SUSANNA ALEXIUS
JANET VÄHÄMÄKI

OBSESSIVE MEASUREMENT DISORDER

OR

PRAGMATIC BUREAUCRACY?

COPING WITH UNCERTAINTY
IN DEVELOPMENT AID RELATIONS

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BOOK

Obsessive Measurement Disorder or Pragmatic Bureaucracy?

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Obsessive Measurement Disorder or Pragmatic Bureaucracy?: Coping With Uncertainty in Development Aid Relations

BY

SUSANNA ALEXIUS

Stockholm Centre for Organizational Research (Score), Sweden

AND

JANET VÄHÄMÄKI

Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI), Sweden

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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Preface

It seems that the world is becoming increasingly complex by the minute, and that, as a consequence, decision-makers in every field must learn to cope with the uncertainties involved when tackling grand societal challenges. Considering these urgent needs, we are truly grateful to the Swedish Research Council for the two generous grants that have enabled us to study and share insights gained on when, how, and why measurements become counterproductive or lead to so-called obsessive measurement disorder (OMD). We have studied how the true experts in this regard, aid bureaucrats, respond to uncertainty while facing great and often unrealistic demands for certainty.

Following the everyday efforts of these aid bureaucrats to find and forge paths through the dense administrative jungle has left us, as researchers and fellow citizens, both humbled and hopeful. For we have been pleasantly surprised to find more of what we call "pragmatic bureaucracy" than of the dreaded obsessive measurement disorder.

We would like to extend a heartfelt thank you to all of you who in one way or another have enabled and supported our research journey. First and foremost, to all of our generous informants for taking the time to reflect and share – thank you! Thanks also to our brilliant colleagues, students, and practitioner advisors for taking the time to read drafts and for your constructive ideas and suggestions. And to the team of transcribers, the anonymous reviewers and the supportive team at Emerald for your encouragement! Thanks to our eminent language editor Kelly Olsson for improving both our English and our arguments, and to our wonderful research assistant Alice Tunfjord for everything. And last but not least, a warm thank you to our families and friends for the love and day-in day-out support necessary to complete a book project!

In the end, although there is seldom a clear-cut recipe for decision-makers in highly complex settings, let us not forget that development aid should be more about developing people and societies, than developing measurements.

Stockholm, Sweden, June 2023
Susanna Alexius and Janet Vähämäki

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Chapter 1

Coping With Uncertainty in Development Aid Relations

The courage and ability to take on complex and uncertain coordination across distances in time, space, and cultures has been a characteristic of human affairs since ancient times (Harari, 2012). Long before our current times of space journeys, gene manipulation, and the internet – international trade, warfare, colonization, and religious missions and crusades entailed coping with great complexity and uncertainty. Today, the need to tackle "wicked" problems of coordination in complex settings under highly uncertain conditions, as illustrated the recent global COVID-19 pandemic and our critically deteriorating climate, remains as vital as ever before (Ferraro et al., 2015; Gray & Purdy, 2018; Ramalingam, 2013; Rutter et al., 2020; Schreyögg & Sydow, 2010; Verweij & Thompson, 2006).

In this volume, we present data from a field on the world's top list of highly complex settings – foreign development aid, a field in which ideas and resources make their way through an intricate web of organizations – *aid organizations* – to hopefully reach societies and people in need. More precisely, we present and discuss findings from our studies of some of the aid field's many interorganizational project relations, where the main characters of our field story – *aid bureaucrats* – find themselves engaged in managing projects aimed at tackling complex problems such as poverty, hunger, inequality, disease, and climate change.

How Do Aid Bureaucrats Cope With Uncertainty?

As the title of our book suggests, a central point of departure for our research project has been the concept of "obsessive measurement disorder" coined by Natsios in 2010. Natsios (2010) argued that the pressure on the US Agency for International Development (USAID) to demonstrate results brought about a state of obsessive measurement disorder (OMD) in aid organizations. Natsios defines OMD as a counterproductive condition where organizations become so preoccupied with measurements and formal control that they risk losing touch with other fundamental aspects that matter to their mission. The background Natsios' observation and warning about OMD in development aid administration was that demands to demonstrate results and to control the use of resources in aid projects had increased over recent decades (Eyben, 2010; Eyben et al., 2016; Shutt, 2016; Vähämäki, 2017).

The field of international development aid can be categorized as an extreme case in the sense that its typically very dedicated aid bureaucrats find themselves faced with highly complex conditions from which arise numerous uncertainties that they feel obliged to respond to (see Chapter 2). In their view, they need to at least try to create a sense of certainty, and a common response is to do so through attempts at controlling and measuring the results of aid. Together with others within the realm of their organizations and interorganizational relations, aid bureaucrats struggle, seeking and learning to find ways forward through the often dense administrative jungle. Our ambition with this volume is to examine how the demand for certain results affects aid bureaucrats and their organizations and, more generally, how quests for certainty are responded to in interorganizational project relations. At the heart of our inquiry is the question: *What do aid bureaucrats in interorganizational project arrangements do to cope with uncertainty, while facing great demands for certainty*?

When studying how administrative ceremonies, coping mechanisms and responses to uncertainty develop and spread, and how they come to occupy the time and minds of those involved, it is not terribly surprising to find that the rational "plan and measurement frenzy" tends to be most intense where uncertainty is the greatest. Such is the logic of the "mechanisms of hope" most modern

organizations apply today in an effort to uphold the rational decision-making ideal (Brunsson, 2006). Against this backdrop, our point of departure as critical management scholars is that certainty can be seen as a powerful modern myth – a myth that greatly influences governance and management. In following with this reasoning, we also assume that the slighter the chances of actually *reaching* a state of certainty, the more attractive the myth (Shenhar, 2001; Tsoukas, 2018). This presents us with a mirage, an illusion that can be likened to the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow: a quest for something that, in reality, is nowhere to be found. But as the world is becoming increasingly complex by the minute, we believe it is both timely and interesting to learn from those who, despite all, take on this compelling "mission impossible."

In terms of empirical data, our study is based on the analysis of hundreds of documents and some 80 interviews with aid bureaucrats working at different levels and in different organizations, including public agencies, private companies, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and universities, all involved in development aid projects financed fully or in part by the Swedish taxpayer. (For a detailed account of the methods, materials and analysis, see the Methods Appendix.) More specifically, the theoretical purpose of our project has been to identify coping mechanisms and responses that may help to prevent the extremes of obsessive measurement disorder, and foster instead pragmatic, constructive organizing and learning that benefits not only aid organizations and their employees but also – and more fundamentally – the people and societies in need. In essence then, our study investigates the question of why performance management and measurement requirements seem in some instances to hinder, and in others to support the implementation of aid projects and programs.

Demands for Certainty in Public Administration

Although being able to show results has always been an important societal issue, the New Public Management (NPM) wave of the past decades has led to intensified pressure to do so, a demand driven by a strive for increased efficiency, transparency and accountability, and a higher quality of public services, and the strive to make policy implementation more effective (Hood, 1991;

Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011). At the same time, countless studies have raised criticism of management trends associated with NPM (Forssell & Ivarsson Westerberg, 2014; Lapsley & Knutsson, 2016; Reuter et al., 2012; Van de Walle, 2010), with scholars having pointed out unbidden consequences such as an increased focus on short-term, measurable targets and outputs, increased audit and control practices, and too much time allocated to administration, with the implication that professionals are being left with too little for other work practices (Agevall et al., 2017; Alexius, 2021; Alvesson, 2021; Bornemark, 2018; Bringselius, 2018; Forssell & Ivarsson Westerberg, 2014).

It is also well-known that control efforts can lead to even more control efforts (Power, 1997). There is a risk, for example, that an organization that perceives itself to be closely controlled will in turn attempt to control others. Such as when an aid organization finds itself pressured by the media or an external auditor (Vähämäki, 2017). Scholars have also argued that too great a focus on performance measurement may erode development policy implementation (Buntaine et al., 2017; Hoey, 2015; Honig, 2018; Natsios, 2010; Rottenburg, 2013; Wallace et al., 2007) and can lead to extreme states such as OMD (Natsios, 2010). Counterproductive effects of increased control and performance management requirements have also been reported in research related to the concepts of the "audit society" (Power, 1997), "results measurement society" (Bowerman et al., 2000), "evaluation society" (Dahler-Larsen, 2011), and "administration society" (Forsell & Ivarsson Westerberg, 2014).

Looking more specifically at the field of development aid, it is also the case that at all levels, from macro to micro, responses to uncertainty have largely taken the form of a quest for results and effectiveness. Over the past decades, development aid organizations, both in Sweden and around the world, have put a lot of time and energy into building a system of indicators, measurement and accountability mechanisms (Eyben, 2010; Eyben et al., 2016; Gutheil, 2020; Shutt, 2016; Vähämäki, 2017; Vähämäki & Verger, 2019). These efforts can be seen as rationalized responses aimed at reducing uncertainty since a reduced level of uncertainty is deemed important to protect the legitimacy of the aid system (Hood, 1991; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011). This has been a major concern for

Sweden's aid agency Sida ever since the birth of Swedish public development aid in the 1960s (Vähämäki, 2017). Consequently, new results initiatives have been launched in Sweden every decade (1971, 1981, 1998, and 2012), with all of these tides of reform having centered on reducing uncertainty by demonstrating that aid "works" and produces results (Vähämäki, 2017).

Whereas most previous research projects on aid regulation have taken their departure from established project documents, attempts to explore the regulatory translation and the associated organizational dynamics have been less common (Ferguson, 1994; Hoey, 2015; Mitchell, 2002; Mosse, 2005; Rottenburg, 2013). Calls have, therefore, been made to specifically study what happens in aid organizations where such regulations are crafted and responded to (Eyben, 2010). In response to these calls, Vähämäki (2017) investigated how these types of regulations are understood within a government aid agency, but studies on the interorganizational relations remain scarce, and there is a need to move beyond single organization case studies to a more complex systems perspective on the wider world of aid relations and its interorganizational dynamics (Wallace et al., 2007). This is relevant in order to gain a deeper understanding of *when*, *how*, and in particular *why* performance measurement requirements and other control and auditing demands have a performance-weakening effect rather than the intended performance-enhancing effect on development policy and its implementation. These are key research questions we discuss in this volume.

To sum up, there is widespread knowledge and awareness today that excessive use of performance management and control seeking measurements to reduce uncertainty in complex settings can lead to unintended consequences and perverse, counterproductive effects for management and operations (Adcroft & Willis, 2005; Diefenbach, 2009; Forssell & Ivarsson Westerberg, 2014; Holzapfel, 2014; Johansson & Lindgren, 2013; Meyer & Gupta, 1994; Natsios, 2010; Smith, 1993). This debate has in turn spurred a "post-new public management" frenzy. In Swedish public administration, for example, in the years following 2016, trust-based management became the new management fashion (Bringselius, 2018) and, in the development aid sector, most aid organizations joined the chorus of those eager to at least *talk* about other ways of governing aid

(Vähämäki & Verger, 2019). In this hope-filled discourse, concepts such as "adaptive management" and "learning-based management" took center stage (Dexis Consulting Group, 2017; Honig, 2018; Honig & Gulrajani, 2018; Shutt, 2016; Vähämäki & Verger, 2019), with "results" (as in "results-based management") at times updated to terms like "learning," "trust," "agile," or "adaptive." The new management fashion in public administration has also faced substantial problematization, however, and has not escaped critique (Björk & Tengblad, 2023; Ehn & Sundström, 2020; Örn, 2017).

Yet, it is important to note that there are also studies that show how measurement and management of performance can be perceived as having a *positive* effect on monitoring, evaluation, and learning (Whitty, 2015), that emphasize how staff are able to adjust to requirements in ways perceived to be supportive of learning and which can contribute to effective aid (Wällstedt, 2016), and studies that show how performance measurement and management may enhance rather than reduce trust in certain settings, such as development aid (Alexius & Vähämäki, 2020).

Obsessive Measurement Disorder or Pragmatic Bureaucracy?

We know from previous research that attempts to simplify the complex and control the uncertain future can sometimes run amok and lead to "hyper-rationality" (Gustafsson Nordin, 2022; Tamm Hallström et al., 2022), where an intense and exclusive focus is placed on the rational processing of *everything*, including the interorganizational relationships that are key to the business of international aid. However, previous research also tells us that decision-makers gain and apply professional judgment and can possess a broad repertoire of strategic responses, including ways to ignore some external demands on rule-following and performance measurement requirements (Alexius, 2007; Eyben, 2010; Oliver, 1991; Vähämäki, 2017).

In the upcoming chapters, we present our findings on how aid bureaucrats cope with uncertainty in their everyday project operations. In essence, we find that they do so by navigating the tension between rigid bureaucracy and laissez-faire pragmatism, thereby

walking a fine line between the risks of obsessive measurement at one extreme, and the risk of corruption and nepotism at the other. By applying their professional judgment, we find that most aid bureaucrats aim for a middle ground on the continuum between the two dreaded extremes. Thus, in order to be happy at their post, they learn how to cope within the realms of or by way of more creative uses of and approaches to rule-following and rational decision-making procedures.

We call this position and approach of the aid professionals "pragmatic bureaucracy," which we define as: *the use of judgment to identify a sweet spot between the extremes of bureaucracy and pragmatism, where bureaucracy is used rationally when possible, and pragmatically when needed*. The different chapters of the book contribute different facets of this concept, with the closing chapter devoted to an in-depth account of how pragmatic bureaucracy is performed and what its consequences are. Our work hence builds on and aims to contribute to previous research on the conditions under which performance measurement requirements improve or erode development policy implementation in complex fields such as that of development aid (Hoey, 2015; Hood, 2012; Natsios, 2010).

Chapter Outline

Chapter 2: Complexities, Uncertainties, and Responses

In this theoretical chapter, we first define three key characteristics of a complex system such as that of development aid: (1) multiple interacting components, (2) fluid boundaries, and (3) unpredictable dynamics. Next, we discuss how these complexities give rise to three kinds of uncertainties: (a) uncertainties of state, (b) uncertainties of effect, and (c) uncertainties of response. To complete the theoretical backbone of the chapter, we then cut to the core of our research question to discuss two types of responses aimed to reduce uncertainty: (1) approach-oriented responses, and (2) emotion-oriented responses, including trust. Here, we introduce the concept of *trust transference* and explain why, in highly complex systems, trust transference from *impersonal sources of trust* (such as organizational structures and processes, third-party standards and assessments, management technologies and methods) are typically the

most legitimate ones. To tie in closer with our field of study, throughout the chapter, we illustrate the theoretical concepts and take – always with empirical examples.

Chapter 3: Recipients Are Responsible Donors Too: On Plural Actorhood and Role-Switching

In this second theoretical chapter, we continue to lay the foundations for upcoming empirical chapters by analyzing the identity and social roles of aid organizations, and how their bureaucrats manage uncertainty by following institutionalized expectations of proper, responsible behavior. We propose that the concept of *plural actorhood* has the potential to update outdated notions of intermediaries by shedding light on the aid organizations' abilities to perform and switch between *several* equally genuine roles. Most of the aid organizations are characterized by the duality of being *both* a donor *and* a recipient of aid, *both* a rule-follower *and* a rule-setter, *both* an auditor *and* an auditee. Therefore, the mechanism of *role switching* opens up for a more complex understanding of aid organizations which also allows us to better explain how aid bureaucrats balance the fine line of pragmatic bureaucracy.

Chapter 4: Practices of Approximation: Simplifying the Complex and Controlling the Future

Faced with uncertainty, aid bureaucrats commonly refer to approximations for actual outcomes and effects which are difficult to assess. The overall aspiration has been to tame the complexity and uncertainty at hand by providing simplified information, such as numbers on impacts and effects. New practices and methods have emerged over the years, but discussions on what should be counted as a result often lead to more, not less information being produced and processed, and to confusion, not clarity. Rather than being easy to comprehend, the numbers often spur new questions, and new numbers. The mismatch of temporalities in the field also implies that project managers are expected to provide reports *before* these results have had a chance to materialize. Nevertheless, most aid bureaucrats find results processes important as legitimizing rituals and mechanisms of hope, if not as validation of actual results.

Chapter 5: In Proper Organization We Trust: On Extrapolation From Proper Organization Proxies

Despite the high aspirations of the Swedish Policy for Global Development (PGD) and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which call for variation and diversity in organizational forms, we see signs of increased conformity in the governance and management of aid projects across the various actor groups involved in development aid. Rather than valuing and trusting the specific features and processes of civil society organizations, companies, universities, and public agencies, we find that aid bureaucrats tend to aim for compliance with a general ideal of what we here call the "proper organization." When decision-makers need results produced at a faster pace than the underlying conditions allow, extrapolating results from "proper organization proxies" (POPs) such as legitimate organization structures, processes, and management technologies serve as pragmatic means of bridging this temporal mismatch. Core to this ideal is the idea that good results stem from sticking to a standard format for modern organizations – that are purposeful, autonomous, and rational. As a consequence, domain-specific or thematic expertise becomes less sought after, less valued, less used, and less trusted.

Chapter 6: Certainty for Sale?: A Historic Exposé on the Role of External Experts in Development Aid 1960s–2020s

Ever since the field of public development aid was established in the 1960s, external experts have been extensively employed in aid organizations' attempts to respond to the various uncertainties of aid operations. In this chapter, we take a closer look at what the Swedish development aid agency, Sida, has required from external experts and how the content and rituals of these contracted expert deals have contributed – or *not* – to perceptions of trust and certainty. We present an historic exposé from (a) the Quick-fix Implementer Era when aid bureaucrats were to contract an external expert to fix the problem, to (b) the Collaborative Turn Era where problems were perceived as much more complex and required close relationships and joint participatory approaches, to (c) the current Proper Organization Proxy Era where the role of aid

bureaucrats is reduced to that of a catalyst whose main responsibility is to justify that aid money goes to the right partners and where external experts are legitimizers of proper donor and recipient behavior. And all throughout, external experts have served an important function – that of making organizations in the donor role less uncertain of their decisions on which recipients should receive funding. Interestingly, however, the use of external experts has in all times given rise to more uncertainty, which, in turn, has called for more experts.

Chapter 7: Multivocal Brokering: Translating and Decoupling for Results

In this chapter, we take a closer look at some of the key competencies of professional aid bureaucrats and discuss how these may help to explain whether obsessive measurement disorder occurs or not. Our primary concern here is to examine the relatively under-researched contribution made by aid bureaucrats when they *broker* policies, relationships, and aid projects into tangible and meaningful actions and valuable results. By using *translation* and *de-coupling*, aid bureaucrats broker conflicting reporting requirements and understand and navigate the logics of different institutional and organizational settings. Guided by their *multivocality* – the ability to use several "languages of aid" – the aid bureaucrats can shape legitimate results that make good sense to those at a distance, while at the same time honoring and protecting efficient local aid practices. We suggest that brokering often functions as a highly valuable buffer that can counteract tendencies obsessive measurement disorder.

Chapter 8: Pragmatic Bureaucracy: An Antidote to Obsessive Measurement Disorder?

In this concluding chapter, we present and discuss our empirical findings and contributions as well as practical implications and suggested topics for future research. In essence, we argue that most aid bureaucrats in our study struggle to do good, seeking and learning to find ways forward through the often dense administrative jungle. Although somewhat unexpected, we found that *pragmatic*

bureaucracy seems to be the most common response to uncertainty in the complex development aid projects. Rule-following is key to the pragmatic bureaucrat, but rules are not followed blindly. Flexibility and professional judgment based on a rich set of experiential knowledge make the call. We suggest that pragmatic bureaucracy functions as a potent antidote OMD but also as a vaccine that may help prevent overregulation and control and instead foster constructive learning that benefits aid results.

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Chapter 2

Complexities, Uncertainties, and Responses

Complex systems are characterized by three ideal-typical traits: (1) *multiple interacting components*, (2) *fluid boundaries*, and (3) *unpredictable dynamics* (Rutter et al., 2020). These characteristic conditions of a complex system bring about a number of uncertainties that in turn call for a response to this uncertainty. (We look more closely at these traits in relation to the development aid system below.) Uncertainty can, generally speaking, be defined as a situation where there is no "single and complete understanding of the system to be managed" (Raadgever et al., 2011). Previous literature (Milliken, 1987; Sicotte & Bourgault, 2008) has commonly differentiated between three types of uncertainty: *uncertainty of state* – What are we up against and how will it change?, *uncertainty of response* – What can we do about the uncertainty of state? What responses are available and which should we chose?, and *uncertainty of effect* – What will happen if X happens, or if we respond in certain way Y, or certain way Z?

Fig. 1 below shows the social phenomena of complexity, uncertainty, and uncertainty responses, as well as their relations and potential outcomes. A general takeaway from the illustration in the figure is that complexity gives rise to uncertainty (Howell et al., 2010), and uncertainty in turn calls for some kind of uncertainty response. However, as the double-ended arrow between uncertainty and uncertainty response also indicates, we should not

Complexity ⟶ Uncertainty ⟶ Uncertainty responses ⟶ Certainty/Uncertainty reduction

Fig. 1.   Complexity-Uncertainty Model.

necessarily assume that uncertainty responses will lead to certainty or uncertainty reduction. That is, it will sometimes be the case that uncertainty responses lead to further, typically unintended, uncertainty.

Multiple Interacting Components

Looking at the conditions in the field of development aid, we find that the first characteristic trait of complex systems, that of *multiple interacting components*, is unquestionably fulfilled. As insightfully stated by Ramalingam (2013, p. 5):

> Today, we are dealing with what has been called a "many-to-many" world of aid. There are more agencies using more money and more frameworks to deliver more projects in more countries with more partners employing more staff specializing in more disciplines. The relationships and interdependencies between existing and new organizations have increased and so have the pathways and channels through which aid resources can flow.

The theoretical complexity condition of multiple interacting components (here, organizations) is also exemplified in a quote from one of our informants from the Pan-African Network for Economic Analysis of Policies (PANAP). The informant explains the organization's role in the Pesticide Action Network (PAN) relating to the "Towards a non-toxic South-East Asia" program (financed by Sida and coordinated by the Swedish Chemicals Agency (KEMI):

> So we're an organization that basically does mostly advocacy and campaigning, and through our partners we support farmers and communities to do agroecology

> work. So we're a network, a very dynamic network,
> constituted of 400 partners in the Asia-Pacific region.
> [...] We've also been active in various advocacy
> platforms through the UN chemicals framework, the
> BRS conventions, the Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm
> conventions, and through the FAO JMPM, which is the
> joint pesticide management.

There are not only large numbers of organizations involved in
the interlinked vast, transnational systems of aid delivery. Among
them, there are also many *different kinds* of organizations such as
nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), international develop-
ment organizations (e.g., UN bodies), national governments, pri-
vate and public companies, research organizations, and
philanthropic organizations. Considering the multitude of organi-
zations involved, and despite the efforts of international relations
research to grapple with it, we find it unfortunate that many studies
on development aid management continue to embrace a seemingly
rationalistic perspective. For example, in the previous literature,
one commonly finds the development aid system and its relations
described in terms of decision-making "chains," or "channels" of
linear "principal-agent" relationships (Dietrich, 2021; Gulrajani,
2015; Wallace et al., 2007). Many studies also write about
"donor–recipient" relations in an overly simplified way, like when
Swedlund (2017) concludes that "it takes two to tango the devel-
opment dance" (see also Edgren 2003; Ferrin et al., 2008). The
"postaid" literature has criticized this simplified view of donors and
recipients, and uses instead terms like "providers" and "partners."
The typical view taken in the current aid narratives is, moreover,
that effective aid operations should be undertaken in an
"equator-less landscape of multistakeholder global partnerships"
(Eyben & Savage, 2013, p. 457) populated by "old" public aid
donors from the North and "new" actors such as aid donors from
the South, from civil society, and the private sector (Gulrajani,
2022; Taggart, 2022).

As we discuss in more detail in Chapter 3, however, both the
"tango-for-two" and the "chain or channel" metaphors, along with
the idea of "multistakeholder partnerships," are misleading, firstly,
because most recipients (or "partners") are *donors too* and most

donors (or "providers") are *recipients too*, and secondly because, as rightly described in the "post-aid" literature, it takes many more than two organizations for most aid operations to materialize. Here, we also note that, in addition to the numerous organizations involved in multistakeholder partnerships, we must not forget the influence of a large number of *horizontal* relations. Many of these are market relations between, on one hand, aid organizations and external service providers such as management consultants, auditors, and legal experts on the other.

Some researchers argue that we live in an audit society (Power, 1997), or a performance measurement society (Bowerman et al., 2000), where effectiveness is valued according to measurable outputs. On the supply side, we find a growing number of actors in the fields of auditing and control (Gustafsson & Tamm Hallström, 2013, 2014) as well as evaluators and consultants. In the field of development aid, they work, for example, to improve developing countries' monitoring and evaluation systems (Hoey, 2015). The growing institutional demands on control and reporting affect how development aid is organized, creating new conditions for aid projects and programs. Later in the book, in Chapter 6, we take a closer look at what some of these external service providers and experts are selling, and how the content and rituals of their market deals contribute to perceptions of certainty in the system, but also to the perception of uncertainty. Thus, to keep to a dance metaphor, we could say that development aid takes a full dance floor of partners and perhaps an intricate group folkdance with a lot of twists and turns all around the floor would be a more fitting comparison than a lonely tango for two. For the outsider, it is often difficult to tell who is dancing with whom and who is taking the lead since this changes continuously with the flow of the music.

Fluid Boundaries

If we zoom out and acknowledge the horizontal market relations and the full impact of the wider institutional field (politicians, the media, etc.), we find that the field of development aid is indeed a system with *fluid boundaries*, the second characteristic trait of complex systems (Rutter et al., 2020). In fact, the complex system of development aid resembles more a dynamic network than, as the

popular metaphors used in the field would suggest, a set of static funding "chains" or "channels" (Alexius & Vähämäki, 2020). As will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3, we argue that the conventional way of perceiving some organizations in the aid system as "donors," others as "recipients," while a third group are described as "intermediaries," is misleading since this neither captures the nature and dynamics of the relationships nor their outcomes (Alexius & Vähämäki, 2020). Rather, in the case studies recounted in this book, we found that most organizations involved in development aid act as *both* donors and recipients, many of them switching back and forth between the two roles daily (see Fig. 2 below and Chapter 3). Based on our findings, we argue that the social roles and institutionalized behavioral scripts and norms tied to these roles are also key to understanding the dynamics of the aid system, including the various responses and outcomes seen in the system (Dietrich, 2021).
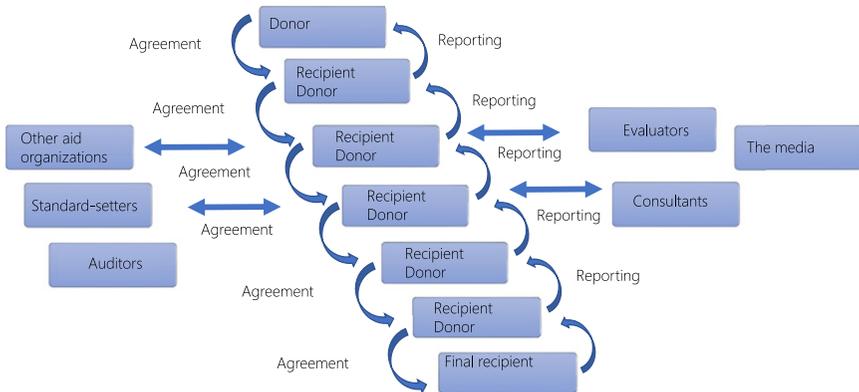
Fig. 2.   Schematic Representation of the Dynamic Web, With Examples of Its Vertical and Horizontal Relations.

For aid bureaucrats and their organizations, the many and diverse parties involved and fluid boundaries of the system obscure clarity and give rise to confusion as to who is involved, who does what, and what (if any) coordination is taking place. As one interviewee from a study on the mediatization of development aid expressed it (Grafström & Windell, 2019, p. 23):

> Development aid is spread out around the world. It is allocated to numerous, thousands of actors, and it is exceedingly difficult to-, well, quite simply just to see how it's done.

Conflicts of interest are also common in the aid field and may bring about other challenges, such as inertia in decision-making (Alexius & Furusten, 2023). The boundary-spanning, fluid nature of grand societal challenges may also bring about confusion, power struggles, and conflicts about interdependencies and the allocation of responsibility among the many parties involved (Alexius, 2017). Are there inefficient overlaps or troublesome responsibility gaps, for example?

In addition to the great multitude of organizations involved, most of them now face expectations from their increasingly pluralistic institutional environments to take on a growing number of additional tasks and responsibilities, resulting in a broader and more fragmented mission for all (Alexius, 2021; Bromley & Meyer, 2015; Pache & Santos, 2010; Thornton & Ocasio, 2008). Digitalization and IT security, environmental concerns, and human and animal rights are just a few examples on this growing list of expectations on today's modern organizations. Among the drivers of this development, we find globalization in general and the many "institutional actors" – often meta-organized interest organizations – that see it as their mission to formulate and package norms and to spread them to other organizations by way of "institutional products" such as standards and certifications, rankings, and prizes (Brunsson & Jacobsson, 2000; Furusten, 2023). In addition to this rapidly spinning machinery of norms (which is fueled just as much by market incentives and profits as by benevolence and dreams of a better world), it is also clear that we face a number of critical and urgent grand societal challenges, such as pandemics and climate change. Examples of grand challenges that are expected to be top of mind for today's aid bureaucrats and their organizations include aggravated global instability, hunger, extreme poverty, fragility, and geopolitical shifts, along with climate change and pandemic preparedness and mitigation.

The growing literature on how society might respond to grand societal challenges (Ferraro et al., 2015; George et al., 2016) reflects

an increasing interest in various forms of logic- and boundary-spanning organizing and, not least, collaboration among organizations from different societal sectors (Alexius & Furusten 2019; Brès et al., 2019; Gümüsay et al., 2022; Mair & Rathert, 2021). A case in point is the popular, hopeful "Collaborate more!" slogan that appears in contemporary policy debates and studies on climate change. In following with the ambitious intentions of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of UN Agenda 2030, and specifically Goal 17 on partnerships for sustainable development, the expressed ideal of "multistakeholder collaboration" is typically motivated with reference to the complex and uncertain nature of this grand societal challenge (Brammer et al., 2019; Christensen & Lægreid, 2007; Dietz et al., 2003; Ferraro et al., 2015; George et al., 2016; Steurer, 2011). What collaboration actually means in practice, however, is rarely problematized – it is more often assumed valuable a priori (Greenwood & Freeman, 2017; Schreyögg & Sydow, 2010).

At the interorganizational project level, uncertainties are commonly found to derive from changes in strategy or in the setup of internal or external partners (Zheng & de Carvalho, 2016; Lechler et al., 2012; Migilinskas & Ustinovicius, 2008). Along the same lines, Knobloch and Solomon (1999) identified four sources of what they call "relational uncertainty" (see list below). As organization scholars, we note that most of these uncertainties can be linked to fundamental elements of organizing – members, decision-making procedures, rules, monitoring, and sanctions – as explained below:

The sources of relational uncertainty according to Knobloch and Solomon (1999) and how they link to fundamental organizational elements:

- How is the relationship *defined*? (In essence, uncertainties concerning who the *members* are and what *decision-making* procedures will be used among them.)
- What are the *goals*, future plans, and commitments of the relationship?
- What are the *norms* that apply to the relationship? (In essence, uncertainties about the applicable rules.)

• What are the ways in which the relationship is *evaluated*? (In essence, uncertainties about *monitoring* and *sanctions*, such as costs and rewards, that apply to the relationship.)

Unpredictable Dynamics

As will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4, it is also the case in development aid that a fixed input seldom, if ever, has a fixed, predictable output (Rutter et al., 2020). Rather, in terms of *unpredictable dynamics* – the third characteristic trait of a complex system – there is tension, ambiguity, and paradox all-around concerning both the nature and the development of the kinds of profound societal problems aid organizations work to mitigate (ibid). As another informant from Grafström's study on the mediatization of aid organizations explains (Grafström & Windell, 2019, p. 31):

> Development aid work is a very complex process, that is dependent on what the history is, what institutions there are, what social customs, what politics, and all kinds of other aspects. So, the belief that we can design projects so that they can move forward in a straight line… They don't […] Things do go forward, but very haltingly, with a lot of backlash.

The unpredictable dynamics of how a complex system will develop in the future therefore calls decision-makers to exercise judgment and flexibility since wicked problems can be neither neatly solved nor easily implemented by rational planning (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973/1984; Rittel & Webber, 1973). In fact, research on decision-making and reform has found that decision-making is rarely rational (Brunsson, 1985; March & Simon, 1958) and, even when ambitious decisions are made, it is often uncertain whether they will be implemented as intended (Brunsson, 1989; Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Røvik, 2000). As one of our informants, a project leader at the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in Cambodia put it:

> In this area in particular, you need to have a lot of flexibility, because you get a lot of things popping up unexpectedly.

Uncertainties of state generally occur when there is a failure to understand how components of a complex environment are changing. In the development aid system, some examples of externally derived uncertainties of state relate to political and economic stability (or instability) in certain sectors, regions, and countries. (According to recent figures, 72% of the world's populations −5.7 billion people live in autocracies by 2022 (V-Dem, 2023). Uncertainties of state can also include changes in local infrastructure and nature, including natural disasters of various types (Kolltveit et al., 2004). With the ultimate objective of reducing poverty and inequality in the world, balancing power relations is yet another key challenge that poses considerable variation and unpredictable dynamics for organizers. While the power of an organization in the donor role may seem obvious, as demonstrated by its resources and funding decisions, the power of aid organizations that operate closer to the ground typically lies in their domain-specific knowledge about the local context (Pomerantz, 2004). Hence, although organizations in the donor role are traditionally seen as more powerful than those in the recipient role, in practice, different types of power play out and combine differently at different times, often in unpredictable ways.

For the aid system as a whole and promises made in international commitments like the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, an uncertainty of state lies in the question of whether funding for the agenda projects will actually materialize. Despite there being a collective funding commitment of 0.7% of contributing nations' gross domestic product (GDP), resources allocated to development aid are shrinking. In fact, according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), in 2021, aid organizations in the donor role paid out less than a half of the funds promised (OECD, 2023). For organizations in the recipient role, the unpredictability of whether aid funds will actually be delivered causes many difficulties and is a costly uncertainty since planning for projects and programs might be done in vain. A typical problem in development aid is moreover that, even when

agreed, funds are often not paid out according to schedule. For example, an earlier OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) survey showed that, on average, only 45% of aid is delivered on schedule (OECD, 2009). For organizations in the recipient role, this uncertainty of state (Will the money arrive?) can also lead to *uncertainty of response*, i.e., uncertainty about what the appropriate or best available response can be. Typical questions spurred by uncertainty of response include the following: "Should we start implementing the project and count on the money coming in retroactively?," "Should we try to secure funding from other sources?," or "Should we just assume that the money will not arrive and plan for a phase out?"

As a third kind of uncertainty (in addition to the uncertainties of state and the uncertainty of response), *uncertainties of effect* generally arise in situations where predicting the effect of a future state is not possible.[1] In development aid, decision-makers not only face challenges imposed by social, cultural, and geographical distances but must also handle uncertainties of effect when aiming for results in the unpredictable future, often several decades down the road (Andrews et al., 2017). This means that they don't always know if the response to a problem has been effective or not. At both the organizational level and project level, uncertainties of effect may, for example, derive from organizational resistance, lack of continuity or persistence as the project unfolds (Hong Zheng & Monteiro de Carvalho, 2016; Lechler et al., 2012; Migilinskas & Ustinovicius, 2008). With regard to the situation of unpredictability in funding, an organization in the recipient role might wonder: If we begin to implement now, and money does not arrive as expected – what will happen to the project? Or: What will happen if we receive funding from another source? Will we need to pay that back if the initial funding comes through?

To sum up, under conditions of high complexity, uncontested facts that are trustworthy, definite, transferable, and predictable are elusive (Greenhalgh & Papoutsi, 2018), and decisions must often be made in an uncertain state where information is typically scarce,

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[1]An extreme example here would be unpredictable uncertainties (also called "unknown unknowns") whose influences on effects are not possible to even identify beforehand (Pich et al., 2002).

contested, and/or flawed in different ways (Wolpert & Rutter, 2018).

Responding to Uncertainty

Looking at the broader, cross-disciplinary literature on responses to uncertainty, the first takeaway is that uncertainty constitutes a powerful stressor (Greco & Roger, 2001). Although uncertainty responses may range from passive to more active and interactive strategies, we can also conclude that *active* strategies aimed at *reducing* uncertainty have by far been the dominant focus in previous literature (Berger, 1979; Berger & Bradac, 1982). It is hence crucial to note from the outset that uncertainty is seldom accepted in modern, Western decision-making contexts.[2] Even in highly complex settings such as that of development aid, uncertainty is – at least officially – collectively frowned upon and treated as a problem to be solved (Cyert & March, 1963; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003).

On a basic level, uncertainty reduction centers on attempts to *make sense* of something, either proactively or retroactively (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). Uncertainty reduction also often relates to our ability to predict what will happen in the future, as well as to understand the relationship between inputs and outputs (Williams, 2005). For example: What is the best response with respect to enabling continued aid that promotes equality and human rights in a country where a fundamentalist religious regime has recently taken office? Or, in cases where corruption has already occurred on numerous occasions, should decision-makers continue with an approach that favors local ownership and capacity-building, or would a stricter response that emphasizes control be a better option?

Since rationality is such a widespread ideal and virtue, not least in secular societies, control gained through rule-following and rational decision-making procedures is simply *comme il faut*. For example, questions like "What is the likelihood that something unexpected will happen?" and "How much will it matter if it does?"

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[2]One exception being decision-makers whose very goal is to increase uncertainty (e.g., terrorist groups).

are expected to be answered clearly and promptly, typically following administrative ceremonies where the probability and consequences of different unknown future scenarios and outcomes have been estimated and decided on (Zeng & de Carvalho, 2016).

As mentioned in the introduction to the chapter, the double-ended arrow between uncertainty and uncertainty responses in Fig. 1 reminds us to not assume a priori that all responses will have the intended effect. We simply cannot know for sure whether a response will *decrease* the uncertainty at hand, as is usually the intention. In fact, rather than decrease it, some responses may actually *increase* uncertainty instead.

A basic distinction between different uncertainty responses is that some are oriented to the *cause* or source of the uncertainty and others target its *effects*.[3] Most of the uncertainty-reducing responses identified in previous literature are *approach-oriented responses*, meaning that individuals (at times on behalf of organizations) try to address and reduce the uncertainties at hand by *doing* things. Examples of such "doings" include planning, suppression of competing activities to focus solely on the uncertainty, and seeking support from others.

People may also work on their emotions to feel differently about the uncertain situation at hand. *Emotion-focused responses* include positive reinterpretation, acceptance or denial, turning to religion, and seeking sympathy from others (Kåver, 2004; Vazard, 2022). It is also a general takeaway that putting our trust in someone or something helps to calm our minds, thereby reducing our perception of uncertainty. This undoubtedly applies not only in social interactions with people we know but also when we interact in large complex systems where we are strangers to one another (Gambetta, 1988). Thus, in uncertain settings, trust can serve as a valuable substitute for the much sought-after certainty, and consequently, trust-enhancing efforts are a common emotion-focused response to uncertainty (Alexius & Vähämäki, 2020).

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[3]For instance, whereas some approaches to a risk of fire involve trying to eliminate the source of the risk (e.g., installing fire-proof materials), others involve reducing unfortunate consequences or the likelihood they will occur (e.g., installing fire alarms to minimize the consequences in the event of a fire).

That said, depending on the setting and its institutionalized expectations regarding behavior, responses that focus on emotion and trust may not be accepted as legitimate. From an early age, we are taught that there is a difference between *feeling* certain and *being* certain and, despite a growing body of research on the rational aspects and outcomes of emotions (Lodge & Taber, 2013; Oscarsson, 2022), in many modern contexts, feelings are still officially frowned upon as grounds for decision-making. The institutionalized expectation on organizations and individuals in our Western culture to attempt to respond to uncertainty with *doings rather than emotions* may contribute to explain why many trust- and emotion-focused strategies, including acceptance, remain relatively understudied in the governance and management literature.[4] As will be argued and demonstrated throughout the empirical chapters of this book, this seems also to hold true for development aid relations, where *doing* something differently to cope with uncertainty is clearly expected, and formal control is seen as superior to trust- and emotion-oriented responses.

Looking specifically at the development aid sector, Riddell (2007) argues that when asked whether aid leads to results, i.e., a question with a highly uncertain answer, the answers given by aid organizations in the donor role typically fall into one of three types of approaches: (1) attempts to convince the public that some aid does indeed work and produce results, (2) attempts to convince the public that steps are being taken to *enhance* the future impact of aid while trying to reduce the number of cases where aid does not or has not worked well in the past, or (3) attempts to nurture, extend, and deepen the support for aid, acknowledging that a significant part of aid is ineffective and openly sharing knowledge about its evident failures as well as successes. The latter approach – to admit that aid is complex and sometimes ineffective, and that some failure is inevitable – is a response that Riddell (2007, p. 115) claims "has been avoided almost entirely." Again, this suggests that when it comes to the field of development aid, it seems difficult, if not

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[4]In other strands of literature, this stance is discussed and portrayed as either problematic (in, e.g., sociological studies on socioeconomic inequality and oppression) or as a solution (in, e.g., literature on meditation and mindfulness).

impossible or unacceptable, to accept uncertainty. Rather, in this field, uncertainty must be acted upon.

Anticorruption measures taken in development aid make up a clear and typical example of how aid organizations and their bureaucrats respond actively to uncertainty. As an example, the anticorruption regulation of Sida, Sweden's public development aid agency, for example, states that corruption represents a serious hinder to development and is incompatible with the objective of development cooperation. When it comes to corruption, staff should "Never accept! Always act! Always inform!" (Sida, 2004). Here, corruption, in the sense of obtaining an improper gain, is viewed in broad terms, where gains may be of a financial or nonfinancial nature. The Sida regulation also states that the risks associated with interpersonal trust are often linked to proximity as they involve "people close to me, my workplace, my political party or my village" (Sida, 2004, p. 7). The norms are clear: organizations in the donor role are criticized for having had too culture-relative a view on corruption and for covering up mistakes while neglecting to take proper action.[5]

Increased measures targeting corruption and nepotism are understandable when considering the consequences for an agency such as Sida in the wake of a corruption scandal like the one in the health sector in Zambia in 2009. In that case, the embezzlement scandal originated in the Zambian Ministry of Health and involved close to SEK 50 million (about 10% of which, i.e., SEK 5 million, came from Sweden) that disappeared over the period January 2008 to May 2009 (Sundström, 2022). Despite the fact that it was a whistleblower within the Zambian ministry itself who broke the scandal, and that it was Swedish aid that had supported establishment of the whistleblower system, the Swedish Minister for Development Aid published an opinion piece in an online news platform in Sweden in the aftermath of the scandal (Carlsson, 2009) in which she argued that this type of corruption could be happening in all aid projects, and that it was only a coincidence that it had

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[5]Along the same lines, Hope (2001) argues that, in Africa, the main motivating and driving factors of new public management (NPM) reforms were bureaucratic corruption, dysfunctional governance systems, and fiscal crises.

been detected. The harsh critique of Sida's handling of the matter was accompanied by severe cuts to the agency's budget, along with other restrictions such as new recommendations for reducing interpersonal relations in aid management (Sundström, 2022).

Trust Transference From Impersonal Sources of Trust

How trust is created and maintained is commonly analyzed as a process taking place in-between two persons. In so-called interorganizational trust processes, it is true that there are two organizations center stage, yet, as discussed in Chapter 3, these organizations – the legal persons – are in turn represented by physical persons. In the aid field, it is typically an organization in the donor role that is the trustor who, assisted by its bureaucrats, makes decisions aimed at assessing the *ability*, *benevolence*, and *integrity* of an organization in the recipient role, the trustee (Mayer et al., 1995). As argued by Mollering (2006), although there are many similarities to interpersonal trust processes, there tend to be a range of additional and impersonal factors assessed in interorganizational trust processes. Our previous studies (Alexius & Vähämäki, 2020) suggest that the greater the distance (physical and cultural distance) between the parties, the more likely it is that there will be trust transference from impersonal sources of trust, such as bureaucratic procedures and routines, general management technologies, and organizational structures or processes. But why is this?

In the highly complex and uncertain world of development cooperation, it would be fair to assume that interpersonal trust is the "glue" that holds the complex relationships together (see also Eyben, 2010; McGillivray et al., 2012; Pomerantz, 2004; Swedlund, 2017). In all of our case studies (Alexius & Vähämäki, 2020), aid bureaucrats in the recipient role mentioned good personal relations with aid bureaucrats representing the organization in the donor role as a success factor for aid projects. Yet, in line with findings of Eyben (2010), we found that there is a tendency, particularly among aid bureaucrats that represent the organization in the donor role, at least officially, to downplay or hide these interpersonal relations and their role in governance. When asked how they cope with uncertainty, aid bureaucrats in a donor role seldom mention

key individuals as sources of trust. We suggest that this hesitation is due to several factors. It is true that the large distances, many parties involved, long-term investments, different cultures, and complex dependencies that characterize the field make it difficult for aid organizations to demonstrate that the funding is useful (Korsgaard et al., 2015). But these are not the only factors. In addition, a specific fear of corruption and nepotism, and a general fear of media scandals related to the taxpayers' money being wasted, also present aid bureaucrats with a challenge: a great need for trust in a situation where the conditions for and acceptance of interpersonal trust are limited (Alexius & Vähämäki, 2020).

We suggest that the donor's hesitation both to mention and to actually lean on personal relations stems mainly from concerns related to legitimacy and, more specifically, to the dreaded extremes of pragmatism – the risk of scams such as corruption or nepotism (see Chapter 8). The institutionalized ideal has it that donor representatives must not be naïve and "over-trusting" (Laroche et al., 2019). Large sums of taxpayer money are in circulation, and high demands are placed on independence, feedback, and corruption control. Due to the high external pressure on the aid organizations and their professionals to ensure that money flows to the right hands – there is a shared fear of media scandals in the increasingly mediatized aid field (Grafström & Windell, 2019). As a whole, this helps to explain why openly visible instances of interpersonal trust may contribute to increased levels of uncertainty, rather than reducing it. Faced with challenges to interpersonal trust, it is hence not surprising to find that the bureaucrats, pragmatically, look beyond interpersonal trust for alternative sources of trust that they can tap into. In the following, we introduce a pair of key concepts in this regard – trust transference (Bachmann et al., 2015) and sources of trust – which help to clarify how trust can be transferred from impersonal sources (e.g., from credible third-party actors, management tools and technologies, and organizational structures and processes) with the aim of making a trustee more trustworthy.

The concept of trust transference was first established by Bachmann et al. (2015) to describe how trust can be transferred from a credible third party who acts as a "go-between" in a new relationship. When the trustor (e.g., an aid organization in the donor role) assesses the trustworthiness of a trustee (e.g., an aid organization in the

recipient role), trust in the trustee expressed by another trustor may be transferred into the new relationship. This can occur, for example, when a donor's trustworthiness assessment of a new recipient is elevated by the recipient already having received financial support from other donors, or when respected consultancy firms are involved, indicating that others have already assessed and helped to "qualify" the potential recipient organization as trustworthy. In a similar fashion to that described by Bachmann et al. (2015), we found that aid bureaucrats use knowledge of potential recipients' previous and current trustful relations to third-party actors in their organizations' trust assessment decisions (see also Chapter 6). Previous relations with legitimate expert organizations such as management consultancies or auditing firms are commonly referred to in processes of trust transference (Busco et al., 2006). But our data also give us reason to broaden the use of the concept of trust transference to include a range of management technologies like quality standards and project management methods.

Fig. 3 illustrates how the trust process is typically described (situation A), where the trustor assesses the trustworthiness of the trustee and whereby it places its trust on the trustee. Situation B describes a situation where the trustor places its trust on impersonal
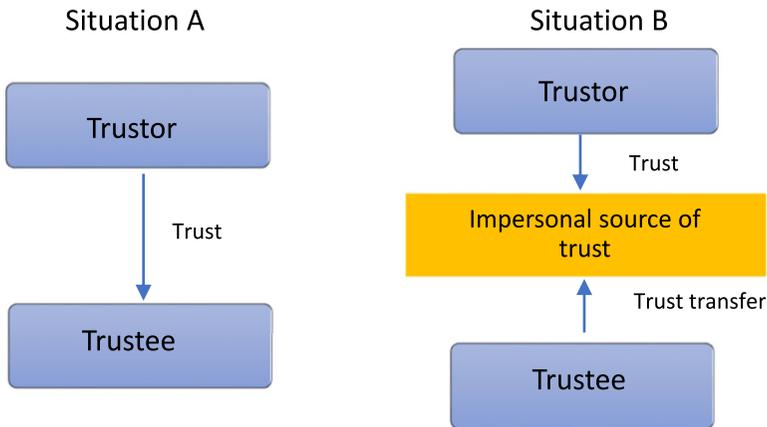

Fig. 3.   Trust Transference From Impersonal Sources of Trust
(Based on Alexius & Vähämäki, 2020).

sources of trust which transfer trust to the trustee. In these cases, trust may, for example, be transferred from third-party assessments of the trustee organization or from generally accepted management technologies to enhance the trustee's trustworthiness. An example is due to illustrate how this may happen. Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States, new airport security regulations and procedures were added with the aim of reducing and controlling the *source* of uncertainty, and hence the risk of another terrorist attack occurring in the air. However, for ordinary travelers who stood in longer lines, removed their shoes, and packed their toiletries in see-through plastic bags – how did the additional measures affect their perception of uncertainty? Since it is fair to assume that most travelers do not have the knowledge or data required to determine whether or not the taking off of shoes or use of clear plastic bags *actually* affect the source of the uncertainty and reduces the risk of another attack, it largely comes down to a question of *systems trust* (Giddens, 1990). If travelers have trust in the complex airport system with its organizations and experts, it is likely that the extra security procedures will indeed lower the travelers' *perceived* uncertainty of a terrorist attack occurring.

Trusting in someone or something calms our minds and reduces our perception of uncertainty. In uncertain settings, trust can serve as a substitute for certainty. If, however, the said travelers removing their shoes etc. do *not* trust the airport system's organization and experts and wonder whether the extra security measures are really that efficient rather than just a waste time and money, then the perceived uncertainty levels will not be reduced. In fact, they may even rise. Summing up what we can learn from the airport example, in a complex and uncertain setting, the prevalence of trust is often key to whether or not uncertainty-reducing responses have an effect on perceptions of uncertainty. When a gap remains between what we wish we knew and what we actually do know and are able to predict and control, trust is commonly used to attempt to *bridge* this gap. And as will be elaborated on in several of the chapters to come, the means of the approach-based responses to uncertainty (management standards, measurements, etc.) can also be referred to in emotion-based responses as impersonal sources of trust. The nature of these social processes will be the focus of the upcoming chapters of this volume.

Chapter 3

Recipients Are Responsible Donors Too: On Plural Actorhood and Role-Switching

A common categorization of the population of organizations in the field of development aid is one of differentiating between "donor organizations" and "recipient organizations." The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, Development Assistance Committee (OECD DAC) justifies and enhances this distinction via classification codes that clarify what can be counted as aid provision by a donor, categorizing only funds that go to the least developed countries as eligible Overseas Development Assistance (ODA). The flow of aid money is thereby classified, in various tables and statistics, as donor/aid-provider funds or aid-recipient/ partner funds. Considering these classifications, it is not surprising that international commitments adhere to the terminology and distinction between "donors" and "recipients." These money flows, the amounts, frequency, etc., are issues that have long drawn a lot of research attention as well as practitioner discussion on the wider topic of donor–recipient relationships (see for example Dietrich, 2013; Fielding & Mavrotas, 2008; Dole et al., 2021).

A shortcoming in previous academic literature, as well as in policy and practitioner conversations, however, is the lack of problematization of the common notion of two distinct types of aid organizations – donor organizations and recipient organizations – that are key to development aid governance and operations. This simplified categorization rests on an assumption that one set of

organizations only make decisions on money to be transferred from them (donors), and another set of organizations only receive this money (recipients). It is reasonable to trace this assumption to the rational contractual ideal, according to which, ideally, it should be crystal clear who the two main contractual parties are and what responsibility is to be allocated to each party. However, as discussed in Chapter 2, in practice, there tend to be numerous organizations involved in the implementation of development aid projects. So, if there can be only *one* donor and *one* recipient, who or what are the others involved? Some previous conceptualizations use the terms "primary donor" and "final recipient" for these two main parties, and then make sense of the other organizations "in-between" by referring to them as "intermediaries." In actual practice, however, it has proven difficult to find such intermediaries whose behavior differs from that of the "donors" or "recipients." When looking at actual behavior in the field of development aid, including decisions taken, we argue that viewing most aid organizations as both donors and recipients, in the sense that they both receive money from others and make decisions on the further transfer of those funds to the next organization(s) in the hierarchical chain of contractual relations, adds conceptual clarity to the analysis of the interorganizational relations. In order to problematize the common and at times taken-for-granted notion that certain organizations in the field are donors only, others are recipients only, and still others intermediaries only, we turn to classic sociology on identity and social roles to explain why we found no "intermediaries" yet plenty of recipients who are also donors responsible for providing funds. And these roles are not only played by the organizations involved. In fact, they cannot do it unless their staff do the same (see also Chapter 8). This is why we must start off with theory about human identity.

Plural Actors With Multiple Identities

The modern concept of identity can be defined as an awareness of oneself as a unique entity, separate from others (Harari, 2015). In practice, however, this ideal-typical definition is continuously challenged when one's personal identity meets the complexities of social interaction. In social contexts, one's identity constantly competes with or is complemented with the identities of collectives,

groups, and organizations to which a person belongs, such as one's family, friends, community, employer, church, gender, age group, sports club, nation, etc. Much like a Russian babushka doll, each individual has many layers of identity, most of which are tied to the groups and organizations they belong to (as a family member, employee, citizen, etc.). As Lahire put it (2011, cover):

> The actor is analysed as a student, worker, consumer, spouse, reader, sportsperson, voter etc. However, in societies where people often live through simultaneously and successively heterogeneous and sometimes contradictory social experiences, each individual inevitably carries a plurality of roles and manners of seeing, feeling and acting.

Today, there is agreement among social scientists that we should avoid the extreme positions of identity theory: both that of the under-socialized individual with complete free will and that of the over-socialized "cultural dope" with no "own" will at all (Ahrne, 1993; Etzioni, 1988; Granovetter, 1985). Just as with the Russian doll, we can acknowledge that we may all have an innermost core of personal preferences and traits but would not be "who we are" as individuals without the all-important external expectations on one another's behavior. Seen from a social constructivist perspective, identity is foremost shaped by society as a result of social processes and relations where a person interacts with her environment, with society (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). And unlike the stable materialization of a Russian doll made of wood, the shaping of our identities is a dynamic process where notions of "who I am" are constantly constructed and reconstructed in reflexive processes with others in the social contexts in which we spend our lives.

In essence, this means that one's identity is defined not only from within (i.e., "this is who I see myself as") but also highly defined in processes of social interaction (i.e., "this is who you see me as, in this particular situation") where different identities are called for in different situations. Hence, an individual's social identity tends to take slightly or even drastically different shapes from one context and type of situation to the next, depending on how others view that individual there. Although the word "identity" stems from the

Latin *identitas*, meaning similar or the same, we must be somewhat mindful of the commonplace illusion of a single, stable self as Goffman explained in this critical and ironic quote from his classic piece on the presentation of self in everyday life (Goffman, 1974, pp. 293–294, see also Goffman, 1956; Lahire, 2011 p. 15):

> We come to expect that all these acts will exhibit the same style, be stamped in a unique way. [...] Surely it is reasonable to say that each utterance or physical doing that the individual contributes to a situation will be rooted in his biographical, personal identity. Behind the current role, the person himself will peek out. Indeed, this is a common way of framing our perception of another. So three cheers for the self. Now let us try to reduce the clatter.

It is true that our identity changes over time, as life progresses and we get older. But one's identity also changes in the present, as we go from one social context and situation to another and adjust to the expectations encountered there. So, socially, a single human body bears heterogeneous identities and schemes of action. In this sense, we are "plural actors" (Lahire, 2011), a concept that has the potential to shed light on our ability to perform several equally genuine social roles. As Lahire put it (2011, pp. 15–16):

> The commonplace illusion of singleness and invariability. [...] Everything happens as if there were a specific symbolic and moral profit ... in believing oneself "identical" or "faithful" to oneself at every time and place, whatever the events experienced or tests undergone ("I've not changed"; "I'm always the same"). ... Socially, however, the same body passes through different states and is the irrevocable bearer of heterogeneous and even contradictory schemes of action and habits.

Instead of falling for the myth of the single, core identity, we must learn to embrace and value the "holding of multiple roles and

being of many things," each as genuine as the next (Fredriksson, 2021, 2023).

Masters of Social Games

A key characteristic of *Homo sapiens*, as a species, is our great ability to perceive and to learn, from an early age, how to perform a range of different roles suitable for a range of different social identities that are in turn expected as part of the "role set" of different "social games." The family game, the school game, the market game, the community game, and the nation state game are some of these all-important social games in which most of us take part in our everyday lives (Harari, 2014). Each of these social games has not only a basic set of rules we must follow but also a basic set of lead roles. For example, children and parents are key roles in the family game, the roles of teacher and student dominate the school game, and the seller and buyer make up the basic role set of the market game.

By acting in the roles and following the rules of a social game, we pursue social rewards (Abrutyn & Lizardo, 2022). Generally speaking, in all of these social games, adapting to the social expectations in play is a winning strategy that allows us to score high on social legitimacy and long-term survival (Ahrne, 1993). The fact that people generally follow the expected "logic of appropriateness" on proper behavior "for someone like me, in a situation like this" (March & Olsen, 2010) hence offers a powerful explanation to social behavior. Each of the social roles and the relationships acted out within them represent "an entire institutional nexus of conduct" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 92), and hence, a bundle of expectations of proper behavior that we learn, internalize, and then typically come to take for granted. This great ability of ours – to perceive, learn, and flexibly perform the different social roles expected of us – is fundamental to the human ability to coordinate quickly, also across vast distances, and it is through this special ability that we create and recreate society through our social interactions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Harari, 2014).

The Creation of Organizations as Actors in Social Games

Another of *Homo sapiens*' key characteristics that has had far-reaching implications for society is our innovation of the nonhuman "juridical" or "legal person". As rights- and duty-bearing juridical persons, organizations are able to do many things physical human persons can, such as enter into contracts of rights and obligations, own property, and be sued (Deiser, 1908; Dewey, 1926; William, 1911). And like contemporary individuals, organizations are actors in the sense that they can have characteristics like autonomy, clarity of purpose, decision-making capacity and sovereignty, technical action capability, and effective self-control (Meyer & Bromley, 2013). In the words of Brunsson (2022, p. 10):

> The organization defined as a legal person does not consist of people, nor of their interaction, but is a person in its own right. But this person can have relationships to physical persons. Fundamental for organizations understood in this way are not the possible relationships that people may have to each other but the relationship they have to the organization, for instance, as employees in a firm or member in an association. The relationships that employees or members may have to each other are indirect: they are created by their relationship to the organization. They are expected to work for the organization, not for each other.

Organizations and affiliation to organizations grant humans opportunities to collect and mobilize resources (Ahrne, 1993), and we tend to think of organizations as our invention and property, as if they were in our control. It is vital, however, to also acknowledge that we humans have become highly dependent upon this creation of ours, and that our society is an "asymmetric society," in the sense that legal persons dominate physical ones, not least when it comes to ownership (Coleman, 1982). It is fair to say that just as humans have decided upon the conditions of actorhood for

organizations, so too have organizations come to define the conditions for much of our interaction and collaboration.

Considering the complexity and uncertainty of development aid, as well as the vast amounts of money being transferred, it comes as no surprise to find that organizations are key actors in the social game of development aid. No matter where we look in the system of interlinked contractual parties, we find a plethora of aid organizations playing the social game of development aid through the decisions they make. When doing so, however, each organization is dependent on its relationships with its employees and other professionals (i.e., physical persons) who enable the organization's decision-making and act on its behalf. As Brunsson puts it in a recent essay (2022, p. 13):

> Legal persons differ from physical ones in the sense that they cannot quite do anything on their own. They must be represented by physical persons. [...] Legal persons do not do anything spontaneously or by reflex. One or several physical persons must decide what the organization will do.

Hence, in their joint endeavor to recreate aid organizations and adapt them to the role scripts of the donor and recipient roles, aid bureaucrats and aid organizations are mutually dependent. Let us now take a closer look at some key features of this institutionalized role set of the donor and the recipient.

The Social Game of Development Aid and Its Key Role Expectations

The various principles, standards, and accountability measures developed by the OECD and United Nations are key sources for understanding contemporary norms and expectations regarding donor and recipient behavior. The principles and indicators of the OECD Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, for example, describe norms of appropriate behavior for organizations in the donor and recipient roles, with a particular focus on efficiency. Other examples include the OECD DAC Blended Finance Principles Guidance and United Nation's Addis Ababa Action Agenda,

which define appropriate behavior for the private sector, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), governments, etc. The various accountability measures set up to monitor the different principles, standards, and guidance documents further support the socialization of different actors to conform to these normative role scripts.

Although expectations regarding appropriate behavior are high for all aid organizations, those in the donor role face particularly high expectations to live up to a rational-bureaucratic ideal where relations should be formalized, impartial, and kept at arm's length, and where transparent, standardized control procedures and documentation are considered crucial to assessment and accountability (Eyben et al., 2016; Martens, 2005; Pollit & Bouckaert, 2017; Shore & Wright, 2015). Moreover, the OECD DAC Peer Reviews, for example, put pressure on nations in the donor role to adhere to the international principles and standards. These assessments of how efficiently DAC member nations manage their development programs have been carried out for over 30 years now. Conducted periodically, every 5–6 years, by the OECD DAC Secretariat and two other agencies, the peer reviews put additional pressure on organizations in the donor role to behave properly. It is important for nations to come out well in peer reviews and other types of comparisons of adherence to standards and principles in the field, as a negative review can lead to reputational damage.

Expectations on organizations in the donor role to manage difficult decisions related to funding and project assessments are thus high. A comparison can be made here to the social game of the market, where competent buyers must be neither naïve nor over-trusting (Laroche et al., 2019). Large sums of taxpayer money are circulating, and high demands are placed on independence, feedback, and corruption control. Therefore, as described in this volume, organizations in the donor role are expected to create a sense of certainty about their projects and the money involved (Riddell, 2007).

If we apply Knobloch and Solomon's (1999) four sources of relational uncertainty (see Chapter 2), we find that, as the "manager" responsible for the interorganizational aid relation, the organization playing the donor role is expected to demonstrate decision-making authority and both to clearly define the relationship and to provide clarity on its goals, norms, and the ways in

which it will be evaluated. And while an organization in the donor role should, ideally, also possess domain-specific knowledge, according to our informants, this ideal is a less pronounced part of the role script nowadays (see Chapter 5).

For organizations playing the recipient in the social game of development aid, on the other hand, the main difference is that, in the recipient role, it is now expected, especially by the local institutional environment, that they defend and praise specific local circumstances and domain-specific knowledge and justify any exceptions from general rules, as the path forward to good results in aid projects (see Chapter 5). Despite much policy talk about aid serving the needs of the recipients, however, previous research has concluded that donor interests typically outweigh recipient needs (Eyben et al., 2016; Jacobsen & Sandvik, 2018). Indeed, the very same international general principles and standards noted above as being critical for organizations acting in the donor role also apply to those in the recipient role. In terms of rewards for role-following behavior (Abrutyn & Lizardo, 2022), organizations in the recipient role are expected to be thankful and obedient toward donors, since recipients must not "bite the hand that feeds them" (Fisher et al., 1982). In practice, this often means that the governments of developing countries need to show that they have credible plans, such as a Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS) to combat poverty and a National Determined Contribution (NDC) climate action plan to reduce emissions and adapt to the impacts of climate change. Throughout the implementation of any aid project, the actions of organizations in the recipient role are also continuously monitored, meaning that they too need to demonstrate that they are working toward the agreed-upon goals and following the principles and standards set. While organizations in the recipient role are expected to follow the various principles stated above, they are also expected to have all sorts of financial management procedures, auditing rules, and performance-monitoring rules in place. Thus, for an organization in the recipient role, following international norms and other expectations is a matter of survival because organizations that do not follow the rules cannot expect aid-funding decisions to go through.

Role-Switching

Since aid organizations need to play a number of different roles and adapt to different, more or less institutionalized role scripts (Abbott et al., 2017; Brès et al., 2019; Furusten, 2023; Hale, 2020), a critical aspect of aid bureaucrats' professionalism is making their organizations fit to play these roles properly. Although the phenomenon of role-switching is common within the realm of complex transnational governance (Brès et al., 2019; Fredriksson, 2021), research on how aid bureaucrats handle and cope with the multiple roles of their organizations in everyday practice remains scarce (Alexius & Vähämäki, 2020; Wallace et al., 2007).

A close comparison can be seen in the market game of the stock market, where the same person or legal person needs to be able to switch, sometimes from minute to minute, between the two key roles of seller and buyer (Aspers, 2011). We have similarly found that most organizations in the vertical chain of contractual relations in the aid game also exhibit this duality (see Fig. 4 below), with organizations playing the roles of both recipient and donor, both rule-follower and rule-setter and, in relation to results, both
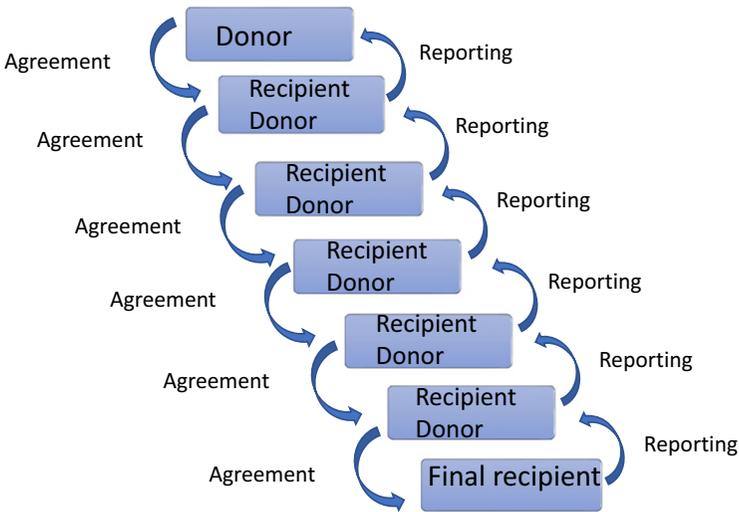
Fig. 4.   The Aid Organizations as Plural Actors That
Switches Roles.

auditee and auditor. When playing the recipient, aid bureaucrats help their organization interpret what it needs to do in order to receive further funding. When switching roles, to act as the donor, aid bureaucrats then do their best to help the organization turn its attention to regulating what the next actor in line has to do in order to obtain funding (see Fig. 4).

To give an example, in one of our interviews, we asked a Swedish Chemicals Agency project manager whether he perceived any difference between how the agency (in its recipient role) was governed by the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida), and how the agency (in its donor role) governed its partner organizations. As the project manager put it:

> Basically, I think that we think alike. That you have these control systems to make sure that things are done right, that the money is used in the right way, that you prioritize the right things, and so on. I don't see that there's a huge difference between [the two], actually.

With respect to Sida's roles, in relation to the Swedish Chemicals Agency (KEMI), for instance, Sida plays the role of the donor who sets the rules and regulations. In its relationship with the Swedish government, however, Sida plays the role of the aid recipient that follows the rules and regulations of government directions and directives. In this relationship, it is the individual bureaucrat at the Ministry who does her best to responsibly act out the donor role. And at times, it is clear that it is indeed the person, rather than the organization, who makes the final call. As Sida's unit head described:

> I sometimes receive quite clear directives... about the kind of results reporting the Ministry for Foreign Affairs wants. Sometimes there aren't that many comments. It may be that there is no entirely clear policy as concerns, well, the Ministry's expectations regarding results reporting. It's more the case that the official responsible ... *she's* the one who demands concrete results and an understanding of our operations.

Hence, aid organizations like Sida, UN Industrial Development Organization (Unido), and International Science Programme (ISP) are not only donors but also recipients, depending on the specific relationship or situation. Following this institutional analysis, we conclude that aid recipients can be found in the wealthy, Swedish context too. However, why is this relevant for the research questions of this volume? And how do plural actorhood and role-switching contribute to explain how uncertainty is responded to? A more exhaustive illustration of how plural actorhood and role-switching play out in interorganizational aid relations may be helpful here.

In the fall of 2017, the management of Union to Union, a Swedish federation of unions engaged in development aid, took the decision to follow Sida's new Trac tool, an internal set of instructions influenced by Sida's facilitation agenda and a wave of trust-based management in Sweden at the time (see Chapters 2 and 4). The new instructions stated that organizations receiving funds from Sida no longer needed to submit a specific results matrix. Union to Union was informed of this new directive at Sida's official Reclaim the Results development dialogue seminar on February 14, 2017, a gathering that one of our informants called a "revival meeting" since Sida representatives at the seminar spoke warmly in favor of other "softer" methods as an alternative to the stricter results-based management (RBM) and measurement methods (see Chapter 4). Sida's director-general told us that the seminar was organized because some partners had expressed a perceived lack of clarity concerning Sida's view on RBM and other requirements and, as he put it, he wanted to make Sida's position clear:

> Partners need to apply their own RBM methods. RBM is for your own sake, to maximize your results. Therefore, Sida has no specific requirement for a certain results matrix. Sida is pro whatever method helps us see the results achieved.

The gathering was well-attended, and Union to Union was one of close to 250 organizations with representatives at the seminar who received this message. When Union to Union's representatives opted to follow Sida's recommendation in its upcoming application

process, however, they were met with suspicion and correction on the part of Sida officials. As the Union to Union program manager recalled:

> The new guidelines stated that we didn't have to submit a results matrix at the aggregate level. So we chose not to... But then our Sida officer called and said "No, but that's not going to work." [I replied]: "But the guidelines say we don't need to ..?" [The officer again]: "Yes, but then I don't know how to evaluate. Oh no!"

We also spoke to the Sida officer in charge to get her version of what happened. Her conclusion was that there must have been a misunderstanding. Although the guidelines had indeed been changed in some respects, according to her, this did not mean that Union to Union did not need to submit some form of account of their set targets and expected results. As the Sida officer put it:

> We can't write blank cheques. There has to be some substantial accounting. We have a major responsibility you know.

Union to Union managers' astonishment and disappointment is understandable considering the message delivered by the director-general at the Reclaim the Results meeting and the formal decision Sida took to change its guidelines. Yet, as the citation above indicates, Sida's senior aid bureaucrat is simply keen to play her role as a representative of a responsible donor organization. She is only trying to do her job professionally and to honor and respect the confidence placed in her by using the taxpayers' money responsibly. An indication of the degree to which this role-scripted behavior has become institutionalized among aid bureaucrats is revealed in an interview with another unit head from Sida:

> We [Sida as an organization] have been open to letting our partners design their own management tools. However, I believe that there are many program officers here who are so used to talking about indicators and there being baselines and how to

> assess matrices... We're simply used to talking in these
> terms, output and all that.

Another telling quote comes from Union to Union's program
manager where she recounts her reaction to the Sida officer's
unexpected demand for the results matrix:

> So then we were given until November 11th to produce
> a results matrix [for Sida], and we learned that on
> October 20th or so. It wasn't actually that difficult
> though, in the sense that... we'd already requested
> result matrices from our applicants. So, in every
> application we'd received, there was already an LFA
> [Log Frame] matrix...

Here, we see how the same bureaucrat perceives the same control
method differently, depending on the role her organization is
expected to play. While, from a recipient point of view, the Union
to Union program manager was happy to skip filling out a result
matrix, when switching roles and acting on behalf of her organi-
zation in the donor role, she reasons and acts similarly to Sida and
Foreign Affairs Ministry aid bureaucrats. As a proper, responsible
bureaucrat, she makes the exact same decision as others in the
donor role had – to not forgo the management tool.

As we see in the examples above, our interview data show how
an aid bureaucrat who expresses a wish for fewer control technol-
ogies and less oversight for her organization in the recipient role
nevertheless decides to retain or even add more control measures
and oversight when the organization switches to its donor role.
What seems unreasonable from the perspective of the
rule-following aid-fund recipient can thus seem perfectly reason-
able, or even necessary, from the perspective of the rule-setting
donor.

In a similar study of how results reporting requirements were
translated in a contractual relationship between three organizations
– Sida, Forum Syd (a Swedish international development NGO)
and an organization in the final recipient role in Asia – Laurén
(2019) found that the frequency of required reporting and
requirements for detailed data increased from the first organization

in the donor role (Sida) onward. And, as the organizations in the interorganizational relationship switched roles and turned from recipients into proper donors, measures used to facilitate and reduce reporting successively faded out. These and similar findings suggest that, despite calls for more simplification and less control, these changes are not necessarily occurring in aid relationships. But why not?

Our argument here has been that the institutionalized expectations (Furusten, 2023) and social scripts embedded in the social game of development aid's key role set are an important part of the answer. Institutionalized expectations on aid organizations influence whether bureaucrats assigned to enable the decisions of their organization see a particular control method as a source of trust or a sign of distrust (Schepker et al., 2014; Verburg et al., 2019). The concepts of plural actorhood and role-switching open the way to a more complex understanding of the identities of the organizations involved, and the ensuing, more elaborate understanding allows us to explain why an aid organization that crumbles under the heavy burden of control and measurement requirements may nevertheless decide to use such requirements and possibly even add more of the same kind, when passing the agreement to the next organization acting in the recipient role. With respect to the issue of obsessive measurement disorder (OMD), this implies that, rather than being reduced, control measures and oversight may be kept the same or even increased as an aid project moves along from the first organization who acts in the donor role to the final organization(s) who act as recipients.

Despite this pattern, however, we did not find as many instances of OMD as we thought we would. But why not? As will be discussed in Chapters 4 and 6, one explanation for this is found in the waves of reform in the field, i.e., the general historical pattern that after a period of governance reforms with an intensified focus on measurements, comes a period when aid bureaucrats resist and react to the administrative burden, and new forms of governance are introduced. Thus, because the role of the professional bureaucrat is such a common one for the many people working in the field, as well as a role found at all levels and in most of the organizations represented, taken together, our cases also depict the professional bureaucrat as a pragmatic and stabilizing factor in the aid system.

As will be elaborated in later chapters, we believe that the influence of the bureaucrat role script also plays an important part in explaining why we do not see more OMD in this complex system. Part of the bureaucrats' professional role involves actively working to turn their organizations into proper donors and recipients, dressing their organizations to perform in each of the roles. And as we also elaborate on in the coming chapters, they seem, for the most part, to do this without consciously experiencing either "role ambivalence" (Merton, 1976) or "role distance" (Goffman, 1959, 1967).[1] Rather, from our viewpoint, the aid bureaucrat seems to remain the steady state, true to their core professional values. They are neither donors nor recipients. They are, above all, pragmatic bureaucrats.

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[1] *Role distance*, as coined by Goffman, refers to a performer's detachment from a role he or she is performing. An important distinction is thus made between the existence of expectations on how the performer should perform the role and the performer's commitment to that role – in other words, the act of presenting oneself as being removed from or at a distance from the role one is being required to play.

Chapter 4

Practices of Approximation: Simplifying the Complex and Controlling the Future

Ever since the birth of Swedish public development aid in the 1960s, the response to the key question "Does development aid really work?" has largely taken the form of a series of ambitious, rational results-oriented initiatives introduced with some regularity, every decade or so (1971, 1981, 1998, and 2012). As mentioned in Chapter 1, these initiatives have all centered around attempting to reduce the uncertainty of effect that springs from the fact that it is often impossible to determine beforehand which projects will produce good results and highly effective development aid (Vähämäki, 2017; and see Chapter 2 in this volume on the different types of uncertainties). Decision-makers in the field of development aid face three interlinked expectations: (1) to do for the poor what is morally right, (2) to provide aid that is effective, and (3) to provide this aid on the scale and within the budget enabled by the public taxpayer. Two "management dreams" have been particularly influential in the aid field's response to these three expectations: (1) the dream of simplifying the complex and (2) the dream of controlling the future.

In complex systems like the development aid system, it is difficult to predict the actual results of undertakings (Sugihara et al., 2012). It seems, however, that this difficulty only adds to the desire for clarity and certainty. The overall aspiration has been to tame the complexity and uncertainty at hand by providing simplified

information, such as numbers on impacts and effects, with the practical support of a range of management tools and techniques. In the day-to-day life of aid bureaucracy, this has led to the development of practices aimed at approximating to achieve the desired results, i.e., by using indicators or "proxies" to evaluate what is happening or will happen in the future. It is well-known that decision-makers in complex, uncertain settings speak a "results language" that is keen on easily measured and communicated approximations for the more elusive actual outcomes and effects (Hayward & Marlow, 2014; Heinrich, 2002; Lowe, 2013).[1] Using representations such as indicators simplifies not only decision-making but also communication (Tarschys, 1978), however not always, as will be discussed in upcoming chapters. In long-distance relations in particular, numbers, measurements, and quantifiable information are often seen as solutions to the problem of how to achieve control since numbers travel well (Erlingsdóttir, 1999) and are perceived as providing precision, rigor, and objectivity when representing things outside our field of vision (Cooper, 1992; Robson, 1992).

In this chapter, we take a closer look at the approximation practices of aid bureaucrats as attempts to handle uncertainty. These practices are of interest for the purposes of this book in that they can in many cases be seen as instances of pragmatic bureaucracy, and in other cases as leading instead to the perception of a possible obsessive measurement disorder (OMD). While the motives behind their use are generally reasonable and the intentions good, approximation practices also come with several critical challenges, addressed in this chapter, such as a *temporal mismatch* between when project decisions are needed and when results are available. In other words, although the results of development aid can often only be determined after several decades, there is a wish to back decisions on a radically shorter time line – of 3–5 years. We take a closer look below at how aid bureaucrats and their organizations have pursued the two management dreams – of simplifying

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[1]The word *proxy* stems from a contracted form of Middle English *procuracie*, meaning "procuration," and refers either to a person authorized to act for another, or to the function of serving or the authority to serve in another's stead (Merriam Webster Dictionary, visited online June 11, 2023).

the complex and controlling the future – over the recent history of development aid. In the next chapter (Chapter 5), we then continue the discussion with an emphasis on the characteristics and implications of a more recent and growing phenomenon in approximation: the use of what we call "proper organization proxies."

Linear Production Models at the Core

Over the years, numerous methods and technologies have seen the light of day in development aid, all produced in an aim to simplify complexity and somehow control the uncertain future of aid project processes and effects. In keeping with results-based thinking, a typical model used has been a basic production model that depicts inputs (resources of various kinds) moving through a linear process via which they are turned into outputs. Ideally, these outputs should then in turn lead to tangible outcomes that have a positive impact on the lives of those in need. To this end, many aid bureaucrats have preferred to use rationalistic models, like the one below (Fig. 5), that rest upon the largely taken-for-granted idea that later results (output, outcome, and impact) can be clearly linked to earlier inputs and activities. Attempts to make sense of these relations have therefore long been a top priority for aid bureaucrats responsible for project decisions, along with other concerns like internal efficiency and external effectiveness of the operations (Modell & Grönlund, 2006) and hence the prudent use of taxpayer money.
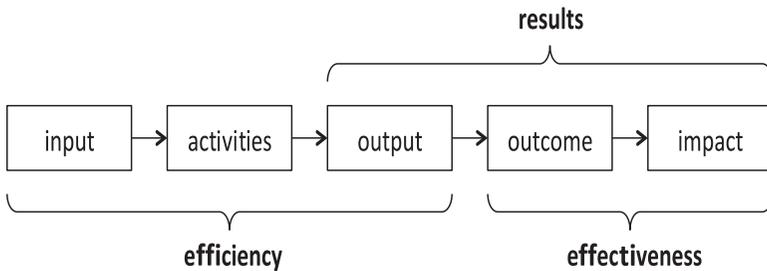
Fig. 5.   The Basic Results Production Model
(Vähämäki, 2017).

The basic model for producing results (Fig. 5) has been introduced in a range of different methods and technologies. One of these is the Logical Framework Approach (LFA), a method developed in the 1960s by Fry Consultants Incorporated (1970), a consulting firm contracted by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The method came with a technology, in the form of a matrix, that has since often been required by decision-makers of organizations in the donor role to make the activities and projected results of organizations in the recipient role visible (Coleman, 1987; Earle, 2002; Martinez, 2013). When the LFA was introduced in USAID, independent measurement of output and progress toward ultimate project purpose were described as "objectively verifiable data" that could provide aid managers with "a common frame" for evaluating projects and help to reduce their "preoccupation with inputs" (USAID, 1965, p. 8). This suggests that the rationale at that time was that aid bureaucrats were spending too much time approximating the left side of the results production model (i.e., input and activities). Models like the LFA were therefore argued to provide certainty and be valuable means by which to turn aid bureaucrats' attention to results and the right side of the model (i.e., output, outcome, and impact), an argument that came to linger (Vähämäki & Verger, 2019). Since the 1960s, various versions of LFA have spread widely among development agencies and other aid organizations, with the hope and ambition of visualizing trustworthy results. This has not been a problem-free undertaking, however, and some of the key fundaments of managing aid and enduring the difficulty of realizing the dreams of simplifying the complex and controlling the future in practice are discussed below.

Shifting Focus to the Right Side of the Production Model

In the results production model, results are defined as output, outcome, and impact. In the 1970s to the 1990s, actors in the field of international aid engaged in a discussion about the experienced need to redirect their attention from inputs and activities, such as the number of seminars organized or the number of wells dug, to outputs and outcomes, such as the number of people trained or the

number of people with access to clean water. The hope was that all aid projects could be planned using a causal logic of what led to what.

In 1971, Sweden's international aid agency, the Swedish International Development Authority (SIDA), implemented a technology called "results valuation."[2] When assessing project proposals from organizations in the recipient role, prior to any funding decisions, all SIDA aid bureaucrats were expected to produce a hypothesis that set out a project's main goals, subgoals, planned production goals, planned activities, and planned costs, along with indicators, i.e., approximations, for each level of the goal hierarchy. When following up the project, calculations were then to be carried out and a comparison made between the projections in the hypothesis and what had actually happened (Vähämäki, 2017). The calculations required numbers to be entered into a formula for the planned fulfillment of the main goals and then divided by the estimated total costs, resulting in a measure of the "planned significance." A "planned productivity" measure was similarly calculated by dividing the planned production targets by estimated direct costs. During follow-up, the resulting numbers were then to be compared with the "actual productivity" and "actual significance," yielding a figure for the "actual effectiveness" of the project. If we have confused you here, you are not alone, for in practice, the use of SIDA's results-valuation method proved to be very cumbersome.

Only about 10% of SIDA's staff ended up carrying out the required valuations as intended, with the vast majority claiming that doing so was not possible and, in addition, that requesting this type of data from recipients harmed recipient relations (SIDA, 1974). Discussions arose within the agency concerning whether or not it was even possible to isolate a project's effects in this way. After some years of testing out the technology, SIDA's board made the claim that it was "unrealistic to expect a quantitative assessment of effectiveness." The National Audit Office, on the other hand, continued to argue that it should be doable (RRV 1972:43

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[2]In 1995, the original Swedish International Development Authority (SIDA, with capital letters) was merged with four other agencies to form the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida).

PM8). In the end, the results valuation method was replaced by new methods, and the evolution of new methods has been a pattern observed ever since, not only in the Swedish aid context but also more broadly in international aid (Reinertsen, 2022; Vähämäki, 2017; Vähämäki et al., 2011). However, at the same time as older methods have been replaced by newer ones, most have shared the same ideological foundations: a belief in the ability of rational plans to control the future and yield proper results from complex, messy practice.[3] That is, a belief derived from an unrealistic assumption that decision-making follows a linear or scientific approach with a simple, sequential progression: from inputs to outputs, to outcomes, to impact (Brunsson, 1985).

In everyday practice, a difficulty that has occurred in each attempt to apply results technologies is that aid bureaucrats find it difficult to come up with a reasonable hypothesis. To cite an example, in 1995, the use of the logical framework method was made compulsory, to be appended to all aid projects at the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida). An assessment carried out in 2000 showed, however, that a hypothesis was not apparent in the majority of Sida's aid projects, indicating that only four of the agency's close to 5,000 projects (i.e., 0.08%) had actually met the LFA requirement to rate how well a project was progressing against the initial hypothesis. A few years later, in 2004, after intensive internal project work and an internal campaign stressing the need to comply with the mandatory requirements, compliance did increase to 25% (easily seen in the digital system), although even this number demonstrates that most projects were still not using LFA or a similar method (Vähämäki, 2017).

A recurring comment from evaluations of aid projects over the years has been that many projects managers have not used rational planning methods *as intended* (Burman, 2021). A primary reason given for this is the inherent difficulty in actually defining what should be considered as an input, output, outcome, or impact. The task is further complicated by the fact that organizations in the donor and recipient roles usually have different understandings of

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[3]An exception to this general trend was outcome mapping, a method that promised to enable a greater focus on complexity by not basing its measurements on linear models (Earl et al., 2001).

these elements (Brolin, 2017; Eyben, 2010; Vähämäki, 2017). One of our interviewees from Volvo, a private sector car company that collaborates with Sida, for example, noted how he was puzzled to learn that Sida considered its hosting of a meeting with businesses a project output. As this businessman himself put it, he and the representatives from other firms attending the meeting found this a little frustrating since: "After all, it was only a meeting. We hadn't achieved anything yet, but they [Sida] seemed to think so." Hence, for Sida, in the donor role, the meeting was a result (an output or outcome) since cooperating with the private sector was a political priority, whereas all of the meeting's other participants, playing the roles of partner or recipient, were eager to progress "from talk to proper action on the ground" and saw the meeting as no more than a planning activity (an input).

Contrary to the hope-filled management dream of simplifying the process, and relevant to our interest in obsessive measurement disorder (OMD), we have noted that discussions on what should be counted as a result in the results production chain often lead to *more*, not less, information being produced and processed, and to *confusion*, not clarity. We have also observed that, in practice, it is more common to report on inputs or outputs (the left side of the ideal-typical model in Fig. 5) since this information is often easier to quantify and sometimes the only data available when a project decision has to be made (Binnedjikt, 2001; Mayne, 2007; Vähämäki & Verger, 2019). However, considering the example cited above, since there is no standard to clarify whether a meeting should be considered an input or whether it is already an output, rather than being easy to comprehend, the numbers often spur new questions and new numbers.

Even when there are positive results data at hand, which are to the benefit of both parties (organizations in both the donor and recipient roles), there may be confusion regarding who can justifiably take credit for those results. In the highly complex web of financial relations and dependencies, questions concerning the links between particular funding and particular impacts arise. When organizations in the recipient role have several organizations that finance their operations, as most do, it is often almost impossible to determine what money, from which donor, led to what specific results. Nevertheless, project managers are expected to try their best to reach such conclusions. As one Sida research aid manager explained:

> Because coming to these conclusions isn't straightforward. This individual got a grant from Sida and now has a seat on that committee. It's not necessarily only thanks to Sida's research unit, but it's fair to assume we helped. That we can see that it relates to matters connected to the research they did with Sida funds, and they're in a stronger position and so on. That we can come to conclusions like that, a little. But it's not an easy task. And especially not with research that is so incredibly long term.

Thus, from a pragmatic standpoint, what usually happens is that all donors involved try to take at least *some* credit for any good results that materialize, that can in some way be linked to their funding. Since it is difficult to determine dependencies, due to the multitude of interacting partners and projects and the long-term result horizons, project administrators are constantly on the lookout for any positive result that can be reported home. An example of a similar pragmatic stance can be seen with the cholera vaccine Dukoral, which has had immense global impact, where support for the underlying research in the form of grants from Sida and many others began back in the 1980s. Our informants explain that continuous reporting of successful and easily comprehensible results is important even if a result may be seen as an instance of episodic evidence, citing Dukoral as an example. The concrete materiality of the vaccine in its vials also helps in this regard since tangible results are appealing and more easily showcased and communicated to those at a distance.

To summarize, despite trying out different methods and technologies over the years, aid bureaucrats continue to face the same unrealistic expectation of having to show results before they materialize, and it remains hard to tell with any confidence whether aid actually reaches those most in need, in an efficient, effective, and human way. The most recent wave of attempts, of the past 15 years or so, has targeted impacts. As White points out (2010, p. 153), one argument for this move toward impacts instead of outcomes stems from a realization that outcome monitoring "does not tell us about the success, or otherwise," of government programs or the interventions supported by international development agencies. Impact evaluations, he argues, not only answer the question of what works but also why (White,

2009). However, while the method of "impactization" may be recent, the sales pitch for it follows the traditional script, promising that impact will connote "something visible, clear, objective and calculable in which relevant activity can be causally linked to a desired policy outcome" (Power, 2015, p. 45).

Hence, the underlying argument for impactization closely resembles that of the logical framework approach, as well as many other methods and technologies used in development aid, which is: we don't know much about what happens and why things happen in development aid projects. Only now, in the case of impactization, the insufficiency in focus concerns information about outputs and outcomes rather than inputs and activities, as it did in the 1960s. It is important to note, however, that despite the ongoing struggles and mishaps, followed by new suggestions and ideas, most of the aid bureaucrats we have encountered say that they view these results processes as unquestionably important as legitimizing rituals (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) and mechanisms of hope (Brunsson, 2006), if not as validation of actual results.

The Allure of Numbers

In theory, simplified information could naturally also consist of *qualitative* indicators or emotional episodic narratives about those helped to a better life. However, qualitative results data seem to be less valued and trusted in the field of development aid (Alexius & Vähämäki, 2020).[4] Here, it is evident that simplified information in the form of *quantitative* facts and figures that represent progress is alluring, that is to say, numbers that communicate that the funds reach the populations they are intended to support (Bowerman et al.,

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[4]Attempts to challenge this position and to bridge the qualitative and the quantitative have, however, been made, a recent example being the *SenseMaker* tool that promises to deliver results through a "complexity-aware, narrative-based method that involves collecting, analyzing, debating and sharing large numbers of short stories about people's experiences" (Deprez, 2021, p. 1). Via an app, the SenseMaker program poses questions to beneficiaries of policy initiatives and translates these narrative responses into numbers to produce visualizations such as graphs.

2001; Eyben et al., 2016; Vähämäki, 2015; Vähämäki & Verger, 2019).

Considering the broken feedback loop in development aid, i.e., that aid recipients have hardly no direct feedback loops to the decision-makers in the donor countries (Martens, 2005), it is understandable that numbers have been a particularly lauded driver of development policy, as well as an important means for aid bureaucrats to justify and communicate their decisions. The magic of numbers is that they allow us to imagine that we can freeze the world so that it can be more easily acted upon. As mentioned previously, numbers also offer the potential of taking action and communicating results from a distance (Erlingsdóttir, 1999; Hall, 2010; Robson, 1992).

Previous research has shown, somewhat paradoxically, that quantification tends to be valued most in complex fields such as development aid, where outcomes and effects are typically hard to measure (Jacobsen & Sandvik, 2018). The widespread praise of measuring results we found among aid bureaucrats is in line with the powerful ideal spelled out in Zall Kusek and Rist's Handbook for Development Practitioners, where they list the arguments regarding the "power of measuring results" (Kusek & Rist, 2004, p. 11):

- If you do not measure results, you cannot tell success from failure.
- If you cannot see success, you cannot reward it.
- If you cannot reward success, you are probably rewarding failure.
- If you cannot see success, you cannot learn from it.
- If you cannot recognize failure, you cannot correct it.
- If you can demonstrate results, you can win public support.

However, as discussed in Chapters 6–8, while a few of the aid bureaucrats treat these arguments very seriously, almost like mantras, most of the aid bureaucrats and especially the more senior are also able and willing to discuss them critically if given the chance. The academic literature on approximations is dominated by critique that questions the validity of proxies and discusses, at

length, the negative implications of invalidity. To give just one example, in the climate field, many experiments on biodiversity and ecosystem functions measure "species richness" and assume that this approximation can serve as an indicator of a broader suite of attractive ecosystem functions (Stephens et al., 2015). When evaluated, studies have however shown that species richness may be an unreliable or even invalid proxy with the potential to mislead management strategies in the field of ecosystems (Eigenbrod et al., 2010).

In previous literature, the allure of providing numbers as proxies has been described as coming with several unintended consequences such as that, over time, measurable activities have crowded out activities that are more difficult to measure, and that short-term outputs are pursued over long-term objectives (Natsios, 2010; Vähämäki & Verger, 2019). In some cases, the focus on proxies has led to staff spending an increasing amount of time collecting data and monitoring activities and less time managing and implementing activities (Diefenbach, 2009; Forssell & Ivarsson Westerberg, 2014; Johansson & Lindgren, 2013; Meyer & Gupta, 1994; Natsios, 2010).

The development whereby more time is dedicated to delivering numbers and less to understanding the local particularities of a context, including institution-building and policy reform, has been called "mission drift" – a drift from one particular focus to another (Alexius, 2021). According to Natsios (2010), mission drift represents a clear risk factor for OMD. In our analysis, we have seen instances of mission drift and pressure on aid bureaucrats to focus on proxy numbers rather than devoting time to the implementation and understanding of aid projects. In our interview with the head of research cooperation at Sida, she expressed it as follows:

> We've seen in these Conclusions of performance that we write every year, where you need to enter numbers, that when our colleagues had filled in these numbers and got them in there, the analysis, then they were so tired of it, that they lost... You couldn't see the forest for the trees... For me it was completely uninteresting, which should be really exciting, to read these Conclusions of performance, to go through all these numbers. But they didn't match the indicators... And I had to go and look

at that instead of reading the text and actually see, what was it, that had happened in the project? So, which are the results really? And these numbers, that have been selected, they're not just any numbers. So I made it very clear, that I didn't think [it was good].

This quote illustrates a typical ambivalence among aid bureaucrats regarding their production of numbers and approximations. In addition to the risk of proxies overshadowing the "exciting" part of projects, our interviewee also draws attention to two common apprehensions related to producing numbers:

(1) The difficulty of validating the numbers. Jerven (2013) has shown that the statistical capabilities in the aid sector are extremely poor. He also argues that the numbers substantially misrepresent the actual state of affairs and warns of the risk of scarce resources being misapplied as a result of aid bureaucrats' poor understanding of statistics.
(2) A fear of how numbers will be used. Vähämäki (2017) writes that the "fear of use" is a typical fear among aid bureaucrats. When they are afraid of how decision-makers may understand and use the numbers, and uncertain whether the numbers will be understood as good or bad and how this might affect a project, some aid bureaucrats may even try to avoid providing numbers.

Clearly, there are fundamental questions to be asked about proxy validation and calibration: about whether proxies are reasonable or bad approximations. But, as concluded by Stephens et al. (2015), reducing reliance on flawed proxies would require increasing large-scale, long-term monitoring practices that are seen as high-cost, unnecessary luxuries.[5] In our view, it is important that

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[5]We have noted that methods that advocate greater scientific rigor in the measurements, such as randomized control trials, which promise high-quality methods for evaluating impact, have been used very little, if at all, in development aid (Olofsgård, 2014). Methods such as Bayesian theory-based evaluation, which promise a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods to conduct theory-based evaluations (Befani, 2021), have to date been used sparingly, most likely due to these methods being more costly than others.

we also look beyond the rational validity critique and acknowledge that as a day-to-day pragmatic response to uncertainty in complex systems, proxies are attractive, despite their flaws.

The Challenge of Mismatching Temporalities

A common feature of uncertain systems is that decision-makers need to be engaged in temporal coordination (Gümüsay et al., 2022). When a multitude of actors are involved, different temporalities are likely to suit different actor groups. Due to the inherent temporality of the aid project itself, on one hand, and the time it takes for results to materialize in the field, on the other, there is a temporal mismatch between the critical and urgent need for short-term decisions and results (in line with the narrow project time frame and consideration of the yearly public spending rule) and the fact that most key results can only be seen in the longer run. One Sida manager engaged in research cooperation describes a typical case where experienced aid bureaucrats, like her, see the need to look at results from a 20-year perspective while at the same time having to cope with the fixed, 5-year project-funding time frame:

> We're now looking at going into Cambodia and our perspective is 20 years. We grant support for five years at a time; we can't give more than that. But [20 years] that's the perspective, and that's when we'll see the results. That's when they'll have a PhD education of international standards and they'll be able to generate the next generation, or have a sustainable system. But that's 20 years down the road.

In essence, the mismatch of temporalities implies that project managers are expected to provide regular reports with trustworthy results before these results have had a chance to materialize. Though this may sound like an impossible mission, it is a dilemma that aid bureaucrats deal with every day. Thus, from a pragmatic bureaucratic viewpoint, approximations often come in handy to save the day.

The case of Swedish support to Bai Bang in Vietnam demonstrates this difficulty of mismatched temporalities. The Bai Bang project – Sweden's largest, most expensive, and longest running aid project to date – ran from 1974 to 1995, a period during which Sweden committed about SEK 2.8 billion in total (approx. SEK 9.8 billion in 2022 figures). The idea behind the project was simple: Sweden would provide support to Vietnam to construct an integrated pulp and paper mill that would raise living standards in the Bai Bang region. Implementation of the project, on the other hand, proved considerably more complicated. From the outset, the project faced a range of serious challenges, many of which related to difficulties associated with cooperation between two countries with such different political and economic systems. Adding to these difficulties was the considerable adverse media coverage in Sweden, much of which focused on various controversies that arose, including the living conditions of workers at the mill and in the surrounding forest areas. In 1985, allegations of forced labor in the project arose, creating a political storm in Sweden (McGillivray et al., 2012) and outdating the project completely. Other difficulties included Sida feeling it was not receiving sufficient data to assess the wood supply from the designated timber, and the frequent revisions and extensions of the project time-frame required to overcome the various critical issues that arose. As Sida's director-general recalls:

> It was the biggest project in terms of money that we had done, and it took twice as long as we anticipated, and cost twice as much. Bai Bang was such a stupendous effort for Sida so one can debate whether it was actually worth it for the aid authorities from a labor-economics standpoint.

Almost the entire Sida organization was involved in the project, and it was heavily discussed in Sweden among different actors, making it burdensome to deal with. However, an evaluation carried out in 1999 called the project "an aid project which obtained a measure of success despite the odds" and argued that the project had been extremely successful, having produced 110,000 tons of paper, twice as much as the target set in the 1980s (Jerve et al., 1999). Thus, despite the

project being seen for many years as outdated, in terms of both the results and the negative effects of the media coverage and extra work it implied for the agency, 20–30 years later, it was considered a success. On June 11, 2022, the Hanoi Times published an article entitled "Bai Bang Paper Mill: Outstanding symbol of Vietnam-Sweden relations."[6]

As concluded previously in Chapter 2, grand societal challenges (such as climate change and socioeconomic inequality) are characterized by great uncertainty of the long-term affect. As the case of Bai Bang shows, key results tend to materialize at a rate incompatible with the short-term horizons of local political agendas and decisions (Biddle & Koontz, 2014), with many results visible only after decades of aid work. And when long-term results do finally appear, another uncertainty is actualized: will they help decision-makers to make better decisions in the future, decisions grounded in learning from past experience and assessments?

Lost Momentum for Learning?

The example of Bai Bang points to the risk of losing momentum in learning from project results when projects end long before results start coming in. Hence, despite frequent talk about the importance of aid funds contributing to long-term outcomes and impact on the ground, the tendency is that projects don't learn from long-term results. In the aid relationships we have studied, information on late-incoming results is sometimes toned down or even ignored – a scenario we found to be true in both aid projects carried out by the International Science Program (ISP) and those coordinated by Union to Union (a federation of Swedish unions that supports collaborations in aid). In the case of ISP, numerous reviews of the program (i.e., evaluations from 1977, 1994, 2001, 2002, 2011, and 2018) have found it to be highly supportive in achieving results (Edqvist et al., 1994; GHD Pty Ltd, 2011; Leide et al., 1977; Pain & Carneiro, 2018; Selin Lindgren & Wendiga, 2002; Wield, 2001). Despite the positive reviews, however, as one ISP representative explained, his perception was that providing positive evaluation

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[6]https://hanoitimes.vn/bai-bang-paper-mill-outstanding-symbol-of-vietnam-sweden-relations-320996.html

results was not "what mattered the most" in assessments of future support:

> Right, but that's precisely what it said, that ISP was...
> that what ISP did was good, ISP is needed... And then
> it also said in the evaluation later, that our follow-up-
> and assessment systems weren't good enough, and this
> is what we've worked on developing the whole time up
> until the 2018 evaluation, that said the system is still
> not good. But for other reasons... The results have
> actually been there all along. It's just that now Sida
> was expected to report new types of results.

This representative, ISP's director, also concluded that, despite the positive results, the evaluators criticized ISP for its measuring methods, a critique that has led ISP to try out several new ways of measuring results, methods that have in turn also been criticized. Thus, in the end, the discussion on evaluation has centered on the methods and technologies used to measure results and neglected the activities, outcomes, and impact as such. When interviewed, the former secretary-general of Union to Union expresses similar thoughts:

> I think that the results evaluations speak very much for
> our cause. But that seems unimportant. They [Sida] are
> like: "Right, well, you've attained results.... but is it
> really cost-effective to organize like this, or like that ...

Here again, the secretary-general's comment exemplifies that despite evaluations having found that Union to Union attained positive results, *the manner in which it organizes* its operations has been questioned and, at times, the interest in cost-effectiveness has come to overshadow the assessment and recognition of results achieved (see also Chapter 5). The fact that the leaders of these organizations perceive that actual results are not what matter most in development aid relations has been discussed in previous studies (Andreoni, 1990; Easterly, 2002; Lindkvist and Bastøe, 2020; Martens, 2002; Pritchett, 2002), all of which argue that, despite altruistic intentions, there is a built-in disinterest in the actual results.

Explanations for this lack of interest are that policymakers mainly care about being re-elected and that aid organizations are

mainly motivated by self-interest (in the sense of gaining more funding for their projects) and, unless they are explicitly punished for poor performance, they need not exert maximal effort (Martens, 2002). Another argument, linked to the emotion-based approach to reducing uncertainty (discussed in Chapter 2), is that aid is more about feeling good than doing good, which leads to the decision-makers having a greater interest in disbursements than in actually making a difference for the aid beneficiaries (Andreoni, 1990; Easterly, 2002). Pritchett (2002) argues moreover that knowledge of results may be avoided because it can hamper funding flows, meaning that the public spending rule gets higher priority than aid effectiveness, and that "it pays to be ignorant." This previous literature also notes an element of fear – that results information and knowledge are avoided due to a fear of hampering the aid organization's routines or harming its reputation.

Our case studies confirm that providing organizations in the donor role with results information that is too complex, even when that information is accurate and positive, may lead to a negative outcome for organizations in the recipient role since doing so may confuse the aid bureaucrat responsible, thereby raising the level of uncertainty rather than clarifying and reducing the uncertainty perceived by the organization in the donor role. As will be discussed in more detail in upcoming chapters, we found this to be particularly common in situations where donor representatives lack sufficient context or the domain-specific knowledge necessary to assess the complex results information at hand.

In sum, we have shown that when aid bureaucrats and aid organizations implement the management dreams of simplification and future control in practice, difficulties and mismatches arise. There is seldom a straightforward response to the question: Does aid lead to results, and – if so – what results? But since the unrealistic expectation – that there is a simple answer – still exists, new practices for approximating results continue to emerge, practices with which aid bureaucrats and aid organizations become preoccupied. When analyzing current project work practices, we have identified what seems to be an increasingly prevalent type of approximating – an approximation practice that centers on what we call "proper organization proxies," which we elaborate on in Chapter 5.

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Chapter 5

In Proper Organization We Trust: On Extrapolation From Proper Organization Proxies

Is variation in aid implementation a good thing? An official objective in development aid policy is to safeguard diversity in development aid implementation by honoring a variety of partners of varying organizational forms that operate in different institutional contexts.[1] This objective is reflected in the so-called "actor groups" who receive and channel Swedish public aid funding: (1) civil society organizations, (2) private sector actors, (3) Swedish authorities in the public sector, and (4) research cooperation (see www.sida.se).[2] Within these actor groups, there are different organizational forms (public agencies, companies, associations and foundations, and universities and colleges). Embedded in the policy objective of safeguarding diversity is the idea that these different

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[1]See, e.g., Swedish Policy for Global Development, 2003, and Goal 17 of UN Agenda 2030.

[2]The term "actor group" is a term used by Sida. As organization scholars, our interest in comparing these actor groups lay in the fact that they represent different institutional contexts and orders in society that are associated with the ideal-typical contexts of the public sector, the market, and civil society (for a broader discussion on this, see Alexius & Vähämäki, 2020).

institutional contexts and their ideal-typical organizations (the agency, the company, the association, and the university) have certain conditions and capabilities that enable them to contribute to aid operations in different and complementary ways. A contemporary example of this is seen in the promotion of so-called "multistakeholder partnerships," where diverse actors from civil society and the public and private sectors are expected to form coalitions, for example, to meet the objectives of Agenda 2030.

Classic contingency theory similarly suggests that the different organizational conditions of the many different types of organizations involved in development aid (e.g., a food and agricultural workers' union, a car company workshop, a public chemical inspections agency, and a university math and physics lab) require different ways of managing aid projects, and that the success of their respective aid projects depends on how well the organization's contextual factors fit the chosen project management methods (Burns & Stalker, 1961; Gulrajani, 2015; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967; Perrow, 1967). As a great number of combined factors (contingencies) can characterize the specific organizational and cultural context in which aid projects are embedded, each such combination suggests a different fit with available forms and methods of managing projects and hence a need for flexibility and adjustment when it comes to selecting these forms and methods (Gulrajani, 2015; Shenhar & Dvir, 2007). On a grander scale then, the core idea is to attain more valuable results and effects by allowing and encouraging a plethora of diverse actors from different institutional contexts to join forces against poverty, in their own ways. The core message is therefore that an agency can't do for the poor what a company can – and vice versa, a nongovernmental organization (NGO) or association can't do for the poor what a university can – and vice versa. Hence, according to this well-established theory and with efficiency in mind, a "one-size-fits-all" approach is deemed suboptimal: there ought not to be any gold standard of aid project management to be recommended.

In line with this assumption of a need for variation in management and governance methods, aid bureaucrats in the recipient role typically hope that their specific domain or thematic expertise (e.g., the domain expertise in union work, sex education, car repair, environmental protection, or chemistry research) will be valued, protected, and above all, trusted as a key source of development aid results, and

assume that domain-specific knowledge makes up a prominent part of their organization's ability – a critical factor when a donor assesses trustworthiness of potential recipients (Mayer et al., 1995). However, despite the high aspirations of the Swedish policy for global development (PGD) and United Nation's Agenda 2030, which call for variation and diversity in organizational forms, we see signs of increased conformity in the governance and management of aid projects across the various actor groups involved in development aid. In our empirical material, we identified both confusion among recipients and hesitation among donor representatives regarding the use of context-specific ways of organizing.[3] It seems that referring to domain-specific knowledge may even *increase* uncertainty rather than reduce it. We also found that donor representatives tend not to lean too heavily on domain-specific forms and expertise when they assess the trustworthiness of recipients and their projects, at least not to the same degree as they feel comfortable leaning on general management and governance schemes and tools (Alexius & Vähämäki, 2020).

Rather than valuing and trusting the specific features and processes of civil society organizations, companies, universities, and public agencies, we find that aid bureaucrats in the donor role, as well as (and increasingly) those in the recipient role, tend to aim for compliance with a general ideal of what we here call the "proper organization."[4] Our observation is that, in practice, the official political agenda that favors variety and diversity collides with an even stronger management and governance ideal that calls for conformity with a more general, principal–agent, rational financial mode of organizing. Although more research is needed, and is currently under way in a new project (see Methods appendix and

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[3]This chapter draws on a recent study of ours ("In Proper Organization We Trust") on current trust patterns in aid. In that study (Alexius & Vähämäki, 2020), funded by the Swedish expert group on aid studies (EBA), we collected data that suggest an increasing *isomorphism* among the different actor groups involved in Swedish aid projects with respect to how they organize their operations – despite the stated intentions of the national multi-actor policy, which expressly calls for diversity.

[4]The *collegiality* so typical of universities (Engwall, 2016; Sahlin & Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2016) is one example of coordination that seems to be less understood and less trusted these days.

Chapter 8), our tentative findings suggest that this trend toward standardization has far-reaching consequences as partner organizations can be prevented from functioning according to the particular conditions of their institutional context and are no longer (or less) valued for their domain-specific knowledge. Instead, they must constantly prove that they are, above all, "proper" financial partners. We find that this pressure to conform and the confusion between the two ideals (promote variation of partner forms or promote standardization across partners) cause tensions and frustration. Not least since proving one's properness is less about changes happening on the ground in the projects themselves, and more about ensuring, beforehand, the legitimacy of the employed modes of organization. This tension between ideals may thus be one explanation to why bureaucrats in the recipient role experience obsessive measurement disorder (OMD). Before we delve further into explanations for this development and its consequences, let us illustrate with a telling example of the frustration experienced by organizations in the recipient role when their domain-specific knowledge and mode of organizing were not acknowledged as valuable to their results.

Who Trusts the Global Union Movement These Days?

On its webpage, the Swedish Union to Union federation proudly presents and defends its democratic coordinating of the global union movement:

> The work is carried out in existing independent trade union organizations. It is precisely the large international network of free, democratic trade unions and their global federations that makes trade development cooperation possible.[5]

Union to Union representatives tell us how they have, over time, experienced a decrease in Sida's readiness to trust the specific domain of the union movement with its traditional democratic coordination procedures. And how, in its place, Sida representatives have come to

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[5] https://www.uniontounion.org/en/about. Accessed on March 3, 2019.

express a propensity to place their trust in the ideal of an autonomous "proper organization" with a clear mandate and responsibility. This shift in the trust pattern seems to have turned the once unanimously acclaimed democratic structure of global unions into an obstacle to decision-making on the part of the donor, and increasingly also a threat to the legitimacy of aid projects carried out in this domain.

Sida's archive on Union to Union shows a lengthy discussion between the parties centering on the donor's difficulty of assessing risks and results, stemming from what are described as "deviating features" of Union to Union (deviating in the sense of departing from the rational, principal–agent standard form), and how this debate has spurred a large number of controls, such as spot-check reports, organizational assessments, audits and evaluations, over the years. Union to Union is an example of an inclusive federative organization that has long struggled to defend its ways of organizing. One of its representatives stated, for example, that:

> Transnational union organizing carries costs. It cannot be avoided... But they [the donors] don't realize ... what is completely lost [in their view and assessment], are the [values of the] coordination aspect.

Here, our interviewee argues that while there is a general understanding in the union domain that it is at coordinated global and regional union meetings that decisions about project aims must be made, and that this is key to good results, it is more seldom that donors understand the value of this type of coordination these days. Instead, they question the ability of the federative organization to govern actions in the direction of results. As stated by Union to Union's former secretary-general (about to leave her post in protest, when interviewed):

> They [Sida staff] have come to the conclusion that we don't fit in as a frame organization... our rules and our movement are not ... well ... we're an odd bird.

Sida's appraisal report on Union to Union (Sida, 2018a) requests, for example, that the federation "decrease the number of links in the contract chain to ensure that most of the funds get as far

as possible, and to reduce transaction costs." As mentioned in Chapter 4, Sida also asks for a "clear structure" of contracting parties that accentuates the roles of a clear principal and agent, as more organizations and levels involved throughout the report are discussed as potential drivers of "unnecessary transaction costs" (p. 17). For Union to Union representatives, this feedback from Sida has been difficult to grasp and accept since they see their particular way of organizing as their success factor. Union to Union's (now former) secretary-general stated again:

> I mean, one would think that a union... representative democracy must be *the most important aspect*. Making sure that is in place. But that's *not* what is most important, it's the administrative processes and routines. It's the ticking of the boxes... The perfect systems. [...] And for me, in the midst of this, it's incredibly painful.

Sida, in turn, relies on and refers to previous consultant reports that call for clarity and simplification of the organization. In the Sida appraisal report on Union to Union (Sida, 2018a), this consultancy advice is repeated in numerous places (such as the below), leaving the impression of a deteriorating trustor–trustee relation:

> Union to Union has long had difficulties in providing a clear picture of the structure, governance and control of the operations. In addition, roles and responsibilities have been unclear. (p. 9)

> Finally, the management of the own contribution has differentiated from other frameworks' handling and caused the lack of clarity in accounting and follow-up of the operations. (p. 14)

Isomorphic Pressure to Conform to an Organizational Ideal?

Although not yet commonly applied in development aid studies (Moe Fejerskov, 2016), neo-institutional theory offers an explanation to

why, despite the good arguments found in contingency theory for defending differences in organizational forms and processes, there *is* indeed a gold standard in development aid project management these days (Alexius & Vähämäki, 2020). Neo-institutional theory is a rich source of knowledge on how strong ideas are produced, travel, and become institutionalized, that is, the ideas are being taken for granted and adopted as generally good and correct (Czarniawska & Sévon, 1996; Furusten, 2023). A key concept in this theoretical tradition is legitimacy and a core theme is that organizations adapt and respond to the expectations of their institutional environment.[6] They do so in order to raise their chances of efficient operations and long-term survival, outcomes of external legitimacy gained from adjusting to expectations in their institutional environments.

And while some of the additional controls requested of Union to Union by Sida may be explained by actual mishaps on Union to Union's part, we suggest that, for the most part, the added control may be due to so-called *isomorphic pressure* on decision-makers in the donor role (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). The concept of isomorphism, which is key to neo-institutional theory, was first introduced by Meyer and Rowan back in 1977 (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) in their seminal article on how formal organizational structures are often set up as shared "myths and ceremonies" in search of external legitimacy – rather than set up for functional reasons such as to increase internal efficiency. Meyer and Rowan argued that, in the longer run, these processes of adjustment lead organizations of different types to conform (with or without changing their legal form) to similar organizational structures, processes, and technologies in their search for legitimacy (Brunsson, 1994; Furusten, 2023; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). The concept of company-ization, for

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[6]What qualifies as an institutional environment can differ across cases, but the concept is used to define a shared external environment, often called a "field," that encompasses a large number of stakeholders that share certain characteristics, qualities, or missions. Depending on its identity, a particular organization may be part of several institutional environments. For example, a Swedish university is part of the institutional environment of the field of higher education as well as the institutional environment of the national school system, which in turn is part of the institutional environment of the public sector.

instance, denotes a process whereby public and civil society organizations take on ideal-typical forms and traits (structures, processes, and ideologies) first associated with the business enterprise (Brunsson, 1994) as these traits have spread to other institutional environments as widely accepted norms. A key insight from neo-institutional theory is hence that aid organizations may become increasingly similar, at least on the surface, as they conform to "rationalized myths" in society about what constitutes a legitimate organization in the aid field.

In line with this insight on the power of shared norms, and as discussed in previous chapters in this volume, the spread of market fundamentalism in recent decades has moved the ideals and practices of performance management to the top of the public agenda. The introduction of the new public management (NPM) doctrine (Hood, 1991; Pollitt, 2007) introduced auditing practices, performance standards, and an increased focus on efficiency and "value for money" through a range of seemingly apolitical tools, which are in many cases "more statements of political faith than empirically demonstrated findings" (Parker & Gould, 1999, p. 114). This development has prompted states to emphasize financial motives and targets in their governance (Alexius & Cisneros Örnberg, 2015; Tarschys, 2006), and the fact that aid organizations are increasingly established as auditable objects (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Power, 1997) is an illustrative example, where acts of auditing that follows certain general standards shape both perceptions of the organizations' performance, as well as their internal processes (Ek Österberg & de Fine Licht, 2021). However, following Bromley and Meyer (2015, introduction), we conclude that the irony is that, in order to realize the ideal of autonomous actors, organizations are highly dependent on their institutional environments:

> ... organizations are constructed to be proper social actors as much as functionally effective entities. They are painted as autonomous and integrated but depend heavily on external definitions to sustain this depiction.

Thus, as an empirical illustration of isomorphic pressure from the institutional environment, while Union to Union tries to defend a single global union movement aid system with its particular

features and modes of coordination, this view is not shared by the Sida representatives. Rather, the Sida representatives experience an external pressure in the form of assessments and audits that emphasize the potential risks embedded in a multitude of contracting parties with "unclear legal status." Hence, when looking at the situation from the donor's standpoint, we see external norms pressing the aid bureaucrats to shape and support "proper organizations," at the same time as doing so often conflicts with the official policy aims of variation and diversity in aid implementation.

The "Proper Organization" Ideal

The uncertainties that arise from the many interacting organizations, fluid boundaries, and unpredictable dynamics in development aid operations (Rutter et al., 2020, discussed in Chapter 2) must be responded to, and considering the fluidity and dynamics at stake, many donors long for structure and stability in these relations. Boundaries must be fixed, messiness tidied up. Looking at the theory on relational uncertainty, it becomes reasonable to want a given format, an organizational standard that can be used in attempts to reduce the four sources of relational uncertainty as identified by Knobloch and Solomon (1999) and described in more detail earlier in this volume (see Chapter 2): clarifying the definition of the relationship as well as its goals, norms, and how it is evaluated. As organization scholars, we acknowledge that these key aspects of relational uncertainty are closely related to key elements of the formal organization (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000): membership, decision-making authority, rules, monitoring, and sanctions. The organizational elements of membership and decision-making authority relate to the attempts to reduce the relational uncertainty as concerns the definition of the relationship (e.g., Who are the parties in this relationship? and Who has decision-making authority, and how is responsibility allocated among these parties?). The rules element responds to the need to reduce the uncertainty concerning the relationship's goals and norms. And lastly, the elements of monitoring and sanctions respond to the relational uncertainty concerning how the relationship is evaluated.

By "proper organization," we refer here to the empirical observation that aid project results today seem to be increasingly described as dependent on organizational elements and capabilities rather than on project features, contextual factors, or key individuals, for example. Although there are more organizations operating in the aid field, and the complexity and variety of actors involved has increased dramatically (as described in Chapter 2), we argue that there is an observable general institutionalized ideal that can be seen among these organizations, a shared norm of what counts, socially, as a trustworthy, legitimate partner in development aid. Core to this ideal is the idea that good results stem from sticking to a standard format for modern actors – actors that are purposeful, autonomous, and rational (Brunsson & Sahlin Andersson, 2000; Fredriksson, 2023). As discussed in Chapter 4, in development aid, this standard format means, for example, that organizations should have a proper results-based management (RBM) system and use certain management technologies.

When donors hesitate to stand up and defend the particularities of a federative democratic structure or collegiality, for example, the respective unions and universities have a harder time being trusted as unions and universities per se. Their domain-specific organizational features and modes of coordination that were once their "unique selling point" (and, according to the official political ideal of diversity in implementation, still are) have in practice often become a "sore spot" of confusion and potential mistrust: "If only they would step in line and become proper organizations!" Consequently, rather than presenting themselves as universities, car producers, unions, sex educators, or public agencies, we find that potential recipients feel pressure to present themselves first and foremost as autonomous actors with clear boundaries and a clearly defined purpose and objectives, as well as a hierarchy with rational decision-making power and generally approved structures, processes, technologies, and methodologies that should, ideally, be validated or certified by external parties such as consultants, auditors, or other governance experts (more on that below) (Bromley & Meyer, 2015; Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000).

We believe that one reason why we see an increasing use of proper organization proxies (POPs) today is that we live in an organization society where, as discussed in Chapter 3, organizations are expected to

play the lead roles in many complex social settings (Bromley & Meyer, 2015). By looking at it in this light, we are able to make sense of why so many aid bureaucrats are so busy dressing their legal persons in the ideal structures and processes for sustained legitimacy and survival in the complex and uncertain system of development aid.

Many donors are handling more money today but with fewer administrative resources, and this has likely also contributed to the "how" (doing things right) having taken over from the "what" (doing the right things, i.e., mastering both domain-specific and thematic knowledge). Our tentative findings also suggest that there has been a shift over time, where general expertise on how to manage aid projects has become increasingly emphasized and valued by organizations in the donor role. This view is expressed by a senior union representative, with many decades of experience:

> What I've discovered is that there is absolutely no...
> or, very little, knowledge within Sida about the unions
> today. Frankly, I'm chocked!

The former secretary-general of Union to Union similarly stated in an interview that, despite results evaluations having been favorable with respect to the organization's cause and outcomes, she felt that the donor bureaucrat responsible was more interested in the cost-effectiveness of organizing operations in a certain standardized way. The secretary general also explained that she, personally, felt a need to resign from her post because she felt that too much time was being spent on streamlining organizational structures and processes and pinpointing potential administrative risks, when neither weak ownership and coordination nor that money could disappear were the really alarming problems. Rather, in her view, what was really at stake was the lack of civil and human rights.

Another illustration of this mismatch between what organizations in the recipient role believe should be trusted about their operations and modes of organization, and the actual trust pattern of donor representatives, is provided by a program officer from one of the Swedish agencies who stated that:

> We are in fact public agencies; we have no personal
> interest in this. We don't make money on it [...]

> Sometimes we feel that perhaps Sida should trust us more than they do.

As several agency representatives we interviewed experienced, being a public agency, legally on par with Sida and tasked with carrying out government decisions, is not enough to be trusted to carry out aid operations. And, here again, we find that the donor representative responsible becomes frustrated because, in order to make proper decisions on financing these days, additional regulation and control requirements are required. The head of unit responsible for the Swedish agencies at Sida explains:

> It is my experience that other Swedish agencies don't understand Sida's core competence. They think that they know this stuff, know how to work in developing countries, more or less like we do. They don't understand that Sida contributes anything special. We are just a hurdle they have to clear to get the money. They would prefer to get the aid money directly, and the fact that Sida holds the purse strings frustrates them.

This quote suggests a power play and offers the insight that, in practice, both the aid donor and the aid recipient can experience a lack of trust and understanding from their counterpart, concerning context-specific forms, contributions, and expertise. A consequence of the increasing demand for generally acknowledged organizational standards is that domain-specific or thematic expertise becomes less sought after, less valued, less used, and less trusted (Alexius & Vähämäki, 2020).

Unsurprisingly from a neo-institutional perspective, our findings indicate that most organizations that have recently acquired financing from Sida have learned to *not* deviate from the norm by persisting with accounts of complex, domain-specific information (since, this can increase the donor's uncertainty levels). Rather, most organizations attempt to *conform* to the institutionalized norms by producing and passing on simplified and standardized information about their organizing that can serve as a source of trust and a proxy for results (Hoey, 2015; Porter, 1996). The recipient's ability to contribute to

positive results is thus to a large extent based on general organizational features and management skills, knowledge of certain project modalities, the use of RBM, etc. An almost taken-for-granted formula then centers on rational decision-making and the use of "proper" management techniques.

When looking more generally at cases of low-conflict relations between aid organizations, we find organizations in the recipient role that go to great lengths to conform to the "proper organization" ideal. It is, for example, apparent that in the field of development aid, so-called "strategic partner organizations" (SPOs) occupy a highly regarded position of status among civil society organizations. One of the case organizations we studied, Riksförbundet för sexuell upplysning (RFSU) (the Swedish Society for Sexual Education) reinvested a fair amount of the profits gained from its fully owned business (mainly selling condoms and other contraceptives) in the organization's ability to conform to the many detailed requirements to become an SPO (Alexius & Segnestam Larsson, 2019). RFSU has gone to great lengths and taken on much additional administration starting in 2007 when it embarked on the application process with the ultimate aim of attaining the attractive status of a Sida SPO (at that time called a "frame organization"), which it did attain in 2009, with its first funded projects as an SPO starting in 2010. For this to happen, two new controllers had to be hired at RFSU, consultants and auditors had to be consulted, and countless hours of administrative work was put into the application process. As RFSU's secretary-general commented:

> We scurried around like scalded rats the first year. It felt like there were audits upon audits, so many new systems and processes ... a big leap for us indeed.

No less than 29 appendices and over 60 application documents later, as stipulated by the application guide, both the secretary-general and head controller at RFSU concluded that, had it not had access to its own company revenue, RFSU would never have been able to follow through and complete the process. The concept of isomorphism helps us to make sense of why RFSU expended all this time and money in an effort to conform to all of these externally defined requirements.

Extrapolating Results From Proper Organization Proxies

In Chapter 4, we presented an account of how the management dreams of simplification and future control have lingered in the field of development aid for over six decades now. And how, in pursuit of these dreams, responsible aid bureaucrats remain highly preoccupied with different approximation practices. As also explained in Chapter 4, the task of approximating results in a project's activity and output phases is difficult and often conflict-ridden. Even when information is available, it is not always beneficial for the legitimacy of the project since approximations may be perceived as insufficient or confusing, which can in turn increase the perceived uncertainty at hand. Over all, we believe that this helps to explain why the kinds of input proxies described below – the POPs – have become so attractive.

In general, results should be secured as soon as possible, ideally even before a project has begun. At this early, preproject stage, organizational structures and processes come in handy, as do separate third-party standards and assessments and management technologies and methods that can all be in place *ex ante*, before the project decision is taken, and from which future project work and results are then extrapolated. This means that a positive trend is projected from the POPs to the future results. The mathematical concept of *extrapolation* thus draws our attention to how aid bureaucrats can derive a sense of certainty from tangible organizational input proxies in the preproject state. And while projects are assessed continuously throughout the project period, we find the *preproject* phase to be particularly emphasized by organizations in the donor role. In fact, in several cases, we found a comparative *lack* of interest from the donor (Sida) when it came to learning and following up how the different management technologies are used by the recipient and whether and how they affected the results achieved. As a head of unit at Sida pragmatically concluded:

> It would have been much more difficult if we'd focused more on the assessments of what they [the recipients] *actually* do.

To sum up, it seems that referring to POPs gives the bureaucrat responsible a greater sense of certainty, despite the actual uncertainty of the future results.

Examples of POPs Used by Sida – and Aid Bureaucrats' Responses

Let us now present more examples of how POPs are used by Sida. Donor representatives normally conduct an assessment of a proposal from a potential recipient before making a funding decision and entering an agreement of support for a project. In Swedish development cooperations and for those receiving funding from Sida, five different assessment areas are analyzed for this purpose (Sida, 2022b):

(1) Perspectives and development effectiveness;
(2) Goal and theory of change;
(3) Budget;
(4) Partner capacity;
(5) Anti-corruption.

Assessment area 1 (perspectives and development effectiveness) is clearly about norms that apply in the Sida-partner relation. In the appraisal process, Sida program officers should make sure that the partner's proposal or a separate plan takes into account five perspectives: (1) Poverty, (2) Rights, (3) Environment and climate, (4) Gender equality, and (5) Conflict sensitivity. Each of the five areas has its own "toolbox," with several questions that need to be ticked off. A program officer should moreover assess whether the principles of development effectiveness and of good humanitarian donorship (GHD) have been met (Sida, 2022b). During the process, separate help desks made up of external partners (see Chapter 6) are called in to provide support in the assessment of whether the proposal can be considered legitimate. The official role of the help desks is to ensure that their respective thematic expertise is applied in practice. In our interviews, however, we found that these partnership norms are first and foremost seen as backbone criteria prior to any new relationship. To give an example, one of the norms for research cooperation is that projects should be established in

remote areas with limited resources. However, as one program officer for research the research unit at Sida explained, in practice this means that the organization's capacity to operate in these areas is a critical criterion:

> So we never get down to the project level. Rather, we look at the *organization* that is there to support social science research – in environments where there are limited resources, for example.

Certain plans always need to be included and attached to the main proposal, one of these being an environmental plan. A Sida officer, who previously worked in the recipient role at a firm engaged with biofuels, recalls how the donor questioned her as a recipient, prior to the project agreement:

> "What kind of environmental plan do you have?" They could be like: "You *must* have an environmental plan", and very often in an accusatory tone. And for a company that's about to invest and has no capital yet, hasn't got the land yet, has no-, I mean doesn't have any staff … it's not that easy to develop an environmental action plan in *advance* before you know which area we're talking about; is it northern Tanzania or in the south? What are we talking about, is it water issues or is it land issues, or is it population issues or what is it? But the donors didn't understand that … and they really didn't know what was going on.

When donors request that certain procedures and norms be in place already before the project is established, it makes it particularly difficult for smaller and nonestablished organizations because – as shown in the RFSU example above – aid organizations often need to make big investments to tick all the boxes.

As discussed in Chapter 4, most of the aid bureaucrats we have interviewed believe that a good plan is simply needed to meet the expectations and formal requirements of the donor so they prefer to have a proper plan ready. We also get the overall impression that,

for many in the donor role, the illusion that proper plans can clarify and set things straight lives on to some degree (Alexius, 2021). Rationalistic, modernist ideals are held high since hopes are placed on the ability of human intentions and plans to control and improve the future (Bornemark, 2018; Brunsson, 2006). It is therefore no surprise that planning and plans for future results to be achieved serve as fundamental POPs in development aid. In our data, we found a wide variety of requirements for goals, future plans, and commitments used as POPs.

Sida has three written documents to guide contribution management, i.e., managing aid projects. The first is a guidance document – "A guide to contribution management at Sida" (Sida, 2021), the second is a contribution management rule (Sida, 2022a), and the third are the help texts in the Trac contribution management tool – a computerized system where all information about a project must be entered by the aid officer responsible prior to project approval and during follow-up assessments (Sida, 2022b). Information must be entered into Trac to enable disbursements to the projects. When searching for information on what actually is required from a project in terms of predicting results in advance in a results technology, Sida's manual clearly states that making predictions in advance can be difficult (Sida, 2021 p. 11):

> In many cases, the progress of development cannot be predicted in advance, the causal relationship between input and results is not apparent and solutions are not simple or obvious.

However, at the time of writing, in 2023, the "theory of change" technology is nearly institutionalized (see also Chapter 4) and, according to the Trac help texts, all projects must have a theory of change to clarify the causality or what the thinking is behind the envisaged change, what the partner envisages the activities will result in, and what these results are (Sida, 2022b, p. 56). The help texts state that the theory of change can be presented in the format of either a matrix or a narrative, but what matters is "that the logic is illustrated in a manner which shows the causal relationships of the envisaged change" (Sida, 2022b). However, in the help texts on what the aid officer responsible needs to enter into the computerized system for aid

projects, we find the following requirements spelled out clearly (Sida, 2022b):

> The clarification of the causal relations is important for the assessment of the relevance of the intervention. It is also important that the implementing organisation has a clear idea of what it believes will lead to what so that it can react if the envisaged changes do not occur.
>
> When you assess the theory of change you should first of all assess whether the envisaged causal relations are clearly spelt out in the project/programme document.

Many aid bureaucrats we talked to were confused about how far they should go in attempting to plan their projects and predict their results beforehand, and the extent to which their plans should then be followed during implementation can also be unclear. The most important thing seemed to be to follow the decided-upon meeting schedule. Regarding these different reporting routines that must in turn be put in place to meet the conditions of its agreement with Sida, a project manager at the Swedish environment protection agency (SEPA) stated the following:

> We have both a yearly report... that is, each project has a separate one... [...]. And then, we also make a collective yearly report to Sida, as a summary of our entire international development cooperation operation. And then, we also have a follow-up... every project has a follow-up, a yearly meeting. And then, there can be additional meetings during the year, but this is the minimum, the *lowest* level of ambition.

And on this same topic, one senior consultant shared his conclusion that in day-to-day practice at Sida, the stricter norms of the computerized help text templates trump the more flexible wording of the general policy manual, simply because the aid bureaucrats responsible are nudged into ticking the boxes (e.g., to indicate whether the decided-upon meetings have taken place) and filling in what the system requires:

> I believe that the power over the templates... I've seen
> that in many cases, is what determines everything. You
> can write whatever in the overall policy, but it still
> comes down to what it says in the so-called "help
> texts".

A telling example of how these norms and requirements affect
the projects was given in one of our group interviews with the
SEPA. Toward the end of the 1.5-hour interview, after hearing all
about the project plans, one of the agency's climate experts raised
his hand to share the following remark:

> Well, I thought that I would just add that I'm here on
> this project as a climate expert. And 1.5 years into the
> project I just wonder... when are we going to start
> talking about the climate issues?

Thanks to this informant's sincere question, we learned that the
agency's project team had been both informally motivated and
formally requested by the donor to focus first and foremost on
learning a specific project management methodology, in order to
then spend additional time teaching this methodology to partners in
the South. And 1.5 years into this particular climate project, the
main emphasis was still on securing "proper" organizational
structure and processes. Another informant from the SEPA recalled
the conversation with Sida:

> I've noticed that they pitch [as in a sales presentation] it
> more like a project management course. So instead of
> taking a coaching approach: "How do you work with
> change management based on your own conditions?"
> It was more like: "How do you write the perfect project
> plan?"

To get the project going, the role of the agency was mainly
defined as one of helping their partners to draw up project plans of
their own. Interestingly, here, our informant also described the
project plans as a "concrete result," i.e., setting up project plans in
advance is not only a POP for future results but can even be seen as
a result on its own. Many of the aid bureaucrats in the recipient role

that we have talked to express disappointment in the development, where they perceive that an interest in POPs can "take over" and ruin what was otherwise expected to be an exciting start-up phase, because the box-ticking has become more important than the content. Others are more pragmatic, as exemplified by one of the informants from the SEPA:

> They [the other Swedish authorities in the project] agreed to participate in the project because they wanted to focus on the climate and urban issues. But now we tend to focus a lot on project planning… […] But, well, I think "let's go for it for *now*," we need to get the projects rolling here. Later we will naturally go back more to the actual substantive issues. But for now, we need some structure.

And, in line with our reasoning in Chapter 3 on "plural actor-hood" and "role-switching identifies" among aid organizations and their employees, the SEPA officers alternate between complaining about the nuisance of ticking all the boxes and expressing gratitude and pride in having fulfilled their duty as proper bureaucrats:

> We've *got* it now. And setting it up was a real feat. Bloody tedious at times. Excuse the language. We did it at my unit so we've got … I don't know, how many project plans, how many processes and process plans and piles of stuff like that. And when we set them all up, because it was a few years ago now, it was frustrating and pretty difficult, at the same time as we're extremely grateful to have them in place. … You see the beauty of them, the appeal of the plans that is, when you've done the work on them … We've got these processes going on all the time. But they've saved us so many times. And then you know … Somehow you just know that it's important, that it's good. Even if it's quite difficult. Maybe it isn't … I mean, I'd really rather be looking at numbers and research results and producing potentials for new policy instruments, blah, blah, blah. But without these processes, the bottom would fall out.

Studies on decision-making on large investments in uncertain settings have shown that proxies are often used, in advance, as ceremonial substitutes of rational decision-making procedures (Jansson, 1992; Grafström et al., 2021). Budgets can sometimes be used in this way, for example, like a symbolic "security blanket" for uncertain situations (Nilsson, 2021). Similarly, we have found that when faced with uncertainty about future outcomes, donors and recipients of aid commonly refer to tangible POPs available for everyone to see here and now. When decision-makers need results produced at a faster pace than the underlying conditions and wicked problems allow, since they are often interpreted as valid proxies for future results, POPs such as legitimate organization structures, processes, and management technologies serve as a pragmatic means of bridging this temporal mismatch.

In Proper Organization We Trust

In recent years, there have been official calls for less NPM-like management and more so-called "trust-based" management in the Swedish public sector. Nevertheless, the trust patterns identified among the aid bureaucrats we interviewed indicate that many of the same old NPM tools and governance processes remain important as trust-enhancing objects and rituals in interorganizational aid relations. The identified trust patterns may therefore help to explain why NPM modes of management and governance linger on in development aid. Formal governance, measurements, and control do not always hamper trust. Depending on the situation, it may even be the other way around: formal governance may actually enhance trust.

Mollering (2006) argues that although there are many similarities to interpersonal trust processes, there tend to be additional factors assessed in interorganizational trust processes. These factors emphasize the impersonal rather than the personal and often focus on bureaucratic procedures and routines. In line with Mollering's conclusions, we found that donors prefer to place their trust in ideal-typical traits and features of what we call the "proper organization" (Alexius & Vähämäki, 2020, 2021). In fact, the actual sources of trust used by donors all seem to point in a similar direction and

contribute to an organizational standard for trustworthy aid organizations (Brunsson & Jacobsson, 2000; Segnestam Larsson, 2011).

We have discussed approximation practices in aid organizations, practices which in previous literature have been claimed to contribute to OMD (Natsios, 2010). In many of the examples above, aid bureaucrats have expressed frustration over the fact that their organizations have become more preoccupied with approximation practices than with the content or understanding of their projects. According to Natsios (2010), this type of "mission drift" is a clear risk factor for OMD. For some (perhaps newcomers, outsiders, or individuals who seriously believe that the policy dreams are indeed attainable), these practices might be perceived, at least, as an obsessive seeking of measurements to substantiate facts and replicate the messy, dynamic reality. Most of the senior aid bureaucrats we interviewed say, however, that they understand the need for these approximation practices. And, as one of our informants told us, approximations may even have "saved" the organization in the short run. To put it crudely, the organizations fear that they would no longer be in operation if they had not adapted to certain institutionalized approximation practices.

But what happens in the longer run, when, in order to be an eligible aid recipient, the organization is faced with many POPs? A representative from Swedish mission council states in a report by Wohlgemuth and Ewald (2020) that recipients perceive that "narrative reporting requirements from Sida have eased," but in their place, "financial reporting requirements have increased" and remain a challenge (p. 23). For organizations in the recipient role, demonstrating both benevolence (a willingness to adhere to a certain management standard to make life easier for the donor) and ability in terms of general management knowledge and skills can represent a shortcut to a higher trustworthiness assessment (Meyer et al., 1995). But a heavy emphasis on POPs may also hinder organizations from being innovative, and some recipients feel that the risk-taking is left up to them and not the donor (Wohlgemuth & Ewald, 2020).

As seen in this chapter (and as will be further discussed in Chapter 7), bureaucrats acting on behalf of organizations in the recipient role may assume that references to their organization's particular institutional context, domain-specific knowledge, and

actual complex results will enhance their legitimacy and trustworthiness (Alexius & Vähämäki, 2020). In practice, however, despite official praise, it turns out that donors are not as keen on trusting these sources as recipients think. We found that bureaucrats in the donor role generally opt for general management expertise (such as organizational and RBM expertise), partly because they find it easier to comprehend at a distance (see also Chapter 7). The use of general standards also enables comparisons that donors hope will help them to improve efficiency through monitoring.

To sum up, actual complex information about results on the ground tends to confuse rather than to qualify and hence generally does not lead to a higher trust assessment from a donor. We also conclude, in line with previous studies (e.g., Alexius & Vähämäki, 2020; Vähämäki, 2017), that simply *having* a certain results technology or organizational structure in place is already interpreted as a result in itself. As one of the senior management consultants from the consultancy company Niras put it:

> If it's not documented, it doesn't exist. If the results
> aren't in a report, there are no results.

Since performance measurements and control requirements form the heart of the trusted ideal, this presents us with a possible paradox. Despite calls in recent years for less of NPM-like rational management methods and more trust-based management, the trust pattern we have identified indicate that *what most aid officials actually lean on and trust are the same old NPM and governance tools*. To cope with the uncertainties at hand, donors tend to place their trust in impersonal sources, such as general control systems, management technologies, and specific formal structures and processes. It is also likely that they actively hide or downplay the importance of personal relations due to a fear of legitimacy loss (see Chapter 8 and Alexius & Vähämäki, 2020). Paradoxically then, the identified pattern indicate that, despite the official critique, formal control technologies are highly valued as prominent sources of legitimacy and trust that can reduce the perceived uncertainty.

Due to the social messiness and dynamics present, it is seldom the case that decision-makers in the field of development aid are able to predict project outcomes. Still, they are expected to attempt

to do so. Senior aid bureaucrats may be well aware that manage-ment tools such as RBM and the theory of change will – alas – not serve to fully reduce the uncertainty at hand, but most stand firm in their belief that these techniques should nevertheless be used, for legitimacy reasons, to support decision-making and the general public in assessing whether aid funds deliver results and whether taxpayers are thereby helping to tackle the grand challenges of the world. There are typically no quick fixes for development problems. But when faced with substantial uncertainty, donors can at least make sure that money flows to projects in organizations that are considered proper with reference to acknowledged standards. In the face of uncertainty, donors are able to justify their decision-making, by referring to POPs.

Chapter 6

Certainty for Sale?: A Historic Exposé on the Role of External Experts in Development Aid 1960s–2020s

Ever since the field of public development aid was established in the 1960s, external experts have been extensively employed in aid organizations' attempts to respond to the various uncertainties of aid operations. This chapter offers a closer look at what the Swedish development aid agency, the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida), has required of external experts, and how the content and rituals of these contracted expert deals have contributed – or not – to perceptions of trust and certainty.

In essence, and following our reasoning in Chapter 4, on the management dreams of simplifying the complex and controlling the future, the gap between these ideals and the often messy and uncertain practices of development aid projects stirs the demand for external professional services. Considering the uncertainty at hand, it is therefore understandable that decision-makers need the support of several different partners to deal with these complex issues (Kipping, 2002).

In this chapter, we present a historic exposé on the role of experts in development aid relations, in aid organizations' attempts to reduce and cope with uncertainty. External experts have been contracted by aid organizations for a number of reasons and to

help reduce all three kinds of uncertainties described in Chapter 2.[1] These experts have been hired to support the bureaucrats of the organization in the donor role in assessing who should receive aid funds, but also to support the bureaucrats of the organization in the recipient role in accessing funds or helping to implement projects (Curtis, 2004). And the external experts have not only been consulted for their knowledge but also for their moral support to individual decision-makers and as agents of legitimation. Furusten and Werr (2005) argue that external experts often "deal with confidence," in the sense that their clients value and demand not only expert services and advice but also the interpersonal trust that develops between individual consultants and their client representatives. As our examples below show, external experts have often also been used as mediators between two organizations in a donor–recipient relationship. And due to the scale of the aid system and the complexity of the mission, aid bureaucrats need to collaborate not only with one another but also with external experts to get the job done, as Pekka Seppälä from the Ministry for Foreign Affairs in Finland argues:

> The bureaucrat has only a limited role in actually addressing the problem. The role of the development bureaucrat is limited to defining the terms of reference [ToR, i.e. a job description] for a team of consultants who are actually tasked to look at the problem in more detail. [...] A single bureaucrat is powerless if she is unable to command consultants and colleagues to follow the level of detail.

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[1]That is, external experts have been contracted: (a) to prepare or assess a project or a financial proposal *before* the funding decision or to conduct *specific analyses* or studies concerning, for example, how a problem and its conditions will change in a certain country, portfolio, or with respect to a thematic issue – all in order to reduce *uncertainties of state*; (b) to support implementation *during* a project, to reduce *uncertainties of response* concerning the proper course of action to take next; and (c) to evaluate a project *after* it has been completed, to reduce *uncertainties of effect*.

As explained in this quote, a key insight into the role of external experts in the aid field is that aid bureaucrats seldom manage to do the job alone but are highly dependent, not only on colleagues but also on a web of external experts. However, being highly dependent on external experts can also imply difficulties. Recent literature on external experts has argued that their expertise has become increasingly influential in the formulation and implementation of policies aimed at restructuring public services (Lapsley & Oldfield, 2001; Saint-Martin, 1998), typically according to the ethos of commercial professionalism (Furusten, 2023, 2003).

A common argument in this more critical literature is that external experts have moved closer and, in fact, too close to public-sector decision-making fora, and that these experts have come to challenge conventional forms of bureaucratic and democratic decision-making within the public sector, which in turn has decreased the levels of internal knowledge and competencies in public-sector organizations. It has been argued that consultants have increasingly replaced civil servants, and even politicians, in terms of both knowledge and organizational memory and control, which has led to consultants having increased power in politics, public governance, and public-sector practices (Grafström et al., 2021; Ylönen & Kuusela, 2018). This development has been described as "consultocracy" (Kirkpatrick et al., 2019; Ylönen & Kuusela, 2018). Research on consultocracy is critical of external experts being used not merely for planning and implementing of political reforms but increasingly also for support at the heart of decision-making processes, albeit often in more informal ways, making the experts' involvement less transparent and harder to evaluate from the outside (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006; Garsten et al., 2015; Kirkpatrick et al., 2019). Thus, external experts are not only trusted and praised; they are also extensively discussed, evaluated, and criticized. This negative perspective is important, and our historic exposé reveals that through the years, dealing with external experts in the field of development aid has also been criticized for bringing about confusion, mistrust, and more uncertainty, rather than clarity, trust, and certainty, as typically intended. When worst comes to worst, this pattern has become a self-enforcing vicious circle: external experts bring about uncertainty that calls for more external experts, which brings about more

uncertainty, which calls for even more external experts, etc. And sometimes, the unceasing strive for certainty – by way of "proper" external experts and their "proper" processes and technologies – has run amok, increasing the risk of OMD.

Following this general introduction, we will now begin our historic exposé on how external experts have been used in an attempt to reduce uncertainty, and how these uncertainty-reducing attempts have in turn created new uncertainties in Swedish development aid since the 1960s. Our focus here is primarily externally procured experts, but we also provide an account of the views and practices of internally sourced experts – with an emphasis on Sida.

We have divided our empirical account into three main eras: (1) 1960s–1990s: the Quick-fix Implementer Era, (2) 1990s–2005: the Collaborative Turn Era, and (3) 2005–2020s: the Proper Organization Proxy (POP) Era. The material that forms the basis for this chapter consists of both documents (archived project applications, decision statements, correspondence, memos, etc.) and interviews gathered in previous research on the history of Swedish aid (Vähämäki, 2017). The main method used to analyze the material has been process tracing (Collier, 2011), where researchers test different assumptions in an attempt to unfold why a specific event or change happened (see also Methods appendix). Aware of the complex sources of institutional and organizational change, we have sought to identify a post hoc pattern of shifting views on the contestation of aid as well as concerns the demand for external expertise. Our primary focus has been the meso level of market relations, narrowing the scope to Sida's role as a buyer of external expertise, including the micro level of its aid funding decisions.

Due to the gradual nature of organizational change and the slow sedimentation of previous reform ideas, the borders of the identified eras are actually a little more "fuzzy around the edges" than the standard representation of a neat table may allow for, but to the best of our knowledge and available data, we conclude that at about these transformative moments (1990, 2005), a new dominant scheme on the view and use of external expertise did indeed take hold as new "rules of the game" became the norm. Rather than sudden shifts, our exploratory retrospect case analysis approach has enabled us to identify gradual change in the perception of

contestation and uncertainties at hand which in turn have influenced new ways of contracting and co-creating with external experts.

1960s–1990s: The Quick-Fix Implementer Era

During this first era, achieving the goals of development aid – "to raise the living standards of poor people" (Gov 1962, p. 100) – proved to be much more complex than originally anticipated. Employing external expertise in the form of so-called "technical assistance" was seen as an attractive quick-fix solution to development aid problems. However, the assistance from these external experts came to be criticized for increasing the uncertainty by creating even more problems, partly due to the experts not possessing the needed competencies. This criticism in turn led to an increased use of "evaluation consultants" contracted to increase certainty by reporting the effects of aid and so-called "close consultants" that were to work even more closely with aid bureaucrats in order to support decision-making processes. Below, we describe some of the key happenings from this time period.

When SIDA – the Swedish International Development Authority – was founded in 1965, it quickly came to be seen as Sweden's main expert organization in international development aid.[2] At that time, the authority's staff was largely comprised of thematic experts in charge of delivering aid funds to development projects quickly. It is clear from documentation from the time that urgency to combat poverty in the world was a key concern. For example, Ernst Michanek, SIDA's first director-general, stated that the agency had "ten years to steer development in a new direction" (Michanek, 1964). And importantly, there was public support for and optimism about the task, which was indeed perceived as possible, by means of development aid.

At that time, there were two main types of external experts engaged. The first were external experts that could be contracted to support SIDA in its own expert role. The argument for contracting these

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[2]In 1995, the original Swedish International Development Authority (SIDA) was merged with four other agencies to form the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida).

experts was capacity constraints, i.e., that SIDA itself did not have enough staff with the right competencies to undertake certain tasks, such as administration, recruitment, documentation, thematic overviews and project control, or to serve as individual advisors to SIDA staff (RRV, 1983). The second type of external experts needed were those who could help with the implementation of aid projects in the recipient countries. This second type category of experts was most often described as "technical assistance" in "people-oriented programs designed to transfer knowledge through education, training, and research" (Loomis, 1968, p. 1330). The focus here was on changing the behavior of individuals and institutions in "developing" countries (Loomis, 1968, p. 1330). A division of the world had thereby been made into "developed" (i.e., prosperous, scientifically and technologically leading) nations and "underdeveloped" (i.e., deficient, unprogressive) nations that faced conditions of misery, where the latter were depicted as unable to end the suffering of their people without the knowledge and skills of the former. Competencies identified as critical were those of teachers, vocational instructors, adult learning educators, and family planners, but also engineers.[3] Interestingly, it was simply assumed by Swedish politicians and aid bureaucrats that these experts ought to be Swedes, and that it would be most efficient for the aid if they were hired by SIDA (RRV, 1983). As a result of this powerful framing of needs, in the decades that followed, large education and training programs were established in Sweden to educate external experts, as part of the Swedish resource base, to undertake various tasks in development aid (Ewald & Wohlgemuth, 2022).

It was not long, however, before public aid and the use of external experts for technical assistance began to draw criticism. And, as some aid projects were described as "failures," the realization that the task at hand was not as simple as initially envisioned emerged. In fact, great uncertainties arose about the effects of aid. In both international articles (Loomis, 1968; Jolly, 1989) and formal evaluations (RRV, 1983; Forss et al., 1988), criticism was raised regarding the fundamental set-up behind technical assistance

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[3]From the Swedish *folkbildare*, a concept connected with Sweden's community-based Folk high schools, a study association system with a long history of liberal and popular adult education.

where individual people were being contracted by organizations in the donor role with the intention that this would support the process of modernization in poor, recipient countries. Loomis (1968), for example, argued that the very presence of technical assistance implied a continuation of inadequacy and inferiority on the part of the recipient, which in turn led to resentment, and in the end implied a reduced or nullified effect of the aid received.

The Swedish national audit office/Riksrevisionsverket (RRV) raised the criticism that external experts had too "narrow" an understanding of the development problems, which posed the risk of making problems at hand worse, hence a critique that drew attention to the great uncertainties of state at hand (see Chapter 2) (RRV, 1983). A Nordic evaluation of the technical assistance went as far as to argue that "many aid projects have a negative impact on institutional development," suggesting that projects often ended up being run by the technical assistance people, which created oversized organizations that were not sustainable without aid funding (Forss et al., 1988, p. ii). The evaluation furthermore argued that the transfer of knowledge had been "nonexistent or crippled" and questioned whether there had actually been a need for foreign personnel (Forss et al., 1988, p. 1).

Yet another point criticized had to do with the power gained by the external experts over development politics and project implementation. RRV's 1983 audit argued that project documentation and assessments were sometimes produced entirely by external experts, with no involvement of internal SIDA staff. According to the audit, this meant that the external experts could often "form the projects to suit their own companies" (RRV, 1983, p. 26). Tendencies toward what our contemporary criticism of consultancy calls "consultocracy" (Ylönen & Kuusela, 2019) were thus identified and found fault with early on in the field of development aid.

The hope of finding a simple solution (knowledge transfer through technical assistance) to the problem of world poverty (which in 1960s was deemed as an "easy, quick fix") had thus proven to be riddled with uncertainties. And although the quick-fix framing was an ideological misconception, blame was increasingly placed on external experts for their "failure" to deliver a simple, quick solution. Somewhat paradoxically, however, the uncertainties and failures that had come to light concerning the use of

external experts soon increased the demand for a third kind of external expertise: evaluators. Guidelines for evaluation of international development assistance had been developed as early as 1959 by UNESCO and a few years later by USAID (1965). It was not until the 1980s, two decades after first being implemented, however, that the field experienced an "explosion of interest" in aid evaluation (Lancaster, 2008). The large organizations in the donor role set up evaluation units, and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) established the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) Expert Group on Aid Evaluation (Cracknell, 1988). There was also increased pressure on organizations in the donor role to take responsibility for aid funding actually producing "results." Clearly, the criticized short-sightedness of the early aid projects had led SIDA to seek to improve administrative routines that would ensure more long-term thinking.

In addition to these three kinds of external experts (in capacity support, technical assistance and evaluation), the criticism led to a surge in one other "expert solution." During this era, there was also a great deal of criticism against SIDA for not following proper procurement rules in its contracting. At this time, one-person companies were typically procured directly, with neither a bidding process nor evaluation criteria. It was therefore recommended that SIDA organize its procurement processes better, to gain a better overview of the consultancy competencies being contracted and to ensure that the consultants hired actually possessed the right knowledge and skills "with broader perspectives" – as opposed to the existing, criticized "narrow" perspective on development assistance (RRV, 1983). This was a bit ambivalent considering the consultocracy critique, and RRV's recommendation at the time was that SIDA should increase its own internal competency by procuring what was referred to as long-term "close consultants" ("närkonsulter") to assist in "complicated cases of expertise procurement" and other specialist tasks (RRV, 1983, p. 6).[4] The view was thus that, as long as external experts were procured correctly, the close working relationship between these external experts and SIDA decision-makers was a good thing for the aid processes.

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[4]From the Swedish *närkonsulter*.

1990s–2000s: The Collaborative Turn Era

During the next era of uncertainty responses, deeper knowledge and thematic competence, preferably founded on science, was lauded, and many aid programs were built up to support those values. Closeness, informal relations and participatory approaches with different actors, including external experts, were valued for building competence and to help tackle the uncertainties of the complex global development goals. However, the close relations between external experts and organizations in the donor role were again criticized for increasing inequality and uncertainty. We describe some of the main events and trends of this era below.

With the 1990s came an even more complex view of development aid. Aid organizations now increasingly sought to influence developing countries' macro-economic policies and to support the building of strong local institutions. At the same time, more bottom-up and participatory approaches were favored. Aid projects now often had more abstract goals that were difficult to verify objectively, such as the goals of "increased equity and social transformation" or "increased capacity-building" (Hintjens, 1999). This collaborative turn in international development also made the constitution of professional or expert identities more complex since experts of participatory programs now had to downplay or even conceal their own expertise, agency, and practical role in program delivery, to match the authorized view of them as "facilitators" or "catalysts" of community action and local knowledge (Mosse, 2007).

In 1995, SIDA was merged with four other government agencies and became "Sida," giving the agency a strengthened role as an expert organization (as well as the orthographic change to fewer capital letters). As recommended by the 1983 audit, and justified by proper procurement and efficiency and capacity development arguments, Sida had now created a system of "close consultants." Thus, each thematic unit and division at Sida had a group of consultants attached to its operations. Every program officer could thus have a couple of "close consultants" connected to their operations. And while many of these close consultants had expertise in the particular thematic fields, they often ended up doing any kind of administrative task, such as conducting assessments of aid

projects and decision-making processes in the agency. In addition to working closely with the consultants, Sida had many other close collaborations within the so-called Swedish "resource base," defined as consisting of Swedish academia, external experts, the private sector, and civil society. It was seen as important to build up competence in development among a wider set of Swedish actors (Ewald & Wohlgemuth, 2022). Closeness and continuous interaction with close consultants and other actors in society was thus seen as important for competence development and, in the longer perspective, Sweden's ability to deal with the uncertainties of state in the field of development aid.

In contrast to the discussions on the need for closeness during implementation of aid projects, however, during the 1990s, there was also an ongoing discussion and attempts to "organize independency" in the assessment of aid results. It was claimed that evaluations should be conducted not by the actors participating in implementation but by a separate body outside Sida (SOU, 1993, p. 1; RRV, 1991). As a consequence of these discussions, two attempts were made to set up such independent bodies: SASDA – the Secretariat for Analysis of Swedish Development Assistance, launched in 1992 (Gov 1992, p. 59) and shuttered in 1993 and the slightly longer-running EGDI – the Expert Group on Development Issues, launched in 1998 and discontinued in 2007.

The official reason for shutting down both of these bodies was a lack of resources, but there were also claims relating to SASDA and EGDI having difficulty actually showing results of aid (RR 1998/99, p. 43). The final report from SASDA, for example, stated that "the presently available statistics on Swedish aid are not suitable for studies and analyses of the effectiveness of aid" and suggested that more efforts were needed to further specify the requirements concerning the reporting of results (Ds, 1994, pp. 58, 137). Thus, the body itself argued that a more substantial set-up for reporting results was needed for it to be able to properly evaluate the results and effectiveness of aid. The politicians of the day, however, seem to have believed that the independent bodies did a poor job since they were unable to come up with precise answers to how, whether, and what type of aid led to results. Hence, both SASDA and EGDI were born of a quest to improve the analysis of "results" and both died of the difficulty of doing so.

In the periods during which Sweden has lacked independent evaluation bodies, fewer evaluations that take a wider perspective on topics have been conducted. Nevertheless, due to the fact that evaluations were now systematically conducted on all aid projects, as well as aid portfolios and country, sectorial and thematic approaches, the field had now become perhaps the world's most evaluated policy field (Vähämäki et al., 2011). Another concern during this era was that criticism was once again raised of the fact that external experts seemed to increase the inequality in power relations between organizations in the donor role and organizations in the recipient role. This criticism foremost addressed the idea of the continued use of external experts as technical assistance. William Easterly, a former World Bank economist and later professor at New York University, for example, published a book provocatively entitled *The Tyranny of Experts: Economists, Dictators, and the Forgotten Rights of the Poor*, in which he criticized aid agencies for perpetuating the "technocratic illusion" that external expertise would solve the problems of the developing world. According to him, the advice of external experts had helped to oppress people rather than to free them from poverty (Easterly, 2016).

In a critical report from international nongovernmental organization (NGO) ActionAid, it was argued that external experts, in the form of technical assistance, absorbed USD 19 billion of aid in 2004, a quarter of global aid flows. ActionAid argued that this assistance was "phantom aid" imposed by donors as a "soft lever to police and direct the policy agendas of developing country governments." The report further argued that it was an open secret that "much of the current spending is ineffective, over-priced, donor-driven and based on a failed development model" (Greenhill, 2006, p. 4). In a similar vein, Koch and Weingart (2016) penned an exposé of various studies on external experts, arguing that most studies had found that, in the context of aid, external experts in the form of technical assistance largely fail to achieve the objective of increasing the capacity of organizations in the recipient role to an extent that would render them independent from outside assistance. As a result, Koch and Weingart argued, recipient governments run the risk of ending up in a perpetual cycle of being advised by external experts who potentially (and illegitimately) gain significant influence in the policy space (Koch & Weingart, 2016). Thus, once again, the critique of

consultocracy and of external experts contributing to increased (rather than reduced) uncertainty was aired. A global discussion arose also regarding the need to move on from technical assistance (a support form increasingly seen as imposed by donors) to supporting programs owned and operated by developing countries (Williams et al., 2003), the idea being that external experts ought instead to be procured by the aid recipients, and that they should support capacity building in the recipient countries (Williams et al., 2003).

To sum up – during the Collaborative Turn Era, uncertainty of state (see Chapter 2) was seen as something to be tackled in close collaboration with internal and external experts. External experts were still procured to assist in implementation of aid projects. Close consultants were contracted to support aid organizations in their donor role. The need for independence, and for maintaining an arm's length perspective, became a matter for external evaluations and evaluators. However, the close relations between external experts and organizations in the donor role were once again heavily criticized for increasing inequality and uncertainty.

2000–2020s: The POP Era

In this era, the aid landscape has become even more complex, with an increasing number of actors, including more involvement from the private sector. The ideal role of aid in this current era is more often described as that of a catalyst since it has been generally more accepted that aid in itself cannot solve the still large and increasing development problems (MFA, 2003). As described in Chapter 5, the recurring criticism or suspicion that aid is not effective enough has put pressure on Sida and other aid organizations to become "proper organizations" that focus primarily on structures and procedures, on doing things the right way and by the book. This development has also entailed a shift in power internally at the agency, with an increased emphasis on the expertise provided by in-house controllers and lawyers, with thematic experts increasingly seen as the new support functions. Increased internationalization and the aid effectiveness agenda have also meant a smaller space for Swedish external experts in foreign aid projects.

Severe criticism from external audits, government, and the media regarding ineffective and inefficient aid delivery led to drastic changes and several reorganizations in Swedish aid from 2006 onward. Sida received a new mandate in which its task was reduced from that of an expert organization to its main role being that of a financier and controller of development aid projects (Gov, 2010 ta bort b). In 2012, with a new director-general, board and changed leadership in place, Sida consequently launched a management process based on the assumption that getting it right and complying with all legal and external requirements would lead to improved results.[5] Changes made due to budget and through several reorganizations implied a drastically reduced number of thematic experts at the agency and an increased number of in-house generalists such as controllers and lawyers instead. The latter experts (i.e., generalists) were seen as crucial in order to attain consent (i.e., "no objection") in decision-making at different stages of aid project management. In practice, the new process thus meant a shift of power from program officers to controllers and legal experts. Procurement rules were tightened up, and external experts were now contracted mainly through larger bidding processes. Within Sida, the legal department had gained more power and streamlined both the direct procurement rules and the framework agreements by establishing budget ceilings, more specifications, etc., all in the aim of becoming a "proper organization," more like other government agencies. Alongside these governance reforms, there was a gradual shift in organizational culture within Sida toward an increased focus on "doing things right" and "by the book." All of this brought the closeness to external experts into question once again, which in turn implied several new anti-corruption measures, such as establishing an external whistle-blower function and imposing anti-bribery rules. For Sida employees, this meant it was no longer considered appropriate to be invited to lunches and dinners by external experts and, consequently, that informal

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[5]Decision concerning contribution management process, including new rule for managing contributions, implementation guide and templates, new quality assurance of contribution management, and establishment of a management organization for aid processes. 2012-03-07/03079.

communication channels were reduced. Clearly, the fear of nepotism and corruption had increased.

Internationally, measures were taken to decrease the power of organizations in the donor role and to strengthen organizations in the recipient role. The international aid effectiveness debate was coordinated by OECD DAC, and the advent of the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness in 2005 implied that donors were no longer to run projects and contract their own external experts and project implementation units but rather they were to align operations with larger development country procurement and financial management systems. Ideally, donor funds should be pooled or directly channeled through developing country systems to large sector or national programs. For external experts, this meant that the external expert market became more international and situated in the developing countries, which in turn required larger set-ups by the consultancy companies.

All of these changes led to external experts being contracted to a lesser extent. "Close consultants" were no longer procured due to the fear of nepotism. Many smaller Swedish consulting companies struggled to survive and mid-sized firms had to merge their businesses. Swedish Consultants, a network formed by some of the larger Swedish consultancies (SIPU, Neptunia Development, Niras, WSP International, and InDevelop), expressed their discontent with the situation and how their competence was handled in a 2012 opinion piece published on the Swedish Development Forum (FUF) website:

> Consultants are the most cost-effective players in development assistance and it is high time that we are recognized and regarded as an obvious partner in Swedish development assistance as well. Despite all the talk about the importance of the private sector, the consulting companies were not consulted when the development assistance policy platform was sent for consultation earlier this year. We exist and we want to contribute our experiences to results-oriented Swedish development assistance.[6]

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[6]https://fuf.se/en/magasin/vi-garanterar-resultat/

Somewhat symptomatically, however, the Swedish Consultants network was not long-lived either. But, as we will show below, the new set-up and stricter view of external experts also created new uncertainties that in turn called for new experts.

Generalists Are Not Enough

In our interviews with aid consultants over the past decade, we have found a mission drift in the sense that the typical aid bureaucrat today is expected to be more of a generalist and less of a specialist on specific thematic topics. One program officer interviewed expressed it as follows:

> I feel like I've become more and more of a generalist in my professional practice. Everyone should know everything. I'm getting bad at a lot of things. I'm maybe getting less good at what I'm actually best at, or where I have a lot of expertise.

Nevertheless, a general opinion among our interviewees is that additional, specific competence is still needed in the current era, at least to some degree, for proper decision-making. From the mid-2000s, after decreasing the number of thematic experts employed, Sida switched to procuring large framework agreements with external experts for different thematic topics. Today, at the time of writing, Sida uses nine such external "help desks," which cater to a range of specific topics.[7] The fact that there are nine help desks shows that the complexity of the task has increased, as well as that Sida still needs external support to reduce uncertainty in its decision-making. The help desks are typically procured to assist Sida in assessment and analysis of the different perspectives, and often act as go-betweens in instances where Sida bureaucrats are uncertain about whether a thematic topic has been sufficiently

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[7]The areas covered are: Gender Equality, Democracy, and Human Rights; Peace and Human Security; Environment and Climate Change; Education; Agriculture; Employment and Market Development; Anti-corruption; Anti-corruption/Democracy and Human Rights; and Health and Sexual and Reproductive Rights.

considered or not. And sure enough, the help desks have been heavily consulted, with the environment help desk, for example, having had between 150–200 assignments per year (SLU, 2022). However, the aid bureaucrats interviewed state that the help-desk support cannot quite match that of former times, when the bureaucrats were permitted to have a one-on-one working relationship with an expert and, when needed, procure particular external experts for a particular matter. As one Sida program officer recalled:

> When I started at Sida [in the 90s], I worked with the energy sector in India, and then I worked with the "super-duper-duper expert" in Sweden. He may not have known that much about foreign aid, but damn, he sure knew how to talk to the energy minister of India. Today we have our help desks, but I can't say that it's always the super-duper expert they send, it's not the same. Today, we don't have such a large focus on thematic issues, but rather we focus on procurement rules.

In one of our group interviews with five program officers, the officers told us that they have had to "invent new ways" of working with and around the new procurement rules. One of the informants told us that she typically contacts the external experts she needs for advice anyway (e.g., certain scientists at universities) but without being able to pay them for their services, which she finds problematic. Another informant told us that officers now need to learn how the system can "work for you":

> We've had framework agreements where we've been given the okay that we can handpick the consultants we want. We enter how many hours, then we agree on it and then we just send the contract to Niras and then they sign. So, it works... What this [shows] is kind of, how to make the system work for you. So it's like... you don't break any rules, but you tweak the rules so that they contribute to job satisfaction, motivation and good results.

Another general opinion among the aid bureaucrats interviewed about how the aid business works today is that things have become very rigid, and increasingly run by controllers. One of our informants noted the power shift toward controllers, saying that, today, Sida "sprinkles all units and embassies with controllers," at the same time as the thematic expertise has been "slimmed down." Expressions used by our middle-aged interviewees who started working with development aid in the 1990s, to describe Sida and the aid business at that time, include "daring," "open-minded," and "flexible," with a focus on recruiting "people with field and thematic competencies." One external expert said that "the 90s were gutsy, we had guts" and went on to talk about how today's organization does not dare to oppose rules. When analyzing this shift, we found that this implies that Sida's task today has increasingly become one of identifying, creating, and supporting legitimate "proper organizations" that can forward funding to final recipients in need. As an example of this allocation of responsibility, one program officer stated that:

> Before, we had much more focus on development...We worked collaboratively with institutions. We were part of a development process in these countries. (Today)... we're not in touch with the state in the same way. We used to have a dialogue with the state. And who do we have a dialogue with now? It's our partner organizations.

Thus, the main focus today, to be eligible for funding with taxpayers' money, is on making sure that recipient partners are proper organizations. Needless to say, this has created a new uncertainty about how to turn those partners into proper organizations and how to tell if they really are. In Chapters 2 and 5, we described the theoretical underpinnings for how trusted third-party organizations can be used in processes of *trust transference* when organizations in the donor role are to assess the trustworthiness of organizations in the recipient role with the aim of reducing relational uncertainties. Below, we develop this discussion further from the point of view of the external experts engaged in such assessments and some of the recipient organizations receiving the support. We also describe how

external experts are contracted to help organizations in the recipient role become "proper organizations."

The RBM Framework Contract: Legitimizing and Creating Proper Organizations

Starting in 2013, a novel way of using external experts has been Sida's framework agreement for RBM. The way the contract works is that Sida can suggest a consultant to be contracted to support organizations in the recipient role in the writing of better aid proposals and logical frameworks for their proposals and providing RBM training and support to recipients to become more results-oriented in general.[8] Similarly, as the help-desk contract, this support is aimed at organizations in the recipient role and Sida's implementing units. And the understanding among many of those involved is that this support is offered "for free" since the bills are paid by a central unit at Sida headquarters. The procedure is such that any Sida officer can request support for projects they are handling. In practice, this means that the Sida officer "offers" the organization in the recipient role RBM support or support from one of the help desks. The offer is often given in conjunction with an assessment of ongoing support or new support, when the organization in the recipient role needs to submit their results framework.

Our general perception is that the main underlying aim of consultancy support today is that it is a way for organizations in the donor role (in this case Sida) to reduce the relational uncertainty at hand. Services are "offered" to the recipient organization at times when the aid bureaucrat in charge feels uncertain about whether the potential recipient organization will deliver good results. As we described in more detail in Chapter 5, adopting generally legitimate structures and procedures can be viewed as POPs for good results.

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[8]The consulting company Niras (formerly InDevelop) has held the overall RBM framework agreement with Sida since 2011. In addition, a similar framework agreement with Sida's research unit for the years 2008–2016, the aim of which is to support the research unit and Sida's research partners with RBM implementation, was awarded to AIMS Consulting. Similar agreements exist for the nine help desks.

Once a potential aid recipient has received the trusted third-party services (i.e., the POPs) – the donor representative generally feels more certain and can proceed with funding decisions. For example, as one of our informants, an aid bureaucrat at Sida, told us, one way to ensure that he would feel certain "about the investments on this horse" (meaning a potential new recipient organization) was to make sure that the organization had received the RBM support contracted from the external experts. Two of the contracted RBM consulting companies – Associates for International Management Services (AIMS) and Niras – are described below, where we find that, although they both offer "RBM advice," their approaches differ. Hence, behind the single RBM label, there is still variation to be found.

The AIMS Approach to RBM Support

In previous literature on how and when measurements become counterproductive, it has often been pointed out that when management technologies, such as the logical framework approach, are required, this in turn creates demand for more measurements, which can become counterproductive (Eyben et al., 2016; Natsios, 2010). Because management consultants sell these management technologies (Abrahamson, 1996; Natsios, 2010; Røvik, 1996), they are also often blamed for causing overregulation.

One of the consultancy firms we have studied, AIMS, a firm that during the period 2008–2013 had over 100 assignments with Sida and its recipient organizations in research cooperation, clearly saw its role as one of supporting recipient organizations in how to use logical frameworks the rational, traditional way, with a hypothesis and measurable indicators throughout the project.[9] When interviewed, the principal consultant stated that it was important, "already during the planning stage of a research project, to have a hypothesis on impacts, or how the research results were going to solve problems in society" by, for example, "measuring citations of the research by others."

One of the organizations in the recipient role, the International Science Programme (ISP), recalls some serious questioning from

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[9]Information from AIMS website: http://www.intlmgt.com/projects

this time period of its way of reporting results, as well as a hostile attitude and rhetorically questioning by Sida about why it should have to support ISP at all. ISP thus found itself in a situation where it lacked funding to cover the coming month's salaries and was close to having to dismiss several staff members. A proposed "solution" from Sida to reduce this relational uncertainty was for ISP to implement RBM. The minutes from the meeting where the topic was raised stated that:

> Results-based management must be implemented in ISP's planning and reporting of activities financed by Sida. By extension, the RBM model is to be used in the activities ISP supports.
>
> <div align="right">(Sida, 2009, p. 2)</div>

Sida's research unit brought up the "offer" of ISP receiving support from the AIMS consultancy company. At first, however, ISP did little about the matter and did not contact AIMS since one of the ISP directors saw the offer as "typical mistrust of our work." Thus, at the next meeting, the "offer" became a formal "request" by Sida that ISP takes on support from AIMS. The minutes from that meeting stated that "ISP should, as soon as possible, arrange an RBM workshop with John Mathiason (Syracuse University, USA) as the leader" (Sida, 2009, p. 1). In this situation, ISP realized that it had no choice but to adapt to their funder's "request." Thus, with support from the AIMS consultancy firm, ISP introduced the logical framework approach and developed 32 key performance indicators (KPIs) to be used to follow up their projects. Although ISP had long had its own ways and technologies for tracking results (see Chapter 7), this example shows us that these were deemed too uncertain by the Sida program officer. Hence, for a decision to be made on continued support, ISP had to conform by adopting general RBM technologies, aided by external experts trusted by Sida. Despite all the talk about consultants being facilitators and ownership lying with the recipient organization, ISP's methods officer stated that the following occurred when the log frame and indicators were chosen:

> Yes, we had the goals, specific objectives, and then AIMS made a logframe with indicators that related to these three specific objectives. And then when it was in place, Sida selected the ten that they wanted us to work with right now.

The cited statement shows that AIMS had a very influential role in defining ISP's log frame and indicators. The Sida officer responsible trusted RBM and AIMS and, as some of this trust could be transferred to ISP, the perceived uncertainty of effect was reduced enough to enable further funding. ISP had now become a "proper organization" with trusted structures and processes.

Throughout the years, it seems as AIMS consultants became very influential in actually deciding who should receive financing from Sida. The main consultant of AIMS stated in an interview that:

> It is easy to show whether your research worked or not. So, if you are not able to specify how your research is supposed to be *used*, if you can't do that, you shouldn't get any money. At least not from Sida.

AIMS thus promoted a perspective that knowledge of how research results were going to be used should be a strict criterion for receiving funding from Sida; thus, we see a tendency toward consultocracy. In a later interview, the Sida's director for research aid during the years when AIMS was first contracted reflected on the use of these consultants: "Yes, we needed them, we needed them when it [the message from politicians] became so clear that we needed to show 'results' in aid." Further illustration of AIMS' influence on decision-making at Sida, over the years, can be seen in that AIMS was not only contracted by the organizations in the recipient role and Sida, the donor, but also to evaluate how RBM was implemented in the research aid supported by Sida (Mathiason et al., 2013).

Applying general management schemes may certainly increase trust and legitimacy, but, as discussed in Chapter 7, this is no guarantee that specific, local operations become more efficient, unless condition-specific adjustments are made along the way. And

when we look more closely at whether the AIMS approach did in fact support the delivery of actual results, we find that the AIMS consultants themselves continuously report back to Sida that they find "highly variable reporting on outcomes" from the organizations they have worked with. Based on this, AIMS continuously recommends to Sida that its officers should request improved results reporting from recipient organizations in particular "given formats" (AIMS, 2013, p. 64 ska heta Mathiason et al.). This further demonstrates that external expert organizations such as AIMS have been driving the proper organization agenda in relation to both the donor ("a proper donor should not provide funding to organizations who cannot specify x") and the recipient ("a proper recipient should be able to specify x…"). The contract with AIMS came to an end in 2016, when Sida decided there should be an agency-wide framework agreement for RBM. By that time, AIMS had, over a period of 8 years, supported over 50 research organizations in over 100 projects in more than 30 countries.[10]

The Niras Approach to RBM Support

As a comparison, the consulting firm Niras (then InDevelop), which was awarded the Sida framework contract for RBM in 2011, had from the agreement's inception a somewhat different approach to RBM (than AIMS). Niras' consultants clearly stated from the beginning that they did that not want to sell a standard RBM technology or approach, arguing that other consultancy companies sold "theory of change consultants" or "LFA consultants" or "harvesting consultants." One Niras consultant making the claim that:

> Yes, some work in such a way that they sell theory of change and that's basically what they do, and they have their modules and their approach and their method and that's it, it's all done. But, that's not how we do it. And – yes – it's a little harder to work the way we do. But it's maybe more like… indirectly it becomes our brand too, that we don't work like that.

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[10]http://www.intlmgt.com/projects

In our interviews with Niras consultants in 2022, they talked about their approach as the "Niras approach," implying that their role was one of "hand-holding" or a "lubricant" of sorts. Important features of the Niras approach to RBM are the views that learning is more important than accountability and that consultants should not provide ready-made packages or one method for all, but rather they should listen to the clients, always asking "What are your needs?," "What is the problem?" or "Is this really the problem?," and "What parts of this actually can or need to be measured?" Adjustments are thus allowed or even encouraged, and customers are free to whichever method they want. Hence, Niras consultants promote a softer approach to measurements, with "a couple of key indicators, so that one doesn't drown in the stream of information." In fact, one of the consultants stated that the expression of "obsessive measurement disorder" had come in handy for the firm since it described an extreme position – a position that Niras did not promote.

Another consultant interviewed noted that he always brought up the topic of OMD in RBM training courses to demonstrate an extreme that organizations should be careful to avoid. Thus, Niras consultants clearly see themselves as the drivers and fashion setters of an alternative approach to traditional RBM. However, similarly to AIMS, we find that Niras consultants have also had an influence on Sida's decision-making processes, not least through their views on "minimum requirements." As one of the consultants commented:

> We've talked a lot about us being a kind of mediator and intermediary, both when it comes to seeing what the organization is starting from and what Sida's minimum requirements are. The Ministry for Foreign Affairs has requirements and Sida has requirements, and most organizations just want to do things right because they want money, and that's completely understandable. Even there, we might come in and say stop, and verify, Sida doesn't want you to use the Sida system like that, Sida wants you to use the system you're using and follow-up the minimum requirements.

Here, we see a clear difference between the ideals and practices of the AIMS approach and the Niras approach to RBM. However, despite their belief in the softer, more flexible approach, Niras' consultants told us that they often struggle to apply it fully, and that the alternative approach seems at times to generate more uncertainty than certainty. From time to time, it also happens that someone else, often an evaluator, suggests that it is the adjusted result matrix that is the problem. As one of the Niras consultants stated:

> Nowadays [when this happens], we always try to ask "Is this *really* the problem?" However, almost always it's simply stated that the problem *is* the result matrix itself or the theory of change itself… it's always like this.

In sum, despite the two consultancy companies having taken somewhat different approaches (with AIMS clearly wanting to sell a standard technology and Niras' alternative approach of trying not to sell a particular technology or method but a customized solution instead), in their respective ways, both companies have come to serve organizations in both the donor role and the recipient role, and both companies have been influential in shaping the notion of POPs, i.e., in the form of aid organizations using RBM criteria to reduce the uncertainty in their decision-making and obtain aid financing. AIMS followed a common approach discussed in previous literature on management – it sold a management technology, in this case the logical framework and certain KPIs. In doing so, the AIMS approach encouraged increasing the number of measurements requested from the recipients. The Niras approach, on the other hand, was clearly and explicitly an "anti-OMD approach." The company promoted fewer indicators, not using a specific measurement scheme, keeping the real problem in focus, always adjusting to the reality on the ground, etc. It is worth noting, however, that both companies faced difficulties in getting their approaches through. For example, in an evaluation conducted by AIMS itself, it was argued that Sida officers did not request reporting of results and appropriate measurements to a

sufficient extent, and that a results culture had therefore not materialized according to plan.

The Niras consultants similarly argued that their alternative approach did not bear out in the organizational culture since there were so many other experts (such as controllers and other external experts, for example, at the help desks) who promoted a pro-measurement culture. As discussed in the beginning of this chapter, an aid bureaucrat coordinating a decision-making process must manage multiple issues that must be backed by a "web of bureaucrats": internal advisors must provide "no objections," external advice on different perspectives must be taken into account, etc.

Although all of the bureaucrats in this web may be tasked with supporting the same project, they seldom meet and learn about the advice provided by the other bureaucrats. As an example, one of the help-desk officers interviewed talked about the difficulty of only being a part of the process "from the sidelines," and not knowing if, why, or how your input is used. That is, consulted experts seldom see the whole picture. Although many different external experts are involved in the same process, they seldom work together.

The challenge of coordinating input from so many different competencies was also brought up in a recent evaluation skill sets of Sida's environment help desk (Niras, 2021), where it was stated that, because most assignments are short term, there is a lack of long-term engagement in processes as well as a lack of information and communication among parties involved in the same process. Thus, it is often the case that the different advisers in the web give different advice. This is something that can lead to uncertainty and increased measurements. One of the Niras RBM consultants exemplified this tendency citing the power of controllers:

> If you're talking about a counterforce (to an alternative approach to RBM), controllers are a strong counterforce that blocks the way. It's an internal counterforce in all the organizations we work with, in both Sida and partner organizations, and even if... if the contact person that Sida has at the organization says that "It's okay to do this," they've got a controller in their organization who says "Hold on. You have to report this, and this, and this

> is important." And then we end up with this
> quantification, not only of activities and output, but in
> general some kind of conclusion is drawn from it.

The consultants interviewed claimed that, in the end, this led to a fear or anxiety of wrongdoing, and that, in itself, this fear then became a factor that drove increased measurements, a force they had difficulty managing. One consultant even argued that this fear had led to risk matrices becoming more important than results matrices in the aid organizations. What this shows is that, despite having access to a balanced set of advice from a range of experts, the multitude of advice often creates not less but *more* uncertainty for the aid bureaucrats involved.

Summing Up 70 Years of External Expertise

In this chapter, we have shown that a mission drift has occurred in Swedish development aid as concerns both the in-house expert role of aid bureaucrats and the role of outside experts procured from the consulting market. We have described a gradual shift from an era in which aid bureaucrats were to contract an external expert to fix the poverty problem (the Quick-fix Implementer Era), to an era where the problem was perceived as much more complex and required close relationships and joint participatory approaches (the Collaborative Turn Era), to an era where the role of aid bureaucrats is reduced to that of a catalyst whose main responsibility is to justify that aid money goes to the right partners and ensure that aid recipients have "proper" systems to deal with aid funds (the POP era). The role of external experts has thus also undergone a change – from perceiving their outside expertise as the solution to problems to seeing these experts as facilitators and, today, to perceiving them as the legitimizers of proper donor and recipient behavior. Table 1 summarizes the mission drift that has taken place in the field of aid during the three different eras.

The analysis in this chapter departs from an interest in the role of experts, and in particular external expertise, as a means to reduce uncertainties of development aid operations. Over the years, the idealized expert role has changed, and today, external experts mainly act in the role of standard setters – often hired to legitimize

Table 1. Three Eras of External Expertise in Development Aid.

	Quick-Fix Implementer Era 1960s–1990s	**Collaborative Turn Era 1990s−2005**	**Proper Organization Proxy Era 2005–2020s**
Role of Sida and its aid bureaucrats	Expert agency – contractor of agents who would solve development aid problems	Expert agency – knowledge leader in Swedish society	Administrative agency – main task to finance and control aid funds. Catalyst.
Dominating competencies and values at Sida	Implementation expertise. "Solving the problems" Development country-focused organization.	Thematic expertise – program officers. Participatory approaches. *What* values "Doing the right things" Horizontal organization.	Management/ generalist expertise. *How* values "Doing things right" Controllers, lawyers. Hierarchical organization.
Role, use, and critique of external experts	Implementers of projects. Criticized for consultocracy in project decisions.	Facilitators of processes. Close consultants. Criticized for not doing things right and for consultocracy in administrative decisions.	Increase in management experts. Trust transfers to legitimize "proper organizations." Criticized for not seeing the bigger picture and for consultocracy in project decisions.
Swedish consultancy market	Many smaller Swedish consulting companies	Larger Swedish consulting companies	Mainly large international consulting companies

a particular process or entire organization as "proper" enough. In its donor role, Sida has, for example, made substantial efforts to hire third parties to support organizations in the recipient role in becoming more results-oriented.

As a contribution to the literature – and the current discussion on consultocracy – we have found that during all the three eras (1960s–2020s), external experts have had an influential role in decision-making. The influential role they have played has also been criticized over the years, which has in turn led to new forms of contracting. However, we note that, at the time of writing in 2023, the harsh critique of external experts being too close to decision-makers is no longer as pronounced. The contracting procedures and framework agreements of the current era seem to grant selected experts legitimacy to be seen as tamed enough to work closely with decision-makers. Unsurprisingly, throughout development aid's modern history, external experts have adjusted to selling what it is possible to sell, in line with shifting expectations. And all throughout, they have served an important function – that of making organizations in the donor role less uncertain of their decisions on which recipients should receive funding. Interestingly, however, the use of external experts has at the same time given rise to more uncertainty, which, in turn, has called for more experts.

Chapter 7

Multivocal Brokering: Translating and Decoupling for Results

Development aid work is not a classic profession as such. Despite this, for many people across the globe, the aid field is their professional arena. In this chapter, we take a closer look at some of the key competencies of professional aid bureaucrats and discuss how these competencies may help to explain whether obsessive measurement disorder (OMD) occurs or not. Our primary concern here is to examine the relatively under-researched contribution made by aid bureaucrats when they broker policies, relationships, and aid projects into tangible and meaningful actions and valuable results (see Eyben, 2012; Gulrajani, 2015; Lewis & Mosse, 2006).

As noted by Boellstorff (2003), the "broker" is a fruitful methodological entry-point for researchers concerned with translation, as an approach to understanding relationships between and within larger systems (such as that of the aid network and its wider institutional environment). In development aid literature, the term "broker" was first used by Bierschenk et al. (2002) who analyzed how a group of actors mediated between "donors" and potential "beneficiaries" in the acquisition of development funds, and how these brokers took an active role in supporting the local beneficiaries to express their needs to the structures in charge of aid to obtain financing. Bierschenk (2021, p. 420):

> Development brokers thus act at the interface of institutions, policies and projects of development cooperation, on the one hand, and the people "targeted" by them, on the other. Towards the former, they present themselves as spokespersons representing the local population and formulating their "needs". They know which funding lines exist and how they can be rhetorically harmonised with these local needs. In contrast, vis-à-vis the local arenas, they position themselves as actors who have the relevant capital (knowledge, language, contacts) to mobilize development aid.

In previous aid literature, the broker concept has primarily been used to analyze how nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) mediate between donors and local populations (Knodel, 2021; Lewis & Mosse, 2006). It has also been used to analyze how aid bureaucrats in organizations in their donor role are trained into the role of broker (Eyben, 2012; Gulrajani, 2015). When applied to a person, the term "broker," as used by Bierschenk et al. (2002) and many others, generally suggests an independent party who acts in between two or more actors. However, following our reasoning on plural actors who switch social roles and our critique of how the concept of intermediaries is used (Chapter 3), we use the term here to describe a social role that, depending on the situation, can be played by aid bureaucrats employed by both aid organizations and externally sourced consultants (see also Bräuchler et al., 2021).

Multivocality: A Key to Successful Brokering

Based on our findings, we suggest that brokering often functions as a highly valuable buffer that can counteract tendencies toward OMD. This effect is seen when the broker has the ability to shape legitimate results that make good sense to those at a distance, while at the same time honoring and protecting efficient local aid practices. We suggest that a key competence in this regard is *multivocality*. Aid organizations represent what Jancsary et al. (2017, p. 1162) describe as multivocal actors that are "positioned at the interface of two or more logics [. . .] in the sense that their evocation

offers the opportunity to leave open which logic is initiated." This multivocal position, Jancsary et al. argue, can allow organizations and their employees more leeway to select elements from different institutional logics, rather than conforming blindly to just one logic. However, as seen below, it takes experience and training of aid bureaucrats in order to foster this competence that can help to realize this valuable opportunity.

For an aid bureaucrat in a brokering role, multivocality can refer to her/his ability both to understand and to skillfully use several "languages of aid." Examples of such languages are the "bureaucratic language of aid," the "market language of aid," and the "local languages of aid" used in different societal spheres, organizational forms, and local field contexts. Included in multivocal competence is also the professional judgment to know what language to use *when* and how to *translate* back and forth between the different languages to obtain good results that make sense to as many of the stakeholders involved as possible, for example, the know-how to communicate a local result to a distant decision-maker who lacks deeper knowledge and understanding of the particular project context and its conditions, but who is "fluent" in the bureaucratic language of performance measurement and control requirements.

As an example, one of the aid bureaucrats working with results reporting for an organization in the recipient role told us that there is often a need to "go back and forth, trying to explain things to partners about changes in requirements or concepts," thus that there is a high need to translate "in between" the formal reporting requirements and what the report *ought* to say if it were to do justice to the local practices. Similarly, when describing her work at a Swedish union in the donor role, another aid bureaucrat told us about the clashes that occur when the local organizations the union funds have to hand in their results reports and how she tries to broker the process to make the best of this situation:

> The first thing I check (in the annual reports) is – does this match the application? If not, why? And then I also check and find that now they've forgotten this matter they talked about at the meeting. They forgot to say that they had received 25% salary increases, or

> whatever it might be. Or, they got this breastfeeding agreement, that they're allowed to breastfeed during work hours in agriculture, for example. And the bit about the preschools that they've created, they've forgotten that too. Because most of the time they take some things for granted, and then they forget... Because we mustn't forget either, that the people I work with aren't usually project experts, but they're trade union people.... So they're not report writers either, but they are experts on union activities, so these values can ... well, the academic world and this other world can collide.

The quote illustrates feelings of frustration and confusion that are common and can derive from value conflicts embedded in requirements of what to write in a proper results report and the perceived gap and lack of justice these requirements represent for the local culture and project implementation conditions. Our union informant tells us that the local project staff often view the reporting of results as a difficult or even "incomprehensible" task since they typically don't fully understand why activities cannot just be described in a narrative that is easy for the locals to understand.

Our informant also tells us that a good way to learn about these local conditions and understandings is to try to be quiet at meetings and really listen to "ordinary talk," and in particular to listen to how the local experts talk about what they have done in the project. It is during such occasions that she often identifies unreported and unexpected positive results that she then "turns into a format that fits the reports, so that everything ends up in the right columns." In other words, our informant uses her multivocal competence to make sure that the project staff is supported and encouraged for their achievements, and that these achievements get credit, also at a distance.

Along similar lines, another informant, an external expert in results-based management (RBM), explained that local representatives can become "paralyzed" when confronted with the expected "boxing and packaging" of results:

> Sometimes I use it as an icebreaker, if we come to an organization that has a hard time with the terminology, with the RBM method itself. It's like: […] "Do you have some kind of goal that you're striving for? Do you somehow follow up that you're doing the right things? And do you allow yourself to make adjustments as you go?" Yes, then everyone does do these things and [they say] "yes, but that's what we do all the time." [And I say] "Good, then that means you're result-oriented!" [And they go] "Oh, we are?" But then the paralysis hits… later, right when they have to […] start boxing and packaging it… on a lot of different levels… [and they complain] "Oh, but now the indicator is formulated exactly the same as my activity or my output!" and everything just becomes one big mess.

Our informant explained that "through a lot of dialogue," he tries to come closer to what he calls "the practical reality" of the aid organization he supports. And to give its representatives the courage to stand up for the particularities of their project context and to motivate relevant exceptions:

> If they just have the courage to motivate why the matrix doesn't have that many indicators, most of the time it'll be just fine. But often this requires that I *give* them that courage.

In this vein, we have also found that the multivocal brokering of results requirements can, with time, make actors who start off being negative to requirements, change these opinions. One example is the International Science Program (ISP) organization, whose representatives were opposed to the requirements and criticized the Logical Framework Approach (LFA) and key performance indicators (KPIs) when they were first introduced to their reporting routines. However, over time, and with the support of local coordinators, brokering and trying to adjust reporting practices to the local needs, ISP gradually came to accept the technologies and, when we interviewed representatives from the organization,

claimed at least that they now found the reporting useful and valuable. When asked about his experience of the added monthly KPI reporting requirements, a PhD student from ISP's group of ultimate beneficiaries similarly stated that they had been valuable:

> I should say that when it was introduced I was like "Oh, why the hell are we doing this?" So I felt so bad initially, but trust me, now, I'm loving it. Yes, it's giving me a push. It's ... I'm like "Wow!" After four weeks I have to report. And ... whenever I'm submitting the report I also have to present. And in my presentation I have to show something new, what I've been doing the previous four weeks (...). Otherwise there's nothing pushing you. Sometimes as a human, you may fail to come up with a result in a month, which isn't good. Yeah, but it's nice. I think it's a nice innovation and we should continue reporting monthly.

Since PhD students often conduct much of their work alone, the new reporting system offered a chance to receive external attention, and since the reporting process also included an oral presentation with feedback from peers, it increased the motivation and trust to continue the work. All of this was thanks to brokering having taken place and adjustments having been made to fit the needs of the recipients.

Translation Takes Time

In line with Bierschenk et al. (2002), we have found that it takes a lot of time to acquire brokering competence, that it is learned through continuous networking and personal relations, and that it typically also requires a lot of travel. A project coordinator for the Swedish chemical agency (KEMI) in Malaysia told us about the importance of personal relations, and that aid bureaucrats do field visits to get to know the specific local context:

> I think by reporting, you get a better understanding of what is happening, thus reports are definitely a

> learning experience because you get a better narrative
> of what is happening. But for us, reporting is naturally
> important, but what's *more* important are the visits,
> like to be there physically. Reports are secondary.

Similarly, the aid bureaucrat from Kommunal (the Swedish municipal workers' union responsible at the time for supporting 13 Union to Union-funded development projects in Africa) told us that she averaged about 115 travel days a year. She also told us that it had taken her a year to familiarize herself with the job, guided by her predecessor who had long been a well-liked and trusted partner for the local organizations. During her year-long introduction to the job, our interviewee learned the "results languages" used by both the local populations and the organization in the donor role. In order to sustain the trusting relationship embodied by her colleague (who was about to retire), they both thought it was important "to be there" during all phases of the project work: during the planning phase, when the organization submitted its results report, and when the project was evaluated. And, essentially, to continuously maintain "face-to-face and hand-shaking contact" with the implementers as well as with key individuals in the project networks.

External consultants whom we have interviewed also say that their influential position of power derives in part from actually having time to meet and to get to know and learn from the recipients:

> Often, I think that Sida managers [...] have quite a few
> projects in their portfolio, so even if you're in charge of
> a project, you don't have time to familiarize yourself
> with and to meet these people very often.

For many aid bureaucrats, time is indeed precious. In a survey responded to by 131 decision-makers in development policy, lack of time was the main reason why they did not engage more with the research community nor base their decisions on previous research, where 72% responded that they did not have the time to engage with research in their work (Ioannou & Vähämäki, 2020). One of the aid bureaucrats at Sida elaborated on this theme:

What we're seeing is that we have less and less time to engage in dialogues with our partners. That's the challenge I would say. Dialogue is *more* needed in complex contexts. When I left SAREC, there were 45 of us. Now I have a total, I think, if I include two in Africa and those located out at the embassies, I think we are 23 or 24 people. With the same size budget. And what I hear from our partners is: "You used to be so much more involved. We could discuss issues." And in some operations we can still be more involved than in others. And that makes a huge difference. Because when we have this dialogue... we have a lot of experience and have seen how things work in different contexts [...] But there is less and less time for that, even though we try to simplify the preparation phase to have more time for follow-up.

Unfortunately, in our empirical material, we have seen quite a bit of the negative impact of staff not having enough time to foster their multivocal brokering competence. A Sida official responsible for results management practices at the agency noted that, sadly, she didn't know what to say when some of the less experienced staff members expressed uncertainty considering whether they should spend time on building relations with recipients since they had found that "there is no box for that in the system." As commonly referred to downside to measurements, this is nothing new. As the saying (often attributed to management theorist Peter Drucker) goes: what gets measured gets managed.[1]

Whereas we concluded above that dialogue and networking are important aspects of brokering, a lack of dialogue can certainly increase misunderstandings. An officer in charge of a development project at the KEMI described an example where casual discussions about the project during a field trip finally helped him to understand what the project was really about:

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[1]This however, being a challenged "truth" in recent years. See for instance, https://medium.com/centre-for-public-impact/what-gets-measured-gets-managed-its-wrong-and-drucker-never-said-it-fe95886d3df6

> I've been involved in situations where you're maybe on a field trip with someone, this was when I was stationed in Asia, and they'd start telling you about something that had happened in the project, which was very exciting. I don't remember the example now. [And I'd say] "But you haven't reported this." [And they'd say] "No, but we didn't know you wanted us to." And that's exactly what we do want. *That* was the impact! That's when it hit home, that we weren't really making ourselves understood.

As the officer explained to us, the reason why the exciting impact had not been reported was that the framework for reporting the project's results was too narrow. Having allowed the narrow formal results-reporting framework to guide previous communications, the donor representatives had not asked the project staff to report on major issues such as positive changes to environmental legislation that the project had contributed to. This is an example of a situation where there had not been enough dialogue in-between organizations, a situation where counterproductive measurements could easily have increased.

We thus note that a general finding of our studies is that our interviewees all report that the closer they get to the field reality, the more they value and experience a need for physical meetings, in order to create and share a joint understanding of the project's reality and to sustain trusting, long-term relations.

Pragmatic Responses Enabled by Multivocal Brokering

In the following, we describe two pragmatic responses to complexity (Alexius, 2021) that we identified as particularly important when aid bureaucrats engage in multivocal brokering to handle potentially conflicting values and requirements: the pragmatic responses of translation and decoupling.

Translation

As used here, translation refers to the process where aid organizations and their aid bureaucrats neither merely "adopt"

requirements and results, nor "passively pass them on" to the next organization in the aid network but rather adjust or "edit" the requirements and communication for a better "fit" with particular situations and local conditions. In their study of how ideas "travel," Czarniawska and Sevón (1996) formulated an influential theory on "translation of organizational change" and demonstrated that organizations do not blindly follow just any rule or requirement from their institutional environment but rather respond to the rule or requirement actively by "translating" and "editing" them to fit the interests, culture, and conditions of the organization (Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996).

As demonstrated by Erlingsdóttir (1999), the form an idea takes or how it is "packaged" also matters to its chances to travel. If an idea is packaged as a rule, i.e., a written instruction for action with a known sender, it is easier to copy, which may increase its chances of traveling fast and intact over vast distances (see also Brunsson & Jacobsson, 2000). There is, however, no guarantee that rule-following will occur as intended by the rule-setters since the rule-followers then also have the opportunity to translate and edit rules intended for them.

In line with our discussion in Chapter 3, an important part of successful brokering is the ability to change roles, to go from one logic and situation to another, and to play the game according to a variety of rules. In the translation process, aid bureaucrats can find opportunities that support the combining and aligning of different values or compensating or adjusting for values that they fear might otherwise be "lost in translation." Bierschenk et al. (2002) argues along similar lines that a key to brokering is in-depth knowledge of the actors of the different "universa" in the aid system. This in-depth knowledge is typical of persons who have, over time, earned a "double membership" (feeling and acting at home in multiple roles and at multiple sites).[2]

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[2]Bierschenk et al. (2002) studied "development brokers" – i.e., persons who broker in-between organizations in the donor and recipient roles in development aid. Although these development brokers were external (similar to the external experts discussed in Chapter 6 of this volume), we find his findings on key skills similar to those identified in our data.

One example of "double membership" is having knowledge or previous personal experience of another institutional domain. This type of knowledge should, at least logically, have become increasingly important in the field of development aid since contemporary aid policies commonly state that aid projects are to be solved in multistakeholder settings calling for the inclusion of the private sector, public sector agencies, the research community, and civil society. One of our interviewees, who at the time of the interview worked as an aid bureaucrat at Sida but who had previously worked in the private sector, claimed that it would not have been possible for her to set up a multistakeholder project without her previous experience of how the private sector operates:

> I don't think it would have been possible for me if I hadn't had this . . . experience there in between the [agency] experiences. I wouldn't have been able to understand it in-depth, I wouldn't have been able to do it without that experience. I don't think so. [I mean] understand how the business world thinks and how we think about them.

Our interviewee from the Kommunal union also spoke about the importance of balancing her presence in- and representation of the "project world" and the "donor world," in order to do a good job:

> . . . I also feel that I had so much [experience] . . . that it was really valuable to have been a union chair before, because in that role I was constantly defending myself from influences. That is, defending [against them] *and* yielding [to them]. After all, you have to let yourself be influenced too. But I know that people try to fool me and manipulate me to get me in the direction they want. I'm a power factor in that role, so I've learned pretty well how to filter it and get to know what people want, and what the purpose is, and where things are headed. And I use that a lot in my role [. . .] For instance, local union reps in particular can say straight out: "But we need a car, S. Can't you get us one?" [And I just say] "No, I can't do that. But we can

> work more with the women's committees that you have."

The citation exemplifies that brokering requires a lot of experience and an awareness of what one can or can't do in a particular role and context. We find that it is often the experienced aid bureaucrats who possess this competence to "navigate by judgment" (Honig, 2018), charting a path between formal and informal ways of coordinating aid projects. Along similar lines, an aid bureaucrat at Sida told us that time spent on getting to know the local context is a definite success factor for projects:

> I spent so much time on just getting them to understand one another. That is, because the more I know, the more I want it to work. So I kind of... [in those situations] I'm not acting like a traditional client, placing an order. And I think it's a really great principle [to be able to depart from the traditional role at times]. But it takes a lot of time, and a lot of engagement. If I hadn't cared about it, it wouldn't have worked out.

Thus, becoming an efficient broker-translator requires time, willingness, courage, and engagement to learn about the others and the particular contexts at hand.

Decoupling

The second pragmatic response of decoupling refers to the practice of *superficially* abiding by requirements, for example, by adopting new legitimizing structures or administrative processes (see Chapter 5), *without* necessarily implementing them in local practice as intended at the central level (Boxenbaum & Jonsson 2008; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). As discussed in the historic account in Chapter 4, Sida aid officials have often agreed to general results initiatives and management technologies in vogue at the time, without always applying them in practice.

Decoupling has been explained as a common way for organizations with complex missions to secure legitimacy from their social

environment by adopting widely acclaimed structures and processes as "myths and ceremonies" in the organization (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). And when there is no fit between these general structures and processes and the local conditions for efficient operations, a pragmatic solution is for organizations to "decouple" their legitimate façade from the local particularities of their inner order (see also Oliver, 1991). In this way, organizations can secure both legitimacy at a distance and operational efficiency, while protecting efficient local variation (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Bierschenk et al. (2002) refers to this approach as "scenographic competence" and discusses how every aid project needs a "show window" likely to "entice the potential donor, and to delight the evaluation experts" (p. 22).

In our data, we have found several examples where new results requirements have been completely decoupled from operations. One such example concerns a project implemented by KEMI and the United Nation's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). The project in question received the evaluation critique that it was reporting on too many achievements but not in relation to the logical framework presented in the initial project document, which the evaluators saw as a key criterion for understanding the results of the project. Responding to this critique, the organization in the recipient role chose to revise the targets. But when asked whether the revised targets had actually changed anything in the actual work "on the ground," the respondent confessed that it had not:

> No, not really, because I think we actually ... The design of the project itself was adequate and good enough to be able to contribute to the sort of outcomes that we intended to work towards anyway, so ...

This type of decoupling, obeying the rules and requirements of reporting superficially, without changing anything in actual practice, is a pragmatic response that we have noted in several cases. In an anecdote about the Swedish Association for Sexual Education's (RFSU's) role as a donor to local African associations, the goal was that these local associations, in the spirit of RFSU, would work toward a more open and well-informed approach to sex. It soon became apparent that the local association needed financial

contributions from many different sources to keep its activities afloat, including from local religious organizations. Although these local funders shared RFSU's desire to reduce the number of unwanted pregnancies and unsafe abortions, the local religious associations had a completely different idea of *how* this should be achieved. So, when RFSU's controller came to visit to evaluate the project, she was greeted by a large poster with the text: "Abstinence!" According to the anecdote, the experienced controller visiting from RFSU nodded discreetly toward the poster and asked for directions to the ladies' room. When she returned, the right poster was in place, the one with RFSU's message: "Always use a condom!" The controller explained that:

> [As a donor], you have to understand that if an organization [in the recipient role] somewhere in Africa gets grants from us at RFSU, they maybe get grants from some local church as well. Yeah, they get grants from different places. So, when RFSU comes, the signs that promote condom use go up. And when the local priest comes around, it's abstinence that's up on the wall. But if they're unlucky, they haven't had time to take down the first poster when the other donor comes to visit. Quite a dilemma!

The RFSU story is a rather amusing one but also illustrates something important: decoupling may even be a prerequisite for survival. As the case also shows, a qualitative evaluation of goal achievements needs to take local conditions into account. And in order for this to happen, an understanding of those conditions is a prerequisite. Respect and trust in the relationship between rule-setter and rule-followers is vital, and representatives in the donor role who only consider their *own* formal requirements can raise the risk of suboptimization.

The RFSU example further indicates that attitudes toward management by objectives and results can be expected to be influenced by the bureaucrat's own social role (see also Chapter 3). When playing the part of donor (goal-setter and result-evaluator), it is easy to wish for more detailed follow-up reports and to think that that is what promotes quality and learning. When, on the other

hand, an aid bureaucrat finds her/himself in the recipient role (being targeted and evaluated), one is more likely to find governance unnecessarily detailed and controlling, and perhaps even see it as an expression of distrust.

However, important to our purposes here is the fact that a person who has been in *both* roles and places and understands the system as a whole, like the controller from RFSU, has a better chance of acting more pragmatically as a broker and laying the groundwork for an honest broker dialogue about opportunities to balance formal requirements with characteristics and conditions of the local practice. For example, in our interviews with managers and controllers at RFSU, several people in both of these positions used the metaphor of a "fruit salad" when talking about the relation between their operations and their pragmatic approach to results reporting. As one of the managers explained:

> We try to keep up the good, long-term operations that we believe in. If we liken these operations to a fruit salad, it's then often the case that donor A wishes to know all about the bananas, only the bananas, while donor B may think that kiwis and oranges are important. So, we're pragmatic and adjust our reporting according to their interests, though we try as far as possible to keep the same fruit salad, so to speak.

And not only persons in the donor and recipient roles take on brokering. Several of the RBM consultants hired by Sida that we interviewed similarly also explained how important they thought it was, and has been over the years, to strengthen aid organizations' understanding of what is at stake if they merely "blindly obey" and don't speak out against "stupid rules that don't fit." In one of our earlier interviews from 2013, one of these consultants explains how a lack of multivocal competence, further worsened by Sida bureaucrats' own wish to obediently comply with in their recipient role (in relation to the Ministry for Foreign Affairs), puts pressure on the whole system to conform:

> My impression is that it has often taken several back-and-forths, since there is often a language barrier

between the Sida program officer and the so-called "implementer", which is often a Swedish organization but can also be an international one. They simply don't speak the same language and don't understand each other. And then, we step in as translators essentially, and then you have to sit down [and talk about it]. The Sida program officer could maybe do this, but they don't have that time. So then we [the consultants] have to sit down and talk about that this is what they [Sida] really mean, it's not as complicated as [the recipient representatives] seem to think when they receive the matrix [. . .] As a whole, it feels like Sida has received a mandate from the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and that the Ministry for Foreign Affairs drives the results agenda and Sida falls in line and tries to come up with something that they push out to their program officers, who then push it out to the partner organizations. But the partner organizations may have a different methodology and different ideas, and there we see a tension, and this is where we [consultants] try to figure out a way. . . like we end up with this smash-up and we try to find practical ways to untangle it.

The external consultants also told us a lot about the dilemma they experience when they are contracted to validate Sida's requirements but have gained enough local knowledge to realize that these requirements both can and should be adjusted to the local conditions. In one interview, we discussed when and how measurements become counterproductive, and one RBM consultant told us that, contrary to intuition, increased measurement frenzies often come from organizations in the recipient role, rather than from organizations in the donor role:

Often it's the partners who want more measurements. . . or are more inflexible and think they have to do it in a certain way. And that's where we come in and explain: "No, but you don't have to, it's changed [the rules], *these* are the things you need to look at." I think that's more

common. They *think* that Sida is a certain way when they're not...

It could also be the case that the demand for more measurements (than are actually necessary) stems from a lack of knowledge or interest in measurement techniques and a belief that it is simply easier to "do the right thing" and to follow the social scripts for "how you do aid" – to cover all bases by wearing both suspenders and a belt (see Chapters 3–5):

> I would say that there are very few who do it because they *believe* in measurements. I would say that *no one* really does. It's more that people believe that this is how you do aid. You *need* a matrix and you have to follow up. [...] So quite a few times, I've heard the partner organization we're working with say: "We *have* to do this, that's what Sida says." And then I say: "No, you don't have to." And then I get: "Yes, that's what they say." And then they refer to a program officer and say: "Yes, it *has* to be done." And then what happens is I've had to participate in an annual meeting or in a dialogue meeting or something, and then I'm contracted to help out and become sort of a Dr. Phil between the two, and explain who is who and which rules apply.

This citation shows that partners often end up guessing what Sida representatives really require, often due to a lack of direct dialogue with them. In an attempt to somehow compensate for this deficiency, external consultants are called in to broker the relationship. The external expert quoted above is clearly very confident in his knowledge of the rules and regulations and of how they should be interpreted locally, at the partner organization. But external consultants in a brokering position like this can also create a dilemma, in that the consultants need to use their judgment, courage and relational capital (Bierschenk et al., 2002) to avoid creating distrust or disappointment in any of the parties. As one consultant explains:

> Even if Sida is footing the bill, our primary task is to support the partner. But Sida is often inquisitive, which can sometimes lead to a dilemma. This happened to me the other day. You have a certain trust relation with the partner organization to be able to do your job properly. They need to be able to trust that we won't run to Sida and tattle on them. [...] But we can also understand that Sida shows an interest, and rightly so, after all they're the ones who are paying.

The consultants also discussed the need to stay true to their values and their belief in the need for implementing rules in a flexible manner and making adjustments for local needs and conditions. One consultant commented that trying to manage, communicate, and sustain in relation to the "main client," Sida, was indeed an art since such a flexible approach cannot be packaged neatly:

> As soon as we start to get too packaged or say "this is the method we prefer," then it's no longer good. [...] I don't want to find our model tucked away in some drawer four years from now. You don't want to find a damn model. It should... you want to see that something *happened* [on the ground] ... call it what you want. And that actually takes courage, I think, to *not* just spout methods jargon, but to ask questions like: "Are we doing the right things?" It *can* be just that simple.

Decisions to increase reporting requirements are often made on an individual basis by an aid bureaucrat at the organization in the donor role. This means that there can be a decoupling also internally at the donor organization, due to the fact that the decision-making capacity is delegated to the different positions and hierarchical levels. This can go either way. If the donor organization takes a central decision to strengthen its approach to control and measurement vis-à-vis recipients, individual aid bureaucrats in the donor organization may decouple to allow for a more flexible approach. However, it can also be the case where a central decision

taken in the donor organization to ease the requirements is not followed as intended by the organization's own bureaucrats who want a stricter approach. One study on partners' experiences of their interaction with Sida stated that central decisions on increased flexibility around requirements had "not been a blessing for all partner organizations" (Gouzou et al., 2018). That study described how the lack of clarity often created confusion and more work for the partners. Several of our respondents talked about their experiences of such unclarity or confusion about whether Sida – as represented by one's particular program officer – would require a certain results technology or not. To add further nuance, one of our respondents observed that the frequent staff changes seemed to coincide with an increase rather than a decrease in measurement requirements (despite formal central decisions to the contrary):

> This may have to do with the fact that when you don't have clear directives on what the expectations for follow-up are, it all depends on the individual program officer handling your project. And that officer is often replaced over the implementation period. I've also experienced that – where Sida-funded projects have started out with one set of requirements and then at the end these have changed. Sometimes they've become less strict and more flexible, but other times they've become more complex and difficult, with higher requirements. And this is a difficult situation for the implementing organization too.

This respondent also reasoned that someone new on the job, who lacked brokering competency and was hence unsure about how much leeway there was for interpreting a central policy, may prefer to take a stricter line, following the reasoning of "better safe than sorry." In such cases, measurements can increase.

When it comes to decoupling, as discussed in Chapter 5, it is also important to note that, since external evaluators often relate to "proper organization proxies" such as the logical framework and RBM practices, organizations in the recipient role often simply need to adapt to these practices, at least "in principle" and "on the surface." This institutional pressure has forced many organizations

to employ cadres of staff whose only task is to get reporting and procedures right to meet the required "proper organization" standard. Some decades ago, the professional label of "monitoring evaluation and learning" (MEL) officer did not even exist. Today, hardly any aid organization can operate without one.

Spiders in the Aid Web

In this chapter, we discussed how uncertainties and value conflicts in the aid system are handled by way of brokering, i.e., in the form of either translating or decoupling of different sites and logics, and the respective performance measurement and control requirements they place on aid. Brokers can handle conflicting reporting requirements and understand the logics of different institutional and organizational settings. Brokering skills are often acquired over a long period of time after spending time in various contexts, practicing one's listening skills and building and sustaining relational capital. We also discussed how such brokering competence is found among experienced aid bureaucrats employed by organizations in the donor and recipient role but also among external senior consultants.

Our findings indicate that brokering is important, not only to safeguard and communicate results from the bottom-up but also to counteract tendencies toward overregulation and OMD. In this sense, no matter where they are situated, individuals with this precious brokering know-how could be likened to "spiders in the aid web" constantly spinning and tirelessly weaving their threads of communication to bridge the gaps and enable results to be captured and stick.

Chapter 8

Pragmatic Bureaucracy: An Antidote to Obsessive Measurement Disorder?

The need to cope with complexity and uncertainty when tackling "wicked problems" such as poverty, inequality, disease, and climate change remains as vital and urgent as ever. Therefore, we know that there are many out there who – like the main characters of our story, the *aid bureaucrats* – find themselves faced with numerous uncertainties that they feel obliged to respond to in order to do good with common resources.

As discussed in Chapter 1, thanks to previous research and practitioner experience, there is both knowledge and awareness today that excessive use of performance management and control-seeking methods to reduce uncertainty in complex settings can lead to unintended consequences and perverse, counterproductive effects for management and operations. It is therefore not surprising that, in the development aid sector, most aid organizations have officially joined the chorus of those eager to at least *talk* about other ways of governing aid (Vähämäki & Verger, 2019). But what happens in *everyday practice*? *What do aid bureaucrats in interorganizational project arrangements actually do to cope with and respond to uncertainty, while facing great demands for certainty*? Looking more closely at the field, from macro to micro, it is clearly the case that attempts to cope with uncertainty largely take the form of rationalized responses related to the abundant systems of indicators and measurement and accountability mechanisms

available in the field (Eyben, 2010; Eyben et al., 2016; Gutheil, 2020; Shutt, 2016; Vähämäki, 2017; Vähämäki & Verger, 2019), a view that is confirmed in our studies.

As discussed in Chapter 1, a central point of departure for the studies behind this volume has been the concept of "obsessive measurement disorder" (OMD), coined by Natsios (2010) who defined OMD as a counterproductive governance condition in which – faced with increasing demands to demonstrate results and to control the use of resources – decision-makers become so preoccupied with formal control and measurements that they risk losing touch with fundamental core aspects of their mission. The theoretical purpose of our project was to search for instances of OMD in interorganizational aid projects and to attempt to explain when, how, and why OMD occurs, or not. However, as the research journey has progressed, we have come to the conclusion that these questions about OMD cannot be thoroughly answered without taking into account the broader topic of how aid bureaucrats deal with *uncertainty* more generally.

Based on the analysis of hundreds of documents and some 80 interviews with aid bureaucrats working at different levels and in different organizations, including public agencies, private companies, NGOs, and universities, all involved in development aid projects financed fully or in part by the Swedish taxpayer, we have examined how external demands for results, control, and efficiency affect aid bureaucrats and their organizations, and how these demands are translated and responded to in interorganizational aid relations by the aid bureaucrats responsible (see Methods appendix for details). Above all, we have set out to identify uncertainty responses and coping mechanisms that may help to prevent or act as an antidote to the extremes of overregulation and OMD control frenzies and instead foster pragmatic, constructive organizing and learning that benefits those in need. Our findings thus contribute to the discussion on why performance management and measurement requirements seem on some occasions to hinder, and at other times to support the implementation of aid projects and programs. In this sense, our work builds on and aims to contribute to previous research about the conditions under which performance measurement

requirements improve or erode development policy implementation (Hoey, 2015; Hood, 2012; Natsios, 2010).

Pragmatic Bureaucracy: Balancing Bureaucracy and Pragmatism

In the preceding chapters of this volume, we have presented our findings on what aid bureaucrats do to cope with and respond to uncertainty in their day-to-day project operations. We have identified much insightful determination to not let formal control and measurements hinder good development aid. In essence, most aid bureaucrats in our study – both those employed by aid organizations and the external experts who are often procured – struggle to do good, seeking and learning to find ways forward through the often thick administrative jungle. They do so by navigating a continuum (see Fig. 6), trying their best to avoid either of its extremes: the rigid state of what we call "hyper bureaucracy" (where formal control and measurement systems take an unfortunate turn into OMD and take on a life of their own) and the *laissez-faire* state of "hyper pragmatism" (with its risks of corruption and nepotism). When referring to "hyper" here, we mean that some aid bureaucrats may become seriously or obsessively concerned, or even fanatical, about the virtues and practices of bureaucracy, or of its opposite – the extremes of pragmatism (although this latter state has not been the focus of our studies).

It is true that rational ambitions can run amok into abstract systems distanced from core operations in the local fields of practice, such as seen in the global markets for standards, certifications, and accreditation, for example (Brunsson, 2022; Gustafsson Nordin, 2022; Tamm Hallström et al., 2022). Yet, most aid bureaucrats involved at the micro and meso levels of complex, uncertain development aid projects seem to aim for a middle ground on the continuum, where they attempt to cherry-pick the best of bureaucracy and pragmatism while avoiding their downsides. We call this idealized state "pragmatic bureaucracy," which we define as *the use of judgment to identify a sweet spot between the extremes of bureaucracy and pragmatism, where bureaucracy is used rationally when possible and pragmatically when needed.* As seen in
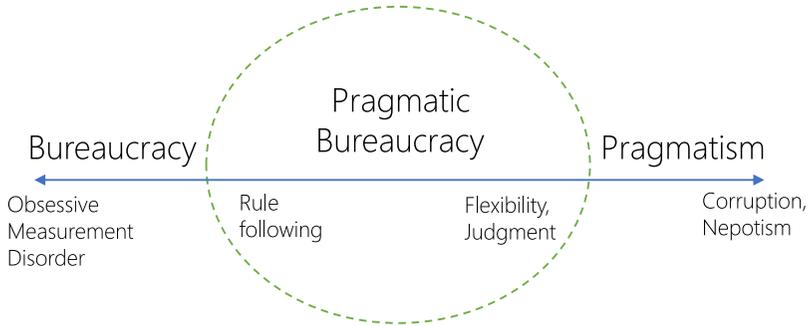
Fig. 6.   Pragmatic Bureaucracy.

Fig. 6, rule-following is key to the pragmatic bureaucrat. But rules are not followed blindly. Flexibility and professional judgment based on a rich set of experiential knowledge make the call. In order to be happy and content at their post in the long term, pragmatic bureaucrats learn how to cope within the realms of or by way of more creative approaches to rule-following and rational decision-making.

Bureaucracy – Used Rationally When Possible

As discussed in Chapter 2 and exemplified throughout the volume, aid bureaucrats have a truly demanding mission. At the Swedish development aid agency, the Swedish international development agency (Sida), for example, program officers are expected to ensure that taxpayers' funds are distributed to "proper organizations," to seek trustworthy relationships with the representatives of these organizations and to have a zero-tolerance for corruption. Program officers are also explicitly called on to be both "brave in action" and to "rely on their own judgment" (Sida, 2018a). These governance demands add up and are sometimes seen as contradictory by the aid bureaucrats, who must figure out how to approach and configure the underlying values. While some find it confusing and time-consuming to navigate these expectations, many others simply accept them, treating the many layers of steering as "belt and suspenders" for their operations. "Better safe than sorry" seems to be a common, risk-averse approach among this group, as illustrated by a quote from a senior informant at

the Kommunal union, who expressed her appreciation of the formal control systems:

> Of course it's [formally] governed. But I experience it as only positive, because I don't want taxpayers' money to be used incorrectly anywhere, or for our own membership money, almost worse, to be used incorrectly. After all, it's a trust industry we operate in. Having these control systems gives me a sense of security in my work. I don't see them as a disadvantage or a restriction of any kind for the projects. I appreciate them, it's nice to know that they're there.

Our overall impression, based on our data, is that the majority of aid bureaucrats sincerely believe that formal regulations and measurement requirements are needed and that they come with good intentions, although these may not always be fulfilled. As pragmatically explained by one of the help-desk officers at Sida, "ticking-the-box" requirements may not offer a quick fix, but they may be small, important steps in the right direction:

> I think without ticking-the-box requirements, people might not even think of some things. And I think that most people, when they start to think about these perspectives, they … something happens. Even if it's not a big change, there's some kind of change with the desk officer or the partner. Often both. Just asking the question "Did you think about that?"; something happens. So, it's not necessarily a bad thing to tick boxes.

The help-desk officer argues, in line with rationalism ideals, that following good intentions, working toward goals guided by box-ticking requirements and indicators on thematic topics may be very useful steps "in the right direction." At the same time, and not surprisingly, however, most if not all of our informants also agree that, as an aid bureaucrat, you must be sensible and should neither exaggerate the amount of measurements nor let their impact on project management take over. The following three quotes are typical for how our informants reason regarding the good intentions of bureaucracy and the simultaneous risks and realities of it all "going too far" and into a counterproductive state. The first quote comes

from a results-based management (RBM) consultant who (often on Sida's behalf) supports organizations in the aid recipient role with their RBM structures:

> I'm thinking about our ongoing mission and the one I had before with a civil-society organization in Sweden with its various country-based offices. And there – Holy Hannah! – all the requirements those field offices get, it's just crazy! It's quite fascinating. And there's really no mechanism to handle that at head office, how to *process* the information and what to *do* with it all. And it naturally places a huge burden on the field offices. And there is... it's interesting and there's an awareness at some level, that there's a power imbalance. But they can't really... And I don't really know why, because they do mean very, very well. They don't speak in terms of incompetence, absolutely not... But at the same time they act as if... the trust isn't really there. Just so much nit-picking. But I don't know, maybe it's just inexperience. That [the donor representative] hasn't really... hasn't actually worked with projects out in the field.

The quote exemplifies the tension between aid bureaucrats at the recipient organization's head office in Sweden and offices at the national and field levels. In this case, it was the aid bureaucrats at the local field offices who added a lot of additional requirements, which were then difficult to handle at the field level. This topic was discussed more at length in Chapter 3, where our observation was that most aid bureaucrats (although switching between the roles of donor and recipient in their contractual interorganizational relations), when acting in the donor role, seem to be more inclined to acting as traditional bureaucrats and less so to recognizing the need for flexibility and contextual adjustments. That is to say that no-one involved means any harm, but the requirements stack up and can end up becoming counterproductive anyway, particularly at the local field level. Unless, of course, those tendencies are somehow counteracted by brokering bureaucrats along the way, as discussed in Chapter 7.

A common narrative of our informants was that overregulation is typically something that happens or had happened to someone else, far away or in the past. This distancing narrative seems to be a way to handle the anxiety and burden associated with over-regulation. Only more seldom did informants acknowledge that OMD could also happen to them here and now. Below is one such account, where an informant from the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA) tells us how there used to be a lot of bureaucracy in the development-country field setting, but that now he experiences the same, or even worse, in Sweden:

> I'm a researcher, a leader, and I'm also involved in several projects and programs. So I work a lot with capacity-building programs and research programs abroad... I think it's 30 been years now. I usually joke with... Maybe I shouldn't say this, but I usually joke with my colleagues that... It used to be that working in developing countries was so hard because of bureaucracy and that no-one trusted each other, so much control, that the joke was that we had to take pens... Because everyone had to sign everything before anything gets done. But now we're there too, so we [in Sweden] have overtaken them [in terms of control requirements].

Similarly, in the following quote, our informant, a toxicologist from the Swedish Chemicals Agency, voices his concern about sustaining the right balance between bureaucracy and pragmatism:

> It's become much more regulated, more reporting requirements... yes, in every possible way. To begin with it felt like the annual report was mostly just a formality maybe. You wrote your report, and there wasn't necessarily any deep discussions about what it actually said and how it could improve your job... So, I mean, it's really positive that we've started to... that the reports get used, that someone reads them carefully and makes constructive comments. So that's good for everyone involved. Then there's the follow-up of the financial side of things, where... it's clear that we ... it's really important that everything is in order, but it

feels like things have gone in the direction of *wanting more and more* details about [financial] things. And even now, when we develop new projects, that [the donor] now wants to see a very, very detailed budget ... and so if you're off by more than 10%. . . if you have very small budget items. . . like if something costs 10,000 SEK more, then you may have to have coaching calls from Sida. And it might feel like you've gone a little too far in your ... yes, in your *eagerness* for all the details. . . I don't know if you gain that much [with that approach]. In our project today, we report more details, and the demands on the financial reporting are a bit higher maybe. And that's been good. It feels like we've moved towards a reasonable level. There was maybe a little too little detail before, and now we're at a fairly good level. But I wouldn't want to see it go any further. . .

These quotes demonstrate that aid bureaucrats understand the rationale of added requirements and try also to understand why overregulation happens and when. They may talk about it as a "joke", but they prefer not to be the ones affected by it or the ones passing it on to others (though, as discussed in Chapter 3, not all aid bureaucrats self-reflect about the latter). The quotes also clearly show that the informants experience uncertainty with respect to who and where the tendencies toward hyper bureaucracy come from and why.

As discussed in Chapter 2, certainty relates to our ability to know what will happen in the future. The better we are at predicting this, the more certain we feel. And, to the contrary: when we don't think we can predict the future, the more uncomfortable and unsafe we feel. From a psychological standpoint, the less certain about the future we are, the more anxious we feel and the more emotional energy we expend trying to assure the future (Rock, 2008). But, as our informants have described, and as we discussed at length in Chapter 4, in practice, well-intended attempts to create a greater certainty in development aid projects may result in confusion and, paradoxically, greater uncertainty. The quotes below are from one of our group interviews where the informants (representatives from several public agencies) discuss their recipient role vis-à-vis Sida as a donor:

Informant 1: It's like, what do you expect me to write there? What are the parameters?

Informant 2: My experience is that it's a bit of a paradox. They're trying to find clarity but it's not clear what should be applied. It's more like "yes, but this exists, you can do this, you can do that" but there's no real clarity in it...

Informant 3: And when you say that [that it isn't clear], that's not good either!

Informant 2: Yes ... And then I was thinking of applying a bit more modern model with a narrative and some anecdotal results and stuff, and didn't know ... is it approved? Can we do that...? Are we going to get a slap on the wrist and be told that we've squandered the money, or did we do something *good*?

Informant 4: I thought there were a lot of mixed messages. In the beginning, I was really frustrated about what I was supposed to do. What was good and what was bad, and what should be changed and why? It drove me nuts for a long time ... because the signals I was getting were so different and I just... No, I thought it was exhausting.

Informant 5: There were also often different people at the meetings. When we had coordination meetings with Sida... And there always *new* people saying new things that often seemed at complete odds with what someone else had said at the previous meeting.

Informant 4: Yes, no, this state of not really knowing what it is that... No, I think it makes you feel stupid because you think you've understood something, and you do it, and then it was *completely wrong.* And you don't really find out *why* it went completely wrong. I thought it was really arduous.

The cited excerpt from this group interview with the Swedish agency bureaucrats indicates uncertainty and ambivalence regarding the expectations of the donor organization, which our informants

clearly describe as having the full power to define what is required. However, the earlier citations also suggest that the donor represen-tatives are no different; they too express ambivalence and uncertainty about the proper procedures. Seeking clarity on what donors want can therefore be frustrating for *everyone* involved.

As discussed throughout this volume, the quest for certainty about the future is not only a psychological preference for most individuals. It is an institutionally defined preference and social expectation that influences both people and organizations. As discussed in Chapter 3, most of the aid bureaucrats we interviewed switch back and forth between the donor role and the recipient role, where both roles entail an expectation that the bureaucrats conform to the respective insti-tutionalized expectations of proper behavior. The institutionalized ideal for the donor representatives is that they not be naïve or "over-trusting" (Laroche et al., 2019) as sums of tax money are in play and independence, feedback and corruption control are essential. Due to the high external pressure on aid organizations and their professionals to ensure that money flows to the right people, along with the increasingly mediatized nature of the aid field, there is also a shared fear of media scandals (Graftström & Windell, 2019). The citations above show that bureaucrats in the recipient role are also eager to understand the donor's signals regarding proper behavior. For those recipient organizations, competing to enter into a contract, or remain recipients of aid funding, it may also be a question of survival.

In many respects, and particularly when in the donor role, the views of our informants are well-aligned with the classic bureaucratic ideals so typical of democratic public sector organizations with complex missions (Catasús, 2021; Waters & Waters, 2015; Weber, 1922/1987). The core virtue associated with bureaucratic management is the rule of law. From this follows that decision-making should ideally be grounded in a formal system of common rules and documentation in order to safeguard the values of predictability and equal and fair treatment of all. Although many aid bureaucrats have chosen to work in development for its inspiring ideals and the hope of making the world a better, fairer place, they have come to accept that their daily work often consists of rather dull, administrative practices aimed at ensuring that "funds get through the machinery" in the proper way (Cornwall et al., 2007).

Despite there having been different trends and ideas over the years about how this should be done and what the "fund machinery"

requires (see Chapters 4 and 6), the aid bureaucrat's work has always encompassed the need to coordinate and attempt to reduce uncertainty by making sure that the aid financing meets all of the formal requirements, or that these requirements are acted somehow upon. It is simply a part of their everyday work–life conditions. As discussed in Chapter 4, aid development's two management dreams – to simplify the complex and control the uncertain future – have an obvious impact on norms on how to achieve greater efficiency and quality in aid projects. These norms prescribe that it should be done through rational-bureaucratic structures and processes.

As critically argued by Easterly (2002), however, the use of bureaucracy in foreign aid is often unproductive since there are so many perverse incentives. Bureaucracy works best when there is high feedback from beneficiaries, high incentives for the bureaucrats to respond to such feedback, easily observable outcomes, a high probability that the bureaucratic effort will translate into favorable outcomes, and competitive pressure from other bureaucracies and agencies. Easterly (ibid.) argues that many of these conditions are unfavorable in foreign aid, and that the aid community responds to its difficult environment by organizing itself as a "cartel of good intentions," inhibiting critical feedback and learning from the past, suppressing competitive pressure to deliver results, and making identification of the best channel of resources for different objectives. Despite the good intentions, altruism, and genuine professional dedication of the individuals involved, according to Easterly (2002), aid operations can therefore be "foundered in a sea of bureaucracy." Weber may have had efficiency in mind when theorizing bureaucracy, and a division of labor combined with a hierarchy *may*, in theory, enable efficient action, but in real life practices, this is far from certain.[1] As concluded in the Britannica dictionary definition of bureaucracy[2]:

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[1] A classic ideal strength of a bureaucratic organization is its functional specialization, where responsibility for certain parts or aspects of the complex whole is allocated among different managers that are all situated within a hierarchy. This organization, Weber suggested, would support efficiency when tackling a complex, democratic mission (Weber, 1922/1987).

[2] www.britannica.com/topic/bureaucracy. Accessed on June 4, 2023.

> The words *bureaucracy* and *bureaucrat* are typically thought of and used pejoratively. They convey images of red tape, excessive rules and regulations, unimaginativeness, a lack of individual discretion, central control, and an absence of accountability. Far from being conceived as proficient, popular contemporary portrayals often paint bureaucracies as inefficient and lacking in adaptability.

In a field where the actors are constantly under pressure to demonstrate efficiency, it is no doubt uncomfortable to confront contemporary stereotypes that portray bureaucrats as unresponsive and lethargic cogs in the aid machinery. As seen in Chapters 4 and 5, when aid bureaucrats need to demonstrate results here and now, approximations often come in handy to save the day. But does it have to be this way? Although hard to tell at times, our impression is that only a small minority of the aid bureaucrats we interviewed actually *believe* that the rational use of bureaucracy can do the trick and fulfill the management dreams of simplifying the complex and controlling the future. Rather, they typically see a need to insert a sensible dose of pragmatism.

Weber himself described how bureaucracy may come to discourage creativity and innovation and adaptiveness to change, and how it can develop into a "soulless iron cage" where following the rules, policies, and documentation routines becomes more important than working effectively and productively for the common good (Blau, 1955; Merton, 1940; Weber, 2015). Luckily, however, we found that tendencies toward hyper bureaucracy are actively counteracted by a larger group of aid officials, found among both those employed in-house and the contracted consultants (see Chapters 6 and 7). When possible, they use bureaucracy rationally, but when needed in order to counteract tendencies toward OMD, they use it pragmatically, for, as the old saying goes: "He who wants everything, loses everything."

Bureaucracy – Used Pragmatically, When Needed

On the other end of the management and governance spectrum depicted in Fig. 6, we find pragmatism, which is typically described

as the opposite of bureaucracy. The pragmatic administrator tends to focus on real-life practices and outcomes and, as long as results are good, is willing to decentralize and to offer space for adjustments and diversity (Cavaleri, 2004). In a pragmatic system, the *what* is more important than the *how*, and there may be several *different* "hows" united by a willingness to do whatever works to reach the desired goal (see Chapter 5). Pragmatism is hence a way of dealing with problems, or in our case situations of uncertainty, that focus on solutions informed by the decision-makers' own experience and judgment of whether these solutions will work in the particular context and project practice – as opposed to general ideals captured in theory or some rule. In a case study on the Federal Reserve (the Fed), Conti-Brown and Wishnick (2021) describe an ethos of what they call "technocratic pragmatism," arguing that a pragmatic and experimentalist central banking is best suited to develop the expertise necessary to address the Fed's emergent and complex problems – as long as it *remains constrained* by norms designed to preserve its long-term legitimacy as part of the administrative state. Hence, by incorporating a bit of pragmatism, but not too much, bureaucrats and technocrats can cherry-pick or even attempt to optimize two important, but often conflicting, goals: development of the expertise needed to tackle the complex problems and the requirements associated with democratic governance. As concluded by Conti-Brown and Wishnick (Conti-Brown & Wishnick, 2021), this is an ethos that encourages experimentation but requires "significant guardrails."

Judgment and Experiential Knowledge

In Chapter 2, we discussed *sensemaking* as a core process of uncertainty reduction. When seeking answers to our research question of whether and why OMD is experienced or not in this daily toil of aid bureaucrats, we conclude that those answers are highly dependent on whether they are able to *make sense* of the formal regulations and oversight and whether they can find ways to *interact with the rules in a meaningful way.* Another key to pragmatic bureaucracy is the willingness and practical opportunity to develop not only one's professional judgment but also the courage to use it.

In his essay, Ahrne (1993) uses the metaphor of the organizational centaur (part human, part organization) to make the point that what an employee wins in access to resources and opportunities within the realm of an organization is at the same time lost in terms of individual independence. There typically remains *some* room for one's own sensemaking and professional judgment of how to act in a given role and situation (Goffman, 1968, 1972), however, and hence the metaphor of the centaur. Previous research tells us that even in highly institutionalized and highly regulated fields of operation, decision-makers can apply professional judgment and possess a broad repertoire of responses to institutional pressure, including ways to flexibly adjust or even ignore some rules and performance measurement requirements (see e.g. Alexius, 2007; Eyben, 2010; Oliver, 1991; Vähämäki, 2017). As an illustration of the "aid centaur," several of our informants talked about the situation when, in 2017, Sida adjusted its Trac system and took the decision to ease requirements and formally allow individual program officer to exercise more flexibility and judgment. We found that many program officers handled this novel freedom with caution or even hesitation, which to us indicates that, when regulations are eased, some form of compensation must occur, and not all aid bureaucrats have these professional compensating competencies.

A pragmatic bureaucrat is typically someone who is not new to this complex field of operations and been around long enough to have seen different "waves of reform" come and go and different management methods being tried out. Long enough also to have had ample opportunity to develop sound professional judgment from this rich and varied experience, and who, through this tacit experiential knowledge, *has come to the lived conclusion that one cannot fully rely on rules or formal steering if one wishes to make good things happen on the ground* in development aid projects. In fact, if one was to attempt to remove all uncertainties and handle everything by the book, very few aid projects would be up and running at all. Thus, a pragmatic bureaucrat realizes that not only does it take tacit knowledge, imagination, and improvisation to find workable and ethically defendable paths forward, it also takes courage, and yes, some degree of risk-taking, to apply those mental resources to intervene when important projects risk getting stuck in red tape. This

means that rather than placing trust only in impersonal sources of trust such as management technologies, it is also placed in individuals and context-specific conditions. To compensate for tendencies toward rule-following fundamentalism, pragmatic bureaucrats are mindful about broadening their portfolio of work approaches. And although vulnerable, when experience tells them it is necessary, they dare to be open to both unwritten and unspoken rules and to engage personally in the creative process of "rule-bending" (Jassey, 2013) in order to make the right decision.

Rule-Bending Closet Relationists

As described in Chapter 7 and in previous literature on the professional, everyday life of aid bureaucrats, brokering skills are heavily used in development aid practice (Cornwall et al., 2007; Eyben, 2010; Jassey, 2013). In an official text regarding bureaucracy at Sida, a Sida aid bureaucrat wrote about the "unspoken rules of the game" in the following way (Jassey, 2013, p. 133):

> At Sida, there is often talk about a tacit "Sida knowledge" – a knowledge that you can't gain from reading manuals or even talking to others, only through years and years of actual work. This is experiential knowledge in its finest form. And a lot of this knowledge is about how to bend the rules. Maybe more importantly, though, part of "being in the know" is to know how and when the real decisions are made. It is a knowledge that makes it possible for a Sida desk officer to create the flexibility and risk-taking that is required in development work. And, quite possibly, our whole system would come to a standstill if that knowledge didn't exist.

The cited passage exemplifies that, according to this aid bureaucrat, effective aid bureaucrats are *not* those that follow rules and procedures *to the letter* but those who acquire their *intention and meaning* and then apply this tacit "Sida knowledge," to *bend the rules responsibly* (rules stipulated in handbooks, for example). The citation also exemplifies how it takes years of actual work to

gain such knowledge and thus that it is typically the most experienced bureaucrats who possess this type of knowledge. Another text describing aid bureaucracy follows the theme of the "Beast of Bureaucracy," and the make-believe Nordic development aid organization Valhalla (Cornwall et al., 2007) tells the story of how the imaginary "Lagom" project (Swedish for "just enough") was tried to test the rules of bureaucracy. The authors of that text argue, in line with Weber's own critique of bureaucracy, that the "unwritten rules" were critical in order to maintain a balance that would enable creativity and learning:

> Lagom had worked on an assumption of uniformity and a need for formality. Yet everything we'd learnt about Valhalla told us of an organisation in which individuality was prized, in which unwritten rules accompanied the creative process of rule-bending to get around a formidable and cumbersome bureaucratic system, and in which communication (and much of what would be thought of as "organisational learning") happens through informal, often barely visible, networks and interactions.
>
> (Cornwall et al., 2007, p. 58)

This citation also exemplifies the importance of informal networks and personal relations in learning the norms and practices of rule-bending (see also Alexius, 2007, 2017). Some of this learning takes place openly as part of the routines for becoming socializing as a professional aid bureaucrat. As discussed in Chapter 3, there have been times when it has been considered fully legitimate and responsible to decouple completely from what the bureaucrat thinks are ill-fitting rules. However, in our empirical material, we have seen that, lately, with the increased fear of corruption and nepotism and skepticism of close, informal relations, it is no longer legitimate to openly ignore counterproductive rules and regulations (see Chapter 1). According to Eyben (2012), this development has put pressure on aid bureaucrats to become "closet relationists," meaning that they have now had to learn how to "hide" valuable input from informal relations behind a rhetoric that contains the proper verse on distant accountability and RBM.

In Chapter 4, we discussed the approximation practices needed to make sense of the world in which development aid operates. Pragmatic bureaucrats are aware that ascertaining exactly what aid funds lead to what results remains a "mission impossible," i.e., it is often simply not possible to explain which money from which donor led to which results. So, although proxies can never provide the real, complete picture of the world, pragmatic bureaucrats *do their best* to track down and translate results from complex realities. To do so, they rely not only on reporting opportunities and formal meetings but take every opportunity to interact with partners whenever and wherever possible, including in the field. As discussed in Chapter 7, during a field visit, an officer from the Swedish Chemical Agency realized what the impact of a project had been and used that insight to support the partner organization to also report on the impact. Similarly, an officer from the Kommunal union told us that she always tells her recipient representatives to not be afraid to be honest about what is working and what isn't since "we need to ensure that we talk about difficult things and mistakes so that it all turns out good in the end."

A pragmatic bureaucrat is one who learns and uses information from their role-switching for brokering purposes, as is also illustrated in the examples given in Chapter 5 where the Sida bureaucrat uses her experience via "double membership," i.e., experience gained from working in the private sector and experience gained when now working in the aid donor role. Needless to say, learning about the particular contexts in which the aid projects operate requires willingness and engagement. And, in practice, this often entails extensive traveling, like the bureaucrat from Kommunal who clocked 135 travel days a year, and maintaining a continuous informal dialogue with partners (see Chapter 7). In following with this finding, in all of our case studies, aid bureaucrats in the *recipient* role have noted good personal relations with aid bureaucrats who represent the organization in the donor role as a success factor for aid projects. In the highly complex and uncertain world of development cooperation, some researchers even claim that interpersonal trust is the "glue" that holds the complex relations together (see also Eyben, 2010; McGillivray et al., 2012; Pomerantz, 2004; Swedlund, 2017). But, as discussed in Chapter 4, this is clearly a sensitive issue.

In line with previous findings (Eyben, 2010), we have found a tendency, particularly among aid bureaucrats that represent the

organization in the *donor* role, to downplay or even hide (at least officially) interpersonal relations and their role in governance. When asked how they cope with uncertainty, aid bureaucrats in a donor role seldom mention key individuals as sources of trust. As mentioned above, they may even feel the need to act as "closet relationists" due to the risk of critique for acting overly pragmatic. We therefore suggest that this hesitation of those in the donor role both to mention and to actually lean on personal relations stems from *legitimacy* concerns and, more specifically, from the risk for scams such as corruption or nepotism, the dreaded extremes of pragmatism. It is true that the large distances, many parties involved, long-term investments, different cultures, and complex dependencies that characterize the field make it difficult for aid organizations to demonstrate that the funding is useful (Korsgaard et al., 2015). But there are other factors. A specific fear of corruption and nepotism, and a general fear of media scandals related to taxpayers' money being used unwisely, also present aid bureaucrats with a challenge: the need to place trust in situations where the conditions for and acceptance of interpersonal trust are poor or uncertain.

Just like bureaucracy, pragmatism has serious downsides that must be avoided. One such downside that has proven to be very sensitive for the aid officials in our study – hyper pragmatism – is an extreme that can be described as a state of *laissez-faire* or a "hands-off" approach, where people are left to do whatever they choose. As discussed in Chapter 4, openly relying on interpersonal relations is seen as a vulnerable, risky approach that blurs formal accountability and casts a shadow over the principle of equal treatment. In Alexius and Vähämäki (2020), we illustrated this with a case where a Sida manager dared, without fully trusting either the organization or its representatives, to take the risk of letting the organization develop a funding proposal. The said bureaucrat was benevolent and aware of the risk taken, and the entire cooperation could have ended in distress and no results. However, in this case, the action was successful and led to a project that is still up and running, at the time of writing. Again, this speaks to the importance of taking risks and daring to trust, despite not having full control of the outcome from the outset (see Chapter 4 and Alexius & Vähämäki, 2020).

Going the Extra Mile on the Responsibility Radius

As discussed above, a small group of aid bureaucrats care mainly about compliance with regulations for legitimacy reasons, be this their own legitimacy as aid bureaucrats or donors, or the legitimacy of the project, their organization or the entire aid system. As discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, they have learned that, in the face of great uncertainty, trust can legitimately be transferred from bureaucratic sources (such as rules and measurements, as well as general organizational structures and processes and a range of management tools and technologies such as quality standards and project management methods). By way of such legitimizing ceremonies, an aid bureaucrat in the donor role can help make an organization in the recipient role more *trustworthy* (Alexius & Vähämäki, 2020). However, as we have seen throughout the chapters of this volume, many aid bureaucrats today are preoccupied with the *how* of organizing, that is, with the setting up of proper rational and legal structures, technologies, and processes, preferably already in advance of decision-making.

Considering that interpersonal relations may indeed be essential for the achievement of development results (McGillivray et al., 2012), it is fair to ask: What happens if aid bureaucrats come, solely or mostly, to trust and care about legitimizing ceremonies and proxies? Some justify this distanced position with reference to the ancient bureaucratic ideal of *sine ira et studio* (without hatred or passion) that calls for bureaucrats to keep their professional distance and not get personally involved (du Gay, 2000, 2005). Bureaucrats that reason in this way can come across as somewhat cynical, preoccupied as they are with ticking the right boxes in order to simply do what is expected of them and their organization (see Chapter 5). However, the majority of the aid bureaucrats we have encountered are not content with this position as they think and feel in their hearts that, considering the crucial missions of development aid, ticking the right boxes does not satisfy their goal of doing good, and certainly not when they know from their own experience that the strict following of rules and procedures was not enough – or may even have been counterproductive to good results on the ground. As one of our informants self-reflexively observed:

> I realize that we've become completely occupied with all these proxies and indicators.... But whatever happened to poverty??

Pragmatic bureaucrats are hence prepared to go against the ideal of formal compliance when they find it *meaningless* with respect to their partners' well-being and project aims (Hupe, 2019) or in order to *compensate* for "damage" already done by a strict following of the rules. In this process of gaining and applying their own professional judgment in decision-making, the bureaucrats themselves may feel torn between obedience and compassion (Belabas & Gerrits, 2017) but in the end choose to act in the way that they find most meaningful and possible to justify.

As illustrated in Fig. 7, pragmatic bureaucrats often *do much more* than formally required. They are not only aware of the need but also willing to "go the extra mile" on the personal "responsibility radius" that stretches from the risk-averse, rule-praising hyper bureaucrat's position, with a minimum of personal risk-taking, to
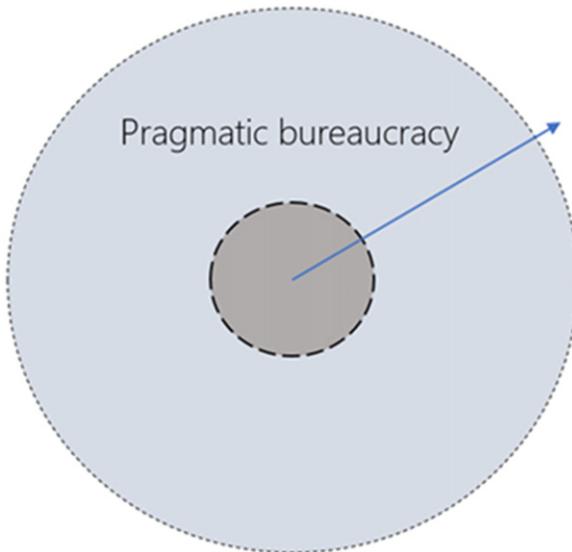

Fig. 7.   The Responsibility Radius: From Hyper Bureaucracy to Pragmatic Bureaucracy.

positions where the bureaucrat exercises increasingly more prag-
matism and personal responsibility for taking the correct decisions.

Often this requires a wider time span. In order to understand
what will happen in the longer run, long after a project decision has
been made and the funds have been allocated, pragmatic bureau-
crats must also look back and not only to results from their own
projects but also to other aid interventions from different contexts,
to learn and understand what worked and what didn't. The
uncertainties related to the frequent mismatch of temporalities in
development aid were discussed in Chapter 4. There, we used the
example of Bai Bang to illustrate that key results from an aid
intervention are sometimes only visible decades after a project has
formally ended. The noted example of the Dukoral vaccine shows,
in addition, that results are seldom attributable only to *single*
donors but are more often the result of several donors and several
different types of support. Pragmatic bureaucrats are interested in
both the wider set of results dating back in time and joint results
achieved in the wider system, and use this insight to legitimize and
make sense of contemporary actions as well as possible future
results.

A pragmatic bureaucrat is also one who not only listens to and
learns from key partners but who also considers different types and
sources of information, research findings, etc., in an aim to better
understand the aid context and to make better decisions. Often this
requires that they work with and learn from practices and activities
other than the ordinary project-reporting documentation and
ordinary project meetings. As one of our informants stated:

> We continuously try to participate in activities they
> arrange even though a lot of what they do is not within
> our core competence and something we know anything
> about... We try to participate as much as possible and
> see what they do in reality. Not just to request reports.

Needless to say, engaging like this and caring about the project
and their partners typically takes additional time. But it may also
be the case that, in the long run, these practices actually free up
time and capacities, thanks to the fostering of a trustful donor–
recipient relationship (Alexius & Vähämäki, 2020). As described in

Chapter 7, pragmatic bureaucrats are like "spiders in the web" who, if working in aid organizations in the donor role, must deal with a "web of external experts" and colleagues to comply with their task. The pragmatic bureaucrat then has the professional judgment to determine what competencies are needed and when and knows that contracting a certain type of external expert is sometimes required to reduce uncertainty (Chapter 6). Rather than assuming that "this is the way it should be," they dare to be vulnerable. When they pose the open question "How will this land?," they are prepared to really listen to the replies. The pragmatic bureaucrat thus typically acts as a generalist and knows a little about a lot of tasks and areas of expertise (administration and procurement rules, different thematic fields, how to handle aid projects and help desks, etc.). In essence, as described by one of our informants in Chapter 6, pragmatic bureaucrats use all of this knowledge and their judgment to "make the system work for you."

Pragmatic bureaucrats can be found all over the aid net. In Chapter 7, we discussed the two different approaches of two consultancy companies (AIMS and Niras), where the first was stuck on promoting a certain technology whereas the other was foremost interested in asking "how" the approach would land and who would take responsibility for balancing the different professional interests. The latter approach required a lot of courage and embracing of uncertainty.

Beware of the Hyper Bureaucrats!

Whereas pragmatic bureaucrats work to counteract OMD and tendencies in that direction, we have also presented examples in this volume that suggest a more radical and less constructive approach. At times, aid bureaucrats who operate on the far left of Fig. 6 (hyper bureaucracy) act like fundamentalists, which can be not only unpleasant and tiresome for those around them but can also pose a serious threat to the likelihood of actually achieving good results.

The hyper bureaucrat's world is a narrow one, with clear boundaries and a short personal responsibility radius, where the main responsibility assumed is that of the hyper bureaucrat's own job tasks, with an emphasis on a strict following of the rules that does not allow for exceptions or adjustments. As a result of this

stance, the hyper bureaucrat seldom sees the bigger picture of how change actually happens, and may get stuck in suboptimizing. The hyper bureaucrat does not bend the rules but accepts them as they are, following them in a fundamentalist way, *no matter the outcome (because "I am only responsible for making the correct bureaucratic decision")*. Complexity should be simplified and uncertainty removed, preferably by proper organization proxies (POPs). What is being documented is more important than what happens later, in the real world and in the local field. Needless to say, this approach can cause a lot of harm.

In settings where hyper bureaucrats gain power, their anxiety of not ticking all the correct boxes is transferred onto recipients who in turn may experience obsessiveness in both how the donor decides to handle bureaucracy and in their own responses, a vicious cycle indeed. In Chapter 3, we describe one such example involving a Sida officer who, despite both Sida's internal regulations and the director-general having made it clear that Sida should not require a partner to use a certain method or results matrix, nevertheless requested Union to Union to do precisely that. The Union to Union representative found that there was very little flexibility on the part of the donor organization and therefore *experienced* that they were not trusted and that the regulations were obsessive. The experience was aggravated by the fact that Union to Union felt that no consideration was given to the fact that their results reports and evaluations indicated that Union to Union's operations showed several positive results. Several other examples in this volume also demonstrate the importance of making sure that aid money only goes to proper organizations, implying that POPs have become the modus operandi of aid bureaucracy. Acting solely on the basis of POPs could easily be understood as a nonhuman approach, not using the human senses, which hyper bureaucrats are less prone to refer to in their work.

But POPs can be ensured in different ways. Where pragmatic bureaucrats might assist by helping to translate how something that the recipient organization is already doing could be interpreted as a POP, hyper bureaucrats might do this in harsher manner by using a language of power, such as in the example given in Chapter 6 where International Science Program (ISP) was told that it had to contract a certain RBM expert in order to be eligible for further financing.

POPs are created and used to deal with all of this, but, in the end, POPs can't do the work. Real people with an awareness of the complexity are needed to carry it through. Whereas some bureaucrats are aware that the system does not work by itself, others seem less aware. Ultimately, in the realities of a complex, uncertain setting, it is a matter of how people must walk the talk to compensate for deficiencies in governance.

Conclusions, Practitioner Advice, and Ideas for Future Research

As mentioned above, a point of departure for the cases discussed in this volume has been if, when, how, and why measurements become counterproductive or lead to OMD in the field of development aid, which, as we have seen, is an extreme case in terms of both complexity and uncertainty. Studying what aid bureaucrats in interorganizational project arrangements actually do to cope with and respond to uncertainty, while facing great demands for certainty, we have identified worrying cases where the ambitions to simplify the complex and control an uncertain future have run amok. Yet, somewhat to our surprise and definitely to our relief, we have also identified a range of uncertainty responses and coping mechanisms that we believe contribute to preventing the extremes of overregulation and control frenzies. As the title of this final chapter indicated, we suggest that what we call "pragmatic bureaucratic" approaches and practices can serve as an "antidote" to OMD and in fact also as an inoculant against OMD. Our findings contribute to the knowledge and general discussion on why performance management and measurement requirements in some cases seem to hinder but in others can clearly support the implementation of aid projects and programs. In short, and on the basis of our empirical studies, we find good reason to conclude that pragmatic bureaucratic responses to external demands for certainty in this complex field contribute to constructive learning and organizing that benefits those in need. Below, we summarize some of our main conclusions (see also Methods appendix for more details on the research process that led to them).

Main Conclusions

First of all, we conclude that **OMD is not an objectively verifiable state but an individual *experience* of *perceived* overregulation (of, e.g., a project, organization, interorganizational relationship, or larger system)**. What matters to this experience is the way in which different rules and regulations and measurement schemes are developed, communicated, and used by the parties in a relationship (e.g., in the relationship between bureaucrats who represent an organization in the donor role and bureaucrats who represent an organization in the recipient role). As discussed in the Methods appendix, and as concluded in previous research (Eyben, 2010; Vähämäki, 2017), it is important to study what happens at the micro level in aid organizations where regulations are crafted and responded to. When conducting these studies, and talking to many bureaucrats about their individual experiences of bureaucracy, more nuance emerges, allowing us to conclude that **it is not the *amount* of regulations** per se **that leads some people in the aid system to experience OMD**.

As shown in the cases in this volume and as discussed in the Methods appendix, we have identified a variation in terms of how bureaucrats and their organizations experience the *same* type and amount of regulation. This leads us to conclude that we cannot only use measurements to understand the effects of measurements; we need to look beyond the measurements to study the organizational cultures and societal institutions in which they are embedded. In contrast to the typical (and, if we may say so, rather loose-fitting) assumption that reducing control technologies and measurements will automatically lead to more trust and innovation, we have found that *more important than the amount* of these control measures is how they are introduced, communicated, and motivated. *The worst cases and highest risks of experiencing OMD are seen in situations where a bureaucrat stops caring and taking responsibility for how bureaucracy and measurements affect the parties involved.*

Another individual factor we have seen that may contribute to persons having a greater tendency to act as hyper bureaucrats is a lack of awareness that control and measurements systems can cause counterproductive effects. The root cause for this unawareness can naturally be a simple lack of experience. But often, linked to this

lack of experience, *we find fear, which can lead to tunnel vision and a fixation on measurements at the expense of more unquantifiable aspects* of performance and the need for context-specific adjustments (Smith, 1995; Vähämäki & Verger, 2019). This can be a fear of losing control or losing one's job or an unrealistic belief in the role counting and measurements play when it comes to solving development problems. Also, **some people are just more prone to becoming preoccupied and excited about the technical and logical schemes of measurements and matrices than others, and when they spend increasing amounts of time collecting data and monitoring their activities, there is a risk of *crowding out* core activities in the field** (see also Chambers, 2010; Forssell & Ivarsson Westerberg, 2014; Patton, 2010; Thiel & Leeuw, 2002).

Yet another identified risk factor is meaninglessness. Somewhat surprising to us, most aid bureaucrats we encountered are open to various interpretations of meaning. Bureaucracy could be introduced as a well-intended means to increase efficiency and good results, but it could also be introduced in an attempt to enhance legitimacy in the face of external criticism and suspicion, or simply as a handy proxy for the effects that have a tendency to show up long after a project is formally finished and assessed (see Chapter 4 on the mismatching of temporalities). We thus conclude that *how a particular control technology will be perceived depends on the circumstances and, not least, on whether aid bureaucrats (and other people in the system) have the knowledge, imagination, and motivation to make sense of the regulation.*

As demonstrated by psychological research and research on the human brain, sensemaking helps us cope with uncertainty as it lowers our levels of anxiety, which in turn calms the mind and allows us to think wisely and see the bigger picture (Kåver, 2004). As a comparison, people who suffer from OCD are most often aware of their obsessions (Smith & Segal, 2018). Despite this awareness, however, they often continue with their obsessive behaviors. Smith and Segal's advice therefore focuses on how people with OCD can learn to resist obsessive rituals. One tip is *to not avoid discussing and thinking about the fears that cause the obsessive ritual* (ibid.).

Along similar lines, Smith and Segal (2018) also suggest writing down or recording obsessive thoughts and worries and thereafter

setting aside times or "worry periods" during which all of these worries are exposed and discussed, preferably together with others, in support groups. If we translate this to aid bureaucrats and OMD, common fears among aid bureaucrats are that aid money may not be being spent correctly and that partner organizations or their representatives may prove to be untrustworthy. Alleviating these fears might, for example, be addressed through talking openly about them with colleagues, in support groups. Translating the same tip to development aid organizations could mean holding meetings to discuss all of their worries about recipient partners not spending aid money correctly, as well as allowing oneself, on other occasions, to speak in more hopeful terms about the unknown and to discuss signs of positive development in partners and projects that can be trusted, even with less control.

In times of worry, it usually helps to stay actively engaged, *to do something* about the uncertain situation. As discussed in Chapter 2, in Western (management) culture, taking a passive approach to great uncertainty is more the exception than *comme il faut*. Here, we can note that we did find a couple of cases of passive-aggression in our data, but the calming acceptance advised by mindfulness experts was lacking. We therefore conclude that ***actively responding to uncertainty is in itself an institutionalized expectation. However, where the active response of many aid bureaucrats means using approaches and practices of pragmatic bureaucracy, others respond actively by adding further layers of regulation.*** Several times in this volume, we have come back to the case where Sida's top management's response to external critique of overregulation was to undertake serious efforts to simplify measurements and reporting requirements and make formal regulations more flexible. We have, however, identified different responses to this de-regulation and encouraged flexibility, depending, it seems, on the individual's level of knowledge and experience. Some less-experienced individuals responded, contradictory to the original purpose, by actually adding further rules and regulations. We have explained this response reaction with what we call the "trust paradox" – the finding that trust is often transferred from rules, regulations, and measurements, which are typically described as the opposite or as hinders to trust (Alexius & Vähämäki, 2021) (see also Chapter 2). While these impersonal sources of trust can in some cases support

the trust-building process, they can also constitute a serious hinder since every added regulation and measurement creates the expectation that it should be acted upon, something that can impede real-life experiences and learning.

As also seen in the historical exposé in Chapter 6, the trust paradox helps to explain why ***formal decisions for a more flexible bureaucracy is no quick fix since for some staff, such reforms can lead to the perception of added uncertainty***, and an experienced need for new strict measures (that are decided on, and added at the project level, at the individual bureaucrat's own initiative). Thus, socialization in organizations can sometimes foster newcomers into a pragmatic bureaucracy culture, but in other cases or at times of harsh external critique and crisis, we instead see socialization into more of a hyper bureaucratic culture. Needless to say, it is not easy to stand alone as a pragmatic bureaucrat in an organization with a hyper bureaucratic culture, but the opposite is also true.

A precondition for learning how to become a pragmatic bureaucrat is ***continuity of the staff responsible for a project or people in the units that handle certain matters. However, since staff changes are highly frequent in development aid work, this is clearly an obstacle for fostering a learning, pragmatic bureaucracy culture.*** Awareness is important but, since difficulties most often arise during implementation (Vähämäki, 2017), this is where professional judgment and experience comes in. People with experience in the field know how to handle these situations, where two of the most common pragmatic bureaucratic responses tap into the multivocal brokering skills of *decoupling* and *translating* (see Chapter 7). However, sometimes long experience is not enough. Some aid bureaucrats, specifically those who have held a narrower specialist position earlier (such as a controller or auditor), might run rabbit when they obtain a power position. Thus, hyper bureaucrats without much formal power can be counteracted by pragmatic bureaucrats, while hyper bureaucrats with more power can be disastrous: ***Beware of hyper bureaucrats in power positions!***

Advice to Policymakers and Top Managers

What do these findings mean for policymakers and top managers in the field? First and foremost, we recommend that you ensure that

you maintain a growing cadre of staff with pragmatic bureaucratic competence that can help to counteract tendencies toward OMD. Pragmatic aid bureaucrats can make the most of every aid project by considering its particular context and conditions and finding ways to interact with partners that support the achievement of development goals; they know how to occasionally bend or adapt rules responsibly. Hence, we agree with the following conclusion from a human resource management blogpost[3]:

> An organization should include pragmatic and bureaucratic management from the top down. Therefore, by mixing these different ways of thinking and working, an organization will be well-balanced and ultimately capable of creating the best outputs.

For top managers of aid organizations, this means, firstly, ensuring and honoring your own pragmatic bureaucratic awareness and competence and, secondly, daring to support, justify, and foster the same in others. Here, it is important to note that it can be challenging to formalize learning that leads a more pragmatic bureaucrat since the type of *tacit* knowledge involved is traditionally shared and learned informally.

As shown in this volume, ***the multivocality that typically comes from previous experience of work in different knowledge domains is an unquestionably valuable asset for pragmatic bureaucrats***. However, one must also look for individual qualities such as courage and dedication, in line with our reasoning about a person's *responsibility radius* (Fig. 7). How willing and able is that person to go that extra mile in this uncertain context? For example, in order to safeguard empirically well-motivated variation in regulation and governance (see Chapter 5 on the risk of isomorphic conformity in the development aid field). ***As a general conclusion: rich and multifaceted knowledge of different domains among staff is crucial but so are the organizational memory and available arenas and practices for learning.***

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[3]Human Resources Management, Bureaucratic and Pragmatic Management, hrm024209.wordpress.com, maybe: 21 March 2016. Accessed on June 9, 2023.

We have seen that in the longer run, most senior aid staff become more or less socialized into the pragmatic bureaucratic approaches and practices. We have also concluded that these skills are most often learned, not in formal processes but informally in-between colleagues in everyday project interactions. It is therefore ***important to strive to retain senior staff who have already obtained and mastered these skills and to allow them the time and opportunity to share them more openly with junior staff and newcomers***.

And since juniors and newcomers are typically the most anxious, it is vital to also encourage this group to listen and learn from the more senior pragmatic bureaucrats. It is also important to acknowledge, however, that these types of processes that involve maturing and cultivating one's judgment normally take time and cannot be rushed since judgment must to some extent be based on one's own life experiences (Alexius & Sardiello, 2018). There is also a need for staff who persistently dare to talk about the purpose of measures and how different rules, regulations, and measurement schemes affect the partners and wider system, to be permitted and encouraged to take part in developing these measures.

Ideas for Future Research

As the world is becoming increasingly complex by the minute, we believe that it is both timely and relevant to learn from those who, despite all, dare to take on this compelling "mission impossible." Future research on management and governance in other complex fields (such as health care and corrections and social care) can take inspiration from the extreme case of development aid, leading the way to fruitful studies, comparisons, and discussion of the prevalence and importance of pragmatic bureaucracy in those other settings.

One of the methodological approaches in this volume has been to look at the field of development aid from a historical perspective, by presenting, in Chapter 6, three eras of Swedish development aid. Based on these eras, we concluded that the conditions for a pragmatic bureaucratic approach to development aid have differed over time. Since the professional composition of who "does" aid bureaucracy has changed, and there are more controllers and fewer program officers today, as well as more focus on "doing things

right," we can assume that there may also be fewer pragmatic bureaucrats today than there were in previous eras. Historical comparisons of bureaucratic ideals and practices thus constitute another possible avenue to pursue in further studies.

In our own upcoming research, we are also interested in finding out more about where, when, and how individuals and organizations acquire (or not) the competencies of pragmatic bureaucracy and aim to study more cases on its actual chances of counteracting OMD and tendencies toward OMD.

We also welcome studies on the different conditions for and consequences of the use of POPs (discussed in Chapter 5). In particular, we believe that the classic question of acceptance of variation versus conformity is well worth exploring, not least in relation to currently ongoing debate about the goals of Agenda 2030 and similar undertakings officially proclaimed to encourage multistakeholder collaboration.

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Appendix 1: Methods and Material and Reflections on the Research Process

From Initial Assumptions to Key Conclusions

This volume is one of the outcomes of the authors' joint project "Towards an organizational theory on obsessive measurement disorder," funded by the Swedish Research Council. As mentioned in the introductory chapter, an important point of departure for the project has been to explain when, how and why obsessive measurement disorder (OMD) occurs or not, and to identify coping mechanisms and responses that may help to prevent overregulation and control, and instead foster constructive learning that benefits aid results.

Drawing on rich in-depth case studies of aid bureaucrats in inter-organizational relations, we set out to learn more about how and why decision-makers respond as they do to the high levels of complexity and uncertainty that characterize their operations. Needless to say, we have also been curious about the outcomes and consequences of these aid efforts, and especially keen to understand if, when, and how attempts to demonstrate certainty become counterproductive for the purposes at stake.

As our research journey progressed, however, we found that the core question of OMD could not be explained without taking on the broader topic on how aid bureaucrats deal with uncertainty. Throughout the research process, we have therefore broadened our scope and, as we learned more, adjusted our methodology and analysis accordingly. Below, we provide an account of the choices and the iterative process that led us to the findings presented in this book.

As a general note to the reader, we welcome that case findings presented and discussed in this volume are confirmed, or perhaps disproven, in future studies, including studies on larger populations

of organizations and aid bureaucrats. At the time of writing, we have begun such a follow-up study, in a second project financed by the Swedish Research Council: "Towards isomorphism in development aid? A study on current trust patterns and their implications for the multi-actor policy on diversity in aid."

Three Initial Assumptions About the Prevalence of OMD

Following from our initially formulated research question: "When, how and why does OMD occur?" – a *first* assumption was that we would indeed find *many* instances of OMD in the inter-organizational aid relations that we were about to study. Since we already knew, from previous joint studies and Janet's own extensive work experience in the field, that there is a substantial amount of regulation and numerous measurement technologies in this field, we initially also assumed that we would find OMD pretty much *everywhere*, or at least in most instances – albeit to varying degrees. We were hence particularly interested in the *amount* and *frequency* of regulation and measurement technologies employed by organizations in the donor role, where we initially assumed that these regulations and tools would help to explain the prevalence of OMD, essentially that: "the more regulations, the higher the prevalence of OMD."

At first, we set out to study the *degree* of OMD in the four so-called actor groups who receive and channel Swedish public aid funding: (1) civil-society organizations (2) private-sector actors, (3) Swedish authorities in the public sector, and (4) research cooperation (see www.sida.se).[1] Because the different actor groups have somewhat different financing mechanisms and criteria for how to apply for funding, we found it reasonable to believe that one or

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[1]The term "actor group" is a term used by Sida. As organization scholars, our interest in comparing these actor groups lay in the fact that they represent different institutional contexts and orders in society that are associated with the ideal-typical contexts of the public sector, the market, and civil society (for a broader discussion on this, see Alexius & Vähämäki, 2020).

another group may be more regulated and hence more or less likely to suffer from OMD (see Carleson, 2017; Resare, 2011).

In order to compare how the actor groups' different institutional domains were regulated, we analyzed the overall governance mechanisms for the four groups, i.e., their separate aid allocations, strategies, agreement templates, performance measurement and other control requirements, formal and informal guidance documents, formal and informal organization structures, etc. We also conducted over 20 interviews with representatives from Sida and the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, and representatives or responsible managers for the respective actor group. In addition, we participated in a number of more general events, debates and discussions applicable to all actor groups (e.g., events organized by Sida's Forum on Working Adaptively and the Network for Learning – Capacity Development in Practice, or events organized for a specific actor group, e.g., a research day organized by International Science Program (ISP) for all research partner organizations).

In addition to the general macro studies used to study the first hypothesis (i.e., our first assumption), we selected case organizations to represent each of the four actor groups and conducted interviews with their representatives as well as studying their agreements, evaluations, performance measurement, and control requirements in detail. We looked at documentation such as contractual requirements including management technologies such as the "logical framework," but also at additional requirements (such as random checks), and looked for situations where these artifacts or decisions (e.g., a decision to contract a third party, such as a consultant) played a key role in continued collaboration. Written documents like agreements, contracts, e-mail exchanges, and other project-related texts have also been valuable to the study as they offer an opportunity to follow and compare how formulations, stipulated conditions, sanctions, etc., are passed on unchanged – or rather, after being changed and/or extended by the organizations in the aid chain and its wider network.

We have studied the following seven case organizations and their respective aid relations: the International Science Program (ISP) – an example of support through universities, Union to Union – an example of support through civil society organizations; RFSU (the Swedish Association for Sexual Education) – an example of support

through civil society organizations; the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA) – an example of support through public-sector authorities; and Volvo – an example of support through private-sector actors. In a data collaboration with three graduate students working on two master's theses (Laurén, 2019; Smith & Ringqvist, 2019), we also had the opportunity to follow the cases of the Swedish Chemicals Agency – another example of support through Swedish authorities, and Forum Syd – an example of support through civil society. Both master's studies followed several aid-channeling organizations (from the aid organization based in Sweden to organizations operating in the developing countries), and posed questions regarding when, how, and why OMD occurs or not in these aid relations.

The *second* of our initial assumptions was that the prevalence of OMD would also *increase* as we tracked the contractual relations along the vertical "aid chain" from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Sida, down to the aid organizations in the different actor groups and their partners in the developing countries. Above all, we wanted to explore whether there was a tendency for aid organizations in the donor role to *add even more* control requirements before turning to the next organization in line, in the recipient role. We hence hypothesized that "the greater the number of relationships in the aid chain, and the further down the chain you come, the higher the prevalence of OMD."

After concluding that the "aid chain" is in fact more of a web of aid relations (see also Chapter 7), we developed a *third* hypothesis, which was that the prevalence of experienced OMD may be explained by horizontal relations (such as those to external experts) in the "aid web," based on our assumption that: "The more external experts that have sold measurement technologies to the aid organizations involved, the higher the prevalence of OMD."

Thus we also studied the aid organizations' agreements and contracts with external experts and interviewed external experts on their views on when, how, and why OMD occurs. We interviewed the group of consultants at NIRAS (then InDevelop) who were working with the overall Sida framework agreement twice, in 2013 and in 2022, and in 2018 we interviewed the consultants from the AIMS consultancy company. We also conducted interviews with thematic Help Desks procured by Sida. The main method used to

analyze the historical material was process tracing (Collier, 2011), where the researcher tries to unfold why a specific event or change happened by testing different assumptions. Here, we found that a changed demand for external expertise was linked to a changed perception of uncertainty.

Key Findings: Aid Organizations Are Similar and OMD an Experience

Our explorations based on the three initial hypotheses (described above) gave us some interesting tentative answers, but also spurred us to broaden the scope of our study, as described below.

In our studies of the first hypothesis (*H1.* the more regulations, the higher the prevalence of OMD), we found no clear pattern in the data to verify this common assumption. Rather, we came to conclude that **OMD is not an objectively verifiable state, but an individual *experience* of a *perceived* overregulation** (of an aid project, organization, inter-organizational relationship, or larger system). Moreover, and importantly, we conclude that **it is not the *amount* of regulations** per se **that leads some people in the aid system to experience OMD**. As discussed at length in several chapters, the prevalence of OMD, or rather the chances of preventing or counteracting such tendencies, **depends instead on whether aid bureaucrats (and other people in the system) have the knowledge and courage to make sense of the regulation and oversight, and to interact with it in a meaningful way**, using approaches and practices that we call "pragmatic bureaucracy" (see Chapter 8).

In some cases, we even found, counterintuitively, that increased oversight and control led to *positive* outcomes, such as increased trust and a sense of visibility for a specific topic or specific task carried out by someone in the organization (see Chapter 6). Based on these findings and analyses we conclude that there is not a straightforward answer to the question of whether reduced oversight on its own would result in less OMD experienced in aid (see Alexius & Vähämäki, 2020). Concerning the comparisons between the different types of organizations and the assumed differences between them, independent of their institutional context we have found that **aid organizations and their aid bureaucrats are more *alike* than different**, something we discuss in chapters 4, 5, and 7.

Our tentative findings concerning the second hypothesis (*H2*. the greater the number of relationships in the aid chain, and the further down the chain you come, the higher the prevalence of OMD) are discussed in Chapter 4 where, on one hand, we present data that supports the assumption and, on the other, data that speaks against it. In essence, we found that most aid organizations are expected to be "plural actors" who frequently switch between the two main roles in the core role set of development aid operations: the donor and the recipient. We conclude that each aid bureaucrat who takes on the donor role on behalf of their organization tends to be eager to meet the social expectation of being a responsible, "proper" donor. And by this is typically meant ensuring continued (and sometimes increased) regulation and oversight. **Although more research is necessary, our tentative findings indicate that, although aid organizations and their bureaucrats switch between the roles of donor and recipient, the donor role may come to dominate the bureaucrats' approach to regulation and control. However, we also find attempts to balance the tendency to overregulate.** Such initiatives are initiated in part by aid bureaucrats who act in the recipient role, and in part by external experts who may also advocate exceptions and adjustments to regulation and control schemes (see Chapters 5–7).

Considering the third initial hypothesis (*H3*. the more external experts that have sold measurement technologies to the aid organizations involved, the higher the prevalence of OMD), based on our tentative findings we do not rule this out. However, as described in Chapters 6 and 7, **while some external experts appear to have increased the risk of OMD, others helped to counteract such tendencies.**

Empirical Material and Analysis

In terms of empirical data, our study is based on the analysis of hundreds of documents and some 80 transcribed interviews with aid bureaucrats working at different levels in different organizations, including public agencies, private companies, NGOs, and universities, all of which are involved in development aid projects fully or partially financed by the Swedish taxpayer.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted by the authors in different projects dating back to 2013, with an emphasis on the period 2017–2023. We used a rather broad and open, thematic interview guide where we let the interviewees speak as freely as possible about key topics related to governance and management of aid. All interviews lasted between 1 and 2 hours, and we asked about perceptions of control, trust, and learning, and also more generally about the nature of the relationships to other organizations, in both the donor and the recipient role. There were questions about the specificities of the actor group to which the organization in question belongs, about its "intermediary" role as such, about popular management technologies, evaluations, contracts, and other governance mechanisms. As the study progressed, the interview guide was refined, for instance, to follow up early findings that indicated the importance of a "role-switching" and the balancing power of "pragmatic bureaucratic approaches," but the topics and focus remained the same.

The over 140 hours of interview time have been transcribed verbatim by a certified transcription firm (approximately 40–50 pages for each interview). The documents, field notes, and verbatim transcriptions, along with our own reflections noted after each interview session, were then analyzed in several rounds and coded abductively, that is, combining insights from theory and the data at hand (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2008). In terms of data validation strategies, access to both interviewees and other sources of verbatim accounts (such as contracts and information on websites) means that the case narrative is to a large extent based on so-called low inference descriptors, i.e., verbatim accounts of the interviewees' own views (Johnson, 1997). Since the project is a collaboration between two authors, all coding and analyses were first conducted individually by each author, after which another round of recoding and analysis was conducted jointly. In an interpretative mode, a cross-reading of all of the interview transcriptions and field notes was performed by the authors to tease out analytical patterns and relevant themes. Allowing time between the rounds of analysis provided an opportunity for further reflection, enabling the discovery of new meaningful patterns (Davies & Harré, 1990). Although all of the data collected was considered in our coding and analyses, only a selected number of sources are referred to in the

narrative of the case, to illustrate patterns interpreted as representative for the material as a whole.

Translated into triangulation strategies for validating data (Johnson, 1997), we used (a) data triangulation where we analyzed verbatim transcripts of interviews, written documents, website data, and field notes from participant observations, (b) methods triangulation (document studies, interviews, participant observations), (c) investigator triangulation, in the sense of teamwork between two authors in collecting and interpreting the data, and last but not least (d) theory triangulation, where we have used multiple theories and perspectives to help interpret and make sense of the data (i.e., such as institutional theory on social roles and scripts, theory on trust formation and theory on governance under conditions of uncertainty and at a distance). None of the interviewees requested anonymity, and all gave their oral consent to use the interview data in academic publications.

Further Verification

In some cases, we have had the benefit of participant feedback as we have presented early drafts to interested interviewees and tentative findings in later follow-up interviews and in practitioner lectures. Participant feedback of this sort represents another validity-promoting strategy to verify interpretations and extended insight (Johnson, 1997). In our case, practitioner feedback has resulted in both minor revisions and valuable clarifications. A number of informal, non-recorded but informative conversations, face-to-face or via Zoom, have added further insight and nuance to the findings.

Since we are primarily interested in organizations and institutionalized roles rather than the roles of individual persons, we have deliberately chosen not to publish the names of those interviewed. Having stated this to the interviewees, we believe that this has further contributed to the open and frank accounts received. And although we have decided to publish the names of the organizations, we hope that the reader will find, as we have, that the similarities across the cases are more pronounced than differences, making the individual cases in themselves less paramount.

Along the research journey, earlier findings have been further verified via follow-up group interviews with aid bureaucrats, external experts, and other scholars (with the final sessions held in early 2023). Our analysis has also benefited from the insightful comments and advice received at several international academic conferences, and we wish to thank the conveners and participants of the following: Nordic Development Research conference, Gothenburg, 2018; Political Resource conference, Södertörn, 2019; European Group for Organization Studies (EGOS), Edinburgh, 2019; Organizing the World conference, Stockholm, 2022; the EGOS conference in Cagliari, 2023 and the Nordic Development Research conference in Uppsala, 2023. Furthermore, we have had continuous opportunities to present and discuss our findings with a dedicated reference group consisting of: Göran Sundström, Professor of Political Science at Stockholm University; Bino Catasús, Professor of Business Administration at Stockholm University; Joakim Molander, PhD, Head of Budget and Program Performance International IDEA in Stockholm; and Kristina Tamm Hallström, Associate Professor of Business Administration at the Stockholm School of Economics.

Throughout the research process, we have aimed for reflexivity in the sense of critical self-reflection on our potential biases and predispositions, where having two researchers to gather and analyze the data adds a valuable dimension (Otley & Berry, 1994). Employing these kinds of validating strategies in data generation and analysis has been argued to push the exploratory research toward both methodological and theoretical rigor (Eisenhardt, 1989; Stebbins, 2001). Last but not least, we wish to make clear to the reader that this volume makes no claims providing a fully representative picture of the operations of every aid bureaucrat and aid organization involved in the global field of development aid.

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Appendix 2: Summary: Conditions and Factors to Consider

Below, we have summarized key responses to the research questions about *when*, *how*, and in particular *why* performance measurement requirements and other control demands can actually weaken performance rather than having the intended performance-enhancing effect on development policy and its implementation (see also Chapter 8).

When Does It Occur?

Conditions that can increase the risk of performance measurement requirements and other control systems having performance-weakening effects:

- *Organizations are externally criticized*, and decisions are taken to respond forcefully to the criticism and the underlying uncertainty by way of attempted "trust-transference" from impersonal, legitimacy-enhancing measures such as additional results-based management technologies and measurements.
- *Decision-makers are too short-sighted*, for example, due to the mismatch of temporalities between politicians' or other decision-makers' own mandates (period in office) and the actual time required to make a difference in the field.
- *Organizations have large numbers of newly employed staff.* New employees may be unaware of the fact that control and measurement systems can lead to counterproductive effects. They may also be excessively rule-abiding due to fear of losing control or losing a job position, or fear of not being considered professional. Less experienced bureaucrats may have unrealistic beliefs when it comes to solving development problems and in the

management dreams of simplifying the complex and controlling the future.

- *Organizations have a high staff turnover*. This condition can make it more difficult for staff to gain a long-term understanding and for senior staff to share pragmatic bureaucratic insights and practices with junior staff or newcomers. This state may also contribute to decisions being taken "blindly" in following with institutionalized role-scripts, where the role of donor is the most influential one in this regard.

- *Stress and a lack of slack time in the organization* can further contribute to bureaucrats not having the time and energy to go the extra mile and take responsibility for how control and measurement affect the parties involved, particularly in the longer run, and how measures need to be adapted to the particular context.

- *A change in the professional competence profile of the staff*. When large numbers of technically oriented generalists come to replace staff with more specialized, context-oriented knowledge, there is a risk for mission drift in the organization. Sometimes, more technically oriented generalists turn into "hyper bureaucrats," over-excited about the details of technical and logical measurement schemes and unable or unwilling to see the bigger picture. The risk for performance-weakening effects is especially likely to increase when such hyper bureaucrats create larger networks and/or gain powerful positions in an organization or the wider system.

Why Does It Occur?

- The search for legitimacy and an unreflective strive toward effectiveness at all costs take center stage and become counterproductive, particularly in the longer run.

- Bureaucrats lack professional judgment, experiential knowledge, courage and/or opportunities to share, and learn/socialize into a more pragmatic bureaucratic culture.

- Bureaucrats don't have time to see the reality and meet with partners since they are too busy with requirements and measurements, despite having the awareness that measurements can become counterproductive.

What Can Be Done About It?

- Ensure that the organization has a growing cadre of staff with pragmatic bureaucratic awareness and competence. Honor, foster, and support this competence.
- Honor the staff's brokerage skills, multivocality, and knowledge about different domains and contexts.
- Enable opportunities to talk about the fears of losing control, losing a job, or not being considered professional, for example, by creating designated "worry periods" to discuss uncertainties in the field.
- Create awareness on current control and measurement rituals by reflecting on how they affect partners and main beneficiaries. Prioritize communication and mutual understanding, i.e., ask and listen to your counterparts about how they experience different rules, regulations, and measurements. The plural actorhood and role-switching (between the roles of donor and recipient/partner) experienced by most aid organizations and staff can be a fruitful point of departure for such discussions.

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