

Jan. 13, 2020

The Art of the Pivot...in the context of results-based management



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Responding to moral dilemmas arising from interventions in MSD programmes

LIWAY is an innovative programme which aims to tackle urban poverty for women and young people in Addis Ababa. It is funded by Sida and implemented by SNV, Mercy Corps, Save the Childcare and Technoserve with Agora Global providing technical support across the programme.

When working in the labour sector recently a phenomenon, which I've seen in many different MSD programmes, arose. It presented a moral dilemma to which we hope our response has some relevance to others.

After 18 months of rigorous analysis and relationship-building we established a very promising intervention. It took a more proactive stance to linking unemployed people to opportunities and allowed employers to source low-skilled workers quickly and with lower transaction costs. The details of the intervention are not important for the purposes of this article. It basically involved a private service provider running the registration and maintenance of the database instead of a paper database managed by overworked local government officials.

Now, as tends to be the case in Ethiopia, when the Government moves it moves decisively, for better or for worse. The establishment of the Jobs Creation Commission, reporting to the Prime Minister's Office, has given this issue prominence, power and a budget not previously seen. The Government has, in a very short space of time, sought to address the same issue. It distributed hardware and software to Kebele offices to register and mobilise job seekers.

This circumstance is not unusual. MSD is about innovation and, as Elisha Grey and Alexander Graham Bell would presumably attest, this rarely happens in isolation. Good analysis will have identified the root causes of underperformance and others may well arrive at the same conclusion. The added difficulty of MSD is that interventions try to ensure sustainability and tailor any offer the programme makes to ensure that others continue to be able to deliver a particular function after the intervention has ended. I have in the past made an agreement with a partner, including considerable co-investment from them in delivering embedded services, only for another donor programme to come in and offer to pay them to deliver exactly the same thing.

In such circumstances programmes find themselves in an awkward situation. They have committed time as well as financial and emotional investment in an idea and, in an instant, the potential for registering results can disappear. And this at a time when a donor may be pressing the programme to show results and increasing the emphasis on high quality attribution strategies. Programmes have three choices:

The zero degree pivot (i.e. carry on regardless)

This could include negotiating with the other party to try to delineate areas of responsibility. In the case of LIWAY this would be discussing with the Government particular geographies where each would work. Another approach is to try to cling to the coat tails of another actor, participating in discussion fora in the hope of claiming some impact, but essentially contributing very little. For the most part this change would probably happen without them.

This is probably, and unfortunately, the predominant approach in development. The driver is primarily a results-based management culture. If you invest money in an intervention for 18 months, programmes find it difficult to account to a donor that while they were doing the right thing, it amounted to nought. In some circumstances it could have some merit. If the other actor intervening in the area is showing signs that this might not happen, or may be short-lived, maintaining your own buy-in within a sector can allow you to pick up the pieces after the intervention fails to deliver on its promise.

The 90 degree pivot

The key objective of an MSD programme is to contribute to improved sustainable development outcomes. Rather than considering such external interventions as a threat, programmes might choose to see them as an opportunity to increase impact and reach scale more quickly. Such an approach would lead a programme to ask the question 'what aspect of what we know and what we're doing could improve the effectiveness of the intervention by another party and help it to be more sustainable?'

In the LIWAY example the programme is now focusing its efforts on working with the Government to examine which aspects of the programme pilot are actually helping

people to get jobs, rather than just registering them on databases. It is looking at what other support functions are necessary, what would be needed to deliver them effectively, and who's best placed to do it. This intervention tactic moves from one of business modelling and financial assistance, to one of data collection and technical assistance.

The 180 pivot

Another option, which is even less palatable to programmes, is to withdraw entirely. The much flaunted but less practiced *incentivising of failure* could be highly appropriate in such circumstances. The same feasibility analysis which determined this to be a viable area for intervention in the first place could be a reason to withdraw from this intervention now. For this to be an attractive option for a programme there has to be a more pragmatic approach from funders. This involves recognising the value of investing in interventions which were doing the right thing, in the right way, for the right reasons, but which ultimately didn't deliver impact.

So what's the art of the pivot? Knowing when to carry on, change course, or get out. In deciding which of these strategies to pursue it's essential to keep the systemic change you're seeking, rather than the immediate interest of your programme, uppermost in your mind. This applies to both donors and programmes. Doing so will limit donor duplication, measurement gymnastics, and wasted effort in clinging onto the coattails of others. Moreover, it will capitalise on the considerable skills and experience the MSD community have to offer in magnifying the efforts of others towards increasing sustainable development impact.

[> View the LIWAY programme profile](#)