



Pragmatic aid management – a step towards success in fragile situations

October 2013

A high degree of pragmatic aid management is linked to relatively positive results of aid to fragile situations. However, other factors – such as high-level political support in donor countries, high-quality staff and focus on ownership and transfer of responsibility to local actors and institutions – seem to be important as well.

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The success of aid-supported activities in fragile situations is highly uncertain. There are numerous reasons why aid fails in fragile and unstable societies. These include social tensions and disruption, political uncertainty, weak human and institutional capacity, absent infrastructure, uncoordinated aid management, irreconcilable interests among major actors, etc. However, aid programmes sometimes succeed despite the adverse conditions. Why is that so and what are the major reasons explaining success?

Evidently, the severity of the context plays an important role. War zones are much less conducive for success than post-conflict situations where political tensions have subsided. A critical condition is local political support for aid-supported activities. Still, the way aid is managed may also have an important bearing on success. Based on an analysis of evaluations of aid-supported activities with relatively positive results, it seems that particular characteristics of aid management increase the likelihood of achievement.

Five such characteristics are here defined as pragmatic aid management (see table inside this brief).

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In fragile situations donors should

- manage aid pragmatically with emphasis on flexibility, context dependence, policy liberty and political sensitivity
- commit themselves politically to sustained support enabling aid managers on the ground to take risks and adopt unconventional approaches
- deploy highly qualified and sufficient staff to manage aid in fragile situations
- adopt a process focus on ownership and transfer of responsibility to local actors and institutions



Policy liberty	The extent to which aid activities can be carried out with a certain level of liberty regarding the general, overarching policies of the aid agency. Such aid is more concerned about conforming to local opportunities than about implementing aid agency policies.
Flexibility	The ability to redirect resources and revise and change approaches during the execution of aid-supported activities.
Responsiveness	The extent to which consideration is given to the opinions and outlooks of partners, state institutions and beneficiaries in the formulation and implementation of aid programming. Responsiveness requires an ability and willingness to listen to views that differ from previous assumptions and to act accordingly.
Context Dependence	The reliance of the conception of aid-supported activities on the historically and socially specific conditions, structures and institutions of a society. Context dependence requires aid interventions to be based on a thorough understanding of the society in which they are undertaken.
Political Sensitivity	The extent to which aid management consciously pays attention to the political economy, power and political settlement in a country. Political sensitivity is demonstrated when aid managers identify and exploit windows of opportunity that may further a development process which the agency supports.

The analysis is based on the following cases:

- Danish-supported activities in and around Somalia, 2006-2010
- Danish support to Mozambique, 1992-2006
- Danish support to the education sector in Afghanistan, 2002-2011
- British support to security-sector reform in Sierra Leone, 1999-2008
- US support to East Timor, 1999-2002
- UNDP support to the reintegration of ex-combatants in Tajikistan, 1999-2003
- German support to the reintegration of ex-combatants in Sierra Leone, 2000-2005

The *policy liberty* of aid managers was, for instance, large in Sierra Leone where British aid supported a security sector reform including a complete reconstruction of the police in the early 2000s. Many knowledgeable British advisors were deployed in Sierra Leone and some of them in very central positions. They were given substantial room-for-manoeuvre to manage aid according to the needs and opportunities in the country. Similarly, American aid managers were able to adapt their work to local conditions when they arrived to East Timor shortly after the very bloody violence in September 1999 organised by pro-Indonesian militia groups. Higher level decision-makers in Washington did not interfere with the activities on the ground. While policy liberty does not appear to be significant in all cases, it has been extensive in the most successful ones.

The most pronounced aspect of pragmatic aid management in these case studies is *flexibility*. The ability to reallocate re-

sources and to respond to unforeseen changes is much noted and appreciated by partners and fellow agencies. This characteristic is highlighted as the major factor explaining success in several evaluation reports. Danish aid, for instance, is often praised for its ability to reallocate resources *within* programmes. This is highlighted in relation to the education sector support programme in Afghanistan where some of the originally conceived activities were downplayed in favour of others.

Responsiveness to locally expressed concerns and needs is a less shared characteristic. Given the lack of staff on the ground in the case of the Danish support to Somalia, it is not surprising that the level of responsiveness here was limited. However, it seems that responsiveness is sometimes useful, sometimes less so. A possible reason for this is that vested interests and spoilers may seek to divert efforts to carry through necessary reforms, which, given the fragility involved, it may actually be possible to implement. In post-conflict situations, although windows of opportunity may be open, responding to the concerns of vested interests could close them again. Thus, responsiveness in a politically tense situation should not be pursued in any case.

Chasing flexibility, context dependence seems to be an important characteristic of successful aid management. Most of the aid-supported activities discussed here have been developed in accordance with the specific nature of the society in which they have been carried out. Interestingly, successful aid management may be context-dependent without necessarily being responsive to locally expressed concerns. For instance, British advisers strongly promoted a police reform adapted to local realities, while challenging customs and



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cultures in the force. One observer believes that this was a condition for the success of the security-sector reform.

The *political sensitivity* of the aid management analysed here has been rather uneven. From a sometimes extremely sensitive approach in Sierra Leone to a politically relatively insensitive approach in Afghanistan, where inappropriate management structures were set up in the Ministry of Education, aid has been managed in clearly different ways. Yet, it seems from the limited cases covered that more politically sensitive management practices produce better results.

Pragmatism in aid management means a lot. Notably flexibility and context-dependence appear to have characterised all the relatively successful aid-supported activities analysed. Policy liberty and political sensibility are also important features which help aid management to achieve results. Interestingly, responsiveness is not always crucial.

PRAGMATISM IS NOT EVERYTHING

Though pragmatic aid management seems to help produce positive results, the case studies indicate that other factors have also been conducive to the relative success of the aid-supported activities.

First, political support from above is likely to be important. This is most clear in Sierra Leone, where both national and foreign political support was very strong. The president of Sierra Leone saw the security-sector reform and the revamping of the police force as crucial conditions for his own political survival, and the British development secretary made

these activities a pivotal issue in her development policies. This strong support enabled aid managers to carry through activities that were daring and challenging, as they enjoyed a lot of policy liberty at the same time.

In relation to Mozambique, political support in Denmark was also strong in the 1990s, albeit of a slightly different kind, as it was more broadly based, including development organisations and trade unions. In East Timor, aid managers had a clear sense that what they were doing was contributing strongly to contemporary US foreign policies in the area. Moreover, they had the trust and support of their immediate superior, the Senior Mission Officer in USAID/Jakarta. Political attention has also characterised Danish support to Afghanistan and Somalia, but the concern has been less development-focused and more security-related. This creates a different context for aid managers.

Second, the quality of staff has been highlighted repeatedly in the reports. The ability of competent aid managers to act under extremely difficult circumstances seems to be crucial. A former political officer in the US State Department described the aid team in East Timor as follows: 'OTI team members were totally appropriate for East Timor. These independent types were just what was required. Career officers would not have been nearly as effective'.

In Afghanistan, it seems that the relative success of Denmark's support to the education sector in the early 2000s hinged on a technical advisor posted in the Ministry of Education. In Sierra Leone, the British head of the police from 1999 to 2003 appointed by the President introduced



'local needs policing', out-manoeuvred opponents within the police and even arrested political leaders accused of war crimes. Qualified staff in the right place at the right time and equipped with the policy liberty to manage aid according to context undoubtedly helps bring about success.

Third, coordination with other donors and partnerships with national and local institutions, embryonic though they may have been, have been emphasised in a number of reports. In Somalia, Danish aid managers have been praised for stimulating international coordination, and in Mozambique an evaluation report argues: 'The Danish financial support operations were valuable in themselves, but their wider benefits in setting a pattern for other donors were probably even greater'. In East Timor, aid managers were commended for facilitating the engagement of both domestic and international actors. Such coordination and cooperation help building an aid environment conducive for results, and more human and financial resources are mobilised for similar goals.

Fourth, the principles of ownership, alignment and on-budget management of aid have to an important degree characterised the cases analysed. Most striking is the British support to security-sector reform in Sierra Leone because, on the one hand, it involved the deployment of foreigners in key decision-making positions in the state and, on the other hand, it was managed with a strong consideration for Sierra Leonean ownership of the changes. As national institutions and actors stepped up their performance, foreigners were gradually withdrawn from the central positions.

In Afghanistan, it was decided right from the beginning to provide on-budget support to the education sector, something which preceded other donors with several years. In Mozambique, alignment with national policies characterised Danish aid management from the early 1990s.

Principles evidently help aid managers to navigate in very volatile surroundings, but the nature of the principles is hardly irrelevant. A strong sense of the temporary nature of the support stimulates a focus on making institutions perform. Yet, it is a difficult balance to strike because short-term cooperation may not produce the desired results.

Sierra Leone is again a case in point because the British and Sierra Leonean governments agreed to a ten-year memorandum of understanding as a framework for their cooperation. Yet, London would not agree to the deployment of a British Military Training Advisory Team for more than three years due to concerns about Sierra Leone becoming dependent on it, although it was obvious to people in Sierra Leone that more than three years were needed. Thus, the conclusion may be that a strong focus on ownership and a gradual handing over of responsibility are needed and help in building capacity, but the precise moment for pulling out should be determined along the road.

Fifth, the evaluations of the reintegration of ex-combatants in Tajikistan and Sierra Leone indicate that a particular approach to this issue has been developed on the basis of experience from many different contexts and that this approach is conducive to success. While it must be adapted to context, it nevertheless has a number of characteristics, including comprehensiveness in terms of economic, political and social issues, a combination of short and long-term perspectives, and the inclusion of many different actors in addition to the ex-combatants.

All this indicates that *pragmatic and principled aid management with political support and qualified staff in coordination with relevant domestic and international actors – the process being characterised by a focus on transferring ownership – is conducive to the success of aid-supported activities in fragile situations*. In addition, luck is probably also needed to prevent spoilers succeeding in derailing the activities.

Nevertheless, it seems that a great deal can be done to provide optimal working conditions for aid management in order to achieve positive results. Though the basis for this conclusion is a limited number of evaluations and analyses, the diversity of the cases discussed here strengthens the points that cut across the cases. Thus, it appears reasonable for donor agencies to review whether they have established optimal conditions for the management of the activities they support. In addition, it would be useful to strengthen and review seriously the monitoring and evaluation of aid to fragile situations.

FURTHER READING

Bourgouin, F. and Engberg-Pedersen, L. 2013: "Pragmatic aid management in fragile situations", *DIIS Report 2013:26*, Danish Institute for International Studies.

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