

## **Planning for unpredictability: initial thoughts**

This discussion note attempts to stand back from current norms of work in development practice and think about what we are trying to achieve when we do 'development work' and how we could best organise ourselves to achieve our goals.

### **Development as intervention**

'Development work' in this context is understood to mean the deliberate application of external resources – which we will call an 'intervention' - with the aim of improving the life experience of some group of people, more or less precisely identified, which has usually been chosen on the basis of location or issue (e.g. 'people at risk of a particular disease'), as well as, often, other far more specific criteria, such as age, gender or wealth. We are not talking here of how individuals or communities act themselves with their own resources to improve their own lives, although some development interventions are premised on identifying and supporting such efforts.

The process of making the 'choice' described above can itself involve a range of factors, but nearly always includes the particular areas of focus/ expertise of the development agency and often the priorities of whoever is funding them. It will usually involve a degree of consultation with other local agents, such as government, local NGOs or faith groups. It may have emerged from long established relationships and discussion with the 'people' who are intended to benefit, or from people claiming to represent them. Alternatively, there is no shortage of documented examples where the 'choice' has been made without the consent or even against the expressed wishes of the 'beneficiaries'.

Interventions can take the form of one off events or donations. More often they involve a series of actions. Either way, their effect or their 'impact' is something which develops over time in the interaction between the outside input and the society into which the input has been made. This is why development interventions, whatever their 'end results' have also to be understood and assessed as processes.

However they have emerged, development interventions are always based on an intent of the person/organisation making them. This intent, coupled with quantities of often scarce resources, give the development organisation considerable power in the process. However, this power never equates to complete control and many would argue that it never should. In an ideal world, the intent of the donor should match perfectly with the intent of the recipient. In reality, this is rare in the extreme. Sometimes there is an explicit negotiation of different, but not necessarily contradictory intents. Sometimes the issue is concealed by a refusal to acknowledge or seek to resolve any divergence. More often there is some sort of fudge.

## **Certainty and Control**

Parallel to the impossibility of control is the impossibility of any certainty in relation to what happens both during the process of any intervention and, even more so, in its effects. There are at least three reasons why this is the case.

Development intervention, as Rosalind Eyben has explored at length, always takes place through a series of relationships with the society in which it takes place. By definition, a relationship is based on the interaction of (at least) two parties. Its quality cannot therefore be entirely determined by any one party, however powerful. In the development sector, the quality of these relationships range from excellent to terrible. One aspect of the quality of relationships is the extent to which diverse intents can be recognised and discussed. Another aspect related to who conducts these relationships. Institutions and organisations can and do have relationships but their form and nature is mediated by people, and so, therefore, are all development interventions.

Development intervention, as a process, is affected by events. These may be significant political economic changes taking place at a global or national level over which the intervention has no influence but by which it will be affected. They may relate to the decisions and activities of other 'players', possibly larger and better resourced development organisations trying to have an influence on the same area of work. They may, and in the high staff turnover world of development organisations often do, derive from personnel changes, maternity leaves, sickness etc. Such changes can affect the range of expertise available to the intervention, the knowledges on which it is based as well as the personal relationships involved.

As argued above, development intervention is almost always a process and a process always has its own dynamics. In every situation in which a group of people set out to work together over a period of time in a situation influenced by 'events', new possibilities – positive and negative – which could not have been foreseen before the process started will emerge.

All these factors are important. All are likely to have a bearing on the success of the intervention. Although what actually happens may be impossible to foresee, the fact that these dynamic factors are in play remains and needs to be taken into account in the management of the intervention. This is not an argument against seeking to control what can be controlled or trying to influence that which cannot. However, to attempt to manage the process on the basis of illusions of non-existent control and certainty makes no sense. It cannot in any sense be regarded as professional.

We understand 'emergent factors' to exist within every human process. They have no moral value – good or bad – independent of the specifics of each factor. However, we would class as 'emergent' the possibilities for learning and adaptive change which could (and should) come out both of learning from practice, the experience of working with new people with their own knowledges and perspectives and, above all, through participatory engagement with those whose lives are being affected. In our view it is profoundly pessimistic to manage an intervention, particularly one which lasts for some time, on the basis that it cannot be improved during the process of

implementation. In our view, 'continuous improvement' should be as much a feature of development intervention as it is of the car industry. The management of interventions needs to explicitly spell out when and through what processes such improvements will be identified and implemented.

The 'management of interventions' covers a range of activities, starting from the making of basic choices of what, where and why, through the processes of planning and implementation, monitoring and evaluation to attempting to assess impact. As suggested above, the making of choices – and how they are made – are of enormous importance. So too is the process of trying to understand what has happened during an intervention, what its effect has been and what can be learnt from it. There is a growing literature on issues of attribution and contribution, on 'developmental evaluation' and on evaluation and complexity. However less has been written on the middle stage: how the details of the intervention are developed and put into operation. Within the development sector, this nearly always involves a plan.

### **Implications for Planning**

We regard planning as a vital stage in the process, but subject to certain understandings of what it can do, what it can (or perhaps should) not do and in what circumstances it is of most value.

Our understanding of the purposes of planning is that it is an activity which allows us

- To clarify our goals
- To explore these goals with other stakeholders, to understand their goals, and to map out the roles, responsibilities and relationships upon which the intervention will be based
- To think through what activities might lead to the achievement of these goals
- To identify the resources needed
- To serve as a means of explaining what it is intended to do so that people understand what is supposed to happen
- To offer a framework for accountability – is what was said would be done being done? – and also for reflection and revision – is what we are doing making progress towards our goals? What can we do better or differently?

In our view, there are two very common problems with plans as they are used in the development sector. The first is that they become too rigid. They are seen as a blueprint for what will be done and against which everything will be evaluated and rewarded. This can encourage a mechanistic and bureaucratic way of working which inhibits innovation and constrains relationships. Most, importantly it can make it hard or impossible to change course. Meeting the plan becomes the object of the exercise, rather than achieving the goal

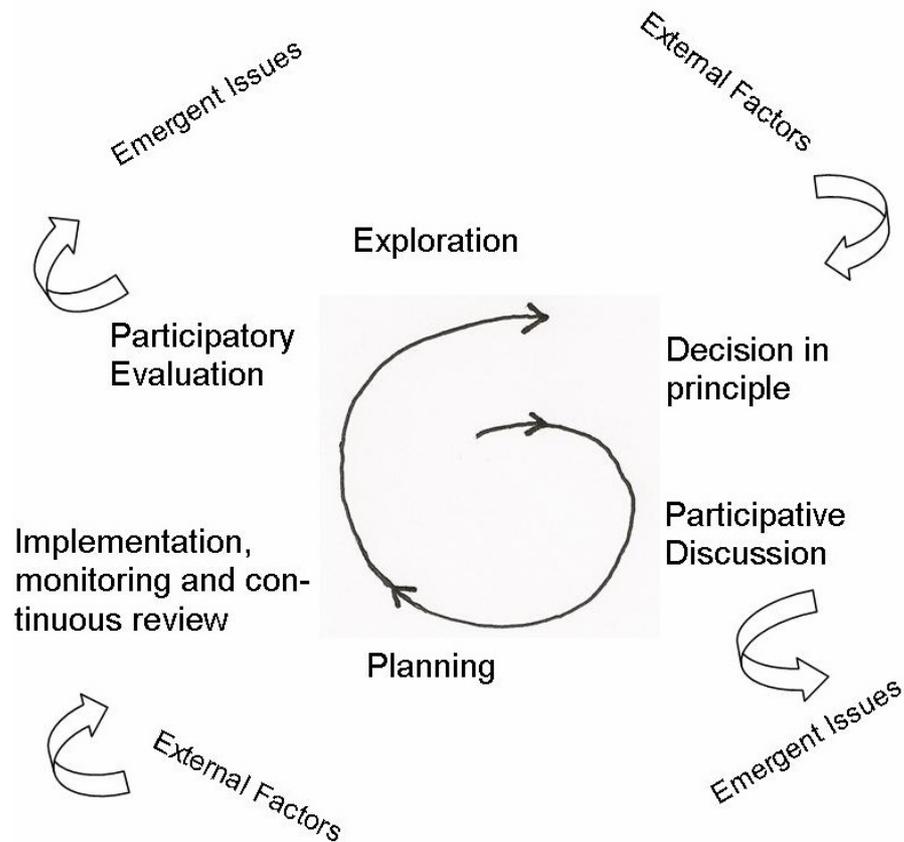
Another issue is the appropriate level of detail. An incredible amount of time money and energy is spent making plans which then do not get approved. This can be extremely demotivating for people. It can discourage participatory planning as either the poor or their local organisations have to make a lot of effort which may come to nothing or the planning is done by professionals on the basis that the work will become 'participative' once it has been approved. Such retrospective 'participation' often leads to disaster. It makes more sense to make the whole process iterative with seed money available for initial stages and the detailed planning to take place in a

context where approval and outline budgets have already been agreed in principle. Ideally such iteration would continue throughout the intervention and be free of too much interference. Designing work in numerous stages, each of which requires a new formal approval is likely to introduce unnecessary angst into the process. Knowing that, subject to due processes of governance and of accountability, the plan can be revised and the money spent in different ways gives people the confidence, as well as the authority, to work in reflexive and responsive way.

## **Two Examples**

The core of an intervention is the application of resources to achieve a goal. The goal is paramount and should be the focus throughout. What is done to achieve that goal may change substantially throughout the process for any number of reasons. Planning for us is a dynamic tool which provides a framework in which progress can be checked and changes made.

IKM was worked and planned in two ways. The first (figure 1) is an adaptation of the well worn project cycle. It is now conceived as a spiral. It embeds iterative working. It tries to ensure attention is paid to new external factors and to emergent issues. Its differences with the traditional project cycle are significant but it is recognisably suggesting a similar process



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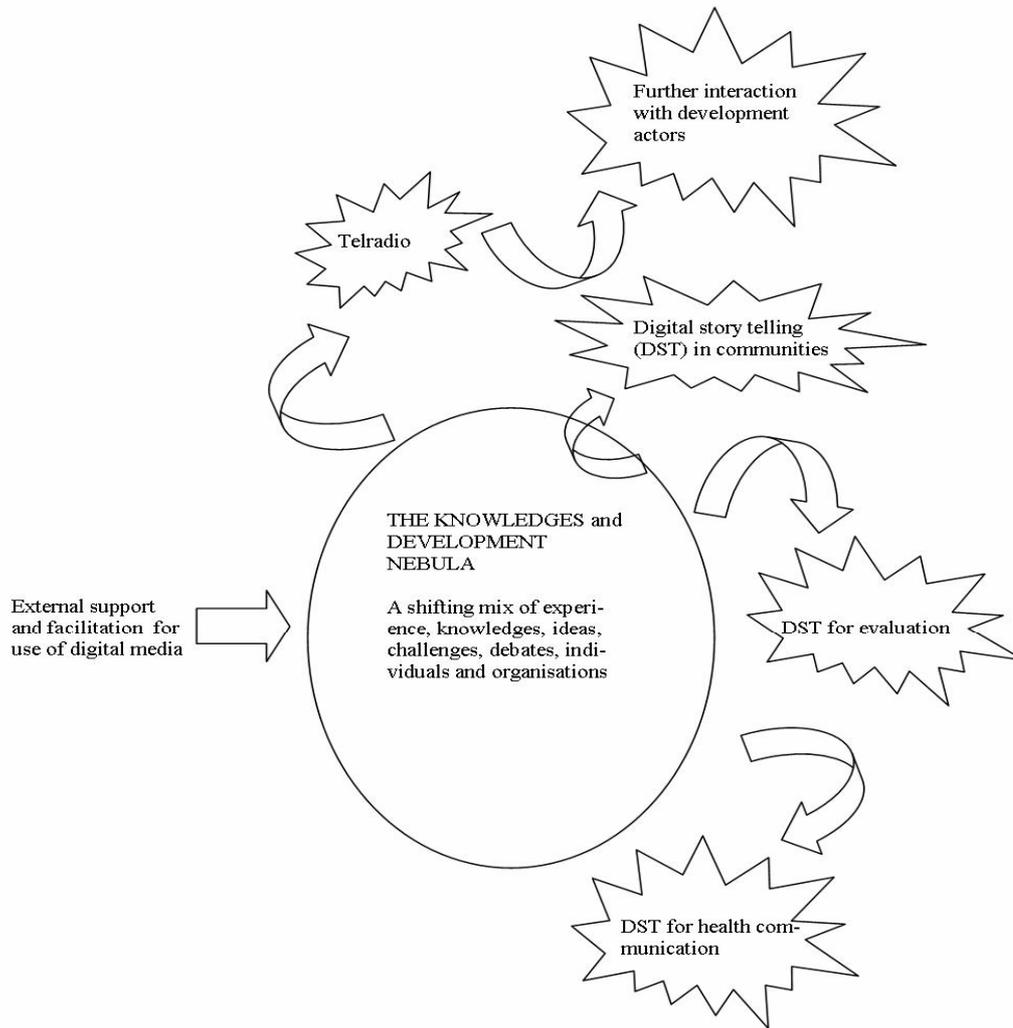
Project cycle assuming participation, uncertainty and emergence

**Figure 1**

The second (figure 2), which is based on Michael David's IKM supported Digital Story Telling project in Sri Lanka is significantly different. It assumes that something will happen as a result of an intervention, in this case support for the making and dissemination of digital stories, but makes very little effort to predict what that will be. Instead the intervention is set up to try and observe what is happening and to find within the activities of many players doing many unanticipated things the best partners and the best ideas to take the intervention further towards its goal, which was to create opportunities for the expression of the voice and knowledge of poorer communities.

To us this completely explicit abandonment of any pretense of control is very interesting. It also seems appropriate to any other intervention aimed at promoting social change or the 'empowerment' of the poor. Almost by definition, the expectation of certain actions or behaviours as a result of 'empowerment' constrains the freedom which is allegedly being encouraged. Instead David's methodology puts

the attention on observation and reflection of what is happening and on how the intervention can respond.



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Pilot methodology for building capacity through locally generated spin-offs rather than through an externally planned 'solution'

**Figure 2**