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A CENTRE FOR DEVELOPMENTAL PRACTICE

Relationships matter:
the best kept secret of international aid?[1]

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Introduction

When working for DFID (Department for International Development) in Bolivia, I arranged for the UK Government to finance two parallel initiatives for people in marginalised communities to secure identity cards – and thus the right to vote. One initiative was to finance a consortium of grass-roots organisations; the other to finance the State's electoral commission. Both initiatives aimed to get more people possessing identity cards but they way they went about this was based on very different diagnoses of the causes of the problem. Both initiatives were relatively successful. However, when, after I had left, a second phase of support was planned with a wider group of donors, it was decided for reasons of efficiency to bring these two initiatives together under a single financing umbrella. The donors obliged the Bolivian concerned parties to negotiate the design of a common programme. The negotiations dragged on for over two years, leading to a collective loss of energy and creativity. A subsequent independent evaluation noted that by forcing the different initiatives – and organisations – into a single, multi-donor financed umbrella programme, donors

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1 This present piece is a simplified and shortened version of an article that originally appeared as 'Hiding relations: the irony of effective aid' in the *European Journal of Development Research* June 2010.

failed to take into account the different world-views of the implementing organisations and the mutual mistrust that prevailed between them.

My initial insistence on funding two separate initiatives had been based on a belief that good practice in international aid requires being alert to and working with rather than against patterns of social and political relations and recognising that there are multiple diagnoses and solutions for complex problems. I have been far from alone in taking such an approach as demonstrated by a burgeoning literature in development journals. (See references for some examples).

This literature critiques planning approaches that assume that aid practitioners are in control and that change is predictable – as expressed through the use of logical frameworks as a planning tool. Such approaches, we argue, prevent donors from responding effectively to a largely unpredictable and dynamic policy environment. Yet, our criticism seems to be having very little effect on how the institution of international aid thinks. So what is underlying this or – to borrow a phrase from Mary Midgely – what is its philosophical plumbing? And why is there so much resistance to our arguments? These are the questions this article explores. I conclude there to be challenging implications for those of us who believe that relationships matter in international development aid.

The philosophical plumbing of international aid
‘Efficiency’ and ‘results’ – today’s mantra – are only the latest expression of a certain mode of thought that has been described by a German philosopher, Ernst Cassirer, as ‘substantialist’. The substantialist world consists of pre-formed entities, in which relations among them are only of secondary importance. This is why in international aid quantifiable things play an important

role as indicators of results achieved – for example, numbers of kilometres of roads built or hectares irrigated – frustrating the empowerment and capacity development efforts of agencies receiving official funding. I remember a recent workshop where someone said, “The log frame would make us appear to have failed but we have achieved so much”.

Substantialism is a mode of thought that categorises things, including people and abstract concepts. I have spent much of my working life as a substantialist and in many contexts continue to think this way.

Even with a people focus, I can still think as a substantialist. I began working for DFID in the 1980s at a time when many British-funded projects were designed on the basis of exploiting a technology or resource; only then was a half-hearted effort made to associate this with improving someone’s wellbeing. I found that a log frame could help put people into the picture – but these were people (although I did not think of it then that way) as categorical subjects such as ‘the landless poor’. Joy Moncrieffe and I have written about this in *The Power of Labelling*. Substantialists also ascribe essential properties to abstract concepts. For example, ‘greed’ and ‘grievance’ are understood as entities that can be measured and can explain why civil wars happen (see Collier and Dollar’s book).

Only gradually did I begin to think in terms of relationships rather than categories. Before arriving in Bolivia I had already been making a case with DFID senior management that ‘relationships matter’ . My argument was that the complex and contingent nature of societal change and the impossibility of predicting that

Substantialist words
- Money
- Technical assistance
- Catalyst
- Aid architecture
- Incentives
- Targets
- Mechanisms
- Outcomes
- Women/ children
- Vulnerable groups

a particular event will lead to a certain outcome suggests an approach to donor action that is to develop long term and consistent *relations* with selected recipient organisations who are pursuing a social change agenda compatible with the donor's own values and mission. Rather than aiming to achieve a predetermined specific real world change in which the recipient organisation is treated as an *instrument* to that change, the focus of donor effort would be in supporting that organisation's own efforts in what may be a rapidly changing policy environment. Although then unaware of Cassirer's terms, I was thinking relationally.

Cassirer contrasted substantialism with another way of looking at the world, which he termed 'functionalism' but in more recent literature is referred to as 'relationalism'. Here, the totality is more than the sum of its parts. A musical composition is more than the notes that constitute it because it is the relation between the notes that makes it music. Relationalism is a perspective in which things (substances) are understood and observed as they relate to or are a function of other things. In this perspective individuals are inseparable from the relational contexts in which they are embedded. The connection between individuals and their social world is a simultaneous process of people making society and of society making people. Referring to aid as a catalyst is substantialist as it assumes the donor can trigger change in others without itself changing. In relational thinking, donors as well as recipients are changed by the aid relationship and it is this that produces unintended consequences.

An easy way to understand the difference between substantialist and relational/process approach is to switch from thinking about the world as a *noun* to understanding it as a *verb*. For example, in the world of business management this implies thinking about organising rather than organisations.

My predecessors in the British aid programme – the first social development advisers – emphasised process. Thus they worried that the logical framework put projects into a straitjacket, with a formulaic blueprint constraining flexibility and responsiveness to the changing environment. They argued that the introduction of log frames would damage people-centred projects because the uncertainties of emergent social relations required 'planning by approximation'. My response was that using a log frame did not rule out responsiveness and flexibility. The trick was to revise the log frame on an annual basis. At that time I had not appreciated the capacity for bureaucracy to turn a good idea into a procedural monster!

Outcomes, processes and complexity

The categorical nature of substantialist thinking leads to a paradigm of change that assumes that it is possible to gain sufficient knowledge to engineer the desired result. This works when we are dealing with what are called 'bounded problems' or what Jake Chapman calls 'difficulties'. With difficulties there is broad agreement on the nature of the problem; there is some mutual understanding of what a solution would look like; and there are limits to what is required in terms of the time and resources required for their resolution.

Unbounded problems, on the other hand, are 'messes'. There is no agreement about the diagnosis and therefore the actions required; no possibility of an eventual permanent solution because solutions generate new problems; and therefore no way of determining the quantity and type of resources needed. Why governments fail to achieve results, suggests Chapman in his little

Relational words
- Patterns
- Systems
- Processes
- Waves
- Networks
- Emergent change
- Uncertainty
- Relativity

book, is because they insist on treating messes as difficulties, ignoring the wider effects of a linear cause-effect intervention in one just part of a complex system.

Much of international development practice involves working with messes. In such contexts relationships between actors matter and actors themselves change and evolve through their inter-action with each other. At their best, aid practitioners surf the unpredictable realities of national politics, spotting opportunities, supporting interesting new initiatives, acting like entrepreneurs or searchers, rather than planners. They are keeping their eye on processes and looking to ride those waves that appear to be heading in the direction that matches their own agencies' mission and values.

While some aid interventions, eg building bridges or schools lend themselves to the substantialist world of logframes and bounded problems, many others involving history, power and culture − such as identity cards for excluded indigenous people in Bolivia − do not. Here change is complex, often unpredictable and politically messy. A relational approach is useful, a substan-tialist one largely futile or even counter-productive. But if the case for such an approach to the complex context of international aid would appear to be so convincing, then why is it that top management continue to ignore relations and process and prefer substantialist inputs and/or outputs?

The persistence of substantialism

Not only has substantialism survived as the philosophical plumbing of international aid, it is becoming even more dominant. There is ever-increasing pressure to design projects/programmes and report on performance in a manner that assumes all problems are bounded. The argument runs that the taxpaying public want to know how their money has been spent

in terms of kilometres of roads built, teachers trained, or children immunized. DFID, for example is now imposing extraordinary demands in terms of reporting against indicators of achievement that bear little relation to the manner and possibilities that activities have for supporting social transformation. Power, relations, the partiality of knowledge and complexity are ignored, as are surprises and positive and negative unplanned consequences. Theoretical and contested concepts such as civil society, capacity or policy become reified and then numbers assigned to the reification e.g. 'state the number of policies influenced'.

Part of the problem is that many of those driving these planning processes are very distant from the reality of the lives of the people aid is meant to be helping. Top level aid bureaucrats have some contact with front line practice − albeit usually mediated by middle management − but their principal arenas will be domestic on the one hand and global on the other. In neither instance do they wish to consider the relational messiness of the local. They are obliged to represent international aid to their peers, their Treasuries and politicians as a feasible project that they are capable of controlling. Over time, they learn to ignore what they cannot deal with.

This produces perverse consequences in which the orthodox perspective confirms previously-held convictions. Evidence is sought to check that one is still on track, not to ask whether there are other tracks. Alternative ways of understanding and tackling problems are ignored or dismissed as irrelevant. The choice of indicators is too often assumed to be just a technical matter, despite power influencing whose ideas count and what is deemed a 'result ' Many experienced front line aid practitioners, well aware of this conundrum learn to articulate substantialist discourse while responding relationally to local context so as to minimise unwanted effects. A UN official told me that many of

her agency's most effective country level interventions are those that have not been reported because these were concerned with investing in relationships rather than achieving the kinds of outcomes that get included in logical frameworks.

But is top management, while steering clear of the messiness of implementation turning a blind eye to – or indeed half-heartedly encouraging – relational practices so as to ensure the whole edifice of aid does not collapse in the face of too many evident failures?

Turning a blind eye to relational practices

No official aid agency has been prepared to undertake a study that aims to learn about their staff's everyday practices – what they are doing, as distinct from what they report they are doing – and their effects. However, from my experience as an aid practitioner and from listening to what other practitioners are now telling me, it seems that relational practice is far from uncommon in aid agencies, even among government and multilateral agencies. One example I have studied is DFID in Peru, whose office closed in 2005.

Despite formally including a logical framework in its Country Action Plan, DfID took a largely relational approach to its programme in Peru, an approach later judged as a success story in a DAC publication on human-rights-based approaches to development (OECD, 2006b). In many of its initiatives it responded swiftly and flexibly to the rapidly changing political environment after the fall of Fujimori. Staff practised planned opportunism – a way of working that requires the capacity to judge when an intervention might be critical in supporting a process of change, with active and horizontal communications between all those involved concerning what they are observing, while learning from the changes occurring as an effect of the

initial intervention. It proceeded by modest, step-by-step actions with no certainty as to what would happen next, described by complexity theorists, Snowden and Boone as 'probe, sense, respond' (2007:4).

Complexity theory posits that self-organising networks, rather than hierarchical structures, are a key element in societal change. DFID/Peru staff responded to the potential that such networks presented. They invested far more energy and resources in supporting relational processes both within and outside the State administration than in formal organisations and had little interest in securing technical outcomes.

On the other hand, un-scrutinised relational approaches can become complicit with the clientelistic cultures in which aid practitioners find themselves, undermining their own donor ideology of bureaucratic values of impartiality. DfID in Peru financed a national forum on health policy that aimed to bring together a diversity of points of view from government and civil society. Selecting, supporting and thereby privileging particular groups and networks in civil society, and working across the civil society-State divide, proved more tricky and contradictory than envisaged, with DfID running the risk of being seen as partisan, non-transparent and unaccountable.

An approach based on shared values means not having to enquire about the details of the recipient organisation's activities but rather having a trust based relationship, being interested in the effects – as judged by those for whom the programme is intended, rather than by the donor. In one of the rare studies of how official aid agency staff reflect on their practice, Peter Tamas found his respondents preferred to remain ignorant about the details of how recipients implemented the projects they were funding, because of the contradictions they would discover between messy reality and how the log frame represented things.

Certainly, in my own case, I often knew more than I was prepared to acknowledge even to myself, let alone to include in formal reports.

An aid practitioner with a relational approach to her job recounted to me with horror what happened when the audit of an NGO project her organisation was co-financing with another official donor discovered that the NGO director had used project funds to pay for his wife's air ticket to accompany him on a business trip to Europe. Both donor organisations held the NGO in very high esteem for its effective work with very poor communities and if she had had her way, she would have conveniently forgotten the auditor's discovery. However, her organisational counterpart in the other donor organisation decided that corruption was never ever permissible in whatever circumstances and stopped project funding, obliging the other donor also to stop funding the project. This last illustrates the tension between the practitioners who can get away with relational behaviour provided no one blows the whistle and those that believe they have to implement the official discourse even to the detriment of achieving results.

While some of the relational practices I have described are more or less 'in the open', others such as trust based relationships tend not to be talked about other than in safe spaces of reflective workshops. Because what gets reported up the system may be very different from what the front-line aid practitioner may have known to be the case, there are crises of confidence and contra-dictory behaviour among front-line workers as they struggle with the dissonance between what they do and what they report that they do.

Conclusion

Taking as my starting point current orthodoxies of results-based management, this article has discussed the long duration of the substantialist 'philosophical plumbing' of international aid and the ambivalent, if not subversive, relational response of some aid practitioners. Their response reflects an alternative mode of thought, largely invisible in official discourse, but with a potentially significant influence on institutional viability and the capacity of aid interventions to support progressive social change. However, because these relational practices are often mis-represented up the management chain to conform to the official representation of how aid works, their positive effects may be falsely attributed to the successful implementation of the substantialist orthodoxy. Thus, hidden relational practices may be sustaining the very norms that such practices are subverting.

There is a parallel here to how the Soviet Union was able to report that collectivised agriculture was an effective means for sustaining agricultural productivity. In practice, the farm workers put their energies not in the collective farm but in their own small holdings, and pilfered collective-farm resources to invest in them; this led to sufficient food being produced for the authorities to be able to demonstrate that the overall system was working. In his book *Seeing Like a State*, James Scott argues that without their realising it, the farm workers' subversion was maintaining the very system that they were resisting. As in the case of the collective farm workers, subversive front-line aid practitioners may be unintentionally propping up orthodoxy whose failures would otherwise be too self-evident.

What would happen if top managers and politicians were to recognize the value of relational ways of thinking and doing and adopt these whole heartedly? Just as *glasnost* brought about the fall of the Soviet Union, so an admission of what is really

happening might result in the collapse of international aid. On the other hand, a real clamp-down on relational practices would probably lead to systemic collapse of the institution. Practitioners need just sufficient encouragement to continue subverting the system for the system's benefit. I am one of those who offer such encouragement with support from the institution I am critiquing. After all, I get invited to speak at donor-funded conferences and donor staff get the resources to come to my workshops. This is my dilemma; my relational advocacy may be helping sustain the substantialist plumbing!

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