

Back to the future of aid administration

by Mark Moran

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Community consultations, Pahoturi River, South Fly, PNG

I recently took a late career change, back to what I had enjoyed the most — frontline development work. I've been working in rural and remote communities in the Pacific and Australia ever since. My recent work in international development has been with “facility” managing contractors — companies that manage flexible technical assistance mechanisms. After reaching senior roles in NGOs and academia, I thought a more experienced me would find it easier.

Ha! It's never been harder understanding people and place, their strengths and their complex challenges in governance and development.

I've loved seeing the effects of localisation coming through, with capable local staff, organisations and enterprises sparking deeper engagement. According to DFAT's recent Guidance Note on [locally-led development](#), localisation means “respecting and enabling the agency, leadership and decision making of diverse local actors in framing, design, delivery, resourcing and accountability”. It also lists mandatory indicators, including the number and value of contracts and grants to national governments, companies, NGOs and other local organisations as well as the number of national staff employed by facility managing contractors.

Sounds good, but alas, localisation has not necessarily afforded local staff and local providers more power, as [also observed with emergency humanitarian assistance](#). The political economy of development assistance has remained dominant, risk management more important than innovation, optics more than results.

The paperwork seems to have gotten worse, as more and more development ideas have permeated. Efforts to cede powers to the frontline can become a double-edged sword, as reporting periods shorten, trainings increase and procurement rules and risk assessments tighten. Reporting on multiple cross-cutting issues has become increasingly complex, with localisation itself requiring Localisation Participation Plans.

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The administrative reporting burden on both the managing contractor to generate reports, and for DFAT to review and approve them, can at times overwhelm the effort. This is especially acute during the first year of a new program, and at annual intervals over its duration, with a final burst at the end.

After the Investment Design Document and tender and contract documentation, there can be inception reports, baselines, monitoring, evaluation, research, learning and adaptation (MERLA) plans, gender equality, disability and social inclusion (GEDSI) plans, annual workplans, annual performance reports, analytical reviews and briefing notes. Implementation can descend into long months of paper warfare, of drafting, meticulously tracking changes, responding to comments from multiple reviewers and waiting for approvals to arrive. Much complaining, heroic evening efforts and witty anecdotes emerge about the “tail wagging the dog”.

Of course, things do settle down, and the real work occurs. But, then it’s still the same ol’ double game, dealing with the frontline demands of daily interpersonal development practice and the administrative demands of spending and reporting.

This mismatch has long been argued by a long list of people, [including myself](#), but [Rondinelli was one of the first](#), more than 30 years ago. There are alternatives available that bridge the gap. Approaches like the Harvard Kennedy School [Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation](#) and Dan Honig’s [Navigating by Judgement](#) argue that progress in development can neither be designed nor predicted but must be rather worked out incrementally through practice. They have proposed lean designs and agile adaptations, as learning emerges with practice, but these approaches still remain at the margins of the status quo of aid administration.

At times I’ve thought that I’m now less effective as a counterpart because I hold less positional power in the system, to broker better deals for the frontline. But my local colleagues don’t seem to mind; in fact, they appear to appreciate that we’re all in this together. Of course, I still hold considerable power, and they are quick to look to me to help them to wordsmith the reporting. And while I personally find much of the reporting to be borderline baloney, my local colleagues tend to see it is an artefact of my culture and so it’s mine to step up and deal with.

Fair enough! Perhaps I am the system taking care of itself; a system if I’m honest that is partially of my making, as I too once ploughed the fields of development with my own new ideas. Once I get on with it, they reciprocate by opening their local knowledge and networks, and the work unfolds.

Clearly, outsiders like me play an important role in managing and containing projectisation and paperwork, creating space for what Anna Gibert describes as the

“local dynamism, creativity and political manoeuvring that is required for sustainable social change to occur”.

Anna likened her work to being secretarial, although she was careful to qualify this was not “faux modesty” on her part, recognising the need to skilfully articulate results that resonate with the donor. Such humility makes sense when the holy grail of development has always been what occurs organically and endogenously, transacted interpersonally with local leaders at the helm.

But I don't think it quite fits to describe my work as secretarial. It is incredibly difficult to massage alternate and complex realities across multifarious headings and ticked boxes to achieve benchmarks of “effective” development. Somehow, the volume of pages must then be distilled back down to the equivalent of a two-page executive summary, perhaps destined for a diplomatic cable. Getting this right requires much technical experience across a broad range of sectors and hand wringing through many ethically and politically fraught compromises.

I love working in development and remain committed to its promise, but I do worry about critiques playing into the hands of those who would do away with it all together. I am happy with my decision to work where I enjoy most. The collaborations are full of productive surprises, the more you relax into them. The friendships have never come easier. And the more that I think about it, looking back, that's what I've always enjoyed the most.

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