the original source of data, you can check not only whether data have been correctly reproduced, but also if they have been selectively lifted. In interpretation of time series data, for example, the choice of a base year often establishes a direction of interpretation. A report critical of structural adjustment may find, for example, a sharp rise in infant mortality in urban areas in the year after the introduction of a structural adjustment programme. But if we include the ten years prior to introduction of the structural adjustment programme, the data may show a long-term tendency toward rising infant mortality, associated, perhaps, with the breakdown of public health services.

Second, see whether the categories in which data are grouped correspond to the questions that are asked in the report and the answers found. Much grey material is not based on new surveys or independent research – data are found and made to speak. There is nothing wrong with this in itself (indeed, doing it is one of the prerequisites to finding out fast), but it means that we must be particularly careful about verifying interpretations. As the result of feminist criticism of research methods in the social sciences (cf. Eichler, 1988), for example, we are now much more careful about over-generalization and lack of gender and age sensitivity. Take, for example, a study on the consequences of a cash-crop farming scheme for rural incomes based only on interviews with household heads, most of them male. The study may tell us many things, but it cannot tell us about intra-household distribution of income and thus it cannot generalize about the effects of the project on rural poverty.

Third, integrate the qualitative studies you have read into the interpretation of quantitative data, and micro-level studies into the interpretation of macro-level studies. For example, where migration is clandestine, registers of migrants are unreliable sources of data on the extent of migration. Male/female ratios can be an indirect indicator of emigration by men, as long as there is little emigration by women. To relate changes in male/female ratios to contemporary shifts in migration patterns in Southern Africa, we therefore need qualitative information on the legal changes in the 1960s and 1970s that restricted access to women from Lesotho, Botswana and Swaziland to the South African labour market. Case studies and the collection of individual labour histories cannot be aggregated to provide a quantitatively secure picture of the extent or shape of migration, but they can alert us to patterns to probe at a macro-level and provide direct evidence on underlying mechanisms (see Chapter 13).

Conversely, we can integrate quantitative data into the interpretation of qualitative data and macro-level information into the interpretation of micro-level studies. In part because of its policy orientation, there is, often, a tendency towards over-generalization

in grey material. Conclusions based on the phrases ‘most of’ or ‘the majority of’ cover a range from 50.1% to 99.9%, and are not necessarily based on exclusive categories. Without quantitative data, it is impossible to determine the meaning of such phrases. A report suggesting that the majority of rural households obtain most of their income from agriculture may lead us to under-emphasize the importance of off-farm income for rural households that depend both on farming and non-agricultural work. Processes that may appear general and inevitable at a micro-level may become specific and transient when we locate them within a macro perspective. Sharply falling rural incomes in the 1970s in Mozambique did not necessarily apply to communities in southern Mozambique relying heavily on remittances from migrant miners in South Africa, whose real wages were rising.

### *Step 5 Rethinking conclusions*

Having located assumptions, recast questions and possible answers, and confronted the data, you should compare the conclusions of a report with those you would draw yourself. There may be conclusions that are simply wrong or misleading, or there may be significant silences. The observation on off-farm employment in the report on poverty in Mozambique discussed above, for example, is not precisely false, if we think that the ‘brightness’ of employment prospects has to do with the levels and conditions of that employment. It is, however, deeply misleading if it is read to imply that off-farm employment is not central to the economy of many rural households.

In interpreting policy-oriented documents your conclusions about the findings of the document become not only a basis for developing your own arguments, but information about the world you are studying. In the case above, for example, the fact that an important World Bank report on Mozambique generalized about all of sub-Saharan Africa and emphasized the marginality of off-farm employment is itself a finding about an important institutional actor.

### *Step 6 Rethinking the audience*

Sometimes it is easy to identify the audience for which a report was written and to recast its information for a different group. An evaluation report on a particular development project, for example, will attend to the competence of particular project staff. If we are writing a more general assessment on the co-ordination of NGO activity in rural poverty alleviation for the Ministry of Planning, we are not interested in the details of individual competence, but in the recruitment process that underlies general problems in staff competence in NGO projects. We may draw important economic information from a highly technical report on public sector management written for economists at the World Bank and present it in simpler and more accessible ways for public sector trade unions.

Sometimes, however, rethinking the audience means not only identifying the objectives and experience of different actors in the policy process, but also recognizing that institutional discourse itself may have changed. A Mozambican researcher assigned to work

with an early World Bank mission on agriculture told me, for example, ‘They think that all Mozambican peasants are subsistence cultivators, so I’m going to take them to Manica to see specialized commercial growers’. Later, when the stereotype of the entrepreneurial smallholder had replaced that of the traditional tribesman in the minds of international consultants, it became important to take them to see women-headed households dependent on wages and remittances. Reports that seem anachronistic or limited in their concerns can become relevant when we locate their findings within a different set of issues for an audience with different expectations and experience.

## 6.7 Conclusion • • •

This chapter has emphasized that grey materials – policy-oriented reports prepared for and by governmental and non-governmental agencies – can be important sources of information. We must treat them as we would other key informants – locating them institutionally, reconstructing the context in which they spoke, analyzing and interpreting both their statements and their silences. This is only possible if we are both informed and reflexive about our own assumptions and concerns in the developing dialogue that we pursue with all our sources – and our own projected audience – in the construction of policy-oriented arguments.