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Lost in the Matrix: The Logframe and the Local Picture

Introduction

This paper will look at the convergence and tensions between two trends that have gradually emerged over the past decades to have an important influence on development management and practice and, as a consequence, on the monitoring and evaluation of social development. The first of these has been the increased focus of large donors and aid agencies on the setting of goals and targets for their interventions and the creation of objective indicators for their evaluation. This approach is influenced by the New Public Management agenda, with its drive for greater efficiency in the public sector, mirroring the practice of business. The second trend, more deeply rooted in social anthropology, is the perceived need for a greater understanding, not only of the cultural context where planned interventions will take place, but also of the differing sets of values, frames of reference and perceptions of the situation on the ground held by stakeholders and local project managers.

Results, or performance-based management is perhaps epitomised by the logical framework matrix, an approach first taken from the engineering and business management sectors that has spawned a series of related planning and evaluating tools. The logframe was first introduced to USAID in the 1970s and variations on the original theme of the 4x4 hierarchical matrix are still very much in evidence in donor and bilateral agencies today.¹ Although originally conceived as a planning tool, it is still of the utmost relevance to the current discussion on measurement, as indicators for evaluation are built into its structure and are a key component. Whilst those that support the use of the matrix often argue that it is principally a planning tool, it cannot be denied that outputs and purpose laid out in the initial logframe are frequently used in mid-term reviews. Similarly indicators decided upon in the planning stage of a project are later used for evaluation purposes.

Meanwhile, the growing awareness that cultural context must be taken into account when planning or assessing interventions and projects has manifested itself in increased dialogue around issues of stakeholder participation in planning and evaluation. Debate continues as to the extent to which the views of beneficiaries or users are properly acknowledged and fed into project management or the learning process, even when participation is fostered. However, the work of Robert Chambers, David Korten, Samuel Paul and Lawrence Salmen, among others, has brought the question of participation into mainstream debate. Growing from this, the *Voices of the Poor* series, documenting participatory research with poor people from around the world, was commissioned by the World Bank to feed into its 2000–2001 World Development Report.

These two very different trends both have degrees of appeal for policy makers and managers in the higher levels of donor agencies. The results based management approach and its associated planning tools, supposedly bring 'logic', clarity and accountability into the planning, monitoring and evaluation of a project, with clearly stated goals and targets at all levels and a set of objectively verifiable indicators that will assess progress towards these. On the other hand, after years of expenditure on development projects that have failed to deliver expected results,

¹ For a full explanation of the function of the logical framework see Coleman 1987.

donors have begun to wonder whether cultural specificity and greater knowledge of local context when planning and evaluating projects could lead to increased learning, and as a consequence more effective development interventions and poverty alleviation. They believe that this type of knowledge can be gained from consultation with beneficiaries and in some agencies, employing local staff.

Aspects of both trends can appear attractive to international NGOs and government agencies, and do not seem, necessarily, to be mutually exclusive. If greater participation and cultural awareness at the planning and evaluation stages of a project leads to greater project success and increased organizational learning, this will also contribute to the drive towards achieving overall agency goals and targets and could improve efficiency. And yet it is not so easy to integrate these two trends.

The Logical Framework Matrix and the concept of change

The tensions that are emerging with regards to cultural specificity and results based management become apparent with a closer examination of the logical framework approach. Logframes have been praised for the way in which they can encourage strategic thinking at different 'levels' of a project, but they have also been much criticised. The problems identified with the use of this type of matrix are often related to issues of cultural specificity and the understanding of change.² Above all, logframes are perceived as rigid and can lead to the simplification of complex social processes. These problems come to the fore when considering the monitoring and evaluation of progress or impact. The fact that indicators must be decided upon at the initial stages of the project leaves little scope for response to unexpected events or outcomes that had not been envisaged or accounted for within the matrix. The structure of the logframe suggests that everything will go according to plan: programme activities, outcomes and goals are all laid out in advance, as are indicators with which to monitor these. As such, there is no provision for a change in project direction nor a space for learning to be fed into project implementation.³ This despite the fact that the links between different project levels are based purely on assumptions, and there is no guarantee the project will run according to plan.

The linear view of change, prompted by the logframe, where processes feed into each other in an orderly hierarchical manner is perhaps a Western construct, and is certainly one imposed by agencies from above, bearing little relation to the 'reality' of development work:

The generic project form [...] is similar to a production engineering model. It is grounded in the idea that all inputs must be foreseen, and that every input should lead to a measurable outcome. The 'logical' framework analysis is based on this hypothesis, and its kissing cousin – results-based management – is the same. It is basically about doing and measuring things. It avoids the importance of a process [...] Real achievements cannot be realized by avoiding the importance of time and the complexities of the great forces arrayed against change: culture, politics, money, markets, technologies, attitudes, vested interests. In real development projects [...] achieving the efficiencies of the engineering model will always be a fantasy. (Smillie 2001)

Recent literature from the business sector that seeks to inspire organizations to function in a more 'organic', less mechanistic way provides a very different vision of how change comes about. Fritjof Capra is a physicist and systems theorist who has applied his organizational theory to the business and management sector. His most recent publication *The Hidden Connections*, makes use of the extended metaphor of 'living systems' to analyse the functioning of organizations. The work includes a discussion of the change process or the 'emergence of novelty'. Here he provides an example of this process from the arts and sciences,

² Other problems, such as their impact upon behaviour of project managers will be discussed later in this paper.

³ Although logframes can be altered during the course of a project, many commentators note that they are rarely revisited.

Since the process of emergence is thoroughly nonlinear, involving multiple feedback loops, it cannot be fully analysed with our conventional, linear ways of reasoning, and hence we tend to experience it with a sense of mystery. (Capra 2002:119)

In development work, the origins of change can be equally obscure,

Human development results from a complex mix of non-linear processes which are largely determined by non-project factors. This means that the actual change in people's lives is contingent: it is an open system, determined by and dependent on many things...Projects are not the cause of development: far greater forces are in play. (Fowler 1996:58)

And yet, rather than investigate its complexities, there is a tendency to attempt to rationalise change, through a rigorous process of attribution and accountability. Fowler goes on to argue that the gap between project predictions, and how change processes actually occur, has led some to 'tighten up' aid projects, by employing more detailed data and logframes in an attempt to isolate projects from external influences. However, this approach is ultimately self-defeating as initiatives must be properly integrated into existing political, social and economic systems, in order to be sustainable (Fowler 1996).

Norman Uphoff, a professor at Cornell University who has focused on rural development and local institutions for the past 25 years, takes a very different approach in his publication, *Learning from Gal Oya*. The work is an attempt to understand the success of an irrigation project in Sri Lanka in the face of adverse conditions and general initial pessimism. Uphoff approaches this through a rejection of traditional social science analysis. One of his main arguments, in his 'Explanations' section of the book, is that analysis and Western classifications foster a compartmentalised view of the world that is reductionist in its outlook. Drawing on chaos theory and appreciation of non-Western philosophy, Uphoff calls for synthesis and a holistic approach:

An appreciation of chaos theory moves us away from deterministic models without abandoning the presumption that there are causes and effects to be analysed and understood. It encourages us to think of systems as being more open than closed and as evolving rather than fixed. (Uphoff 1996:294)

For Uphoff, analysis can be dangerous as it involves breaking up processes into isolated component parts, and is likely to lead to simplified thinking. It is only useful if it can contribute to greater overall understanding as *the whole is more than just the sum of its parts*. Furthermore, breaking a project down into categories discourages those involved in the project to think of it as a holistic process, and provides the opportunity to apportion blame for lack of success.

Uphoff's experiences provide a lesson for those who attempt to confine project planning and analysis to tightly designed projects based on patterns of assumptions. There is very limited space in the logframe to record or analyse the influence of external factors on project work, and as such little can be learnt about how local, national or global contexts can influence project work. Changes in political or economic circumstances, disasters and emergencies are obvious risks that will interrupt planned project activities and can make achieving goals more complex. But Uphoff shows how important friendship, embarrassment and social standing were in the promotion of change in Gal Oya. They were crucial factors that could not be predicted at the planning stage of the project. Criticising traditional social science analysis, he argues,

Personal and individual factors get excluded from theoretical consideration and are treated as random or residual variations, because they are regarded as idiosyncratic. They do not receive the attention they deserve as things that hold social enterprises

together and make them succeed. Yet whether they are strong forces or weak ones, they should not be ignored. (Uphoff 1996:289)

Capra also places emphasis on more subtle processes: his work *The Hidden Connections*, revolves around an analysis of the informal networks in business. Although these are often unacknowledged, the running of an organization relies upon them. Successful management in business for Capra depends on an understanding of how individuals and groups interact with each other. It is through these 'communities of practice' that ideas for change can be introduced and fostered. Uphoff's work shows how essential less visible social relationships can be in the promotion of human development. It is interesting to note the convergence between these two individuals from such different professional and academic backgrounds.

Culture and Participation versus Hierarchical planning tools

Donors and agencies have come to believe that one way of better assessing risk, understanding how project activities might play out in a given context and getting a better idea of whether a project is working, is to foster participation by beneficiaries and users. In a sense they are attempting to understand informal networks, by recreating 'communities of practice'. This approach has now become fairly widespread, but with differing degrees of commitment to 'real' participation.⁴ This aside, problems arise when a project involves use of both participation and the logframe. Participation at the planning stage of a project can feed into the hierarchy of planned activities to make them more responsive to the needs of beneficiaries. Indeed, there has been suggestion that the logframe can be used as a participatory tool. It, and other related tools have

[T]he potential, if adequately used, to create a genuinely local dynamic of learning, exchange and organization which could lead to a process of people driven development. (INTRAC/South Research 1994:iii)

Use of popular consultation to verify logframe indicators and inclusion of findings into planning for future project activities has also been noted by Kothari (2000) and Fowler (1996). However, the limited space the matrix provides for recording information gathered for monitoring or evaluation purposes means the richness of the data, characteristic of participatory processes, is often condensed and/or recorded in quantitative form (Kothari 2000:4). Aggregation of data to supply the succinct information demands of the logframe also makes it more likely that issues of gender and equality will be glossed over, or be absent altogether.⁵

There is a danger that with the use of the logframe the real drive behind participation will be lost. Originally conceived in order to promote empowerment, social inclusion and 'ownership' of project goals, the current emphasis on measurable results and pre-planned indicators fosters an extractive approach to participation. Rather than attempt to garner a better understanding of localised poverty, of social interaction and how beneficiaries and users view the interventions that have been taking place around them, evaluators may well be focused on answering questions set out in advance by the logframe's objectively verifiable indicators. Although the groups involved in participatory methodologies are, of course, artificial constructs, participation can still provide important insights into community organization and attitudes. But it must be remembered that participation will not, by definition, promote empowerment or necessarily lead to greater learning, especially if evaluators decide conclusively beforehand what type of information they will be gathering.

⁴ See INTRAC 1999, **The Participatory Approaches Learning Study**, for an overview of problems associated with stakeholder participation in project planning.

⁵ Informants in Wallace *et al.*'s 1997 study note also, that donors require a completed logframe before funding is forthcoming. Resource and time constraints therefore prevent a full participatory planning process that involves the logframe.

Cultural awareness and analysis of informal processes should be the main focus behind project planning and appraisals. Scott's work, *Seeing like a state* documents the spectacular failures of a number of grandiose development projects conceived in a cultural void, purposely divorced from the reality in which they would be implemented. His text attempts to serve as a warning for Western, blueprint ideas about change. With reference to failed and in some cases, highly damaging projects, such as Brasilia and Soviet collectivisation he argues,

Designed or planned social order is necessarily schematic; it always ignores essential features of any real, functioning social order...The formal scheme was parasitic on informal processes that, alone, it could not create or maintain. To the degree that the formal scheme made no allowance for these processes or actually suppressed them, it failed both its intended beneficiaries and ultimately its designers as well. (Scott 1998:6)

In his conclusion, Scott presents some simple rules for development planning: '*Take small steps...Favour reversibility...Plan on surprises...Plan on human inventiveness*' (Scott 1998:345). If development agencies and donors are to heed Scott's warnings, there must be greater flexibility both in project planning and evaluation with more space for learning and adapting to change. This will mean putting culture and context at the centre of development, not thinking of them as a bit of 'value added'.

Culture is not just another variable to be taken into account, not an extra to be added to an already complicated agenda. Culture is at the heart of all development models and all development models are cultural, whether they emanate from Brussels, Washington or Beijing. (Marsden 2002)

There is a growing awareness amongst development professionals that the logframe and similar tools squeeze out data related to local culture and context, and thus do not provide a space for an analysis of informal interactions and external influences that can be the lifeblood of a successful development intervention. A number of recent texts illustrate the particular tensions between a results oriented approach and the need for an awareness of the cultural and contextual factors that can promote change within a project.

Modifying the logframe

Rick Davies, in his article 'Improved representations of change processes: Improved theories of change', focuses principally on how to summarise complex issues in the logframe and other tools used to record linear stage theories of change. His argument is based on the need for a greater number of stages within these frameworks that reflect the different actors who are involved in the process of change. This would mean abandoning the abstract idea of stages as currently represented by the standard logframe. These would then be defined by types of people, making the matrix more complex, open for discussion, and supposedly better representative of change:

The more identifiable stages in a theory of change, the more likely the theory will be described in more tangible and observable terms. The more of these there are the more disprovable the theory will be. This should be seen as a positive feature. Secondly, this change would help re-direct attention away from the validity of individual indicators of a specific change, to the validity of the theory of change as a whole, as expressed through the predicted sequence of events. [...] Thirdly the more steps there are in a theory of change, the more precisely that progress can be measured along the path of change. (Davies 2002:5-6)

Whilst this approach is laudable in that it attempts to represent the complexity of change in a tool that has often been criticised for oversimplification, and acknowledges that views are likely to be conflicting, there are some underlying problematic issues. Whilst the article seems to suggest that this model will bring a greater number of 'world views' into an analysis and appreciation of

change, Davies is not explicit as to the extent to which this version of the logframe will depend upon input from those affected by the project. It could be that he is merely substituting formal indicators for a list of people who will in some way be touched by an intervention. Furthermore, he appears to insist on an 'explicit temporal order' in recording change, as though human interaction and activity occurred in a neat 'chain reaction' type pattern.

However, despite devoting a great deal of attention to modifications that could be made to tools that see change as a linear process, further on in the same article, Davies seems to abandon this concept in his discussion of change as a 'network' of events. Here he acknowledges that many factors can simultaneously have an impact and produce change. Firstly he notes that,

Most change is a two way process. When two parties interact they both influence each other, despite the inequalities of power that may exist between the two. [...] Theories of change summarised in Logical Frameworks rarely recognise this aspect of change, nor does the structure encourage this reflection. (Davies 2002:17)

Secondly, he also notes that agents involved in this two way process are interacting with other agents at the same time. They do not do so in orderly sequence, as is suggested by linear process theories of change.

This is not well recognised in Logical Frameworks although it is a feature of the real world. (Davies 2002: 17–18)

Davies thus states clearly that the logframe is not an adequate tool for the representation of change. It is oversimplified for use in the context of development interventions and initiatives. Furthermore, thinking about change as a network, he argues, 'has the potential to help us overcome the bias towards formal organisational structures and ignoring the informal structures that often surround and support them', (Ibid: 25) a view consistent with Capra's approach to communities of practice.

A recent review of achievement assessment in DFID social development projects by Kothari provides another, somewhat ambivalent, analysis of the logframe. On the one hand, the logframe is considered useful in project design and management, but on the other, it is 'not particularly useful in evaluating the impact of a project' (Kothari 2000:6). Indeed, her attitude to it as a tool for representing more qualitative monitoring, learning and evaluation processes becomes highly critical:

LFMs appear to discourage the use of qualitative methods of data collection, analysis and presentation and ignore the importance of contextual influences on project performance and impact. (Kothari 2000:7)

She also notes the deficiency of the logframe in its ability to respond to events or outcomes that have not been accounted for in its original structure. Her recommendation involves the creation of indicators that can account for unexpected impacts. It is here that Kothari, like Davies, is attempting to open up the logframe to the impact of culture and context, to try to make it more responsive to the specificities of project location and insertion into a social 'reality'. However, this recommendation, aside from being in essence paradoxical, further complicates the design of the matrix, which by her own account, is already an obstacle for project staff. She observes that the logframe is often used sloppily, that there is a lack of buy-in by partner organizations, that staff are seriously challenged in the selection of indicators that are objectively verifiable and that, perhaps most crucially, the matrix is rarely revisited during the course of a project.

A further recommendation she makes also aims to capture better the less predictable elements of development work. She calls for greater focus on the risks and assumptions column of the logical framework matrix. Already marginalised as the fourth column in the matrix (it should be placed adjacent to the first column to which it refers) according to Kothari's review it is generally

not given sufficient attention by project staff planning an intervention. Kothari is right to recommend more profound analysis of these risks and assumptions, since they are the most important aspect of development planning. Social development projects are based largely on conjecture and guesswork; a fact that seems to have been lost in the current climate of accountability and attribution. A greater focus is needed on the underlying assumptions behind planning procedures which can easily be challenged by those with differing world views, and the risks that can devastate even a meticulously planned intervention. But is the logframe really an adequate tool for assessing and evaluating these types of impacts and changes? With her criticism of the very structure of the logframe and observation that it is rarely used correctly, followed by recommendations for its modification, Kothari seems to be flogging a dead horse, which she has played a part in killing.

Like Davies, Kothari seems loath to reject the logframe entirely and instead advocates modifications and refinements of its structure. Both these authors are preoccupied with 'culture', in a broad understanding of the term. They wish to provide a better medium for the representation of change, which is necessarily contingent upon an understanding of how local realities and external forces can influence the change process. But both take results-based management tools as their starting point, and then consider how to make them more responsive to the complexities of cultural context and change.

By failing to reject the use of the logframe outright, these texts will play their part in the continual side-lining of culture and context when it comes to monitoring and evaluation. Kothari does call for new ways of presenting information drawn from participatory processes, but until these are developed and crucially, widely accepted, the logframe is likely to remain dominant and culture will continue to be an afterthought. Similarly, if agencies continue to demand that fixed indicators and specified goals be laid out at the initial stages of a project, monitoring and evaluation of real change will remain stymied. These authors do identify culture and context as crucial factors contributing to change, but they remain as add-ons or as an afterthought when it comes to evaluating development projects. They will remain so if agencies insist on management by objectives and fail to see development as a process, and change as complex and multi-faceted.

Cultural clash

Whilst the logframe can be a useful planning tool, and can encourage strategic thinking, 'A logframe should be a product and summary of a systematic situation analysis, and cannot substitute for that' (Gasper 1997: 1). Unfortunately, it has become dominant and domineering and threatens to undermine the move towards the intuitive social analysis of qualitative methods that has the potential to improve the chances of success in development projects. The logframe perhaps best illustrates the contradiction between results based management and donors' stated drive for an awareness of local world views, embodied in participation. The very nature of the logframe, in that it is imposed from above on often reluctant local managers, and the manner in which information is fed upwards towards higher levels of management, surely make it incompatible with participatory approaches that attempt to empower beneficiaries and involve them in the decision-making process:

It is an issue of real concern whether the use of such a specific tool, derived from a particular way of understanding how knowledge can be generated, used and presented, can possibly enable the voices of the poor to be heard. (Wallace *et al.* 1997:33)

Furthermore, while the concept behind the logical framework may be 'logical' to Westerners, for those in the South its approach, particularly towards notions of time and effectiveness, may well be very unfamiliar. Indeed Wallace *et al.* conclude,

[The] logframe is a planning tool derived from a Western frame of reference. It is complex for many staff working in NGOs in [the] UK to learn, it is far more difficult for staff and partners in the South to understand and use; it is culturally and conceptually

alien to many in the South. Many of the terms and concepts cannot be translated into different languages; far from being a universal language as some claim, it seems to us to be a very culturally specific language. (Wallace *et al.* 1997:32)

In a type of paradox, donors are purporting to learn about and from people in the South without relinquishing their soundly Western starting point or querying the 'world views' that are so intimately tied up in the structure of the logframe. Nor are they questioning how an imposition of this type of language upon communities in the South will affect their meaningful participation.

In his deconstruction of the logframe, Gasper's query is telling:

Why is LFA [Logical Framework Approach] apparently most at home in aid projects, where power imbalances and existential distance between parties are so marked? (Gasper 1997:2)

It is becoming clear that the logframe is not 'at home' in aid projects at all. It is precisely because of power imbalances in aid relationships that the logframe remains firmly in place: it responds to the needs of certain levels of management in the development hierarchy.

Before moving on, it is necessary to ask whether it is appropriate for a tool derived principally from the business sector to be so fundamentally entrenched in the monitoring and evaluation of projects run by non-profit organizations. Essentially, objectives of the private sector are fairly clear cut: to make financial gain. However,

Even the most basic common measures of performance like profitability in the private sector (disputed as their measurement might be) are not available to [international aid organizations]. (Davies 2002:1)

Similarly,

In public policy and human development, goals tend to be less simple, clear, accepted and comparable with each other, and knowledge of causal links is weaker [than in engineering, business and military contexts]. (Gasper 1997: 2)

The implication of these two statements is that the logframe is inadequate for assessing development work. But reading between the lines, these authors also give an insight into why agencies are keen to continue using them despite so much damning criticism: logframes meet the perceived need to condense and conclude, compare and replicate.

Donors' priorities

Perhaps then, the principal reason why these authors are reluctant to reject the logframe, and instead make recommendations for its modification, is because an outright rejection of the tool would be highly displeasing for large donor agencies. The higher levels of management in these organizations are keen to keep the logframe in use as it serves their own needs. Donors have a very clear set of priorities when it comes to measurement of development interventions and they need to stay in control of the process if they are to receive the information they require.⁶

The most important question to ask is, who or what are evaluations for? Are they to identify problems and successes, to foster learning within an organization and to feed into project design thus improving delivery? Are they intended to provide examples of best practice which can be replicated elsewhere? Or are they intended for use in the higher echelons of management to

⁶ The emphasis on control is perhaps illustrated by the greater focus placed on the horizontal logic of the logical framework matrix that has been noted by Gasper (2000) among others. Indicators and means of verification are 'the symbols of accountability', and are more useful for control purposes than the less tangible links between matrix levels.

assess progress towards overall agency or department goals and to respond to information demands from home governments and electorates? As Kothari notes

Greater acknowledgement needs to be made of the dilemma between monitoring for accountability and monitoring for project management and assessment. This is an issue which fundamentally shapes the form of assessment procedure and the ways in which the findings are presented. (Kothari 2000:1)

Some aid agencies, notably ActionAid with its Accountability, Learning and Planning System (ALPS), see monitoring for project management and assessment as 'downward accountability'. Reducing the amount of bureaucracy and report-writing, here the emphasis is on using information from monitoring and evaluation processes to feed back to stakeholders and local project staff and generate a learning process. Furthermore, the evaluation process is designed by local or partner staff, in close participation with beneficiaries. Drawing on Freirean analysis, the process revolves around 'review and reflection' advocating monitoring based on empirical observation. Freire's philosophy, with regard to knowledge and interaction between the subject and the world, has important lessons for monitoring and evaluation.

To underestimate the wisdom that necessarily results from sociocultural experience, is at one and the same time scientific error, and the unequivocal expression of the presence of an elitist ideology. It may even be the hidden, concealed, ideological foundation that, on the one hand, blinds a person to objective reality, and on the other, encourages the nearsightedness of those who reject popular knowledge as having led them into scientific error. In the last analysis, it is this 'myopia' that, once it becomes an ideological obstacle, occasions epistemological error. (Freire 1994:84)

For Freire, the process of *conscientização* – an individual's growing awareness of the systems within which they live and the forces acting upon them – is the path towards 'knowledge':

Knowledge emerges only through invention and reinvention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world and with each other. (Freire cited in Araujo Freire and Macedo eds 1998: 68)

ActionAid's new system for monitoring and evaluation attempts to give greater weight to the knowledge and worldviews held by those most closely involved in and touched by its development interventions. ALPS stresses the importance of monitoring for learning purposes, and the generation of knowledge that is useful to stakeholders and project staff.

Unfortunately, despite this progression, some of the most significant players in the international development arena seem to view the evaluation process as a purely upward process:

DFID's approach...is based on the establishing of **targets** in an upward direction that leads to the establishing of overall aid policy. Accountability is also shown as an upward process from the programme and project base of aid through to the UK Treasury and Parliament. (Kirk 2001: 89, emphasis in the original)

A report from the DAC (Development Assistance Committee) Working Party on Aid Evaluation into results based management, makes a clear divide between performance measurement, and evaluation for management improvement. The author notes that accountability tends to be backward-looking and often fault-finding, whereas the management improvement approach has an emphasis on learning and tends to be more positive and forward looking (Binnendijk 2001: 16).

However,

There is some concern within the donor agencies that performance measurement and reporting tasks, often required by government-wide law or executive orders, may be 'crowding out' evaluations. That is, they may be competing for the same, increasingly scarce staff time and other resources. (Binnendijk 2001: 14)

It would seem, therefore, that there is a growing emphasis on performance measurement designed to feed into accountability and audit, despite the fact that concern has been voiced that information gathered for this purpose is not necessarily of use to managers involved in a more learning-oriented evaluation process (Binnendijk 2001, Wallace *et al.* 1997).

The higher up the hierarchy a manager finds themselves, the greater the amount of information they have to handle. They perceive a need to aggregate large amounts of data that have come from diverse projects, so as to get an overall picture of how the agency or organization is functioning. This is why the use of the logframe at project level is so attractive. It is a blueprint for monitoring: a useful set of boxes that can seemingly be compared across projects, programmes and entire regions. If project managers are working with the same tool, the understanding is that their results will be comparable. Wallace *et al.* contest this assumption, however,

It seems curious that an increasing number of NGOs with different mandates, missions, aims and objectives, working in a wide diversity of cultures and contexts should find it appropriate to use similar methods for framing and presenting their work. Can 'one framework fit all' in reality? Again, this conviction that one tool can be used in any context appears to take little or no account of the work done in cultural studies. (Wallace *et al.* 1997:31)

Furthermore, it is thought that the information derived from the logframe will enable replication of a project elsewhere. This issue will be discussed further below.

Accountability to whom?

The drive for efficiency with the results based management approach brings with it a culture of accountability. There is a need to know whether targets have been reached and if so, how. Cost efficiency is an issue here: if an agency has well-documented examples of best practice, the belief is that these can be 'scaled-up' and put to work elsewhere, avoiding wasteful mistakes and time consuming in-depth project planning. The accountability culture is also connected to the perceived need for transparency across the board: Western governments must show their electorate how taxes are spent, whilst providing a good example to the developing world, where accountability will also help counter corruption.

The setting of goals therefore requires systems to be in place to monitor progress and evaluate overall success, but the efficiency-accountability argument can be turned on head. If there is a culture of accountability, surely this will make people more efficient in order to meet goals? In theory transparency and increased efficiency seem to be sensible and attractive ways of improving the success rate of development interventions, but whilst we have already seen a number of structural problems with the tools used to record project progress, these can also have serious effects on the behaviour and attitude of those brought to account by them.

Despite the emphasis on participation and local knowledge, reporting requirements from donors tend to bypass the values of those most closely involved in and touched by the project. An example is insistence on the supremacy of objectively verifiable indicators that have been set out in the initial logframe and the requirement that local managers adhere strictly to procedures. Harmful effects of this have been noted:

In parallel to increasing talk of local ownership, building local capacity and so on, low-trust management imposes more and more, time-consuming, even humiliating, compulsory procedures upon recipients. (Gasper 1997:4)

Regimentation and strict bureaucracy is likely to hinder relationships supposedly based on partnership. O'Neill is another critic of the accountability culture. She sees a growing lack of trust that is wearing down social capital.

We may constantly seek to make others trustworthy, but some of the regimes of accountability and transparency developed across the last 15 years may damage rather than reinforce trustworthiness. The intrusive methods that we have taken to stem a supposed crisis of trust may even, if things go badly, lead to a genuine crisis of trust. If we want to avoid this unfortunate spiral we need to think less about accountability through micro-management and central control, and more about good governance, less about transparency and more about limiting deception. (O'Neill 2002b)

Adverse consequences

The issue of deception is key. Faced with the rigours of reporting, with targets that they are unable to meet, or having to use a system that is alien to them, managers may end up reporting what they think donors wish to hear for fear of losing funding or having to explain that initial assumptions have not been played out in reality. Donors and agencies themselves can then become caught up in a cycle of deception. Alternatively, the orientation towards targets and accountability can skew the way project staff carry out their work. Rather than centring on improving livelihoods or increasing empowerment, they can switch their primary focus onto reaching targets and measuring indicators.

[I]n practice the written plan often appears to become more important in allocating budgets and measuring progress than the process; what has been put on paper can become more important than promoting the ability of staff to think and work strategically. (Wallace et al. 1997)

There is also the temptation to focus on the 'lower rungs' of the logframe:

An audit/accountability mentality, however, may ironically shift focus back down to outputs, which can be more easily attained and attributed to agency activities, and for which data can be collected on an annual basis. (Binnendijk 2001: 16)

Whilst this attitude is caused, in part, because manageable, tangible results are much easier to measure, there are more complex factors at work here. Ellerman draws attention to the dilemma facing a hypothetical project manager, noting that if s/he designs a project that adheres to 'Official Views' which then fails, 'the individual could hardly be faulted for being a good team player' (Ellerman 2001:23). 'Official Views' can clearly be a hindrance to learning from evaluation processes,

Any genuinely self-directed learning process in the client country might veer off in the 'wrong direction' which the project manager could not support. The project manager would return to headquarters as a failure without a project. Therefore the flow of knowledge must be managed. (Ellerman 2001: 24)

The culture of accountability and attribution breeds fear of retribution. As a result, managers set less ambitious targets and become risk averse, not daring to take the initiative even if they feel instinctively that alternative approaches towards a development problem might be more effective. Alternatively, overarching purposes or goals can be perceived as 'sacrosanct', as such project managers feel they must adhere to them at all costs, despite changing circumstances or a realisation that they are inappropriate. This surely makes a mockery of donors' drive towards participation, local ownership of projects and recruitment of local staff as managers. The imposition of rigorous reporting procedures is clearly a way Northern donors can impose control over their Southern partners, who they clearly have yet to begin to trust.

Learning and Replication

The concern donors have over corruption and mismanagement of resources is of course justified, and checks do need to be in place to ensure that funds are indeed directed towards pre-planned budget lines. At the initial stages of a project opportunities for learning are fairly limited. However, once activities, infrastructure and staff are in place, and a project is 'functioning', levels of accountability should begin to drop, as the opportunity for learning increases.⁷ Project staff should not be held responsible for 'failures': development interventions are based upon assumptions and conjecture, that as we have already seen, are highly dependent upon factors external to the project, upon local attitudes and social and political structures. Even with careful research and analysis, development can go badly wrong. But rather than admonishing those involved and attempting to sweep failure under the carpet (especially tempting when it is expensive failure), donors should foster a more open and trusting environment, where mistakes can be learnt from and which encourages initiative and measured risk-taking. No agency or donor is currently in the position to say that they have discovered the unequivocal route to poverty reduction and social inclusion.

As Marsden argues in his examination of the monitoring of social development:

The current focus on local-level participatory development strategies encourages a move to qualitative and intuitive analyses...The aim should not necessarily be to 'domesticate' these intuitive analyses into prescriptive formulas incorporated into a more complex model with predictive power, but rather to use them to engage in the creation of alternative developmental paths in which development projects are seen as policy experiments and subject to constant readjustment. (Marsden 1990:25)

This quote from Marsden also flags up another current focus of large donors: the need to replicate. 'Scaling-up' has become a much used term in the development world and a priority for large development agencies. But it could also be described as blueprinting and seen as just another name for a practice that has come in for considerable criticism over the past years, notably with reference to the World Bank. The practice of scaling up flies in the face of arguments in favour of cultural specificity and careful appraisal of local context. It is of course crucial to draw learning from development interventions, but this learning should be about general ways an organization can work, rather than specificities of project planning. Handy argues,

Learning is not finding out what other people already know, but is solving our own problems for our own purposes, by questioning, thinking and testing until the solution is a new part of our lives. (Handy 1989:63, quoted in Ellerman 2001: 13.)

Ellerman further develops this argument, when he queries the preoccupation with 'best practice'. He quotes Robert Cole's *Strategies for learning* which states there is no such thing as diffusion of best practices: best practice will only start to evolve during the course of its diffusion, Ellerman goes on to argue,

Prudent counsel is to scan globally for best practices but to test them locally since local adaptation often amounts to **reinventing the 'best practice'**. Scan globally; reinvent locally. Many foreign experts have painfully discovered that the "devil is in the (local) details". It is the local component of knowledge that requires adaptation – which in turn requires the active participation of those who know and understand the local environment. (Ellerman 2001: 20, emphasis added)

Ellerman's analysis of development institutions is also helpful when it comes to an overall assessment of why donors are so keen to stick to results based management and associated

⁷ Personal communication with J. Adams, INTRAC.

tools. Taking Flaubert's idea of 'the rage to conclude' he explains that the principle factor behind the behaviour of donors and agencies is their desire to find answers to tricky development problems, and to lay down the 'One Best Way' of addressing these problems. O'Neill would agree,

In theory again the new culture of accountability and audit makes professionals and institutions more accountable for good performance [...] But beneath this admirable rhetoric the real focus is on performance indicators chosen for ease of measurement and control rather than because they measure accurately what the quality of performance is. (O'Neill 2002a)

Despite the emphasis on culture and context, and the need for careful situational analysis, donors are still searching for toolkits, guides and methodologies that they hope will give them a degree of security in an uncertain world. The focus on targets is a way of blocking off the complexities of the developing and transitional world, and seeing progress or failure in black and white terms. The logframe encourages this type of simplified analysis, and gives priority to quantified indicators.⁸ Statistical data facilitates comparison of data, and can shut out the different views of the world and of progress that are flagged by more qualitative, less clearly conclusive research. There continues to be a bias away from these richer appraisals of the impact of development interventions. In her analysis of DFID projects, Kothari notes,

There remains a tendency for social development related issues to have a strong quantitative bias and reflect an unjustified lack of confidence in the qualitative aspects of social development approaches. Indicators which provide evidence about how people feel about processes and interventions, that go beyond income to describing well-being can be an arguable more objective means of measurement than statistical analysis which can be riven with concealed subjectivities. (Kothari 2000: 14)

Just as Flaubert poured scorn on his characters' naïve assertions of 'truth', so we must embrace ambiguity and understand, at the very least, the essential subjectivity of any exercise we undertake to assess social development. Development is about people, who are subjective beings, as are the people who design projects and those that evaluate them. There is perhaps no such thing as an 'objectively verifiable indicator', as two evaluators will bring their own cultural baggage and perceptions to any analysis they undertake. Similarly, different project managers will interpret a logical framework in differing ways, thus bringing into question the value of making comparisons between projects, based on a matrix alone. This should not prove to be a sticking ground: it is important not to be scared of conflicting views, even within an organization. We must stop trying to grasp at the 'truth' or the 'reality' on the ground. Evaluation should be about teasing out differences, not trying to cover them up. It should also be oriented towards learning at the local project level. Aggregation of results and attribution at 'high' levels of a project or programme are essentially meaningless activities that do little to address the needs around which the whole concept of development has arisen. Similarly we should avoid focusing all our attention on pre-specified goals and targets that blind us to other issues that may be equally pressing. Social development must be seen as a process, and we need a flexible approach towards project evaluation and monitoring that takes in the multiplicities of change and a broad spectrum of values. Perhaps one that involves a greater degree of internal reflection amongst stakeholders and project staff, and less emphasis on producing data for overall agency targets.

⁸ Gasper continues to argue against the use of the logframe in monitoring, and especially ex-post evaluation, of social development projects (2000). He points out that the use of logframes itself has never been systematically evaluated and he proposes a conceptual approach for this to be undertaken. However, it remains to be seen whether any major donor will ever provide funding for an evaluation of logframe evaluations.

Above all, there is a need for trust, especially in those who know and understand the situation on the ground, and who have a level of comprehension far beyond that of the higher levels of management. If donors and agencies involved in international development really want to meet targets of poverty reduction, gender equality and empowerment they must be more committed to learning and innovation, which will involve investing greater levels of trust in ground staff.

There must be real rather than notional room for change, evolution and iteration. The attempt to lock down every detail in advance of project startup is understandable in the current climate of ODA management, but it works against learning, trust and partnership, and ultimately against effectiveness[...] The need for control could perhaps satisfied in other ways – for example, by instituting better mechanisms for learning (as opposed to simply reporting). (Smillie 2001:15–16)

At the moment measurement is ultimately all about control and reflects the strained relationships between aid disbursers in Northern countries and organizations receiving resources in the South. A shift in this relationship and the whole way in which measurement and monitoring are perceived could have a significant impact on the state of international development. To conclude with a quotation from Robert Chambers, if the North-South orientation were abandoned,

The drive to disburse, the rushed visits, top-down logical planning, upward accountability, and many deceptions would diminish or disappear. Each level would empower and trust the levels below to exercise discretion, to foster diversity and to learn from mistakes. (Chambers 1995: 212)

Questions pending

The two trends introduced at the start of this paper: results based management and a flexible approach that gives weight to differing cultural perceptions, appear to be splitting the evaluation process into two distinct fields. Their potential compatibility appears to be negated by a growing realisation that different evaluations are carried out according to the reporting needs of different actors. The divide between evaluation for learning and evaluation for accountability is becoming increasingly marked. Wallace *et al.* spell this out:

[E]valuations for donors tend to be done by outside consultants, the parameters are often set by the logframe analysis against which results are measured, they are carried out in a short time, with reports written primarily for the funders. For those focusing more on learning, the process may be long-term, more participatory, designed by staff, partners and beneficiaries, with results being primarily for those involved in the project/programme. (Wallace *et al.* 1997:45)

Taking into consideration this divergence, a series of questions are thrown up:

- Should the development community try to bridge the growing divide between the two types of evaluation, by reintegrating them?
- This appears to be what Davies and Kothari have attempted to do, whilst Fowler, and others, call for the participatory use of the logframe. But can the problems of language, Western concepts of linearity and its fundamentally hierarchical nature ever be reconciled with goals of empowerment and giving voice to the most marginalised?
- Is it instead advisable to separate the two trends; to create two parallel processes? One could look at short-term reporting on 'goal posts' and accountability to donors, based on indicators, while the other would give greater weight to qualitative evidence and would look at long-term and unintended consequences.⁹

⁹ This argument has been developed by B. Pratt, INTRAC 10th Anniversary Conference, December 2001.

- Given time and resource constraints, is a two-tier system really practical? Will standard reporting for donors always dominate?
- Is ActionAid's new system, which is attempting to minimise reporting for audit purposes really workable?
- Will bilateral donors ever be able to relinquish results based management and their tools, or is it too late? Are these management techniques too firmly entrenched in their public sectors for aid agencies to behave differently? And should bilateral agencies work on the same reporting and target oriented principles as other government departments?
- What are the implications for NGOs that continue to received funding from organizations that demand results based planning and reporting, even though these demands are incompatible with NGO goals of empowerment and participation?
- We may all be striving for positive results, but we have to abandon the certainty that we know exactly what these are and the best way to achieve them. Asserting that we have the answers smacks of ethnocentricity and cultural superiority. Is this flexibility in fundamental opposition to the whole concept of results based management?

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