



Policy Insights No. 10

The Human Dynamics of Aid

by Malcolm MacLachlan and Stuart C. Carr*

International development assistance from richer to poorer (“developing”) economies accounts for major flows of capital, human resources and technical assistance. While the net direction of these flows remains a topic of hot debate, there have been several barriers identified to the efficient use of aid within developing countries, many of which revolve around difficulties with achieving “good governance” in recipient countries (World Bank, 2004). Donor agencies have consequently become increasingly interested in facilitating good governance in the aid recipient organisations they work with. However, Feachem (2004) in his capacity as Director of the Global Fund, has noted that it is now becoming increasingly obvious that good governance is also an issue on the “supply side”: competing interests and agencies within the United Nations and multilateral aid system; between different donor governments; and between a plethora of non-governmental organisations, is producing inefficiencies and a lack of co-ordinated activity.

Without making organisational learning a feature of the aid system, the notion of capacity development is, we believe, reminiscent of Sisyphus, destined to battle the same obstacles time and again. Capacity development is by definition contingent on organisational learning. While we recognise that there may be no singular “type” of learning that can claim precedence over others, we wish to focus in some detail on the learning that is required to make projects work through people. Beyond the economic, technical and political resources needed to get things done, it is people who are the intended beneficiaries, and it is people whose interaction with the systems of aid we have, and again the

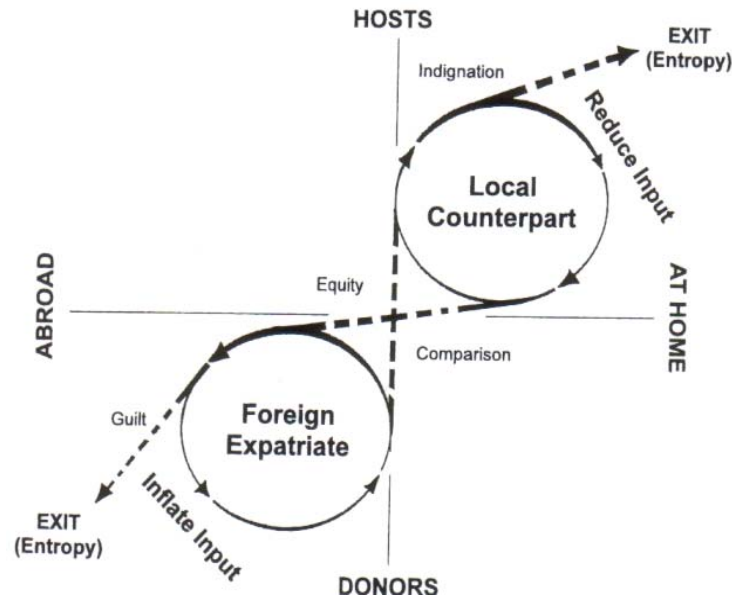
people representing them, that need to be understood. At the foundation of these Human dynamics is motivation, and in particular motives toward social equity. Learning “how” those motives work – including when they unexpectedly backfire – is crucial for developing capacity.

Illustrative Recurring Scenarios

Scenario 1: Double Demotivation

The first recurring scenario concerns pay and remuneration and its evolution is portrayed in Figure 1. First, groups will compare their pay for equity (*Equity Comparison*). Among the higher paid group (e.g., *Foreign Expatriate*) there may be some discomfort (e.g., *Guilt*), which combines with other stressors to precipitate turnover (*Exit*). Alternatively, there may be some early effort to work harder, to match the higher pay (*Inflate Input*). Because nobody however can work 10 or 20 times harder than others, the likely end-result of the equity comparison process is to restore equity *psychologically*, by implicitly reasoning: “If we are paid more, we must be worth more.” Self-attributions like this are not likely to optimise input to the job, and thereby surreptitiously undermine motivation (demotivation 1). That inflated sense of self is then projected to, and sensed among, the lower paid groups. These groups are already feeling *Indignation* at their lower pay. If they do not *Exit* (and perhaps contribute to the brain drain) they will *Reduce Input* to reflect the extent of their under-payment (demotivation 2).

Figure 1. **The Escalation of Double Demotivation**



This reduction is then sensed in the higher paid groups, becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy for their own self-inflation. That increment in self-inflation then reinforces another round of reduced input, and so on – which ultimately creates a vicious circle. Thus over time double demotivation is observed, a demotivation in *both* the foreign expatriate’s and the local aid worker’s behaviour.

Figure 1 gives us psychological indicators of double demotivation: guilt and self-importance among the higher paid; coupled with a sense of indignation and withdrawal among the lower paid. These predicted emotions, and indicators of double demotivation, have been tested across a range of settings with a variety of research methods. Each time we observe the same pattern. An example is given in Table 1. These data come from the National University of Malawi (UNIMA). At UNIMA, a range of Indigenous and expatriate lecturers worked for local and international (aid) salaries.

From Table 1, the internationally salaried pay group felt relatively guilty compared to their local counterparts; and, as well, were more likely to believe that expatriates make better employees than their local counterparts (the mean score in Table 1 belies a number of scores greater than the mid-point and, because of social desirability effects, probably also underestimates the true extent of agreement with the items). Crucially then from Table 1, the local partner group “misses” the expatriates’ view. On the items

about local instructors, the Malawians are significantly more likely to support pay equity, to perceive unfairness in the dual pay system, and to feel that local people are demotivated by the large salary gap. Crucially again, the expatriates’ miss the partners’ group view.

Double demotivation stems from failures to “see ourselves as others see us”, perhaps the essence of “single loop” learning. A couple of other important points should be noted:

- If culturally based attitudinal differences were the key demotivator among local personnel, then expatriate lecturers on local salaries should align their views with their internationally salaried counterparts. However, subsequent analysis found that their views were more closely aligned with their similarly paid, local counterparts (Carr *et al.*, 1998), suggesting that *economic system* – and not cultural or attitudinal differences – appears to be creating conditions for capacity stripping.
- Papua New Guinea’s National University was significantly disrupted, and temporarily closed in 1998, by an industrial dispute centring on a dual pay system. This illustrates how pay discrepancy may have effects that reach far beyond individual discontentment, to organisation-wide unrest (for a recent review, Carr, 2004).

Table 1. **Items on which Pay Groups Differed**

	Expatriates	Malawians
Items bearing on work motivation amongst foreign expatriates:		
Some expatriates on large salaries feel guilty because they earn much more than local workers	3.4	2.0
Expatriates are better employees than their local counterparts	2.7	1.6
Items bearing on work motivation amongst host instructors:		
Expatriates who work abroad should work under the same terms and conditions as local people	2.2	4.1
Most companies are unfair to their local employees	3.3	4.6
Local people are demotivated by the large salaries that some expatriates earn	2.9	4.2

Notes: Scale ranged from 1-5, with higher ratings indicating stronger agreement.

All pairs of comparison were statistically significant, after Bonferroni correction procedures for Type I error.

Source: Extracted and adapted from Carr *et al.* (1998).

Scenario 2: Pay Me!

A crucial human factor in Scenario 1, in addition to the perceived discrepancies in pay per se, is the issue of human dignity. Pay has symbolic as well as material, economic value: a fair day's pay for a fair day's work. Expected reciprocity like this creates a range of problems for aid, which we have dubbed the Pay Me! reaction. This term "Pay Me!" sprang from anecdotes about the reactions of local communities to foreign aid. Aid folklore alleged that there is community reluctance to assemble donated drought-directed well equipment, to unload relief food aid, to participate in educational research, and to attend AIDS reduction workshops – unless "payment" was offered for the participation. For instance, in the case of the drilling equipment, some aid workers arrived at a rural village that had been badly affected by a persistent drought, resulting in people having to walk many miles to fetch water for drinking and for their everyday domestic use. The aid workers asked the villagers to help them unload the well drilling equipment from their trucks, so that they could set about sinking a new and deeper well in the vicinity of the village. The aid workers were quite taken aback when the villagers said that if the aid workers wanted their help, they would have to pay them for it.

The aid workers protested that this equipment, and their own presence here, was for the good of the community. The villagers countered that while they recognised that to be so, was it not also their case that the aid workers were themselves getting paid to do this good work? And if the aid worker deserved to be paid for their labour, then why

were the villagers less deserving? In order to test out the generalisability of this reaction beyond their specific contexts, we produced several such anecdotes and wrote them into a survey, which was then given to a range of aid-experienced respondents. They predicted that one in five reactions would be of the Pay Me! variety, instead of volunteering to undertake self-help work for free. But the rate of Pay Me! also varied according to the vignette itself, with Pay Me! reactions being significantly stronger the more the type of community in the vignettes had experience of contact with aid agencies.

In at least some circumstances it would seem, that instead of "helping people to help themselves", aid projects can create more of a "pay me to help myself" reaction. What might be behind this? One answer focuses on the importance of dignity and reciprocity in human relationships. "Every gift takes something away", including, for example, pride and self-respect. Giving someone an occasional present may be a kindness, but continually being on the receiving end of "gifts", especially ones that you have no economic possibility of reciprocating, can become humiliating, and perhaps even foster resentment. One way to restore some sense of dignity in such circumstances, thereby implicitly equating your own value with that of another, is to ask to be valued in the same way – to be paid (remunerated) for one's time. Furthermore, at an instrumental level, time spent assembling well equipment or unloading food, is time that could be spent on other, perhaps more personally beneficial, activities. Thus, the Pay Me, like double demotivation, can be seen as restoring equity and balance.

Table 2. **Thematic Synthesis of Job-related Skills/Characteristics Derived from Four Studies of Critical Incidents Experienced by People Working in Development and Relief Contexts**

Organisational Skills

Flexibility in problem solving
 Identify strengths and weaknesses in colleagues and clients
 Openness ask advise and learn from others including locals
 Awareness of influence of power relationships on interactions
 Preparedness to hand over projects to local workers
 Achieve closure
 Diplomacy/tact

Self in Relation to Others

Communication clearly and precisely
 Compromise
 Listening skills
 Create a sense of security and trust
 Awareness of other's suspicions and fears
 Cope with being an outsider
 Pass power on (not self-promoting)
 Establish a social support network in a new environment
 Establish rapport with local counterparts
 Deal with people on an individual/human basis, rather than on a merely functional level
 Patience
 Express sympathy

Analytical skills (in relation to aid)

A willingness to question projects even in rigid/authoritarian organisations
 Continually challenge assumptions
 Knowledge of previous projects' successes and failures
 See things at a policy as well as practical level
 Detach from the situation one is involved in re critical analysis.
 Flexibility/Adaptability
 Clear definition of one's role (and its limits)
 Tolerance of Ambiguity
 Establish a role for oneself in an ambiguous situation
 Non-dependence on praise/affirmation from others
 Not being impulsive

Intercultural Skills

Local language skills
 Awareness of own and local cultural perspectives
 Tolerance of different views/ways of life
 Not imposing one's own values on others (non-judgmental)
 Attitudes/Behaviour in relation to problems
 Sense of humour
 Detach and relax off duty
 Assertiveness
 Decisiveness
 Tolerance
 Resourcefulness
 Emotional resilience ("thick-skinned")
 Perseverance in the face of difficulties/criticism
 Realistic expectations of one's assignment
 Not to take failures/setbacks personally
 Easy-going/laid back
 Cope with stress
 Be a facilitator (vs. a doer or decision-maker)
 Awareness that one cannot solve every problem, and ability to hand over to someone more experienced

Other Personal skills/attributes

Ability to live/spend time alone
 Ability to endure difficult living conditions
 Religious faith

Source: Reproduced from MacLachlan and McAuliffe, 2003, with permission.

Scenario 3: Motivational Gravity

Continuing with the theme of dignity, capacity development is often aimed at encouraging achievement, and thereby with recognising achievement motivation. Achievement motivation in turn has at least two major and equally irrepressible forms. These are: achievement for the individual; and achievement via the social group. Because these twin human factors are equally salient, developing achievement means keeping the two forms of recognition reasonably balanced. Just as too much collectivism will stifle the individual, too much individualism will also stifle the group – promoting a collective backlash. In attempts to develop capacity, a collectivist balance (or at least stability) is often threatened by the mantra of individualism and self-promotion that is generally part of the culture of globalisation. A similar point applies to respect for traditional systems of power, which may stress hierarchy and seniority rather than the comparative egalitarianism of more “democratic” systems of governance. Thus two important dimensions interact here: individual vs. group, and hierarchy vs. equality.

These interacting dimensions may dramatically influence individual achievement and performance. Reactions to individual achievement by authority (i.e., bosses) can range from “pull up” (encouragement) to “push down” (discouragement). The reactions of colleagues can range in turn from “push up” (encouragement) to “pull down” (discouragement). This matrix of tensions creates four-way taxonomy, a social force field that orientates human relationships. These fields exert, or threaten to exert, different combinations of push and pull on an individual achiever, a dynamic we have called “motivational gravity” (see the Motivational Gravity Grid in Carr and MacLachlan, 1997). It is important to say that this “gravity” is not necessarily destructive or vindictive. For instance the “pull down” of a collective is often designed to bring an individual back into the “middle”, in the same way that gravity keeps human feet, literally, on the ground. Thus motivational gravity, like Pay Me! and double demotivation, restores social equity – it is a form of restorative justice.

Synthesis

The concept of motivational gravity, like double demotivation and Pay Me, reminds us that aid agencies sometimes position local employees in the potentially difficult quadrant of feeling “pull up” from the employer but “pull down” (or “inwards to the middle”) from local groups. We therefore hope that the concepts we have outlined will help partners in capacity development, possibly interacting from different personal and cultural positions, to “think- through” their

own social and political landscape, and thereby be more mindful about sustainable ways of building capacity. Problem recognition is a first step to problem resolution. In an ideal world, we would be able to identify a wide range of recurring scenarios that would make us aware of how we appear to others, and thereby lead us to be more reflective practitioners. Such “double-loop” learning is a key component of building capacity in any group or organisation. From that wide list, we would ideally *synthesise* a range of particular skills for overcoming the barriers already identified. Skills are particular and practical; they are “how to” forms of knowing based on procedural, not declarative, knowledge. In capacity development, there is increasing recognition that international aid efforts should be less tied to predetermined *outcomes* (achieving X in Y years) and more concerned with establishing the specific *processes* to develop local capacity. “Process skills”, everybody seems to agree, are important, and furthermore their development is an important part of capacity development (MacLachlan and McAuliffe, 2003).

Process Skills

In our previous studies of critical incidents in international aid work, process skills have repeatedly been rated as the most important skills to have – above and beyond technical skills. To illustrate how the job-related skills were identified, and something of the character of the incidents described, we present the summary of just one of the incidents. The respondent identified this incident as a positive critical incident. She was working as a nutrition teacher in a high school in the Solomon Islands (Cullinan and MacLachlan, 2004):

She had identified lack of protein as a major problem in the local diet, after having educated herself thoroughly on indigenous foods. She felt that another source of protein (besides fish) that would be acceptable to the local people was needed. The (expatriate) headmaster insisted that milk was the way to go and refused to listen when she tried to explain that the people just would not drink milk – she had asked them about this. They had never drunk milk and the concept seemed disgusting to them. She felt that many projects fail because they ignore the people they are trying to help. She wanted to start a chicken programme, but it was met with resistance (from the headmaster) at every step. When she finally got some chickens at the school, and wanted to teach the pupils how to rear and cook them, the headmaster insisted on selling them all. She recalled a long and heated meeting one morning with the headmaster, where she pleaded with him to let her try out the idea of giving the students a few chickens to bring home over the Christmas break. Eventually she persuaded him. The programme was a great success. The students came back after the break knowing how to rear chickens, having also taught their families. Once they got the taste for chicken, they loved it.

This incident was described as a positive one because the respondent succeeded in her goal of identifying a new source of protein for the local diet, which would be acceptable and viable. Taking this incident as an example of the type of work her assignment required, the respondent identified a number of relevant skills/characteristics: Knowledge of the local culture (from learning about local foods, and those which would not be compatible with local traditions); ability to listen (from asking the local people about their diet and preferences before embarking on the project); ability to persevere despite barriers (from continuing despite opposition from the headmaster). Reflecting back on our collective scenarios above, these are issues of showing respect and giving face. In a similar vein, the researchers further identified communication skills (from achieving her goal via lengthy discussion/persuasion with the headmaster); ability to be flexible in problem solving with meagre resources (from recognition that many other options were not viable, either culturally or financially, and discovering the solution of rearing chickens); not imposing own values on others (recognising that the obvious solution to the headmaster was not acceptable to people of its culture and background); knowledge of previous projects' successes/failures (from knowing that ignoring the needs/wishes of the local people had previously led to failed nutrition programmes).

Comparative Studies of Process Skills

Table 2 synthesises the results from several studies (see MacLachlan and McAuliffe, 2003) and groups them under thematic headings. It is our view that while some of these skills are clearly 'universally' required, others are especially necessary in the sorts of contexts where aid workers find themselves, such as the scenarios we outlined earlier. It is on those that we concentrate in our analysis below.

In terms of *Organisational Skills* for example, an awareness of the implicit power relationship between the expatriate (donor) and local (recipient), and perhaps related to this the demonstrated openness to learning from others, and the preparedness to hand over projects to local workers, are important job attributes. Regarding the *Self in Relation to Others*, creating a sense of security and trust, awareness of others' suspicions and fears, an ability to cope with being an outsider, to pass on power, and to express sympathy are key process skills.

Intercultural Skills are perhaps some of the most strongly related to the context of aid assignments and those identified in our studies – awareness of own and local perspectives, tolerance of different ways, being non-judgemental – each require an ability to decentre from one's self as the basis for making decisions. Such ability is also important for stepping back from a project and using *Analytical Skills*, to question the aims and assumptions of projects, to appreciate one's own role and the limitations

of that role and to work with ambiguity, perhaps independently of others' support. Finally, *Attitudinal Behaviours* describes a number of attributes that are probably closely related to personality, such as an ability to detach from the situation and relax when off duty, emotional resilience, and tolerance. Similarly in our research on double demotivation, personal traits like tolerance of pay inequity buffer individual demotivation (McLoughlin and Carr, 1997; for further examples of salient personal characteristics, MacLachlan and Carr, 1999).

Across the many incidents we have studied, it is clear that often it is not the work itself that people find most trying, but the *interpersonal* and *intra-personal* context in which it occurs. It is how people manage their relationships with others and how they "sort out" in their own head what is going on – in terms of natural disasters, long term deprivation, war affected children, or whatever – that is of prime importance for how well they are able to perform at their work. The interpersonal stresses we alluded to are often not just in relation to clients, but also (perhaps even mostly) to do with the 'organisational politics' within agencies and between them.

We have used the example of critical incidents to illustrate "how" some of the process skills, needed to contribute to meaningful capacity building, can be identified. Prior to this, we also described three collective scenarios focusing on an analysis of group interactions and on how an implicit sense of inequity and injustice can contrive barriers to progress. Having argued that these two overlapping facets of knowledge can contribute to organisational learning within the field of international aid, we end by considering what systems need to be created for organisations to actually do this.

An Infrastructure for Learning

The level of activity in many aid organisations often means that the "capture" of what has been learnt on one assignment or project is eclipsed by the need to rapidly respond to new demands and opportunities. We have argued that a key aspect of good governance on the donor side is however that donors should learn from their own experience. For this to become a reality an organisation needs to create a *system* that incorporates certain basic steps:

- i) Have a record of its current and past activities- *Record*
- ii) Have a means to systematically reflect on the experiences of its staff – *Debrief*.
- iii) Have a means of quickly and easily accessing data salient to new projects – *Access*
- iv) Extract this data in a format that identifies ways in which the organisation may learn from previous experience and factor that experience into new initiatives – *Transfer*.

While most organisations will informally attempt the sort of learning cycle described above, everyday experience attests to the difficulties of future actions taking up where past experience leaves off. For this sort of reflective “double loop” learning to be achieved, the above process must be institutionalised; it must be one of the things that the organisation is explicitly about. While the development of ICT systems, pro-forma debriefing protocols, and training in their use, does without doubt place a greater administrative burden on the organisation, it is a strategic investment that has the promise of bearing fruit in the short term – in what aid organisations decide to do next – as well as in the longer-term, through empowerment and capacity development.

An example of the immediate use of such systems may be useful. The sorts of skills identified through the use of critical incident debriefs will provide immediate field experience to train people who are to undertake assignments in developing countries. These skills, therefore, do not simply represent skills and characteristics in the abstract. These critical incidents may be seen as a resource, where they can be role-played and the requisite skills and characteristics shaped-up prior to assignees being placed in the field. It is thus at the very early stages of development work, before assignees even leave “home”, that attention to developing process skills and improving incrementally can be worked on by feeding back field experiences from real life critical incidents and incorporating their contextual complexities and frustrations.

A parallel argument applies to the “other side” of developmental partnerships: What is really needed is mutual gap analysis. For the recipients of aid projects, the host communities seldom have an opportunity for pre-arrival training in the same way that pre-departure training may be given. In double demotivation scenarios in those settings for example, each partner group might be given an opportunity to understand previous critical incidents, and how these might reflect back on themselves. This sort of learning is as complex and difficult as it is useful. It cannot simply be wished for; it has to become part of a system of learning from what you do, in conjunction with others. Nowhere in organisational life is this more “critical,” perhaps, than in capacity development partnerships.

Policy Implications

Our emphasis on the human dynamics of international aid has some important policy implications. First, policy implementation is hindered by a failure to consider local human dynamics, and particularly how people will seek to protect their sense of self worth and social identity. The influence of pecuniary factors on the broader motivational environment, and people’s sense of equity and justice, has to be factored in. Consideration must also be given to receptivity factors arising out of different social contexts – “one size” interventions don’t fit all circumstances. Second, organisational learning is not something that can be achieved by a few enlightened individuals; rather, an organisation must address this need through a systemic approach that requires individuals’ experiences to contribute to the intellectual capacity of their organisation, their partner organisation(s), and possibly other capacity development partnerships. Third, while some organisations are likely to operative protective practices, the public good is more likely to be well served where public funds are directed toward those organisations that are willing to share their learning with others. Hence the need for organisational learning is not only of a “vertical” nature within donors, but also “horizontal”, between donors and their partner organisations, and *vice-versa*.

International development work has historically focused on material resources and the technical expertise necessary to use them. More recently, emphasis has begun to shift away from “technical assistance”, and towards an ethos of facilitating development by enhancing “in country” capacity. In order for this to be a reality not only must there be scrutiny and improvement of the governance of recipient countries, their structures and institutions; but there must also be improved governance from the suppliers of aid. A vital aspect of improved donor governance is instituting human resource systems that can contribute to capacity development – for example through learning from the organisation’s prior development experience. Both at the level of individual field workers, and at the level of group or organisational interactions, organisational learning in donor agencies is a primary requirement, and perhaps even a moral requirement, for capitalising on improvements for in-country governance.

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