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Project facilitation as an active response to tensions in international development programmes

John Lannon & John N. Walsh

Synopsis

This paper examines the tensions that exist in international development programmes between traditional task-orientated approaches to development and those taking a broader perspective, which see programmes as sites that also encompass adaptability and learning. Using an interpretative case study approach over a two-year period, we examine how an international non-government organisation (INGO) worked in partnership with local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) involved in delivering development and humanitarian programmes to bring about change in the communities they served in Kenya, Zimbabwe and Uganda. We identify four key tensions and propose active responses to these tensions which we term project facilitation.

Introduction and Background

Programme management has developed from a framework to group existing projects and define new projects (Pellegrinelli, 1997) to an established method for managing uncertain, complex and large-scale changes (Martinsuo & Hoverfalt, 2018) that integrates multiple projects (Murray-Webster & Thiry, 2000). Programmes have longer durations than projects, require the coordination of divergent and interrelated projects and involve multiple stakeholders (Pellegrinelli, Partington, Hemingway, Mohdzain & Shah, 2007; Stretton, 2016; Wagner & Lock, 2016). However, programme management may exacerbate tensions between recursive task-orientated views of projects and a wider, organisational view of programmes (Lycett, Rassau & Danson, 2004). This is particularly the case in the international development sector (Nejmeh & Vicary, 2009) where change may be non-linear and unpredictable so that

management practices and decision-making enable programme activities to be shaped by learning (Valters, Cummings & Nixon, 2016). Consequently, there is a need for research that takes a more adaptable approach to programme management to deal with the uncertainty and complexity inherent in international development (Brinkerhoff, Frazer & McGregor-Mirghani, 2018; Derbyshire & Donovan, 2016). Indeed, such complexity has increased as INGOs, to be effective and sustainable, move away from the traditional donor-recipient model and enter into partnerships with local organisations and communities (Ndhlovu, 2007).

Issues and Questions Considered

Effective development is dependent on having a good understanding of local situations (Powell, 2006), and on integrating contextual, local knowledge into development interventions (Ferguson, Huysman & Soekijad, 2010). Organisations seeking to create and sustain competitive advantage in rapidly changing environments must find ways to both exploit knowledge and capabilities efficiently and explore ways to innovate and respond flexibly (Pellegrinelli et al., 2015). Nonetheless despite the emphasis on participation, localisation and community owned solutions (Mansuri & Rao, 2012) and the increasing evidence that solutions are best developed closest to where they will be implemented (Chambers & Ramalingam, 2016; Moses & Soal, 2017), a linear, top-down/bottom-up view of knowledge transfer still predominates in the international development sector (Moschitz, Roep, Brunori & Tisenkops, 2015).

In the literature dealing with tensions, competing demands are often expressed as opposing elements, such as stability and change, exploitation and exploration, and efficiency

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and flexibility (Gaim & Wahlin, 2016; Lovstal & Jontoft, 2017; Smith & Lewis, 2011). Finding active responses to the tensions that exist within programmes offers greater potential for effective delivery of long-term benefits than defensive strategies like repression, temporal/spatial splitting, or suppression (Jarzabkowski, Le & Van de Ven, 2013; Lewis, 2000) that typically occur in programme environments.

This paper examines the tension between the traditional task-oriented approaches to development and the wider view of international development programmes as sites for adaptability and learning. The aim is to develop an understanding of how programme management can respond effectively to this tension in situations where adaptive approaches to management are being adopted by an INGO in partnership with local NGOs in three different countries.

Methodology

The research used a case study approach (Yin, 2009) to understand, in a real-world context (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007), the tensions present. Case study research has been used to examine tensions in project management (Hodgson, Paton & Muzio, 2015; Paton & Hodgson, 2016) and specifically tensions within collaborative partnerships (Kislov, Hodgson and Boaden, 2016). The research took place over a two-year period. Qualitative data was collected from focus-group discussions as well as unstructured and semi-structured interviews at multiple levels, including the top-management team, programme managers, programme advisors as well as local managers and staff of the INGO and partner NGOs in Kenya, Zimbabwe and Uganda. These were supplemented with participation as an observer in meetings and workshops as well as a review of programme/project documentation. Data was analysed using template analysis (King, 1998; King 2004).

Outcomes and Findings

Four key tensions were identified (figure 1). (1) The results-based versus adaptive management tension. Results based management, using standard indicators placed a strain on local partner NGOs. More flexibility was required in

the monitoring and evaluation process, achieved by locally adapting indicators, to suit specific contexts, while broad programme strategies were determined by headquarters. (2) The managerialism versus localisation tension. A tension existed between using rigorous programming standards and providing NGOs the opportunity to implement the most appropriate local solutions. The INGO rejected a one-size-fits-all approach to development. This was an active response built on trust between partners. (3) The knowledge exploration versus knowledge exploitation tension. The development sector encourages new approaches to development challenges, requiring knowledge exploration, while INGO donors sought project efficiency, achieved through knowledge exploitation. Local NGOs were found to focus on exploration as they engaged in emergent learning and innovation during programme implementation. A key INGO capability was to develop the capacity to capture and re-use new locally context-specific knowledge by enhancing the systems designed to support knowledge exploitation that would also enable a richer level of donor reporting. (4) The reporting versus learning tension. While peer learning and co-creation of knowledge was seen as important in development such activities vied for managers time with programme reporting. Given the importance on reporting results to donors this activity tended to take priority. Articulating this tension created the impetus to capture learning at the local level and capitalise on the willingness among local actors for learning and knowledge sharing.

This research demonstrates the value of active responses to tensions between traditional, recursive and adaptive tendencies in international development programmes. Confronting and working through tensions enables actors to develop better ways of working, leading to positive long-term benefits. In the context of programmes, we characterise the approach needed to make this successful as project facilitation. Project facilitation involves developing devolved decision-making to local project implementers, creating appropriate spaces for reflexivity, supporting horizontal context-specific knowledge sharing and learning to take place between projects while also facilitating the capacity to refine process knowledge into existing organisational frameworks.

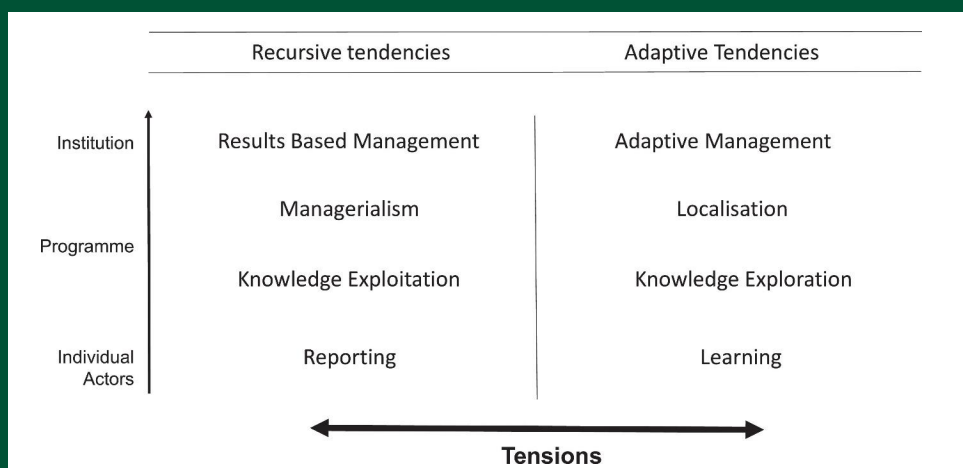


Figure 1: Key tensions that existed at varying levels or analysis.

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