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Due to the evolving role of development organisations over the years, critical questions are being asked of their accountability and performance throughout the development literature. The complexity of the challenges these organisations are facing are accelerating faster than can be addressed with traditional, analytically based management approaches. The design community has much to say on how it can play a more significant role in this context.

Consolidating an in-depth literature review with applied, hands-on and in-the-field experience, we propose new perspectives on how more human-centred design approaches assist development organisations. Particularly, how these organisations may achieve greater social accountability by moving beyond quantitative measures in defining and delivering initiatives to address real human needs. In addition we extend Buchanan’s 2001 seminal body of work which introduced the role of human centred design as affirming human dignity through the empowering of people and communities to engage in decisions that work for them rather than being recipients of external and sometimes misaligned “solutions” to them.

Our work is relevant to a mixed audience comprised of designers, development managers, donor organisations, and other actors involved in the design of new futures for marginalised populations in developing countries.

Keywords: Development management, international development, non-profit, human-centred design, sub-Saharan Africa
Introduction

It is becoming ever more apparent that the existing nature of political systems and business practices are proving unable to adequately address the underlying large-scale problems which are causing poverty to prevail. With increasing pressure on global resources and funding availability, non-profit organisations who administer aid and development programs are increasingly being expected to do more with less, particularly around building local capacity and co-designing solutions based on shared value rather than long-term dependency for beneficiaries.

The growing criticism of development organisations extends to the ineffectiveness and unsustainability of their traditional, linear and cause-effect models of change, which have had minimal long term impacts on marginalised communities in developing country contexts (Dennehy, Fitzgibbon et al. 2013, O'Dwyer and Unerman 2007, Collier 2007, Britton 2005, Madon 1999). These linear approaches have ensured accountability to be directed to donors more so than beneficiaries, and on project needs more so than human needs. Whether intentional or not, this has resulted in limited beneficiary participation in defining the need or solution possibilities early enough to really influence key issues which directly affect them.

Human centred design offers prospects for a strengthening of development organisations’ social accountability and performance. This is achieved through balancing out the current over-reliance on survey data, averages and quantitative measures with more qualitative representation of human need through nuanced representation of the voices of the beneficiaries themselves.

Just as human centred design delivers competitive advantage for businesses and governments who use it (Westcott, Michael et al. 2013), it also has the potential to support international development organisations in achieving more inclusive and community-driven innovation. Victor Grau Serrat, Co-Director of D-Lab at MIT notes:

“the emphasis has shifted, more from designing for poor people, to designing with poor people, or even, design by poor people. The key aim now is to develop the local capacity, so that villagers themselves can develop their own technology. Instead of viewing them as needy and vulnerable, we view them as resourceful and creative” (Chandler 2012).
The characteristics of human centred design provide gap fillers in this context and contribute to the way real human need is understood and used to inform decisions in development management practice.

Some development industry professionals liken human centred design to the anthropological concept of ‘participatory development’ and that the idea of engaging local populations in development projects in the hopes that projects will be more sustainable and successful (Mohan 2008) is not new at all. However, human centred design is different in that it is not just about stakeholder engagement. It borrows much more from the designer’s toolkit, specifically, to empathise, visualise and create end-to-end solutions with user needs at the centre of any management planning, decision making and evaluation.

Bringing together analysis and insights from Design, Business and Development bodies of literature, as well as in-the-field observations and narratives with designers and development practitioners, this paper puts forward the case for the integration of more qualitative design-based approaches in development management practice and decision-making.

Today’s challenges in development management

Why is this important? A new level of consciousness (Moyo 2009)

Across Africa, there are many pieces of expensive medical equipment lying around with no one trained to use them (Perry and Malkin 2011), pump wells lying idle because a part unavailable locally has broken down (AE 2011), and education programs that fail to leverage the cultural context and so don’t achieve a sustained impact (Schweisfurth 2011).

Then there is the greatest issue of all: traditional approaches to charity reinforce peoples’ reliance on others to help them – rather than building a notion that they are able to help themselves (Moyo 2009, Andrawes and McMurray 2014). Moyo claims aid to Africa has made the poor poorer, and the growth slower, arguing that:

“Africa’s development impasse demands a new level of consciousness, a greater degree of innovation, and a generous dose of honesty about what works and what does not as far as development is concerned” (Moyo 2009)
From another perspective, Collier (2007) argues the design, organisation, distribution and implementation of development initiatives are what’s central to the issue. Development organisations and their donors have persisted with conventional management practices and knowledge systems, despite their limitations in achieving sustainable economic growth and poverty reduction (Moyo 2009).

This calls for a more nuanced approach to the management of development initiatives (Collier 2007) if these organisations are to improve their effectiveness and extend their accountability to those they are claiming to serve.

**What needs to change? The accountability paradigm**

The call for greater accountability toward key beneficiary constituencies in the development literature is termed ‘social accountability’ and has been discussed extensively for years (Burger and Seabe 2014, Newcomer et al. 2013, Unerman and O'Dwyer 2010, Ebrahim 2005, Cronin and O'Regan 2002, Najam 1996). In practice, however, development management accountability to beneficiaries is not as prioritised as accountability to donors, on whom development organisations depend on for survival (Gent et al 2013, Edwards and Hulme 2002; Najam 1996).

Donors place great emphasis and importance on ‘functional accountability,’ which is short-term in orientation, requires reporting on resources and resource use, preferences high levels of control during implementation and prioritises the measurable and quantifiable over more ambiguous and less tangible changes in human development (Newcomer et al. 2013, Dennehy, Fitzgibbon et al. 2013, Unerman and O'Dwyer 2010, Ebrahim 2003, Edwards and Hulme 2002). This is in stark contrast to long, iterative and people-centred projects that do not provide quick, tangible results or may not correspond with the outcome perceived by the initial intervention thus making this latter approach unfavourable to donors, even if the project addresses the real needs of the beneficiary population (Dennehy, Fitzgibbon et al. 2013).

There is a significant push for development organisations and their donors to move beyond a focus on narrow, functional accountability and more towards a social accountability one that engages their key beneficiary constituencies more (Cronin and O'Regan 2002; Dillon 2004; Ebrahim 2005; Lloyd 2005; Najam 1996). Embracing this broader form of social accountability has been challenging within a funding environment which
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concentrates on upward accountability through financial reporting on activities and short-term impact.

What is stifling progress? An over-reliance on logic

Chambers and Pettit (2004) write about the changing nature of development rhetoric to include words like partnership, participation, empowerment and transparency, which imply changes in power and relationships in recent years. This rhetoric seems not to have been matched in practice, rather:

“power and relationships are governing dynamics that... prevent the inclusion of weaker actors and voices in decision-making” (Chambers and Pettit 2004).

In practice, most donors require the use of the Logical Framework Approach (LFA) as a planning and evaluation framework to demonstrate accountability for spending designated monies for designated purposes (Najam 1996). It is now, and has been for decades, the global standard endorsed and required by many donors for planning and evaluation relating to development initiatives. The LFA, as adopted by many development organisations and required by many donor organisations, is considered to stifle participation, as it:

“reinforces relationships of power and control... [and] embodies a linear logic associated with things rather than people” (Chambers & Pettit, 2004).

The use of the LFA in formulating development programs has reinforced patterns of exclusion (Tacchi, Lennie et al. 2010). Power et al. (2002) state that this particular tool is not conducive to community processes and can prevent communities from driving the development process. It is important to build systems and procedures starting from the community’s needs and abilities, instead of expecting communities to conform to donor requirements of using tools such as the LFA (Dennehy, Fitzgibbon et al. 2013).

The structures and approaches that are put in place by the donors, through mechanisms like the LFA do not allow the space for management styles that encourage innovation, collaboration and participatory ways of
Ledia Andrawes and Adela McMurray

working (Tacchi, Lennie, & Wilmore, 2010). The requirement to fit within the framework encourages development managers to focus on work which can show reasonably predictable outcomes in a relatively short time frame. As a result, they tend to lose sight of emerging opportunities and unintended positive and negative impacts (Bakewell and Garbutt 2005). This failure of the LFA to cope with unintended consequences should not be taken lightly. It is these unexpected consequences which might be the most important consequences of all. There are many case studies of development initiatives where the most striking success was seen in areas not anticipated in the plan, making it very difficult to report with the logical framework:

“In cases where donors have a distaste for reporting beyond the terse numbers neatly set out in the logframe’s rows and columns, insights of real value are highly vulnerable” (Harley 2005).

In practice, most development initiatives are experiments, but the LFA sets them up to be judged by the criteria of what they set out to do. This reduces the possibility of supporting initiatives which are explicitly experimental – looking to see what happens rather than predicting a narrow set of outcomes (Bakewell and Garbutt 2005). What this one dimensional approach fails to consider is the messy and complex realities facing development actors. The sector’s reliance on the LFA seems to produce more confusion than clarity, and reinforces:

“mechanistic views of the development process in which inputs automatically lead to the specified outputs” (Bornstein 2003).

Development initiatives do not operate within a self-contained system – there are often many factors involved which lie beyond the scope of the planned initiative that will change the way things work (Bakewell and Garbutt 2005). The challenges facing development managers are changing and with that comes new opportunities for improving both the effectiveness and social accountability of development programs through new and complementary ways of working.
Tomorrow’s opportunities for design in development

What is the way forward? A more nuanced picture

As seen with the LFA, most development organisations have adopted conventional management practices from the business world which has resulted in an audit culture of obligatory tools, frameworks and reporting (Jenkins 2012, Angus 2008). Two key issues with some of the more linear management approaches are:

“the attempt to make a science of planning with its subsequent loss of creativity... [and] the excessive emphasis on numbers” (Liedtka, 2000).

In the same vein, Joel Best (2001) challenges why there is a tendency to refer to statistics as absolute facts that cannot be challenged: “people gather statistics much as rock collectors pick up stones.” His point resonates with the status quo in development organisations today where there is a reluctance to recognise that all statistics are shaped by human actions:

“people have to decide what to count and how to count it, people have to do the counting and the other calculations, and people have to interpret the resulting statistics, to decide what the numbers mean” (Best, 2001).

The excessive emphasis on numbers, when those numbers are in fact social products, does not provide a nuanced or holistic picture by which development management decisions can be made effectively. The use of such quantitative-heavy measurement frameworks also place pressure on development organisations to show their donors that everything has been done in a positive light, and subsequently stifle the possibility of learning within and outside the organisation (Taylor and Soal, 2003).

This risk averse management style does not value or reward attributes of experimentation, action learning, risk taking and creativity (Angus, 2008). Over the years, however, there has been growing critique and unease with this over-reliance. These quantitative-heavy and linear approaches to inform decision-making cannot hold their own in such complex environments. However, neither would a purely qualitative one, hence why a mixed method approach is what is being proposed. Increasingly today, the design discipline is becoming of particular interest in strategic management circles.
as an approach to dealing with complex realities (Johansson-Sköldberg, Woodilla et al. 2013). As is the case in businesses and governments the world over, development actors are increasingly turning to the design community for ways to better represent and respond to a more nuanced understanding when serving their beneficiary populations.

Thomas Lockwood defines human centred design as “a process that emphasises observation, collaboration, fast learning, visualisation of ideas, rapid concept prototyping, and concurrent business analysis” (Lockwood 2010). Human centred design offers a complementary knowledge system that offers approaches that are more widely participatory as well as:

“more dialogue-based, issue-driven rather than calendar-driven, conflict-using rather than conflict-avoiding, all aimed at invention and learning, rather than control” (Liedtka 2000).

**Field example: Understanding farmer circles of trust**

In one example in Kenya, designers have worked with a development organisation, a private sector bank and farming communities to understand how best to provide farmers with access to new types of financial products and services. As part of the user research activities, the designers mapped out the trust relationships of farmers in several semi-urban and rural communities. Who do they go to first for various purposes? Who do they go to second? Third?

Figure 1 is a visual representation of trust relationships which would be difficult to communicate through more statistical means. The depiction is not meant to be an accurate representation for each and every farmer, however, it has provided development managers with new ways of understanding concepts of trust and reach for the user group they are seeking to benefit. It also provided an immediate reality check which challenged prior assumptions around how farmers perceived financial institutions.
As depicted in Figure 1, most farmers preferred to borrow and save money through informal means such as family and neighbours, mainly out of fear of losing their homes if they could not pay back a bank. One development manager reflected by noting:

“we assume that all farmers want credit, but this tells us that just because they want it, it doesn’t mean they trust it coming from us or even our local financial services partners” (personal communication).

There is significant investment from donors for the development of financial products and services for low-income consumers in developing country contexts. The financial inclusion space is full of statistics informing us of the majority ‘unbanked and underserved’ populations in Kenya for example – however what these statistics don’t tell us is some of the contributing factors as to why – why it may have more to do with trust and perception than a lack of access as is sometimes assumed. This is the point we argue – quantitative approaches tell us ‘how many’ but qualitative approaches tell us ‘why’ (McMurray, Pace and Scott).
As seen with this small example, human centred design provides more nuanced perspectives when identifying beneficiary needs from which to base strategic management decisions. This contrasting approach offers development managers the opportunity to lean more on a knowledge system rooted in iteration and experimentation, with:

“sequential attention to idea generation and evaluation in a way that attends first to possibilities before moving onto constraints” (Liedtka, 2000; Liedtka, King, & Bennett, 2013).

Through new ways of working adopted from the designer’s toolkit, development managers’ assumptions are being challenged, more and more, decisions are being based on grounded empathy and a deep understanding of the complex realities faced in context. The conversation is changing regarding what’s really important.

**What can human centred design do? Affirm human dignity (Buchanan 2001)**

There are many powerful examples of the application of human centred design methods for the development and marketing of tangible products in developing country contexts (Thomas 2006, Prahalad 2005). To date, human centred design’s contribution to poverty reduction can be determined as either of two things, (1) the production of goods and (2) the consumption of goods (Thomas, 2006). However, Richard Buchanan’s 2001 work takes the concept of human centred design further than that, it is:

“fundamentally an affirmation of human dignity. It’s an ongoing search for what can be done to support and strengthen the dignity of human beings as they act out their lives in varied social, economic, political, and cultural circumstances.”

This suggests that human centred design has a more significant role to play than just developing new products and services. It actually has an extended responsibility to advance people’s dignity. The work of London and Hart (2004) agrees with this, suggesting that the traditional business logic model of introducing products into low-income markets requires fundamental rethinking – suggesting a stronger participatory focus on local capacity building and inclusive processes of co-design of innovations.
Field example: Empathising with nurses through nurses’ words

In Ghana, designers worked with development managers in understanding the intrinsic drivers of rural community health nurses and possible solutions to their day-to-day challenges through strongly grounded ethnographic research and facilitated co-design workshops with the nurses.

One of the techniques employed was a process and experience mapping exercise designed to understand nurses’ greatest sources of frustration – in their words – this led to a nuanced understanding of what was working and where things were breaking down in the system. It was clear that supporting rural community health nurses goes beyond providing them with the means to do their jobs, but also hinges on making them feel appreciated and rewarding them with professional development opportunities.

This is not revolutionary in and of itself, however, visualising what was learned in new ways, such as figure 2, offers a new way of responding to human need that is significant for addressing many of the challenges development managers face working in such complex environments.

Figure 2: Process/experience map of nurse challenges in their words

Making visual what was heard in the field has helped development managers use that data in a meaningful way. Similar processes have been used to visually map out the system and the relationships between different players, differentiate between the nurses through understanding the varying intrinsic drivers within the group, as well as capture their lived experiences of, and pathways through the health system.

Prioritising the design based on personas and a deep understanding of the system helped the management team avoid the trap of making decisions based on what they thought beneficiaries want, freeing them to base their decisions on what beneficiaries actually need and value.

The time spent shadowing, speaking to and understanding the local realities, needs, preferences, constraints and touch points of the rural community health nurses resulted in a strong, grounded empathy for the thousands of decisions which followed in the planning, design and implementation of the project.

**What is the designer’s role? Solutions rooted in humanity**

Designers depict issues as experience by making things visual and tangible. Whether sketches, models or prototypes, these are all used to mobilise people. Designer strengths lie in creating artefacts around issues which development managers can gather to interpret and discuss. The point here is not so much that these artefacts are visual but rather that they embody knowledge that cannot be easily articulated using tables, words and numbers. The visual evokes emotion and as seen in the field examples, influences the nature of conversations being held at senior levels within development organisations.

This approach tends to provide development managers with an experience which helps them understand what it might be like to be involved in a particular social context or scenario from a user’s outside-in perspective rather than the traditional organisation’s inside-out default.

While the basic role of development management remains the same as in business management, that is, getting the job done effectively and efficiently, it has the additional task of needing to affirm human dignity. Human centred designers’ support development managers to do this through ways to listen to, interpret and represent beneficiary needs, their voices, their values, and enable empathy to be at the centre of development planning and evaluation. In addition to this point, what this demonstrates is that by applying human centred design beyond traditional product and
service design, to develop tools for more effective and human centred ways of working within and outside organisations (Buchanan 2001, Brown and Katz 2009, de Mozota 2013, Lockwood 2013, Liedtka 2014) poises a significant opportunity for development organisations to continue their evolution of learning, innovating and optimising their effectiveness.

A human centred design approach provides a stark contrast view of solving social problems to the status quo where a problem can be fully described and then solved in a linear way. The messy, iterative process that designers know how to organise and work effectively through is closer to the complex realities development actors are faced with in their contexts.

As demonstrated by the points above, the design community, now more than ever, is looking at better supporting development managers to think about problems as systems, rather than individual parts. As noted by Buchanan (2001) in his seminal work, by expanding their approaches, designers can go beyond aesthetics and basic form and function, to solutions rooted in humanity.

**Where to from here? Rethinking measurement sector-wide**

The current nature of funding dominated by quantitative outputs and measures, understandably drives donors to invest in development initiatives which generate predictable and tangible returns on the dollar. Although the current way of operating is working, it is not optimal to maximise outputs. Development organisations, as with other types of organisations, need to consistently innovate in order to keep pace with current trends, remain sustainable and persist as leaders in their respective fields of expertise.

Since their inception since World War II, development organisations and their business practices have matured and the way they function needs to evolve to keep pace with this evolution of maturity. As we move into a different era, organisational architectures and mind-sets require a blended methodology approach to defining human need and measuring their impact in order to remain sustainable – for both these organisations and those people they seek to serve.

Taking into consideration that development sector success is predominantly being measured on per-capita economic growth (Morse 2013), it is clear why there is an unhealthy obsession with numbers in the sector as reflected in donor demands and development management dynamics. For some time now, there have been growing concerns about the relevance of current measures of development performance, in particular
those based on GDP figures. The conclusion of the Sarkozy Commission Report (2009) supports the idea that those organisations concerned with genuine human-centred development need to shift their focus from narrow measures of economic progress to broader measures of human wellbeing (Stiglitz and Sen, et al. 2010).

No doubt having numerical and defensible measures of success is critical for the continued legitimacy of international development initiatives, but what if an over-emphasis on this approach is coming at the expense of human dignity and wellbeing? Although less familiar and less tangible than substitutes such as the ‘dollar-a-day’ proxy, developing measures for terms such as ‘dignity’ and ‘wellbeing’ is key in shaping a new approach to how development organisations measure their success (McGregor and Burns et al. 2012). Anecdotal evidence from the field supports this, human need should be depicted in terms of what is important in people’s day-to-day lives in order to shape new metrics for development sector success.

Working towards the promotion of a more holistic measure for human development requires development organisations to engage in human-centred and multi-method approaches. This is paramount to better understand what people define as their needs and allow for their voices to contribute to deliberations over policy direction and programmatic implementation which will have a direct impact on their lives.

The key challenge of this change is to bring the beneficiaries’ voice in dignified forms to the decision making table as well as defining success through broader measures of wellbeing, dignity, rights, quality of life or satisfaction. In order to protect and promote human wellbeing it is necessary to increase awareness of alternative, human-centred measures as development indicators, find out where and how they are being used, and consider how they can be adapted by development organisations (McGregor and Burns et al. 2012).

**Conclusion**

We triangulate the criticisms outlined in the literature review, combined with anecdotal evidence and in-the-field first-hand experience. The findings suggest there is a pressing need for development organisations to integrate their beneficiary needs, as framed by the beneficiaries themselves, as early as when in funding gathering and planning mode. This is generally not the case across development organisations. The inflexible and linear
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Management approaches required by donors have led to many initiatives focusing on projects and not beneficiary realities, resulting in limited or no beneficiary participation in defining the need or solution possibilities. Development organisations have followed this rigid model for long enough.

The real challenge is to move from intermittent cases of product successes to a systemic approach to development planning that integrates beneficiary needs, through participatory methods, before programs become too rigidly attached to their narrow set of LFA outputs and outcomes. There are is growing interest as more development organisations are looking to challenge the status quo as they experiment with human centred design approaches to help them achieve such an integration.

The way development organisations empathise, interpret, design, implement and evaluate initiatives is where designers can play a more significant role. There is scarce mention in the literature of the design community’s responsibility within development organisations, and the sector at large. We suggest future research to focus on the issue of how designers can play a role, beyond the current mode of facilitating the production and consumption of new goods and services, rather in how greater social accountability and participatory practices can be achieved at the strategic management levels of development organisations.

Based on the gaps in the existing literature, we argue that human centred design approaches can offer an unconventional, yet powerful way for development organisations to manage fast-changing and ever-increasing complex realities – while moving them toward more human-centred ways of working in developing country contexts.

In consolidating the literature with in-the-field experience, we also propose further investigation into redefining success measurement specific to the development sector. We do not propose to discard the current dominant quantitative paradigm but instead build and extend on it with the inclusion of qualitative approaches facilitated through human centred design. We assert the proposed shift to multi-methods facilitates, and thus impacts on, the wellbeing and human dignity of people living in developing country contexts. This poises the opportunity for further research to better develop the conceptual framework and necessary rigour to support the arguments made here.
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