

ABCS OF MSD: H IS FOR... HUBRIS, HOROSCOPES... AND STAYING HITCHED TO REALITY

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For some time, I've been worried about an emerging pandemic (no, not *that* one), but a form of obsessive-compulsive behaviour – best termed the 'Fix All the Things Syndrome' – that is spreading in our systemic change community.

The first symptom is 'complexitis': a nagging feeling that the world is so complex that you can't possibly act until you've found a way of connecting it all. To scratch this complexitis itch, sufferers try to self-medicate with relentless research to find the one, true answer or the unified theory of everything. More severe cases can be recognised by a frenzied sketching of countless market system 'doughnuts' on any available blank space. The most critical cases often end with an irresistible urge to define systemic change to a point of singularity that would have eluded the late Prof. Stephen Hawking. (See also 'Paralysis by Analysis').

For those already suffering from the Fix All the Things Syndrome, COVID-19 appears to have triggered a more debilitating variant: the 'Fix All the Things Now and All the Future Things Syndrome'. Symptoms begin with extreme paralysis, a feeling of powerless that you can't do anything until this is all over because it's all so terrible. For some sufferers, symptoms can then change radically, taking the form of 'Delusional Resilience': a resolve that you must prevent anything awful ever happening again, and a belief that you possess extraordinary powers of prescience and an ability to act in future time. The sufferer feels that they must prepare systems to predict and repel the next global health crisis/currency crash/armed invasion/meteor strike/K-Pop phenomenon [delete as appropriate].

I'm unaware of a medical cure for these ailments, but in my role as market systems therapist, I have found that it helps to reiterate some basic realities, to bring the afflicted back to Planet International Development rather spiralling off to Planet Utopia:

- **Avoid hubris:** Aid interventions can't fix everything, and they get into trouble when they try to. To paraphrase from DFID's ex-Chief Economist¹, although development challenges may have multiple drivers, that does not mean that programmes should be equally complex. Management and measurement become as complicated as the systems you're supposedly trying to fix when you bite off more than you can chew.
- **Don't place your faith in horoscopes:** Aid interventions can't predict the future, much less fix it. Former US Secretary of Defense wasn't right about much but he was on to something with his 'known knowns', 'known unknowns' and 'unknown unknowns'.²
- **Focus on stuff that matters to market actors:** Sustained change relies on the ownership of actors in a system. It's difficult to get them to buy into something that isn't a tangible problem or opportunity in the here and now.

In my experience, an aid initiative must start by work on existing, practical issues if it is to have credibility, gain traction and get partners to buy in. And donors don't typically provide funds to address things that haven't happened yet – they want to see results based on improving the current situation.

Programmes need to be pragmatic. Once they have some initial momentum in a system and get more licence to operate from funders, then they can – and do – focus on 'deeper' systemic changes that build resilience. But it is important to recognise that building resilience rarely generates additional quantifiable outreach or impact: it tends to lock in what's been achieved already or stop it from disappearing. That means having a value-for-money conversation with funders if time, funds, and effort are to be spent pursuing resilience.

¹ https://twitter.com/rglenner/status/1081942033948991488?s=20&t=Q_oRu0NnJExO7FtZG6XKQQ

² [Rumsfeldian Resilience: Managing risks realistically instead of gazing into crystal balls - Springfield Centre](#)

Another key pragmatic consideration when trying to build resilience is to define system boundaries, to avoid Fix All the Things Now and All the Future Things delusions. Establishing realistic system boundaries, makes it more feasible to identify threats or trends inherent to an industry, which have a high probability of recurring (i.e. known knowns or known unknowns). With that focus, a programme can then attempt to strengthen specific functions that enable market actors to deal with or adapt to likely threats or trends.

There are examples of MSD programmes working in a focused, practical way to bring about deeper systemic changes that build resilience. In the livestock and fisheries sectors, systemic change initiatives seek to improve producers' returns by increasing productivity, quality, value addition and penetration of higher value markets. This often entails more intensive practices, heightening the risks of disease and over-exploitation of resources. In Eastern Indonesia's pig sector, [PRISMA](#) is supporting various market actors to better identify, monitor, and deal with diseases associated with intensive livestock production and increased animal movement. [Kenya Markets Trust](#) is building capacity in the livestock sector to manage resource use in areas with escalating ecological and land pressures, introducing solutions to prevent or mitigate animal losses, especially due to weather shocks, and strengthening the industry's capability to respond to growing demands for food quality and safety. In Sri Lanka, [Market Development Facility](#) is working with government and industry to establish a sustainable fisheries management plan, linked to sustainable-catch labelling required in premium markets.

These might not be sexy, paradigm-shifting changes for the next millennia. They won't win Nobel Prizes. But we operate in the world of the doable. We need a focused, pragmatic approach to sustainability and resilience if we're to overcome Fix All the Things Now and All the Future Things Syndrome. We need to avoid hubris and horoscopes and stay hitched to reality.