THE OTHER F WORD

Kate Fogelberg

Just because you can, doesn't mean you should. These words have been repeated by many a British politician during the last twelve months as they tried to balance personal and state responsibility. I can't say I normally find myself agreeing with the likes of those making political decisions in Britain these days, but strangely enough, on this I think they are right.

At least…they are in the context of my day job.

In a former life, I was part of an organisation that was on the journey from directly providing water and sanitation services to poor people around the world, to one that, ahem, was going to get the market to do this stuff for us. We knew donating or partially subsidising infrastructure and training was a recipe for short-term impact at best and wanted to change. But it's embarrassing to think back on how little we knew about how to change.

Before any of us could tell a supporting function from a core transaction, we intuitively knew we wanted to take a baby step out of the toilet doughnut and figure out a way to spark a process that might be able to work without us one day. Rather than provide subsidies to households, we thought if we 'seeded' a toilet market by giving builders free cement to construct toilets, that would be more sustainable. Had we thought at all about the other f word – the feasibility – of what we were proposing to do, I'd like to think we would not have invested time and money in something that was (spoiler alert) very likely to fail. Good intentions simply did not translate to good interventions.

Savvy development professionals that we were, we knew some money would need to be exchanged along this value chain for it to have a fighting chance of making it, once we'd pulled the cement lifeline from the builders. We had put our feasibility blinders on when we came up with the first idea, and they were still there when we developed an 'innovative' (cough, unrealistic) solution to the financial challenge. The award-winning (not a joke) solution was that cash-strapped families could pay the builders (wait for it…), not with cash at the time of delivery, but with their composted toilet waste after a year. No longer just builders of toilets, these lucky folks would now also pre-finance toilets, organise collection and transportation of tonnes of composted waste, and find and negotiate buyers for this Fortune at the Bottom of the Pit.

This is a perhaps an extreme example of what happens when you get feasibility wrong. But feasibility does seem to play more of a supporting actor in the MSD story, when it ought to be a main character. Lip service is often paid to feasibility considerations throughout analysis and intervention development, and then people are surprised when interventions don't perform as expected. See the example above for a case in point, or maybe just ask yourself some hard questions about your own attention to feasibility in interventions that didn't work out.

Building a series of 'feasibility checks' into intervention development is one way programmes can try to avoid falling into the toilet pit of despair we found ourselves in when, erm, things weren't going exactly to plan. Whether in your design workshops, intervention planning documents, or internal review processes, critically assessing feasibility of the opportunity, the solution, and potential partners can help programmes remember that "just because you can, doesn't mean you should".

The following five questions may help:

- ***Is there really an opportunity?*** In our case: nope. A really simple end market buyer analysis would have shown us that even if commercial farmers were interested in humanure (they weren't), they purchase manure in tonnes, which would mean a poop payback period of 7 years for the average customer. Experience more widely suggests that as programmes embrace the deep dive into root causes, they can lose sight of whether there is really an opportunity.

- ***How valuable is it?*** Had we tried to answer the question of how much a tonne of shit was worth, we may have chosen a different path. But value, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. We correctly identified that builders, like anybody, will take free bags of cement that are given to them. But would builders be interested in pre-financing the next lot of toilets? And what about that mythical commercial farmer who wanted humanure? Why would they want to try a new, unproven type of fertiliser? How much would they be willing to pay for it? Better market analysis would have identified who, if anybody, had the incentive to change, and whether the projected value of the change would be attractive enough to them to overcome the cost of change.

- ***Why hasn't it happened already?*** The fifty-million-dollar question! If what you've identified is such a good opportunity, there must be some reason why it hasn't happened yet. It could be that somebody hasn't spotted that opportunity, or that the perceived costs of change outweigh the benefits, or that powerful vested interests have blocked the change.

We would have never made it past assessing the feasibility of opportunity, but if your intervention idea does, the next step is to assess the feasibility of solution:

- ***How will the proposed solution deliver benefits to the market actor and the target group – and what are costs and risks of change?*** This question is a simplified results chain in disguise. There is a tendency to wait until a partnership agreement is signed to develop a basic theory of change or results chain, but if your basic logic isn't sound, no partnership agreement or measurement plan can solve that. We need to understand the likely value to funders and implementers – how many people will benefit? But we don't deliver change directly, so we also need to know whether the change will deliver benefits to market actors. Is it valuable enough that they will maintain the change once we've packed up and gone? We are an optimistic lot, so finding ways to develop realistic projections along your theory of change is important.

Lastly, if you've advanced to partnership selection (and have the luxury of selecting from multiple partners), we've found it's important to re-visit your assessment of a partner's interest and ability to change once a specific business model is being proposed.

- ***Is your assessment of a potential partner linked to changed business model and evidence based?*** The will / skill matrix is an important piece of any self – respecting MSD practitioner's toolbox. But, like most two-by-two matrices, there is a real risk that the useful simplification can also gloss over the nitty gritty of what is required to make a change. Thinking through a partner's will and skill for a specific business model change and looking for signs in their past that they've tried to do things differently before can help you be more realistic about the feasibility of change.

Had we taken feasibility seriously and challenged ourselves to answer these questions, our good intentions may have turned into better interventions. As it was… by using the 'other F word' a bit earlier in the intervention development process, we could have minimised our use of the more familiar F word when it all went down the toilet!