Soapbox: Zip Goes a Million

In 1902, an American novelist named George Barr McCutcheon, penned the amusing work of fiction, "Brewster's Millions". At the turn of the year, in 1906-07, a Broadway stage adaptation followed, and some time later, a musical, re-named "Zip Goes a Million." Adapted ten times over, perhaps the best-known version of the storyline is Richard Pryor and John Candy's 1985 renewal of this far-fetched work of fiction, where Pryor plays the lead character, Montgomery (Monty) Brewster.

In this version, Monty's mad great-uncle sets him a challenge in his will: spend $30m within 30 days such that you have nothing to show for it at the end of the month, and if successful, you'll inherit $300m as your reward. Monty accepts, and is accompanied by para-legal, Angela Drake, from his great-uncle's specified law firm to keep an eye on his spending.

In this, my 2013 tongue-in-cheek, development industry themed re-write, the role of the mad great-uncle will be played by the UK Cabinet, Monty's shoes will be filled by a development contractor and the para-legal character will be assumed by a DFID staffer from one of their country offices. The new challenge: spend 0.7% of national GNI on aid as soon as possible. The prize? Well, a concert at Wembley, some colourful rubber wrist-bands, and a signed Polaroid picture of politicians shaking hands, naturally!

Has setting this 0.7% target and fostering its cult-like worship set us on an identical storyline to Brewster: having to burn through a lot of money, whilst having nothing to show for it when all is accounted for? After all, spending more money than ever before in fewer countries with fewer staff resources to direct this expenditure is sold to the general public as a good thing, isn't it? We'd be a generous citizenry, but better still, and appeasing the frothing Daily Mail lobby, we'd be doing it with less "overheads" on the government's accounts!

But, how do you spend 0.7% of GNI in such circumstances, year-on-year? Carelessly, would be my guess. In the absence of the people, insight, strategy and persistence required to stimulate permanent transformations in the way that developing country systems perform, what else other than 'careless' could I have said? To protect myself from being branded an 'aid-hater' at this juncture I should declare that my problem is not with having an aid budget, it is with blowing a big one and being little further forward in the fight against poverty.

Having more money available now and more in the pipeline will not motivate contractors to search for solutions to age-old shortcomings - that development programme outcomes are rarely sustained, nor are they often 'developmental' (as opposed to distortionary). Shouldn't programmes whose aim is "development" be judicious in their use of resources, spending funds intelligently on ventures that actively encourage and incentivise the individuals and institutions of developing countries to invest in and organise around upholding their own indigenous transformations? To do this, however, programmes and donors need to possess the human resources (skill) and time (patience) required to identify these ventures and instigate the necessary changes that bring them to fruition, and not conversely, to be systematically stripped of both "luxuries". Shouldn't we be asked to try and get more out of less, rather than being set up to in fact get less out of more?

Programmes with true developmental objectives - ie. those that aim to transform developing country systems for the long-term - have particularly suffered under the heavy-handed pressure to spend existing budgets quickly whilst simultaneously being force-fed expanded budgets, linear spending patterns, and additional programme components. It is not only the programmes that have swollen beyond their natural limits. The absorptive capacities and incentives of developing country institutions and market players as counterparts and co-investors are equally tested. Meanwhile, DFID continues to engineer further means of spending money quickly and predictably (perhaps commissioning a new Challenge Fund), arguably with less interest in development validity and more in the resonance of the political narrative that can be sold to the general public.

It is, after all, the UK's prerogative to spend X% of GNI and developing countries must receive it. Our targets are setting the pace of 'giving' but also 'receiving'. Just to get money out the door, these same targets, however, risk jeopardising existing efforts by some programmes in the DFID portfolio to spend in a way that is more conscious of capacities and incentives of the recipient. Meanwhile, programme leaders are increasingly absorbed in battles with afore-mentioned Angela Drake types over spending more and targets, perhaps more than they are absorbed in battles around higher quality and more durable outcomes. Sadly, it seems, politics is doing its level best to reduce quality for the sake of quantity. UKAID - "Zip Goes a Million".