

# Tackling Implementation Challenges in Development Organizations



# Polka or Parker? What Management Could Learn About Smart Implementation from Music

*Neil Hatton*

“Philosophers have only interpreted the world. The point is, however, to  
change it.”  
— Karl Marx, Eleven Theses on Feuerbach (also inscribed on his grave)

“You can’t change the way Manila looks, you can change the way you look at Manila.”

This sentence – from a Filipino acquaintance of mine, Carlos – taught me a very important lesson in life. At the time that he said this, I had been living in Manila for more than three years and was feeling negative about the city. It was dirty, crime-ridden, clogged with traffic, architecturally uninspiring, and a difficult place to live in all around. No matter how often I tried to convince myself that the biggest shopping mall in Asia really was a fascinating thing, I still could not convince myself. I complained about this to practically everybody who was willing to listen (and even some who were not). Carlos took me by the hand one evening and walked me around the city to look at the sights and sounds that I had been looking at daily for three years. He told me many things that I did not know, casting old facts in a new light, and he wove a story that got me to like – if not fall in love with – Manila. He literally changed the way I looked at the city.

This personal lesson is similar to one I feel we need to implement when discussing “smart implementation” in development projects. We have been looking at many of the same things for many years and trying to make it smarter in many ways. The problem here is not the skills level or amount of effort, but rather the way we are looking at it. Management theory has a particular way of looking at things and a logic that leads us – in development contexts – down a blind alley. But if we are prepared to look at the “problem of implementation” in a different way, many of these difficulties turn out not to be so hard after all. Herein lies the route to “smart” implementation – not working harder but, rather, smarter.

In this brief chapter, I try to describe and assess other sources of inspiration that are available to us to help us with this challenge. Which other alternatives are available? How can we integrate these alternatives into our personal and, above all, organizational repertoires? These questions are fruitful, as they reveal a lot along the way about our individual and collective attitudes to management, change and social systems.

This chapter is loosely structured as follows. In the first part, I look at why social systems behave in a fundamentally different fashion than mechanical systems, on which most of our management theory is based. I also explore why this simple insight has found no place in management theory. In the second section, I expand on this to look at the fundamental differences between organizations and cooperation systems or multi-stakeholder partnerships and the requirements that this implies for the development goals that must be achieved through such partnerships. I then take a small detour and look more closely at the process of developing a jazz tune, which has many parallels to our work in development. On the basis of these insights, I try to sketch out a smart implementation, but one that lies distinctly in the real world of craft and not science. Lastly, I describe some of the experiences that the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) has had in this area, both in terms of developing a model for such interventions as well as the challenge of changing its organization to make it an explicit core competence of the company as a whole. Along the way, I try to illustrate the argument with examples from the work of GIZ to make it less technical and more accessible to a wider audience, while still attempting to retain a vestige of academic rigor.

### *Lost in triviality*

The management world is still basically wedded to the belief that organizations and social systems are essentially trivial (in the sense of them being mechanical, not in the sense of them being unimportant<sup>1</sup>) and can be 1) understood and 2) changed in an input-output and goal-oriented fashion. This comes from the origins and birth of modern management and

---

1 This does not mean that they are not important; however, they are not simple. Even trivial systems can be very, complicated, for example the logistics system of DHL. They are not, however, complex.

Frederick Taylor.<sup>2</sup> This paradigm of management came from engineering and the application of such principles to the analysis and organization of the tasks of manufacturing. This ushered in a revolution in organization second only to that of the industrial revolution. It found a permanent home in the specialization of conveyor-belt production, which enabled the production of the Model-T Ford and gave birth to the hierarchical and functionally-specialized organizations that produced it. This Taylorist paradigm is still dominant in virtually all modern thinking and writing about management. It goes so deep that it has gained the status of an implicit and rarely questioned truism, regardless of its validity. It is our experience that there is a huge difference between the mechanistic and predictable view of “scientific management,” as Taylor himself called it, and the behavior of social systems. When the change process (e.g., the production of a car) takes place in a situation where both the process of assembly of the machine as well as the behavior of the workers can be by and large controlled, this paradigm works.<sup>3</sup> As soon as the social interaction of the actors in the change process becomes important (e.g., the design and implementation of a better health system), this paradigm breaks down irrevocably. It seems odd to even have to state this, as development practitioners have experienced this daily for many years, but the consequences are worth dwelling on.

The reason for this difference is worth exploring in more detail. A mechanical (or to give it its technical name, a “trivial”<sup>4</sup>) machine is one that reliably converts input A into output B. Its inner workings can be pre-

- 
- 2 This initial insight was systematized and perfected a few years later across the city in Detroit by his General Motors colleague Alfred Sloan, who gave his name to the eponymous management school. For the sake of legibility, I shall refer to this approach as “Taylorism,” even though the correct epithet would really be “Taylorist/Sloanist,” but then I would sound like Marxist revolutionaries and you would never finish reading.
  - 3 This model assumes, of course, that the workers do not form unions or go on strike for better pay or fall in love with each other or fight each other or any of the other myriad things that assembly line workers (and human beings in general) actually do.
  - 4 For those interested, this is a very short summary of the work of the Austrian cyberneticist and systems thinker Heinz von Förster, who illustrates this point brilliantly in his paper “Abbau und Aufbau.” The paper is out of print, but it is reproduced in Simon (1998) in German. It is instructive that, to the best of my knowledge and research, this paradigm-defining paper (along with many other texts in the systemic/cybernetic tradition) have never been translated into English.

cisely described, and if it does not work as planned, a suitably qualified person can intervene and repair the machine so that it works as it should. This is exactly how machines should and do work, from simple (a pencil sharpener) to complicated (cars and computers). A non-trivial system, on the other hand, converts A into B, but also (and depending on the situation) into C, D, and even X, and under certain circumstances Z. Inputs are only loosely converted into outputs (as anyone who has tried to teach a child French vocabulary will know). Its inner workings cannot be described, and if it does not work as planned, it is not easy to “repair” it – as anyone who has tried to “repair” a student, employee, colleague, or partner will testify (the suitably qualified people here being teachers, psychologists, managers, parents, husbands, and wives). And we should not forget that the job of capacity development and developmental transformation at an international level that we address here is a much higher and more complex challenge than individuals, families, or single organizations. As the examples suggest, this starts with psychological (i.e., people) systems – people cannot be changed in the input-output fashion described above, although it has not stopped organizations, schools, and governments over the millennia from trying. Social scientists refer here to “complex” as opposed to “complicated” systems – systems that are so complex that they cannot be modeled, explained, or designed/operated/repared like their trivial counterparts.

But that is precisely what we attempt to do every day in organizations, is it not? And the tools that we have available (the word “tool” is in itself a giveaway) are all based on the Taylor paradigm of the mechanical system – the wrenches and hammers of social engineering.<sup>5</sup>

**Gregory Bateson: What is the difference between kicking a tin can and a dog?**

Gregory Bateson (1972), the social anthropologist, is famous for asking what the difference between the two (hypothetical, we hope) questions was. His answer illustrates the difference that indeed makes a difference.

Kicking a can involves the precise calculation of the angle and point of contact, the force required to propel the can, and the required distance to get it out of our way based on its size, shape, and weight. The average child can do this quite well before their 10th birthday.

---

5 Mark Twain summed this up neatly when he said, “If your only tool is a hammer then every problem starts to look like a nail.”

Kicking a dog is similar, but also very different. Before I make contact with the dog (or more precisely, his rear end), both the dog and I start to think. The force with which my foot connects with the dog to get him out of my way remains a constant variable to be calculated – but the reaction of the dog (runs away with his tail between his legs; barks and runs away to get reinforcements; stands up, growls, and bites me) depends on the complex inner workings of the dog (what kind of experience has he had with people and kicking?). More-

over, my experience of kicking dogs (assuming I really do such a thing) is also relevant. Did all the dogs that I kicked run away, or did one of them bite me? Will this affect the force or conviction with which I connect with the dog? I can hope and project what will happen (according to my experience with dogs), but until the dog reacts, I cannot know it in the sense that I can know where the tin can will land.

And kicking cats is a different discipline altogether (you have to catch them first).

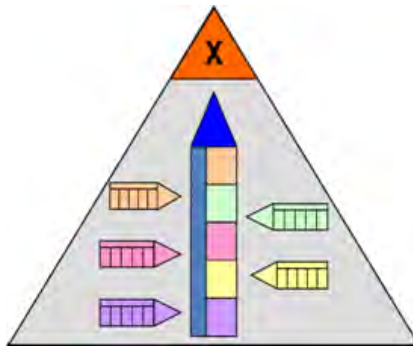
Clearly, social systems are non-linear in their behavior and are based on so many variables that have to do with the past experiences of the participants that they are at best unpredictable and at worst completely baffling. This places the social engineer in a dilemma. Teachers, parents, psychologists, and especially managers (not to mention development professionals) want and need to be able to influence these complex systems, and indeed they do, every day – but not with the mechanistic repertoire of hammers and screwdrivers. Fritz Simon (building on an earlier observation of Sigmund Freud) summed up the dilemma of the social engineer when he described teaching, education, and psychotherapy as “impossible professions” (Simon, 2002, but originally from Sigmund Freud) – based on a paradox of having to intervene to achieve a specific goal in a system that cannot be made to function in a predictable manner. Such professions – to which the development worker also belongs – have to live with the paradox of being responsible for producing results in systems: a) which they do not and cannot fully understand; b) which do not let themselves be influenced by them if they do not want to be; and c) for which the development worker only has the hammer provided to him by Mr. Taylor.

Lip service is paid to this insight in more modern management theory, but not in practice. The understanding of social systems (organizations or development contexts) leads to a kind of window-dressing of the change management projects. The literature praises “participation” and the involvement of the staff and stakeholders in the process (rather than seeing them – as Taylor did – as pawns in a chess game to be moved and sacrificed at will). This remains superficial – organizations and management

theory are still dominated by the “machine-trivial” paradigm and not by the “social-complex” model. Moreover, the task of the development professional and their organizations is at a higher level of complexity than even this, as we see in the next section.

*Cooperation systems and development partnerships are not organizations*

Having seen that our concepts of management and organizations are somehow stuck in the early part of the last century, we must now confront a second uncomfortable truth. Even if the management concepts had kept up with the recognition of the uncontrollability and unpredictability of social systems, we in development cooperation contexts are not just dealing with individual organizations but rather partnerships and coalitions spanning many stakeholders, from the government to the private sector as well as civil society.



These partnerships and multi-actor projects are not just fashionable, they are born out of the recognition that the problems that the international community is faced with (climate change, social inequality, peace and conflict) are not solvable by the efforts of a single organization. We could not build the super organization that would be able to do all this. Rather, we are reliant by necessity on the contributions, resources, and participation of a diverse range of organizations – from the government to the private sector and civil society. The international consensus is clear about

this,<sup>6</sup> but it is less clear about some of the consequences that this brings with it. One of these is the fundamentally opposed logical systems of organizations and cooperation projects, partnerships, and alliances.<sup>7</sup> In order to understand this, it is necessary to look a little more closely at the classical organization as well as the development project or partnership.

A classical **organization** organizes its internal processes so as to “produce” a good or service that is useful to its clients. Internal component processes here include, for example, strategy, marketing, controlling, as well as personnel management. These component processes combine to produce the “product” – be it goods or services – of the organization.

Several characteristics of this organizational form are relevant for consideration here. Organizations of this type are characterized by *formal goals* and *hierarchies* of managers and employees. Employees must pass through rituals of hiring (and sometimes firing), are subject to disciplinary rules while members of the organization, and are required to comply with decisions made by managers, often reflected in their individual goals and salaries and backed up by considerable internal sanctions (and occasionally rewards!) as well as external support from civil law.

Organizations develop in this way a particular and individual character over the course of time with rules, structures, and processes that reflect this. During the course of our work in an organization, we are obliged to work with colleagues who we would not choose as friends, we do things that we would probably not do voluntarily in our free time, and abide by decisions that we do not agree with, would certainly question, and maybe refuse to comply with if they were taken by friends or family members. Being a member of an organization imposes restrictions and claims on our behavior. This closed structure not only *enables* management in its strictest sense, but also *requires* it – to organize and implement the processes through internal hierarchy that is required to produce the product or service of the organization and specify and differentiate the component activities and processes that go into producing it.

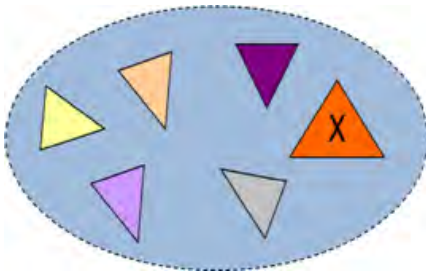
---

6 The 2030 Agenda that places great emphasis on partnerships as a key implementing method is a singular example among many.

7 There are many definitions and names for such undertakings, which are often specific to individual donors and their systems. Multi-stakeholder partnerships, projects, alliances, networks, and cooperation systems are all, however, elementally similar in the characteristics that are relevant here.

“Classical management” in all its forms – and certainly in the variation represented by Taylor and discussed in the previous section – is predicated upon this basis: an active management function that can design, implement, and improve component processes that combine to produce the organization’s product. Good organizations are well-managed, poor organizations are badly managed. Good management is a major source of competitive advantage in modern organizations, and poor management is often at the root of the demise of once-great industry champions.<sup>8</sup>

In contrast to this is the situation of a *development project*,<sup>9</sup> characterized by a high degree of cooperation, negotiation, and fluid structures.



Here, the products of the individual organizations are combined together into a network of contributions that seek to address particular problems at a country, regional, or global level. This is a *multi-organizational* context based on a convergence of interest rather than any formal, hierarchical basis. Rules and decisions are made and taken through negotiation and cooperation rather than formal management processes. “Management” – in the hierarchical sense described above – cannot take place here.

---

8 According to *The Economist* (“Measuring management,” 2014), 30 percent of the productivity gap between the United States and Europe can be explained by this factor alone.

9 By “development project” we mean here a project that is a voluntary agreement between independent actors in pursuit of some kind of societal goal. This is in contrast to a firm’s or organization’s internal project in which employees of the same organization come together from different departments to achieve an individual organization’s or firm’s goal. They are outside of the usual departmental structures in an interdisciplinary project team but remain employees of the organization in the sense described above. They are subject to the logic and management discipline of the classical organization outlined above.

Similarly, classical management techniques predicated on the logic of the organizational/management system cannot work either. Management here is predicated on – and requires – hierarchy and a classical approach to decision-making. This is precisely what is missing in collaborative and participatory development projects. But management is also required in such partnerships. Decisions about strategy, participation, funding, planning, organizing, and implementing activities as well as monitoring and evaluating such projects still have to take place here if the partnerships are to achieve their goals; it is just that the motor that makes it possible (hierarchical management in the Taylor sense) simply does not exist.

The challenge facing all development practitioners is to develop adequate management systems and tools that are feasible, acceptable, and suitable for such multi-organizational contexts. Being “smart” here first involves recognizing the real dilemma that we find ourselves in and not just rushing in with quick fixes that do not (and cannot) work. Development cooperation projects need “smart” here to equate to the acknowledgement of the context in which it operates – not hierarchy but negotiation. This simple but fundamental insight of the difference between organizations and cooperation systems really does make a difference. It explains the need for a fundamentally different way of doing things in projects and partnerships in a cooperative context, as well as why “more of the same” from the classical management context simply will not work.

### *Polka or Parker?*

Having already said that most organizations march to the beat of a rather old-fashioned drum, it is time to adopt a metaphor to make the point more strongly. It is as if the organizations in which we work and are socialized are analogous to classical music – a body of theory and practice developed between the Renaissance and the 19th century. Classical music had (and still to a large extent has) fixed ideas about orchestras, instruments, composition, musical theory, and the like. Our organizations are the guardians of this classical tradition. Our introduction and socialization into them is governed by the Taylor paradigm, the theory of organization (and reorganization) is governed by hierarchy and the organizational chart; when we think about the organization, we articulate our thoughts (just like classical composers) in the scales and chords of the Taylorist paradigm. But where organizations have stayed by and large still, music has moved on to

encompass a myriad of new instruments, musical theories, compositions, and performances in a way that organizations and their underlying theory have not. One of the most relevant for this analysis is jazz – a combination of composition and improvisation that was a major innovation in its time (see box below).

Development professionals and organizations that have understood and embraced the fundamental cooperative nature of the partnership systems in which they work, however, are playing in a jazz combo with their partners. They do this very well (and successfully), but when they return to their organizations and report on what they did in the form of best practices or contributions to knowledge-management networks, they tend to fall back into the language of classical socialization.<sup>10</sup> Try writing down a brilliant jazz solo in musical notation and it loses its force; try repeating a jazz improvisation and it falls flat. Each performance lives for the moment – the band, the audience, the atmosphere, the city.

This metaphor cannot, of course, be taken too far. But the basic picture – we are talking, practicing and playing Beethoven (a “polka” from Johann Strauss) in our organizations. But playing in a jazz combo with our partners (“The Bird,” Charlie Parker) in partnerships and projects in developing countries sums up the slight feeling of schizophrenia that many successful development practitioners have: Polka or Parker?

**“Dohhh – those jazz guys are just makin’ that stuff up!” – Homer Simpson**

Jazz improvisation is the process of spontaneously creating fresh melodies over the continuously repeating cycle of chord changes in a tune. The improviser may rely on the contours of the original tune, or solely on the possibilities of the chords’ harmonies. The trick to jazz improvisation is

playing music with both spontaneous creativity and conviction.

Members of a jazz band will have a basic structure given by the tune and the series of the (normally) 12 bar repetitions that structure it. Band members will alternately play backing and improvise solos, sometimes tossing musical ideas and phrases back and forth to develop and expand. There is no standard tune, rather the

---

10 To develop the image a little further, one consequence of the above is that the “language” spoken in an organization such as the GIZ (or any other large development organization) is that of 1) triviality and 2) hierarchy implied in the “classical” Taylor paradigm. That means that tools and instruments or even lessons learned (best practice and the like) are articulated in the language of the organization (trivial and hierarchical) and need its hierarchy to be repeated in other organizations.

jazz players listen to each other's playing to pick up hints and signals from the others. Some ideas are good for piano, some are better played on the bass, and others need brass to develop their full potential. Some ideas can only be developed together; others are really solo. The end result is a complex interlay of rhythm and harmony, mixed into a basic tune that is composed in advance and forms the backbone of the piece.

But not everything is free (unless it is free jazz). The players have rigorous technical and musical training that enables them to master their instru-

ments and the compositions they play. They spend many hours learning the chords and scales that are the grammar and vocabulary of the tunes that they play and the melodies that they create when onstage with their band. The result is mostly neither 100 percent improvisation nor 100 percent composition but a skillful mixture of both, balancing the elements as well as the musicians in the band.

Jazz musicians are not the only ones to improvise; classical musicians such as Bach, Handel, Mozart, and Beethoven were all masterful improvisers.

### *Smart implementation is art and craft – and not the science (of delivery)*

The implementation of development projects in international cooperation contexts needs to place much more emphasis on organizing and less on implementing. This requires an understanding of development management as performance art akin to jazz music, by which we mean improvised, flexible, intuitive, and always sensitive to the context, and that these attributes are positively connoted and part of the dialogue and learning inside of our organizations. At the moment, we really are letting our development practitioners out in the field develop fine music together with their partners, but when they come back to their organizational bases, they often struggle to capture what they have done in classical notation. This is a challenge not only for balancing the respective needs of the two sides (hierarchical management in organizations, and cooperation management in development projects and partnerships) but also for establishing cooperation management (jazz) as a legitimate and concrete body of knowledge and practice with an institutional memory for learning and establishing the tools, instruments, theory, knowledge, skills, and attitudes associated with it.

Finding this performance art, taking it out of the realm of personal and individual intuition and gut feeling, and giving it a voice inside the decision-making processes of our international development organizations and networks is a great challenge. Building our organizations in a way that

they can allow for such a hybrid transmission (classical music inside the organization and jazz in cooperation projects) requires a high degree of skill on the part of the organizations. To make an explicit organizational core competence out of an implicit individual intuitive skill is a challenge indeed. But this very skill of balancing the two worlds is what is required of the individual practitioners in their everyday work as well as the organizations that they work for. Indeed, the very nature of the multi-stakeholder partnerships that we need to forge to find answers to the challenges of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the problems of global governance demand this from us all.

It may be a source of disappointment to those brought up in the classical paradigm that there really is no such thing as a “science” of implementation, but rather a craft set composed of skills, knowledge, tools, models, and techniques that have evolved over the course of many decades, and that have now found a legitimate voice in the shape of cooperation management. Much as the jazz musician has learned their trade of technique, scales, theory, phrasing, and composition that can rival that of the classical musician, so too has the development practitioner acquired a considerable body of experience and knowledge that deserves recognition and attention alongside that of their classical counterpart of management. But as with management in organizations, its exercise is context-sensitive (culture and content) as well as intuitive (there are no blueprints for social change), and the experienced practitioner builds all this into their behavior when active in such contexts.

### *Capacity WORKS as an attempt to codify jazz improvisation*

To take the epitaph of Marx seriously, we have to start thinking about changing the world rather than just analyzing it. Here there is a crucial difference between the academic discipline of understanding and analyzing, and the more pragmatic job of the change manager. Coming out of the industrial and commercial world of consulting, where good money is to be had guiding organizations through the process of change and development, there is a large body of practice (if not of theory) that underpins this. Although academics have consistently and rightly noted the lack of scien-

tific rigor of the management world,<sup>11</sup> this has not stopped the change managers from earning credibility in business. The change manager is a pragmatist who collects and uses tools and instruments pragmatically and does not let him or herself be bothered by such a theoretical understanding of the world that makes their work impossible.<sup>12</sup>

This was more or less the situation 15 years ago in GIZ, as the organization (or at least parts of it) struggled with the questions of what it actually did “in the field” when it was implementing its projects, and when and why it was successful (or unsuccessful).<sup>13</sup> The first and intuitive answer of the organization was simply that there were a small amount of very good project managers around who were good at what they did. The implication of this was that such people had to be “cloned” in order to increase their numbers in the organization. When the organization had cloned enough of these star project managers, it would be more successful. This logic was seductive and fit the most widely held paradigm of change, namely that the activities of heroic individuals (leaders, managers, and other charismatic persons) are the key elements of change processes. Although change processes need people, they are a necessary but not sufficient condition of the systemic change process in which organizations, networks, and whole sections of society are required to work in harmony over an extended period to bring about sustainable societal change. Indeed, many change processes in development contexts fail, despite such good and qualified people, and the oversimplification of such processes – reducing them to the consequences of the actions of a few individuals – is as lazy as it is wrong. This is where the overwhelming donor emphasis on

- 
- 11 They see “management” more as an eclectic mixture of psychology, sociology, as well as a smattering of engineering and natural sciences rather than a body of theory in its own right.
  - 12 It is no accident that the profession of change manager originated not in Europe but in the United States, where the roles of theory and practice are often reversed and where pragmatism and experimentation enjoy a better reputation.
  - 13 The mode of delivery of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and the GIZ is and was unusual here in the context of international development. German policy is and was always more favorable to the implementation of projects together with partner countries. This involved financial support and personnel in the recipient countries in temporary project structures, as opposed to budget support or basket funding of sectors more popular with other donors. Budget support and the like is not affected by the characteristics of cooperation systems identified here.

human capacity-development not only fails to improve the systemic capacity of a society but can actually harm it, as people are trained out of their jobs in organizations that do not change with them. Most donor-induced capacity-development strategies concentrate almost exclusively on the human factor and neglect the other crucial aspects.

GIZ<sup>14</sup> gathered these individuals and examined in a lengthy and systematic process what it was that they did. This was at first tantamount to heresy; it was simply not possible to compare the efforts of such people as diverse as this. Banking projects could not be compared to agricultural ones, nor agricultural states with emerging economies, and Africa had nothing to do with Latin America, surely! After this initial hilarity on the part of the participants had subsided, they shared in a first step their “tips and tricks” – their personal toolbox of instruments and tools that they used to do their jobs. Of course, many were technical and had to do with specific bodies of professional knowledge that were relevant for their sectors or fields of intervention. After a while, however, other kinds of tools emerged. These were on a more unconscious and less articulated level from those that were technical and mixed in a creative way with them. Interestingly, these tools seemed to come from a common toolbox in which bankers and educationalists, farmers and governance specialists, as well as colleagues from diverse regions, cultures, and countries all seemed to have something in common. This was basically the level of social change outlined in the previous sections – not directing a trivial system to produce particular products, but rather “massaging” the social system toward common goals by building coalitions, discussing topics, and facilitating new ways of working that were in any one context technical, but also generic – a 12 bar blues improvisation on a basic melody.

There was even a layer below this. After the practitioners had emptied their pockets and all the Swiss army penknives, rabbits’ feet, and balls of string were lying on the table, there was something else still left, intangible but real. Alongside the generic instruments and tools that they used to do this that were common across all sectors and cultures, there was an implicit and underlying body of knowledge about how and when these tools were best used. This third level of practice was so faint that it was almost at the level of the subconscious. Just as Parker did not play any old

---

14 Of course, at the time of doing so, the GIZ was still the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit GmbH (GTZ) and only took on its current form in 2011.

stream of notes (despite what Homer Simpson might think) when he recorded *Ornithology* but rather an intuitive and complex melody based on a lifetime of study and technical mastery, so too with the development practitioners, who did not just throw in tools, instruments, or interventions but rather had a common theory about *what* was needed *when*, also based on a lifetime of reflective practice and technical mastery. At a time when virtually every development organization on the planet already had tool-boxes for capacity development and tools coming out of their ears, these colleagues also had a **model** of **what** was needed and **when**.<sup>15</sup> This was the genesis of the **model** of change in cooperation (i.e., social) systems. This was the birth of Capacity WORKS as an insight into how these change processes really take place, and the initialization of a debate about a body of knowledge that, up to then, was (and still is) being conducted with the language and vocabulary of Taylorist management. It is not an exaggeration to say that this insight was the start of the codification of a body of knowledge about change management in social systems that continues to this day, and is by no means over. Project managers with experience, upon seeing Capacity WORKS in its finished form, were able to say, “I recognize that,” as it reflected their good and intuitive craft, built up over many years and passed on, in some cases, from generation to generation. New project managers entering the organization were presented with a codified body of knowledge, practice, and theory that enabled them to go out into the world and (together with many others) change it. GIZ was thereby able to say that they had an institutional body of knowledge that was independent of the people in the organization – a real organizational capacity.

### *Capacity WORKS*

Emerging out of the basic recognition described in the earlier sections – namely that a) social systems are not trivial systems but highly complex, b) cooperation systems cannot fall back on the basic logic of hierarchical organizations for decision-making, as well as c) the empirical observation

---

15 It would be wrong to suggest here that these three discoveries took place sequentially in the course of such a mythical debriefing of GIZ colleagues. This was a process that took many months, with different groups and with many blind alleys, one-way systems, and deviations that all led to the goal.

that clever development practitioners had been doing all of this regularly and for a long time – the model of Capacity WORKS as well as the choice of instruments began to emerge as an answer and evolved over about four years to completion in its first form. GIZ needed some kind of professional support for its staff in designing and implementing ever more complex projects that were increasingly oriented toward a comprehensive capacity-development approach. This involved working on the three levels of people, organizations, and society, as well as making sure that these were linked with each other in a capacity-development strategy. The astonishing thing here is that, since then, there have been numerous updates<sup>16</sup> to the model and its tools, but the basic structure has remained unchanged: 5 success factors and about 40 tools to support them. The basic insights described here remain valid and have stood the test of implementation in the field.

Capacity WORKS is not the Holy Grail and has no claims to be the one and only solution to the challenges of working with cooperation systems. It has, however, been able to capture these good practices, enrich them with an overarching and explanatory model as well as a theory of change in societal systems, and (at least try to) anchor them in a large bilateral development agency as a core organizational skill. In this aspect, it is rather unique in the development context.

### *Introducing Capacity WORKS into GIZ*

The development process involved the debriefing described above, which took place over a two-year period, followed by a two-year pilot worldwide in GIZ. After having assessed the suitability and practicability of the model and its tools for the GIZ context, it was rolled out into the organization in a two-year mainstreaming process that involved a massive investment in training at all levels in the organization (as well as outside) and the adaptation of rules, structures, and processes to accommodate Capacity WORKS in all aspects of the organization. As with the painting of long bridges, when the organization got to the end, it had to start at the begin-

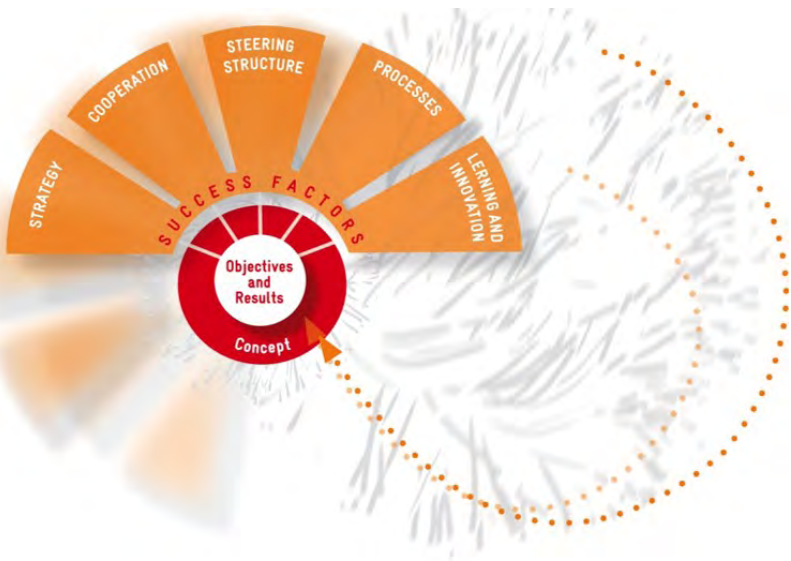
---

16 Four to date (2016).

ning again, and so the seamless integration of Capacity WORKS into the organization is an ongoing and never-ending task.<sup>17</sup>

## The model

The deepest level of insight working with the development practitioners was that (as described above) they had an intuitive model of how social systems develop and change, and as a consequence, a model of practice of how and where and when to intervene in them to “massage” change in the desired direction.



There are many relevant elements represented visually here. The first and most striking is that, as described above, all successful managers of development projects were doing similar things (or rather, they were encouraging their cooperation partners, with their help and support, to do particular

---

17 This change will not be described in detail here. Readers interested in this should read the article from Glotzbach, Maurer, and Görden (2013) that describes precisely this (only in German).

things). Virtually all of the practitioners involved, irrespective of geography, sector, or situation, were doing things that fell into five broad categories – the success factors. I expand on this below. None of these success factors are in themselves radical or complex – they refer to elements that are more or less common sense. These success factors deliberately only occupy the top half of the model visually representing the idea that we are dealing with an open system that is susceptible to many influences other than those related to the project. Also, these success factors are not numbered or sequenced in any way. No one success factor is more important than the other, and there is no “step one” or starting point. The model can be accessed at any time and from any angle – there really is no need to start from the beginning and work your way through. To colleagues being introduced to the model, this came either as a complete relief or as the greatest provocation imaginable.

Secondly, these “success factors” were not ends in themselves (“cooperation is good and more cooperation is better”) but rather a means to an end. The end, represented by the small white disc in the middle, is the objectives and results for which GIZ received its commission from BMZ in the first place. Thus, the discussion was not “Who are the best partners?” but rather “Which partners do I need to achieve the results that need to be achieved?” Underlying all of this is the red disc, here rather cryptically entitled “sustainability.” This is a reference to the framework of sustainable development, within which all our efforts take place and which forms a kind of moral and ethical platform upon which we build.

Thirdly, building on the idea that there is no chronological order in which these success factors have to be taken, there is also no fixed timescale for their implementation. The success factors can be worked through in a team meeting in 45 minutes to get a quick snapshot of the project, they can be used to guide a project appraisal or evaluation of its management structure, and they can be used to guide and structure an implementation phase of a complex project cycle over several years.

Lastly, there is no right or wrong way to use Capacity WORKS. Some projects adopt a light approach whereby adapted elements are used from time to time, others use it explicitly as a structure for planning and implementing together with their partners, while others use the tools and instruments as stepping stones in their own creative processes and interactions with their partners, developing new and adapted offshoots of basic instruments.

The most obvious elements remain, however, the success factors. These are the groups or categories of activities that the successful project managers used to effectively “manage” the cooperation system. There are five.<sup>18</sup>

## Strategy

All practitioners were very good at – and careful to build – a common strategy among the relevant actors about “why” this change project was required. A common (and positive) vision of the future (not a deficit and problem-oriented view of the past) unites diverse actors and focuses and synergizes the energy and resources of the participants. Successful practitioners invested time and resources in a communicative and social process of strategy formulation with partners – not dictating from above as in organizations, but building and cajoling from the side. All good development practitioners recognized the need for a common, agreed, and well-understood strategy that all parties could sign up to. At the same time, they were aware that it was not enough to simply impose this from the outside or let a well-paid international consultant write it. Rather, they designed a process that enabled the participants to grapple with the meaning and the significance of this project and its goals for themselves. The selection of tools reflects this and provides the development practitioner and their partners with a suite of tools for collectively analyzing and elaborating strategic options and deciding collectively which are the most promising.

## Cooperation

Only when the participants in a cooperation system acknowledge that they are all dependent on each other can the system be successful. Although asymmetries of power, knowledge, and resources remain, each actor has a part to play, and without it nobody gets to the final goal. Only when this mutual dependency is explicitly acknowledged can the cooperation system move forward. Similarly, as remarked above, cooperation is a means to an end here (the achievement of the goals) and not an end in itself. Coopera-

---

18 This is of course a very short summary. Please see Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (2016) for more details.

tion is expensive and time-consuming and must be used sparingly – as much as is necessary, and as little as possible to achieve the goals. More cooperation is not always better, and the economy of cooperation must be considered as paramount. The differentiation concerning roles and responsibilities within the project structure as well as the relevant contributions the partners make need to be discussed, negotiated, and agreed upon. The toolbox provides a wide range of tools for the mapping, analysis, discussion, and negotiation of cooperation roles as well as for their maintenance and development.

### Steering structure

Good development practitioners built a solid decision-making structure for the lifetime of the project that enabled decisions among the actors about resources, financing, planning, implementation, monitoring, evaluation, and conflict to take place without recourse to organizational structures. A development project has to take decisions daily about management, and it needs an adequate structure to do this. Analog to the discussion on cooperation, this too is dependent on the goals of the project. A regional project will have a more complex steering structure than a national one. The toolbox provides a structured set of tools that enable the development practitioner – together with their partners – to design, build, and maintain a steering structure adequate for the complexity and the goal structure of the project. Given the recent research and evidence concerning the lack of impact of global partnerships as crucial elements for achieving the 2030 Agenda targets,<sup>19</sup> and the fact that the reason for this failure was largely to be found in the lack of effective governance (Pattberg, 2012) (i.e., steering) structures, this insight appears now to have been confirmed by independent research.

---

19 A recent study of 348 global partnerships registered in the UN Commission for Sustainable Development database found that 80 percent either achieved nothing (37%) or only achieved things that were not related to their objectives (43%) (Pattberg, 2012).

## Processes

Our successful development practitioners had a keen managerial eye for the processes by which the change takes place. Sometimes these are existing processes in organizations or cooperation systems and networks that need to be improved. Sometimes radical new and innovative processes need to be first invented, designed, piloted, and then scaled-up. The management (change processes) of the project as well as the permanent processes in the sectors and countries where the sustainable change is to take place need to be analyzed, designed, managed, and improved. The design and introduction of processes that take place between independent organizations (e.g., local area development processes) is a huge challenge for all development participants and requires care and attention to detail.

## Learning and innovation

Successful development practitioners paid more than lip service to the concept of learning. Not just concentrating on what individuals had to learn, but considering the system as a whole in its learning needs and interdependencies, such practitioners instituted a process of reflection and learning (together with partners) on an individual, organizational cooperation system as well as on policy level. Only in this way can change be sustainable.

All of these factors are complemented by tools (42 in total) in a **tool-box**<sup>20</sup> that are clustered in the success factors and that enable change managers and development practitioners to intervene in such systems and design processes and activities that reflect on them. There are between 6 and 10 tools per success factor that can be used in differing situations according to need. They vary in complexity: from simple back-of-the-envelope discussions that can take place at almost any time to larger processes that can take many weeks or even months to complete.

---

20 Similarly, the discussion or even description of the tools would overstretch the scope of this article. Please see the Capacity WORKS handbook for more details on this (or go to the GIZ website: <http://www.giz.de>).

## Conclusion

We said at the beginning that the purpose of this theoretical mystery tour was to try to “work smarter not harder,” in the sense of smart implementation in development projects. We also said that this could not involve doing more of the same, just better – but rather to change the way we look at the problem. This we have illustrated with a theoretical look at the way in which social systems really change and not how we would like to see them. It is not easy to change one’s perspective – anybody who has ever had to really change knows how difficult it is to separate oneself from cherished notions and beliefs.

Our entire management theory of the last 100 years has been built on rather shaky foundations. The insights from engineering and the natural sciences concerning the technical organization of production processes simply cannot be transferred wholesale into the area of social interaction. The attempt to make our implementation processes in development projects by being smarter in the way in which we apply the wrong knowledge cannot be the answer to the question posed by this book. This can be done better by looking at and learning the secrets of success of those (impossible) professions that deal successfully with change at a social level every day. This argument applies completely to organizations, but an additional element that complicates our work in development cooperation is the recognition that such projects are not organizations but rather cooperation systems that lack the hierarchy found in organizations to manage themselves and direct their change processes. This lack of hierarchy is only a problem if you are looking at the problem of social change in the wrong way. To borrow the maxim of Carlos with which I started the chapter: you cannot change the way social systems work, their basic laws and paradigms; you can, however, change the way you look at social systems. Borrowing even a few of the tools built up by the systemic schools of thinking – from biology to physics and psychology – can give us a whole new way of looking at the problem, and successfully changing these systems in a way that fits our moral and social values.

This can be seen very well in the other case studies in this book. The colleagues working in all these situations were apparently in completely different situations. No one in their right mind would dare to compare the contexts of mining in Liberia, climate mitigation financing in Indonesia, and creating safe work environments for women in Latin America with each other. Quite apart from their linguistic and cultural differences, the

context, and the professional expertise required, the actors and political contexts were all diametrically opposed to a common understanding or comparison. But they all did similar things; much like in the development process of Capacity WORKS, it is apparent from reading about what they did that they acknowledged the context and consequences of the cooperation system and the realities of the actors and their relationships within it.

The ideas and thoughts in this book and this chapter were always relevant to the management of cooperation systems in the past. Given the newfound enthusiasm for such cooperation systems – called partnerships and multi-actor partnerships – and their pivotal role in the achievement of the 2030 Agenda, this discussion has gained a new relevance. Especially when one looks at the rather sobering evidence concerning the lack of success of such partnerships, this debate has a lot to offer – both theoretically as well as practically. The lack of success (noted earlier) of such partnerships is universally attributed to the poor “governance” of the partnerships.<sup>21</sup> By governance, the commentators quote such issues as partners, equipment, rules, regulations, and processes, whereby the actors in the partnership can transform will and commitment into concrete outputs such as services or standards. This fits neatly with the ideas and philosophy with which GIZ, through Capacity WORKS, has been working the last 10 years.

To all the smart implementers in the world, even if they did not know they were, please keep making it up! Homer Simpson and I will both be very grateful.

## References

- Bateson, G. (1972). *Steps to an ecology of mind*. Chicago University Press.
- Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit. (2016). *Cooperation management for Practitioners: Managing social change with Capacity WORKS*. Wiesbaden: Springer Gabler.
- Glotzbach, S., Maurer, M., & Görjen, M. (2013, April). Balance-Stück in vier Akten. Die Einführung eines systemischen Managementmodells in der GIZ. *Zeitschrift für Organisationsentwicklung*, 76–83.

---

21 “There is a clear correlation between the effectiveness of a partnership and its process management” is one of many comments in this vein; quoted from Liese and Beisheim (2011).

- Liese, A., & Beisheim, M. (2011). Transnational public-private partnerships and the provision of collective goods in developing countries. In T. Risse (Ed.), *Governance without a state? Policies and politics in areas of limited statehood* (pp. 115–143). New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Measuring management. (2014, January 18). *The Economist*. Retrieved from <http://www.economist.com/news/business/21594223-it-no-longer-just-plausible-theory-good-management-boosts-productivity-measuring>
- Pattberg, P. (2012). *Public private partnerships for sustainable development*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Simon, F. (Ed.). (1998). *Lebende Systeme*. Berlin: Suhrkamp Taschenbuch Wissenschaft 1290.
- Simon, F. (2002). *Die Kunst, nicht zu lernen*. Heidelberg: Carl-Auer-System Verlag.