
Original Article

Hiding Relations: The Irony of ‘Effective Aid’

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Abstract The present vogue of ‘managing for development results’ is an expression of a historically dominant mode of thought in international aid – ‘substantialism’ – which sees the world primarily in terms of ‘entities’ such as ‘poverty’, ‘basic needs’, ‘rights’, ‘women’ or ‘results’. Another important mode of thought, ‘relationalism’ – in association more generally with ideas of process and complexity – appears to be absent in the thinking of aid institutions. Drawing on my own experiences of working with the UK Department for International Development and other aid agencies, I illustrate how despite formally subscribing to the institutions’ substantialist view of the world, some staff are ‘closet relationists’, behaving according to one mode of thought while officially framing their action in terms of the other, more orthodox mode. In doing so, they may be unwittingly keeping international aid sufficiently viable – by the apparent proof of the efficacy of results-based management – to enable the institution as a whole to maintain its substantialist imaginary.

La vogue actuelle pour la ‘gestion axée sur les résultats’ est l’expression d’un mode de pensée historiquement dominant dans le domaine de l’aide internationale, à savoir le ‘substantialisme’, qui conçoit le monde essentiellement en termes d’entités telles que ‘la pauvreté’, ‘les besoins de base’, ‘les droits’, ‘les femmes’, ou ‘les résultats’. Un autre mode de pensée important, le ‘relationalisme’ – plus généralement associé aux notions de processus et de complexité – paraît absent. À partir de mes propres expériences de travail avec le Département pour le Développement International du Royaume Uni (DFID) et d’autres organisations d’aide internationale, je montre comment certains membres de ces organisations bien qu’adhérant officiellement à la conception substantialiste du monde de l’institution qu’ils représentent, sont en fait des ‘relationnistes cachés’, dont les actions obéissent en pratique à un mode de pensée différent de celui à travers lequel leurs actions sont officiellement conçues. Il est possible que ceci leur permettent, sans le savoir, de rendre l’aide internationale suffisamment viable – par la preuve apparente de l’efficacité de la gestion axée sur les résultats – pour permettre à l’institution dans son ensemble de préserver son imaginaire substantialiste.

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Introduction

When working for the UK Department for International Development (DFID) in Bolivia, I arranged for the UK Government to finance two parallel initiatives for people in marginalised communities to secure identity cards – and thus the right to vote. One initiative was to finance a consortium of grass-roots organisations and the other to finance the State’s electoral commission. Each of these initiatives worked relatively well on their own terms. These differently positioned actors employed contrasting strategies based on distinct diagnoses and purposes. After I left Bolivia, however, a second phase was planned with a wider group of donors, and those concerned – in pursuit of the principles of

joined-up programming and efficiency – sought to bring the two initiatives that I had coordinated together under a single financing umbrella. The donors obliged the concerned parties to negotiate the design of a common programme, a process that dragged on for 2 years, leading to a collective loss of energy and creativity. A subsequent evaluation noted that by forcing the different initiatives – and organisations – into a single, multi-donor financed umbrella programme, donors failed to take into account the different world views of the implementing organisations and the mutual mistrust that prevailed between them (Echegaray, 2007).

My insistence on funding two separate initiatives had been based on a belief that effective aid requires being alert to and working with rather than against patterns of social and political relations. I was not alone in taking such an approach. When exposed to the fluid and multi-layered processes of power that is the reality of international aid, some aid practitioners react with an equally fluid and multi-layered responses – contrary to the current orthodoxy of a linear cause-effect model of aid practice that has been the subject of increasing criticism (Curtis, 2004; Groves and Hinton, 2004; Wallace *et al*, 2006; Mowles *et al*, 2008). Yet, the criticism seems to have little effect on how the institutions of international aid ‘think’ (Douglas, 1987). I suggest this is partly because the ‘philosophical plumbing’ (Miggely, 1996) that manifests itself in logical frameworks has had a long duration in aid practice – as well as more broadly in public management. This mode of thinking, ‘substantialism’, is concerned with entities – ‘poverty’, ‘basic needs’, ‘rights’, ‘women’, ‘results’ – as distinct from a more relational mode of thought concerned with connections, patterns and processes (‘relationism’).

I now realise that my past mode of thought and practice as a development anthropologist was often substantialist. Gradually, however, I came to recognise what I saw as the practical advantages of relationalism. Before arriving in Bolivia in 2000, I had thus already been making a case with the DFID senior management that ‘relationships matter’. This meant paying due attention to context and process. The complex and contingent nature of societal change and the impossibility of predicting that a particular event will lead to a certain outcome suggests that donor action should focus on developing long-term and consistent *relations* with selected recipient organisations, those pursuing a social change agenda compatible with the donor’s own values and mission. Rather than aiming at achieving a predetermined, specific real-world change in which the recipient organisation is treated as an *instrument* to that change, the donor should support that organisation’s own efforts in what may be a rapidly changing policy environment. Since leaving DFID and moving to the University of Sussex Institute of Development Studies, I have been attempting to persuade the institutions of international aid to think and act in this way (Eyben, 2004, 2006a and 2006b). So far, such attempts by myself and others appear largely to have failed to influence the official discourse, yet – and this is the present article’s main argument – I propose there have always been, and continue to be, some aid practitioners who, to a greater or lesser extent, are operating relationally. I suggest that it is these relational practices that allow international aid to be sufficiently successful for top managers and politicians to make a case for its continued existence. Furthermore, because the effects of relational practice are often represented – even by those who are closet relationists – as the successful implementation of the orthodox substantialist norms of the day, relational practices may not only be making aid viable but also sustaining its substantialist imaginary.¹

Conceptually, my principal argument derives from literature relating to the discretionary power of front-line workers in bureaucracies, as well as to the everyday practice of

'subalterns' resistance' (De Certeau, 1998; Scott, 1995), whose tactics emerge 'where an institution – a business, an army, a city, a scientific institution – separates itself from its environment to establish a panoptic position' (Mitchell, 2007, p. 99). I suggest that international aid is exaggeratedly panoptic, purporting to observe and explain the whole world from its historically derived locus of power. To paraphrase Mitchell, it is concerned with the construction of abstract models detached from everyday reality. Although subaltern resistance has been explored in relation to the behaviour of those at the receiving end of aid (Ebrahim, 2005), less attention has been paid to staff in official aid organisations and the different relational arenas that shape both subordinate practice and panoptic representations of top management. However, there is a growing body of work by anthropologists concerned with aid practice (Mosse and Lewis, 2005; Lewis and Mosse, 2006; Gould, 2008) to which this article hopes to contribute from a critically instrumentalist position. Although I continue to champion relational approaches, the goal of this article is not so much to make a case for these but rather to reflect on why they are in practice allowed to happen while being officially ignored. I would like to help create an environment in which aid practitioners are alert to the history (Lewis, 2009) and context that shapes their thinking and action.

So far, no official aid agency has been prepared to undertake a study that aims to learn about their staff's everyday practices – what they are doing, as distinct from what they report they are doing – and their effects.² Thus, the instances of practice, which I use in this article draw on my own direct experience as an aid practitioner and on conversations with staff at workshops, which I have been facilitating for bilateral and multilateral aid organisations, focusing on developing habits of reflexive enquiry. In what follows, I first look briefly at 'substantialism' in international aid and consider how such thinking is currently reflected in the discourses and practices of 'effective aid', illustrating this with the case of donor approaches to accountability. I then explore what is meant by 'relational' thinking and look at it in connection with ideas of process, and complexity. I note that, despite the increasing academic popularity of such ideas, substantialism persists as the dominant mode of thought and representation of aid practice and also consider possible reasons for this. However, despite the persistence of substantialism, relational practices can be found and I go on to provide some examples of these, suggesting that while rarely documented they may be more common than is recognised. Finally, the conclusion discusses the implications of my argument in relation to the viability of international aid.

How Aid 'Thinks'

The immediate origin of this article lies in an invitation from a working group of bilateral aid agencies to review the monitoring of the implementation of the Paris Declaration on Effective Aid and in particular the Declaration's commitment to mutual accountability for development results. The indicator for achieving mutual accountability was identified as 'mechanisms within recipient countries for mutual assessments of progress in implementing agreed commitments on aid effectiveness'. I declined the invitation but continued to reflect upon the terms of reference, and this reinvigorated my interest in how international aid thinks. In particular, I was intrigued by the question of why 'mechanisms' and not 'relations'?

It was not just the bilateral aid agencies that took such a line. Although the civil society network involved in monitoring the Paris Declaration emphasised, not surprisingly, the

political nature of the Declaration and warned against its over-technical focus,³ this network's solution was to demand additional or different mechanisms – more inclusive or more radical – than those that donor and recipient governments were likely to favour. Its challenge, in other words, remained within the 'mechanism' paradigm.

For a long time, I had assumed that lack of interest in relations and process was because of the dominance of economists in the aid system (Eyben, 2006a, b). However, I was beginning to wonder whether this was a reflection of something more durable. I had already noted the tendency of international aid practitioners (including myself on many occasions when making the case for more aid for women, indigenous people or 'the poor') to think in terms of categories, units and entities (Eyben, 2007). I then found a name, *substantialism* a term coined early in the twentieth century by Cassirer, a philosopher intrigued by the ontological challenges of Einstein's then recently published Theory of Relativity (Cassirer, 1953). A substantialist perspective sees the world primarily in terms of pre-formed entities in which relations among the entities are only of secondary importance. Substantialism allows us to observe, classify and ascribe essential properties to concepts, such as 'international aid'. Asking how an institution thinks is a substantialist question. Most of us raised in the Western intellectual tradition 'naturally' think this way. Hence, although among all the elements of the Paris Declaration, mutual accountability would appear to lend itself most easily to relational thinking, the substantialist foundations led those drafting the terms of reference to conceptualise the problem in terms of mechanisms.

Indeed, 'accountability' is a good example of a substantialist concept, as it concerns the relations between pre-constituted parties. Not only individuals but also organisations are assumed to be 'bounded, coherent, coordinated and sovereign entities with intentions, who are able to talk, decide and act, and who control their own actions' (Brunsson, 2003, p. 202). Thus, the commitment of the Paris Declaration to 'manage for results' holds organisations responsible for their performance against pre-established objectives as entities.

Accountability is a response to the (substantialist) principal-agent problem or, as De Renzio (2006, p. 1) puts it, 'accountability denotes the mechanisms through which people entrusted with power are kept under check to make sure that they do not abuse it, and that they carry out their duties effectively'. Accountability's popularity in international aid practice is a reflection and part of a broader philosophy in which all relationships are understood in this manner (Ranson, 2003) – for example, the notion of the social contract. What some Governance Advisers in DFID refer to as 'the political settlement'⁴ is pervasive in official international aid thinking. It is a perspective of political and social reality, which understands historical change as an outcome of bargaining processes, as undertaken in a market place, and according to certain rules of the game. The same understanding is reflected in the prevailing mode of conceiving civil society as the watchdog of the state (Mercer, 2002).

The origins of 'mutual accountability' in the world of aid lie in the efforts of some donors, led by the World Bank among the multilaterals, and DFID and Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) among the bilaterals, to persuade recipient governments to adopt results-based management. Eventually this became a formal 'Managing for Development Results' (MfDR) initiative, set into motion at the margins of the 2002 Monterrey Conference on Financing. In 2003, the Joint Venture on MfDR was established as a stream of activity within the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) Working Party on Aid Effectiveness, incorporating both bilateral and multilateral donors. This was followed up, in 2004, by a conference in Marrakesh, to which representatives of

recipient governments were also invited, where Core Principles and an Action Plan were agreed upon. These principles will be familiar to many readers from their knowledge of Logical Framework Analysis:

the change in mind set [is] from starting with the planned inputs and actions and then analyzing their likely outcomes and impacts, to focusing on the desired outcomes and impacts (for example on poverty reduction) and then identifying what inputs and actions are needed to get there. It also involves establishing baselines and identifying upfront performance targets and indicators for assessing progress during implementation and on program completion.⁵

What the document refers to as ‘the change in mind set’ is, however, no more than a change from one substantialist discourse, ‘inputs’, to another, ‘outputs’.

An analysis of the historical evidence – something well beyond the parameters of the present article – would be required to determine whether previous generations of aid practitioners were less substantialist than the present. My own view is that they were probably not.⁶ The current discourse of efficiency and results is, I suggest, only the latest expression of the substantialist underpinning of aid. A previous manifestation, when technical experts had a greater voice in decision making, was in terms of things – fish, crops, schools – in which the social relations of the people using these things were largely ignored. Those of us who, in the 1980s, were advocating for people-centred development were challenging the hegemony of things, asking ‘fish, crops and schools for *whom?*’

But having a focus on people did not necessarily mean becoming relationalist. This needed accompanying interest in *process* as much or more than in *outcome*. Moreover, as I have argued elsewhere (Eyben, 2006a), even those of us who were, to a greater or lesser extent, relationists saw a tactical advantage to align with certain more progressive substantialists to secure a policy emphasis on poverty-reducing outcomes instead of the technical achievements of the 1970s or the macroeconomic indicators of the 1980s. Today, quantifiable results still play an important role in talking about the results of aid; log frames, for example, frequently refer to the numbers of kilometres of roads built or hectares irrigated as indicators of poverty reduction achieved. This frustrates the empowerment and capacity-development efforts of non-governmental organisations receiving official funding, who declare, ‘although we have achieved so much, the log frame would make us appear to have failed’.⁷

In the late 1980s, the general belief that British aid had not performed as well as it should have done was stimulating numerous publications on aid (Cassen, 1987; Riddell, 1987), and contributed to the adoption of logical framework analysis to improve quality, something that at the time I found useful in encouraging colleagues to ask themselves why they wanted to undertake certain activities. At that time, many British-funded projects did not have clear aims. An available technology or resource was identified and then a half-hearted effort was made to associate its exploitation with some way of improving the world. A log frame, I argued, required a statement of purpose in relation to identifiable beneficiaries, whereas the assumptions column required taking context into account. Thus, a log frame allowed putting people into the picture – but people – although I did not think of it then that way – as categorical subjects such as ‘the landless poor’ and so on. In fact, only the assumptions column offered the potential for recognising relations.

Relational Thinking

Cassirer contrasted substantialism with ‘functionalism’, but in more recent literature this is referred to as ‘relationalism’ (Emirbayer, 1997). Here, the totality is more than the sum

of its parts – a musical composition is more than the notes that constitute it because it is the *relation* between the notes that makes it music. Relationalism is a perspective in which things (substances) are understood and observed as they relate to or are a function of other things. A relational approach, just like a substantialist one, is not necessarily normative. It is an explanation of how life is, not how it should be.

Thus, a relational approach would understand international aid as a particular pattern of social relations shaped by context-specific and historically-derived configurations within broader fields of power and meaning in global and local politics. An illustration of the difference between a relational and a substantialist understanding of aid is found in Edgren's (2004) discussion as to whether aid is a catalyst (in which he takes a relational view when arguing that it is not). A catalyst, by definition, causes a process to happen without itself being changed by that process. This would imply – although Edgren suggests that this is patently not the case – that a donor is capable of intervening without being affected and influenced by the patterns of relationships of which its organisation and staff are a functional part.

Swartz (1997) argues that substantialism is the more intuitively obvious way of knowing the world because it starts from observing physical entities and then, by extension, attributes the qualities of an entity to things we experience but cannot observe, such as power or love. Thus, our efforts to understand relations are obscured by the way we organise the world based on ordinary experience. At the same time, however, the notion that substantialism is a more intuitive way of knowing is open to challenge when we consider that those raised in Buddhist traditions learn a relational perspective (Kalupahana, 1992), whereas relationalist ideas are clearly important in European cultural traditions, including, for example, in the writings of Spinoza (Wienpahl, 1979). Nevertheless, substantialism can be said to have been the 'default' intellectual mode in European history. Today, however, relationalism is becoming fashionable, not only because of developments in physics and mathematics but also, for example, because of feminist thinking that has interrogated the essentialism of fundamental social categories, such as gender (Butler, 1999).⁸

In the social sciences, relational thinking starts from the premise that social actors – be they persons or states – are mutable; they not only shape their social relations but are also shaped by them. In stark contrast to methodological individualism, the connection between individuals and their social world is seen as a simultaneous process of people making society and of society making people. A relational mode of thinking 'identifies the real not with substances but with relations' (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 15). Having said this, relationalism is not necessarily a theory of change. Its functionality could sustain an equilibrium model of society in which all relations are mutually supportive, existing to sustain the greater whole. For a critical instrumentalist, such as myself, something else is needed to make the case for how a relational approach to aid can contribute to what Chambers calls 'good change'.⁹

Relations, Process and Complexity

Lipton famously wrote 'Economics is mainly about outcomes; anthropology is mainly about processes' (Lipton, 1992, p. 1541). As the first anthropologists working for the British aid programme in the mid-1980s emphasised process, they were concerned that the logical framework risked putting projects into a straitjacket, with a formulaic blueprint constraining flexibility and responsiveness to the changing environment that an effective

project required. They argued that the introduction of log frames would damage ‘people-centred’ projects, projects that required ‘planning by approximation’ (Butcher and Conlin, 1986, cited in Cracknell, 1988). My own response was that using a log frame did not rule out the responsiveness and flexibility that process projects required. At that time, however, I had not appreciated the capacity for bureaucracy to turn a good idea into a procedural monster if not used intelligently. I might have better appreciated these risks if I had then been aware of the more theoretical literature about policy process and bottom-up approaches to managing emergent change that was informing the notion of process projects (Clay and Schaffer, 1984; Lindblom, 1990).

Processes exist in substantialist accounts, but these are attributed to the doings of a reified entity – an actor. A relational approach, on the other hand, does not assume that all processes must be attributable. Even when it might be possible to postulate observable entities shaping the process, a sole focus on these entities may mean losing sight of emergent effects (Jackson and Nexon, 1999). For example, if mutual accountability is studied as a series of separate actions by different entities, then one risks ignoring a process that is generating its own effects, not attributable to any specific actor. An easy way to understand this is to switch from thinking about the world as a *noun* to understanding it as a *verb* – to focus on the effects of the blowing rather than on the blowers (Jackson and Nexon, 1999). Doing this allows us to imagine that a process is mutable in relation to space and time, as are the mechanisms established to promote it. In the field of business theory and practice, a conceptual shift of this kind is already taking place – from studying organisations to studying organising (Scott, 2004).

How would such a perspective inform one’s view on achieving results? Ormerod (1998, 2005) argues that for the last three centuries, mainstream western thought has understood historical change as a linear progression; specific causes produce particular effects in proportion to the significance of the initial cause. This paradigm of change assumes that it is possible to gain sufficient knowledge to engineer the desired result. This, he proposes, provides an illusion of being in control, with often unintended and unhelpful consequences. Governments would have more impact if they were to revise their understanding of how change happens and adapt their own role accordingly. This would stop governments thinking that all problems can be solved in a predictable manner and assuming that sufficient information was available to inform the decision.

For example, Chapman (2002), illustrating his argument with reference to the UK National Health Service, contrasts bounded with unbounded problems. The first are ‘difficulties’. With difficulties there is broad agreement on the nature of the problem; there is some mutual understanding of what a solution would look like; and there are limits to what is required in terms of the time and resources required for their resolution. Unbounded problems, on the other hand, are ‘messes’. There is no agreement about the diagnosis and therefore the actions required; no possibility of an eventual permanent solution because solutions generate new problems; and therefore no way of determining the quantity and type of resources needed. Why governments fail to achieve results, Chapman suggests, is because they insist on treating messes as difficulties, ignoring the wider effects of a linear cause-effect intervention within one part of what is, in fact, overall a complex system – for example, what happens when a target is set for the maximum number of weeks a patient should stay on a waiting list before seeing a specialist.

This kind of thinking is increasingly being discussed in terms of complexity theory, which helps with an understanding of emergent change because it combines process with systems thinking (Urry, 2005). In particular, there is a burgeoning literature that draws on

complexity theories to explore aid and development issues (see, for example, Groves and Hinton, 2004; Morgan, 2005; Fowler, 2008; Mowles *et al*, 2008; Ramalingam *et al*, 2008), which I have found useful to make a case for why process matters for achieving desired change. At the same time, however, the question remains that if the case for such an approach to the complex context of international aid would appear to be so convincing, then why is it that top management continue to ignore process and prefer substantialist inputs and/or outputs? Why are economists still preferred over anthropologists?

The Persistence of Substantialism

Substantialism in international aid thinking may be explained historically by development's institutional origins in European colonial expansion (Cooper and Packard, 1997; Crush, 1995). Its continued survival may be because of the perceived requirement to justify aid expenditure in terms of tackling problems that are identified as soluble.

As evidenced by Chapman's critique of the National Health Service, the notion of relational process has been resisted in the domestic policy arena both by public sector bureaucracies and the politicians they serve. It would be difficult to win an election on the basis that policymaking is terribly messy and that politicians and civil servants have very little control over what happens. It is therefore rational to frame policy as a response to a bounded problem. Nevertheless, in United Kingdom domestic arenas, there does appear to be a greater awareness of relational processes. The new emphasis by the main political parties on active citizenship and locally based decision making is based on the argument that those closest to the situation are best able to diagnose problems and debate solutions. This rationale is weakly reflected in the aid effectiveness concept of 'country ownership'. However, because international aid is de-territorialised (Gould, 2008), there is less reason for top managers to abandon the domain of the bounded problem. Citizens of aid-recipient countries have no direct recourse to donor policy actors and arguably the complex messiness of the local can conveniently remain unknowable.

Ignorance of top managers about the everyday reality of implementation may be reinforced by arrangements by which donor policies are confirmed as an appropriate response to the substantialist imaginary. For example, what appears to be a policy dialogue between donor and recipient may be nothing more than 'group think' between donors and like-minded national counterparts. To secure support for their point of view, donors may seek to construct some parts of recipient governments – such as Ministries of Finance – in their own image and it is with those parts that they may spend most of their time. The effect is that those employing alternative framings are likely to become muted voices in the official meetings and consultations related to the pursuit of effective aid. Thus, evidence is sought to check whether one is still on track, not to ask whether there are other tracks. Alternative ways of understanding and tackling problems are ignored or dismissed as irrelevant.

Yet, what is muted or heterodox in that context may be orthodox in another arena. Recipient government staff – other than perhaps those in the aid management units of Ministries of Finance – only occasionally participate in the world of aid management. Although many may learn to articulate orthodoxy in that world, they are also actors in connected social relational fields, thus unintentionally producing complexity and unpredictability in aid relationships. Recipient-country counterparts learn to do what is required – currently, through medium-term expenditure frameworks and performance matrices – to sustain the aid relationship and the benefits flowing from it. They may go

through the motions of imposed procedures but do not internalise their logic or the values underlying them, potentially subverting or triggering unintended effects upon aid objectives.

At an enquiry by the UK Parliament's All Party Group on Aid into aid effectiveness, I argued that the multiple sets of relationships involved in any aid intervention will inevitably involve different ideas about what success is and how it is achieved. I enquired whether they expected everyone to be in agreement about how to reduce poverty in the United Kingdom. Of course, they did not. As politicians, they know that the policy process is messy and contested. Why then, did they assume that in aid recipient countries it would be possible to achieve broad-based ownership of a national poverty reduction strategy? Apparently struck by my observation, they had been provoked temporarily into thinking about aid recipient countries as real places rather than a category.

Meanwhile, because the principal arenas of top managers will be domestic on the one hand and global on the other, they are obliged to represent international aid to their peers, their Treasuries and politicians as a feasible project that they are capable of controlling. It could be argued that such bureaucrats are 'cynical subject[s]', 'quite aware of the distance between the ideological mask and the social reality but nonetheless insist[ing] upon the mask' (Žižek, 1989, p. 29). However, cynicism implies a selfish indifference, which is not the case among many top bureaucrats. They may be committed to making 'good change' happen but because they are not directly involved with its implementation, they can choose to remain ignorant about its complexities and unknowables. At a recent symposium on effective aid, following on from a presentation I had made on bounded and unbounded problems, a very senior international aid official, speaking to a prepared power point, gave measles vaccination as an example of aid effectiveness. He acknowledged my argument by admitting he had indeed chosen as an example, a bounded problem that could be fixed technically. He then put the dilemma aside.

Despite generally steering clear of the messiness of implementation, however, some top managers may be turning a blind eye to – or indeed may be half-heartedly encouraging – relational practices to ensure that the whole edifice of aid does not collapse in the face of too many evident failures.¹⁰ The next section identifies some of these more or less permitted practices.

Relational Practices in International Aid

A tug-of-war seems to be happening within the international aid world, in which institutional anxiety about being too distant from reality triggers a sufficiently permissive environment for relational responses to the complex contexts of international aid. However, these relational responses become in turn, to a greater or lesser extent, 'co-opted' by the substantialist paradigm. This section identifies some relational practices to illustrate this point. These are: (i) decentralisation of decision making to country offices; (ii) no single comprehensive diagnosis or response to complex problems; (iii) funding activities that recognise the 'messiness' of partnerships; (iv) facilitating political disagreement and debate; (v) 'planned opportunism' in support of emergent process; and (vi) trust-based relationships.

As the messiness of problems is more apparent the closer we are to the reality of lived experience, *decentralising decision making* to as low a level as possible seems an obvious step to embracing relationalism, and one that aid agencies appear to be adopting. However,

ways of reporting messiness up to top management, in whose hands big decisions may still rest, remains a conundrum. Those drafting international aid agency country strategy papers struggle to represent complexity while putting things into neat categories (Eyben, 2007). Such struggles have more recently been compounded through the growing emphasis, as expressed in the Paris Declaration, on the importance of donors developing a shared diagnosis of a country's problems, which tends to lead to simplistic statements of the obvious. These contradictions between real-world mess and demands for simplicity may lead to staff in country offices seeking to avoid reality – for example, by ignoring recent calls to encourage them to make reality checks or immersion visits (Irvine *et al.*, 2006).

In my introduction, I provided an example of how a relational approach to aid supported *different diagnoses* as to why many Bolivian citizens did not have identity cards. Although it is relatively easy for an aid practitioner to appreciate how different elements in society and government may have different perspectives, the logic of that reality is harder to follow through. Donors like joined-up approaches not just because they make things simpler to fund and in theory incur fewer transaction costs. Also at work is the belief that greater impact would be achieved if only everybody could be persuaded to join forces. However, as DFID learnt in Peru, trying to force different kinds of organisations into a single donor-funded umbrella programme for reasons of donor efficiency put the relational strategy it was pursuing, in support of health sector reform, at risk. DFID failed to persuade civil society organisations and the Ministry to be part of the same programme and created ill feelings concerning its role in the health sector (Eyben, 2005).

As governments (and donor agencies) are often composed of factions, each with different ideologically based diagnoses, they may adopt a variety of policy interventions based on these differences. Although this might seem to be political expediency, it has an unintended consequence similar to a venture capital approach, allowing multiple paths to finding a solution. Donor 'challenge funds' – through which NGOs submit projects for financing – are aid instruments that offer the potential to recognise and support different diagnoses. If the fund is well designed in terms of freedom for manoeuvre, no one proposal will be judged right and the others wrong. Each can provide an explanatory entry point to making sense of complex reality.

Aid agencies can facilitate *disagreement and debate* as much as consensus for tackling messy problems. In pursuit of diversity when designing four-country case studies in Southeast Asia concerning the Paris Declaration, I requested that for each study the investigators speak with a range of stakeholders in different relative positions to the case being studied, and in their report record and reflect on differences in views rather than seek to synthesise them into a single perspective. At the subsequent workshop in Bangkok, which brought these stakeholders together, the existence of these 'not best practice' case-studies facilitated debate and disagreement as a necessary first step to exploring the potential for partnership.

Messy partnerships (Guijt, 2008) is a relational approach that allows differently positioned actors to get a better grasp of systemic issues through mutual communication of their partial knowledge of the system. It implies providing neutral spaces where they can meet without any prior commitment, letting events develop at their own pace as an emergent process. Interestingly, this kind of activity has long been understood as central to the work of professional diplomats. Cocktail parties and similar quasi-informal occasions are designed to provide such spaces. The constraint on the possibilities these offer stem from how power operates in such spaces – who is invited, who accepts the invitation and

how the event is organised to accommodate different perspectives in terms of everyone feeling at ease.

Despite formally including a logical framework in its Country Action Plan, DFID took a largely relational approach to its programme in Peru, an approach later judged as a success story in a DAC publication on human rights-based approaches to development (OECD, 2006). In many of its initiatives, it responded swiftly and flexibly to the rapidly changing political environment after the fall of Fujimori. Staff practised *planned opportunism* – a way of working that requires the capacity to judge when an intervention might be critical in supporting a process of change, with active and horizontal communications between all those involved concerning what they are observing, while learning from the changes occurring as an effect of the initial intervention. It proceeded by modest, step-by-step actions with no certainty as to what would happen next – an approach described by complexity theorists Snowden and Boone (2007, p. 4) as ‘probe, sense, respond’.

Complexity theory posits that self-organising networks, rather than hierarchical structures, are a key element in societal change (De Landa, 2000). DFID/Peru staff were responsive to the potential that self-organizing networks presented. They invested far more energy and resources in supporting relational processes both within and outside the State administration than in formal organisations, with little interest in securing technical outcomes. The head of the DFID office in Peru recognised that the logical framework, with its embedded linear logic, had its limitations for dealing with the complex processes that many of its initiatives supported (DFID, 2005, Chapter 4).

On the other hand, un-scrutinised relational approaches can become complicit with the clientelist cultures in which aid practitioners find themselves, undermining their own donor ideology of bureaucratic values of impartiality. For example, DFID in Peru financed a national forum on health policy that aimed to bring together a diversity of points of view from government and civil society. Selecting, supporting and thereby privileging particular groups and networks in civil society, and working across the civil society-State divide, proved more tricky and contradictory than envisaged, with DFID running the risk of being seen as partisan, non-transparent and unaccountable (Wilson and Eyben, 2006).

An approach based on shared values means not having to enquire about the details of the recipient organisation’s activities but rather having a *trust-based relationship*, being interested in the effects – as judged by those for whom the programme is intended, rather than by the donor. In a rare study of how official aid agency staff understand their practice, Tamas (2007, p. 910) found that his respondents preferred to remain ignorant about the details of how recipients implemented the projects they were funding, because of the contradictions that they would discover between messy reality and what he refers to as ‘the Enlightenment imaginary’.

Certainly, in my own case, I often knew more than I was prepared to acknowledge to myself, let alone include in formal reports. Another practitioner with a relational approach to her job recounted to me what happened when the audit of an NGO project that her government agency was co-financing discovered that the NGO director had used project funds to pay for his wife’s air ticket to accompany him on a business trip to Europe. Both donor organisations held the NGO in very high esteem for its effective work with very poor communities and if she had had her way, she would have conveniently forgotten the auditor’s discovery. However, her organisational counterpart in the other donor organisation decided that corruption was never ever permissible in whatever circumstances and

stopped project funding, obliging both donors to withdraw. This last example illustrates the tension between the practitioners, who can get away with relational behaviour provided no one blows the whistle, and those who believe they have to implement the official discourse even to the detriment of achieving results.

Although some of the relational practices I have described are more or less ‘in the open’, others such as trust-based relationships tend not to be talked about other than in safe spaces of reflective workshops. As what gets reported up the system may be very different from what the front-line aid practitioner may have known to be the case, there are crises of confidence and contradictory behaviour among front-line workers as they struggle with the dissonance between what they do and what they report they do. An aid agency staff member, for example, told me he was hiding from his line manager what he considered to be the most effective initiatives that he had supported in a conflict-ridden country, because these involved supporting cross-community relations at the local level and ran counter to management’s high-level strategy. Similarly, another told me she believed many of her agency’s most effective country-level interventions in support of gender equality had not been reported because these concerned investing in relationships, rather than in achieving the kind of outcomes that had been incorporated in the logical frameworks. On the other hand, it is important to note that I have also observed that some senior aid managers tacitly appreciate the effectiveness of relational approaches, and I have even found them practicing such approaches themselves in their own arenas of action.

Ultimately, many front-line aid workers have an intense commitment to the development cause (Stirrat, 2008), and the most likely reward for their resistance to the system is long hours of unpaid overtime. At the same time, their relationship with the authority of their organisation is ambivalent. Although resisting the bureaucratic system of rules and procedures in favour of a relational approach, they also need a collective sense of mechanistic order in the highly uncertain world in which they operate (Mosse, 2006), and thus may simultaneously be actively re-affirming what they are resisting. However, if aid staff were more generally prepared to reveal the extent of their knowledge of what was going on and their own actions based on that knowledge, we might find that relational approaches to aid practice – however much co-opted and undermined by the substantialist discourse – are more common than one would suspect.

Conclusion

Taking as my starting point current orthodoxies of results-based management, this article has discussed the long duration of the substantialist ‘philosophical plumbing’ of international aid, its current manifestations in the form of the discourse of ‘effective aid’ and the ambivalent, if not subversive, response of some aid practitioners. I have argued that their response reflects an alternative mode of thought, largely invisible in official discourse, but with a potentially significant influence on institutional viability and the capacity of aid interventions to support ‘good change’. However, because these relational practices are often misrepresented up the management chain to conform to the public representation of how aid works, their positive effects may be falsely attributed to the successful implementation of the substantialist orthodoxy. Unrevealed relational practices may be sustaining the very norms that they are subverting.

There is a parallel here with the way that the Soviet Union was able to report that collectivised agriculture was an effective means for sustaining agricultural productivity.

In practice, the farm workers put their energies not in the collective farm but in their own small holdings, and pilfered collective-farm resources to invest in them, and it was this that led to sufficient food being produced for the authorities to be able to demonstrate that the overall system was working. Without the farm workers realising it, their subversion was maintaining the very system that they were resisting (Scott, 1998). As in the case of the collective farm workers, subversive front-line aid practitioners may be unintentionally propping up the orthodoxy, whose failures would otherwise be too self-evident.

Finding room for manoeuvre – and keeping that secret from their superiors – has long since been documented as a strategy of public officials (Clay and Schaffer, 1984; Lipsky, 1997). Particularly, the *de facto* discretionary power of front-line workers to treat some of their clients differently from others challenges the bureaucratic ethos of impartiality (Herzfeld, 1993). In that sense, as Tamas (2007) argues, front-line workers' discretionary relationalism prevents the institution of aid from becoming more accountable – and by implication more effective.

Although I agree with Tamas that these hidden practices can impede institutional effectiveness because of their lack of transparency, I also believe that these self-same hidden practices are at the moment keeping the institution of aid *more* effective than would be the case if such practices were not tacitly permitted. It is not just a matter of the construction of success (Mosse, 2005). As with Scott's subversive collective-farm workers, it is the *effectiveness* of the 'closet relationists' in international aid, which permits the system to survive in its current form.¹¹ In short, I argue that *aid organisations are already practising relationalism* to some extent, but that this practice is kept invisible. I conclude that the contradiction between the substantialist philosophical plumbing and the relational practice is what sustains international aid's current level of effectiveness.

What would happen if top managers and politicians were to discard their substantialism and take my campaign seriously, recognizing the value of relational ways of thinking and doing and adopt these whole heartedly? Just as *glasnost* brought about the fall of the Soviet Union, so might an admission of what is really happening in international aid result in its dismantlement with Northern taxpayers refusing to buy into such a contingent and messy process. On the other hand, an energetic clamp-down on relational practices might equally lead to institutional collapse. Practitioners need just sufficient encouragement from top management – as well as from relational advocates like myself – to continue subverting the system for the system's benefit.

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Notes

1. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this turn of phrase.
2. In 2007, the Expert Group on Development Issues (EGDI) of the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs was about to commission such a study when a change of government resulted in the dismantling of EGDI and the cancellation of the study.

3. From Paris 2005 to Accra 2008: Will Aid Become more Accountable and Effective? A Critical Approach to the Aid Effectiveness Agenda. Draft for discussion at regional consultations – September 2007, <http://betteraid.org/>, accessed 15 January 2008.
4. Author's interviews in early 2006.
5. See www.mfdr.org, accessed 10 January 2008.
6. But see Kothari (2005, p. 430) who argues that the kind of thinking I am describing has increased in aid practice and been shaped by 'the universalising principles of the neoliberal agenda'.
7. I am grateful to Susan Godt for reporting this remark to me.
8. The relational or contextual point of view suggests that what the person 'is' or indeed what 'gender' is, is always relative to the constructed relations in which it is determined. 'As a shifting and contextual phenomenon, gender does not denote a substantive being but a relative point of convergence among culturally and historically specific sets of relations' (Butler, 1999, p. 15).
9. See Chambers (1997). I am not proposing here to discuss what 'development' is, nor consider the different explicit and latent purposes of international aid. My argument is that many aid practitioners feel a moral commitment to support what they see as 'good change' and try to act accordingly.
10. Possibly 'turning a blind eye' sounds too conscious a process. 'Knowing and not knowing' might be a better way of expressing what is happening, see Cohen (2001).
11. I borrow this term from Engelke's reference to those project staff who objected to the publication of Mosse (2005), whom he described as 'closet relativists'.

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