

ABCS OF MSD: A IS FOR... ALAN

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*Where better to begin but with MSD's Ancestry and, more specifically, one of its key Architects – the inimitable Alan Gibson. It was almost four years ago that Springfield – and indeed the development world as a whole – lost one of its brightest and most influential lights. For those who knew him Alan was, and in so many ways still is, a voice of reason and clarity amidst the everyday development clamour. He was instrumental in the codification and elaboration of the thinking and frameworks that continue to underpin MSD policy and practice today and, importantly, in putting MSD on the map for so many donors and practitioners. Sticking to the alphabetical theme, Alan's personality added much to his (and MSD's) impact – he brought to the field **Ambition, Advocacy and, yes, Attitude!***

Upon Alan's death we wrote a piece entitled "Of Mice and Men" – that reflected not just on Alan's contribution but upon how far MSD had come and the risks of losing sight of its essence as it became ever more mainstream. That piece resonates as much today as it did four years ago – and hence is reproduced below both as a reminder to us of Alan and his contribution, but a reminder too of, as Alan would have said, the "so what?" of MSD and the perils of getting lost in form over substance...

Of Mice and Men

Alan Gibson was found dead on 10th February, 2018 having gone walking in the mountains of north-west Scotland and failed to return. This is a loss which is felt deeply by family, friends, colleagues, and development more broadly. To many, Alan was a mentor and friend and every new person one meets in development makes it all the more clear how uniquely talented Alan was.

Climbing mountains in difficult conditions could be a metaphor for Alan's professional life. Alan was a pioneer in market systems development. Never one to take the easy route, he challenged the status quo, questioned convention, confronted nay-sayers and exposed posterior-coverers, to forge a new path. Many of us are in his debt for doing so.

Alan was not one for sentimentality and so, rather than wallowing in what we've lost, we thought it might be an appropriate moment to celebrate his legacy, with a Gibson-esque holding up of the mirror to development and its ills.

Ten (*now fourteen!*) years on from the release of the first [M4P Operational Guide](#), where are we? £2+bn spent under the banner of M4P and much, much more under 'market systems development' more broadly. We're all systems people now, aren't we? But is there a risk that 'systems' has become a slogan – as Alan would say, 'wholesome... and meaningless'? Or, to borrow from Shakespeare:

*'Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.'*

One fears an emperor's new clothes phenomenon: a lot of hype, but is anything really different? A certain amount of hype might not be a bad thing, you might argue. It's good marketing, helping to spread the message. So long as that doesn't dilute the content, fine. The objective of sustainable, large-scale development impact and finding effective means of getting there shouldn't be compromised. But is that really the case?

With Alan's passing, it is time to revisit the substance of market systems development.

There are four operative terms in the market systems development approach: (a) **'Market'**: A means to deliver sustainable benefits by leveraging incentives; (b) **'Systems'**: A means of ensuring scale by transforming the way markets work rather than just the performance of individual actors; (c) **'Development'**: The use of external aid to achieve an impact on those that need it – poor and disadvantaged people; (d) **'Approach'**: A way of working to achieve objectives – the why, what and how. The MSD approach can be broken down into three components:

- **A rationale and objective:** To deliver large-scale, sustainable development impact to poor and disadvantaged people (why we do what we do).
- **A framework for analysis:** Understanding the institutional underlying causes of negative outcomes (what we want to change).
- **Guidance for action:** A method of intervening in systems so as to achieve these objectives sustainably (how we bring about change).

As the popularity of market systems development has grown, so has the size of the emperor's wardrobe. In an effort to fill it, developmental tailors have tended to neglect these operative terms. So we see a tendency to focus on:

Markets (firms) and not systems: Firm-centric initiatives ignore scale by providing support to businesses that never have any realistic prospect of going to scale. They ignore the mechanisms through which behaviour change is catalysed; or

Market systems with no development: Harking back to the earlier years of 'the growth is good' doctrine, by seeing growth as an objective in its own right without considering whether poor and disadvantaged people have benefitted from it; or

Development with no market systems: Initiatives look at what is important to disadvantaged people's livelihoods and then deliver the solution, such as subsidising seeds for people to sell crops, ignoring sustainability; or

Technical methods, with little connection to the why, what and how: Useful analytical tools have emerged to help understand complex systems. But using them doesn't mean you're going to create large-scale, sustainable change. You have to be very clear about what you're going to do as a result of the analysis and how you are going to do it. Similarly, guidelines have emerged for making deals, providing grants and measuring results. But unless these are grounded in accurate analysis and guided by clear objectives, you tend to lose sight of what it is that you're trying to achieve.

How can we rectify this trend? When reviewing anything, Alan's first question was always 'so what?'. So, let's use the sadness at his passing as an opportunity. Hold up a mirror as you're on your way to the office tomorrow and ask yourself a question: is what I'm doing, saying, or writing, really advancing the cause of better development? Will it really make a difference? If not then maybe you should do something else.

Be brave. Don't be a 'tim'rous beastie'. Ask yourself, what would Alan Gibson do?

In memory of Alan Gibson (1961 – 2018)