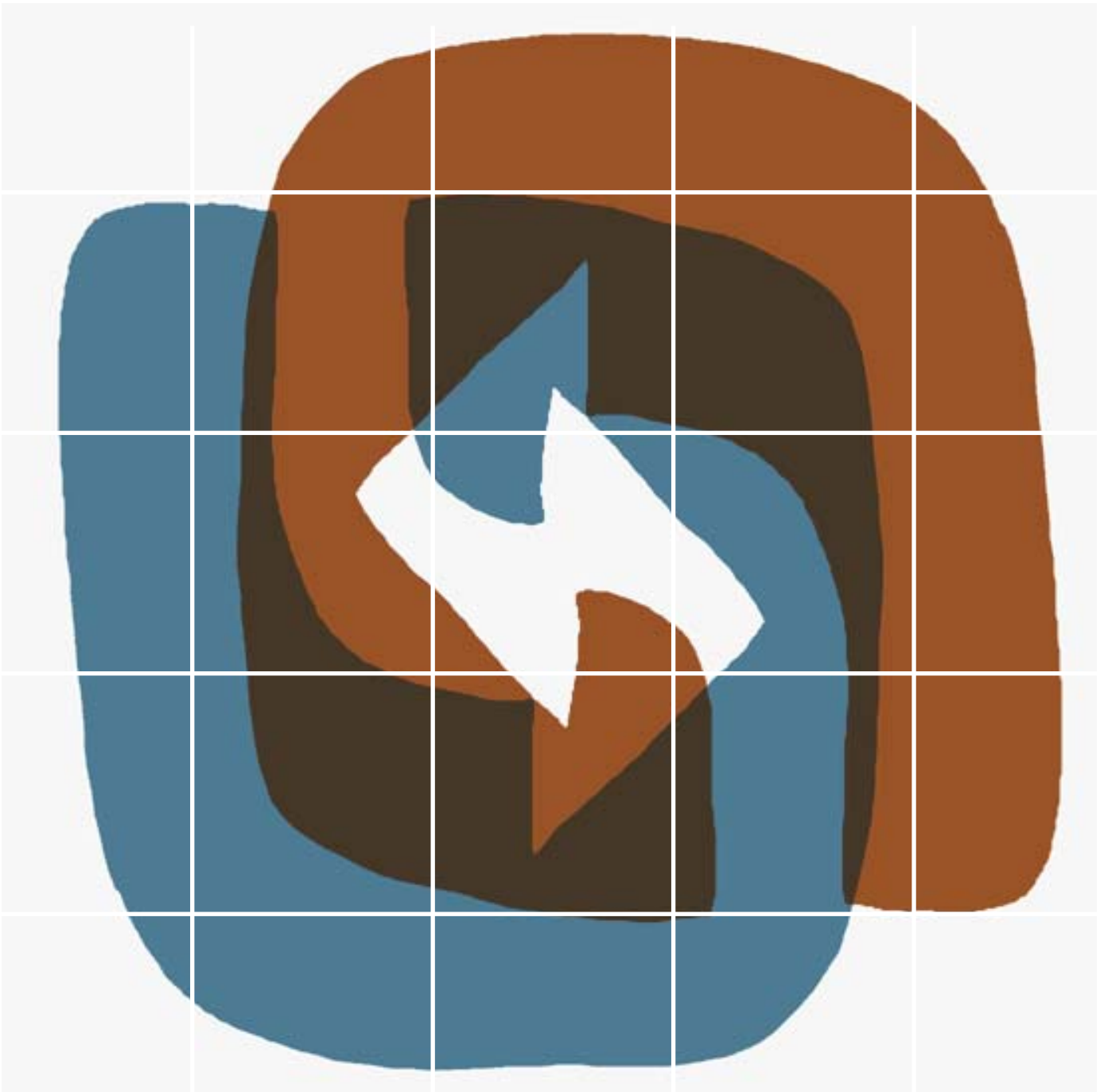# Relationships Matter
# for supporting change in favour of poor people

## Rosalind Eyben

# Background

Organisational learning, in which leaders and managers give priority to learning as integral to practice, is increasingly recognized as critical to improved performance. ActionAid, DFID and Sida collaborated with the Participation Group at the Institute of Development Studies to explore understandings of learning and to document innovative approaches.

Learning with ActionAid centred on institutionalising a radical organization-wide approach to accountability, learning and planning. The new system prioritises accountability to poor people and partners and so revolutionizes the way the organization does business. The paper by David and Mancini documents the struggle to institutionalize the new system and the extraordinary changes that it has engendered.

The learning process with the UK Department of International Development (DFID) looked at how to reflect on and improve relationships as a central aspect of aid delivery. The paper by Eyben provides a justification for the role of relationships in DFID's practice as an bilateral development organization. In their paper, Pasteur and Scott-Villiers examine the importance of learning about relationships and offer a set of questions for the organization wishing to learn. Larbi Jones describes three DFID projects and the methodologies applied at various stages to reflect on and learn about partnerships and influencing in Brazil.

Staff of the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida) worked to explore understandings and practices of participation across the agency. They experimented with participatory learning groups, which took different forms in Stockholm and Nairobi. In their paper, Pratt, Cornwall and Scott-Villiers detail the learning methodology and point out pitfalls and possibilities. Cornwall and Pratt, in a separate paper, explore the realities of implementing participation in a complex bilateral development organisation.

Much of the impetus for IDS to engage in these collaborations resulted from a workshop held at IDS in May 2001 on "Power, Procedures and Relationships" which highlighted learning as a way to achieve consistency between personal behaviour, institutional norms and the new development agenda (IDS Policy Briefing, Issue 15). A group of IDS staff have pursued this subject, including Robert Chambers, Andrea Cornwall, Rosalind Eyben, Kath Pasteur, Garett Pratt and Patta Scott-Villiers. IDS also organised a workshop in February 2003 to facilitate reflection and sharing between those involved in each of these initiatives.

## Background to this paper

Based on the author's own experience of working for development agencies, most recently as head of a country office in Latin America, this paper also draws on research carried out in 2003 and supported by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) Asia Regional Policy Research Fund. This included interviewing DFID's partners in one country and running workshops for DFID staff in the same and in two other country offices. The first draft also benefited very considerably from the opportunity of sharing ideas and experience at a workshop in Sahy, São Paolo on 'Partnerships and Influencing', described in another paper in this series (Pasteur and Scott-Villiers).

# Relationships matter for supporting change in favour of poor people

**Relationships Matter** seeks to:

- Summarise the principal theme and pose **some questions for readers to consider and discuss**, possibly in workshops that they may wish to organise;

- Briefly review and critique **current understandings of influencing in the UK Department for International Development (DFID)** and provide examples from Latin America of efforts to take the agenda further;

- Look at how these understandings have been applied and developed in parts of **Asia**;

- Propose some **fundamental principles** for influencing and explore the **operational implications** of these for teams in country offices of DFID and other international development agencies.

# Introduction

This paper has its origins in the efforts of many staff in the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID) to get to grips with their purpose in the countries where they are working. How do we make pro-poor change happen? What is influencing, should we be doing it and if so, how?

The paper challenges some of the assumptions about the practice of aid. It argues that if donors are to achieve their aims of contributing to the reduction of global poverty they need to invest as much or more time in managing relationships as they currently spend in managing their money. It means staff in international development agencies, individually and collectively will have to learn to change their behaviour, both with their own colleagues and with those with whom they engage at global and local levels.

No instructions are provided as to how to "do influencing", nor is formal guidance provided to be incorporated into the next cycle of country action plans. The purpose is rather to stimulate debate and reflection. Readers are encouraged not to linger too long at the level of conceptual analysis. Rather they are urged to move on to reflecting on an individual and collective basis on the quality of their relationships.

Overall, this paper seeks to adopt what was reported to me by one government official from an aid recipient country as his ideal profile of a DFID staff member. That is:

• Not making lots of recommendations that are hard to understand;

• Not too serious, not too official;

• Asking more questions than giving instructions

Readers could also consider the equal importance of behaviour as well as analysis for supporting or undermining processes of change.

'Influence without controlling.
Be alert but not clever.
Be both yielding and firm.
While being attentive and understanding, be able to refrain from action.
Inspire and nourish without possessing. Teach but do not take credit for learning.
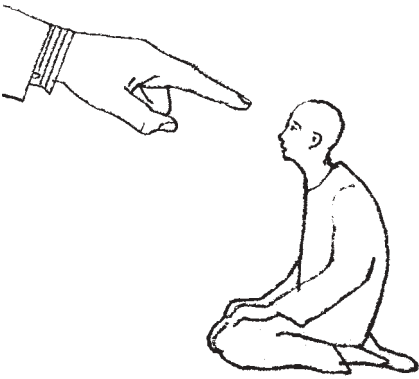Lead as if following.'

*The Tao of Being*[1]

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[1] Grigg, Ray (1990)
*The Tao of Being*
Aldershot:
Wildwood House p19

## Power, control and influence



**This is not what this paper means by influencing, but this is how many recipients of development aid experience donor behaviour.**

How can international development agencies influence processes that lead to positive changes in the lives of poor people in Asia, Africa and other parts of the world? Does influencing mean that they have to learn to be better at persuading or forcing others to do what they want?

Influencing has been defined as what is required when one is not in control.[2] In those African countries where Official Development Assistance may account for up to 50 per cent of the budget, power relations between donors and recipients appear very unequal. The financial imbalance is often underscored by one of human capital when the donors turn up with huge teams and attend meetings en mass with small numbers of recipient government staff. Even here, however, donors may wrongly believe that the recipients are under their control. Powerless people have their own "weapons of the weak". The well known failure of aid conditionality is sufficiently indicative that this belief is fallacious.

Except when development agency contracted staff are responsible for spending the money themselves to the benefit of the ultimate recipients (as for example in some humanitarian situations), the international development agency is always working through some intermediary organisation and is therefore no longer in direct control of the way the money it provides is spent. In practice we can see that influence and control is not a binary split and that the sense of "being in control" (by auditing procedures) is not the same as the reality of control. Indeed, even in a situation where ultimate beneficiaries receive aid directly from the international agency they may very well turn that aid to ends that the donor did not anticipate or desire.

Due to this sense of being in control in highly aid dependent countries, development agencies often think that influencing is more important when they are working in environments where recipient governments and local civil society are not so dependent on donor resources, and therefore less likely to do as they are told. For example DFID interest in influencing has so far been more evident in countries in Asia and Latin America, which are less aid dependent.

When an aid agency makes a conceptual split between control and influencing, the first tends to be seen as spending money and the second as talking. Thus, those country programme managers with large budgets sometimes may become anxious if they think staff are spending too much time on activities that are not directly related to the disbursement of the budget.

### A proposition

It is proposed that everything that an aid agency does, including spending money, is necessarily about influencing processes in favour of economic, political and social change. Understanding the policy context and investing in relationships are the two inter-connected and iterative activities that are the primary means for supporting these processes. Aid instruments should be understood as appropriate mixes of financial and human resources. As such they should derive from, and not drive, our understanding of the context and the investment in relationships.

For any development agency, influencing can thus be understood as the process between desired ultimate outcomes (for example the



[2] We believe that influencing is more than 'encouraging changes in position, behaviour or approach in areas where DFID's direct control is limited, the extent to which DFID seeks influence reflects the gap between its expectationss and control' Spicer, E (2000) *Influencing Scoping Study*, London: DFID)

Millennium Development Goals) on the one hand, and the human and financial resources available to the agency on the other. Without sustained attention to shaping, reflecting on and improving this process development agencies are likely to be ineffective in the deployment of their aid instruments.

In the last two or three years, a number of agencies, including the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida), the Swiss Development Corporation, and DFID have become interested in increasing their understanding of the political, historical and social context of policy processes. An integral part of this process is an enhanced investment in in-country relationships. Everyone in aid agencies accepts that we can only secure positive change in the lives of poor people by working with and through other organisations, but we still tend to pay insufficient regard to the quality of our relationship with others. We do not always consider how our own good and bad institutional, team and personal behaviour can promote or impede positive change processes. Nor are we very good at appreciating that our analysis, learning and practice would be much improved were we do it with others, rather than by ourselves or with those who think just like us.

More effort is needed to empathise with partners, taking into account how they perceive the world and learning about how they would like that world to be. They can help agencies learn to be more effective, listening and responding to what they tell us about our behaviour, including the way in which we identify, design and deploy aid instruments. More practice is required if "heroic leadership" cultures are to change in favour of making relationships matter.

## Issues to consider

In this spirit of empathy, the following questions are posed for staff of international development agencies to ask themselves:

• Do we need to be more modest about impact and choose policy areas where the door is half open, on the latch or where there is a key to change? Rather than forcing to open a door by directly taking on challenges where little change is likely in the short term? To what extent should this type of analysis influence the choice of sectors?

• Would a more circuitous approach, working to support others, be more effective in the long term? Should senior management more clearly demonstrate and affirm that more back room, facilitative and supportive leadership styles are equally or more praiseworthy than our usual way of seeking to influence its partners? Does advocacy have to mean us speaking directly to power, or cannot it also include helping others do this?

• How can we become more sensitive to unequal power relations, and to checking regularly whether one's own behaviour is strengthening or undermining the voice of the poor and the powerless?

**Hopes and expectations at a workshop in a DFID country office on "relationships matter"**

*'How do we build trust both within DFID and outside?'*

*'How should we work together as an office?'*

*'I think relationships really do matter for our work but worry that current work/management priorities and incentives don't support this. How can incentives shift?'*

*'How can I have better relations with other organisations?'*

*'I hope this workshop will rationalise what I instinctively know to be true.'*

*'I believe in my heart that relationships matter but I have no confidence that headquarters or any senior civil servant believes this.'*

• To what extent must we accept the status quo so as to engage with those in power?

• What are the criteria country teams could use in privileging relationships with some multilateral partners over others? What will bring greater impact, trying to directly change organisations more powerful than our own, such as the international finance institutions? What are the implications of them influencing us more than the other way round? What would result from working with those less powerful but with whom the agency already shares common values and vision or whose values the agency would like to emulate?

• How do we learn and who do we learn from? Can we give greater value to the experience and knowledge of our national staff? And to learning with our partners the reality of life of poor people?

• How do we build trust and what are the implications for the way we understand our accountability to different stakeholders? How can we ensure that our structures and procedures work well for our partners in the South as well as for the taxpayer or donor in the North?

• How can we better invest in relationships through improved teamwork, moving away from endless reporting and revision of documents over which no-one has ownership, to better communication and consultation balanced with quick and transparent decision-making?

• Is relationship management sufficiently emphasised for staff recruitment and promotion?

• How do relationships between ourselves and our external partners replicate the pattern of relationships among us? Do we need to change things internally as a step to better external relations?

# Understanding of influencing

For DFID its interest in "influencing" comes from its strategic commitment to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. It is viewed as an activity essential to DFID's interest in policy level engagement. Its Evaluation Department notes that, while there is neither a common definition nor understanding of the term in DFID, 'it is commonly viewed as a process for bringing about change in policies and/or institutional behaviour'.[3] Many understand this to mean *directly* influencing institutions and other actors to support the achievement of DFID objectives. This stems from the 1997 UK Government White Paper on International Development that speaks of "using our influence" and the UK National Audit Office refers to influencing activities as those that bring about changes in the policies and practices of those being influenced.[4] Influencing is also understood as a round about way of achieving change, as distinct from when DFID is more directly in control (or understands it to be so), as in the Spicer report on influencing.[5]

When working for DFID in Latin America I felt the need to explore further what could be meant by "influencing" and reached some initial conclusions which are summarised in the box below. I subsequently came to realise that the last of the influencing elements I had identified, investing in relationships, was the most crucial.

The implications of unpacking influencing were that changes in practice were required by head office to support country level efforts. These I then identified as follows:

• The human effort required should be considered on its own terms and not be linked nor made proportional to the size of the financial transfer. *High impact on policy and practice may result from intensive human resource investment*, supported in some cases by little or no money, and in other cases by substantial resource transfers. There should be no hard and fast rule but it should be a decision made by the team on the basis of local knowledge of the policy environment.

[3] DFID (2002)
*Influencing activities in DFID: an introductory note by Evaluation Department*
London: DFID, p1

[4] National Audit Office (April 2002)
*Performance Management - Helping to Reduce World Poverty* (cited in the report from Evaluation Department)

[5] Spicer (2000) op. cit: 'Encouraging changes in position, behaviour or approach in areas where DFID's direct control is limited.'

**Unpacking "influencing"**

**Facilitation:** providing space and informed support for policy-makers (in the broadest meaning of the term), helping them debate, negotiate and exchange ideas and experience.

**Advocacy:** supporting advocates for pro-poor change, through moral support, bringing their views to the attention of policy-makers, and, when appropriate, providing funds and/or technical assistance.

**Information and knowledge:** supporting the development of evidence-based policy, and helping policy-makers secure access to the information and knowledge they want; it also means constantly analysing the policy environment, learning from others, and using this learning for our facilitation and advocacy work.

**Investing in relationships:** identifying allies who may share a common policy objective and building non-instrumental relations of trust and friendship.

• *Procedures* needed to be assessed against their capacity to support rather than block (1) the effective management of relationships and (2) a focus on outcomes that deploys a range of aid instruments. There was a need for positive and effective cross-Department working with procedures able to respond flexibly and rapidly to new ways of working at the country level.

• Support to pro-poor changes required a quality of understanding of a country's history, culture and politics that can only be acquired through day-to-day participant observation. DFID has already largely accepted *in-country teams as the basic organising principle for the country programmes* but the full implications of this organisational model remain to be explored. Spending most of the time in internal meetings inside the country office is not an effective way of being in contact with local reality. To what extent were these meetings a result of the demands made on the office by the centre?

• The intellectual balance of power was weighted too strongly towards the centre and needed to shift more to the country programmes *so that country level experience and knowledge makes a greater contribution to shaping policy at the centre*. Positive incentives were required for young fast-track professionals to gain country experience at the start of their DFID career.

These ideas were not unique to the experience acquired in one country and have since proven to resonate with DFID country offices in other parts of the world.

### Partnerships

Understandably, many people in aid agencies feel uncomfortable about openly using a term such as influencing. It may imply they are tasked with getting others to do what the agency wants. The current interest and even anxiety about "influencing" could be attributed to a deeper discomfort about the role of aid and whose voice counts. This unease is reflected in the way "partnership" is often understood as a friendlier synonym that expresses the potential for two-way "influencing". "Partnership" is particularly popular as a concept in countries, as in much of Asia, characterised by low – or rapidly declining – aid dependency. Its use recognises that to make a difference the agency needs to work with and through others.

Nevertheless, even "partnership" may imply a wish for one-way influence, that is, the power to make other people do what you want, rather than working with them to do things that you both want or supporting them to do things that they want. Part of the problem may lie with the way an aid agency understands what it is trying to measure. Is aid a contribution to the development of global relations that help make the world a better place for all, or is it about resource transfers from richer to poorer regions of the world? Clearly it is both. But aid tends too often to be seen as about getting others to do what the agency thinks is right. Improving the quality of its partnerships may require the agency to review its accountability systems. Somehow accountability to taxpayers in the donor country must be balanced with other lines of accountability to those in the recipient country so as to achieve genuine partnerships.[6]

### Who is interested in influencing?

At the moment those in DFID who seem most interested in influencing have relatively little money to spend in relation to the overall budget of those they are trying to influence, for example other international actors and/or the recipient government. They are typically staff in middle-income countries or where donor influence has been declining overall as the country becomes less aid dependent or, lastly where the agency presence is relatively small compared with other donors, such as DFID in Peru in the example provided overleaf

[6] Eyben, Rosalind & Feguson, Clare (forthcoming) 'Can donors be more accountable to poor people?' *in Lesley Groves and Rachel Hinton (eds) Inclusive Aid: Changing Power and Relationships in International Aid, London: Earthscan.*

**Influencing for pro-poor change in Peru in 2002**
(from a presentation given by the head of the DFID office in Lima)

• Do the **groundwork**… Problem analysis… who are the *stakeholders?* …
President and his men, Church, Armed forces, Big Business, Media…Ministers, Political
Parties, Congress, Multilaterals… NGOs, CBOs, Officials, Bilaterals…

• Set **clear objectives**… A clear statement of aim… is it realistic/achievable? Is the
strategy credible? Build alliances… With bilaterals or multilaterals? With civil society?
Who in Government?

• Use your **political capital** well…. Position Power…Expert Power…Personal
Power… Resource Power…

• **See it through**… Have you got the resources (human usually)?

• Pro poor change is political… so **identify the potential risks**

On the whole, influencing is probably seen as an activity that is more justifiable when staff do not have to prioritise the management of a big bilateral budget. Where such spending becomes or remains a priority it is harder for them to de-link their own investment of time from the agency's investment of money. In this latter case influencing may be more viewed as a matter of oiling the wheels, rather than the wheels themselves. How would this play out in countries with Poverty Reduction Strategies and associated multi-donor budgetary support? If the management of the budget becomes the responsibility of the recipient government then agency staff time would theoretically become fully devoted to influencing the design and implementation of policies. However, disbursement pressure on many aid agencies can seriously distort the relationship because staff are still largely judged on their ability "to push the money out of the door".

DFID's Evaluation Department notes that influencing is seen as something new and different from the traditional project approach, which is understood to mean spending money on a series of discrete activities to achieve measurable outcomes. Of course, in real life, projects never actually worked this way.

They were always about relationships and complex processes of change and resistance in an environment that any donor found difficult to control. By scaling up its ambitions, and by thinking and acting today outside that project box, what has happened is that a development agency can no longer avoid the reality of the messiness and complexity of the world in which it operates.

Agencies are now learning to see themselves as one of very many actors engaged in an invigorating, confused and dynamic process of trying to shape their world in the way each one would like it to be.

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## DFID in Asia: the current situation

Many of the countries where DFID works in Asia are characterised by low or rapidly declining aid dependency. DFID is a major bilateral partner in only a few of them. This has led the Asia Directorate to the view that DFID's success will depend on the impact it has on others, as compared with the (assumed) direct impact DFID can make in highly aid dependent countries in Africa where it is a major partner. Influencing in Asia is therefore understood as achieving results with and through others (including spending money through others) as distinct from disbursement to achieve direct benefits for poor people. This section briefly considers the current situation in DFID Asia in relation to policy processes, approaches to partnerships and selection of aid instruments.

### Policies and partnerships

Country teams and associated studies that DFID has commissioned have contributed significantly to a greater and more informed understanding of the long- and medium-term factors that affect policy processes and outcomes in Asia. Learning from these the DFID Director for Asia noted last year in his plan for DFID's work in the region (Director's Delivery Plan) that successfully influencing others depends on greater understanding of what motivates decision makers and the (dis)incentives they operate under. To deepen this understanding further studies have been commissioned looking at policy change and aid instruments.

The Director's plan states that DFID needs to be much more open to being influenced by others, to building genuine partnerships, and to demonstrating its transparency and accountability to local communities. This is based on learning and reflection from feedback gained on how others see DFID. The more an organisation listens to what its partners have to say about it the more effective it can be in working with them.

Working well with others requires empathy and recognising they may see world differently. The box below illustrates differences in perception between DFID and its government partners in an Asian country where the author interviewed a range of government officials.

### Examples of different perceptions between DFID and some of its Government partners in an Asian country

**Concept of poverty reduction**
*DFID*: Pro-poor policy should target on the poorest population.
*Government partners*: Pro-poor policy should consider efficiency in terms of reducing the number of poor people.

**Expectation from pilot project**
*DFID*: Perfection of project; high quality project; professional reputation.
*Government partners*: Pilot project is allowed to fail. More important to learn the lessons. "Failure is mother of success".

**Transparency of budget and spending**
*DFID*: Unimportant to show the budget and spending in detail to partners.
*Government partners*: It is serious matter to conceal the budget and spending. It is related to trustworthiness.

**Concept of a good scaled-up project**
*DFID*: Comprehensive and high quality; emphasise process and participation.
*Government partners*: Wide coverage, fast outcome, and low budget.

## How popular is a heroic leadership style?

Management culture in a number of development agencies is still very much the heroic style of getting things done and it is this which probably makes staff very vulnerable to criticisms of arrogance while at the same time being admired for their persistence and ambitious objectives. 'Brash and haughty' said one member of the international community in an Asian country concerning his observations of DFID staff in another Asian country. 'DFID really likes to tackle the hard problems' commented someone else from another agency, also from his observations of DFID in two other countries in the region.

One observer recommended an approach that went more with the grain. He asked whether greater incrementalism would achieve greater long-term change? He also mentioned the danger of an agency finding itself alone, deserted by its partners because of its over-strong insistence on a particular topic. This may be because some in the agency have an over-simplistic understanding of advocacy as speaking directly to those they are seeking to change, rather than investing in empowering local partners to make the case. Or perhaps they feel they need to be seen as advocates?

Going with the grain implies going through doors that are half-open, rather than those firmly closed and without a key. In any country in Asia there are a multitude of issues that concern poor people and need tackling.

Just because the highest mountain is there does not mean the agency has to climb straight up it with just one partner, such as a sector ministry, when all the evidence indicates the slopes are too steep and the partner unwilling to walk the talk. Going up via flanks, and working towards smaller summits with multiple partners, may be the more effective although slower way of getting there.

## The importance of trust

Informants in one Asian country spoke about partnership implying trust. There was a concern that sometimes a donor agency can be 'manipulative'. 'It pulls the strings because of its money'. Another commented that donor

agencies need to be much clearer about what they mean by partnership and not claim a relationship where they say they will stay in the background but then seek to micro-manage. Bad influencing is when partners perceive attempts to push them around. It is about an ultimately ineffective deployment of aid instruments, either in terms of money or people. It is suggested that effective influencing requires knowledge and relationships that deploy aid instruments to strengthen empowerment of partners rather than to have power over them.

DFID, for example, can be good at this. A study undertaken by a consultant for another DFID office in Asia noted how other development agencies appreciated DFID because of the way it played a neutral facilitating role. More generally donors can be good at creating opportunities for discussion between different interest groups about issues of public concern, providing objective information in support of this. Such an approach has been adopted by DFID in Brazil.[7]

The above study also noted the importance of relationships of trust between those involved. It had one main recommendation for a successful influencing strategy, which was the need to analyse far more systematically which individuals, groups and organisations to target, and what approaches to take in each case. This also means that an agency must monitor its relationships, and regularly evaluate how effectively they are working; and why, so that approaches can be improved upon over time.

## Sensitivity to and knowledge of the host culture

We may find variations in the quality of their relationships with local partners that different country offices may enjoy, although from the same agency. These variations can depend on the extent to which the international staff rise to the challenge of learning about the local context and being actively encouraged to learn the national language or undergo a programme of community-based familiarisation. In one country programme office in Asia the staff scored highly with partners on their cultural sensitivity, prior knowledge of the country and

[7] See the paper in this series by Emily Larbi-Jones

their capacity to speak the national language. Furthermore, this same office is also highly regarded for its employment of and relations with national experts. Country offices vary in the extent to which national staff are appointed at senior, as distinct from junior levels. Particularly in the absence of any such senior appointments relatively junior national staff may feel that their local knowledge is not sufficiently respected nor valued by the agency hierarchy.

Ultimately, in terms of an agency's poverty reduction objectives, this paper believes the aim should be to support the empowerment of those who have currently very little autonomous power to change their lives. So how can an agency with such a goal avoid privileging some voices over others and thus contributing to a reproduction of the status quo? Within country offices this implies checking on whose voice counts more than others: is it men more than women? International staff more than national staff? In its external relations whose voice in the agency is given more weight and how does this affect staff understanding of the dynamics of power? Agency performance in these matters is carefully scrutinized by its partners. One DFID country office was commended by its partners for its interest and commitment to visiting rural areas and "listening to the people".

### Aid instruments

Asia Division is currently exploring the appropriateness and impact of the instruments currently available to country programmes. It has been suggested that it is easier to operate flexibly and in ways which respond to the local context where a donor agency is a small player and does not have to wrestle with the problems of fiduciary responsibility implicit in giving large amounts of financial aid to very poor and aid-dependent countries. The greatest potential for flexibility and responsiveness is found in an aid instrument such as the Strategic Impact Fund, adopted from a model developed initially in Bolivia.

### Principles of Strategic Impact Fund

The Fund provides small amounts of money. It is opportunistic, responding flexibly and rapidly to a changing policy environment. It is used both proactively, for activities identified by the DFID team, and responsively, to support partners' initiatives. Each proposal is peer reviewed and has a DFID sponsor who stays engaged with the initiative, assesses the impact and feeds back lessons to DFID and its partners. Criteria for allocating SIF financing are the potential for making a significant strategic impact on a key area of policy; the extent to which any proposal is innovative and at the cutting edge and; the preparedness to take a risk if there is potential for high impact. Failure is understood as an opportunity to learn.

One country programme has until now been largely using "demonstration projects" as a principal means of influencing changes in policy and practice. While some of these projects had not been initially designed with the aim of broader policy impact, in a number of cases there was clear evidence of such impact

### Risks that may incur when selecting aid instruments

Country teams in Asia have been wrestling with the appropriateness and receptiveness of mechanisms for transferring large financial resources that were developed in very low-income and aid-dependent Africa. There may be a risk of technical decisions being taken about the use of instruments that can unintentionally lead to quite big changes in strategic direction, privileging some relationships over others without any serious discussion having taken place as to whether this is what was wanted. The next section proposes that some of this concern about aid instruments can be resolved if they are seen as second order instruments selected on the basis of DFID's understanding of the policy context and the relationships required to most effectively support processes that will change poor people's lives for the better.

# Re-thinking influencing

Everything that an international development agency, such as DFID does, including spending money, should be about influencing processes of change in favour of poor people. Investing in relationships and understanding the historical, political and socio-cultural context of policy, as two inter-connected and iterative activities are the primary means for supporting these processes. Aid instruments (appropriate mixes of financial and human resources) should derive from and not drive these means. For any area of policy engagement, related directly or indirectly to the achievement of a Millennium Development Goal, the instrument would be selected from a menu and in conformity with DFID's understanding of the specific country context of policy and relationships. The figure below summarises this approach to influencing.

It goes without saying that this representation of the recommended process in a particular aid recipient country must be seen as fitting in the wider societal and global environments that may play a more significant role in blocking or bringing about real world changes. Readers are warned not to spend too much time arguing about the niceties of the figure as this risks being a displacement activity for reflecting on the changes they may need to make.

**Influencing processes in favour of positive change in the lives of poor people**



POSITIVE CHANGE IN FAVOUR OF POOR PEOPLE

INVESTING IN RELATIONSHIPS

UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT

AID INSTRUMENTS
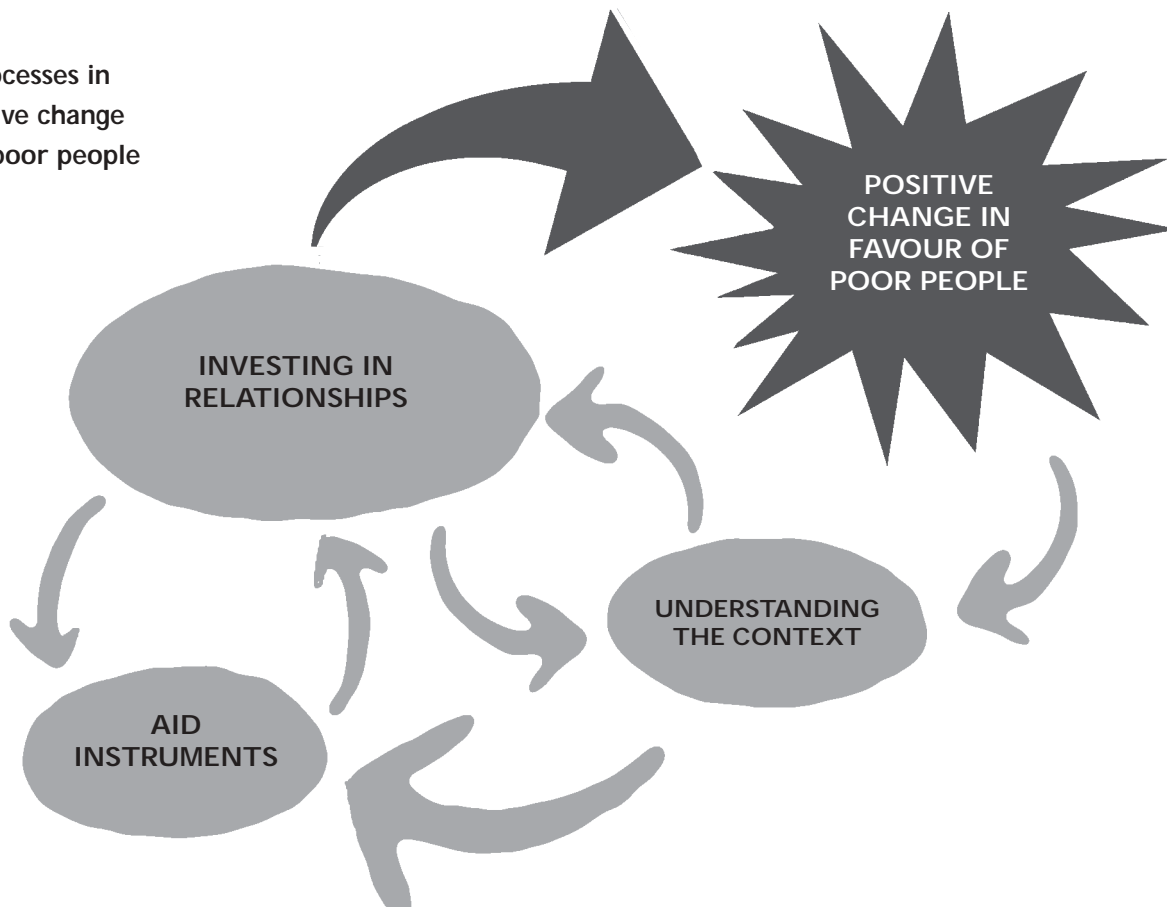
## Fundamental principles for influencing processes in favour of poor people

**The first** fundamental principle is that any relationship investment should be informed and tested by its capacity to support and not undermine poor people's empowerment.

**The second** is that influencing is neither sequential nor linear. In all the countries where we work there are antecedents to our relationships, our understanding and the aid instruments we are using. In other words, there is a history to our presence that informs today's activities and our potential for changing these. Rather than think of sequencing, look for room for manoeuvre.

**The third** principle concerns the development agency understanding itself, not as the director, sitting in the audience but as one of the actors on the stage in a script not yet written. In some countries, such as India or China, the donor development agency's role may be not much more than the "second gentleman" in a play by Shakespeare who delivers a crucial line in just one scene…

### Understanding the policy context: actors, spaces, knowledge

Policy-making and implementation is complex, non-linear, chaotic, overlapping, political and dynamic. Analysing key contextual political and institutional structural and historical factors, as proposed by Unsworth[8], is crucial. It also matters how we do this analysis and with whom we do it. An analysis of any policy context is affected by who is doing the understanding, what kind of knowledge they are favouring and what power they have in the political process to make their voice heard. A development agency's analysis will thus be affected both by its own position in the policy process and with whom it chooses to associate. The actors, knowledge and spaces framework developed by Keeley and other colleagues of the author at the Institute of Development Studies may help readers understand this better.[9]

Who are the key actors associated with any policy process? Which actors dominate? Which are excluded? Actors can be conceived as institutions and organisations, or even particular individuals. Which spaces matter? Spaces can be thought about in different ways. They may relate to particular levels of the state, and activities linked to government such as formal policy consultations, or they may be civil society fora and processes outside of government. Where are things happening that might have wider impact? Which actors operate in these spaces? Who is included and excluded? Does one engage with spaces dominated by the powerful, or add weight to the spaces of the powerless? How might different spaces be better connected? Which forms of knowledge dominate this policy process? Whose knowledge is excluded? What are the dominant storylines and key framing assumptions that shape policy in this area?

This is a way of understanding the policy context that allows us to think about power, the donor agency's power and the power or powerlessness of others. Thus development agency country teams could think about including themselves as one of the actors, with a predilection for a certain type of knowledge, operating in a certain number of policy shaping spaces.

It is worth experimenting with this framework with those with whom development agencies are seeking a stronger relationship. As part of the analysis each partner can ask for help from the others in understanding *how its own agency's behaviour creates or restricts space for more voices, particularly of those it is seeking to help – poor people with less power*. This process supports the implementation of the first and second fundamental principles.

[8] *Better Governance* op.cit.
[9] The actors, knowledge and spaces framework was developed by Brock and McGee in work on poverty policy processes in Nigeria and Uganda (forthcoming) and builds on Keeley, J (2001) *Influencing Policy Processes for Sustainable Livelihoods: strategies for change. Lessons for change in policy and organisations* Brighton: IDS.
See also Keeley, J and Scoones, I (2003) *Understanding Environmental Policy Processes*, London: Earthscan.

## Questions for an influencing strategy

| | |
|---|---|
| *What change are we looking for?* | Which forms of knowledge dominate this policy process? Whose knowledge is excluded? What are the principal storylines and key framing assumptions that shape policy in this area? What knowledge are we using? What are we ignoring? |
| *How could this change happen?* | Where are things happening that might have wider impact? Which actors operate in these spaces? Who is included and excluded? |
| *Who could make it happen?* | Who are the key actors associated with this policy process? Which actors are most powerful? Which are excluded? What kind of actor are we? How do we behave? |
| *What do we need to do to make the desired change happen?* | Does one engage with spaces dominated by the powerful, or add weight to the spaces of the powerless? How might different spaces be better connected? |
| *What resources will be required: people, time, money, information?* | How are we equipped? Who trusts us? Is it just our ideas and/or our moral support that is needed? How can we use our money and staff to empower and not undermine? |
| *How will we know if we have succeeded?* | How can we track the process? How can we listen to what our partners tell us? |

### Investing in relationships

Successful influencing requires self-awareness and a capacity for reflection and a willingness to work with others beyond a short-term, instrumental relationship. Bad influencing is when partners perceive attempts to push them around. It is about an ultimately ineffective deployment of aid instruments, either in terms of money or people. It is suggested that effective influencing requires knowledge and relationships that deploy aid instruments to strengthen empowerment of partners rather than to have power over them.

Influencing others does not necessarily imply trying to be the leader of the pack. DFID senior management has stated that it requires country offices to exercise a leadership as well as an influencing role in pursuit of poverty reduction goals. Staff may erroneously conclude that good performance is judged to be seen as leading from the front. This may undermine rather than support efforts by others. For example, DFID may be tempted to try to always to be in the lead in donor coordination rather than giving support to other organisations that may have greater legitimacy.

Facilitation means helping create the space to let others take the lead. When this happens, it is appreciated. Attribution will be harder but sustained impact greater.

### Which partnerships to prioritise?

Coordination and partnership between development agencies has become much more common in recent years as part of the drive to support initiatives such as the Comprehensive Development Framework and Poverty Reduction Strategies. A question for any donor is whether to prioritise partnerships with others in the international community with whom it shares common values and vision, but whom (rightly or wrongly) it judges to possess little influence and/or low levels of technical capacity, *or* to engage with others who it judges more powerful while finding a shared vision difficult to secure (and indeed risks being over-influenced by the more dominant partner)?

*There was a young lady from Riga*
*Who went smiling to ride on a tiger.*
*They came back from the ride*
*With the lady inside*
*And a smile on the face of the tiger*[10]

In relationships with the international community in any country, any donor agency could systematically assess and compare the strengths, weaknesses and specific advantages of their various present and potential international community partners in relation to the following criteria:

[10] Anon.

1 The extent to which they share and practice a common vision with the agency,
2 Their technical and institutional capacity to influence policy processes,
3 The pro-poor quality of their networks and relationships and
4 The pro-poor policy influencing implications of the aid instruments available to them.

## What do we look for our in our working relations with others?

This was a question discussed at a workshop on relationships matter in an Asian country office. Staff concluded that *inside their own office* they looked for trust, respect, understanding, sharing, caring, consideration, advice, communication and coordination with support and assistance to achieve each staff member's objectives. To achieve this, they decided they needed:

• To understand their organisation's aims and objectives;
• More informal spaces for discussion and chances of getting together;
• Top management's support and initiative to create the environment;
• Respect for diversity, especially taking into account the knowledge and experience of the staff appointed in country;
• Value and respect for each individual.

In working with people *in other organisations*, they looked for a shared agenda and objectives, a sharing of knowledge and experience, a sharing of achievements and lessons and a "buy in" of DFID policy. They thought that what the other organisations were looking for from them were:

• Money
• Technical assistance
• International experience
• Personal benefits (study tours, scholarships and other training)
• Support for capacity building
• Support in helping the recipient government make tough decisions
• Respect
• Not to be dictated to.

Changing organisational culture

*'When we get to work we are expected to think of people in boxes and charts.'*

*'You can't have an institutional relationship without people. By calling it an institutional relationship we give it status but ultimately relationships are about people.'* [11]

Changing its culture is possibly a greater challenge to a development agency than is improving its analytical capacity. Nevertheless the effort should reap significant rewards in terms of the potential impact such changed behaviour from staff could have on changing the behaviour of the intermediary organisations in government, civil society and the international community with whom the agency engages in-country. Do as you would like them to do to others (that is the poor and marginalised citizens).

### Where does empathy come from?

'You argue that we need to empathise more. I very much agree. But where does empathy come from? Intellectually I am sure we are all committed to poverty reduction but emotionally how many staff have direct experience of working in and for a resource-starved LDC government? Working in the DFID office is not the same. We often make completely unrealistic demands on our partners radically to reform this or change that or do something else. I'm not sure how good we are at change ourselves [that is inside DFID]. The most arresting statistic I have seen recently (besides Zambia's life expectancy now down to 33 years) is the fact that the total Zambia government budget is £834 million. For the whole country. DFID's budget alone is five times this sum.'

*(From an email sent to the author by a DFID staff member commenting on an earlier draft of this paper.)*

[11] Staff members at a workshop on 'Relationships Matter'

## A fresh look at aid instruments

Finally, how does such an approach relate to choice of aid instruments (the human and financial resources available to a development agency)? Understanding the policy context, and the relationships an agency chooses to invest in, should determine the selection and mix of aid instruments, rather than (as is perhaps often the case) aid instruments – types of inputs – being allowed to dominate the influencing agenda for pro-poor change. In other words, I am proposing that effective influencing requires greater attention to the processes that can convert the instruments into pro-poor outcomes, as illustrated in the figure at the start of this section.

The implications of this approach are an engagement with the real world of mess and paradox, recognising that we are not in control and giving ourselves modest but feasible objectives. Systems thinking, rather than linear mechanistic models, is a helpful way of exploring and learning how to do this.[12]

## Assessment for accountability and learning

At one of the country office workshops on relationships matter participants stressed the importance of recognising that DFID does have power. They stressed that in some circumstances a lot can be achieved for poor people by exercising power. However, we must recognise that power is not the same as being in control. This has implications for the choice of planning tools. They felt that the logical framework was being used to try to control others. They noted partners were challenging the use of the log frame because partner organisations have their own identity and way of seeing things. Furthermore the realities on the ground may be very different from what we expect them to be and there is a danger of our not realising this by the way we use our planning and assessment tools. Participants observed that if we are more aware of our lack of control over the wider situation then we might be more successful in achieving what we wish. On the other hand, if we are not in control of our environment, then how do we measure the outcomes we seek to achieve ?

The DFID consultation document *Better Governance*[13] notes that donors need to review ways of assessing performance, to ensure that these do not inadvertently reinforce pressures for them to set and drive the agenda, and for short time horizons. They need new ways of assessing and managing risk, and new approaches to evaluation that capture the impact of more incremental movement towards long-term strategic objectives. The influencing framework proposed in this paper may contribute to these new ways.

It is impossible for an international development agency to demonstrate how a particular aid instrument has contributed directly and specifically to a significant real world outcome, so other means must be sought for assessing the difference we make. One way of doing this is through the process of "plausible linkages" along the uni-directional lines indicated in the figure from aid instruments through relationships to real world changes. The Ford Foundation already engages in this kind of

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### Development agencies are in a mess!

A **difficulty** is characterised by:
- Broad agreement on the nature of the problem;
- Some mutual understanding of what a solution would look like;
- Being bounded in terms of the time and resources required for its resolution.

Messes are characterised by:
- No clear agreement about exactly what the problem is;
- Uncertainty and ambiguity as to how improvements might be made;
- Being unbounded in terms of the time and resources they could absorb.

Development agencies are in a mess. A systems approach helps us understand this and think about ways to achieve desired change

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[12] See, for example, Jake Chapman (2002) *System Failure: Why governments must learn to think differently* London: Demos The box on this page is taken from Chapman.

[13] Unsworth, S, (2003) 'Better Governance' *Draft Consultation Paper, London: DFID*

tracking progress and more could be found out about how they do this. Other agencies could follow suit. With its partners an agency could agree indicators for changed behaviour at various intermediary stages along the line to greater empowerment by poor people. Such indicators would, of course, assess the agency's changed behaviour as well as that of its partners.

### How do we define success and failure?

Relationships are not just about money but can remain fruitful even when the funding comes to an end. A workshop participant commented that DFID has examples of this but does not take note of them. Thus a project may be considered a failure despite its success in achieving long term relationships that can contribute to subsequent work: 'Despite the programme collapsing, and people in DFID changing, the relations and contacts were handed down to new staff ... it is an example of long-term gain from non-instrumental relations'.

The kind of assessment proposed in the previous paragraph needs to be systematic and repeated over time. Individual 360 degree assessments of DFID staff could be done regularly by everyone every year, so that it becomes a regular and unthreatening tool that records progress and supports learning. When a staff member has frequent and sustained contacts outside the agency, it could be extended to include feedback from colleagues in partner organisations. Equally, a country office can seek regular and systematic feedback from partners and other stakeholders on the collective performance of the team.[14] To

date such feedback is sporadic and usually undertaken in a fairly "quick and dirty" fashion (as was the case in the study the author conducted in one Asian country) without sufficient investment in disaggregating and reflecting on the implications of the possibly conflicting views of different groups of stakeholders (for example, government as compared with civil society). This need not be the case. What is required is commitment from country teams to systematic learning about their behaviour. Social audit methodology is well developed and is used increasingly and on a recurrent basis by public sector organisations within the United Kingdom and other parts of Europe.

[14] ActionAid are doing this with some success; see Rosalind David and Antonella Mancini's paper in this series.

# Conclusion and challenges

Contributing to global poverty reduction is probably the most challenging task any organisation can set itself. There will never be any ready-made solutions. We are collectively engaged in something never done before in human history. We cannot know the way because we have never travelled it before. The questions posed at the start of this paper may encourage innovation and greater impact without expecting just one answer. The intention is to question certainty and to encourage innovation and exploration. It may also offer ideas concerning with whom and how we relate.

There are three associated challenges for aid agencies in taking this agenda forward. The first is the way agencies currently access success, discussed above. As long as the focus is on results that can be quantifiably measured staff will find it difficult to escape from linear planning processes however much they recognise that they are working in circumstances that require a different approach.

The second is connected to how most public sector organisations distinguish administrative costs from programme costs. Thus their own staff are accounted for as an "overhead" rather than as a key component of any aid instrument. This makes it very difficult to mix and match proportions of money and people as most appropriate for any specific context.

Although the recent tendency to recruit national staff at more senior levels has reduced the problem, the third challenge concerns the rapidity of staff turnover. In most agencies internationally recruited staff stay in an aid recipient country for an average of no more than three years. In many cases this may not be long enough for them to develop the knowledge and understanding to work effectively with organisations in that country. Furthermore, there is a high risk that the successful investment they do make in institutional relationships may be severely diminished by the agency's failure to recognise the importance of such an investment. For example, staff leave without sufficient time to hand over to their successor.

## Next steps: some conclusions from a workshop

• Be more **flexible** and more responsive to partners' priorities. This could include establishing small, quick response funds to support activities that the partner thinks important (even if we do not) and reinforce relationship building for strategic gains.

• Agree with partners the **response times** for project cycle management and invite them to track our performance.

• **Learn** from partners about the context of our work. This could include inviting partners to more open discussions, asking them to give seminars and talks (or nominate others) on key development issues. It could also mean making field visits with them, positively seeking to understand their reality and the reality of poor peoples lives and taking advantage of that understanding to help ground our work.

• Be **transparent and consistent** concerning our internal decision-making processes.

• Respect **partners' time**, spending time with them when they want it and prioritising their demands over internal demands. This would mean reducing the number of fully internal meetings.

• Encourage partners to make an **external assessment** of our collective and individual performance. This could be routinely included in the TOR for annual project reviews; a partner in one country could be invited to join a review team of a programme in another country.

Finally, if relationships matter we need to work with our heart and guts as well as our head. For staff in British organisations this may be more of a challenge than it is for those whose organisational culture places more importance on emotions. At the São Paolo (Sahy) workshop where these issues were discussed, a Brazilian participant noted how bad the British were at revealing anything about themselves or even wanting to talk with a partner about anything except work. Of course, to a large extent DFID staff behaviour reflects the culture of those who dominate the organisation and the way they in turn have absorbed patterns of relating with others that go far back into DFID's and imperial Britain's past.

### Reflecting on ourselves

Who are we and why do we understand the world in a certain way as a result of who we are?

How does that understanding have an impact on our behaviour and our relations with others?

DFID is gradually becoming a more open and less hierarchical organisation with a greater emphasis on teamwork and delegation, and women as well as men in senior management. Furthermore, *who DFID is* is changing. There are increasing numbers of staff from the countries where DFID works or from other members of the European Union. All these factors can help DFID collectively to appreciate and respond to the importance which much of the rest of the world attaches to friendship, networks and investing in relations, both in their own right and as a means for learning and acting together.

This does not mean that all we need is love; many relationships may be with those with whom we do not share a common vision. They would not be considered as partners, but the organisation needs to map them into its universe. With its partners DFID, and possibly others, needs to work much harder at understanding the road they want to travel to secure the hoped-for shared vision. This requires an intellectual grasp of the context but it also means greater empathy. In short, DFID staff must work at improving their collective emotional intelligence if relations are to matter.
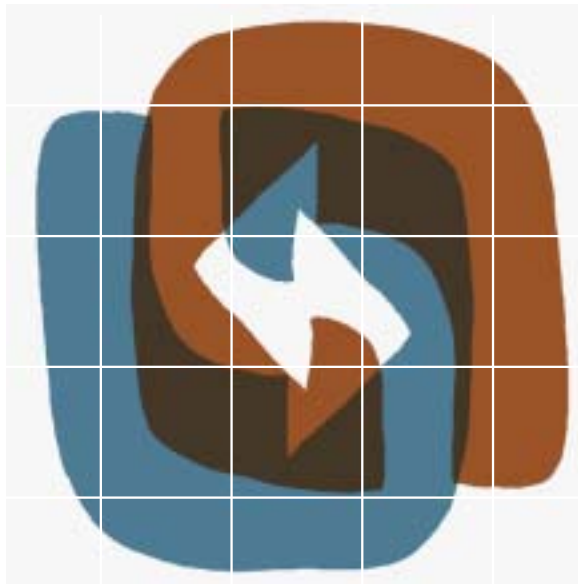
# Relationships matter

## for supporting change in favour of poor people

### Rosalind Eyben

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