## **Context in Context: Embracing Development Chaos**

The development industry operates within a paradigm of the *haves* helping the *have-nots*. Donors decide what is wrong with recipients and work, with the best intentions, to fix the perceived problems through projects. A vital element of any project is positioning it in the context of its delivery.

This paper investigates the context review phase in development project design. It begins by reviewing the bodies of knowledge created by the Project Management Institute (PMI) in the USA and the Association for Project Management (APM) in the UK. It then compares processes and tools used in the development industry. Finally, it introduces chaos theory and examines its usefulness in the development paradigm.

Regardless of intent and industry, properly grounding and defining a project builds a strong foundation for the ultimate design and delivery of the intended goal. The APM and PMI Bodies of Knowledge define two diverse points on a spectrum. Both are based on foundational research, academic rigour, and millions of hours of collective experience. The APM structures its body of knowledge on a set of principles and cycles. It looks at project context through a series of choices related to strategies and life cycles considering organizational and social environments and stakeholder needs and perspectives (Association for Project Management, 2019). At the other end of the spectrum, the PMI defines a series of interacting processes and tools that define, structure, and track the inputs and outputs required to design the project based on the context, objectives, stakeholders, governance, and environment (Project Management Institute, 2021). Both organizations define project context development as iterative, non-linear, and ongoing.

The development industry accepts neither approach; instead, there are a mix and match of tools, ideas, and strategies that are heavily dependent on the Donor. While UKAid recognizes that the "design of [its] projects needs to be strengthened," they neither provide robust guidance for project system design, nor accept an existing body of knowledge—although they lean toward the APM end of the spectrum (Mannion Daniels, 2019, 2). USAID leans toward the PMI approach and provides a detailed toolkit (Mintz et al., 2003). The European Commission (EC) defines three styles of projects—Direct Support, Sector Policy Support, and Macro-economic Budgetary Support—each requiring a different project decision and delivery methodology within a cyclical design approach. Their *Situation Analysis* phase is defined and supported by qualitative descriptions and robust templates and tools to examine policy, context, stakeholders, institutional capacity, problem analysis, lessons learned, and strategy selection (European Commission, 2004). Since three of the four largest bilateral aid donors provide different levels of detail, different strategies, and different expectations, it is unsurprising that program delivery organizations—who often work with more than one Donor—lack a unified approach to program and project design.

The diversity of types of aid—partially defined by the EC—could be one of the contributing factors to the lack of coherence in development project implementation; national ego being placed ahead of recipient need might be another. A myriad of tools permeates the environment. USAID and UKAid support tools designed to help people "think politically" using Political Economy Analysis (Mcloughlin, 2014; Menocal et al., 2018). The tools, self-admittedly, are haphazardly used—perhaps because Political Economy Analysis has shallow and distinctly

Western-based philosophical roots. Garrard and Murphy (2019, 235) observe that "there was political activity long before there was philosophizing about it." Telling people to think politically using a modern, Western-skewed tool does little to decolonize the aid system. Tools like the *PDIAtoolkit* add robustness to strategic projects aimed at state-building by the World Bank but do little to help in designing a project to provide clean drinking water in a village (Samji et al., 2018). Kurtz and Snowden's (2003) Cynefin sense framework defines strategic dynamics as existing in one of five contexts—Simple, Complicated, Complex, Chaotic, and Disorder. It defines a project in each context. Although Cynefin was expanded to provide advice on behaviour and focus to leaders by Snowden and Boone (2007), it uses the term "chaotic" with a vernacular meaning rather than a more useful technical meaning conveyed by Chaos Theory.

Without delving into the equations proposed by Lorenz (1963) in his work on hydrodynamic flow in the earth's atmosphere, his work inspired valuable concepts that have been developed and applied when analyzing human systems—under the name of Chaos or Complexity Theory. Studies in crisis communications, nursing, sociology, management, and psychology have all found some transferability, particularly with the concepts of fractals and strange attractors. (Levy, 1994; Abraham and Gilgen, 1995; Eve, Horsfall and Lee, 1997; Sait Demir, Karaman and Deniz Oztekin, 2019; Fuller et al., 2022). Fractals are self-ordering turbulent patterns. Imagine water flowing around a boulder in a river. The turbulent flow is not predictable, but the water is self-ordering and eventually returns to laminar flow because of the interactions of strange attractors—thus making the system subject to some prediction. More interestingly, fractals are similar at multiple levels of observation (Lewin, 1993). Integrating elements of chaos theory into the context phase of development projects has the potential to unlock new, significant insights. Fractal evaluation may lead to a review of the entire system-causing us to recognize that improving government capacity is as applicable to the *haves* as the *have-nots*. If the *have* governments better regulated their corporations-stopping the looting of resources from the have-nots, for example—there might be less disparity for the aid industry to grapple with.

After reviewing the tools and contexts of development projects, it becomes clear that UKAid, the fourth largest bilateral Donor, provides the scantiest framework for project design and management—and is open about its weakness (Mannion Daniels, 2019, 2; UNOCHA, 2022). UKAid could strengthen its delivery, and the entire industry, by putting ego aside, abandoning its attempts to create a made-at-home solution and adopting a more robust framework from one of the more significant Donors. Perhaps, thinking more politically, it could take the lead in working with other Donors to develop an *International Development Project Body of Knowledge* that embraces the reality and lessons of the chaos around us.

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