In Search of a Working Process for Emergence and Accountability in Development

Stimulated by some UK funded 'ICT4D' projects, known as the Bridging the Digital Divide Group, and other experiences, IKM Emergent has been supporting a number of development researchers, practitioners and policymakers in reflecting on the tensions between emergence and predictability, open processes and control in development related work. Following a workshop held in September 2009, this process continues with plans for a book, for meetings at various international research and development fora and, we hope, participation in the ICTD conference planned at Royal Holloway, University of London in December 2010.

'For Development'

One common starting point was an insistence that the words 'for development' or even '4D' should have meaning. What 'development' consists of and what processes bring it about are – and should be – highly contested notions. This does not, however, mean that anything goes. Many arguments about development are long established and well documented. Claiming that some activity is 'for development' should demand at the least an ability to clearly explain what one means by this term. This will almost invariably force one to locate that understanding within relevant development discourses and to demonstrate through what process some development might take place as a result. All involved in our discussions have their own, varying definitions of what is meant by development, but we agree that it should be more than the acquisition of material objects: that it is also about human experience and that the tools used to manage it should reflect this important dimension.

Planning and Emergence

More challenging were the tensions between what were seen as increasing demands, from risk-adverse donors of many types and sizes, for predictability and control of process, with participants, milestones and outcomes identified in advance, and factors of unpredictability and emergence, which form part of both conceptual work and empirical reality. Rather than being recognized as an important learning process that ensures developmental initiatives continue to support developmentally relevant aims, unpredictability is often seen as a form of undesirable risk, to be minimised or eliminated wherever possible.

Unsurprisingly, the predictability-emergence tension is sometimes seen as one between certainty and uncertainty: however our discussions suggested that this dichotomy is false. In fact, the process of fixed planning starts by envisioning a future reality – one that currently does not exist – and then sets in motion the steps which it is assumed will lead to this new reality. Conceptually, the basing of such

work on imagined futures make such planning no more based on observed reality than more open processes.

Indeed it could be argued that approaches which assume a linear path into the future, and which are then judged according to how strictly or 'accurately' this path appears to have been followed, are less based on certainty, in any real sense of the word, than those that acknowledge that unpredictability forms part of the world in which we work. By unpredictability we do not just mean the inevitably unforeseen events relating to people or the political and social environment in which the development activity is taking place. We also recognise the existence of emergence: the coming into being of new factors – ideas, understandings, opportunities and threats - as a result of the interactions which the activity has set in motion. This is especially the case in the development context where these interactions are likely to include far more distant social, cultural or technical connections across disciplines, social realities and across boundaries between donor and beneficiary communities, than is the case in other areas of human activity.

There is also an ethical dimension related to who defines the goal and the imagined linear path. Much lip-service is being paid to democratising the relationship between funder and beneficiary. At present, participation of beneficiaries as partners in development projects is the widespread orthodoxy on paper. In reality, the scope of participation in almost all cases does not extend to them co-defining the purpose of the project or the imagined desired future. The purpose of a project is often aligned with the overall mission of the donor or the specific funding pot it is financed from. Not only does this complicate some development approaches such as grassroots participation, the capability approach or empowerment, it also raises some ethical concerns. If the project is geared towards a particular imagined future, then surely the people destined to live in this imagined future should be key in deciding what it should look like. Anything else would amount to imposition, benign or otherwise.

Paradoxically, we believe it is possible and perhaps necessary to base criticism of the excesses of current managerialist approaches on managerialist arguments. In our view it is a requirement of effective programmes and effective programme management that they attempt to constantly review themselves in the light of all relevant factors affecting what they are doing and be prepared to adapt, even fundamentally if necessary. The question at any moment should not be 'how well are we fulfilling our plan?' but 'are we working in the best possible way to achieve our original purpose'?

Accountability

Working in more flexible and open ways presents its own problems, not least with funders/donors. One of the reasons for current programme management norms, with their insistence on predictability, is the reassurance this gives funders who are themselves under pressure to demonstrate, often to a sceptical public (as voters or donors) that aid money is money well spent. Even if it can successfully

be demonstrated that the predictability and control of current processes are illusory, this does not mean donors will be prepared to work without strong mechanisms of accountability. This, our discussion concluded, was not negotiable, nor did we want to do away with it. What might be negotiable, are the tools and processes used to provide accountability. Might it not be possible for the appropriateness of management responses to programme learning and to change to be a key factor in assessing accountability?

Challenges and Conclusions

For some, especially those with expertise in other sectors which they would wish to re-sell, development is a service industry, requiring the repeated delivery of identified services in replicable ways. In our view, although the provision of services may in some circumstances form part of a development process, it does not and in itself cannot constitute development. We see development as a very context specific innovation process in which people, beneficiaries and development workers with a variety of skills, experiences and backgrounds interact with each other in search of common understanding of the problems people face and of solutions to these. Once any set of issues is resolved in a sustainable way, there may be no continuing need for 'development' input. Development, thus, is always in beta.

Both people and the developmental context often alter considerably over time. Why anyone would even want to support a particular set of activities over three or five years without wanting and expecting the human interactions involved to create new thinking, new understandings and new solutions is a mystery to us. This is not a plea for short-termism – it is a plea to not curtail the potential of a longer-term funding commitment by forcing the project into the straightjacket of one particular near-future scenario, which happened to be agreed at the outset.

However we understand that such a change from current management practice to one which would welcome and support emergence and innovation will not be straightforward. Accordingly, we intend to continue to build collaborative efforts to better demonstrate evidence of the failings of current practice, provide a solid theoretical base for alternative practice and try to develop simple but effective tools which will support emergence and accountability simultaneously. If you would like to be part of this process, please get in touch.

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The workshop report can be found at http://wiki.ikmemergent.net/index.php/File:Working_Paper_9-CambridgeReport.pdf