

Development Communication: an unspoken framework for actions and results

This soapbox article is inspired by what I thought was an excellent piece – Saying No to Pity - on the BBC today, the 19th December 2012 (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-20762278>).

In this piece, Georgie Fienberg, founder of the Afrikids charity is calling for an end to poverty shock advertising. She argues that such practices fuel miscommunication of the complexity of the development challenge; and how these sensationalist images skew expectations, responses and results reporting, all to the detriment of good development outcomes.

Good development, she argues, is centred on the notion of sustainability – that means matter as much as ends; specifically, that the means through which good development outcomes emerge endure beyond the period of any external intervention. This means responding to the causes of poverty, not sticking plasters over its many symptoms. This is more complex. It takes longer. It's more risky. It relies on working with and through local stakeholders. But it's what development is; it's what development means; and what good development should do.

In thinking through the implications of her call for change, I was struck by three interconnected challenges: how we communicate development issues and challenges; the implications of this on how we respond; and how we learn and improve our performance. I am thinking of all these things in the context of the expectations I have of DFID as an informed and interested UK Citizen, as well as professionally as a consultant and adviser to DFID programmes.

Communication

Ending poverty shock advertising is important. However, surely this means more than simply replacing one type of shock for another? Replacing images of the 'sad and needy' (negative shock) with new images of the 'happy and satisfied' (positive shock). If you want to see what I mean, just look at the new DFID website. The fundamentals of such imaging and communication are the same: people have needs versus look at them after we've met their needs. Development is more complex. It's more nuanced. It's more interconnected. It's less 'sensationalist' and less 'clean'. Yes, we want more 'happy and satisfied' people at the end, but how do we communicate better the development process that delivers these positive outcomes?

Practice

Shock communication influences development approaches. People have needs, we must meet them. Now, immediately, and without delay. Further, we want them to know we've helped them. We want attribution. We want validation. We want the 'happy and satisfied' to confirm they are now so because of us. Again, to see what I mean just look at the DFID website. DFID is saving lives, is feeding kids, is delivering clean water, and is educating girls. And it's doing all this clearly branded as "UK Aid from the British people".

Whilst such direct responses might be entirely valid as a short term relief-cum-charitable response, it is all a very long way from what Ms Fienberg is calling for under the banner of development. That in pursuit of sustainability we should be working in partnership to help others to help themselves – not just today, but tomorrow too. National Governments should be saving the lives of their citizens; local farmers should be producing sufficient food to feed local kids; public, private and/or

community groups should be delivering clean affordable water. If communication of development challenges defines expectations, and expectations shape actions, then we need to do much better in communicating what we do, why we do it, and what we're getting for our money.

Learning

The direct delivery approaches meeting immediate needs directly assume zero risk. They know what they're doing, and simply need more money with which to do more of it. As the article points out "you are told that £3 a month can save this child's life". It's not just certain charities that report such claims; DFID too does it. There's an air of absolute certainty in such claims. There's no room for risk, and no room therefore for the learning that comes from understanding and mitigating risks.

I find all this counterintuitive and staggeringly arrogant. DFID works in some of the most risky places in the entire world. In Congo, in Yemen, in Somalia, in Afghanistan for example. The idea that investing in development in such risky places carries no risk is not credible. Of course there is risk. The development challenge is not ignoring it, but understanding it, responding to it, and learning about how to mitigate such risks better in future.

In conclusion then, I fully endorse the call for change Ms Fienberg is making. However, delivering better development practice starts with how funders communicate development challenges and results. Much development practice is good. Solutions do exist and there are multiple examples of excellent development programmes that have and continue to deliver sustainable poverty alleviation at scale. Development does have good stories. But, the complexity of development compared to the simplicity of charity means responding to the communication challenge is not and never will be straightforward. This is particularly the case in the current context of increased DFID funding. As the UK press is increasingly telling its readers and listeners, impacts of austerity measures are being felt now, tangibly and by many across the UK. It is not interested in responses confirming development as a 'work in progress' – as something that can and does work, but which takes time and can be complex. If we're seeing sad faces in the UK, DFID better show us happy faces, lots of them, now, and all extolling their gratitude to DFID. In such a context, I fear that the calls Ms Fienberg is making, and I am supporting here, will unfortunately most likely fall on the politically expedient hard of hearing.