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Management not models: adaptability, responsiveness, and a few lessons from football

Christopher Maclay*

Despite a swathe of critiques of logframes and other blueprint approaches to development over the last 30 years, most aid infrastructure continues to concentrate on the design and subsequent implementation of closed models. This article does not propose an alternative to blueprints, but challenges the inflexibility of their implementation, which is inadequate given the complex nature of social change. It proposes a supplementary management and learning approach which enables implementers to be dynamic, adaptive, and responsive to problems and opportunities. Emphasising the role of donors, the paper presents a case study of one donor-led programme in Bangladesh doing just this.

Malgré une série de critiques des modèles logiques et autres approches du développement fondées sur des plans directeurs au cours des 30 dernières années, la plupart des infrastructures de l'aide continuent à se concentrer sur la conception et la mise en œuvre ultérieure de modèles clos. Cet article ne propose pas une alternative aux plans directeurs, mais met en question le manque de souplesse de leur mise en œuvre, laquelle est inadéquate du fait de la nature complexe des changements sociaux. Il propose une approche supplémentaire de la gestion et de l'apprentissage qui permette aux chargés de la mise en œuvre d'être dynamiques, adaptables et réactifs face aux problèmes et aux opportunités. Mettant en relief le rôle des bailleurs de fonds, cet article présente une étude de cas d'un programme impulsé par un bailleur de fonds au Bangladesh qui fait précisément cela.

A pesar de las numerosas críticas que durante los últimos 30 años se han realizado a los marcos lógicos y a otros planteamientos modelo del ámbito del desarrollo, la mayor parte de la ayuda destinada a infraestructura continúa centrándose en el diseño y la subsecuente aplicación de modelos cerrados. Si bien el presente artículo no propone una alternativa a los planteamientos modelo, aunque cuestiona lo inadecuada que resulta la inflexibilidad de su implementación frente a la compleja naturaleza de la transformación social, sugiere la aplicación de un enfoque complementario de administración y aprendizaje, que permite que sus instrumentadores sean dinámicos, flexibles y sensibles ante problemas y oportunidades. Destacando el papel desempeñado por los donantes, el artículo examina un estudio de caso referido a un programa que estos impulsaron en Bangladesh instrumentando este enfoque.

Keywords: Aid – Aid effectiveness, Monitoring and Evaluation, Developmental policies; Civil society – NGOs; Labour and livelihoods – Poverty reduction; Methods; South Asia

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Introduction

"While awareness is becoming widespread that the blueprint approach is an inadequate response to rural development problems, its assumptions and procedures continue to dominate most rural development programming and … most development management training." (Korten 1980, 495)

When the economist David Korten wrote the above more than 30 years ago, it had not been long since the Logical Framework – or 'logframe' – had established itself as the primary planning, management, and evaluation tool in the field of development and humanitarian aid. This tool, and the blueprint approach to development management which it embodies, have been much derided over the last two decades, so much so that it is hard to add anything new to the debate. Nevertheless, the status quo remains.

The management of international aid today is dominated by the design and implementation of linear *models*, of which the logframe forms a major component. A model can be defined as a solution package to a given problem, combining problem analysis, with a blueprint of sequentially implemented activities intended to cause certain outcomes, which in turn lead to desired impacts. Most development initiatives come in the form of models like these, intricately designed before project inception, with activities meticulously outlined within clear timeframes and detailed budgets aligned to the activity plan. Managers are commonly hired to implement according to this model blueprint and are held against strict delivery targets and 'burn rates'.[1] The model may then be rigorously evaluated, determined as a success or failure, and accordingly replicated, debated, scaled, or quickly forgotten. This approach to development management, focused on the design and subsequent implementation of predetermined models, will be referred to as the 'blueprint' approach in this paper.

This continued emphasis on models, logframes and linear approaches to development management comes at the same time as an emerging body of research is developing our understanding of the complexity of social change. A recent "*quiet revolution on complexity thinking*" (Frej and Ramalingham 2011, 2) is building consensus around the fact that development initiatives generally take place within complex social and political circumstances, and that there are few clear or linear processes of social progress. Proposals from almost two decades ago to investigate chaos theory as a means to understand development (Uphoff 1996) are being realised, with increasing acknowledgement that aid interventions take place, "*on the edge of chaos*".[2] Despite this enlightened understanding of the complex and unpredictable nature of development and social change processes, blueprint approaches continue to dominate most development agencies, and have in some cases further cemented their role in aid management through their alignment with the increasingly unanimous results-based agenda.

This article challenges modern development management's concentration on the model and subsequent implementation of pre-determined activities. It contends that responses to complex social problems cannot be entirely designed *ex ante*, as problems may not be fully understood, and opportunities not yet apparent. Rather, more attention needs to be placed on the *management* of the models and mechanisms of implementation, rather than just on the design itself. While this proposal is not new, conceptual discussions are still too rarely translated into practice, as enduring concerns with capacity, corruption, or a lack of control mean that ideologies or intentions are trounced in favour of perceived practicality. This paper proposes that development agencies and donors should supplement logframes and pre-determined theories of change with management and learning systems which are dynamic, adaptive, and empower those implementing the models to respond to problems and opportunities as they arise. It also provides evidence through a case study that that such alternative management approaches are actually possible in practice.

I first examine the nature of development management to-date and within today's results-based aid context, with its heavy focus on models, linear logframes, and accountability. I do

not investigate the content of the logframe, but rather the way the logframe and blueprint models have been used in practice, including identifying the important role that administrators and donors play in dictating these practices. I then identify some of the requirements for a development management approach which responds to this reality with an analogy about football. I will emphasise the role of goal setting (rather than activity planning), learning systems, adaptation, and empowerment of implementing teams. I will emphasise the role of donors in establishing (and potentially transforming) this system, and present a management system case study of the UK Department of International Development's (DFID) Economic Empowerment of the Poorest programme in Bangladesh, to emphasise how donors can enable effective and adaptive development management in this way. The article concludes by outlining some major lessons learnt from this system, which can be replicated by other donors or practitioners.

Development managerialism to present

Managerialism is a term used to describe the idea that all organisations (whether private, public, or third sector) have broad similarities and thus can be managed with similar principles. The development sector has whole-heartedly embraced many traditional managerial principles as part of a push towards transparency and accountability, including close monitoring of all financial transactions, and more systematic planning and implementation. A core component of this blueprint management system, the logframe, intricately outlines activities, outputs, outcomes, and goals in a logical progression on one table. While a theory of change maps out the context and possible change processes which could occur in a programme, the logframe operationalises the intervention within this context, fixing a linear model of implementation (Vogel 2012). For the vast majority of donor-funded aid interventions today, the logframe is a fundamental piece of a contractual agreement, and functions as the primary monitoring and evaluation tool to judge the project's success.

It should be stated that this blueprint approach is not the only development management structure used in the sector today. It is a diverse and nuanced field, with distinct organisations operating under varying cultural practices and financial constraints. Local community-based organisations in the global South, for example, may be entirely free of such managerialist systems due to their independence from international aid infrastructure, while at the other end of the spectrum, innovative new funding mechanisms such as Cash on Delivery are being researched and tested, which pay *ex post* for the results achieved. While there are these exceptions, blueprint approaches continue to dominate the aid industry. Particularly at the level of NGOs and multilateral agencies – who combined control almost half (Development Initiatives 2012) of the US$141bn given in global official development assistance (ODA) in 2011 (World Bank 2013) – blueprint models of development persist.

These linear approaches have become increasingly entrenched in the sector over the past decade, in large part because of the drive towards a results-based agenda and 'value for money' by development agencies. An awkward marriage between this philosophy, which promotes a focus on outcomes rather than inputs, and a politico-economic context of increased domestic fiscal austerity, has resulted in ever-increasing control and oversight requirements in ODA. As a recent DFID (2011, 25) report, *Changing Lives, Delivering Results*, explained,

> "More than ever, in the current financial climate, we have a duty to show that we are achieving value for money in everything we do. Results, transparency and accountability will be our watchwords and we are determined to get value for money … ."

The result of this has been to concentrate efforts on the achievement of objective and reductionist targets, with similarly uncontroversial linear logic to justify them.

Linear processes of development management and the logframe have been severely critiqued since their large-scale adoption, both theoretically and practically. Curtis and Poon (2009), for example, argued that the Millennium Development Goals could not be met using linear logframes as a planning tool because of their inflexibility. Yet while something else might be needed, the search for successful and widely adopted alternatives or expanded versions has proved a fruitless task. This is largely due to the fact that blueprint models are not borne out of bad intentions; the logframe, for example, seeks to ensure transparency, accountability, and measurable indicators, and encourage a practical and logical rationale before rushing into implementation. Dearden and Kowalski stick up for the logframe, and emphasise that it is "*simply a tool for communication that, if used correctly, adds clarity to the planning process*" (2003, 502). They add that the draw-backs outlined above "*are not inherent in the tool but result from the way in which it is used*" (2003, 504). It is however this use, or rather misuse, of blueprint management tools that are their greatest weakness.

In 1999, academic Des Gasper humorously coined terms for what he identified as the three major weaknesses in the logframe; 'lackframe', 'lockframe', and 'logic-less frame'. While originally focused on the logframe, these three criticisms are focused more on the way the tool was used than on flaws inherent in its content, and have broad applicability to blueprint management systems in general. These critiques will be briefly expanded upon next to outline their detrimental implications for project impact, and the need to replace – or at least supplement – blueprints with more flexible implementation systems.

Lackframe

The lackframe argument proposes that blueprint implementation models are reductionist, falsely claiming a linear response to complex social problems. Sandra Batie (2008) emphasised an insti-tutional aversion to recognising or responding to the 'wicked' nature of problems which had no simple solution, while recent research by Barder and Ramalingam (2012) proposes that develop-ment is just one property of society's 'complex adaptive system' of people, firms, and social, pol-itical, and economic institutions. It is therefore unrealistic that we could ever really predict or be 'in control' of social change as linear models suggest (Mowles 2013).

There are additional practical implications of reductionist models of interventions, which include the assumption that the delivery of certain activities will lead to certain outputs and out-comes, without specific focus on the subtleties in this delivery. Most activities can be implemented in numerous different ways, and often it is the way they are implemented which really creates value (Thomas 1999). At the simplest level, consider your best and worst teachers; the activity is the same – one lesson taught – but the outcome will vary hugely on *how* the lesson was facilitated. With a focus on *what* is done rather than on *how* it is done, reductionist planning tools such as the logframe encourage a management system focused on activity targets and burn rates, rather than the process of the activities, potentially missing fundamental but subtle keys to developmental success.

While logframe advocates accept that this reductionist format is just a simplified representation of the truth, when this document is handed over to a project team, that simplified view of reality often becomes reality itself. Chris Mowles, professor of complexity management, explained: "*Rather than merely reflect experience, when taken up uncritically by staff in INGOs they actively shape reality, as the abstractions take on a life of their own*" (2010, 758). If the theoretical currency used at the start is reductionist, this is the currency that will continue to be used in practice through-out the project cycle. While supplementary theories of change and high quality managers can add richness to the implementation processes, this comes in spite of rather than thanks to the blueprint implementation plans, which are rarely revisited during a project cycle.

Lockframe

The lockframe critique is a common complaint of practitioners, deriding the inflexibility of pre-determined activity plans in achieving social change. The typical activity-centric style of development management practised today demands that activity targets are met according to agreed timetables, and that the model is implemented as it was designed. As Dennis Rondinelli wrote:

> " … the major criterion of success for many project managers is their ability to conform to plans or programs designed in aid agency or national administration headquarters, rather than their ability to seize local opportunities in order to achieve a project's purposes or modify goals to reflect changing or unanticipated conditions". (1993, 79)

Unfortunately, this form of what I call 'tunnel vision implementation' often fails to respond to field-level realities and misses opportunities. Realities and constraints in complex environments can rarely be fully identified *ex ante*, and may only become apparent during implementation. William Easterly (2008) has famously advocated for 'searchers' over 'planners' in international development, who seek out answers (rather than thinking they have the answers themselves), adapt to local conditions, and respond to existing and emerging demands.

Recent literature has emphasised the significance of adaptation and responsiveness rather than strict adherence to blueprint designs. Tim Harford's book, *Adapt* (2011), draws on a range of disciplines to emphasise that high-level expert-driven pre-designed solutions rarely achieve success in complex circumstances, but rather improvisation and experimentation from the bottom, taken in iterative or 'baby steps' can provide the greatest opportunities for success. Similarly, Andrews, Pritchett, and Woolcock (2012, 16) have called for 'small step' interventions in development practice, which allow for experimentation and learning. Effective social change cannot be delivered by meeting deadlines or yes/no answers, but by asking how, why, and why not. Despite this, pre-designed activity plans are rarely revisited during the course of project implementation (Bakewell and Garbutt 2005), and often continue to be implemented even if they become outdated.

Logic-less frame

Despite a constant hunger in the sector for innovation, which is about trying something new (a new activity, or in a new context), blueprint approaches to development management require in-depth plans of the interaction between given inputs and hypothetical outcomes in advance of implementation. As Pritchett, Samji, and Hammer (2013, 33) explain, "*Even though development project managers recognize and accept that they cannot know ex ante about exact project design, the organizational and systematic context in which they work does not allow them to admit that*". This means that this logic is often invented or reverse engineered to satisfy donor requirements, rather than the process really being constructed in a logical manner.

Even more common is the scenario where the logic is not really owned by the implementing staff. In today's field of international development, project proposals for both international and national NGOs are often drawn up either by external consultants, or a business development team which has little or no role once implementation starts. Project managers, responsible for ensuring that targets are met, are rarely mandated with following the logic, but simply ensuring that the bottom rungs of the logframe (activities and outputs) are met. Once the simplified version of the truth is pursued so directly and uncritically, the activity plan and corresponding logframe becomes the end in itself, and activities and outputs become confused with success and impact. The goal is quickly forgotten, and there is little scope for amendment if or when the original logic proves misguided.

Going for goal: what development management can learn from football management

As already emphasised, this article does not seek to critique the logframe as a tool, but rather seeks to challenge the current practice of blueprint implementation. Today's results-based agenda is likely to continue demanding the 'hard numbers' that logframes and blueprint models provide, at least when deliberating funding decisions. So rather than proposing alternatives, we need to find better ways of working with them. We need an alternative management approach in their implementation which gives implementers the freedom to be dynamic, respond to problems and opportunities, and achieve greater impact. While some development theorists would argue that the closed and inflexible nature of managerialist tools such as the logframe make it almost impossible to allow for adaptability, flexibility and responsiveness, others such as Curtis and Poon (2009) suggest that room can be found. Bakewell and Garbutt's examination of the 'use and abuse' of the logframe approach for the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) agrees that what is needed is a more realistic approach to implementation, acknowledging the role of blueprints as a 'first guess', but emphasising the need for "*systems which allow us to adapt them as programmes go forward*" (2005, 21).

How can this be done? How can this linear implementation approach be supplemented to enable implementing teams to be more dynamic and effective? How can it delegate management responsibility to those closest to the action to embrace change and adapt to field realities, while satisfying donors' own requirements? How can we move from blueprint models towards a 'science of delivery'?[3] The answer, I propose, comes from football.

A football manager does not, and cannot, direct activities on the pitch. The level of communication required once the team is playing is too great, and the scenario too uncertain and complex. A pre-designed play-by-play plan is impossible to implement, as activities must respond to the circumstances on the pitch. Of course, the football manager designs game plans according to research and an in-depth knowledge of the scenario, and considers the risks and challenges which may arise. However, the football manager acknowledges that they cannot direct each pass, tackle, or shot. They cannot predict accurately how the opposition will play, how the referee will perform, or how loudly the crowd will chant. The game plan acknowledges complexity and uncertainty, has a strong feedback loop, and is open to change. But more than that, the responsibility for harnessing opportunities, responding to problems, and ultimately achieving the goal (pun intended), lies with the team. The team, once given their game plan, are given full freedom to be creative, albeit with guidance and strategic decision-making from the manager when necessary.

An effective, adaptive management system therefore needs to empower staff with the explicit mandate to 'be creative' and respond to problems or opportunities which can help the goal to be achieved. This does not involve the manager absolving themselves of all responsibility; rather the manager plays an important role in stimulating this creativity. A football manager does not oversee implementation or direct every step in the process, but creates an *enabling environment* so that the team can do well when they get on the pitch. The football manager trains the team during the week to work well together so that they can initiate creative play on their own during the game, particularly when responding to certain events and challenges.[4]

Although the comparison between NGO field staff and highly trained professional footballers may not be a fair one, inherent talent is not the only thing that makes this system work; it works because it is exactly that – a system. The football manager has clear responsibilities to build strategy, to ensure that the strategy is clear to all of his players (read 'staff' or 'implementing partners'), and to make sure that players work towards their goal of victory. The players are then given an explicit mandate for responsiveness, creativity, and problem-solving. An integrated system such as this can enable responsiveness and dynamism in implementation, and

provides useful lessons for the development field. These lessons are examined in more detail in the following section, which is in part built on what Curtis and Poon (2009) call 'open style' development.

Ensure that the whole team aims at the same goal

While football has a relatively simple formula for success (score more goals than you concede), development interventions are extremely complex. While the ultimate goal – poverty reduction, for example – might be clear, how to go about this is often not so apparent. This typically results in a focus being placed on the more attainable activities and lower rungs of the logframe (activities and outputs). Even the recent sectoral overhaul under the results-based agenda has unfortunately tended to focus more on outputs than outcomes, impacts, or achievement of goals. This is the equivalent of only focusing on *scoring* goals while the defence is *conceding* them. The attack, of course, needs to adapt its game based on what has happened in defence, if it is to achieve its ultimate goal of winning the game. This paper therefore proposes a more consistent concentration on achievement of goals (pun not intended this time).

A development consultant once explained to me that the core challenge of implementation was reconciling the competing priorities of the donor and the beneficiaries. He was referring to the focus on activity targets by donors, and social change by beneficiaries. This is a common phenomenon; Martin Ravallion (2012), the Senior Vice President of the World Bank, wrote in a blog:

> "What seems to be missing is a way to more fully align the incentives of managers and operational staff with sustained development impact. Our experience is that many development professionals care passionately about having impact. However, currently development agencies appear to assess their staff primarily using easily observable bureaucratic and procedural measures, such as 'the amount of money moved,' which may be poor indicators of longer term impact."

While goals can be much harder to achieve, they provide a more direct motivation to link activities to impact and can more transparently enable field staff to respond to opportunities and changes in circumstances. This can, and has been done. Beckwith, Glenzer, and Fowler's (2002) investigation of CARE International's Latin America Regional Management Unit (LARMU) showed an unprecedented recalibration of organisational management by adopting the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) 50% poverty reduction target as its primary success indicator. The intention was that this would encourage staff to think beyond projects, and to always question the logic and objectives of the activities being undertaken. The LARMU team's restructuring, the authors emphasised, encouraged a focus not only on performance but impact, while helping to align goals, enhance learning, and avoid competing practices.

Adapting to the game

An attacking line in football needs to adapt its strategy to the defensive situation – if the team is 2–0 down it needs three goals to win – and to respond to opportunities which present themselves – maybe their debutant goalkeeper is having a poor game and we should shoot more from distance, maybe our striker is having a great game and we should pass to him more.

As already outlined, there is a lack of adaptation in traditional development management, with tunnel vision implementation of activity plans a more common practice. Adaptation is needed both in response to the field-level challenges and potential design flaws in an intervention, but also because the factors ultimately effecting impact change with time. Yet while the logframe

represents a core tenet of the managerialist revolution borrowed from the private sector, the concept of top-down inflexible implementation shows a lack of understanding about the nature of management in the private sector. No company implements a plan over half a decade – it supplements a business plan with experimentation, learning, and necessary adaptation. Even annual strategy plans cover too long a period for many businesses, which use supplementary planning and adaptive management processes to stay relevant. Business and management academic Henry Mintzberg has long distinguished between 'deliberate strategies' (planned blueprints such as the logframe) and 'emergent strategies', where ongoing learning and experience from multiple sources combine into a 'convergent pattern' guiding action (1994). Successful management in the private sector requires processes of constant reassessment and reform rather than blueprint implementation (Markides 1999). This is particularly the case for innovation, which is often falsely attributed to a bright spark which is then implemented. On the contrary, innovation is a process of adaptation. In the aid sector, this process of adaptation needs to be supported to ensure that it is (a) reflective and iterative, constantly examining the current scenario, even when successful. This goes beyond activity target monitoring to change monitoring and real-time evaluation; and (b) responsive to opportunities. Development activities must recognise which newly available prospects can support the achievement of goals, and seek to respond to them.

Learning during the game

The adaptation outlined above cannot happen as a single activity; we need to know accurately what is actually happening on the field and why it is happening. This requires more than contingency planning, as it is unrealistic to expect that we can predict all eventualities, particularly for innovation. How can we know that the assumptions we made in project design hold in practice? How do we know that the conditions upon which the innovation was designed won't change during implementation? A constant process of learning is required to manage this.

Unfortunately, most projects are usually only critically evaluated after project completion, leaving little opportunity to channel learning back into practice, at least within the life cycle of the initiative. Even when thorough research does take place, it often does so on too academic or sophisticated a level that it cannot easily be fed back into practice by traditional implementers. There is little scope for constructive or practical feedback. Of course, this might be an unrealistic hope to achieve perfect feedback for short-term initiatives, but currently even multi-year interventions are insufficiently reviewed in this way. At the very least, the football manager watches tapes between games to review what worked, what didn't, and to plan for the next game based on this information.

Calls for change in the development sector are getting louder though. Owen Barder has led an open call to policymakers and practitioners: "*Instead of trying to design a better world, we should focus on building better feedback loops.*"[5] A 2011 high level USAID-Santa Fe Institute working group meeting also concluded that real-time learning of field realities could drastically improve operations and strategy in Afghanistan and Pakistan (Frej and Ramalingam 2011). Similarly, Andrews, Pritchard, and Woolcock's (2012, 16) excellent paper on problem-driven iterative adaptation emphasised that "*positive deviance*" and experimentation is most effective when connected to effective learning systems.

The concept of the learning organisation is nothing new, and links directly with Mintzberg's concepts of emergent strategy outlined above. Most closely associated with the writing of Peter Senge (1990), learning organisations seek to channel learning from practice back into planning and action. The development and aid sector has increasingly developed into a learning sector, with both practitioners and academics writing on the role of learning in development, as well

as the potential tools for doing so (Ramalingham 2006, among others). Nevertheless, most monitoring and evaluation (M&E) within aid projects concentrates on activity delivery and output achievement, rather than *change monitoring* or real-time evaluation. It tends to leave lesson learning activities for evaluations and post-project reflection. This learning need not be retrospective, as development managers, like football managers, must seek to know what is happening in/on the field at any time, and must be capable of responding immediately with revisions to strategy.

Empowering the team

Beyond the simple generation of information, learning organisations need systems which can use that information quickly and effectively. Korten's in-depth examination (1980) of five Asian success stories proposed that the key process for development and organisational success was their ability to quickly translate learning into practice. The study, which looked at now major NGOs such as Bangladesh's BRAC (then a smaller NGO with the full name 'Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee') as well as peasant movements across the region, proposed that: "*The key was not preplanning, but* [being] *an organisation with a capacity for embracing error, learning with the people, and building new knowledge and institutional capacity through action*" (1980, 480).

This fluid channelling of learning into practice requires managers to give space to those below them to be adaptive. Easterly (2008) recognised that implementers themselves were more like searchers than planners, but did not have the room to navigate beyond the blueprint plans imposed upon them. Andrews, Pritchett, and Woolcock emphasised the need for an "*authorizing environment*" for experimentation and adaptation, and said that "*change is only possible if something bridges the agents with power to those with ideas*" (2012, 18). In other words, senior managers or donors must not only enable but *encourage* teams to learn, analyse, and respond to problems and opportunities themselves. The next section outlines how senior managers and donors can help provide the learning and operational systems required in order to achieve this.

Moving forward – the role of donors in creating the conditions for learning and adaptation

This section expands on the role of donors in this system. It first examines the political economy and incentives which have caused donors to develop and sustain this blueprint management approach, and will then summarise why a strictly implemented blueprint approach may not help any of these stakeholders to achieve their result-based ends. It will emphasise the fundamental role of donors in facilitating the change proposed above, before presenting a case study of the Economic Empowerment of the Poorest programme in Bangladesh, which has sought to take some of these steps.

Bakewell and Garbutt's (2005) examination of the aid sector's engagement with logframes found that, although some NGOs had internalised logframe approaches, most NGOs still only used logframes when required by donors. Without doubt, donors have been the primary driving force behind the sector's large-scale adoption of blueprint-style models and their persistence to this day. This is often attributed to the complex political economy underpinning the aid sector, which has resulted in competing – and at times contradictory – incentives leading to the continued impasse.

While some observers (let's call them 'pragmatists'), may see the benefits of flexible and adaptive management systems, they are acutely aware of why the system exists as it does; corruption and low capacities at the in-country level make centralised planning and blueprint implementation seem a safe approach. It also provides comfort to senior administrators who are able to – or

at least feel like they are able to – clearly see all activities being undertaken in a very disconnected sector with seeming transparency (Mowles 2010). In *Trust in Numbers*, Theodore Porter emphasised how such quantitative reliance tends to arise in public policy when there is less trust in people, greater focus on discipline, and where there is relatively little outside criticism of experts (cited in Mowles 2013). This is a remarkably accurate description of the power imbalances in the aid sector as described by Gasper (1997) and "*tilts power towards the donors and centrally based managers*" (Mowles 2010, 762).

This links closely to a second set of observers – let's call them 'pessimists' – who see the existing blueprint approach as a negative by-product of the power dynamic present the aid sector between controlling donors and passive beneficiaries. They argue that 'planning' systems arise from donors seeking to implement according to their own interests, or the interests of voters back home, rather than motivated by the interests of the people which the aid is trying to help (Easterly 2008). Numerous recent examples of centrally planned decisions on aid, from the continued use of inefficient food aid systems which benefit domestic shipping firms in the US, to the value-for-money agenda in an era of domestic fiscal austerity, give credence to this pessimistic view of the incentives perpetuating this blueprint approach to development management. There is at least one more group – the 'optimists' – who believe that blueprint management arises from the high-stakes nature of development interventions, which literally involve life-or-death decisions. Given the risks, donors have a tendency to resort to certainties, reductionist logical models, and seemingly non-contestable numbers.

This article does not seek to argue which of these schools of argument is most accurate, but would suggest that a perceived sense of security and control lies at the core of each. Yet while activity- and expenditure-focused monitoring appears to offer donors a sense of security, in practice it provides an ineffective form of accountability as it can undermine access to the information that matters. Projects can fail because of a range of complex and rapidly changing reasons, yet with donors pursuing a narrow monitoring approach based on pre-conceived logic of impact, less favourable field realities are rarely brought to light or responded to. Donors' typical cat-and-mouse-style field visits, where they are presented with model villages, and in turn second-guess the NGOs, do little to improve this. It is more likely to lead to a game of deception where mistakes are hidden, trust is eroded, and the beneficiaries lose out.

In her critique of 'wicked' problems, Batie (2008) emphasised that it is not only the complexity of the problem that makes it wicked, but the multiple opinions held by different stakeholders, and the trade-offs (often based on judgement calls) involved in solving them. Rather than trying to cover up debate through the establishment of a single logical truth, donors should seek to create systems that encourage this dialogue between opinions, and find space for consensus. Providing clearer information on what is really happening in the field, and the forum for discussing changing plans if required, should be mutually beneficial for both donors and implementers as it is simply "*about doing what the implementing organization wants to do, better*" (Pritchett, Samji, and Hammer 2013, 43).

This alternative does not disenfranchise the donors; it simply seeks to enable more complex paths to be developed in order achieve goals. As Mintzberg explained, "*organisations... should not get rid of their planners or conclude that there is no need for programming. Rather, organisations should transform the conventional planning job*" (1994, 108). Following from the football analogy above, we have learnt at least four possible responsibilities of donors with such a 'transformed' planning role:

(1) Creating a focus on end goals rather than just outputs, and ensuring that those goals are clear to all involved.
(2) Providing and supporting strong learning systems, which are transparent to all.

    (3) Empowering implementers to respond to this learning, with a clear brief on the extent of their agency.

    (4) Providing efficient feedback systems for implementers to brief donors on any necessary adaptation throughout, with the rationale clear within the evidence base.

This transformed role should therefore not necessitate a loss of control of donors. Far from absolving itself of all influence, bottom-up management somewhat paradoxically requires strong leadership; the donor can play the lead role in facilitating, guiding, and institutionalising the process. Next, I present a case study of one donor programme which sought to achieve just this.

Donor-enabled dynamic management systems in Bangladesh

The Economic Empowerment of the Poorest programme (EEP/shiree) is a partnership between UKaid from DFID and the Government of Bangladesh, tasked with developing sustainable livelihoods for the extreme poor.[6] The eight-year (2008–2015) GB£65 million fund managed by one development consultancy currently supports 36 different initiatives implemented by national and international NGOs through two main sub-funds: the Scale Fund (which supports larger projects scaling up proven models) and the Innovation Fund (which supports a series of innovative, untested, and in some cases radical approaches to extreme poverty reduction). Beyond simply overseeing expenditure, a standalone EEP/shiree management team of about 30 staff provides operational support to partner NGOs, and has a lesson-learning and advocacy component which seeks to share key findings from across the portfolio and influence state and non-state actors to achieve impact beyond the one million people it seeks to directly graduate from extreme poverty.

    This programme has evolved to provide an innovative approach to development management, which enables and encourages NGOs to feed learning back into projects and gives them the flexibility to adapt according to field realities. While projects are selected according to their models' design, the logframes and activity plans are then regularly reviewed and re-designed as required.

    This developed largely in response to the fact that many projects initially struggled. The extreme poor were a demographic that most NGOs in Bangladesh had not worked with before. These beneficiaries lacked the education or asset base of traditional small farmer beneficiaries, and tended to respond poorly to the incentives successfully employed with other poor people. Many projects misjudged the nature of the problem and, in particular, a number of Innovation Fund projects turned out to be based on mistaken assumptions and unrealistic theories of change, and activities needed to be subsequently revised. Even for successful models, new opportunities frequently presented themselves as very few actors had ever worked with this group before.

    Facilitating this process was not an easy task; the EEP/shiree research team was too small to conduct in-depth research across the portfolio itself, and lacked the field exposure and subtle knowledge of each intervention to analyse and explain all changes. Moreover, such a lesson learning process would have not worked had it existed externally to the implementing NGOs, as they would be unlikely to trust or own the data produced, at least not enough to change their activities based on these findings. EEP/shiree instead created a system which enabled the individual projects to respond on their own terms, while maintaining accountability at the HQ-level. This process involved three main steps:

1. *Facilitating the learning process*

EEP/shiree developed an innovative Change Monitoring System (CMS) for NGOs to use to monitor the field situation in real-time. This comprised a combination of quantitative tools

(including short surveys administered by field staff of partner NGOs using their mobile phones) and qualitative research activities including participatory rural appraisal methodologies. These tools were designed to catch a breadth of lifestyle changes, and ascertain the role of the projects in contributing to these changes. EEP/shiree prioritised this form of change monitoring over strict activity monitoring, and gave extensive training to NGOs in using these tools. This meant a constant focus on making sure that activities were contributing to the goal of extreme poverty reduction, rather than just on the activities themselves. Furthermore, EEP/shiree made change monitoring the primary reporting area, requesting that NGOs analyse their own data on a regular basis, submitting change reports at least three times per year. This process forced project managers to reflect on changes at the field level, to recognise opportunities, and consider the purpose of planned activities rather than implementing them in a tunnel vision fashion.

2. *Putting learning into practice*

While the above process generated a great deal of information and learning among partner NGOs, EEP/shiree sought to promote the channelling of this knowledge back into project activities. Members of EEP/shiree's operations teams facilitated regular self-review workshops with project teams, not only to examine data from the change monitoring process in more depth, but to analyse what this meant in practice – what are the problems? What are the successes? What is newly possible? What is the next step forward? This meant that struggling initiatives could be reformed, and even winning formulas were reviewed for further improvements. If beneficiaries in a strawberry production programme were seeing greater income changes from getting linked to government safety nets than the strawberry intervention itself, the NGO partner was encouraged to refocus some of their attention on better linking beneficiaries to these safety nets, and then to either change or adapt the strawberry activities.

In addition to this project-level learning, EEP/shiree sought to feed back cross-portfolio learning to the partner NGOs. Major challenges experienced across the portfolio were investigated by EEP/shiree's research team, and guidance notes were developed, capacity building for partners was conducted, and advocacy or further activities were undertaken where necessary.

3. *Releasing the shackles on blueprints*

While the learning process outlined above responds in part to the lackframe and logic-less frame arguments presented earlier, the lockframe challenge remains unless directly confronted. EEP/shiree responded to this challenge by housing the operations team (which provided management support and technical guidance to partner NGOs), M&E team, and the finance team in the same management organisation. This meant that necessary changes to activity plans were made possible; burn rates were less severely policed (as the operations and M&E teams could provide justifications for under-spend), and budgets were completely reviewed at the end of every year to enable the introduction of new activities or amendments of old ones. If NGOs could justify the need to revise their activity plans or budgets, based on findings from the CMS, EEP/shiree's team was there to facilitate this process, which meant that DFID's healthy financial backing could actually be used for what was needed at that time.

Lessons from EEP/shiree, and recommendations for replication

Development organisations cannot fully plan for nor predict their future learning and adaptation. Some seemingly well-designed projects will fail. And those failing projects will need to be redesigned or adapted. Even a winning formula needs constant review and improvement. Based on

weak assumptions and flawed project designs, 42% of EEP/shiree's Innovation Fund Round 1 and Innovation Fund Round 2 projects were forced to undergo *significant* changes to their project design over the first two years of implementation. These project designs and logframes, which seemed rational enough to receive funding, showed significant flaws during implementation, and were therefore adapted to better meet the larger goal of poverty reduction (rather than immediate objective of activity completion).

The lessons from EEP/shiree are not new, but – despite increasing recognition in development management literature – are still rarely applied or implemented. Development management needs to organise itself in such a way that it can be receptive and responsive. It must seek to create conditions which encourage anticipation, enable effective learning, and promote responsiveness and adaptation. This does not require the logframe or blueprints to be thrown out or entirely revised. Enhanced logical models such as results chains used by market development programmes already exist which, if designed well, allowed for more nuanced and non-linear theories of change. But even they need to be implemented within an iterative operational framework to be kept relevant and responsive. Effective development management just requires that blueprints are supplemented by flexible learning and change management systems and are subsequently reviewed and kept relevant. This process requires that at least the following principles are maintained:

1.   *Remain open to the possibility of changes*

In their excellent paper, 'It's all about MeE', Pritchett, Samji, and Hammer (2013) introduced the concept of experiential learning in M&E, which encourages planners to identify a 'design space' of available alternatives (rather than define a blueprint design), which implementers can then 'crawl through' to simultaneously try alternatives and adapt as needed. EEP/shiree accepted that *ex ante* blueprints (which were an important logical 'first guess' for funding decisions and initial project start-up) were not perfect and therefore should be open to subsequent adaptation or 'sequential crawl' (39) of the design space. There are disappointingly few donor-led systems which promote this critical analysis and consistent adaptation, but we should seek to learn from and replicate those which do. Through its Standard for Results Measurement, the Donor Committee for Enterprise Development (DCED) has provided a unique example of donors building consensus around adaptive management concepts in the field of market sector development, and further examples like that of EEP/shiree should encourage replication of such principles and processes in other sectors.

2.   *Develop shared learning systems, and ensure buy-in from all stakeholders*

Donors must seek to help and encourage their partners to adapt and enhance their interventions. While traditional capacity building tends to focus on providing technical expertise to fix a problem, donors should focus on providing the learning systems which can help implementers do their jobs better. Mintzberg explained that part of the 'transformed' planner's role in the private sector is to "*supply the formal analysis and hard data that strategic thinking requires*" and to "*support strategy making by aiding and encouraging managers to think strategically*" (1994, 108). This process – of iteratively working through a problem – is valuable in itself. A recent blog post by Owen Barder (2014) recognised the importance of 'the struggle' in achieving localised social change, a concept which stretches back to Taoist doctrine and concepts of Socratic ignorance which encourage participants to feel that 'we did it ourselves' (Ellerman 2007). Donors must provide partners with the tools to negotiate this struggle effectively. EEP/shiree provided partner NGOs with the tools to collect their own data and the space to revise and adapt their projects. It did not (and could not, realistically) tell them how to implement their projects, but

provided a climate which accepted the possibility of failure, and encouraged ongoing learning and identification of solutions. By straddling both knowledge formation and action, NGOs were able to become more than just implementers or think thanks which shared learning with broad networks and communities of practice, but 'do tanks', which funnelled that learning straight back into practice.

3.   *Ensure flexibility of funding*

While budgeting naturally has to be planned in advance to satisfy donors, flexibility is crucial. Adapted plans need adapted budgets, and funding needs to acknowledge this necessary flexibility. As long as proven, rigorous evidence is provided (such as using agreed learning systems provided by the donor), donors should be able to provide an authorising environment for "*strategic evidence-based crawls*" (Pritchett, Samji, and Hammer 2013, 29) based on common understandings of the available information which would be uncontroversial for their own systems. This could even be based on agreed periodic decision gates, where activities and budgets could be reviewed, as in the EEP/shiree example.

4.   *'Let go'*

The accountability culture of international aid until now has been based around field teams reporting progress against headquarters' predetermined activity targets. This new system encourages such plans to be locally designed and accountable based on reasonable evidence. Through the Change Monitoring System, and a constant focus on *impact* and *learning* rather than activities or inputs, EEP/shiree has had a major role in encouraging this bottom-up approach amongst partner NGOs. This process not only ensures that management decisions are informed by field realities, but is an empowering process for all involved; it creates more ownership of the project by field staff, encourages learning across the board, and promotes downward accountability within the organisation.

While Bakewell and Garbutt presented the challenge that this "*runs against the current donor trends to increase their reliance on tight contracts*" (2005, 21), EEP/shiree has shown how devolution of management can work based on reliable evidence, and that it can satisfy all partners involved. Models do not need to be implemented in a tunnel vision fashion, but can adapt to field needs. This means supporting beneficiaries to make their voices heard, and giving implementers the space to respond to those voices. Development, like football, is complex, and it is hard to know which game plan will work before heading to the field. If we can function better as a team – linking experiences of beneficiaries, to actions of implementers in the field, to managers, administrators and donors – we are more likely to achieve our ultimate goal.

Notes

1.   The amount of money spent each month/quarter compared to planned projections.
2.   See Ben Ramalingham's blog aidontheedge.info.
3.   The World Bank President, Jim Yong Kim, coined the term at the Annual Meeting Plenary Session in Tokyo in October 2011.
4.   The analogy between football and business management was briefly covered at the Global Drucker Forum 2010 by H.C. Erwin Staudt, President of German Bundesliga football team, VfB Stuttgart, in a presentation on 'Liberating Creative Energies,' Vienna, November 18, 2010.
5.   See www.owen.org/blog/4018
6.   See www.shiree.org

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