

Chapter 5

In Proper Organization We Trust: On Extrapolation From Proper Organization Proxies

Is variation in aid implementation a good thing? An official objective in development aid policy is to safeguard diversity in development aid implementation by honoring a variety of partners of varying organizational forms that operate in different institutional contexts.¹ This objective is reflected in the so-called “actor groups” who receive and channel Swedish public aid funding: (1) civil society organizations, (2) private sector actors, (3) Swedish authorities in the public sector, and (4) research cooperation (see www.sida.se).² Within these actor groups, there are different organizational forms (public agencies, companies, associations and foundations, and universities and colleges). Embedded in the policy objective of safeguarding diversity is the idea that these different

¹See, e.g., Swedish Policy for Global Development, 2003, and Goal 17 of UN Agenda 2030.

²The term “actor group” is a term used by Sida. As organization scholars, our interest in comparing these actor groups lay in the fact that they represent different institutional contexts and orders in society that are associated with the ideal-typical contexts of the public sector, the market, and civil society (for a broader discussion on this, see Alexius & Vähämäki, 2020).

Obsessive Measurement Disorder or Pragmatic Bureaucracy?, 65–88



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institutional contexts and their ideal-typical organizations (the agency, the company, the association, and the university) have certain conditions and capabilities that enable them to contribute to aid operations in different and complementary ways. A contemporary example of this is seen in the promotion of so-called “multistakeholder partnerships,” where diverse actors from civil society and the public and private sectors are expected to form coalitions, for example, to meet the objectives of Agenda 2030.

Classic contingency theory similarly suggests that the different organizational conditions of the many different types of organizations involved in development aid (e.g., a food and agricultural workers’ union, a car company workshop, a public chemical inspections agency, and a university math and physics lab) require different ways of managing aid projects, and that the success of their respective aid projects depends on how well the organization’s contextual factors fit the chosen project management methods (Burns & Stalker, 1961; Gulrajani, 2015; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967; Perrow, 1967). As a great number of combined factors (contingencies) can characterize the specific organizational and cultural context in which aid projects are embedded, each such combination suggests a different fit with available forms and methods of managing projects and hence a need for flexibility and adjustment when it comes to selecting these forms and methods (Gulrajani, 2015; Shenhar & Dvir, 2007). On a grander scale then, the core idea is to attain more valuable results and effects by allowing and encouraging a plethora of diverse actors from different institutional contexts to join forces against poverty, in their own ways. The core message is therefore that an agency can’t do for the poor what a company can – and vice versa, a nongovernmental organization (NGO) or association can’t do for the poor what a university can – and vice versa. Hence, according to this well-established theory and with efficiency in mind, a “one-size-fits-all” approach is deemed suboptimal: there ought not to be any gold standard of aid project management to be recommended.

In line with this assumption of a need for variation in management and governance methods, aid bureaucrats in the recipient role typically hope that their specific domain or thematic expertise (e.g., the domain expertise in union work, sex education, car repair, environmental protection, or chemistry research) will be valued, protected, and above all, trusted as a key source of development aid results, and

assume that domain-specific knowledge makes up a prominent part of their organization's ability – a critical factor when a donor assesses trustworthiness of potential recipients (Mayer et al., 1995). However, despite the high aspirations of the Swedish policy for global development (PGD) and United Nation's Agenda 2030, which call for variation and diversity in organizational forms, we see signs of increased conformity in the governance and management of aid projects across the various actor groups involved in development aid. In our empirical material, we identified both confusion among recipients and hesitation among donor representatives regarding the use of context-specific ways of organizing.³ It seems that referring to domain-specific knowledge may even *increase* uncertainty rather than reduce it. We also found that donor representatives tend not to lean too heavily on domain-specific forms and expertise when they assess the trustworthiness of recipients and their projects, at least not to the same degree as they feel comfortable leaning on general management and governance schemes and tools (Alexius & Vähämäki, 2020).

Rather than valuing and trusting the specific features and processes of civil society organizations, companies, universities, and public agencies, we find that aid bureaucrats in the donor role, as well as (and increasingly) those in the recipient role, tend to aim for compliance with a general ideal of what we here call the “proper organization.”⁴ Our observation is that, in practice, the official political agenda that favors variety and diversity collides with an even stronger management and governance ideal that calls for conformity with a more general, principal–agent, rational financial mode of organizing. Although more research is needed, and is currently under way in a new project (see Methods appendix and

³This chapter draws on a recent study of ours (“In Proper Organization We Trust”) on current trust patterns in aid. In that study (Alexius & Vähämäki, 2020), funded by the Swedish expert group on aid studies (EBA), we collected data that suggest an increasing *isomorphism* among the different actor groups involved in Swedish aid projects with respect to how they organize their operations – despite the stated intentions of the national multi-actor policy, which expressly calls for diversity.

⁴The *collegiality* so typical of universities (Engwall, 2016; Sahlin & Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2016) is one example of coordination that seems to be less understood and less trusted these days.

Chapter 8), our tentative findings suggest that this trend toward standardization has far-reaching consequences as partner organizations can be prevented from functioning according to the particular conditions of their institutional context and are no longer (or less) valued for their domain-specific knowledge. Instead, they must constantly prove that they are, above all, “proper” financial partners. We find that this pressure to conform and the confusion between the two ideals (promote variation of partner forms or promote standardization across partners) cause tensions and frustration. Not least since proving one’s properness is less about changes happening on the ground in the projects themselves, and more about ensuring, beforehand, the legitimacy of the employed modes of organization. This tension between ideals may thus be one explanation to why bureaucrats in the recipient role experience obsessive measurement disorder (OMD). Before we delve further into explanations for this development and its consequences, let us illustrate with a telling example of the frustration experienced by organizations in the recipient role when their domain-specific knowledge and mode of organizing were not acknowledged as valuable to their results.

Who Trusts the Global Union Movement These Days?

On its webpage, the Swedish Union to Union federation proudly presents and defends its democratic coordinating of the global union movement:

The work is carried out in existing independent trade union organizations. It is precisely the large international network of free, democratic trade unions and their global federations that makes trade development cooperation possible.⁵

Union to Union representatives tell us how they have, over time, experienced a decrease in Sida’s readiness to trust the specific domain of the union movement with its traditional democratic coordination procedures. And how, in its place, Sida representatives have come to

⁵<https://www.uniontounion.org/en/about>. Accessed on March 3, 2019.

express a propensity to place their trust in the ideal of an autonomous “proper organization” with a clear mandate and responsibility. This shift in the trust pattern seems to have turned the once unanimously acclaimed democratic structure of global unions into an obstacle to decision-making on the part of the donor, and increasingly also a threat to the legitimacy of aid projects carried out in this domain.

Sida’s archive on Union to Union shows a lengthy discussion between the parties centering on the donor’s difficulty of assessing risks and results, stemming from what are described as “deviating features” of Union to Union (deviating in the sense of departing from the rational, principal–agent standard form), and how this debate has spurred a large number of controls, such as spot-check reports, organizational assessments, audits and evaluations, over the years. Union to Union is an example of an inclusive federative organization that has long struggled to defend its ways of organizing. One of its representatives stated, for example, that:

Transnational union organizing carries costs. It cannot be avoided. . . . But they [the donors] don’t realize . . . what is completely lost [in their view and assessment], are the [values of the] coordination aspect.

Here, our interviewee argues that while there is a general understanding in the union domain that it is at coordinated global and regional union meetings that decisions about project aims must be made, and that this is key to good results, it is more seldom that donors understand the value of this type of coordination these days. Instead, they question the ability of the federative organization to govern actions in the direction of results. As stated by Union to Union’s former secretary-general (about to leave her post in protest, when interviewed):

They [Sida staff] have come to the conclusion that we don’t fit in as a frame organization. . . . our rules and our movement are not . . . well . . . we’re an odd bird.

Sida’s appraisal report on Union to Union (Sida, 2018a) requests, for example, that the federation “decrease the number of links in the contract chain to ensure that most of the funds get as far

as possible, and to reduce transaction costs.” As mentioned in Chapter 4, Sida also asks for a “clear structure” of contracting parties that accentuates the roles of a clear principal and agent, as more organizations and levels involved throughout the report are discussed as potential drivers of “unnecessary transaction costs” (p. 17). For Union to Union representatives, this feedback from Sida has been difficult to grasp and accept since they see their particular way of organizing as their success factor. Union to Union’s (now former) secretary-general stated again:

I mean, one would think that a union. . . representative democracy must be *the most important aspect*. Making sure that is in place. But that’s *not* what is most important, it’s the administrative processes and routines. It’s the ticking of the boxes. . . The perfect systems. [. . .] And for me, in the midst of this, it’s incredibly painful.

Sida, in turn, relies on and refers to previous consultant reports that call for clarity and simplification of the organization. In the Sida appraisal report on Union to Union (Sida, 2018a), this consultancy advice is repeated in numerous places (such as the below), leaving the impression of a deteriorating trustor–trustee relation:

Union to Union has long had difficulties in providing a clear picture of the structure, governance and control of the operations. In addition, roles and responsibilities have been unclear. (p. 9)

Finally, the management of the own contribution has differentiated from other frameworks’ handling and caused the lack of clarity in accounting and follow-up of the operations. (p. 14)

Isomorphic Pressure to Conform to an Organizational Ideal?

Although not yet commonly applied in development aid studies (Moe Fejerskov, 2016), neo-institutional theory offers an explanation to

why, despite the good arguments found in contingency theory for defending differences in organizational forms and processes, there is indeed a gold standard in development aid project management these days (Alexius & Vähämäki, 2020). Neo-institutional theory is a rich source of knowledge on how strong ideas are produced, travel, and become institutionalized, that is, the ideas are being taken for granted and adopted as generally good and correct (Czarniawska & Sévon, 1996; Furusten, 2023). A key concept in this theoretical tradition is legitimacy and a core theme is that organizations adapt and respond to the expectations of their institutional environment.⁶ They do so in order to raise their chances of efficient operations and long-term survival, outcomes of external legitimacy gained from adjusting to expectations in their institutional environments.

And while some of the additional controls requested of Union to Union by Sida may be explained by actual mishaps on Union to Union's part, we suggest that, for the most part, the added control may be due to so-called *isomorphic pressure* on decision-makers in the donor role (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). The concept of isomorphism, which is key to neo-institutional theory, was first introduced by Meyer and Rowan back in 1977 (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) in their seminal article on how formal organizational structures are often set up as shared "myths and ceremonies" in search of external legitimacy – rather than set up for functional reasons such as to increase internal efficiency. Meyer and Rowan argued that, in the longer run, these processes of adjustment lead organizations of different types to conform (with or without changing their legal form) to similar organizational structures, processes, and technologies in their search for legitimacy (Brunsson, 1994; Furusten, 2023; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). The concept of company-ization, for

⁶What qualifies as an institutional environment can differ across cases, but the concept is used to define a shared external environment, often called a "field," that encompasses a large number of stakeholders that share certain characteristics, qualities, or missions. Depending on its identity, a particular organization may be part of several institutional environments. For example, a Swedish university is part of the institutional environment of the field of higher education as well as the institutional environment of the national school system, which in turn is part of the institutional environment of the public sector.

instance, denotes a process whereby public and civil society organizations take on ideal-typical forms and traits (structures, processes, and ideologies) first associated with the business enterprise (Brunsson, 1994) as these traits have spread to other institutional environments as widely accepted norms. A key insight from neo-institutional theory is hence that aid organizations may become increasingly similar, at least on the surface, as they conform to “rationalized myths” in society about what constitutes a legitimate organization in the aid field.

In line with this insight on the power of shared norms, and as discussed in previous chapters in this volume, the spread of market fundamentalism in recent decades has moved the ideals and practices of performance management to the top of the public agenda. The introduction of the new public management (NPM) doctrine (Hood, 1991; Pollitt, 2007) introduced auditing practices, performance standards, and an increased focus on efficiency and “value for money” through a range of seemingly apolitical tools, which are in many cases “more statements of political faith than empirically demonstrated findings” (Parker & Gould, 1999, p. 114). This development has prompted states to emphasize financial motives and targets in their governance (Alexius & Cisneros Örnberg, 2015; Tarschys, 2006), and the fact that aid organizations are increasingly established as auditable objects (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Power, 1997) is an illustrative example, where acts of auditing that follows certain general standards shape both perceptions of the organizations’ performance, as well as their internal processes (Ek Österberg & de Fine Licht, 2021). However, following Bromley and Meyer (2015, introduction), we conclude that the irony is that, in order to realize the ideal of autonomous actors, organizations are highly dependent on their institutional environments:

... organizations are constructed to be proper social actors as much as functionally effective entities. They are painted as autonomous and integrated but depend heavily on external definitions to sustain this depiction.

Thus, as an empirical illustration of isomorphic pressure from the institutional environment, while Union to Union tries to defend a single global union movement aid system with its particular

features and modes of coordination, this view is not shared by the Sida representatives. Rather, the Sida representatives experience an external pressure in the form of assessments and audits that emphasize the potential risks embedded in a multitude of contracting parties with “unclear legal status.” Hence, when looking at the situation from the donor’s standpoint, we see external norms pressing the aid bureaucrats to shape and support “proper organizations,” at the same time as doing so often conflicts with the official policy aims of variation and diversity in aid implementation.

The “Proper Organization” Ideal

The uncertainties that arise from the many interacting organizations, fluid boundaries, and unpredictable dynamics in development aid operations (Rutter et al., 2020, discussed in Chapter 2) must be responded to, and considering the fluidity and dynamics at stake, many donors long for structure and stability in these relations. Boundaries must be fixed, messiness tidied up. Looking at the theory on relational uncertainty, it becomes reasonable to want a given format, an organizational standard that can be used in attempts to reduce the four sources of relational uncertainty as identified by Knobloch and Solomon (1999) and described in more detail earlier in this volume (see Chapter 2): clarifying the definition of the relationship as well as its goals, norms, and how it is evaluated. As organization scholars, we acknowledge that these key aspects of relational uncertainty are closely related to key elements of the formal organization (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000): membership, decision-making authority, rules, monitoring, and sanctions. The organizational elements of membership and decision-making authority relate to the attempts to reduce the relational uncertainty as concerns the definition of the relationship (e.g., Who are the parties in this relationship? and Who has decision-making authority, and how is responsibility allocated among these parties?). The rules element responds to the need to reduce the uncertainty concerning the relationship’s goals and norms. And lastly, the elements of monitoring and sanctions respond to the relational uncertainty concerning how the relationship is evaluated.

By “proper organization,” we refer here to the empirical observation that aid project results today seem to be increasingly described as dependent on organizational elements and capabilities rather than on project features, contextual factors, or key individuals, for example. Although there are more organizations operating in the aid field, and the complexity and variety of actors involved has increased dramatically (as described in Chapter 2), we argue that there is an observable general institutionalized ideal that can be seen among these organizations, a shared norm of what counts, socially, as a trustworthy, legitimate partner in development aid. Core to this ideal is the idea that good results stem from sticking to a standard format for modern actors – actors that are purposeful, autonomous, and rational (Brunsson & Sahlin Andersson, 2000; Fredriksson, 2023). As discussed in Chapter 4, in development aid, this standard format means, for example, that organizations should have a proper results-based management (RBM) system and use certain management technologies.

When donors hesitate to stand up and defend the particularities of a federative democratic structure or collegiality, for example, the respective unions and universities have a harder time being trusted as unions and universities per se. Their domain-specific organizational features and modes of coordination that were once their “unique selling point” (and, according to the official political ideal of diversity in implementation, still are) have in practice often become a “sore spot” of confusion and potential mistrust: “If only they would step in line and become proper organizations!” Consequently, rather than presenting themselves as universities, car producers, unions, sex educators, or public agencies, we find that potential recipients feel pressure to present themselves first and foremost as autonomous actors with clear boundaries and a clearly defined purpose and objectives, as well as a hierarchy with rational decision-making power and generally approved structures, processes, technologies, and methodologies that should, ideally, be validated or certified by external parties such as consultants, auditors, or other governance experts (more on that below) (Bromley & Meyer, 2015; Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000).

We believe that one reason why we see an increasing use of proper organization proxies (POPs) today is that we live in an organization society where, as discussed in Chapter 3, organizations are expected to

play the lead roles in many complex social settings (Bromley & Meyer, 2015). By looking at it in this light, we are able to make sense of why so many aid bureaucrats are so busy dressing their legal persons in the ideal structures and processes for sustained legitimacy and survival in the complex and uncertain system of development aid.

Many donors are handling more money today but with fewer administrative resources, and this has likely also contributed to the “how” (doing things right) having taken over from the “what” (doing the right things, i.e., mastering both domain-specific and thematic knowledge). Our tentative findings also suggest that there has been a shift over time, where general expertise on how to manage aid projects has become increasingly emphasized and valued by organizations in the donor role. This view is expressed by a senior union representative, with many decades of experience:

What I’ve discovered is that there is absolutely no . . . or, very little, knowledge within Sida about the unions today. Frankly, I’m chocked!

The former secretary-general of Union to Union similarly stated in an interview that, despite results evaluations having been favorable with respect to the organization’s cause and outcomes, she felt that the donor bureaucrat responsible was more interested in the cost-effectiveness of organizing operations in a certain standardized way. The secretary general also explained that she, personally, felt a need to resign from her post because she felt that too much time was being spent on streamlining organizational structures and processes and pinpointing potential administrative risks, when neither weak ownership and coordination nor that money could disappear were the really alarming problems. Rather, in her view, what was really at stake was the lack of civil and human rights.

Another illustration of this mismatch between what organizations in the recipient role believe should be trusted about their operations and modes of organization, and the actual trust pattern of donor representatives, is provided by a program officer from one of the Swedish agencies who stated that:

We are in fact public agencies; we have no personal interest in this. We don’t make money on it [...]

Sometimes we feel that perhaps Sida should trust us more than they do.

As several agency representatives we interviewed experienced, being a public agency, legally on par with Sida and tasked with carrying out government decisions, is not enough to be trusted to carry out aid operations. And, here again, we find that the donor representative responsible becomes frustrated because, in order to make proper decisions on financing these days, additional regulation and control requirements are required. The head of unit responsible for the Swedish agencies at Sida explains:

It is my experience that other Swedish agencies don't understand Sida's core competence. They think that they know this stuff, know how to work in developing countries, more or less like we do. They don't understand that Sida contributes anything special. We are just a hurdle they have to clear to get the money. They would prefer to get the aid money directly, and the fact that Sida holds the purse strings frustrates them.

This quote suggests a power play and offers the insight that, in practice, both the aid donor and the aid recipient can experience a lack of trust and understanding from their counterpart, concerning context-specific forms, contributions, and expertise. A consequence of the increasing demand for generally acknowledged organizational standards is that domain-specific or thematic expertise becomes less sought after, less valued, less used, and less trusted (Alexius & Vähämäki, 2020).

Unsurprisingly from a neo-institutional perspective, our findings indicate that most organizations that have recently acquired financing from Sida have learned to *not* deviate from the norm by persisting with accounts of complex, domain-specific information (since, this can increase the donor's uncertainty levels). Rather, most organizations attempt to *conform* to the institutionalized norms by producing and passing on simplified and standardized information about their organizing that can serve as a source of trust and a proxy for results (Hoey, 2015; Porter, 1996). The recipient's ability to contribute to

positive results is thus to a large extent based on general organizational features and management skills, knowledge of certain project modalities, the use of RBM, etc. An almost taken-for-granted formula then centers on rational decision-making and the use of “proper” management techniques.

When looking more generally at cases of low-conflict relations between aid organizations, we find organizations in the recipient role that go to great lengths to conform to the “proper organization” ideal. It is, for example, apparent that in the field of development aid, so-called “strategic partner organizations” (SPOs) occupy a highly regarded position of status among civil society organizations. One of the case organizations we studied, Riksförbundet för sexuell upplysning (RFSU) (the Swedish Society for Sexual Education) reinvested a fair amount of the profits gained from its fully owned business (mainly selling condoms and other contraceptives) in the organization’s ability to conform to the many detailed requirements to become an SPO (Alexius & Segnestam Larsson, 2019). RFSU has gone to great lengths and taken on much additional administration starting in 2007 when it embarked on the application process with the ultimate aim of attaining the attractive status of a Sida SPO (at that time called a “frame organization”), which it did attain in 2009, with its first funded projects as an SPO starting in 2010. For this to happen, two new controllers had to be hired at RFSU, consultants and auditors had to be consulted, and countless hours of administrative work was put into the application process. As RFSU’s secretary-general commented:

We scurried around like scalded rats the first year. It felt like there were audits upon audits, so many new systems and processes . . . a big leap for us indeed.

No less than 29 appendices and over 60 application documents later, as stipulated by the application guide, both the secretary-general and head controller at RFSU concluded that, had it not had access to its own company revenue, RFSU would never have been able to follow through and complete the process. The concept of isomorphism helps us to make sense of why RFSU expended all this time and money in an effort to conform to all of these externally defined requirements.

Extrapolating Results From Proper Organization Proxies

In Chapter 4, we presented an account of how the management dreams of simplification and future control have lingered in the field of development aid for over six decades now. And how, in pursuit of these dreams, responsible aid bureaucrats remain highly preoccupied with different approximation practices. As also explained in Chapter 4, the task of approximating results in a project's activity and output phases is difficult and often conflict-ridden. Even when information is available, it is not always beneficial for the legitimacy of the project since approximations may be perceived as insufficient or confusing, which can in turn increase the perceived uncertainty at hand. Over all, we believe that this helps to explain why the kinds of input proxies described below – the POPs – have become so attractive.

In general, results should be secured as soon as possible, ideally even before a project has begun. At this early, preproject stage, organizational structures and processes come in handy, as do separate third-party standards and assessments and management technologies and methods that can all be in place *ex ante*, before the project decision is taken, and from which future project work and results are then extrapolated. This means that a positive trend is projected from the POPs to the future results. The mathematical concept of *extrapolation* thus draws our attention to how aid bureaucrats can derive a sense of certainty from tangible organizational input proxies in the preproject state. And while projects are assessed continuously throughout the project period, we find the *preproject* phase to be particularly emphasized by organizations in the donor role. In fact, in several cases, we found a comparative *lack* of interest from the donor (Sida) when it came to learning and following up how the different management technologies are used by the recipient and whether and how they affected the results achieved. As a head of unit at Sida pragmatically concluded:

It would have been much more difficult if we'd focused more on the assessments of what they [the recipients] *actually* do.

To sum up, it seems that referring to POPs gives the bureaucrat responsible a greater sense of certainty, despite the actual uncertainty of the future results.

Examples of POPs Used by Sida – and Aid Bureaucrats’ Responses

Let us now present more examples of how POPs are used by Sida. Donor representatives normally conduct an assessment of a proposal from a potential recipient before making a funding decision and entering an agreement of support for a project. In Swedish development cooperations and for those receiving funding from Sida, five different assessment areas are analyzed for this purpose (Sida, 2022b):

- (1) Perspectives and development effectiveness;
- (2) Goal and theory of change;
- (3) Budget;
- (4) Partner capacity;
- (5) Anti-corruption.

Assessment area 1 (perspectives and development effectiveness) is clearly about norms that apply in the Sida-partner relation. In the appraisal process, Sida program officers should make sure that the partner’s proposal or a separate plan takes into account five perspectives: (1) Poverty, (2) Rights, (3) Environment and climate, (4) Gender equality, and (5) Conflict sensitivity. Each of the five areas has its own “toolbox,” with several questions that need to be ticked off. A program officer should moreover assess whether the principles of development effectiveness and of good humanitarian donorship (GHD) have been met (Sida, 2022b). During the process, separate help desks made up of external partners (see Chapter 6) are called in to provide support in the assessment of whether the proposal can be considered legitimate. The official role of the help desks is to ensure that their respective thematic expertise is applied in practice. In our interviews, however, we found that these partnership norms are first and foremost seen as backbone criteria prior to any new relationship. To give an example, one of the norms for research cooperation is that projects should be established in

remote areas with limited resources. However, as one program officer for research the research unit at Sida explained, in practice this means that the organization's capacity to operate in these areas is a critical criterion:

So we never get down to the project level. Rather, we look at the *organization* that is there to support social science research – in environments where there are limited resources, for example.

Certain plans always need to be included and attached to the main proposal, one of these being an environmental plan. A Sida officer, who previously worked in the recipient role at a firm engaged with biofuels, recalls how the donor questioned her as a recipient, prior to the project agreement:

“What kind of environmental plan do you have?” They could be like: “You *must* have an environmental plan”, and very often in an accusatory tone. And for a company that's about to invest and has no capital yet, hasn't got the land yet, has no-, I mean doesn't have any staff ... it's not that easy to develop an environmental action plan in *advance* before you know which area we're talking about; is it northern Tanzania or in the south? What are we talking about, is it water issues or is it land issues, or is it population issues or what is it? But the donors didn't understand that ... and they really didn't know what was going on.

When donors request that certain procedures and norms be in place already before the project is established, it makes it particularly difficult for smaller and nonestablished organizations because – as shown in the RFSU example above – aid organizations often need to make big investments to tick all the boxes.

As discussed in Chapter 4, most of the aid bureaucrats we have interviewed believe that a good plan is simply needed to meet the expectations and formal requirements of the donor so they prefer to have a proper plan ready. We also get the overall impression that,

for many in the donor role, the illusion that proper plans can clarify and set things straight lives on to some degree (Alexius, 2021). Rationalistic, modernist ideals are held high since hopes are placed on the ability of human intentions and plans to control and improve the future (Bornemark, 2018; Brunsson, 2006). It is therefore no surprise that planning and plans for future results to be achieved serve as fundamental POPs in development aid. In our data, we found a wide variety of requirements for goals, future plans, and commitments used as POPs.

Sida has three written documents to guide contribution management, i.e., managing aid projects. The first is a guidance document – “A guide to contribution management at Sida” (Sida, 2021), the second is a contribution management rule (Sida, 2022a), and the third are the help texts in the Trac contribution management tool – a computerized system where all information about a project must be entered by the aid officer responsible prior to project approval and during follow-up assessments (Sida, 2022b). Information must be entered into Trac to enable disbursements to the projects. When searching for information on what actually is required from a project in terms of predicting results in advance in a results technology, Sida’s manual clearly states that making predictions in advance can be difficult (Sida, 2021 p. 11):

In many cases, the progress of development cannot be predicted in advance, the causal relationship between input and results is not apparent and solutions are not simple or obvious.

However, at the time of writing, in 2023, the “theory of change” technology is nearly institutionalized (see also Chapter 4) and, according to the Trac help texts, all projects must have a theory of change to clarify the causality or what the thinking is behind the envisaged change, what the partner envisages the activities will result in, and what these results are (Sida, 2022b, p. 56). The help texts state that the theory of change can be presented in the format of either a matrix or a narrative, but what matters is “that the logic is illustrated in a manner which shows the causal relationships of the envisaged change” (Sida, 2022b). However, in the help texts on what the aid officer responsible needs to enter into the computerized system for aid

projects, we find the following requirements spelled out clearly (Sida, 2022b):

The clarification of the causal relations is important for the assessment of the relevance of the intervention. It is also important that the implementing organisation has a clear idea of what it believes will lead to what so that it can react if the envisaged changes do not occur.

When you assess the theory of change you should first of all assess whether the envisaged causal relations are clearly spelt out in the project/programme document.

Many aid bureaucrats we talked to were confused about how far they should go in attempting to plan their projects and predict their results beforehand, and the extent to which their plans should then be followed during implementation can also be unclear. The most important thing seemed to be to follow the decided-upon meeting schedule. Regarding these different reporting routines that must in turn be put in place to meet the conditions of its agreement with Sida, a project manager at the Swedish environment protection agency (SEPA) stated the following:

We have both a yearly report. . . that is, each project has a separate one. . . [. . .]. And then, we also make a collective yearly report to Sida, as a summary of our entire international development cooperation operation. And then, we also have a follow-up. . . every project has a follow-up, a yearly meeting. And then, there can be additional meetings during the year, but this is the minimum, the *lowest* level of ambition.

And on this same topic, one senior consultant shared his conclusion that in day-to-day practice at Sida, the stricter norms of the computerized help text templates trump the more flexible wording of the general policy manual, simply because the aid bureaucrats responsible are nudged into ticking the boxes (e.g., to indicate whether the decided-upon meetings have taken place) and filling in what the system requires:

I believe that the power over the templates. . . I've seen that in many cases, is what determines everything. You can write whatever in the overall policy, but it still comes down to what it says in the so-called "help texts".

A telling example of how these norms and requirements affect the projects was given in one of our group interviews with the SEPA. Toward the end of the 1.5-hour interview, after hearing all about the project plans, one of the agency's climate experts raised his hand to share the following remark:

Well, I thought that I would just add that I'm here on this project as a climate expert. And 1.5 years into the project I just wonder. . . when are we going to start talking about the climate issues?

Thanks to this informant's sincere question, we learned that the agency's project team had been both informally motivated and formally requested by the donor to focus first and foremost on learning a specific project management methodology, in order to then spend additional time teaching this methodology to partners in the South. And 1.5 years into this particular climate project, the main emphasis was still on securing "proper" organizational structure and processes. Another informant from the SEPA recalled the conversation with Sida:

I've noticed that they pitch [as in a sales presentation] it more like a project management course. So instead of taking a coaching approach: "How do you work with change management based on your own conditions?" It was more like: "How do you write the perfect project plan?"

To get the project going, the role of the agency was mainly defined as one of helping their partners to draw up project plans of their own. Interestingly, here, our informant also described the project plans as a "concrete result," i.e., setting up project plans in advance is not only a POP for future results but can even be seen as a result on its own. Many of the aid bureaucrats in the recipient role

that we have talked to express disappointment in the development, where they perceive that an interest in POPs can “take over” and ruin what was otherwise expected to be an exciting start-up phase, because the box-ticking has become more important than the content. Others are more pragmatic, as exemplified by one of the informants from the SEPA:

They [the other Swedish authorities in the project] agreed to participate in the project because they wanted to focus on the climate and urban issues. But now we tend to focus a lot on project planning. . . [. . .] But, well, I think “let’s go for it for *now*,” we need to get the projects rolling here. Later we will naturally go back more to the actual substantive issues. But for now, we need some structure.

And, in line with our reasoning in Chapter 3 on “plural actorhood” and “role-switching identifies” among aid organizations and their employees, the SEPA officers alternate between complaining about the nuisance of ticking all the boxes and expressing gratitude and pride in having fulfilled their duty as proper bureaucrats:

We’ve *got* it now. And setting it up was a real feat. Bloody tedious at times. Excuse the language. We did it at my unit so we’ve got . . . I don’t know, how many project plans, how many processes and process plans and piles of stuff like that. And when we set them all up, because it was a few years ago now, it was frustrating and pretty difficult, at the same time as we’re extremely grateful to have them in place. . . . You see the beauty of them, the appeal of the plans that is, when you’ve done the work on them . . . We’ve got these processes going on all the time. But they’ve saved us so many times. And then you know . . . Somehow you just know that it’s important, that it’s good. Even if it’s quite difficult. Maybe it isn’t . . . I mean, I’d really rather be looking at numbers and research results and producing potentials for new policy instruments, blah, blah, blah. But without these processes, the bottom would fall out.

Studies on decision-making on large investments in uncertain settings have shown that proxies are often used, in advance, as ceremonial substitutes of rational decision-making procedures (Jansson, 1992; Grafström et al., 2021). Budgets can sometimes be used in this way, for example, like a symbolic “security blanket” for uncertain situations (Nilsson, 2021). Similarly, we have found that when faced with uncertainty about future outcomes, donors and recipients of aid commonly refer to tangible POPs available for everyone to see here and now. When decision-makers need results produced at a faster pace than the underlying conditions and wicked problems allow, since they are often interpreted as valid proxies for future results, POPs such as legitimate organization structures, processes, and management technologies serve as a pragmatic means of bridging this temporal mismatch.

In Proper Organization We Trust

In recent years, there have been official calls for less NPM-like management and more so-called “trust-based” management in the Swedish public sector. Nevertheless, the trust patterns identified among the aid bureaucrats we interviewed indicate that many of the same old NPM tools and governance processes remain important as trust-enhancing objects and rituals in interorganizational aid relations. The identified trust patterns may therefore help to explain why NPM modes of management and governance linger on in development aid. Formal governance, measurements, and control do not always hamper trust. Depending on the situation, it may even be the other way around: formal governance may actually enhance trust.

Mollering (2006) argues that although there are many similarities to interpersonal trust processes, there tend to be additional factors assessed in interorganizational trust processes. These factors emphasize the impersonal rather than the personal and often focus on bureaucratic procedures and routines. In line with Mollering’s conclusions, we found that donors prefer to place their trust in ideal-typical traits and features of what we call the “proper organization” (Alexius & Vähämäki, 2020, 2021). In fact, the actual sources of trust used by donors all seem to point in a similar direction and

contribute to an organizational standard for trustworthy aid organizations (Brunsson & Jacobsson, 2000; Segnestam Larsson, 2011).

We have discussed approximation practices in aid organizations, practices which in previous literature have been claimed to contribute to OMD (Natsios, 2010). In many of the examples above, aid bureaucrats have expressed frustration over the fact that their organizations have become more preoccupied with approximation practices than with the content or understanding of their projects. According to Natsios (2010), this type of “mission drift” is a clear risk factor for OMD. For some (perhaps newcomers, outsiders, or individuals who seriously believe that the policy dreams are indeed attainable), these practices might be perceived, at least, as an obsessive seeking of measurements to substantiate facts and replicate the messy, dynamic reality. Most of the senior aid bureaucrats we interviewed say, however, that they understand the need for these approximation practices. And, as one of our informants told us, approximations may even have “saved” the organization in the short run. To put it crudely, the organizations fear that they would no longer be in operation if they had not adapted to certain institutionalized approximation practices.

But what happens in the longer run, when, in order to be an eligible aid recipient, the organization is faced with many POPs? A representative from Swedish mission council states in a report by Wohlgemuth and Ewald (2020) that recipients perceive that “narrative reporting requirements from Sida have eased,” but in their place, “financial reporting requirements have increased” and remain a challenge (p. 23). For organizations in the recipient role, demonstrating both benevolence (a willingness to adhere to a certain management standard to make life easier for the donor) and ability in terms of general management knowledge and skills can represent a shortcut to a higher trustworthiness assessment (Meyer et al., 1995). But a heavy emphasis on POPs may also hinder organizations from being innovative, and some recipients feel that the risk-taking is left up to them and not the donor (Wohlgemuth & Ewald, 2020).

As seen in this chapter (and as will be further discussed in Chapter 7), bureaucrats acting on behalf of organizations in the recipient role may assume that references to their organization’s particular institutional context, domain-specific knowledge, and

actual complex results will enhance their legitimacy and trustworthiness (Alexius & Vähämäki, 2020). In practice, however, despite official praise, it turns out that donors are not as keen on trusting these sources as recipients think. We found that bureaucrats in the donor role generally opt for general management expertise (such as organizational and RBM expertise), partly because they find it easier to comprehend at a distance (see also Chapter 7). The use of general standards also enables comparisons that donors hope will help them to improve efficiency through monitoring.

To sum up, actual complex information about results on the ground tends to confuse rather than to qualify and hence generally does not lead to a higher trust assessment from a donor. We also conclude, in line with previous studies (e.g., Alexius & Vähämäki, 2020; Vähämäki, 2017), that simply *having* a certain results technology or organizational structure in place is already interpreted as a result in itself. As one of the senior management consultants from the consultancy company Niras put it:

If it's not documented, it doesn't exist. If the results aren't in a report, there are no results.

Since performance measurements and control requirements form the heart of the trusted ideal, this presents us with a possible paradox. Despite calls in recent years for less of NPM-like rational management methods and more trust-based management, the trust pattern we have identified indicate that *what most aid officials actually lean on and trust are the same old NPM and governance tools*. To cope with the uncertainties at hand, donors tend to place their trust in impersonal sources, such as general control systems, management technologies, and specific formal structures and processes. It is also likely that they actively hide or downplay the importance of personal relations due to a fear of legitimacy loss (see Chapter 8 and Alexius & Vähämäki, 2020). Paradoxically then, the identified pattern indicate that, despite the official critique, formal control technologies are highly valued as prominent sources of legitimacy and trust that can reduce the perceived uncertainty.

Due to the social messiness and dynamics present, it is seldom the case that decision-makers in the field of development aid are able to predict project outcomes. Still, they are expected to attempt

to do so. Senior aid bureaucrats may be well aware that management tools such as RBM and the theory of change will – alas – not serve to fully reduce the uncertainty at hand, but most stand firm in their belief that these techniques should nevertheless be used, for legitimacy reasons, to support decision-making and the general public in assessing whether aid funds deliver results and whether taxpayers are thereby helping to tackle the grand challenges of the world. There are typically no quick fixes for development problems. But when faced with substantial uncertainty, donors can at least make sure that money flows to projects in organizations that are considered proper with reference to acknowledged standards. In the face of uncertainty, donors are able to justify their decision-making, by referring to POPs.