

Aristotle and Plato at it again? Philosophical divergence within international aid project design and monitoring & evaluation

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Abstract:

International aid projects are broadly concerned with fostering change. Frequently, the ‘theory of change’ within an aid project is communicated using Logical Framework Analysis, or the ‘logframe’. The logframe may be viewed from at least two philosophical perspectives—functionalist and interpretist. Functionalism is found to be useful for problem analysis and project design since it enables a deconstruction of the goal into functional components. Interpretivism is found to assist project monitoring and evaluation since it draws attention to the role of human actors within the social change process, thereby clarifying the social research plan. A bilateral program in the Philippines is described to illustrate the practical differences arising from the divergent philosophies.

Key words:

international aid projects, monitoring and evaluation, project design, logframe, functionalism, interpretivism, social change

1. Introduction

Fundamental to the mission of international aid agencies is the desire to foster change in the world. As such, international aid projects may be considered a form of social research¹ within which ‘theories of change’ are tested (Davies 2002; Rondinelli 1993). The ‘hypotheses’ of change embodied within aid project plans are tested through processes of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) (Crawford, Perryman et al. 2004). The concept of the ‘project cycle’ centres on the notion that lessons learned through M&E are fed back into project design (AusAID 2000; EC 2001; UNDP 2002), thereby driving an iterative process of learning and improvement, both within the life of a given project (‘intra-project learning’), and beyond the life of a given project (‘inter-project learning’).

A dominant tool within the international aid industry for both project design and M&E is Logical Framework Analysis, or the ‘logframe’ (Coleman 1987; Cracknell 2000; Bell 2000; Crawford and Bryce 2003). Although the logframe is criticised for its apparently rigid ‘blueprint’ approach to planning social change (Fowler 1997; Gasper 2000; den Heyer 2001; Earl 2002; Gasper 1997; Lavergne 2002; Davies 2002) it has nevertheless emerged as an official requirement of virtually all multilateral and bilateral funding agencies, and as such, has become the *defacto* aid industry standard for both project design and M&E.

In this paper, we argue that the dominant way that the logframe is used for project *design* is not necessarily appropriate for *M&E*. Ambiguity and conceptual tensions that arise may derive from philosophical divergence. This philosophical divergence is reminiscent of the ancient conflict between Aristotle and Plato. We suggest that there is value in acknowledging the different perspectives on the logframe—‘functionalist’ and ‘interpretist’—and appropriately applying each for the purposes of design and M&E, respectively.

2. The ‘Logframe’

The logframe was developed by Practical Concepts Incorporated in 1969 for the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The logframe is a member of a larger family of ‘simple linear’ theories of change (Davies 2002).

The broader ‘logframe approach’ to project design involves a process of stakeholder consultation, ‘problem tree’ development, ‘solution tree’ development and finally the production of a ‘logframe matrix’ which communicates the aid project strategy employed (or ‘theory of change’) (AusAID 2000; EC 2001; IFAD 2002; UNDP 2002).

The logframe matrix attempts to break down the logic of the project strategy into a chain of ‘conditional causality’ (Walsch 2000; Crawford, Perryman et al. 2004). Essentially, ‘Inputs’ are invested so that certain predefined deliverables or ‘Outputs’ can be produced. The achievement of output targets is in turn expected to initiate or foster desirable ‘Outcomes’ among direct beneficiaries (or ‘Boundary Partners’ (Earl 2002)), which may ultimately contribute to wider developmental ‘Impact’ within the

¹ Cook and Campbell (1979) use the term ‘quasi-experiments’. Rondinelli (1993) uses the term ‘policy experiments’.

ultimate beneficiary community². The pragmatic reality that this linear (IF→THEN) logic rarely eventuates in practice is expressed within the logframe through the identification of ‘risks’³ at each level in the logframe matrix. In practice, the identified risks break up the linear IF → THEN causality into ‘conditional causality’: IF →AND → THEN (as depicted in Figure 1)⁴. In essence, ‘risks’ qualify the linear design logic.

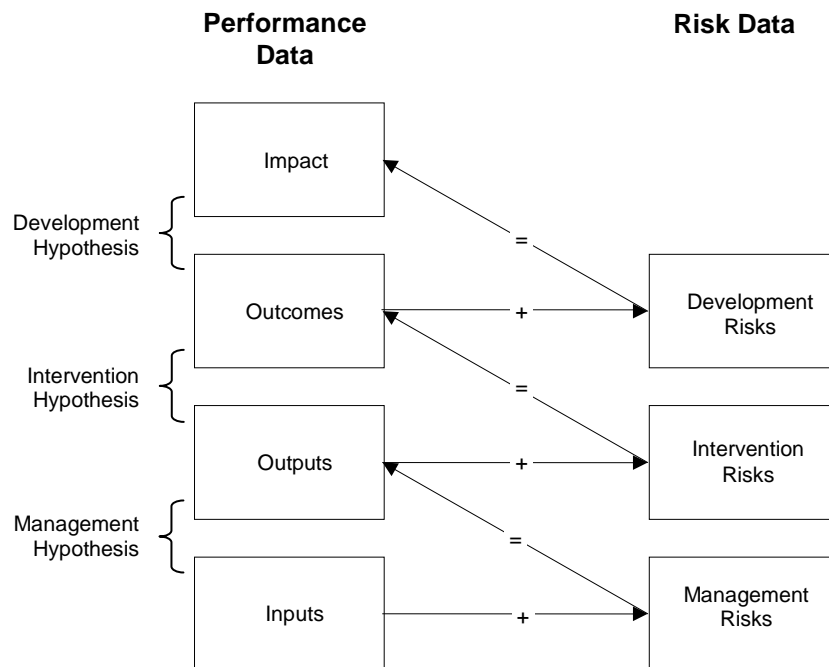


Figure 1: The IF → AND → THEN 'conditional causality' that underpins the logframe matrix (Source: Crawford, Perryman et al. 2004)

The logic that underpins the logframe may be viewed from two philosophical perspectives: functionalism and interpretivism.

3. Functionalism v Interpretivism

Functionalism derives from Aristotle, and is used in this context to describe a perspective that is fundamentally ‘process-centric’. Interpretivism derives from Plato, and is used in this context to describe a perspective that is fundamentally ‘actor-centric’ (Crawford 2004, p 94). These two philosophical perspectives have been the source of considerable debate, and were in fact one basis for conflict between Aristotle and Plato (Pirsig 1974).

Functionalism may be contrasted with interpretivism by its predominant focus. Whereas functionalism has a predominant focus on the nature of the *operational* elements of a system, namely the ‘tools’ (e.g. a spanner), interpretivism has a predominant focus on the *experience* of human elements within the system, namely the people who use or are affected by ‘the tool’ (e.g. the mechanic).

² N.B. Various proponents of the logframe use different terms at each level in the hierarchy of logic. ‘impact’ is analogous to terms such as ‘goal’, ‘development objective’, ‘overall objective’ etc. ‘outcome’ is analogous to terms such as ‘effect’, ‘objective’, ‘purpose’, ‘immediate objective’ etc.

³ N.B. Some proponents of the logframe use the terms ‘pre-conditions’ or ‘assumptions’. These terms reflect the same logical role as ‘risks’, but are phrased in the positive.

⁴ E.g. IF Inputs are invested, AND Management Risks are contained, THEN Outputs will be delivered.

Planning an international aid project from a *functionalist* perspective involves breaking down the desired changes into functional elements—the units of work/effort required to bring about the planned change. Planning an international aid project from an *interpretist* perspective involves articulating the role/experience of key human actors involved in the social change process.

Functionalism is the dominant approach to project *design* using the logframe. The development of a ‘problem tree’ which is subsequently converted into a ‘solution tree’ ensures that logframe matrices grounded in the functionalist perspective have strong intuitive appeal when used for design. In contrast, project *M&E* (as a form of social research) tends to be more grounded when planned from an interpretist perspective. This is because the practice of M&E essentially involves the posing of questions to a range of human actors thought to be informed about the extent and merit of social changes fostered by a project—an interpretist bias is evident.

It is a central tenet of this paper that functionalist logframe matrices used to plan international aid projects may be a source of ambiguity and confusion when carried forward into the implementation phase of the project cycle and used as the basis for M&E.

3.1 The Logframe as a Functionalist Tool

It is well established that functionalism is the dominant perspective in modern thought (Goldspink 1999; Gharajedaghi 1999; Burrell and Morgan 1994; Checkland and Holwell 1998). In particular, the disciplines of project management and organisational theory that underpin the logframe approach derive from the work of Frederick Taylor (Sisk 2003; Yeo 1993) and Herbert Simon (Simon 1960) respectively, and as such are firmly located within a functionalist epistemology. It is, therefore, not surprising that the dominant approach to logical framework analysis is functionalist in nature. This perspective has demonstrated merit in problem analysis and project design.

A recent experience developing a M&E framework for a AUD28million AusAID-funded bilateral aid program to provide community development assistance in the Philippines illustrates the difference between the two philosophical perspectives. The Philippines-Australia Community Assistance Program (PACAP) is a small grants scheme that funds a variety of civil society and local government groups (e.g. non-government organisations, people’s organisations, local government units, religious services organisations etc.) to implement community development initiatives in poor communities throughout the Philippines in general, and in five southern provinces in particular. A simplified problem tree that underpins the functionalist program design is presented in Figure 2.

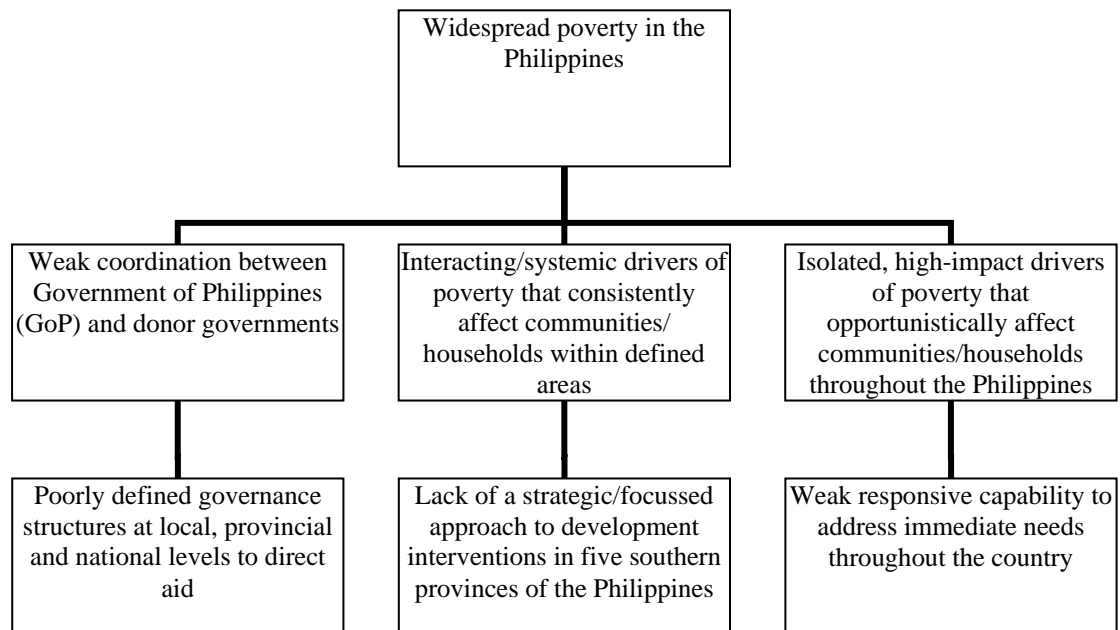


Figure 2: A simplified Problem Tree for PACAP

The corresponding solution tree that derives from the problem analysis above is presented in Figure 3.

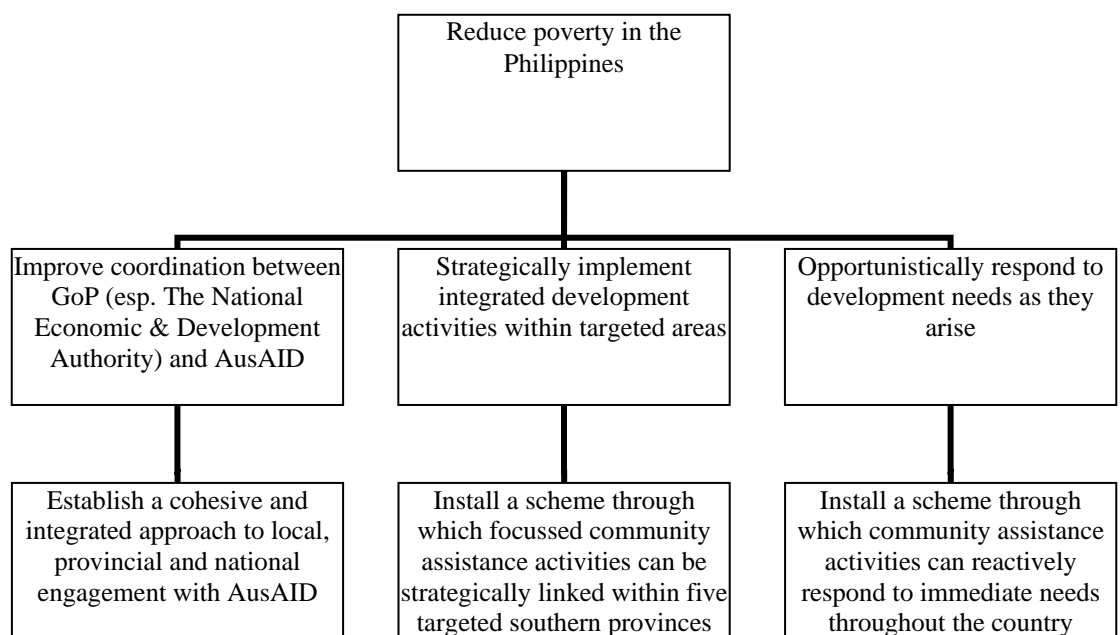


Figure 3: A simplified functionalist Solution Tree for PACAP

The left-hand column⁵ of a simplified functionalist logframe matrix that synthesises the problem/solution analysis above is presented in Figure 4.

⁵ The other columns of the logframe are deliberately left blank for the purposes of this paper to highlight the functionalist nature of the logic.

| Goal | Impact Indicators | Means of Verification | Risks |
|--|----------------------------|------------------------------|--------------|
| To reduce poverty in the Philippines | | | |
| Objectives | Outcome Indicators | Means of Verification | Risks |
| 1. To establish a governance structure bridging local, provincial and national levels for guiding the implementation of community assistance projects | | | |
| 2. To install a Focussed Community Assistance Scheme (FOCAS) linking strategic activities within targeted provinces | | | |
| 3. To install a Responsive Activity Scheme (RAS) enabling diverse and responsive activities throughout the Philippines | | | |
| Outputs | Progress Indicators | Means of Verification | Risks |
| 1.1 Program Advisory Committee (PAC) established 1.2 Provincial Stakeholder Committees (PSC) established in five target provinces, endorsed by AusAID and operating 1.3 FOCAS Management Committees (FMC) established in target areas, endorsed by PAC and trained 1.4 Strategic Guidance Framework installed and reviewed annually | | | |
| 2.1 FOCAS criteria developed 2.2 Focal areas defined 2.3 FOCAS strategies developed by FMC and endorsed by PSC 2.4 FOCAS strategies reviewed and approved by PAC 2.5 FOCAS activities implemented by proponent organisations and monitored by FMC | | | |
| 3.1 RAS promoted throughout the Philippines 3.2 Activity concepts reviewed and endorsed by PACAP 3.3 RAS proposals appraised and approved by PAC 3.4 RAS activities implemented by proponent organisations and monitored by PACAP | | | |

Figure 4: A simplified functionalist logframe matrix for PACAP

The systematic breakdown of complex problems into their component parts, as enabled by the functionalist approach to the logframe, is commonly found to assist project design. However, a challenge subsequently encountered by M&E practitioners arises from the reality that social change, by definition, takes place within the lives of humans, and as such M&E tools/processes must inquire into the perspective of selected human actors in order to establish the extent and merit of

changes fostered by projects. In practice, a functionalist logframe matrix tends to abstract the human actors—tending to focus on the functions or roles of the *implementation team* in fostering various elements of the overall planned change. This frequently results in objectives that read like project ‘milestones’ of the implementation team, rather than descriptions of social change involving a series of actors⁶. As a result, developing a M&E strategy from a functionalist logframe frequently requires a degree of deciphering.

3.2 The Logframe as an Interpretist Tool

Although less common, a logframe can also be developed using an interpretist perspective to communicate the theory of change of a project through the eyes of key human actors involved. Within this perspective the focus is on the role/experience of human actors in the anticipated change process, rather than the functions of ‘the project’ that cause the change *per se*.

Within the functionalist approach to the logframe, the implementation team may consider each level in the logic by asking: ‘*what* must I do to contribute to the objective above?’ In contrast, within an interpretist approach, the implementation team asks *who* am I seeking to influence; and in turn, *who* will they influence?

An interpretist perspective acknowledges that social change, by definition, involves human actors interacting within a system. This interaction has been described by the theory of ‘diffusion of innovations’ (DoI) (Rogers 1962). ‘Innovation’ in this context refers to any novel idea, practice or object. ‘Diffusion’ is the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of the social system.

Some commentators find that adopting a strict actor-centric perspective helps to bring clarity. In the words of Davies (2002, p 5): “My own experience is that when you clearly identify the groups of people who are the actors in each stage of the Logical Framework the story line becomes much more evident, along with its plausibility”.

Work by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) in Canada has also identified value in grounding the theory of change of a project in the roles of human actors in the process. The ‘Outcome Mapping’ approach developed by IDRC (Earl 2002) draws a clear distinction between the roles of the project implementation team and ‘boundary partners’. Earl (2002) defines boundary partners as: “those individuals, groups, and organisations with whom the program interacts directly and with whom the program anticipates opportunities for influence”.

These actors are called boundary partners⁷ because the project will work with them to effect change, but it does not control them⁸. The power to influence development among the ‘ultimate beneficiaries’ rests with them, not the project implementation team. The project tries to facilitate the process by providing access to new resources,

⁶ For example, ‘Objective 1’ in Figure 4 is concerned with the establishment of governance structures. From a functionalist perspective, this is a necessary step (milestone) by the implementation team towards achieving the program’s higher purpose. An interpretist perspective would take a deeper interest in *who* is being influenced by *whom*, such that at the outcome level, the focus would be on the changes in knowledge/attitude/practice (KAP) experienced by direct beneficiaries (‘boundary partners’)—in the case of PACAP, the experience of the members of the various governance bodies.

⁷ More commonly called ‘primary beneficiaries’ or ‘direct beneficiaries’.

⁸ Covey (1990), Fowler (1997), Crawford (2004) and others, find merit in distinguishing between factors within the ‘sphere of control’ of a project implementation team, and other factors that are within their ‘sphere of influence’ or only within their ‘sphere of concern’.

ideas, or opportunities for a certain period of time. The project is on the boundary of their world (see Figure 5).

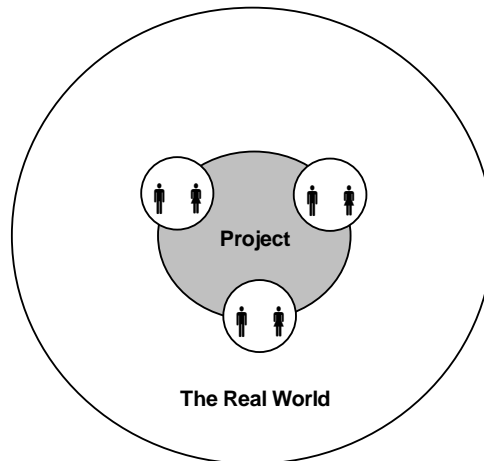


Figure 5: The concept of ‘Boundary Partners’ as a key class of human actor within aid projects (Source: Earl 2002)

A metaphor for the DoI process and the three-stage ‘theory of change’ embodied in the logframe when approached from an interpretist perspective is the ripple observed when a stone is thrown into still water (Crawford, Perryman et al. 2004). The ripple is a useful analogy since it communicates both the time taken for change to take place within a social system, and the observation that the magnitude of influence diminishes the further it moves from the source. The causes of the diminishing ripple are embodied in the ‘risks’ identified at each stage in the theory of change, as depicted in Figure 1. The ripple metaphor of DoI, the three classes of human actor and the levels of the logframe are depicted in Figure 6.

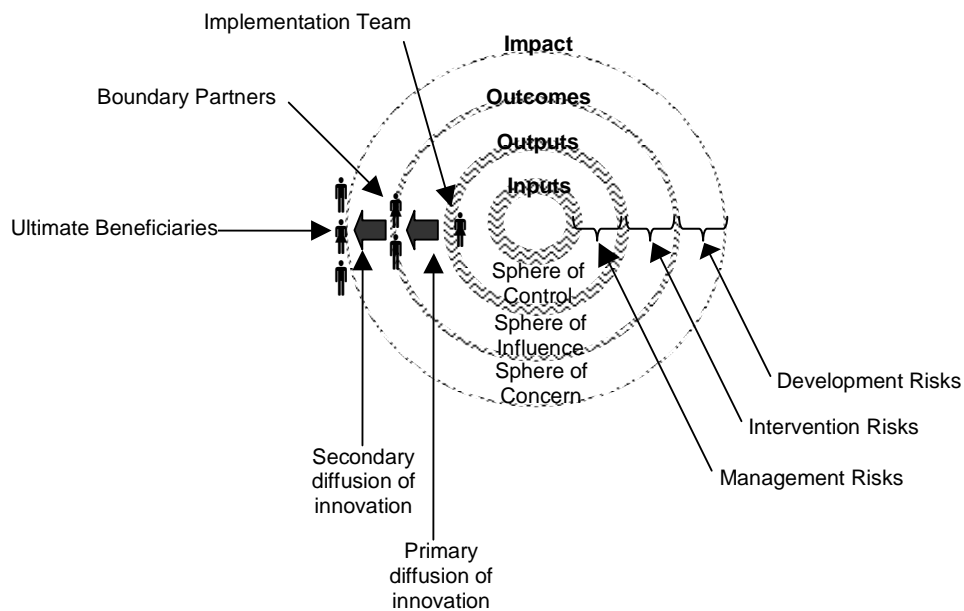


Figure 6: A model integrating DoI theory, the logframe and the notion of diminishing project control (Source: Crawford 2004)

The interpretist philosophy, as embodied in the theory of DoI, succinctly models the processes of change effected by PACAP. The classes of human actor are clearly identifiable in the broad vision for the Philippines program.

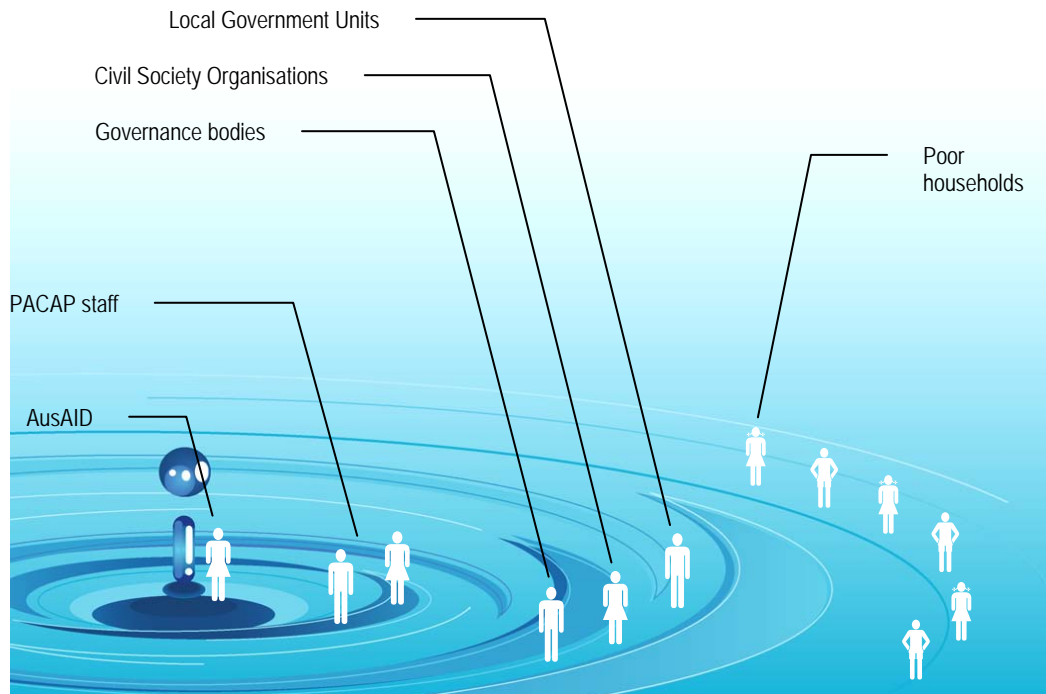


Figure 7: The key human actors in PACAP

Given the problem/solution analysis for the Philippines program presented above (Figure 2 and Figure 3), a logframe (left-hand column only) articulating the theory of change from an interpretist perspective may appear as in Figure 8—note the emphasis on the role of the human actors from Figure 7 at each stage of change in the logframe hierarchy.

| Impact | Impact Indicators | Means of Verification | Development Risks |
|---|---------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Households within poor communities throughout the Philippines are experiencing positive changes in their wellbeing | | | |
| Outcomes | Outcome Indicators | Means of Verification | Intervention Risks |
| 1. Governance structures at local, provincial and national levels are coordinating assistance for poor communities | | | |
| 2. Civil Society Organisations and Local Government Units are planning and implementing community assistance projects within defined focal areas in accord with agreed FOCAS strategies | | | |
| 3. Civil Society Organisations and Local | | | |

| Government Units are planning and implementing community assistance programs throughout the Philippines in response to identified needs | | | |
|---|----------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Outputs | Progress Indicators | Means of Verification | Management Risks |
| 1.1 PACAP has refined and directed the PAC 1.2 PACAP has facilitated the formation of PSCs in target provinces 1.3 PACAP has facilitated the establishment and training of FMCs | | | |
| 2.1 PACAP has defined focal areas in five target provinces in Southern Philippines 2.2 PACAP has appraised and funded FOCAS strategies 2.3 PACAP has facilitated capacity building of proponent organisations implementing FOCAS strategies 2.4 PACAP has monitored FOCAS project implementation | | | |
| 3.1 PACAP has promoted RAS throughout the Philippines 3.2 PACAP has appraised and funded RAS project proposals 3.3 PACAP has monitored RAS project implementation | | | |

Figure 8: A simplified interpretive logframe matrix for PACAP

4. Practical Significance

In reflecting on the simplified logframes presented in Figure 4 and Figure 8, it is clear that both the functionalist and interpretist perspectives can be used to communicate the same strategy or ‘theory of change’. The functionalist perspective assists the project design process since it deconstructs the elements of the problem under study. The interpretist perspective assists the process of implementing an M&E system since the ‘subject of inquiry’ at each stage in the change process is explicit.

Designing a project from an *interpretist* perspective is also acceptable, and since it can subsequently be carried forward as the basis for M&E, promotes efficiencies for project cycle management. However, the predominance of functionalism in modern thinking (especially planning) discourages this. In a recent case, a project design submitted to a bilateral donor was initially rejected when presented in an interpretist form. When the identical strategy was re-submitted in a functionalist form it was accepted. Hence, there may be value in appropriately applying functionalism for design purposes, and interpretivism for M&E purposes in a two-stage process.

One benefit of the interpretist approach to the logframe, as presented above, is that each level in the hierarchy of the logframe is explicitly aligned with a key class of human actor in the social change process which helps to ground M&E planning. That is, outputs are firmly aligned with the implementation team; outcomes are aligned

with the boundary partners; and impact is the realm of the ultimate beneficiaries—thereby clarifying the ‘subjects of inquiry’ for M&E at each stage of the anticipated change process.

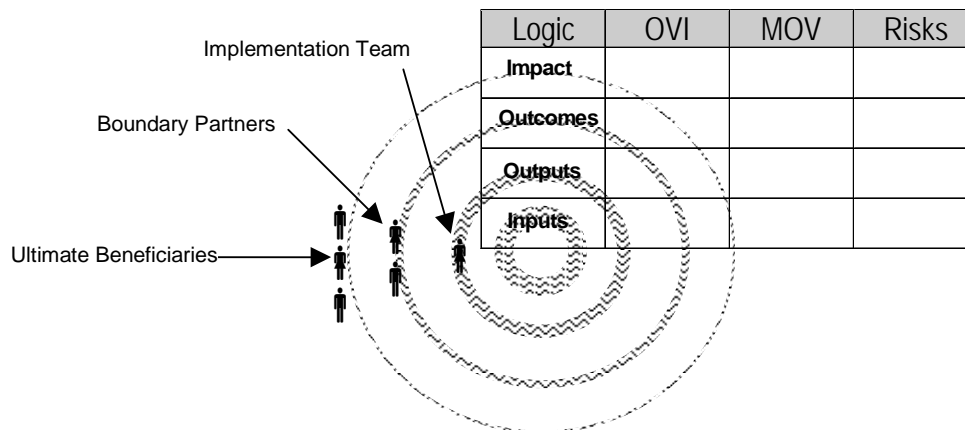


Figure 9: An overlaying of the logframe with interpretist DoI theory

This clear alignment of levels in the design logic with human actors in the social change process promotes a useful ‘systems perspective’ on the overall performance of the project. It draws explicit focus to the temporal stages in the overall planned change, which in turn allows identification of weaknesses in the ‘theory of change’.

Moreover, the replacement of a grammar of abstracted states and passive subjects, with one of direct and explicit assignment of actors, adds clarity for operational management, as well as monitoring and evaluation.

There is also an issue of transparency of language, in a field where (almost by definition) many project stakeholders view English as a foreign language, are ill at ease with an abstracted form of the language, and view the project as centrally concerned with functioning people as distinct from establishing states of function. The process of problem tree, solution tree and logframe construction is often seen as alienating, whereas, ideally, project design and M&E information should be readily accessible, with clarity, to all partners.

5. Conclusion

The logframe's clarity of description of complex development projects has ensured its widespread diffusion for design and M&E. As a tool, it reflects the cultural, educational and institutional biases of the toolmaker, and also those of stakeholders at the donor and project design end of the stakeholder spectrum. An objective, abstracted functionalistic discourse is generally chosen to form the tool. But such ingredients can constitute a communication barrier for field staff and partners at the other end of the stakeholder spectrum.

This paper has argued for the legitimacy of a subjective, interpretist discourse within the logframe, and illustrated that this perspective can provide the same information with equal or greater managerial clarity. As such, we have identified philosophical divergence in the way in which the widely used logframe can be applied within the international aid industry.

Whereas Aristotle and Plato may have debated these perspectives as mutually exclusive, we have since regarded these two perspectives as simply models for particular circumstances. A developmental context demands a discourse that must span wide spectra of geographic, cultural and managerial contexts. As such, an added interpretist perspective has potential to complement the dominant functionalist discourse.

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