

Tools for project development within a public action framework

David Wield

Introduction¹

The growing professionalisation of development management has grown out of, and involved, acceptance of new public management approaches. These include goal-setting — increasingly quantitative — with outcomes overtly described and evidently achievable, in the name of efficiency and financial and/or managerial accountability. In terms of project design and implementation, this suggests the use of technical tools such as Logical Framework Approach (LFA). LFA tools were originally developed and used as design tools for ‘blueprint’ approaches, and as such they have been highly constraining, quantitative, and boundaried. More recently, as many development agencies, particularly NGOs and aid agencies, have addressed the pressure to ‘professionalise’, they have adopted such tools. However, these agencies have at best exhibited an ambivalent attitude to their use and their applicability to the complex and uncertain realities of development practice.

The paper looks at ways of thinking about the LFA in various types of application. There have been many well-publicised attempts to use the LFA in process-based ways.² However, with the countervailing pressures for project management to become more managerialist, these interesting efforts can be threatened. We consider the process-based use of the LFA and argue that this should not be lost in the drive for professionalisation, and that such application is useful to practitioners in complex, value-driven, and qualitative contexts. We also consider the limitations of the LFA from a public action perspective, where public means a wide range

of institutions — not only government institutions but aid agencies, NGOs, community groups, collectives, and political movements.

Development management and tools

Development management is a process that includes the social definition of needs and it is embedded in public action. Development management is more than policy implementation in a rigid sense. Rather, it involves activities that steer and facilitate intervention towards the identification and meeting of human need. This style of management ‘differs from the simple idea of getting the work done by the best means available’ (Thomas 1996: 101). It means steering effort outside the particular organisation for which one works. Since there are never enough means available, it involves balancing resources, often from many sources, all with different needs and priorities. Agencies, institutions, groups, and individuals may never completely agree on what has to be done. Ideas such as influence, steer, facilitate, and sustainability point to the overriding importance of process and continuity. And development management involves learning lessons and feeding them back into practice.

Thus, among development agencies, there is fundamental doubt and considerable cynicism about whether LFA tools can possibly be relevant to process-based management, given that they appear to promote the very project-based styles, with a tendency to technocracy and non-participation, that many agencies believe weaken the overall effectiveness of development interventions.

Development projects and development processes

Development management takes place in a variety of development contexts and institutions, always involving a range of agencies and individuals (i.e. a diversity of stakeholders). There is a tension between the need to focus and clarify development interventions in manageable ways, often artificially simplified, and an understanding of the limitations set by such a narrow focus on bounded projects, interventions, and activities. Interventions take place in a complex, highly populated landscape of human activity.

One starting point for such initiatives in development is the project. At a simple level, this allows a complex series of processes to be broken down into an organised set of tasks which follow a decision to implement a project. There are great variations in what constitutes ‘a project’, including:

- the installation of a single new piece of equipment;
- the introduction of a single new job category;
- an agency expanding its activities to another location;
- the development of a whole new sector of activity.

Because of this diversity of scales it is important to develop approaches that, in effect, step back from a project and see it in its full context as part of a longer and broader process. The importance of this is illustrated by a comment made by one practitioner/academic:

Moving from ideas to action (at whatever level) is one of the trickiest issues [in development]. It requires identifying what actually needs to be done once one has the bright idea, who will do it, and how they will be accountable. Failure to spell this out can be intentional or unintended. For example, government departments often come up with grand plans without concretely working out the institutional base, the impact on incentives, and the power relations that will result. Donor agencies and governments alike, especially recently, talk to stakeholders at great length but the who's and how's are unspecified and vague. NGOs also waste a lot of time and effort in this way. Result — all the lovely discussion and plans for participation come to naught.

Policy and action: projects and environments

How then, in a process-based way, can we situate the intervention (project or whatever) within the 'highly populated landscape'? Considering the relationship between policy and action, and between projects and the wider activities of operations and institutions (i.e. its environment), another practitioner said:

There is a tension between the need to focus projects and interventions and the need to appreciate the complexity of the environment of the new activity. It is obvious that at any one moment the focus may be entirely at project level with no sense of its context. Conversely, those responsible for implementation, may feel they have little control over decisions outside their project.

The following quotations further illustrate the tension:

For example, in a very unstable environment the managers will probably need to adjust project design more often, and there will be a different planning and management approach than in a more stable

environment. Account has to be taken of the breadth of impact of a particular project — and the full range of factors that may affect its course — and of the long term character of change. There are major differences between, and concern with, development processes more broadly — which are likely, at the very least, to involve several projects over a significant period of time, and most likely a complex interaction between different individual projects. (NGO employee)

Most practitioners/project managers are focused on, or perhaps even blinkered by, the project level. Many are so busy managing ‘their’ project that the wider picture is lost. It is also perhaps a reflection on the fact that most project managers feel little responsibility for, or influence over, events outside their project. In reality, there is often a lack of influence. (Aid agency employee)

Projects: Are they discrete, technical initiatives to achieve defined objectives, or should they be viewed as socio-political processes in which competing and collaborating actors seek to achieve stated and unstated objectives? (Academic)

Policy as blueprint or as process

This tension is always there, a reflection of the conflicting images of what projects are.³ The tension can be described, perhaps simplistically, as that between blueprint and process. The term blueprint comes from engineering images of detailed drawings showing exact product specifications, suggesting ‘that projects need to be systematically and carefully planned in advance, and implemented according to the defined plan’ (Cusworth and Franks 1993: 8) — perfect imagery for both state-led and scientific management approaches, but not for the idea of multi-agent, complex, process-based approaches. The process approach, on the other hand, ‘allows for flexibility in project design: although wider objectives must be defined from the outset, project inputs and outputs ... are not set in stone .. and lessons are learnt from past experience’ (ODA 1995: 104). It seems clear that the polarised either/or approach to blueprint versus process is not the way ahead. Rather, it may be ‘a question of which form of blueprint or process, in which circumstances, and even of what means may be used to integrate blueprint and process approaches’ (Hulme 1995: 230).

So, account must be taken of the breadth of impact of a project, of the relationship between projects and ongoing activities, and of the development processes of which it is part. Projects take place in a sea

of linked activities that involve multiple agencies ‘an aggregate of organisations which are responsible for a definable area of institutional life’ (Anheier 1990), where ‘the objectives of individual organisations involved in a project do not necessarily add up to, and coincide with, those of the project or the target group’, and where issues are ‘complex, ill-structured, interdependent and multi-sectoral’.

In practice, many managers and practitioners prefer working with relatively tight routines and blueprints, but they also recognise that these, in fact, exist within processes.

Influencing environments

Such a recognition implies that a simple boundary between the project and its environment is not that helpful. Smith et al. (1981) developed a framework that recognised the environment as more complex than ‘all the elements outside a project, or outside an organisation, that cannot be controlled’.⁴ They use a three-level model of the environment. In the centre is the *controlled* environment, then what they call the *influenceable* environment — those activities and institutions which can be influenced by the project or organisation but not directly controlled. Outside this is the *appreciated* environment, which includes activities and institutions that ‘can neither be controlled nor influenced by its management’, even though their actions affect project or organisation performance.

Such an approach overlaps with that of Vickers’ appreciative system (1965; 1970). This is a process whose products conditions the process itself, ‘but the system is not operationally closed ... the appreciative system is always open to new inputs’ (Checkland 1994: 83–84). Research in the evolutionary theory of technological change strongly suggests that during periods of rapid innovation, the boundaries between businesses (or firms) and their environments are in constant flux (Amendola and Bruno 1990).

Projects and ongoing public action

There is, then, a tension between the need to focus projects and actions and the need to appreciate the complex environments in which interventions take place. Many development practitioners think of their work as project-based and development as a series of projects and programmes — a vast interlocking series of them. In many parts of the world, projects are an increasing element of development activity. Not only has there been a major decrease in state activity, but much of that

activity has been turned into projects — a process of projectisation. In many countries and sectors, there has been a major decline in routine, ongoing activity and a corresponding increase in support for NGO activity (sub-contracted with short time-frames). Aid agency funding, much of it on a project or programme basis, is increasingly important. Many large loans and grants have thus been projectised. But, despite the recurrent debates on the disadvantages of projects as instruments of development intervention, no effective alternatives have emerged, and projects are likely to remain a basic means for translating policies into action programmes (Cernea 1991).

Nevertheless, many development practitioners work in organisations that facilitate and coordinate many different actions simultaneously, rather than having prime responsibility for one project. For example, at a local level, someone in charge of primary health may be responsible for pulling together many projects (that in turn link to many different agencies) into some sort of coherent whole. Their work includes balancing the need for overall coherence against the need to keep up the enthusiasm of project workers. Or rather, the need to combine coherence of action with punctuated intervention. One serious problem in many locations is that the work of project intervention is separated from that of building or preserving coherence — that is, different people do the different tasks, with one type of work (the project work with donor funds) valued more highly than the routine, ongoing activities which try to continue in the face of diminishing budgets. Such balancing involves serious tensions between many different organisations, all with different cultures, resources, and agendas.

Understanding the LFA in a public action perspective

We have argued so far that development issues are generally complex and messy. They usually involve problems that are strongly interconnected, and multiple agencies. They cannot easily be reduced into neat individual problems that can be resolved within one organisation — they require those involved to go outside their organisation, to where they may have little leverage to implement change. Untangling the different casual processes is not possible solely by following a set of routines.

If tools are used as process-tools, the extent to which they can assist in steering and forging coherence of action in situations with multiple

actors and many interests can be assessed. So it is with the LFA.

Framework planning is a tool used to improve clarity and focus in the planning of interventions. The tool, which has many different forms, was established as a structure to assist project planning, but has grown into an approach that can aid the process of consensus-building in project design and management. The LFA has become ubiquitous in the development business, defying those who prophesied its demise as simplistic and just another form of technocratic management by objectives. The basic idea of the tool is to provide a structure to allow those involved in projects to specify the different components of activities, and carefully and causally relate the means to the ends. The framework aims to aid logical thinking about the ways in which a project or other intervention may be structured and organised. It also allows the different groups associated with the intervention to participate in discussions and decisions about it and its underlying assumptions, and to continue involvement as the project develops and changes. Coleman argues that the approach 'is an "aid to thinking" rather than a set of procedures' (1987: 259). Framework planning can be used in a mechanistic manner. There are anecdotes of framework plans being developed in hotel bedrooms by visiting consultants after a day or two's discussion with those most affected by the intervention, or even just with those in favour of it. One practitioner said: 'Consultants are not given much time but expected to come up with a project document and log-frame (framework plan) as part of their terms of reference. This means that a log-frame is sometimes constructed by the consultant alone, which is not intended. If handled badly it can set back an intervention severely'.

There is no shortage of analyses of the LFA in terms of its efficacy as a blueprint and/or process tool. The ambivalence and cynicism mentioned earlier has been encapsulated in a range of good publications.⁽⁵⁾ We will not rehearse these arguments here. Rather, the question we consider is how the change from state-led to multiple-actor involvement in development can be reflected in, and inform, micro-level project design (see Table 1).

State-led development implies that a single actor is able to implement or at least to control implementation. The 'public action' perspective assumes, on the other hand, plurality of financing, and multiple actors with plurality of interest. With state action it is easy to imagine that there is a *public interest*, which the state's role is to reflect and act on. This implies a concept of planning with a single actor doing things. The

implications for project design and planning are that techniques are required for identifying, prioritising, and evaluating such action. The big problem for development and project planning was how to plan development more effectively so that the state could better achieve those tasks that were its responsibility. The development planning and project appraisal literature from the 1950s onwards shows a gradual improvement in these techniques. The 1970s and 1980s brought a massive growth in programming tools and social and qualitative techniques, so that:

...there is now a much wider range of techniques and procedures available for policy analysis. Models can more easily be designed to match the constraints and policy objectives of individual countries, rather than using a standard framework. Also, the shift towards simulating market outcomes means that policy analysis has shifted away from the setting of targets to the comparison of instruments and programmes (Chowdhury and Kirkpatrick 1994: 4).

This categorisation of public interest is simplified of course, but if we consider it from the perspective of the new policy agenda (NPA) it becomes much more complex. The public interest is contested by different interests and different stakeholders. The idea that there can be coherence of planning cannot be assumed. Who should act in the so-called public interest? NGOs? Donors? Local government? The state? If they all act independently in the same sector, how does it all add up? Under these conditions, the old concept of project appraisal is insufficient. Techniques can be used for assessing individual projects, but, overall, how does it pull together? In the 'old', blueprint approach to planning, an unchallenged single actor can plan by allocating resources it controls. Now, with concepts like 'planning as steering' and 'influencing behaviours to get agreed outcomes', a new approach to project design is needed. What would be its characteristics? Intervention as a process means consensus-building and giving priority to coherence so that 'things add up'. The implication is that tools and techniques are needed to seek such consensus and coherence, and that tools are also needed to illustrate and display the results of one actor going it alone in a multiple-actor situation. The right hand column of Table 1 is an attempt to express this situation.

Table 1. State-led and multiple-actor development policy, and implications for planning and projects

| | 'Old', state-led approach | 'New', public action approach |
|------------------------|--|---|
| Type of actor | State-led single actor | Public action by multiple actors with plurality of interests |
| Public interest | Yes, the state knows what public interest is, and acts on it | Public interest is not immediately obvious. Definition of 'public' interest' contested. Different interests, different stakeholders |
| Planning | Planning with one actor. Techniques needed to identify, prioritise, evaluate actions | Coherence cannot be assumed. Who should act? NGOs? Donors? State? If they all act, how does it add up? |
| Problem | How to do it better? | How best to steer and influence behaviours of various actors? |
| Tools | Project appraisal, cost benefit analysis, etc. | Techniques to build coherence. Tools for seeking consensus for coherence of action. Tools to illustrate and display the results of one actor 'going it alone', e.g. participation analysis, stakeholder analysis, framework planning as process. And so on. |

The LFA as process-tool?

So, the LFA can be a blueprint tool restricted to matrix box-filling, but evidence from a range of cases we have analysed suggests that, as one part of a range of tools, it can assist practitioners faced with managing complexity but also having to state goals for which they are accountable.

However, a straightforward strengths and weaknesses analysis of the LFA does not really capture the complex practice of the approach. Rather, it is the ways the LFA are used which are important. Ironically, as Gasper has well described it is the ZOPP (objectives-oriented project planning system) method which, while using the LFA in a process-based way, has also stuck to the most top-down, managerial style of implementation

(Gaspar 1996: 15). Although it has the rhetoric of participation, it ends up being one of the most imposed tools in development policy and practice. Similarly, some of the most interesting uses of the LFA have been as part of a raft of tools used as and when needed. However, some agencies have tried to turn the raft of tools into a prescriptive list of ‘must dos’. And all the time the LFA, has become increasingly used by agencies worldwide.

In our teaching (with, so far, around 250 practitioners), we emphasise that the LFA and other tools are approaches that have and will continue to evolve, perhaps into something quite different; and that the tool is not a ‘precious thing’ — it can be treated roughly and used in whatever ways assist with the process of clarifying and focusing. It is not a ‘pure’ method. We use a range of well-known tools, and also emphasise the importance of power and contradiction at various levels — macro, meso, and micro. Table 1 is an expression of how we have conceptualised the relationship between tools and ‘new’ approaches within a public action perspective.

Reflections

To date in our use of the LFA for teaching purposes, at least three issues have arisen which illustrate its limitations as a stand-alone tool.

Form over substance

In the aid business, form often substitutes substance. In the case of the LFA, the victory of form over substance can be ‘the filling in of the matrix’, or it can be the tyranny of the manipulated ‘participation’. One practitioner had this to say about one particular participatory tool, Participatory Rural Appraisal, ‘PRA leads to genuine participation and ownership. One of the problems ... is that agency staff or consultants are not properly trained, and in fact start creating short cuts in the methodology. Hence the “quick and dirty” type PRA work that is now very common.’

But if public action is contested, as we have argued, and if ‘public interest’ is plural, there must be an analytical framework to handle it. So, in that case, there are some key aspects of LFA which are essential.

These are the tools that give an analytical handle on *public interest as contested terrain* — in situations of multiple interest, tools are needed that help identify the ‘stakes’ and ‘interests’ in particular activities and interventions. But more, tools are needed to ensure that ‘you get somewhere’ — that a platform for action emerges. So, for example, tools

are needed that show stakeholders the results of pursuing self-interest, and that subordinating some interests can improve the overall solution for most stakeholders.

To argue for the identification of interests is not to argue for an ideal or perfect consensus where none exists. Indeed, the identification of interests is needed to develop an understanding of a blocking or controlling interest — which could well include the donor — that would need to be confronted. In the framework plan matrix, the column of measurable output may be a donor's controlling device, for example, which means, 'I will only fund this project if it has these predetermined outcomes'.

The LFA can also be used to bring out disagreements and so used in a process to investigate the possibilities for collective action. It is only by identifying such interests that coherent action can be forged, and that is what makes it so difficult. The search for coherent action will almost always involve institutional change. And transformation is not only an organisational question, but also a political issue. A cynical response to that might be 'Who said it was going to be easy?' Analytical tools are certainly required to improve the conceptualisation and practice of making connections between, and sense of, complex personal interactions.

Assumptions

The second issue for reflection is that of assumptions, the vital importance of which is always emphasised in the LFA. The success of an intervention depends on being clear what is likely to constrain it. However, there is another side to the need for serious analysis of the assumptions that may adversely affect an intervention. Assumptions can also be seen as things you have to work on and change.

A slavish adherence to the LFA would focus on making the most of the constraints rather than on changing them. LFA experts would argue that that is precisely why there need to be iterations of the LFA in a process-based way, but there are numerous examples where the emphasis on assumptions has cemented a constraint rather than trying to change it.

Breaking boundaries and constraints is, of course, quite normal in the steering of development activities. It is also an important aspect of strategic management. Michael Porter (1990) for example, a classic author in this field, has analysed these issues both at a business (firm) level and national level. He argues against the idea of comparative advantage — that nations always produce what they can produce most productively with, for example, some producing low-value products like

cotton while others produce computer software. He argues instead that comparative advantage — and thus competitive advantage — can be reshaped by national and firm-level action.

Although Porter is writing in the context of business or national competitiveness, the same argument can be made for other types of organisation. One way of building advantage is to work on the constraints and continually improve. This key notion in innovation theory is as relevant in development projects and programmes as it is in firms. Those who study ‘the behaviour of the firm’ are constantly looking to understand why some ‘adapt’ to their environments more favourably than others. Similarly, some organisations and programmes appear to be able to engage in ‘adaptive behaviour’. A narrow focus on framework planning can deflect from the need to work on the assumptions and constraints associated with an intervention. Adaptive action can widen the scope of an intervention and increase its effectiveness.

Conclusion

In working on this practitioner-based material, a metaphor kept springing up — one that has been well used in management and development circles to signify both survival and evolution. Ironically, a metaphor that is much used in social constructions of Africa — that of the dance — emerged also at the Harvard Business School in the 1980s with Moss Kanter’s *When Giants Learn to Dance* (1989), a study of corporate attempts to transform organisations and institutions. In writing on Africa, it is used as a metaphor for survival, as, for example, in Stephanie Urdang’s book on women’s survival strategies in Mozambique, *And Still They Dance* (1989). The different uses of the metaphor — dance as flexibility and dance as survival — come together quite nicely when we think of how to improve learning from interventions, and how to use tools without being dominated by them. In multi-actor environments the ability to steer in complex yet practised movements and at the same time to continue to dance — to be ‘active’ and evolve new, creative forms of movement — lie at the heart of notions of public action.

Notes

1 This paper results from reflections on approaches to teaching these tools within a public action perspective, and has benefited from the large quantity of practitioner insights and feedback, some of which is cited throughout. Thanks particularly to Marc Wuyts for insights and discussions, both on our joint attempts to teach and at the same time critique cost benefit analysis in the 1970s, and on the relationship between the LFA and the moves from state to public action. Thanks also to David Daniels, Des Gasper, Mark Goldring, Caroline Harper, David Hulme, Penny Lawrence, Carolyn Miller, Berit Olsson, Gita Sen, Graham Thom, Adrian and Timlin for their contributions, some of which are inside 'quotes', and especially to my colleagues Dorcas Robinson and Simon Bell who assisted with the production of teaching materials for The Open University's Global Programme in Development Management.

2 See for example, INTRAC/South Research (1994) and Gasper (1997).

3 Hulme (1995) provides a useful analytical framework in which to examine such tensions.

4 I am grateful to David Hulme for this insight on Smith et al.

5 See, for example, Coleman 1987; Gasper 1997; INTRAC/South Research 1994; Biggs and Smith 1998.

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