



SUMMARY

How can complexity theory contribute to more effective development and aid evaluation?

Dialogue at the Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund, 3 July 2009, London, UK

Introduction

Panos London hosted a lively and cutting-edge dialogue on complexity theory and evaluation in what was the sixth meeting in a rolling series on how insights from complexity theory are useful in the aid and development sectors. Development and aid are influenced by a range of interacting factors in constantly changing social contexts, which can lead to unpredictable outcomes. Concepts and approaches from complexity theory may be useful for developing appropriate evaluation designs that will enhance real-time learning and responsive working. The day brought together a wide range of stakeholders including development practitioners, academics, donors, consultants and NGO representatives, to share insights and learning. Six case studies of using concepts and approaches from complexity theory to enhance the evaluation of aid and development initiatives, helped to anchor a range of small group discussions that considered the potential for and challenges of working with complexity theory for more effective development practice.

Expert perspectives on complexity theory and evaluation

Keynote speakers highlighted the importance of complexity theory for aid and development evaluation. Ben Ramalingam of the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP) argued that complexity theory was well suited to exploring the reality of development and aid, where many interconnected actors and factors mean that changes are often unexpected and that there is a need for ongoing management and adaptation to dynamic contexts rather than assuming plans can be determined in advance. Robin Vincent of Panos London highlighted how new concepts and approaches drawing on complexity theory were helping to address the way social and structural factors shaped patterns of HIV infection and HIV prevention interventions. Robert Chambers of IDS pointed to the potential breakthrough of combining insights from complexity theory with new developments in using 'participatory numbers'. This combination of approaches could support people living with poverty to set their own agendas and navigate lives that reflected many of the characteristics of complexity.

Proponents of complexity-based approaches faced the challenge of finding clear language and convincing examples of work that had successfully used these methods. In some ways the concepts of complexity theory legitimate the emphasis of many on participatory development. There is a need to recognise that 'reality works this way', and is complex and subject to often unexpected influences and outcomes. In a world where donors and organisations seek demonstrable results and impact, it is vital to find practical ways of working with complexity that can enhance responsive and effective development.

Case studies of complexity and evaluation

Six case studies illustrated the value of complexity-based approaches for a number of key contemporary challenges in development and aid.

Nigel Timmins of Tearfund described innovative processes for developing bottom-up and context-relevant understandings of capacity development in humanitarian work. Piet de Lange from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs also described an initiative to understand capacity development, in this case to help both the Ministry and NGOs develop more coherent understanding and practice in this area, with 30 case studies and seven evaluations being conducted during 2010.

Robin Vincent of Panos showed how complexity theory was informing attempts to address the 'social drivers' of HIV, such as gender inequality and stigma and discrimination. In HIV-prevention work with UNAIDS, complexity-informed approaches stressed learning and participation to strengthen locally tailored action on the one hand, and approaches to modelling broader social determinants of HIV for remedial policy action on the other.

Danny Burns of the SOLAR/University of the West of England described a large intervention to develop community capacity in Wales, which was guided by a 'whole systems action research' process based on complexity-theory principles. This project brought grassroots activists and senior civil servants together to develop a shared sense of local context and to take relevant practical action.

Mike Powell of the IKM Emergent Research and Communication programme described how the programme was explicitly conceived to be open ended and emergent – drawing on existing innovative work in the area of strengthening Southern knowledge-production and weaving it into their emerging programme of work. Evaluation of this programme drew on complexity concepts, with a focus on iterative reflection and learning.

Richard Longhurst of the Institute of Development Studies asked whether the perennial challenge of too few resources for evaluation is exacerbated by recognising complexity and the potential need for more resources to address it. He suggested that putting more emphasis on ongoing monitoring may be one way to respond to this challenge.

Key issues and recommendations from the day

Discussions of case studies, small group dialogues and exercises throughout the day highlighted a number of key issues and culminated in recommendations for further action. Key issues included those outlined below.

Strengthening the focus on ongoing learning

Evaluation should be much more explicitly focused on ongoing learning and adaptation of development programming, and several groups suggested that incentives needed to be changed to reward learning, and honesty about challenges and mistakes.

Recognising that development is complex and planning accordingly

Organisations and donors need to work in more flexible ways to accommodate the complex nature of development processes. Planning should explicitly address complexity at the outset and provide institutional mechanisms for adapting programmes to address shifting contexts and circumstances and to address unexpected outcomes.

Better promoting the understanding, practical application and profile of complexity-based approaches

In a number of ways, participants felt that complexity-based approaches needed a clearer, more confident profile. More case studies of successful applications of complexity theory are needed. Some of the language and terms needed to be demystified or more clearly explained.

Make greater use of multi-media documentation and communication, including stories

Moving beyond written reports to make use of alternative forms of documentation, such as audio, photography and video was discussed. Action research processes may make use of a variety of ways of ‘sense-making’ and evidence, in order to promote reflection and evaluation.

Attention to who evaluation is for and who needs to be involved

The participation of those most affected by development processes in designing and conducting evaluation was vital. Ensuring that evaluation has a focus on *use* is also key – for beneficiaries, organisations and donors.

Potential ways of accommodating complexity

Mainstreaming complexity into evaluations

Concepts and approaches from complexity should be incorporated into evaluations in practical ways, with the language demystified and concepts clarified. Those commissioning evaluations can ensure that complexity is incorporated into the evaluation design from the start and use can be made of creative multimedia and ‘multi-sensory’ forms of reporting.

Need to document and share innovative approaches.

Concrete examples of innovation in this area need to be made accessible. Persuasive examples from a range of different fields need to be shared with key audiences to promote the value of complexity-informed approaches. Participants in the meeting should collaborate to build up a body of knowledge in this area and share examples through available spaces (such as an IKM Emergent workspace on complexity and Harry and Ben's Blog see:

<http://wiki.ikmemergent.net/index.php/Workspaces:7. Complexity>)

Articulate theory of change and continual review of areas of complexity.

Evaluation should begin with an explicit theory of change but recognise that it will need to be regularly revisited. The combination of clear expectations and ongoing monitoring creates more clarity about areas of uncertainty and assumptions. Strategic action research provides an alternative to a log-frame approach with continual review of the theory of change and small cycles of enquiry which feed into the overall macro-change process

Relocate responsibility for evaluation to Southern organisations, including ongoing learning process.

Participants stressed the value of a more bottom-up process that involves people in design and implementation of evaluation, while recognising that local action may still be dominated by local elites.

Need to focus evaluation more toward learning and less toward results and link this to incentives and rewards.

It is important to have trust and honesty, and to share failures as well as successes. This needed rewards and incentives to encourage people to talk about challenges and work to overcome them. There is a need to improve ways of incorporating learning and demonstrate this. There needs to be leadership from the top to make these changes.

Next steps in the meeting series

The workshop report is available on the IKM Emergent website:

<http://wiki.ikmemergent.net/index.php/Documents>

Discussion of complexity is ongoing on the IKM emergent workspace:

<http://wiki.ikmemergent.net/index.php/Workspaces:7. Complexity>

A complexity-related blog connected to a book being written by Ben Ramalingham and Harry Jones can be found at <http://aidontheedge.info/>

The next session in the complexity series on complexity and conversation is on October 29th, followed by another in early 2010, that may be hosted by IKM Emergent in The Hague, The Netherlands. Further details will be available late in the year from the IKM Emergent website.

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