



TVs and Tomatoes

the case for multiple objectives in development projects

DISCUSSION PAPER

You have run out of tomatoes. So, do you jump into your 4x4, rush into town and only buy tomatoes? Of course not. Unless you were desperately short of time, money or brains, you would make good use of your trip. You would fill up your trolley at the supermarket, and do other tasks, such as paying your electricity bill, while in town. You would “use your head to save your legs”. You would be irresponsible not to.

One wonders, therefore, why the development community hasn't adopted a more multi-objective approach in programme design and evaluation.

Multiple Objectives in the ‘Real’ World

In the real world, you rarely do anything with only a single objective in mind. You buy a nice car. Why? Most likely, it will be for a multitude of reasons: you'll save time getting to work, you'll be able to get your children to those evening crammer classes at the edge of town, you'll be able to do your weekly shopping at the super-cheap supermarket, and it'll impress your colleagues and neighbours. Plus, of course, you'll enjoy the thrill of speeding down the motorway with ssshhh-you-know-who in the passenger seat.

Indeed, think about anything you have done, and you will find multiple reasons, multiple objectives. Consider: did you accept your current job solely because you thought the salary was good? Did you choose your holiday only because you

wanted to get a suntan? Did you get married just for the sex?

We do most things for multiple purposes. We look down on people who fail to do this; we label them narrow-minded, infelicitous, inefficient and boring. And yet...

Mono-Objectivism in the ‘Development’ World

Let's look at how we work in the development context. For some reason, we have got it into our heads that a good project has to be something like the following: you have a series of outputs that lead to a limited number of outcomes, and these outcomes all work towards the achievement of a single objective.

A single objective? Yes, a single objective. Just the tomatoes, my dear.

In years gone by, we used to focus on inputs and activities, with little attention given to the longer-term value of whatever we were doing. Thankfully, we have moved ahead from those carefree days. Now, in our efforts to make our projects and programmes more effective, with benefits that are more sustainable, and results more measurable, we have shifted our attention further up the logical ladder, to outcomes and objectives. And that's great. The only problem is, that in the process, we forgot about the real, multi-objective world out there. When welcoming the new emphasis on project-focus, we fell into the trap of what can best be described as ‘mono-objectivism’. We were swayed by the aesthetically pleasing pyramid, you know the one, with activities at the base, a manageable number of outputs above, all leading to a handful of outcomes, which in

turn draw logically up to our single objective... But beauty can be deceptive, and we have been deceived. *We have confused what prompts us to do something with our reasons for doing it.*

In real life, it's nearly always a single thing that *prompts* us to do something. The World Cup is on next week, so let's get a TV. We've run out of tomatoes, so let's go to the supermarket. Maternal mortality rates are high, so let's build some health centres. It's no problem to be stimulated to act in the light of a single stimulus. The mistake is to leave it at that, and respond as a Pavlov dog would do: stimulus, response; stimulus, response. Humankind (outside of the development sector) will generally do a bit more analysis, a bit more thinking, and will seek to achieve maximum advantage from whatever action they plan to take.

The World Cup is on next week, so it's perfectly logical to want to buy a TV. You've got the necessary inputs (your bank account is healthy), there is a need, and, as one would expect from any World Cup, there is a goal. But actually, like any World Cup, you will have *more than one goal*. Yes, you will be entertained over the next few weeks by fascinating football matches - your goal is your own happiness, and you just *love* football. But before you rush down to the store, you will think more broadly about the benefits or otherwise of buying that TV.

Will it bring the family together, perhaps encouraging your troublesome teenaged children to spend less time out in the streets? Will having a TV help to boost your family's status amongst your neighbours? Perhaps your children will learn from the educational programmes?

So what's your objective? If you are obsessed with mono-objectivism, you can select 'happiness' from the drop-down menu (what might the other options be, I wonder?). But of course, you could have selected the same objective as the ultimate justification for buying the tomatoes, or for building your health centres. 'Happiness', while very nice, is not particularly helpful as an objective, and does little to clarify or justify a project. So let's come down a level, and choose valid objective(s) for getting a TV. No drop-down menu here; the world's your oyster. Your primary (and most immediate) objective may be to be able to watch the World Cup live, but there will be other objectives too: that you are entertained in the evenings, that your status amongst your neighbours is enhanced, that your children are better educated, and that your children will be less at risk from the dangers of the streets.

Chicken or Egg? Does Activity or Objective come first?

It's interesting to note that, while it was the immediacy of the upcoming World Cup that prompted us to consider buying a TV, it was only when we be-

gan to think more broadly about the proposed purchase that we thought through what else could be achieved through owning a TV. And so it is that we can now determine more exactly the kind of TV we need. To keep track of the ball in the World Cup, the screen will need to be big. To impress the neighbours, it should be flat-screen; to entice the children away from the streets, it will need to be colour. Since the best educational programmes tend to be shown in the daytime, the TV should have a recording facility, so the children can watch these in the evenings.

So much for the real world - but what about the development world? Those from above (from headquarters offices, mostly) not only ignore the multi-objective world out there, but are also delightfully deluded about how those of us at the sharp end of development actually design projects and programmes. They seem to think that we start with a magical single objective (e.g. reducing maternal mortality) and, on the basis of that, work our way downwards, defining outcomes to achieve that objective, then the outputs to achieve those outcomes, then the relevant activities, and finally the inputs required. But we all know, don't we, that this isn't how things actually happen. Far be it for us to burst their idealistic balloon, but perhaps one fine day, we should confess to them that what we *really* do is the following:

Stage 1: Normally, our starting point will have been one output

or activity (e.g. the construction of these health centres) that has been identified to us as a need, by a beneficiary community or government body. This will be our point of entry, and we will just have to draft whatever proposals are required to get this done.

Stage 2: Don't tell anyone this, will you? But the next step is to think from activity or output level, and work our way upwards. OK, so we've got to build three health centres. What outcome statements can we use as justification for building these health centres? And, taking into account our organisation's mandate, what objective can we claim ultimately to be aiming for?

Inefficiency in Mono-Objectivism

Mono-objectivism is not just based on illusory logic, but is also inherently inefficient. Surely there is more than one benefit that can be yielded from the building of health centres? OK, our primary objective is to reduce maternal mortality, for example, and nothing we add to the project should compromise our abilities to achieve that primary goal. But shouldn't we be encouraged to think about other benefits that can result from this health centre project? And couldn't these be included as secondary objectives, given due recognition, to be monitored and evaluated, i.e. to be fully incorporated into the project? There will be many tweaks we can give

to the project design that could result in substantial additional benefit to the community concerned, at little or no extra cost, if only we could be given the green light.

Let's be wild. Think about what normally we would dismiss as mere spin-off benefits of a health-centre project, and yet which could, if properly incorporated in project design, make the project not just good, but very good. Firstly, of course, there are many health-related benefits that can come from this project. But there's more. By requiring that labour used in the construction is local, we could inject funds into the struggling rural economy. Environmental-awareness programmes could be incorporated into the project, so that local people can develop skills in securing minimal environmental impact during the construction phase. If there's a nascent NGO movement in the area, their members could be encouraged to participate in the planning and monitoring of the construction programme, and thereby could mature significantly during the course of the project. Or why not use the opportunity to build up local skills in appropriate-technology building techniques? The health centres can be built using local materials, and someone can train the locals how to strengthen mud-bricks by using locally-made water-glass, with the ultimate aim (a secondary objective) of people's regular houses also being built stronger and longer-lasting in the future.

Surely we can work towards the achievement of a combination of these objectives? To go back to the shopping trip analogy, we could buy not just tomatoes, but chicken, milk, eggs and fruit, and, yes, just a few extra minutes would allow us to get those trainers being advertised at half-price in the nearby store, and sort out a pending telephone bill.

Admittedly, there are many projects that already are implemented with a view to maximising these kinds of spin-off benefits, but few of us get any brownie points for such endeavours. You would be lucky to earn as much as a footnote acknowledgment in an evaluation report, as there is no satisfactory way of formalising such benefits in our mono-objectivist framework.

A Word of Caution

Of course, we will have to take care when venturing for the first time into the magical world of multi-objectivism. The broader a project spreads itself, the greater the danger that the project loses its focus. In a multi-objective project, the primary objective must always remain paramount in our minds. We *mustn't, whatever happens, forget to buy the tomatoes*. Nor should we allow our attention to secondary objectives even to slow down our achievement of the primary one. The spaghetti is in the pot, and we need the tomatoes tonight.

If we fail to buy the tomatoes, then our shopping trip was a failure. If maternal mortality rates do not improve following the construction of these health centres, then, regardless of how many people now build their houses using improved techniques, or how much the local economy has improved, then this project has failed. But to focus only on maternal mortality is to miss a great opportunity. The challenge therefore is to strike a balance, such that any potentials for added benefit are maximised through carefully selected secondary objectives, while at the same time guaranteeing no adverse consequences with regards to the achievement of the primary objective.

Multi-Objectivism - where can it work?

Take any project idea, and it's difficult not to think of valuable secondary objectives. At little additional cost, literacy programmes can incorporate safe-sex messages to reduce HIV infection rates; advocacy on gender issues can be subtly included in skills-training for construction workers; local organic farming can be encouraged through carefully designed tourism-sector projects; food security programmes can incorporate initiatives to reduce pollution in transportation; vaccination programmes could promote awareness-raising on human rights issues. All it takes is a little lateral thinking. Infrastructure projects, in particular, lend themselves well to a

more multi-objectivist approach. Electrification of a remote village may help stimulate income generating activities amongst the poor, but there's so much more that can be achieved. Students will get electric light to read by, and the women can switch from forest-destroying smoky fires to electric rice-cookers. Through electronic media, communities can access information about modern technologies, gender issues, health issues, family planning, and so on.

And what about the larger scale infrastructure projects, such as roads and railways?

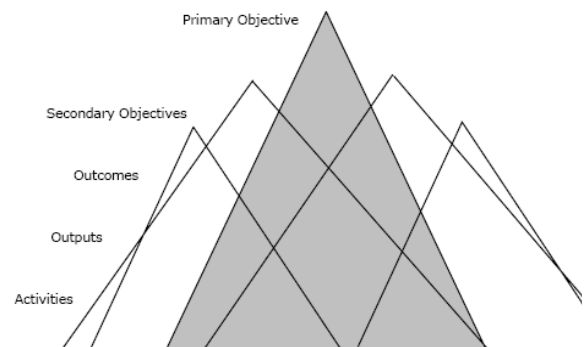
The undervalued road

One sector in which development agencies seem to find any excuse to reject government requests for assistance is roads. It's a classic example of where governments' multi-responsibility finds itself at odds with development agencies' mono-objectivism. And the losers are the people.

Governments don't have the luxury of being able to focus solely on pollution, or on urban crime, or on agricultural development, or on unemployment. By their very nature, governments have to multi-task. And if they can come up with initiatives that will stimulate improvements across the board, in a whole range of sectors, then so much the better. Building roads or rail-

ways to remote parts of the country can be one such initiative. Once a new road or railway has been built, farmers can more easily market their produce, and procure quality seeds, fertilisers and pesticides; youngsters can more easily access higher education; emergency services can reach the area more immediately in the event of some disaster; health services can improve; tourism can be given a boost; and with improved movement of goods, services and people, the disparity of income between the people there, and the rest of the country, can be reduced.

But do the development agencies scramble excitedly for the privilege of supporting a high profile project, that will for the first time connect a remote district with the rest of the country? No. Far from it. In the mono-objective world *they* live in, there seems to be little justification for these kinds of infrastructure projects. If you want to improve the lot of the farmer, there are cheaper ways to help him than building roads or railways. And the same is true, if you want to improve literacy, or health, or education levels, or income levels. For each of these, individually, there are



In place of the old pyramid, how about a mountain range?

more cost-effective ways to achieve progress in that sector, than building roads. A simple farm-produce ropeway would do for the farmers; inexpensive literacy classes and the stocking of a small library would sort out the literacy problem much more cheaply. Set up a small health post, re-equip the local school, start up a micro-enterprise support programme... in turn, each of these would solve the relevant sectors' problems.

Individually, any of these initiatives will be cheaper than building the road or railway. But add the costs all up together, throw in the spin-off benefits (employment, equity, national pride, sustainable long-term development), subtract the spin-off costs (heightened crime rates, faster spreads of disease, environmental impacts) and the mathematics will demonstrate the worth of the road. But for as long as the development community is set on single-objective programmes, the governments won't get the cash they need.

Conclusion

Enough said. The time has come to review the way we design projects, and to reassess the value of mono-objectivism. Let's pilot a more innovative design process, and move boldly but carefully towards a more multi-objective approach. And yes, we must incorporate checks and balances to ensure that we don't go too much the other way, with projects floundering in hyper-objectivism.

What I would propose is the following:

1. Identify your key outcome(s) and output(s) and activities, taking into account the principles and mandate of your organisation, and the expressed needs of the country.
2. Brainstorm the likely benefits (and costs) of doing these activities, of achieving these outputs. Then, work your way up and define the objectives that capture most succinctly the benefits identified.
3. Look through your objectives, and select ONE as the primary objective.
4. Rank the other (secondary) objectives according to priority, with reference both to the needs of the country, and to your organisation's mandate. In the ranking process, you might choose to place those secondary objectives whose contributing outputs and outcomes coincide with those of the primary objectives, or of other secondary objectives, more highly than stand-alone secondary objectives.
5. Weed out any secondary objectives that are judged to be of such little consequence that they risk being 'more trouble than they're worth'.
6. Limit yourself to a certain maximum number of secondary objectives (say, three

for starters?) to be incorporated in your project, so choose the top (three) from your ranking list. These are your secondary objectives.

7. Look at each of your objectives (primary and secondary), and see if the addition or deletion of any outputs and activities will contribute to the secondary objectives, with the proviso that no change should be made which would have negative impact on the achievement of the primary objective.
8. Ensure that a certain set minimum proportion (maybe 80%?) of project funds are allocated to activities which will directly support the achievement of the primary objective.
9. Lobby the powers that be to value multiple-objective projects more highly than mono-objective projects.

Well, it's worth a try, isn't it?

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*Phew, at least that's finished...
I could do with a cup of coffee
now, couldn't you?*

*Oh, waaagh!....
Darling - could you nip back
and get some coffee powder?
I really thought you would
have picked some up while
you were in town...*

Comments on this discussion paper are welcome. Send your e-mail to chris@miniAID.com, and, unless you request otherwise, they may be published for others to view and comment further on, at www.miniAID.com/feedback.