

The RAPID Outcome Mapping Approach and project management for policy change



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‘While the Rapid Outcome Mapping Approach designs the policy influence map, a project management method is the compass to navigate the complexity of policy influencing’

The Irish novelist Colm Tóibín wrote that ‘the future is a foreign country: they do things differently there’ (2010: 84). Development interventions are that foreign country. Ramalingam et al. (2008), describe development plans, strategies and goal setting as ‘attempts to picture how things work in that country and provide an illusion of control’. The reality, however, is that development is not a straight input-output-outcome-impact motorway, but a road with curves and crossings in a changing landscape.

Linear logic, however, remains attractive as we tend to define rules and simplify reality so that the world seems less random than it actually is (Taleb, 2008). Project management approaches help to simplify reality and, if their limitations are recognised, can be useful in implementing development strategies.

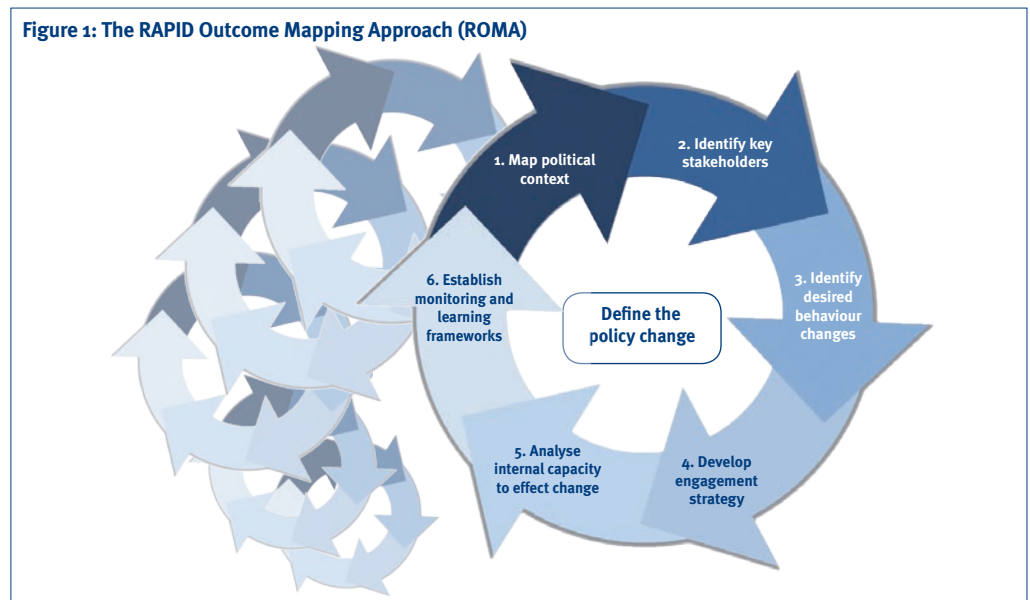
This ODI Opinion examines policy research and argues that project management can actually help, rather than hinder, researchers in efforts to manage policy influencing projects effectively. I will show how this can be achieved by combining project management principles and processes with the RAPID Outcome Mapping Approach.

Policy change through Outcome Mapping

Outcome Mapping was first developed by the International Development Resource Centre (IDRC) in the late 1990s as a way to identify and present the qualitative impact of IDRC research in terms of changed behaviour and practice. Outcome Mapping is not based on a cause-effect framework; rather it recognises that multiple, non-linear events lead to change (Earl et al., 2001).

ODI’s Research and Policy in Development (RAPID) programme has adopted and adapted Outcome Mapping principles to link research and policy change, and develop the RAPID Outcome Mapping Approach (ROMA). The ROMA framework assumes that political environments and social realities are extremely complex and that simple, linear engagement strategies for research and policy-making are insufficient. A key aspect is analysis of forces that may support or obstruct change and the design of a monitoring and learning system to support an iterative process of analysis, action, review and refinement or even a complete revision of action (Figure 1).

Figure 1: The RAPID Outcome Mapping Approach (ROMA)



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Structured project management

Management processes use knowledge of the present to plan for the future. They attempt to make sense of complexity by breaking reality into manageable activities and/or products. Researchers who associate management with prescriptive practices and bureaucracy often resist this. Project management approaches assume that without an agreed and repeatable project management method, those who commission a project, those who manage it, and those who work on it will have different ideas about how the work should be organised and when the project will be completed (OGC, 2007: 3). They break the life of a project into manageable bite-size chunks that allow decisions to be taken as the work progresses.

Can ROMA be reconciled with a structured project management approach? In my opinion it can. While ROMA is an excellent tool for planning policy influencing interventions, it does not suggest a method or an approach to manage these activities, leaving this to the experience of the individual researcher or institution. But what if they lack experience in managing the complex research and communication required to achieve an influencing objective? Project management principles can be helpful here.

A structured project management method such as, for example, Projects IN Controlled Environments (PRINCE2), divides the life of the project into manageable stages where deliverables and activities are planned carefully to coincide with the iterations envisaged in ROMA (Figure 2).

Project management principles and processes provide the method to manage and monitor limited resources and review whether the project remains

viable, while the analytical tools of ROMA provide the right questions to design a research project that aims to influence policy.

Planning is important for a policy influencing intervention, providing overall direction within complex policy environments. In my opinion, however, management and monitoring are more important as they help to navigate the obstacles and changes of circumstances that inevitably influence a policy-influencing project. While ROMA designs the policy influence map, a project management method, such as PRINCE2, is the compass to navigate the complexity of policy influencing.

Research evidence can help decision-makers to design better policies. Research projects that aim to influence policy can benefit from a project management structured approach and framework to help coordinate efforts and inputs, especially when this comes from teams.

Researchers must conquer the fear that management processes will crush their creativity and need to explore, with an open mind, the possibility that these processes can help them to be more effective in their efforts to influence policy. At the same time, we must recognise that a management process can only go so far in dealing with the complexity of reality. After all, as noted by Gladwell (2000), we do not live in an orderly world. It is a complex and messy one where 'slow and steady' does not work and we are influenced by the context. In the case of policy change, the analytical tools of ROMA can help us look at various facets of this context and complement the management of change.

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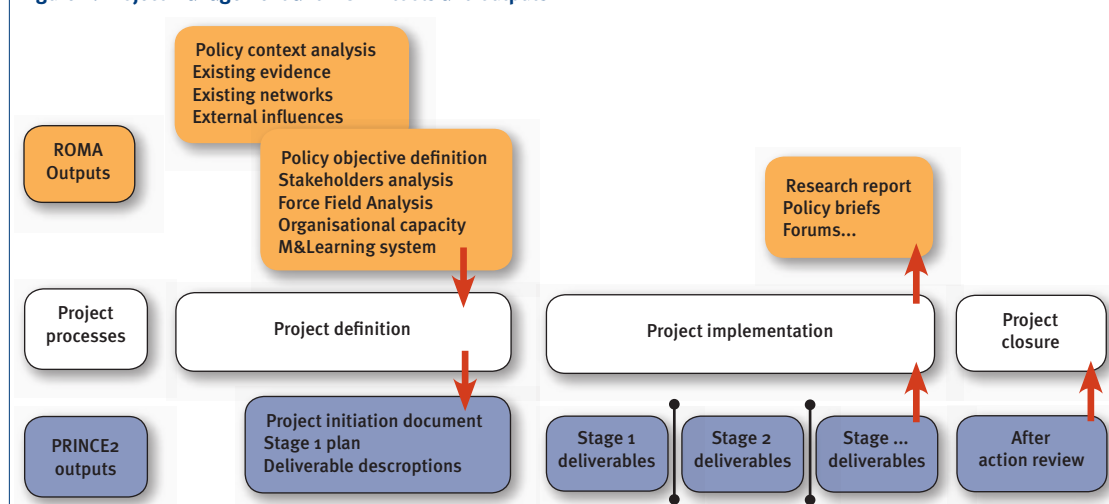
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Figure 2: Project management and ROMA tools and outputs



References and useful resources

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Useful resources:
Office of Government Commerce, PRINCE 2: <http://bit.ly/ogcprince2>
Rapid Outcome Mapping Approach: <http://bit.ly/rapid-roma>