

Plans or People: what are our priorities for rural development?

By Andrew Barlett¹

1. Logical relationships

Why do so many development projects fail to achieve their objectives?

This was the question that UNDP was asking itself in the late 1980's. To find an answer, a task force was created, consultants were hired and studies were carried out. The conclusion was that too many projects were badly designed. More specifically, there were weaknesses in the *project logic*, the relationship between key elements of the project. Objectives were fuzzy and unrelated to clearly identified problems. Outputs were unquantified and not based on a thorough assessment of what should be produced in order to achieve the objectives. And decisions about budgets and activities were being taken *before* any serious consideration had been given to either objectives or outputs.

UNDP's solution to this problem was something called the *Project Formulation Framework* (PFF), which became mandatory for all UNDP-funded projects in 1988². The PFF was a form to be used at early stages in the planning process. It consists of a series of questions that are supposed to help planning teams or individual planners make decisions about the key elements of a project, starting with an analysis of the problems to be solved. When completed, the PFF is between 5 and 10 pages of text, longer than a 'concept note', but shorter than a full project document.

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I had the job of introducing the PFF to staff of UNDP offices and UN agencies, across Asia. I visited 14 countries to conduct workshops, during which the participants formulated at least two new projects. At the same time, one of my colleagues was organising similar workshops across the Region to introduce *Objective-Oriented Planning* (known by the German acronym 'ZOPP') to GTZ offices and partner organisations. The output of the ZOPP workshops was a logical framework, or *logframe*. The purpose of the logframe and the PFF is almost identical; by summarising the key elements of a project in a manner that highlights their logical relationships, these tools facilitate the planning process and act as a reference for subsequent monitoring and evaluation.

Did all this work make any difference to the quality of projects? Has the PFF and the logframe resulted in greater success? I don't think so.

2. Human relationships

Here are a few examples of how projects succeed or fail, taken from my experience over a period of more than 20 years.

In country A, an international NGO was implementing a disaster relief programme and managing a number of rural infrastructure projects. A new project manager had different priorities, including community empowerment and agro-ecology. He made contact with experts from outside his organization and started to organize activities that were not in his project document. His initial success attracted the interest of a donor representative, who asked him to design a new project. Within a few years this person was in charge of a new NRM programme. The programme consisted

of five projects with budgets of tens of millions of dollars. All of these projects used approaches introduced by the programme manager. He was now supervising hundreds of field staff who were training tens of thousands of farmers. At this point, another development agency convinces him to join them. He left the NGO and took up new challenges elsewhere. Back in country A, the NRM programme started to lose momentum and the donors start to lose interest.

In country B, a multilateral bank was pouring money into an agricultural college. Equipment was purchased, teachers were trained, a new curriculum was produced by foreign experts, and operating funds were allocated. None of this made any difference to the standard of teaching because of corruption and inefficiency in the management of the college. Nothing could be done to change the situation because the Director of the college was protected by the Director General of Agriculture, who happened to be his brother.

In country C, a national extension programme was working well in some places and poorly in others. It all depended on whether or not the Provincial Directors were willing to cooperate with the National Programme Manager. And that depended on which political party had control of the Province. The National Programme Manager has been appointed by the Secretary of Agriculture, while the Provincial Directors were appointed by the local Governors. Some of the Governors wanted the Secretary to succeed, while others want him to fail.

In country D, an integrated rural development project was unable to create synergies between different technical components because of rivalry among the foreign experts. The problem centred on two men – one American and the other European – with very different personalities and expertise. Although they were competent in their respective fields, they refused to collaborate. The situation changes after the arrival of a third expert, an Asian woman with no relevant technical skills but who had considerable experience in community development and adult education. She acted as a bridge between the different components

and – consequently – there was a dramatic improvement in the impact of the project.

It is anecdotes like these that Government staff and development experts tell each other during coffee breaks or over a few beers in the evening. Everyday we talk to our colleagues about human relationships, but they rarely get mentioned in official reports. Not in journal articles, nor project documents, nor evaluation reports. Why is that? Kath Pasteur and Patta Scott-Villiers have some ideas on the matter³:

‘It is one thing to recognize the benefits of reflecting on relationships, it is another to translate recognition into practical tools and processes... In learning about relationships, people are dealing with issues that are intangible and sometimes painful to communicate... Relationships involve interpretations of power and feelings, as well as rational negotiation’.

Pasteur and Scott Villiers go on to suggest that – despite the difficulties – the first step “must be reflexivity on the part of the individual. This is based on developing self awareness and a sound understanding of power, position and biases that one holds in relation to others”. We must go beyond mere anecdotes and take a critical look at what we are doing, as a person interacting with other people.

3. What FAO didn't plan to do in Nepal

Last year I was asked to write a case study for an international workshop on Scaling Up. The case study focused on the Farmer Field School, a training method that the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) had used to promote integrated pest management (IPM) across Asia⁴. During a period of ten years, more than two million farmers graduated from Farmer Field Schools. How had that be achieved? This is what happened in one particular country, Nepal, between 1997 and 2002.

At the start of this period, Nepal was not a member of FAO's IPM programme, funds were not available for activities in the country, and the donors had advised

FAO not to expand into new countries. With one exception, the experts working in FAO – including myself – were in agreement with the donors, partly because we were busy in other countries and partly because we were unconvinced about the likelihood of success in Nepal in light of the experience elsewhere in South Asia.

The exception among the FAO staff was one of my colleagues in the Regional IPM Office, Dr. O, the Senior Scientific Officer. Dr. O had met the new Director of Plant Protection in the Nepalese Department of Agriculture, Mr U, and was convinced that here was a person who had the vision, the technical expertise, and the political connections needed to lead an IPM programme. It was also relevant that Mr U had a Deputy, Mrs N, who had the management skills and creativity required to organise training courses under difficult circumstances.

Dr. O and Mr. U lobbied for funds and started field studies. Within months, the rest of the FAO team was forced to respond to the interest that these initial activities had generated in Nepal. To be honest, I didn't appreciate what Dr. O was doing, and we had some serious arguments about it. On the surface these arguments were about work plans and budgets, but underneath there was a clash of personalities and a rivalry for the position of Deputy Regional Coordinator. Nevertheless, the activities in Nepal quickly developed their own momentum.

What happened over the next four years was spectacular. The number of farmers graduating from Farmer Field Schools went from zero in 1997 to 8'600 by 2001. At the outset, the training was led by experts from the Philippines, but three years later the programme was being run by Nepalese trainers, with half of all FFS conducted by farmers themselves. IPM farmers had formed their own organisations in 26 Districts, and the Government had allocated funds in the 5-Year Plan to expand and sustain the programme.

The story of the Nepalese IPM programme did not stop in 2001. The following year saw the launch of The IPM Trainers Association of Nepal (TITAN) with

government officials, NGO staff and farmers as members. y 2003, TITAN was being contracted by CARE International to provide consultants for a large rural development programme in Bangladesh.

Why did the IPM programme grow so fast in Nepal? Committed leadership and creative management can explain much of the success. Dr. O, Mr. U and Mrs. N were willing to break the rules and create new alliances. They worked outside of the plan, outside of the organogram... and outside of normal working hours. Another important factor was that – as a result of reorganisation within the Department of Agriculture – the Plant Protection Section had recruited a new batch of staff. Young and recently qualified, they were eager to learn, they were inspired by what they saw in the field, and they were eager to prove their ability to both peers and supervisors.

It must also be mentioned that, despite initial reluctance, the other experts in the Regional IPM Office were willing and able to respond to the rapidly evolving situation in Nepal. I was involved in reassigning staff, adjusting workplans and juggling budgets. Despite our differences, what Dr. O and myself agreed on was our relationship with the National PM Programme. It was neither his programme or mine, not FAO's or the donors'. It belonged the people of Nepal; to Mr U and Mrs N, to the teams of young trainers, and to farmers like Mr Ganga Ram Neupane, Mrs Damanta Bimauli, and thousands of others⁵.

4. What is the problem with development projects?

What is the point of the stories I have been telling? The point is this: it is people that make the difference between success and failure.

All of us recognise that the opinions of a few individuals can be critical to the progress of our work: a village elder, a Director of a Department, a Task Manager from the donor agency, a charismatic expert. These people have the ability to make things happen, or to block them. We also know that the opinions of these people are not based simply on technical facts, eco-

conomic calculations or organisational policies; personal interests are equally important. If we want our projects to succeed, we need to identify these individuals and figure out what makes them tick. We need to understand their fears and motivations, their affiliations and obligations, their past experience and aspirations.

Anybody who was closely involved with the FAO IPM Programme could draw up a list of between 10 and 20 people without whom the Farmer Field School would not have reached two million farmers. The same can be said about other interventions in rural development that have been scaled up across Asia: IR36, the T&V system, micro-credit, PRA etc. Each of these interventions has names attached to them, the names of people who made it happen.

It is amazing, therefore, that most project documents never mention the names of the people who are expected to implement the project. Quite simply, people are not considered to be a key component. People are reduced to abstract categories such as 'beneficiaries', or artificial structures such as organisational charts (which say almost nothing about the 'who, how and why' of decision-making), and a list of responsibilities in the work plan, tucked away in the annexes. The assumption made by most planners is that anybody with suitable qualifications could be slotted into the boxes, like cogs in a machine. Once the project is approved, a search is made for cogs with the required technical specifications, and it is largely a matter of luck if those people have the commitment, creativity and communication skills that are needed for the project to succeed.

Why do we design projects like this? The problem, I believe, is that the theory and practice of development is inherently technocratic, and remains rooted in the 'high modernist' period of political thought that existed in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War.

What do I mean by 'technocratic'? In the words of John Ralson Saul,

*The new holy trinity is organization, technology and information. The new high priest is the technocrat – a man who understands the organization, makes use of the technology and controls access to the information, which is a compendium of facts.*⁶

The concept of the development project is inescapably linked to the notion that small groups of anonymous experts have the ability to reduce complex socio-historical situations to a set of discrete techno-economic problems that can be solved by injecting new resources and creating new structures, and that the same basic approach can be applied to building a bridge, enhancing the capability of a government department, or improving the livelihoods of rural communities.

Technocracy is not as pervasive as Saul would have us believe. In sports, arts and entertainment, we extol the achievements of individuals and small groups. In business, we praise the work of innovators and entrepreneurs. In politics, we vote for individual politicians as often as we vote for parties. We also accept that many scientific and academic institutions owe their success, and sometimes their existence, to small numbers of eminent people. But in Governments across the so-called 'developed' world, technocracy is the dominant paradigm, with faceless technocrats running ministries and corporations in both capitalist and communist countries. Consequently, technocracy has become the *modus operandi* of most development agencies. Indeed, an important goal of these agencies often seems to be the spread of technocracy from the Governments of the North to those in the South, with the logframe as a weapon for achieving this goal⁷.

Technocracy operates in a mechanistic manner. It is dehumanising. It works on the basis of averages and probabilities, specialisation and standardisation, linear processes with predictable outcomes. The bad news for the technocrats is that the real world, the world outside their Department, does not work by the same rules. In the real world, people – individuals and small groups – make a critical difference to the outcomes.

I am sure that many readers will object to this analysis. You may be asking ‘what about participatory approaches we have been promoting for the past twenty-five years or more?’ I would agree that participatory methods have brought about considerable benefits, but most of this participation has been *instrumental*, in other words it has been organised according to pre-determined procedures in order to improve the effectiveness with which projects and programmes achieve goals that have been set by small elites. I have worked on projects in a dozen countries that used participatory processes for planning, monitoring and evaluation, but in almost every case the participation was highly localised, taking place within a framework that was designed and controlled by a small number of ‘experts’.

Participatory methods will not succeed in overcoming the dehumanising effect of technocracy until participation becomes an end in itself, rather than a means for ends that are determined by technocrats.

5. Can we design better projects?

The answer to this question is undoubtedly ‘yes’. If projects are failing because planners do not pay enough attention to the people who will implement them – to their influence and integrity, their commitment and creativity – we can increase our chances of success by making more effort to understand the roles and relationships of these people. A number of tools and techniques are already available.

Stakeholder analysis is ‘a process of systematically gathering and analyzing qualitative information to determine whose interests should be taken into account when developing and/or implementing a policy or program’⁸. Stakeholder analysis is most often used in policy formulation, but it can be equally useful in project planning. The questions that stakeholder analysis seeks to answer, include:

- Who are the most important stakeholders from a power and leadership analysis?
- What do the stakeholders see as possible advantages or disadvantages of the policy?
- Which stakeholders might form alliances?

Social Network Analysis ‘is a set of methods for the analysis of social structures, methods that specifically allow an investigation into the relational aspects of these structures’⁹. These methods have been used to carry out research in the social sciences since the 1970, but have only more recently been applied to development programmes. One of the leading proponents of network analysis in development has suggested that there are a number of settings in which network models are likely to be useful, including¹⁰:

- In projects where there are many actors who are fairly autonomous and where there is no central authority able to direct their behaviour.
- In projects where there is no single objective, but many alternative and/or competing objectives.
- In projects where a given output may be used by many actors and a given actor may use many outputs.

Like most tools, stakeholder analysis and social network analysis can be used in different ways. They can be used by planners to identify and understand stakeholders, and they can be used by stakeholders themselves as part of an empowerment process. They can also be used by technocrats to develop more effective ways of manipulating stakeholders.

For example, an Australian consulting company has recently been promoting new planning and management tools that incorporate stakeholder analysis. Under the enticing banner of ‘No more logframes!’, workshops are being held to teach development workers about ‘**People Focused Program Logic**’ and ‘**People Centred evaluation**’. The purpose of these methods, however, is no less instrumental than the logframes they seek to replace. According to the training materials¹¹, the ‘people centred logic model... is centrally concerned with identifying:

- Who (the people) are that the project needs to target in order to bring about the desired changes or outcomes we seek, and
- What these people need to be doing differently (practice change)’.

By contrast, an international institute based in the UK is promoting stakeholder analysis and other ‘**Power**

Tools that will help 'marginalised people and their allies...have a greater positive influence on natural resources policy'¹². These tools, which aim to empower people rather than planners, include:

- Stakeholder power analysis
- Mechanisms for organisation
- Media and lobby tactics
- Local Government accountability

On their own, planning tools are not going to change the relationship between development planners and rural people. To bring about that change we also need to give attention to who uses these tools and how they are used.

6. Or should we be moving beyond projects?

While I believe that better projects are possible, I also believe that development agencies should be seeking alternatives to logic-based projects. The entire system of identifying, planning, appraising, managing and evaluating these projects is inherently technocratic. With an enormous amount of effort it is possible to make some projects more empowering, providing space for local leaders and new alliances to emerge. But these efforts are like trying to raise fish in a rice field; it can be done, but the conditions are not ideal. Maybe we would have more success if we dug some fish ponds.

There is a growing group of academics and activists who are interested 'not in development alternatives, but in alternatives to development, that is, the rejection of the entire paradigm altogether'¹³. The alternative to development that is supported by those on the left wing of the political spectrum is grassroots social movements. On the right wing there is a growing belief that the alternative is in the private sector: in small and medium enterprises, and even in global corporations.

Do we need to reject the entire paradigm of development in order to support alternatives? I am not sure. Clearly, donors cannot plan and fund social movements or businesses in the same way they plan and fund traditional projects. Actually, they should not be

trying to plan these things at all! But maybe they can identify and support the social entrepreneurs who are responsible for the developmental benefits that these ventures can produce.

A social entrepreneur is 'someone who recognizes a social problem and uses entrepreneurial principles to organize, create, and manage a venture to make social change'¹⁴. That sounds simple enough, but there are different opinions on the type of ventures that are encompassed by social entrepreneurship. In the USA, social entrepreneurs are often defined as 'people who run social enterprises' i.e. organisations that combine business with philanthropy¹⁵. In this context, the term can be used to describe anyone who starts a not-for-profit organization, while 'others use it to refer to business owners who integrate social responsibility into their operations'¹⁶.

In the UK, attention has also been given to entrepreneurs in the public sector who "transform the institutions they are in charge of, taking moribund organisations and turning them into dynamic creative ones" and community activists who "transform the neighbourhoods and communities they serve by opening up possibilities for self-development"¹⁷.

It is this broader understanding of social entrepreneurship that has greatest value for development agencies, offering scope for supporting innovation and change in both the public and private sector, and across a wide range of civil society organizations.

Entrepreneurs are not always leaders in the formal sense, especially in the public sector where advancement is rarely correlated with risk-taking, and in rural communities where traditional power structures are highly respected. But my experience is that – even in conservative situations – it is usually possible to find people with entrepreneurial skills. In monolithic government Departments in Indonesia, in small businesses in Laos, universities in China and poor villages in Nepal, I have met hundreds of talented networkers, facilitators, activists, and 'champions' of local causes. These people are not necessarily charismatic, and they have rarely been given any management training, but

they all have the characteristics of successful entrepreneurs: they are passionate, goal-driven, resourceful, energetic... and very persistent¹⁸.

How can development donors support social entrepreneurs? The key – I suggest – is for donors to *stop planning for people, and let people plan for themselves*. I am not talking about providing opportunities for participatory planning in the context of ‘our’ programmes, but providing funds that allow people to develop their own programmes. Start with people, not with a set of pre-determined problems, and let them have the space to organize and innovate.

The best way to do this may be through **challenge funds**, also known as competitive grant schemes (CGS’s). Philanthropic foundations have been using challenge funds for decades, but – until recently – most bilateral and multilateral donors have been wary of using this mechanism. When competitive grants have been applied by development agencies the mechanism has often been little more than a type of sub-contracting (particularly for research programmes), or it has been used as a PR tool that accounts for a very small portion of total expenditure.

An excuse among donors is that it is difficult to administer competitive grants on a large scale. But the operations of the Gates Foundation – with an annual budget of \$800 million, much of it in the form of competitive grants – suggests that the administrative difficulties are not insurmountable. Donors are also worried about the issue of accountability. But supporting social entrepreneurs does not mean that we should forget about the results. Mark Kramer of the Skoll Foundation has documented how ‘The field of social entrepreneurship has invented its own approaches to evaluation that suit its fundamentally different perspective’¹⁹. A central theme in this type of evaluation is the measurement of progress against objectives that have been set by the grantees not the funders.

I suspect that the reluctance of donor agencies to use challenge funds has a lot to do with the prevailing technocracy. Social entrepreneurs, challenge funds, and the

empowerment of rural people are all an affront to the elitist views of technocratic planners. I have written elsewhere that ‘As a corollary of empowerment, we – as development professionals – must also become subjects of the development process. If we want farmers to gain power, we must expect to lose some ourselves’²⁰.

Fortunately, the technocrats are losing control of some development agencies. In the UK Department for International Development (DFID), for example, challenge funds are now operating on a large scale^{21,22}, and the mechanism has been applied to agricultural research *and extension programmes* in countries like Bangladesh²³.

7. Back to the drawing board

At the end of 2003 I participated in the final evaluation of a DFID-funded project in Bangladesh that made use of ‘Partnership Initiative Funds’ to support a pluralistic and innovative approach to agricultural extension. Over a period of 5 years nearly 500 grants had been awarded under the project. The scheme was not a complete success, but the potential of using competitive grants was evident, and many lessons were learned.

A year later I was given an opportunity to apply some of those lessons when FAO asked me to formulate the technical assistance component of large Community Development Programme in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK), Pakistan. FAO was hoping that IFAD would fund the technical assistance, but IFAD was reluctant to give the money to FAO. Frankly, I agreed with IFAD. I was no longer willing to decide what government officers or farmers should do with their lives, nor did I want to see that power being given to FAO. Ignoring the training I had conducted 15 years earlier, I designed two challenge funds that would support social entrepreneurs in both the public sector and civil society.

The technical assistance project was quickly approved by IFAD and the Government of AJK. Nobody noticed the absence of a logframe.

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