

Relationships matter

One possible view of this story is that it is just ‘gossip’, what development aid officials chat about after office hours over a beer. Shouldn’t a serious magazine like *The Broker* focus on the *real* challenges of the Paris Declaration and not distract readers by publishing this kind of anecdotal trivia? But wait a moment! Why should it be trivial to study the everyday office life of aid agency staff?

A long-standing issue in international aid has been how official donor agencies, bilateral and multilateral, have designed and run their own projects in relation to their own concerns and interests. As a consequence, already overstretched recipient governments have had to connect with and make sense of the overlapping, sometimes contradictory, activities of dozens of separate donors. Thus an important element in the Paris Declaration has been the principle of harmonization, which means donors joining up to implement common programmes and procedures, so that the recipient has one rather than many interlocutors.

The harmonization agenda, associated with donor aspirations to provide budget support rather than manage their own separate projects, has meant that staff now spend much of their time not visiting projects in the field, but talking with their counterparts in other agencies. To avoid the recipient government having to enter into separate ‘policy dialogues’ with the five or ten donors interested in supporting a particular sector, such as ‘decentralization’, donors choose one among themselves to represent their common position *vis à vis* the government. When it works well, the government can get on with the business of implementing its decentralization policy knowing that all the donors will have fallen into line behind an agreed approach, and that if an issue arises it has only one, rather than a dozen interlocutors to deal with.

Because aid officials have been spending increasing amounts of time negotiating among themselves – and getting stuck in traffic as they drive from one donor coordination meeting to the next – placing all the staff working on a single sector in the same office would seem a good way to encourage a spirit of camaraderie and sense of common purpose. But, as this story demonstrates, it didn’t work out that way. Rather, establishing a joint office appeared to have exacerbated the tensions between the various agencies all struggling to influence the policy agenda.

A shared office solution is still unusual, but much of what Amy Pollard describes sounds very similar to my own experiences when working for DFID in Bolivia. A donor community is a political presence in any country. It seeks to

influence change in that country through its intellectual and financial engagement with national and international actors and institutions. In that shared effort, there are intense internal political struggles. In Bolivia, authority and leadership within the donor community were primarily achieved through the capacity to exert patronage through networks of clients within and outside the government, as well as with fellow donors. Such capacity was only partly contingent on the size of the donor’s budget; it also required access to information, social and political competence and prior reputation within the global donor network. Hence, collective decision making was, in Pollard’s words, ‘an arduous, fraught and time-consuming process’.

Officials need to demonstrate to their head offices that they are having a tangible influence on the local scene. Struggles within the multilateral part of a local donor community may reflect strong disagreements between their respective head offices on policy or procedural matters. Equally likely, as in the DSF case, conflicts between multilaterals arise from competition over access to donor government resources. Seemingly minor matters such as who issues invitations to a meeting then acquire symbolic importance.

Pollard’s detailed ethnographic research is important. It puts into words what is common knowledge among those on the ‘inside’, but is either still not recognized as something that urgently needs to be tackled, or solutions are proposed in terms of changing ‘incentives’ or finding better ‘mechanisms’.

The Broker has recently hosted a discussion about complexity. Ralph Stacey, a leading theorist on complexity, has talked about ‘shadow conversations’ in organizations that take place informally and are in tension with the official ideology. Ethnographic research such as Pollard’s throws light on such conversations. Stacey argues that organizations become less dysfunctional when shadow conversations, instead of being dismissed as gossip, are recognized and nourished. These can become constructive ways of exploring relational differences, and that is a first step to being able to work more easily together.

When aid agencies recognize that relationships matter, they will be taking an important step towards making aid more effective. ■

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