

If we want New Zealand aid to work we need to stop thinking big, and start thinking better

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Perhaps because the problems it is trying to resolve are so big, while its progress is so mixed, aid work is like intellectual flypaper, exerting an irresistible pull on Big Ideas. Solutions born of intuition, theory or ideology, which--proponents argue--will succeed where so much has failed before. Political cycles add to this. New ministers rarely know a lot about aid except that, as a matter of principle, the other lot must have had it wrong. Therefore change. Big, bold change.

At some point, possibly after the next election, the New Zealand aid programme will have a new political master, and no doubt they will have their own big, bold ideas for change. Up to a point this is a good thing; I can think of quite a lot I would like to see changed. Yet at the same time I also want to suggest something else. An approach that hinges on asking questions instead of thinking we have all the answers. Part of the reason that our aid programme has failed to deliver dramatic successes may well be that the other political lot really did have it wrong. But that doesn't mean getting it right is easy. Indeed, if there is one lesson we have learnt from the decades we have given aid, it is that, while aid can work well at times, getting it to work is hard. And no one knows nearly enough about what works in aid and why.

Sure, there are some simple things that can be changed. The Cold War taught that aid that is not intended to help usually won't. So we should re-focus our aid programme on helping developing countries, rather than New Zealand. And common sense suggests that aid workers do best when their own knowledge is respected and when they are operating amongst predictable parameters. So any new minister in charge of New Zealand aid could do a lot simply by repairing broken NGO funding mechanisms and learning to listen to Ministry staff.

Yet beyond this, not a lot is clear: is aid best focused on economic development, or raising human capital? On roads or hospitals? Is aid best given via recipient governments, or as much as possible through non-state actors? The answer to these sorts of questions almost certainly varies by country. And for most of the countries the New Zealand aid programme works in, the sad fact of the matter is that we don't have the answers.

The New Zealand government aid programme has never engaged particularly well with research or evaluation. Some funding has been given, and some learnings gained. But nothing near as much as we need to answer the tricky questions of aid.

And so my advice for the New Zealand aid programme's new Minister, when they arrive, is to forget about big ideas and focus on fostering learning. Mandate more evaluations, well-funded, using the best available methods, and planned from the start of aid activities. Bring in expertise to facilitate this. Share what is learnt. And give staff time to make changes on the basis of what is learnt. Also, support research. The New Zealand

aid programme has never devoted more than a fraction of a per cent of its aid spend to directly promoting research. Yet it needs to if it wants answers to the difficult questions that plague aid work in many of the countries where it operates. The United Kingdom's DFID offers good pointers as to what could be done: fund ongoing engagement with research centres and have aid staff work actively to educate academics about what policy-useful research looks like. At the same time employ at least some aid staff who know what quality research involves. Provide some funding for researcher-directed avenues of inquiry and also tie some funding to research that is related specifically to the needs of the aid programme. Carefully couple ongoing research with larger aid activities, providing researchers with data and aid staffers with insights. And then pay for a service (either in-house or contracted) that can synthesise findings for busy aid programme employees. Require an evidence base for major decisions made in the aid programme. And give staff time to accumulate this evidence base.

At this point, the cynical reader may well be wondering whether all I'm doing is peddling a Big Idea of my own. And it's true, I am advocating a significant change. But the difference is that my Big Idea makes no pretence at having the answers. Instead it's focused on questions. And it's focused on questions because, if we are ever to learn how to give aid well, we need to start asking them.

Ask the right questions and devote enough effort to learning the answers and we might eventually end up with the ability to confidently and effectively use New Zealand aid to make the world a better place.

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