Launch of the Problem Structuring Methods (PSMs) Study Group  
by Alberto Franco, University of Warwick  
and Mike Cushman, London School of Economics

The newly formed Problem Structuring Methods (PSMs) Study Group was officially launched on 27th April 2005 at its first seminar co-sponsored by with Warwick Business School’s Operational Research and Information Systems Group. The event was very well attended with participants from different countries seated around the room in a way that reflected more a PSM workshop than a traditional seminar.

The event started with a welcome by Secretary of the Group and host of the event, Alberto Franco. Mike Cushman gave a light hearted opening address as Chairman of the PSM Group. He talked about the rationale behind the creation of a new study group on PSMs, and reflected on the current momentum of the field as indicated by the recent EPSRC International Review of UK OR Research, the highly successful PSM stream at OR46 in York, and the forthcoming JORS Special Issue on PSMs.

The seminar was on ‘Developing Capacities for Problem Structuring in a Developing Country’. Jonathan Rosenhead from the London School of Economics gave an entertaining and provoking introduction to the political context of Venezuela, and the use of PSMs in that country over the last 15 years. Jonathan, together with John Friend, recently visited Venezuela to evaluate a new consultation programme in which all the country's governors, mayors and ministries have been asked to present their commitment packages for 2005.

The main speakers were Professors Elisenda Vila and Ana Maria Benaiges of the Central University of Venezuela and planning consultants to the Venezuelan government. Elisenda's presentation focused on the use of particular aspects of the Strategic Choice Approach (SCA) at top levels of government. As well as describing the process undertaken, Elisenda mentioned the endorsement to the approach demonstrated by the Venezuelan President, Hugo Chavez. President Chavez used a recent edition of his Sunday afternoon television talk to the Nation to hold up the Spanish edition of John Friend and Allen Hickling’s ‘Planning Under Pressure’ (the key SCA key text) and proclaim that, "all public servants are expected to work with it", a level of official endorsement never before achieved by an OR approach, hard or soft.
Hugo Chavez, President of Venezuela introduces the Spanish edition of Planning Under Pressure on national television (December 2004).

Ana Maria’s presentation focused on bottom-up uses of SCA at local community level. She presented the case of Barrio San Julian, a small community 30 kilometres north-east of Venezuela’s capital Caracas which had been severely affected by mudslides after heavy rains in 1999, and again in 2005. Ana Maria discussed how the application of SCA enabled the community to address the issues that faced them following the tragedy, engage in productive dialogue with local government decision makers and thus allowed the decision makers to get closer to the community, and the community members to get closer to the decisions.
The next seminar of the PSM Study Group will be held on 30 June, 4.00 to 6.00 p.m. at the London School of Economics. Leroy White from the University of Bristol will speak on *Evaluating Problem Structuring Methods: developing a framework to show the effectiveness of PSMs in a regeneration context*. For further details contact Alberto Franco, tel: 02476 524 691, alberto.frano@wbs.ac.uk or Mike Cushman, tel: 020 7955 7426, m.cushman@lse.ac.uk.

You should also contact Alberto or Mike if you are interested in presenting a seminar to the study group. This could be on any newly emerging aspect of PSMs such as: evaluating PSMs; attracting PSM clients; exploring the craft skills of PSM
practitioners; or teaching PSMs in HE or industry. You should also contact Alberto or Mike if you are interested in joining the new PSM e-mail discussion list.