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ENGAGING WITH INSTITUTIONS: CLARIFYING GOALS AND DEVELOPING THEORIES OF CHANGE

Adam Pain

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Table of Contents

Foreword by EBA

At the end of 2020, the Swedish Agency for Public Management (Statskontoret) and the Swedish National Financial Management Authority (ESV) undertook a review of the government's governance of Sida, and of the agency's internal efficiency and management procedures. One of the recommendations was that Sida should develop its work with theories of change (ToC) on a strategic level to strengthen learning and the application of experience, evaluation and evidence in the implementation of the government's strategies. To contribute to this work, the Expert Group for Aid Studies (EBA) decided to produce an anthology with texts that shed light on ToCs from different perspectives.

This working paper is one of the contributions to the forthcoming anthology. The author, Adam Pain, explores ToCs for a common type of intervention in Swedish development cooperation, support to institutions and institutional change. He builds the text on two recent evaluations of Swedish and international aid to Afghanistan and Swedish bilateral research cooperation. While very different in scope, size and context, the two cases both illustrate how donors engage with institutions. And through both cases Adam provides us with ample lessons learned, breaking down the explicit ToCs that guided two cases. The analysis focuses on the importance of understanding context, leadership and social agency when engaging with institutions.

EBA hopes that this text will contribute to the overall conversation on the theory and practice of ToCs in general as well as the hands-on development of ToCs for institutional change. With that said, the text also raises a number of questions for development practitioners on the importance of deep local and contextual understanding that might challenge current organisational setups withing Sida and other donors.

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Jan Pettersson, Managing Director

Introduction

In the 1980s and 90s the consensus in mainstream economics was that development happened through an increase in a country's capital stock. This was linked in development practice to pushing back the role of the state and the promotion of free markets solutions. But as criticism mounted of the consequences of the structural adjustment processes to achieve these aims, thinking returned to the role of the state and of institutions and governance in the development process (Grindle, 1997). This institutional turn, underpinned by the writing of Douglas North (1990) was to lead to the conviction by World Bank and others that 'institutions matter' and 'getting institutions right' should be a primary focus of development. As a consequence, intervening in processes of institutional change have come to be at the heart of many development initiatives in the global south. These have often been grounded in efforts to develop individual and organizational capacities and establish procedures and practices to support the building of rational rules-based organizations.

But as the title of this chapter suggests and as argued in the two case studies that provide its evidence core, institutions are multi-layered and with deep histories, reflecting the complex nature of social life. There is no quick route through "skipping straight to Weber" as Pritchett and Woolcock (2002) memorably put it, to shift one set of institutional practices in one context to mimic those developed in another. Efforts to quickly reach service delivery performance goals or democratic ideals by simply replicating the organisational forms of a well-functioning state ignore why and under what circumstances these organisational forms developed the way they did and the long-contested history of their evolution (North et al., 2009).

The two cases that are used to ground the argument in this paper are very different in terms of scale and intent. As two case studies they cannot be used to make generalisations about what institutions are, what goals for institutional change should be set or what theories of change should support them. Rather, following Lund (2014) they are used for an exercise of abstraction to identify and elaborate key concepts relevant to understanding institutions and processes of institutional change. The point of this chapter is not to provide a tool kit but to develop more of a conceptual framework to think with in the development of theories of change for institutions.

This chapter focusses on just three concepts, understanding of which are seen as crucial to constructing a plausible model of institutional change. These are those of *context*, *leadership* and *social agency*. However, they have to be considered with respect to the specific goals that are set for an institutional change intervention. These are not necessarily the only aspects of institutional change that matter but they are specifically raised to draw out a consideration of key factors that influence institutional change processes, as illustrated in the two case studies. These are seen to be fundamental to how actual institutional change comes about and to provide understanding of when and why this does not happen.

The first case study comes from the National Solidarity Programme (NSP) in Afghanistan that was implemented between 2002 and 2018. It had a total budget of USD 2.7 billion over its three phases and was supported by Sida through the Afghanistan Resource Trust Fund. The core of this massive community driven development (CDD) exercise was block grants linked to the delivery of public goods such as drinking water or road culverts and the formation of Community Development Councils (CDCs). But as we shall see it had much greater ambitions in terms of bringing about institutional change.

The second case draws from Sida's Bilateral Research Programme (BRC). Sweden has provided long term core funding to research based universities in some 25 countries in the global south. The modalities have changed over time, but the broad principle of this support has been to build capacities for high quality research of relevance to poverty and sustainable development.

The chapter argues, drawing on the two contrasting case studies, that both their ToC's were underspecified, largely untheorized and poorly attuned to context. They were also unhelpful in generating understanding and learning about the effects of the intervention on actual institutional performance. In part this was because in both cases the intervention was highly instrumental in seeking to use existing institutions for broader goals which largely they did not achieve. The key weakness, it is suggested, lay in the fact that these two interventions did not actively factor in the existing context. They ignored the key role of leadership, social actors and collective action in managing, negotiating or resisting change in their specific contexts.

The chapter will present, in summary form, background for the two case studies and identify a set of comparative themes from this account. Four themes are identified and address i) the problems of multiple

panacea-like goals for the intervention, and ii) the lack of attention to context. As a consequence of this insensitivity to context, the interventions generated incoherence with the logic of existing practice. This highlights iii) the critical role of leadership and the role of social agency in understanding processes of institutional change before iv) the limits of the existing ToC are summarised.

This then leads into a summary discussion of a theory of fields (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012) to offers a set of meta-theoretical principles which could provide the foundation of ToC of how institutional change in these two contrasting cases might be developed. Theories operate at different levels of abstraction and precision and ToCs are not intended to offer anything more than a plausible account to understand and clarify what might be expected to happen and why. But a ToC should be informed by an explicit cognitive lens (a set of meta-theoretical principles) through which the world is seen, that guides how reality is perceived and how it should be explored and assessed.

Institutions and institutional change

So, what are institutions and how do they change? The institutional turn has been all encompassing and the concept of institutions has often come to be used to cover everything related to institutions from organisations to norms and social structures. But institutions are not social structures in themselves although they contain social structures (Giddens, 1984) as reflected in the organizational relationships and roles that underpin them. This paper follows the definition of Portes (2012:55) in seeing

> '..institutions [as] the symbolic blueprint for organisations. They comprise the sets of rules, written or informal, governing relationships among role occupants in organizations like the family, the schools and the other major institutionally structured areas of social life [such as] the polity, the economy and religion'

As Portes conceptualizes it, organisations are often the most visible element of social life but are underpinned by deeper less visible elements concerned with norms, values, cognitive repertoires (or cultural tool kits) and values. The importance of being conceptually clear about what institutions are is fundamental to constructing a coherent ToC for institutional change. But there is a further challenge. Much of what has been described in development practice as seeking institutional change has

in effect been organization building. This has often been reflected in the establishment of rules and procedures, training in so called best practice and skill development that has characterized much of the capacity development industry. This approach to institutional change, if not always explicit, has been informed by the principles or the theorisation that underlay new institutional economics (NIE) (Harriss et al. 1995).

The institutional turn has certainly encouraged a "blueprinting" of institutional forms with attempts to transplant those developed in the west into diverse contexts in the global south. These blueprints, to caricature them, have largely been normative, emphasising universalistic rules, roles, functions and relationships that institutions and their resulting organisations should contain. But as Chang (2002) has pointed out even within comparable European institutions that fulfil comparable functions, while the outer form might appear similar, in practice their structures may be very different, reflecting the context and culturally specific nature of their development.

Not surprisingly these attempts at what Peter Evans has called institutional "monocropping" (Evans, 2004) have not led to the outcomes that have been expected. On the surface transplanted institutional blueprints may appear to create what is in the mind of their architects. In reality superimposing or the grafting on of new rules and institutional forms might meet oppositional forces generated by the deeper structures of norms, values, interests and power that exist in the recipient organisation. This creates what Pritchett et al (2012) have termed isomorphic mimicry where the outward form of the institution represents the blueprint, but it disguises or camouflages a different reality which may lead to functional failure of the institution. The clash between the discipline-based order that donors attempted to impose on the Afghanistan state and its actual discretionary practices provide a vivid example of this and this is reflected in the NSP programme.

The work both of Peter Evans (2004) and Elinor Ostrom (Ostrom et al, 1993) point to alternative approaches to institutional change. Evans has argued for a more deliberative approach to change working with for example participatory budgeting processes and addressing basic values and cognitive repertoires in order to bring about change. Ostrom similarly focussed on engaging with the users of common property resources to develop better rules and procedures and was hostile to attempts by external actors to impose external rules.

So how does institutional change come about? Portes (2010: 63–67) summarises five possible routes or drivers that lead to institutional change or transformation. The first is the long term and evolutionary one of path dependence that gradually through contention and class conflicts leads graduated change. The long conflictual route to the emergence of Western State is a classic example of this. Secondly, diffusion of new ideas or technology can also drive the evolutionary route, to follow the Darwinian terminology. This route can, thirdly, also be punctuated by periods of dramatic change. In the non-biological world this has been achieved by scientific or technological change such as the rise of the internet that dramatically altered for example access to information and generated new demands for accountability.

There are also two radical sources of change. The first is revolutionary change through class conflict and possibly armed conflict leading to the overthrow of existing power structures. The recent takeover of power by the Taliban of Afghanistan is an example of that. A second one is the role that charismatic religious leadership such as Martin Luther in the 16th century and his namesake in the 21st century Martin Luther King in driving respectively the reformation in Europe and the civil rights transformation in the U.S.

It is self-evident that three of these potential pathways – path-dependent change, revolutionary change and charismatic religious leadership – are not what is envisaged by the current development agenda although in practice elements of all three may be encountered on the ground. What it is left for the development intervention is the role of diffusion of new ideas and/ or technology that may speed up evolutionary change and just possibly drive a period of transformation (see also Hertz, this volume).

Background to the two case studies

This section briefly presents the background to each of the case studies, describes the design intentions, the implementation processes and the findings from evaluations of each of the programmes. It concludes by identifying the key themes that will be addressed in the subsequent comparative discussion.

Afghanistan's National Solidarity Programme

Afghanistan's NSP was seen as central to the state building agenda for Afghanistan after 2001 and was rolled out over three phases (2003–2007; 2007–2010 and 2010–2016) and came to include around 36,100 designated communities (MRRD, 2015). It covered about 88 % of rural communities. A core inspiration behind the NSP was the Kecamatan Development Programme (KDP) in Indonesia (Guggenheim et al, 2004) funded by the World Bank and a key architect of that program was also a principal adviser to the NSP since its formulation. The KDP was largely seen as a way of addressing poverty through a community-based planning process that supported the construction of simple productive infrastructure. This process was seen as a vehicle to develop community capacities so that they could take a more active role in improving the quality of other social services.

Central to the NSP programme was provision of a block grant to be used by the community for the provision of public goods and instrumentally linked to the formation of Community Development Councils (CDCs). The broad goals of the programme were to "build, strengthen, and maintain CDCs as effective institutions for local governance and social-economic development" (MRRD, 2015:12. Key activities in relation to the creation and support of CDCs included elections, committee formation and training in bureaucratic procedures to develop project proposals and implement them.

Nowhere within the NSP documentation is there an explicit ToC but the justification provided by Beath et al (2015) probably encapsulated the thinking behind it:

> "Spurred by academic studies that affirmed the ability of communities to solve collective action problems, CDD programs sought to emphasize participatory planning modalities by which community members identify projects that address their specific priorities. Such processes, it is often hypothesized, may not just provide for better-targeted and more efficient projects, but also can increase participation in local institutions and, with it, build social capital."

This reveals the assumptions about what were seen to be the deficits of existing village life and broad claims were made for the role and success of NSP, including that "community-driven development strengthens state-society relations in Afghanistan." (World Bank, 2011). The same report asserted that "democratically elected gender balanced councils [have built] representative institutions." By 2015 the ambitions for the NSP grew into a new programme called the Citizens Charter (CC) which specifically set out to build a new social contract between communities and government (GoIRA, 2015), underpinned by legislation that would give CDC formal legal status as the lower rung of government.

Core indicators of progress in relation to the role of the CDCs used by the World Bank (2015) related to changes in perceptions of legitimacy of the CDC, functions, service delivery, representation, elections and external linkages. These indicators were essentially the public text of what constitutes success and outcomes of programme processes although these ignored the reality of a networked relationship-based state (Jackson, 2016). To take just one of the World Bank project development indicators (the first which assesses "recognising the CDC as the legitimate institution and representative of communities") there are issues of how exactly they can fairly be assessed. Who, for example, is judging (and how) "legitimacy" and "representativeness" and does the data collected on "communities recognizing their CDCs as the representative in decision making and development of their communities" amount to the same thing?

More generally these indicators spoke more to process compliance rather than being clearly linked and instrumental to some other wider objective. There was also a lack of clarity and agreement over what those objectives were. Villages are not islands and they existed in a sea of other local and meso level governance practices (Jackson, 2014, 2015). These worked to a different rationale so quite how one would know if CDCs were effective and what that meant was far from clear. The World Bank monitoring indicators are aggregate figures and, in their focus, addressed what CDCs did with no reference to what is happening around them. This is understandable given the scope and scale of the NSP. To take just two dimensions – those of legitimacy and linkage making – as an example. It was clear that legitimacy and linkage making is often conferred and undertaken by informal processes and customary structures rather than through any rule-bound discipline based impartial practice which the NSP governance agenda incorporated. Thus it is perfectly possible for both the CDC and customary authority to be both legitimate at the same time, but used for fulfilling very different purposes.

The NSP and its successor, the CC had multiple objectives seeking to combine improvements in economic wellbeing, with building a social contract with the state and improved community governance. There was widespread appreciation of the provision of public infrastructure funded and there are reports from many sources of the positive assessment of the NSP in this respect in comparison with other reconstruction projects (Gordon 2011).

But there was limited evidence for improvements in village governance and economic wellbeing found by a major impact evaluation during phase II. The findings from this evaluation (Beath et al, 2015) were somewhat equivocal in relation to the impacts of CDC formation, reporting somewhat more favourably on some (women's representation for example) than others (village level governance and economic impacts). It was also clear that the creation of CDCs by the NSP had few lasting effects on the identity or affiliation of customary village leaders.

It was evident that the programme had not taken account of how villages organized and managed their affairs before the intervention, or if it did, judged it them as incapable or un-democratic. It worked to a model of a tabula rasa, implicitly assuming in the design that there was a landscape of identical villages with few legacies from the past. It also assumed that new interventions to reorder village government would simply displace what was there before.

Sida's Bilateral Research Programme (BRC)

At least four modalities or types of approach can be identified in relation to building research capacities in universities in the global south. The first two are the most ambitious in scope.

- The first is a centre of excellence model that the World Bank, for example, has aimed to support using a competitive funding approach (World Bank, 2018).

- The second is more of a whole university approach while various donors including Sida has taken and could be seen as an institutional approach. We discuss later what this implies.

- The third modality, which has a long history, is more individualized or a small group approach that is often modestly funded but intent on building long term links between universities in the global north and south. Examples of this include the British Council Links programme (Stephens, 2009) and the Sida funded International Science Programme (ISP) (Pain et al, 2018).

- A fourth modality and in effect a development of the third is more of a networking approach which ranges in scope from a central hub with spokes to one that is more decentralized with multiple hubs and spokes, reflecting the increasingly globalized nature of research partnerships (Royal Society, 2011). The Cambridge–Africa programme and African Economic Research Consortium (Tvedten et al., 2021: 66–67) are examples of the central hub and spokes model.

These modalities are ideal types and in practice elements of each may be included in any one approach. They also are implemented over different time horizons and work at different levels to increase research capacity but all have prioritised a focus on science, technology and mathematics (STEM), agriculture and health related disciplines. Some are more intentional and interventionist and others operate through organic and incremental processes. Implicitly they often have different assumptions of how universities and research capacity can be built and models of institutional change.

Sida's Bilateral Research Cooperation (BRC) Programme

Sweden has been supporting research capacity development (RCD) since the 1970s. Its support has been unique in providing core-long term funding to research based universities and in the case of Tanzanian universities, for example, has lasted more than 40 years. Over that time the intervention logic and modalities of engagement with its partner universities in the global south has shifted through several phases (Tvedten et al., 2021). From the mid-1990s Sida adopted what it termed a holistic or systemic approach focusing on building up first research universities as a whole and then supporting wider processes including national research councils, research as a sector including regional research initiatives and promoting the development of local research training capacity.

Sida's evolutionary approach has reflected its understanding that the building of research capacity takes time and that it should be seen as a partnership of equals in which the partner country increasingly leads on the control and direction of the programme. The formal adoption of a "System Approach" was conceptualised as a framework to think with and a core value in Sida's approach. But it was also underpinned by the belief that a comprehensive model was needed that linked the different layers of research organisations with their institutional context. This in turn would lead to the systemic strengthening of systems and structures to support and promote research. Underpinning this System Approach Sida developed what it termed as a "Basic Logic" that supported the model for research capacity development and it was elaborated as follows:

> "Research training, as well as support to an environment conducive to research, leads to more and higher quality research. Better trained researchers at the universities are expected to incorporate their findings into their teaching, leading to improved higher education, and contribute to scientific frontiers in their respective disciplinary fields. The research produced is expected to contribute to science-based policy-making and improved products and services, contributing to sustainable societies". (Tvedten et al., 2021: 20–21)

This is essentially a set of wished for linked causalities but with no theoretical underpinnings. For the purposes of argument here we term it as a simple ToC (although Sida were adamant that they did not see it as a ToC).

A review of Sida's Systems approach and its ToC through an examination of the BRC programme in four countries reached several conclusions concerning the specific effects of the BRC programmes. The specific assumptions of the approach and logic were also described.

The BRC delivered in terms of many of the explicit outputs, such as individual capacity development (PhD graduates), improved research environment in terms of physical facilities (infrastructure such as ICT, libraries and laboratories) and in terms of research outputs in the form of publications. Moreover, the bilateral cooperation between Swedish universities and their country partners worked well, even if they tended to end when Sida funding stopped.

But moving beyond these specific effects, the evaluation showed an inability of newly PhD qualified staff to continue and develop their research, an absence of supportive environments to help both with funding and the conditions to do research. There was limited evidence of contribution to science-based policy making or poverty relevant research outputs. This all suggested that the wider ambitions of the approach had not been achieved, in part reflecting country context. While individual capacities have undoubtedly been built, the evidence on shifts in organizational and institutional capacities was much more limited. The evaluation concluded the BRC programmes had largely been implemented and monitored on the assumption the goal fulfilment at one level in the model would lead to the achievement of goals at the next level.

> "we have located the key programme challenges …in the limited interlinkages between (i) the relevant regional and national external institutions and the universities; (ii) the university research environment/ research capacity and more and better research; and (iii) more and better research and contributions to knowledge frontiers, science-based policy making, improved products/services and ultimately to poverty reduction/ sustainable societies" (Tvedten et al: 2021:60).

The development of Sida's System Approach and ToC clearly emerged incrementally out of programme practice and probably in tandem. Undoubtedly it drew from experience, learning and experimentation and was an attempt to make clear the rationale of the programme and develop it. However, both the ToC and System Approach were relatively under-specified in terms of providing detailed explanatory mechanisms of how change would come about, what would drive it or what exactly the system was.

Key insights

The outcomes of both programmes – the NSP and Sida's BRC – could, as judged by the evaluations, be seen as disappointing given both the level of investment and in the case of Sida's BRC the longevity and commitment of Sida to support processes of change. In both cases it should be acknowledged that it is possible that the evaluations themselves failed to accurately assess the effects of the programmes. In the case of NSP the implementing Ministry (Ministry of Rural Reconstruction and Development, MRRD) disputed the evaluation findings and

commissioned critical reviews of the methods used. In the case of Sida's BRC there was also disquiet amongst the steering group of the BRC about the findings of the evaluation and they were challenged. As ever evaluations can do relatively little to unpack why a programme does or does not appear to deliver as intended but can simply point to an assessment of results in relation to design intentions.

Moreover there are other aspects of programmes that time bound evaluations have little room to assess such as the modalities of implementation of a programme or the output strength. Given the incremental nature of social change, it may well have been premature to assess the NSP through an in-time evaluation although that charge cannot be levelled at the BRC evaluation.

It has to be recognized that the principle of a ToC is to clearly lay out how it is that the intervention is expected to affect the final outcome. It should establish the goals and try to map out the preconditions and pathways needed to achieve them. It should lay out the main assumptions, identify the key indicators of progress and suggest a timeline over which effects are likely to be seen. But this presumes that there should be an agreed or dominant model of university or community driven development, in each case supported by a clearly articulated, theoretically well-founded consistent theory of change guiding the programme. But in both cases neither of these conditions seem to hold true. We start by considering the goals of both programmes, some of the challenges that they raise and possible ways of responding to these challenges.

Addressing the challenges of multiple or panacea like goals

There are three categorical schema (this draws from the thinking of Bennett and D'Onofrio, 2015) that might be useful to help think through and clarify objectives and outcomes. These three schemas represent a set of possible ways to clarify the motivation and objective of development interventions – a necessary step in improving theory, design and measurement. They are not distinct alternatives but framing them in this way makes clear the choices being made. We will use research capacity development (RCD) interventions as an example.

The first way is to disaggregate the standard outcomes of RCD into its three components: (i) increased research capacity, (ii) improved research environments and (iii) increased contribution to knowledge. The Sida BRC addresses all three. Breaking it down like this raises the question as to whether and how these outcomes might work with or against each other and how this might change over time. It also provides an opportunity to specify a primary objective and to weight design choices accordingly. RCD can of course have multiple effects across different outcomes but a prioritisation of outcomes might encourage greater precision in the development of a theory of change hypotheses and the design of the intervention.

A second categorical distinction can be made between RCD as primarily a means to deliver products e.g. new knowledge as a means of changing processes. If RCD is focused on products such as more qualified researchers or more international research publications, then the intervention becomes narrowly focussed. But if the objective of RCD is defined in terms of affecting processes, and this is where Sida BRC positioned itself, those elements of the intervention that potentially influence behaviour, attitudes and norms become the crucial focus of design, implementation and measurement strategies. Sound contextual knowledge of existing socio-political processes becomes significantly more important than it would be for a "product delivery" approach.
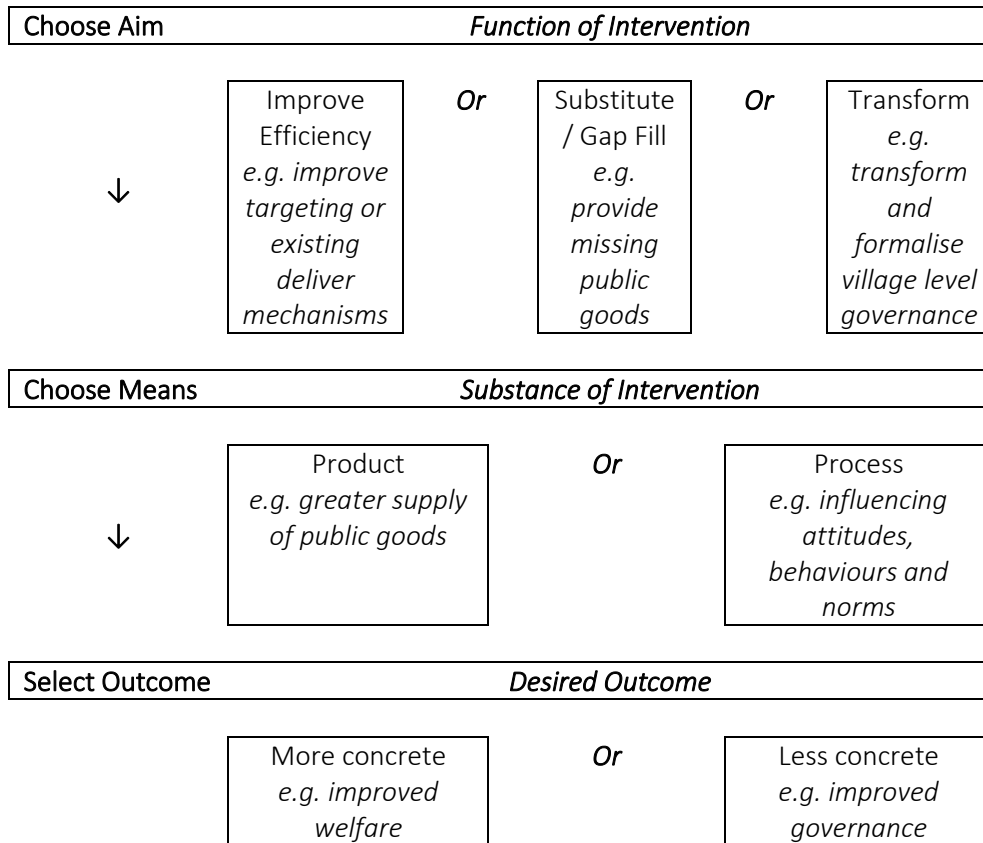
A third way of bringing greater precision to the objectives of an RCD intervention is to be as specific as possible about the extent to which the intervention seeks to (i) improve efficiency, or (ii) provide a temporary substitute or (iii) transform norms and institutions. These three functions are often lumped together, with a transformative aspiration typically implied in the framing of the intervention. Each provides a distinct flavour to an RCD approach, however, and separating them out provides another lens through which to clarify and prioritise objectives.

The efficiency function entails the deployment of an RCD approach to improve how an already existing process or delivery mechanism works. Conversely, the substitutive function concerns the use of RCD to address system failures or the absence of functioning systems e.g. through ICT systems. A transformative function is focused beyond the improvement of existing systems or addressing their failures. It intentionally seeks to transform some aspect or aspects of social organisation, which in turn need to be specified.

In contrast the NSP certainly reflected a wider problem of CDD designs in conflict settings. King (2013:3) describes how they "have been plagued by panacea-type approach to goals". Somehow it is assumed that the delivery of public goods (a welfare outcome) at the same time can "improve governance", strengthen social cohesion and help build state-society relations, all in the short term with small amounts of money. These were the claims of success that the World Bank made for NSP. But as Bennett and D'Onofrio (2015) observed that is a lot to expect for a programme that is essentially supply driven seeking to create a demand but in the name of community participation. All good things do not come together.

Even more so than with the BRC, there is a need to sort out and prioritise goals, separating out the welfare objectives, from those of governance and social cohesion. A second distinction in aims can be made in determining whether the purpose of the intervention is to simply deliver effectively desired public goods or is it to change processes concerned with participation over decision making. These are of course not entirely mutually exclusive aims but public good delivery does not require the close attention to context that efforts to change norms and behaviour do. Finally the same issues as with the RCD of separating out whether NSP was primarily concerned with efficiency, or substitution (of missing public goods) or transformative change can be distinguished. Clearly in the case of NSP its primary function was to deliver missing public goods but then burdening it with transformative dimensions without understanding the logic of existing practice and the incentives that drove that, was essentially a goal too far.

Figure 1: Possible decision tree in relation to goal setting for NSP

Choose Aim		Function of Intervention		

| | Improve Efficiency *e.g. improve targeting or existing deliver mechanisms* | *Or* | Substitute / Gap Fill *e.g. provide missing public goods* | *Or* | Transform *e.g. transform and formalise village level governance* |

↓

Choose Means		Substance of Intervention	

| | Product *e.g. greater supply of public goods* | *Or* | Process *e.g. influencing attitudes, behaviours and norms* |

↓

Select Outcome		Desired Outcome	

| | More concrete *e.g. improved welfare* | *Or* | Less concrete *e.g. improved governance* |

Adapted from Bennett and D'Onofrio, (2015).

It is possible to see these three schemas as a set of layered, if not sequential, decision-points in the design of a given RCD or CDD (NSP type) intervention (see Figure 1). Increasingly, more specific knowledge of the context and theory become necessary as one progresses through this chain of decision-making points. One might, for example, first choose the function of the intervention – transformative – then choose the substance of the intervention – process – then choose the theme or outcome category to be prioritized. In the case of BRC it might be the formation and functioning of strong research groups (or strategic action fields) with entrepreneurial leaders. The subsequent decision would be around the type of improvements or change that are sought and the corresponding outcomes to be measured e.g. group publications, number and nature of collaborative networks, external collaborations and levels of funding. In the case of NSP a more realistic set of goals (see Figure 1) would have been to see the function of the intervention as substitution – providing the absent public goods, then focussing on the product of the intervention – greater supply of public goods – and then selecting improved welfare as the core outcome.

Ignoring context

Programme design must take account of the factors or frictions that might moderate the way in which a particular set of goals and underpinning ToC actually engage on the ground in a specific context. As Barron (2010:24) has put it "when an environment is conducive to change, projects are more likely to act as a catalyst". Equally when the logic of the intervention is not coherent with existing practices and generate contradictory incentives (Pritchett, 2016) the outcome will be much more uneven. Understanding these contextual factors matters but, in both cases, there is little evidence that this happened.

The BRC evaluation in reviewing the relevance of the programme considered whether the ToC was applicable to specific university contexts and whether the systems approach in the cases where it has been applied (e.g. Bolivia, Rwanda and Tanzania) had been appropriate. There was little explicit evidence that the approach has been attuned to circumstances. Observations on the different behaviours of two Bolivian universities supported by BRC, the contrasts between the institutional contexts of Rwanda and Tanzania and a judgement on the pace of change in university capacity in Tanzania in the light of the Basic Logic were the basis for this conclusion. Equally the empirical evidence from the case studies raises major questions as to whether the very notion of a system is appropriate to describe how things work at university levels, let alone at the national, regional or even international levels.

Inevitably if there are doubts about the relevance of the ToC and systems approach to specific university contexts, then this brings into question the effectiveness of the ToC in capturing and explaining change processes within the universities themselves and as a reliable guide to intervention. Limited use could be made of the ToC to explain the missing interconnections between interventions to improve the research environment and support research capacity on the one hand and more and better research and contributions to knowledge frontiers on the other. The ToC did not provide an effective explanatory mechanism. It also did not account for the relative pace of change in Tanzania, in contrast to that of Rwanda or engage with the differences of the two Bolivian universities.

The case for the prosecution for lack of attention to context can be made particularly forcefully for the NSP and its institutional blueprint and the frictions that it generated with existing practices. Many empirical studies in Afghanistan have drawn attention to the durability of village-level

organizations, their complexity, and their changing nature over time (see Noelle-Karimi, 2006; Murtazashvili, 2016). There is also considerable evidence that these customary organizations played an important role in the provision of public goods within the village, particularly in relation to dispute resolution and basic welfare provision (MRRD & CSO 2007).

There is also evidence that points to significant differences in the ways in which villages are run and for whose benefit (Pain, 2018). Much depends on the role and the relative numbers of their elite. Where land inequality is relatively low, the elite were likely to be both relatively economically insecure and more numerous. They were therefore likely to have a shared interest in promoting and supporting social solidarity and ensuring the provision of public goods. Where, on the other hand, the elite were relatively small in number and where they were economically secure, often as a result of large landholdings, the incentives to promote social solidarity and widen access to public good provision were likely to be more limited. Here the elite were prone to act more in their own interests rather than in the interests of the village population at large.

Accordingly, village context may be described as the relationships of responsibility and accountability between the customary village leadership, village elites, and the other households in the village. Responsibility relates to the management of internal village affairs and the provision of basic public goods. It is also the basis of expectations by village households and individuals for the role of village leadership in relation to the wider world and the securing of resources and assistance for the village and its inhabitants. Village context does not exist in isolation but is affected by, and in turn affects, the wider context of district and province.

But the NSP intervention in its design elements was in some respects and in some contexts incoherent in relation to the incentives and motivations that structure community life. Understanding the sources of this incoherence and where it is likely to arise speaks directly to design elements of the programme, its monitoring and its ToC (Pritchett, 2016).

Incoherence existed in the relations of accountability. Finance was specifically used in NSP to motivate the formation of CDCs so that they could get money for projects. Certain other functions were also mandated to CDCs such as undertaking dispute resolution or making linkages with government or other organisations. These do not specifically carry with them funding. The persistence of dispute resolution through customary authority or the making of linkages to district or province through

personal networks suggests that CDCs were not sufficiently motivated to fulfil these tasks because other factors outside the NSP relationship encouraged them to behave in a different way.

Incoherence also existed in the monitoring information that was collected by MRRD on CDCs which was largely concerned with finance, input provision and to some extent organisational performance of the CDCs. An example is the collection of data on the election of women to CDC membership. This is essentially input information and says nothing about the ability of women to act as citizens or agents in CDCs with equal weight to men. Many of the informants (Pain, 2016) when asked about the role of women on CDCs simply suggested that women were there in name only and nominated to fulfil the CDC requirements. They knew that the presence of women on CDCs did not signify real change or give women voice.

In sum NSP failed to take account of village context. Afghan villages could not be treated as if they are all the same in the design, implementation and evaluation of interventions. Some villages were historically governed better than others and there are reasons why this is so. This influenced efforts to bring change to village governance. There was also a need to have a much more nuanced view of working with village elites. Village elites fulfil important functions in village governance in relation to the broader institutional landscape of risk and uncertainty. In many cases they have considerable legitimacy. Finally, rather than seeing new organisational structures such as the Community Development Councils (CDCs) running in parallel to existing customary structures, greater attention needs to be paid to the processes of institutional "bricolage" whereby the old (the customary structures) and new (CDCs) borrowed from and mutually reshape each other's practices and ways of thinking (Cleaver 2012).

Taking account of leadership and social agency

The model of democracy and leadership that the NSP brought to the village was essentially the sanctions model characteristic of western democracies and based on principle-agent relations. The agents – those who are elected to office by secret ballot – can be subject to sanctions by the principles who voted them in and can vote them out. This is seen to promote accountability and transparency.

But there is a contrasting model of principle-agent relations which Mansbridge (2009) has termed the selection model. This works, she suggests, when the interests of the agent are well aligned with those of the principles. Here, agents come to be selected based on prior performance and reputation. It is this selection model of leadership that can characterize the selection of village leaders in Afghanistan and elsewhere (Fischer, 2016). It could also be seen to characterise the way that army leadership can emerge (Sharp, 2021). It is a model of leadership selection that of course speaks to specific contextual circumstances of risk and uncertainty and the roles that leaders need to play under these conditions. It also has relevance to thinking about leadership in university contexts.

Of course, as seen in Afghanistan, village leadership may not be accountable and can be self-interested. But elections rarely displaced such leadership (Pain, 2016) and removal may not necessarily resolve the challenge or the underlying power structures that allowed such leadership to emerge in the first place. It is here that the arguments of Grindle (2011) in terms of seeking change through incremental processes are important. This requires a graduated approach to improving the accountability of leadership to collective institutions and a step-by-step approach in doing this.

The critical issue of village leadership in Afghanistan, its variability, how it is selected and how it is judged is however not just in terms of its ability to manage village affairs. It is also in relation to its ability to establish and maintain networks of relationships outside the village in the village's best interests. There is clear evidence (Pain, 2016: 36–38) that external connections from villages were made on a highly personalised basis and the village elite play a key role in maintaining and exercising these connections. These connections mattered both for the village as a collective – to access resources and project for the village or resolving certain conflict – as well as for individuals to process documents or find jobs for family members. The evidence on these connections made reference specifically to key people or individuals in positions of power rather than the institution such as district government or provincial government, provincial council or central government that the key person might be a member of. Better-connected villages often spoke of connections at multiple levels, but where one of them was a key national figure, this could be the point of access to address provincial or district connections.

In sum, the evidence strongly supported the arguments and evidence of Jackson (2014, 2015) in characterising the critical role of informal networks and patronage relations in securing access by households and villages to resources. As Jackson argues, it is the dynamics of these informal networks that have shaped the process of formal institution building. Thus, villages are connected to the external world on the basis of the personalised connections that they can build and maintain and customary authority plays a key role in maintaining these connections.

There was also evidence for the role of leaders in specific universities finding ways to manoeuvre within specific institutions and using social networks to negotiate the institutional context in ways that were not envisaged by Sida's design. In Vietnam (see Tvedten et al, 2021:75 from which this section is drawn) in both the Health systems research and in Agriculture, key graduates from the former Sida BRC in different ways brought innovation and change into their respective university system by establishing new research groups. In Health doctors found ways to put pressure on health systems through initiatives outside it. In Hue key actors established new programmes in Rural Development and used these to broader networks of collaboration in Vietnam. Two research studies on the nature of the research system in Vietnam (Zinc, 2013; Le Thi Kim Anh, 2016) point to the significance of social networks within research providing both constraints and opportunities.[1]

In Bolivia, the relations between the Department of Chemistry at one university and a commercial pharmaceutical laboratory developed over years, with the head of the department (a former BRC-Bolivia student) and the owner of the company having a common interest in studying the possible uses of Bolivia's vast array of traditional medical herbs. In a second university a strong research group had developed around the issue of water resource management. The group was led by a professor and former BRC-Bolivia student and was the basis for the first local PhD programme. The strength and impact of the group was based on a combination of keen academic interest of the researchers involved, a shared understanding of the critical nature of water quality for the city in which it was located and early contact between the university and relevant municipal authorities.

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[1] In Cambodia the development of a research group in Physics developed over time with Sida ISP support has been one of the most successful groups in terms of publications and its leader, previously informally and now formally has become a key player in the development of the Royal University of Cambodia leading key processes of institutional change.

As the BRC programme in Rwanda showed, the importance of change agents is also related to the ability of key actor to manoeuvre under structural/ institutional constraints and opportunities. The long-term head of the BRC-Rwanda programme office has an academic interest in institutional change and has combined this with developing practical insights and social networks in a way that made the UR programme efficient in terms of outputs. The increasing importance of networks of collaboration in global science (Royal Society, 2011) emphasises the significance of collective action and networking by social actors.

Summing up: rethinking the existing Theories of Change

It is evident from the earlier discussion on goals that both interventions had not clearly thought through the goal setting process and linked specific ToC to specific goals. In both cases the ToCs, such as they were, were either extremely simplistic or too generic. NSP needed to be underpinned by a much a much better understanding of context to inform design, monitoring and evaluation (Bennett and D'Onofrio, 2015). Research on village context and its variability offers one way by which this can be approached (Pain, 2016). Equally the ambitions for the contribution of RCD lead to unrealistic goal setting, under-specification of intended outcomes and lack of articulation of robust change pathways leading from RCD to desired outcomes in theoretically informed and credible ways.

There was certainly a friction between technocratic imperatives that drove the NSP design and implementation and the logic and motivations that drive village life. What the evidence from the village context analysis (Pain and Sturge, 2015) and provincial social orders revealed (Jackson, 2014, 2015) was the power and relational dimensions of social interactions and the logic of networks of association and patron client relationships. Addressing these is not a technical issue and drawing on a relations of accountability framework is useful to point out where the particular points of friction arise.

In the case of BRC there could be scope to develop and specify in greater detail the explanatory mechanisms of the ToC. The higher up a causality chain one goes, the more elaborated the causal connections and assumptions being made about the relations between the individual links in the chain become. It is one matter to make clear in more detail the assumptions linking changes in individual research capacities to

institutional changes within the university research environment. But linking changed institutional capacities to informed policy making, improved contributions to products and services and contributions to sustainable societies begs all sorts of questions about the assumptions being made. It also requires considerations about how policy is made in different context works, the model of science and technology driven futures being used and unpacking the assumptions behinds what drives economic growth.[2] Aspirations of what changes one would like to see happen are not a good guide to actually making them happen.

A more fully elaborated ToC for each specific programme might make clearer some of the assumptions and necessary causal connections[3], and there may be scope for working more with adaptive theories of change (see Borel et el. this volume). But there is the considerable danger that the more one seeks to specify the logic and elaborate the assumptions, the more one becomes overwhelmed by the detail, creating a causality map (and monitoring frameworks) that in practice is difficult to test or monitor and is therefore not useful.

One could certainly add to the existing ToC a more specific recognition of spheres of influence. A Sida programme is likely to have more influence and generate stronger input-output relations at the start end of the ToC. The strength of these connections however become more attenuated (both in terms of attribution and time dimensions) the further along the ToC you move. Equally the further up the system level you move the more diffuse and less certain will be the influence that can be exerted.

There is scope to elaborate the Systems Approach. As it was constructed it related to specific interventions as particular levels – individual research capacity, research infrastructure and research management at the university level and research strategy and funding at the supra-university level.

But the moment one starts using the language of systems, one has to address inter-relations, interdependence, synergies, structures, feedbacks, system behaviour, complexity and scale (for example). Question of timing and where best to intervene become important. Simply intervening at

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[2] Notably missing in the Sida ToC is any recognition of the political processes that enable or obstruct economic growth; see Williams et al. (2009).

[3] The elaborated UK Global Challenge Research Fund (GCRF) ToC indicates a route that could be pursued https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/810137/GCRF_Evaluation_Foundation_Stage_Final_Report.pdf, p. 2.

different levels without that understanding does not amount to a systems approach – but rather a multi-level intervention which is not quite the same thing. The challenges of elaborating exactly what the system is and how it functions are considerable. As King (2013) suggests complexity theory is also relevant to a CDD programme. Trajectories of change can follow multiple routes and be of different durations in order to arrive at the same outcome. This observation is consistent with that of Mansuri and Rao (2012, 12) who state that

> "effective civic engagement does not develop within a predictable trajectory. It is instead likely to proceed along a punctuated equilibrium where long periods of seeming quietude are followed by intense, and often turbulent, change"

In sum a theory of institutional change, whether for Afghan villages or universities, has to incorporate a role for social actors, agency and collective action often through networking that is not just driven by individual utility maximisation but by other motivations as well. It also has to engage with the NIE understanding of how organisational and bureaucratic structures work and the inter-relations between actors and structures (Giddens, 1984).

A theory of fields: understanding social change and order

The chapter outlines here, drawing from a theory of fields, a set of meta-theoretical principles which could inform a ToC of how institutional change can be understood. [4] It uses the case of university capacity development to make the argument. While it is relevant to institutional change within Afghan villages, Afghan villages are not as clearly embedded in a hierarchy of institutional structures as university departments are.

The optic focuses on research as a social field, as a collective endeavour giving a key role to social actors or institutional entrepreneurs. It marries these social dimensions with an understanding of institutions whether formal or informal, as rules and structures. It incorporates key relevant concrete concepts such as power, context, discourse, structure and agency (and unintended consequences of purposive action) that help us understand the ways in which universities work and change.

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[4] This section essentially paraphrases the first chapter of the book.

Universities are bureaucratic hierarchies with both formal and informal elements, which in turn are embedded to varying degrees in higher level structures or authority, particularly if they draw on public funding as all the Sida BRC partner universities do. Within universities there are hierarchies of authority from the Vice Chancellor downwards through university boards, faculties, schools, departments and units. They can be visualized as a form of a Russian doll (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012) with lower levels of the hierarchy formally nested within higher level systems.[5] They are a constructed social order and they contain social actors at all levels. To understand what confers stability and change we must unpack the way things work.

At the base (or at the centre of the Russian doll) are what are termed **strategic action fields**. These are research groups and one or more may comprise a department and a department in turn may be a higher-level strategic action field located within the university hierarchy. Research groups often, particularly in science subjects, are comprised of two or more members and are therefore a collective enterprise. These are socially constructed arenas characterised by both cooperation and competition. Members of the collective have a general shared understanding of what is going on and where matters are settled there will be a consensus even through some members may have more power than others. There is likely to be a shared understanding of the rules by which the field operates.

Within a university department there may be one or more strategic fields with ties or links to each other but also to the department. In this sense there is an interdependence between strategic fields and the boundaries are not fixed. They may cooperate or compete according to the issues at hand. Each has the potential to bring about change in another both through horizontal (between research groups) and vertical linkages (research groups to department). These links are the sources of change and stability. Most fields are in a state of flux, sometimes maintaining stability over time, at other times experiencing stress and rupture.

The sources of stability, conflict and change are to be found in the role that social actors play. On the one hand there are **incumbents** who may have a strong interest in the status quo, yield disproportionate influence and seek by whatever means to maintain their position. Then there are **challengers** who may have a different view on how things should be and may challenge the order of things in a low key way or through more direct

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[5] A Russian Doll contains a set of wooden dolls of decreasing size placed one inside another.

action and conflict. Both challengers and incumbents will draw on the **internal governance units** that exist to ensure compliance with the rules and the smooth running and reproduction of the system. Both have an ability to understand and negotiate the rules and constraints (e.g. manage context) in a way that donor organisations and external partner universities do not.

The rules are usually stacked or interpreted in favour of the incumbent who may exercise power and authority through coercion, competition or cooperation, or often elements of all three. Stable fields, effective research teams and strong departments are usually an outcome of cooperation which provides both material and "existential" benefits to its members. By existential we refer to the social benefits of belonging, a belief in the enterprise and values of the group and membership within it.

But the key element of stability and change with a given strategic field is the role of social skills exercised by people who might be termed as **institutional entrepreneurs**. These are the research leaders (or collective actors) who

> "possess a highly developed cognitive capacity for reading people and environments, framing lines of action and mobilizing people in the service of broader conceptions of the world and of themselves" (Fligstein and Mcadam, 2012:17).

This is not just about narrow instrumental action but requires appealing to wider values, meanings and identities of collective action. These individuals (or groups) have the ability to move beyond their own individual or group interests to see the bigger picture, allowing them through empathetic and communicative skills to mobilize others. They are able to exercise strategic action and control in the specific context in which they work.

However strategic action fields are embedded in a complex web of other fields. Their relationship with other fields is central to understanding the constraints and opportunities for change. The room for manoeuvre for institutional entrepreneurs depends enormously on context as the contrast between Rwanda (where there is limited room for manoeuvre) and Bolivian universities (where there is much more) show. A distinction can be made with those "other" fields that are proximate and have direct and recurring ties to the field in question (e.g. a research group within a department) to a distal field that lack ties and have limited capacity to

influence a strategic action field. Sida's Stockholm research unit might tentatively be characterised as a distal field to the departments and universities that it is funding.

A distinction can also be made between **dependent** and **interdependent** fields and those that are **independent**. Within a formal hierarchical university structure lower-level research groups and departments could be seen to be dependent on higher level systems. To an extent that may be true, particularly where coercive practices to ensure compliance are more prevalent. But in practice there is often more interdependence between strategic action fields even if they exist within a hierarchical structure. In part this is because research groups can have bilateral relations and networks outside the university which can give them authority and because higher level authorities in a university will often depend on strategic support from strong social actors, research groups and departments which are formally lower in the hierarchy. Much will depend on the authority structure within the university.

So how does change at a university level come about? Given the interdependence of fields there are rarely moment of crisis and rupture although this can happen (as happened in one of the Bolivian universities) and these are largely a result of internal crises or exogenous shocks. Such shocks can lead to dramatic change, the third of Portes (2010) routes of institutional transformation. Rather I suggest it is key social actors (or groups) working at various levels who are able to mobilize around opportunities and threats to create new ways of working or manage disturbances and contention who might support the possibilities of accelerated change.

Towards a new theory of change for RCD

It was suggested in the discussion on goals that if one first choose the function of the RCD intervention as transformative and then choose the substance of the intervention as a focus on process the outcome category to be prioritised could be seen as the formation and functioning of strong research groups.

It is at this point that there would be a need to articulate theories of change, which would then influence choices over the types of activities, inputs, and strategies that could plausibly lead to the desired outcome or effect. In the scenario outlined above – a focus on transformation

focussing on processes with outcomes of strong research groups, the key theory that would draw on to develop the ToC would be theories of fields.[6] An outline and schematic ToC based on this in shown Figure 2.

Figure 2: A ToC around based on a theory of fields

Qualified researchers + Entrepre-neurial Research Leader	▸	Common Research Theme of Social Relevance	▸	Acquire sufficient resources & support	▸	Individual, Group & Wider Societal Benefits	▸	Wider scale effects beyond the Research Group

The ToC line of argument runs as follows: if *sufficient qualified* researchers come together under *an entrepreneurial research leader* around a *common research theme* of social relevance and attract *sufficient resources* they will be able to work together productively to provide *individual, group and wider social benefits* which will have *larger scale effects*.

There are of course a number of assumptions that need to be made to make this ToC plausible including a presumption around sufficient shared values of group members, the ability to work together productively and the ability of the research leadership to manoeuvre through the structural constraints and find opportunities. As a result of the narrowing and specification exercises described above more appropriate measurement and evaluation strategies can be identified and developed.

In the same way that the RCD approach is complex and requires deliberate clarification and prioritisation, the ToC that underpins it must be addressed. The aim should be to develop a ToC from which practical implications for design can be drawn. ToC at lower levels of abstraction with arguably more specificity would clarify hypothesised causal mechanisms and processes that could probably make RCD interventions more effective and more amenable to rigorous evaluation. ToC of change linked with a single, more precisely defined outcome may further help.

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[6] Drawing on both the work that addresses the role of social actors e.g. Fligstein & McAdam (2012) op.cit and those that focus on institutional design e.g. Ostrom, E., Schroeder, L. and Wynne, S. (1993) *Institutional Incentives and Sustainable Development: Infrastructure Policies in Perspective*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Summing up

This paper has drawn on two contrasting cases of external interventions that aimed in various ways and over different time frames to drive institutional change. As we have seen in both cases the goals of the intervention have not been fully realised. The paper has argued that part of the problem has been that the objectives of each intervention have been panacea like and all good things do not come together. There are as Rodrik (2011) has put it, stark trilemmas where each of the goals contains inherent tensions and trade-offs with the others. Choices have to be made and an exploration of the goals in both cases show how this might be done.

It is also clear in both cases that little attention has been given to developing and monitoring a robustly theorised model of change to underpin the intervention. While in both cases the assumptions or foundation of the logic of the intervention is to be found in NIE, there has been an under-specification of the theory and limited if any attention to context.

Attention to context suggest that in both cases the interventions did not work in the manner expected of them or in a straightforward way. Rather the trajectories of change towards the outcome are likely to follow multiple possible routes to get to a specific outcome. There is non-linearity in the process of change suggesting that ideas or theories of complexity need to inform the thinking behind the programmes. This might include notions of critical thresholds, punctuated equilibriums and so forth.

The paper has drawn on a theory of fields to offer a more social account of institutional change and to highlight the critical role of leadership, agency and social fields in explaining how change comes about and its incremental and contested nature. External actors rarely if ever have either the understanding or the relationships to steer change outside their own cultural and specific institutional settings. External interventions can often be incoherent with existing relationships of accountability. Rather external actors should rely more on those who know how to manoeuvre in any specific context and help them to develop their capacities to do so in appropriate ways.

No single theory of change can ever encompass all the dimensions of change or speak to the multiple goals that institutional change processes are often burdened with. Equally the ambitions of those seeking to induce change in institutional arrangements need to be more aware of the wider evidence on how institutions do change and recognise the incremental endogenous nature of such processes.

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