Making Good on Donors' Desire to Do Development Differently[1]

Abstract

Foreign aid donors are increasingly focused on changing the way their organizations function. This discourse has focused on desired qualities, e.g. greater knowledge of local contextual realities, appropriate adaptation to context, and greater flexibility to respond to changing circumstances. We argue that more attention needs to be devoted to the "how", and turn to the management literature to identify ways in which donors can achieve their stated goals. We argue that contingency theory is a helpful lens for thinking through what may be required for foreign aid donors to achieve their goals. The organizational qualities sought by donors are emergent properties of complex organizational systems, and can likely only be achieved through a focus on the 'nuts and bolts' of the organization.

Keywords: Foreign Aid; Bureaucratic Politics; Organizational Reform; Aid Management; Adaptive Management

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> To understand a government bureaucracy one must understand how its front-line workers learn what to do…. one cannot say many interesting things about the structure, incentives, and leadership of an agency without first knowing what behaviors are supposed to be organized by those structures, motivated by those incentives, and directed by those leaders. – **James Q. Wilson, Bureaucracy** (1989, 33–34)

1. Introduction

That the organization of foreign aid matters to development intervention success is not a new idea. Albert Hirschman and Judith Tendler made this point as early as the 1960s and 1970s, respectively; as Tendler put it, "I ascribe problem results to an organizational, rather than a historic, determinism."[1] In the decades since, attention to organizations in, and the organization of, the development industry has only increased.[2]

Something has begun to change recently, however; namely, development actors themselves have begun to focus on organizational features. As OXFAM strategic adviser and influential aid thinker Duncan Green recently put it, "Move over 'Innovation', 'Adaptive' is the new buzzword on the block – stick it in front of 'learning', 'management', 'programming', or 'aid' if you want to sound up to the minute."[3] Between June and September 2016 alone at least five publications focusing on "adaptive management" or "adaptive aid" were issued by large international nonprofits and think tanks in addition to DFID and USAID.[4] Aid organizations themselves have begun to focus on internal organizational changes in an effort to enhance flexibility and adaptiveness; DFID's Smart Rules and USAID's Local Systems Framework, to name but two of many examples, are attempts at internal organizational reform to facilitate greater adaptation to local context.[5] The World Bank's 2015 World Development Report – arguably the Bank's flagship document – contains an entire chapter on adaptive design and adaptive interventions.[6]

This paper attempts to kick-start a conversation across traditional boundaries separating theory and practice to widen the menu of options at the disposal of donors when searching for solutions. One community of development practice aimed at changing development practice has united under the banner of Doing Development Differently.[7] To truly do development differently, we argue, requires serious thinking about how to mainstream contingent ways of working inside donor agencies. To be adaptive in practice, organizations need an institutional and institutionalized structure that supports it. We introduce here a new theoretical frame and way of thinking through when and how donors are most likely to be able to institute the changes they seek.

Just a few years ago Andrews, Pritchett, & Woolcock framed adaptation to context as what "mainstream development organizations such as bilateral donors and the World Bank" were *not* doing.[8] They argued that mainstream development organizations were least effective precisely where results could not be achieved by pre-specified "blueprint" solutions. These very organizations have now essentially agreed with this critique and are attempting to alter their organizations accordingly, to move beyond blueprints. In this regard practitioners are increasingly moving towards a thread of the development literature that has long valued adaptation and critiqued traditional donor practices.[9]

A broader framework for considering *how* these organizational changes can be achieved is sorely needed. The weak incorporation of systematic thinking regarding internal organization is hindering these emerging reform efforts. In our view, the current discourse is long on invocations of the need to "be adaptive" but short on systematic thinking regarding how organizations might actually achieve these ends. This is a missed opportunity, as management scholarship has the potential to propel new thinking about donor agency[10] reform and inform the search for greater effectiveness and performance. This work focuses on how aid delivery organizations might accomplish their goals through what we term "contingent ways of working", building on the long tradition in management scholarship known as contingency theory.

We believe the management literature has much to say regarding attempts at internal reform to achieve these ends. We argue that existing organizational theory provides a series of helpful insights for thinking through when and how organizations can better respond to context (section 2), and that organizations will only be able to accomplish their desired "macro" organizational transformations by focusing on "micro" organizational behaviour – the actions of individuals within their organizations (section 3). We then hypothesize as to some of the key barriers that currently preclude individuals within the organization from acting in a manner supportive of these organizational reforms (section 4). Section 5 charts a tentative way forward and concludes.

2. Foreign Aid Donors' Desired Changes as Facets of Contingent Ways of Working

The management literature has long understood the organizational tension between standardized approaches – what in the context of international development is sometimes called "best practice" or "blueprint" thinking – and the ability to respond to local realities. Those arguing that there is no "right" answer, and thus that organizations will do better by making decisions contingent on the features of the situation, are known as contingency theorists.[11] As one group of prominent development thinkers put it, "the tension between the 'best practice' and the 'contingency' view of management is neither new, nor specific to government organizations."[12] The implications of this tension for the structure and reform of aid organizations have yet to be fully explored, however.

The tendency inside aid organisations has traditionally followed the 'best practice' strand of the management literature, minimizes the importance of contextual differences in favour of grand theories and universal prescription.[13] This approach builds on a the historic thread in the management literature often opposed to contingency theory, one that sees the possibility and desirability of an administrative 'science'.[14] Administrative trends like those associated with New Public Management (NPM) continue to inspire hope for generalisable prescriptions and design solutions with universal applicability across all organisations – public and private, Northern and Southern – whatever their type, location and circumstance.[15] NPM's 'contextless' approach to modern public management reform is often derided for being incompatible with local social, political and economic environments.[16]

There are substantial and overlapping communities of practitioners and scholars who have collectively aligned themselves against this historic focus on NPM orthodoxy and 'blueprint' solutions. Indeed, there are presently so many efforts focusing on how aid agencies can be better delivered that two development thinkers recently sought fit to create a typology comparing and contrasting these overlapping efforts.[17] The efforts described

include the Doing Development Differently community, which calls "for development to focus on locally defined problems to be tackled through iteration, learning, and adaptation" and ADAPT's efforts to "identify, develop, and spread the use of adaptive management approaches in complex aid and development projects."[18] This community has now expanded to include actors inside bilateral and multilateral donor agencies, civil society, foundations, and academic institutions.[19]

We perceive three common claims amongst these efforts: 1) Donor agencies need to focus on better understanding the local contexts in which they operate; 2) Donor interventions need to be adapted or tailored to local contexts based on features of the context during project design (which we call "adaptation"); 3) As contexts change, so must donor interventions change; organizations must be flexible enough to allow re-adaptation in response to exogenous shocks and the feedback from intervention performance (which we call "flexibility"). The debate between "best practices" and this counter-movement, then, in many ways parallels a historic tension in management scholarship.[20] (see e.g. Fisher 1998; Weill and Olson 1989 for overviews) That many of these groups focus on "adaptive aid" highlights the parallels between contingent ways of working on the one hand and pre-defined solutions on the other.

This section discusses each of the three facets outlined above – contextual knowledge, adapting interventions to context, and having the flexibility to alter interventions as circumstances or knowledge changes – in turn. We argue that these three features can be fairly summarized as facets of contingency theory, as part of a well-developed pre-existing theoretic architecture.

Understanding Local Context

To adapt or flexibly respond to context, an organization needs to have the capacity to understand context.[21] Not all organizational interventions require a deep understanding of context; however, the delivery of development interventions is clearly one where contextual knowledge is critical.[22] When environments are unstable or the course of events unpredictable, more will need to be decided contingently at the local level.[23] Delivery of development interventions is clearly a context where this is the case – given the number of interacting elements and feedback loops that make predictions difficult and consequences uncertain, complexity theories are often elicited to describe the environmental contexts of development interventions.[24] When tasks cannot be routinized – done in routine, standard, pre-defined ways – contingency theory tells us more control needs to rest in the hands of agents, rather than managers.[25] Sensitivity to and awareness of local realities put a premium on understanding and gathering information, and making design and management contingent on the knowledge obtained.

Adapting Interventions to Local Realities

Merely understanding context is not sufficient for a donor to work contingently, however; donors need to in fact make use of the information they gather to adapt their projects to the realities they face.[26] New Public Management and "best practice" strategies are in tension with organisational adaptation to specifics not primarily in the *gathering* of contextual information but in its *use*. Unlike NPM approaches that seek models or 'best practices' emerging from objective scientific investigation and valid in multiple contexts,[27] contingency

theory stresses the importance of solutions that 'best fit' a singular context. The process of 'fitting' an organisation to circumstances can occur in at least three ways: natural selection based on environmental conditions exerting pressures on organisations (like when biological systems evolve); mutual interaction between organisation and the environment (like the sun, rain and soil all result in crop yields); and an emergent systems approach whereby multiple contingencies are addressed in a simultaneous manner (like an interdependent social network).[28] Contingency theories implicitly underpin the emerging focus on "best fit" rather than "best practice" – at actually adjusting interventions to respond to clearly identified problems.

Flexibility

If the course of an intervention is unpredictable, then the process of adaptation to context needs be continuous throughout the life of the project, rather than merely at its inception.[29] As contexts change, organisations must be able to redirect themselves and feed back to changing circumstances and opportunistic moments. This is why one substantial thread of efforts to change foreign aid delivery focuses on what it calls "Problem Driven *Iterative* Adaptation."[30] The key term here is "iterative" – as in, trying something, learning from it, and then having another go. To in fact "iteratively adapt" requires an organization that has the flexibility to make adjustments as circumstances change. Flexibility involves seizing opportunities, recognising dead ends, encouraging innovation, and changing direction when necessary. This is why the very foundations of contingency theory stress that responding to an uncertainty works best with fewer formal rules and structure and more empowered sub-organizational decision-making (i.e. decentralization of decision authority).[31]

Contingency Theory as a Unifying Lens for Practitioner-Driven Efforts to Alter Development Delivery

Some of the key features of efforts to change development practices, then, relate back to the central tension between contingency theory and scientific management. We believe this is not merely an interesting observation, but also a useful one. Its primary use is by shifting focus from what reformers want to change – which we believe to be novel in a development context but by no means unprecedented in organizational thinking – to how.

Development practitioners exist within a sector that has long focused on standardization and best practices; on finding universal technical solutions. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that existing efforts to change development practice focus on organizational outcomes rather than the internal processes that might facilitate those outcomes. Contingent approaches do not just emerge by fiat. The head of an organization can no more instruct her organization to "be adaptive" than she can enjoin her organization to "be more effective" or "stop making mistakes". Instead, different ways of working emerge because of more granular changes to the nuts and bolts of an organization. Given the increasing prominence of complex systems thinking in the development discourse, one could think of contingent approaches as an emergent property of a complex organizational system.[32]

To actually *achieve* organizational adaptation and flexibility in response to local contexts requires organizations to move to different models of managing and motivating personnel. The next section examines the work environment of development agents, arguing that any change in organizational practice that achieves contextual knowledge, adaptation,

and flexibility must start with internal processes. We believe that the answer to "how" organizations can achieve the changes they desire lies within the organizations themselves.

3. From Individual Workers to Organizational Results: Autonomy, Motivation, and Trust

To shift from a focus on universal technical solutions to understanding and adapting to context is not a small change. Nor is it a costless one; implementing a contingent approach comes at the expense, we argue, of some degree of direct managerial monitoring and control. While contingent ways of working do not require donors to forego control over strategy and implementation, nor do they necessarily reduce accountability to domestic stakeholders,[33] contingent ways of working do change the type of accountability technologies at managers' disposal.

This section explores conditions for contingent approaches in aid by examining the role played by employee motivation, autonomy, and trust. We argue that these agent-level factors are critical in allowing contingent ways of working to emerge within an organization. This work builds on a nascent strand in the emerging literature on adaptive management in aid which focuses on human resources, providing a theoretical justification for the systematic relationship between agent-level internal organizational features and organizational outcomes.[34] This section also highlights the interrelationship between organizational features in shaping agent behavior, thus underlining that contingent ways of working will not emerge from a central instruction (e.g. "be adaptive") but will instead emerge if properly enabled, fostered, and nurtured.

Autonomy: the value of freedom and discretion

Autonomy – freedom from external control and influence – can apply to a variety of organisational levels. Among other relations, an agency can be more or less autonomous *vis-à-vis* its political authorizing[35] environment; an organisational unit can be more or less autonomous *vis-à-vis* headquarters; an individual agent can be more or less autonomous *vis-à-vis* supervisors.

There is good reason to think autonomy at both the organisational and individual levels in aid delivery facilitate contingent ways of working. In situations of uncertainty, contingency theory suggests relatively more authority should lie in the hands of field offices – the 'street-level bureaucrats' of development.[36] These will be the organisational actors closest to the coalface of implementation. Evidence from both aid agencies and developing country governments supports this conclusion, suggesting greater autonomy helps project adaptability and flexibility. For example, a study of Nigerian civil servants highlights that the more complex a project, the more delivery benefits from greater autonomy. This is because more complex tasks need more 'on-the-ground' adjustment.[37] Limited autonomy constrains the ability of aid organisations to gather local information and adapt to changing circumstances.[38] This echoes findings from the broader public management literature that decentralised authority is associated with better performance[39] (e.g. Moynihan and Pandey 2005). Higher levels of individual autonomy are also associated with greater levels of organisational innovation and opportunities for learning, particularly where contextual knowledge is critical.[40]

Greater autonomy is also associated with greater job satisfaction, greater commitment to the organisation and lower employee turnover.[41] Aghion and Tirole describe one mechanism that may explain part of this effect. They discuss agents who have 'formal' but not 'real' authority – who are not able to make decisions based on tacit or local knowledge. For those with formal authority who cannot actually use contextual knowledge in decision making, it is rational to invest less in the collection of local information. This diminishes organisational learning and adaptation and explicitly affects agents' incentives to gather contextual knowledge.[42]

Autonomy is not a 'silver bullet', of course. Increasing autonomy should be done with care and in full consideration of the complex organisational effects to be had from shifting any single lever. More autonomous agents are more capable of acting badly as a result of reduced constraints.[43] More autonomy without appropriately tailored measurement regimes may decrease effectiveness, leading agents to "hit the target but miss the point".[44] More autonomy means, almost by definition, a diminution of central control. As such, the effects of more autonomy depend critically on what motivates agents, and the degree of trust organizations can and do have in their agents – the next two items to be examined below.

Motivation: agents connected to their work are more effective

Giving more autonomy to agents raises the question: Who are the agents and what might we expect them to do with greater operating slack? To borrow from one popular framing, to what extent are they public-spirited 'knights' or self-interested 'knaves'?[45] If agents and organisations are given greater autonomy but fail to change their behaviour, there is no reason to expect improved performance. Indeed, if this autonomy is used in unproductive ways – if unconstrained agents change their behaviour in ways that are unproductive – more autonomy is likely to decrease organizational performance.

We need motivated agents to gather contextual knowledge, to steer flexibly and to adapt to changing circumstances. Motivation may be an even more critical issue for public sector employees than it is for their private sector cousins. Public sector jobs often differ from those in the private inasmuch as the former often lack of clear summary performance metrics across different tasks and involve accountability and reporting to multiple stakeholders; both these phenomena are often true of foreign aid. In environments with these features, the literature suggests that motivation is even more critical, with success depending to a greater degree on the agents' own goals and motivation.[46]

Happier and more motivated agents are more likely to be able to put autonomy to good use, to make use of flexibility built into organisational design, to gather contextual information and to make use of it accordingly. There is a substantial literature that begins with the observation that while bureaucrats sometimes shirk, manipulate and steal, they also frequently do their jobs well and earnestly *despite* the absence of monitoring or financial incentives.[47] In the language of public management, many employees seem to exhibit public service motivation – a genuine belief in what they are doing which motivates their day-to-day activities.[48] Humanitarian and international organization employees are more mission-oriented than average.[49] Individuals electing a career in aid organizations often do so precisely because they care about their organizations' goals.

The motivational mix of employees depends in part on recruitment and selection processes.[50] Motivation also depends on what happens after recruitment and within the

internal organisational environments that employees experience.[51] Organisational design choices that allow employees greater connection to the impact of their work are associated with more pro-social behaviour, such as greater voluntary effort.[52] Too much monitoring or red tape can crowd out pro-social motivation; for example, organisations can make choices about monitoring and compliance that reduce staff motivation.[53] Demotivated agents may be more likely to exit roles, or to switch to organisations where job design allows for more fulfilling work. Motivation, then, can be an indirect product of organisational design choices around autonomy, recruitment and monitoring.

This does not mean staff motivation is entirely under donors' control, or that a 'knave' agent can be made a 'knight' via encouragement and changes in task design. It is striking, though, that empirics suggest aid agencies with more autonomous work environments have more satisfied staff.[54] While few studies examine aid agencies through a motivational lens, some data exists that is consistent with the notion that agents matter. For example, World Bank project success is shown to depend more on the unobservable features of the individuals leading projects than on many of the observable features of the project or environment.[55]

Design decisions around recruitment, autonomy and monitoring can crowd in or out more motivated personnel. Organisational choices can also change the level of motivation in the same pool of agents. Thinking harder about employee motivation in reforming aid agencies is likely to substantially impact performance by facilitating contingent approaches, a finding the broader bureaucratic politics and development literatures echo.[56]

Trust: an alternative to sanctions-based accountability

Monitoring donor staff and punishing poor performers through sanctions – carrots and sticks based on performance – is difficult in development organizations. This is because environmental unpredictability can change goalposts quickly and information gaps between headquarters and country-level realities can be large. The difficulty in sanctioning staff makes trust between staff and their supervisors a requisite for working contingently. This includes trust in the judgments, perceptions, and actions of field personnel, trust by management that staff will use autonomy appropriately, and trust between staff to facilitate the collective understanding necessary to work contingently – to allow the organization to be flexible and adaptive and to gather contextual knowledge.

While trust encourages flexibility and contingent ways of working, it does so at the expense of traditional vertical forms of accountability.[57] As such, at the organizational level trust and sanctions are inversely related; organisations whose political authorisers distrust them are likely to be subject to sanctions[58] and are less likely to devolve control to field agents.[59] Building accountability systems based on trust – rather than sanctions – requires motivated agents, and may not be the best strategy when agents are thought to possess selfish motives. This is because trust-based accountability gives agents greater degrees of discretion and autonomy.[60]

Employees' trust of their organisations, employees' trust of one another, and trust by political authorisers are all associated with higher organisational performance.[61] There is evidence that trust can be a virtuous cycle under certain conditions, with a trusting relationship between service providers and those monitoring services motivating better performance, as well as further trust.[62] Other drivers of trust include organisational stability;[63]

more empowered employees;[64] and a range of human resource practices like the fairness of performance appraisal and compensation, career development opportunities and perceived autonomy.[65]

In contrast, contracting and accounting practices that treat employees as if they are likely to misbehave can diminish trust.[66] Legislative 'micromanagement' of organisations and managerial control practices like performance measurement also work against trust.[67] This is because sanctions can breed distrust. As one former civil servant put it, "Trust is about trusting people … if you require people to demonstrate that they are complying with your diktat (however well-meaning or flexible that diktat is), then you are not trusting them."[68]

Engineering Contingent Thinking by Focusing on Agents

To change organizations so that they better understand local contexts, adapt programs to those contexts, and flexibly alter interventions as needed requires changing what those organizations' agents do. Organisational design decisions that reduce compliance activities and increase agents' freedom to act are likely to have substantial benefits for contingent ways of working where agents can be trusted and are sufficiently motivated. Contextual knowledge is best gathered by autonomous agents. Autonomous agents will be better able to initially adapt projects to local contexts. Giving agents autonomy is one important way of designing in the organizational flexibility that will allow iteration, re-adaptation of projects as environments change or in response to feedback from implementation of the project itself.

The best way to reform aid agencies to work in contingent ways depends critically on the particulars of the agents – who they are and what drives, or can be made to drive, their performance. Where agents are, or can be, intrinsically motivated to accomplish the organisation's goals, extrinsic motivators and monitoring will be less necessary. Reform attempts that fail to think through agent motivation are unlikely to realise their full potential.

Trust-based accountability requires the ability to appropriately select and motivate agents who share the goals of the organisation and have the capacity to implement what needs doing.[69] While it may be difficult to directly engineer trust, an organisation that lacks it will find operating effectively in complicated and uncertain environments difficult. Understanding and adapting to changing local circumstances requires trust by political authorisers and agency headquarters in the capacities of field-level staff. Inasmuch as aid organisations need to gather contextual information and act on this information to work contingently and achieve their aims, they need to trust agents in the field to do so.

Contingency theory can inform the way policymakers might be able to think about the "how" of their efforts to reform their organizations. Working contingently emerges from an organizational system, and thus is less a specifically identifiable feature than a property of the whole organization. This does not mean that organizations need to simply wait for contingent ways of working to emerge, however; Table 1 links the agent-level concepts articulated above with the contingent ways of working aid organizations themselves increasingly seek. To discuss how organizations must change without focusing on the nuts & bolts, the plumbing, of the organization is to engage in a kind of reverse "fallacy of composition"[70]. There can be no change in the "organization" without change in some constituent element of the organization.

(Table 1 here)

We do not mean to suggest that altering an organization so it can work contingently is easy; far from it. The next section will present some of the barriers that stand between many of today's aid agencies and more contingent ways of working.

4. What Gets in the Way: Potential Barriers to Better Internal Ways of Working

The prospective policy entrepreneur trying to change systems inside an aid agency faces a number of potential barriers, some of which are under the agency's control and some of which are not. This section highlights a few of these barriers and potential paths for hypotheses and research. Whereas the section above discusses contingency theory broadly, this section hypothesizes as to the key barriers to change within aid organization. To do so this section draws on current findings related to aid organizations and development implementation.

Accountability Practices

The need to account can distort the focus of an organisation away from the field, with deleterious consequences for contingent ways of working. In aid agencies, this accounting sometimes takes the form of direct control, which requires agents to only make decisions based on what can be verified and reported back to their supervisors. In addition to directly limiting flexibility, this disincentivizes agents from gathering contextual knowledge which often cannot be codified in such a way as to be transmitted up a hierarchy.[71]

Control is also achieved by a mechanism that is normally framed as performance improvement – performance management systems which use data from the field for evaluation purposes. In a study of 11 aid agencies, results measurement and reporting have been shown to distract frontline civil servants from field-related concerns.[72] Former USAID Administrator Andrew Natsios has argued that time spent on compliance distracts from local-level information gathering that limits USAID's flexibility and adaptability; he has called this "obsessive measurement disorder".[73] This is not only a USAID problem. Vähämäki finds in a study of the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) that the repeated introduction of top-down management results technology and the *ex-ante* specification of goals have, in fact, impeded the achievement of development outcomes.[74]

There is currently an active debate about performance measurement in the aid community. We need to ask whether (and when) the incentives that performance measurement creates actually help donors navigate contingently. Very few aid personnel have jobs for which all elements are amenable to measurement. When one's job includes performing tasks that are both measurable and unmeasurable, measuring performance may lead to underinvestment in the unmeasurable task in favour of the measurable task (where performance is more visible).[75] This can disincentivise contingent ways of working because measuring context sensitivity, adaptability and flexibility is fraught with challenges. This is precisely what Rasul and Rogger find in the Nigerian civil service, with performance incentives and monitoring *lowering* project completion rates because of the distortions such monitoring induces.[76] Where we can measure the right things for employees whose performance is tractable to summary statistics of performance, measurement may well be valuable. Where these conditions are absent, measurement regimes focused on evaluation and control may instead distort incentives and performance, reducing local information gathering and limiting adaptation.

It is not inevitable that performance measurement precludes contingent ways of working; much depends on the 'why' of measurement. Table 2 identifies eight purposes that public managers have for measuring performance.[77] If performance measurement is intended as a tool of evaluation, control, motivation and promotion, it may struggle in uncertain environments where data gathering is difficult and gaming relatively easy. Performance measurement is unlikely to be the best solution for promoting contingent ways of working when measurement is for control and evaluation purposes. When pressure is put on a measure to control and evaluate, it is more likely to distort performance.[78] Performance measures are also likely to reduce adaptation by specifying objectives, thus constraining a donor agency's ability to respond to changing circumstances.

(Table 2 here)

This should not mean abandoning performance measurement altogether. Performance measurement that aims to learn about what's working is a critical vehicle for driving improvement. In such instances, measurement can help field personnel, headquarters staff and even political authorisers to 'see' the same reality. It can also help organisations adapt, understand and even replicate their success.

The need to measure – to quantify – performance is one of the most prominent ways the management literature intersects with practitioner conversations regarding donor agency reform. In this regard, performance measurement has found a decisive place in the conversation about how to deliver aid. Yet performance measurement runs the risk of altering agents' incentives and behaviours in ways that augur less well for contingent ways of working and thus context sensitivity, flexibility and appropriate adaptation. A prominent piece in the private sector management literature recently described goal setting as "a prescription-strength medication that requires careful dosing [and] consideration of harmful side effects".[79] We suggest that the same applies to performance measurement for evaluation and control purposes, and may not be appropriate when what is desired for the organizational patient is greater use of contingent ways of working.

Trying to Engineer Change with Small, Incremental Changes to Organizational Practices

There have been, as noted above, some laudable efforts at change inside donor agencies. For example, DFID's Smart Rules are explicit in their attempt to increase staff discretion and scope for judgement. One of the open questions is whether these incremental changes can lead to contingent ways of working in practice.[80] It may require a more fundamental change of multiple elements of human resources, recruitment, promotion, and compensation systems to shift agents from their current ways to more contingent ways of working. Neither of the two most explicit donor reforms which might be described as encouraging contingent ways of working - DFID's Smart Rules nor USAID's Local Systems Framework - touch directly on performance measurement systems.[81] Failing to consider performance incentives for staff and the role they play in agents' behaviour may limit the ultimate success of these reforms.

We believe that multiple "levers" (e.g. promotion systems, performance management, recruitment, agent job design and motivation, etc.) need to be tackled simultaneously to change the degree to which an organization is able to work contingently. As an example, more autonomy is likely to facilitate contingent ways of working. However, achieving more autonomy is not simply about formally changing decision structures. If more autonomy

comes to aid agencies in the absence of more holistic thinking about agents' incentives and performance management, more autonomy may have only a limited positive – or even a negative – effect on performance.

Political Authorizing Environments

Political environments can directly limit the exercise of autonomy.[82] The *de facto* autonomy of aid's street-level bureaucrats has been linked to the relationship between aid organisations and their political authorisers, with more politically constrained organisations tending to give less discretion to their field-level personnel.[83] Less autonomous organisations have less autonomous agents. This means that political authorizing environments can unintentionally limit aid agencies' ability to operate contingently via constraints they place on *de jure* or *de facto* organizational autonomy.

More fundamentally, there is a long thread in the aid literature suggesting that part of the problem is that political authorizers do not actually *care* if aid interventions of successful. Described by Easterly as development's "Cartel of Good Intentions", this argument suggests that ultimately aid's "clients" in the developing world have no power, and are not constituents of, the developed world polities who fund interventions.[84] As such they will always prefer numbers and pictures they can show to constituents while using development projects as a form of "pork" to ensure domestic firms receive profits and generate employment via aid dollars.

That an MP or member of congress is more concerned with a member of his district than that of a distant country he may not be able to identify on a map is indisputable. But we believe the generalization from this to constraints on what agents do in the field is often made with undue haste. Politics is absolutely a constraint for aid agencies, limiting what they can do. But rarely have members of national legislatures actually specified internal ways of working within aid organizations. To note that politics is a constraint to the *agency* is not the same as explaining an inability to change internal ways of working. Moreover, these constraints and political authorizing environments are not static. In a promising example, USAID – long regarded as one of the most constrained aid agencies – has been having success focusing on longer-term impacts and engaging in a more open discourse with authorisers regarding successes and failures.[85] Future efforts may also be directed towards 'strategic discretion' and 'structured flexibility' – concepts that can accommodate contingency without necessarily sacrificing accountability, donor control and strategic engagement.[86]

There are, of course, many potential barriers to change beyond those we hypothesize are critical above. Some – such as political authorizing environments – are largely external to the aid agency. Others, however, such as the failure to think systematically about the many systems (promotion, performance measurement, recruitment, etc.) that intersect in creating the environments faced by agents, *are* within the potential control of agency managers and policy reformers. There *are* things that agencies might more readily change to better facilitate contingent ways of working.

5. Conclusion

Donors are now focusing on internal organizational processes, explicitly linking such changes to expected organizational results. A great deal of attention is paid to what direction

that policy will take; substantially less is spent on how donor organisational reform will be achieved. This paper takes an instrumental approach, asking not if these are the appropriate goals but how donors might better achieve the organizational reform outcomes they articulate.

The commitment to work adaptively and flexibly, or engage more fully in context, requires consideration of how these features might be designed within donor agencies. Too often, demands for contingent ways of working are issued generically, with donor agencies left to ponder how to operationalize them using little more than trial and error, an appeal to think about local circumstances and an underspecified understanding of 'incentive structures'. Difficulties in practically operationalizing and mainstreaming contingent ways of working may be one reason appeals for non-prescriptive behaviour have delivered limited success in implementation.[87] Public management can help policy-makers, political authorisers and aid organisation personnel think systematically about the complex and interdependent systems in which they work in such a way that balances the tension between flexibility and accountability. Doing so provides the opportunity to uncover levers of control and accountability consistent with flexibility, adaptability and greater contextual knowledge.

Creating an organizational environment that allows for contingent ways of working to thrive is not something that can be dictated by fiat. It is tempting to attempt to dictate organizational change from the top; e.g. formal autonomy *is* amenable to direct design by policy-makers. However, changing just this feature of an organisation without focusing on its relationship with other factors, such as trust, motivation and performance management, may reduce its desired effects on contingent ways of working. As such, while any given organization's path to change will be different, to "nudge" the organization towards contingent ways of working requires attention to many elements of the organization's equilibrium.

Effectively getting organisations to change will require creating space within donor organisations for contingent ways of working; this will in turn require thinking systematically and holistically about the 'black box' of the organisation and the individuals within. Reforms aimed at fostering contingent ways of working will ultimately be more effective if they focus on both 'designing' and 'nudging' performance.

Table 1: Advancing contingent ways of working through a focus on agents

Concept	Contingent ways of working		
	Contextual knowledge	**Adaptability**	**Flexibility**
Autonomy	• By giving agents the ability to make use of such knowledge encourages its gathering	• Allows for adaptation to local contexts which is more rapid and based upon better knowledge of context	• Less rigid hierarchy allows agents to respond to observable but unverifiable features of context
Motivation	• Only motivated agents can and will gather contextual knowledge when their efforts cannot be monitored	• Where context can be assessed only by field agents, only motivated agents will be able to adapt programmes appropriately	• Motivated agents will work harder to ensure projects are flexible to changing needs and circumstances
Trust	• Contextual knowledge derives from trusting staff when monitoring not possible	• Trust required for field staff to lead adaptation, which will be required where relevant features of context not transmittable to HQ	• Agents who feel trust from organization, and organizations that are trusted by authorizers, more likely to have and use available flexibility

Table 2: Eight purposes public managers have for measuring performance

Purpose	Public manager's question that the performance measure can help answer
Evaluate	How well is my public agency performing?
Control	How can I ensure my subordinates are doing the right thing?
Budget	On what programmes, people or projects should be agency spend the public's money?
Motivate	How can I motivate line staff, middle managers, non- and for-profit collaborators, stakeholders and citizens to do the things necessary to improve performance?
Promote	How can I convince political superiors, legislators, stakeholders, journalists and citizens that my agency is doing a good job?
Celebrate	What accomplishments are worthy of the important organisational ritual of celebrating success?
Learn	Why is what working or not working?
Improve	What exactly should who do differently to improve performance?

Source: Adapted from Behn 2003[88]

Notes

[1]   Hirschman, *Development Projects Observed*; and Tendler, *Inside Foreign Aid.*

[2]   Van Der Heijden, "The Reconciliation of NGO Autonomy"; Edwards and Hulme, "Too Close for Comfort?"; Ebrahim, "Accountability in Practice"; Bebbington, "Donor-NGO Relations and Representations"; Morfit, "AIDS Is Money"; Pritchett and Woolcock, "Solutions When the Solution Is the Problem"; Easterly, "The Cartel of Good Intentions"; Israel, *Institutional Development*; and Levy, *Working With the Grain.*

[3]   Green, "What Is Adaptive Aid?*"*

[4]   These include a collaboration of Mercycorps & IRC (ADAPT), a collaboration of the Overseas Development Institute & The Asia Foundation (with support from Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade), Bond (a UK-based network of nonprofits), USAID, and DFID. Derbyshire and Donovan, "Adaptive Programming in Practice"; Denney, Harris, and Wild, "How Do You Make Aid Programmes Truly Adaptive?"; Bond, "Adaptive Management"; and ADAPT, "Adapting Aid"; Dexis, "Evidence Base for Collaborating."

[5]   DFID, "Smart Rules: Better Programme Delivery"; and USAID, "Local Systems".

[6]   World Bank, "World Development Report 2015."

[7]   Doing Development Differently, "The Doing Development Differently Manifesto."

[8]   Andrews, Pritchett, and Woolcock, "Escaping Capability Traps," 41.

[9]   Brinkerhoff, "State Fragility and Failure"; Engel, "The Not-so-Great Aid Debate"; Eyben, "Hiding Relations"; Read, Taithe, and MacGinty, "Data Hubris?"; and Vähämäki, "The Results Agenda."

[10]   By donor agencies, we are referring to governmental organisations that provide external financial and technical inputs for the purposes of global development.

[11]   E.g. Burns and Stalker, *The Management of Innovation*; Lawrence and Lorsch, *Organization and Environment*; Perrow, "A Framework for the Comparative Analysis of Organizations"; Morgan, *Images of Organization*; Sauser, Reilly, and Shenhar, "Why Projects Fail?"; and Van de Ven and Drazin, "Alternative Forms of Fit."

[12]   Banerjee et al., "Improving Police Performance", 3.

[13]   Booth, "Politically Smart Support"; and Gulrajani, "Transcending the Great Foreign Aid Debate."

[14]   Simon, "The Proverbs of Administration"; Simon, *Administrative Behavior*; and Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management.*

[15]   Public and private sectors are now thought to be quite distinct actors motivated by different incentives and accountable to different sets of stakeholders. Kelman, "Public Administration and Organization Studies"; and Pollitt, "Managerialism Revisited."

[16]   Haque, "The Contextless Nature of Public Administration,"; Pritchett and Woolcock, "Solutions When the Solution Is the Problem,"; and Hood, "A Public Management for All Seasons?"

[17]   Algoso and Hudson, "Where Have We Got to."

[18]   Ibid.

[19]   Andrews, Pritchett, and Woolcock, *Building State Capability*; Bain, Booth, and Wild, "Doing Development Differently at the World Bank"; Dexis, "Evidence Base for Collaborating"; Derbyshire and Donovan, "Adaptive Programming in Practice"; Faustino and Booth, "Development Entrepreneurship"; Green, "What Is Adaptive Aid?"; and Bond, "Adaptive Management."

[20]   See e.g. Fisher, "Contingency Theory"; and Weill and Olson, "An Assessment of the Contingency Theory."

[21]   The need to understand local context has been recognized quite explicitly by donors; e.g. "Most [aid] organizations are now willing to concede that attempting to operate in complex, challenging, and diverse national contexts does require at least some concerted efforts to understand the local political economy of reform – that is, who are the winners

22 Andrews, Pritchett, and Woolcock, "Escaping Capability Traps"; and Israel, *Institutional Development*.

23 Sauser, Reilly, and Shenhar, "Why Projects Fail?"

24 Ramalingam, *Aid on the Edge of Chaos*.

25 Perrow, "A Framework for the Comparative Analysis of Organizations."

26 The need to adapt programs has also received explicit recognition; e.g. "Delivering results and addressing the underlying causes of poverty and conflict requires programmes that can adapt to and influence the local context." DFID, "Smart Rules: Better Programme Delivery", 3.

27 Overman and Boyd, "Best Practice Research and Post-Bureaucratic Reform."

28 Van de Ven and Drazin, "Alternative Forms of Fit in Contingency Theory."

29 The desire for flexible response to the unexpected is also explicitly part of donor planning; e.g. "We need to design and manage all of our interventions – be it technical assistance, localized aid, policy reform, or another arrangement – in ways that allow adjustments in the face of shocks or in response to learning." USAID, "Local Systems," 10.

30 Andrews, Pritchett, and Woolcock, *Building State Capability*; and Andrews, Pritchett, and Woolcock, "Escaping Capability Traps." 234–44.

31 Lawrence and Lorsch, *Organization and Environment*.

32 For complex systems in a development context see e.g. Ramalingam, *Aid on the Edge of Chaos*; and USAID, "Local Systems."

33 Feldman and Khademian, "Principles for Public Management Practice."

34 Bain, Booth, and Wild, "Doing Development Differently at the World Bank"; ADAPT, "Adapting Aid: Lessons from Six Case Studies"; and Faustino and Booth, "Development Entrepreneurship."

35 Authorizers are actors in the environment to whom organisations report and are ultimately accountable to, for example, parliaments, governments and executive boards. The organisational level refers to the management of donor agencies, whereas agents are the staff (both headquarters and field) of these.

36 The term 'street-level bureaucrat' is most closely associated with Michael Lipsky and refers to an organisational representative who interacts directly with citizens 'on the ground' or 'in the field'. Examples include welfare case workers, teachers and donor field representatives. Lipsky, *Street-Level Bureaucracy*.

37 Rasul and Rogger, "Management of Bureaucrats and Public Service Delivery."

38 Honig, "Penny Wise, Pound-Foolish."

39 Moynihan and Pandey, "Testing How Management Matters."

40 Bernstein, "The Transparency Paradox," 181–216; Hurley and Hult, "Innovation, Learning"; and Nonaka and Lewin, "Dynamic Theory Knowledge of Organizational Creation."

41 Galletta, Portoghese, and Battistelli, "Intrinsic Motivation, Job Autonomy and Turnover Intention in the Italian Healthcare"; and Spector, "Perceived Control by Employees."

42 Aghion and Tirole, "Formal and Real Authority in Organizations."

43 Tirole, "The Internal Organization of Government."

44 Blau, *The Dynamics of Bureaucracy*; and Hood, "Gaming in Targetworld."

45 Le Grand, *Motivation, Agency, and Public Policy*.

46 Dewatripont, Jewitt, and Tirole, "The Economics of Career Concerns" and Dixit "Incentives and Organizations in the Public Sector".

47 DiIulio, "Principled Agents"; Kaufman, *The Forest Ranger*; and Tendler, *Good Government in the Tropics*.

48 Perry and Wise, "Bases of The Motivational Public Service," 367–73. The private sector management literature is undergoing a somewhat parallel realisation 25 years after public service motivation rose to prominence. See Grant *Give and Take*.

49 Hafliger and Hug, "International Organizations, Their Empolyees and Volunteers, and Their

and losers and who holds the balance of power in such processes." World Bank,"World Development Report 2017", 271.

Values"; Anderfuhren-Biget, Hafliger, and Hug, "The Values of Staff in International Organizations"; and UN International Civil Service Commission, "Results of the Global Staff Survey."

[50] Leisink and Steijn, "Recruitment, Attraction, and Selection."

[51] Grant, "Relational Job Design."

[52] Gagne, "The Role of Autonomy Support."

[53] Belle and Ongaro, "NPM, Administrative Reforms and Public Service Motivation"; Moynihan and Pandey, "The Role of Organizations in Fostering Public Service Motivation"; and Giauque, Anderfuhren-Biget, and Varone, "Stress and Turnover Intents in International Organizations."

[54] Honig, "Letting the Driver Steer."

[55] Denizer, Kaufmann, and Kraay, "Good Countries or Good Projects?"

[56] Israel, *Institutional Development: Incentives to Performance*; Warwick, Meade, and Reed, *A Theory of Public Bureaucracy.*

[57] Feldman and Khademian, *Principles for Public Management Practice.*

[58] Natsios, "The Clash of the Counter-Bureaucracy and Development."

[59] Honig, "Letting the Driver Steer."

[60] Mansbridge, "A Contingency Theory of Accountability".

[61] Behn, "The Big Questions of Public Management"; Gould-Williams, "The Importance of HR Practices"; and McGuire, "Collaborative Public Management."

[62] Tendler and Freedheim, "Trust in a Rent-Seeking World."

[63] O'Toole and Meier, "Plus ca Change."

[64] Laschinger and Finegan, "Using Empowerment to Build Trust."

[65] Cho and Poister, "Human Resource Management Practices."

[66] Seal and Vincent-Jones, "Accounting and Trust."

[67] Behn, "The Big Questions of Public Management"; and Lorenz, "Universities, Neoliberalism, and New Public Management."

[68] https://disidealist.wordpress.com/2014/11/18/trust-and-teachers/. This reflection echoes Mansbridge "A Contingency Theory of Accountability", 55: "Sanction-based accountability is most appropriate in contexts of justified distrust. Yet it also creates distrust, which then undermines the foundation of trust-based accountability."

[69] Mansbridge, "A Contingency Theory of Accountability"; and Mansbridge, "A 'Selection Model' of Political Representation."

[70] The fallacy of composition is when one infers something is true of the whole from the fact that it is true of some, or even all, parts.
That is, it is tacit knowledge in the sense of Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* or soft information in the sense of Stein, "Information Production and Capital Allocation."

[72] Holzapfel, "Boosting or Hindering Aid Effectiveness?"

[73] Natsios, "The Clash of the Counter-Bureaucracy and Development."

[74] Vähämäki, "The Results Agenda in Swedish Development Cooperation."

[75] In the language of economics, this is a "multitask problem". Gray and Hood, "Editorial: Public Management by Numbers"; and Holmstrom and Milgrom, "Multitask Principal-Agent Analyses."

[76] Rasul and Rogger, "Management of Bureaucrats and Public Service Delivery."

[77] Behn, "Why Measure Performance?"

[78] Hoey, "'Show Me the Numbers."

[79] Ordóñez et al., "Goals Gone Wild."

[80] The House of Commons International Development Committee (IDC) asked the same question in a recent parliamentary report, suggesting there may be impediments to autonomy in practice because, to quote one senior DFID official "many in DFID have – unfortunately – simply been conditioned now to look for rules ... So it's the culture now, not the rules, which are part of the problem" International Development Committee, "Department for International Development's Performance in 2013-2014."

[81] While USAID's Local Systems Framework discusses the detrimental impact on local systems strengthening of focusing on outputs and outcomes, it stops at the water's edge of performance measurement as it relates to staff. To be fair, an analysis of USAID's systems co-authored by a USAID employee notes the importance of staff incentives as a barrier to change, suggesting concern for these issues within USAID. Brinkerhoff and Jacobstein, "Systems Thinking and Institutional Performance."

[82] Carpenter, *The Forging of Bureaucratic Autonomy*; Brehm and Gates, *Working, Shirking, and Sabotage*; Huber and Shipan, *Deliberate Discretion*.

[83] Honig, "Penny Wise, Pound-Foolish."

[84] Easterly, "The Cartel of Good Intentions."

[85] Shah, "Interview with Rajiv Shah". Former USAID Administrator Shah's view was recently echoed by current USAID Administrator Smith's remarks at a public event: http://www.brookings.edu/events/2016/03/30-impact-foreign-assistance
Brinkerhoff and Ingle, "Integrating Blueprint and Process"; and Gulrajani, "Organising for Donor Effectiveness."

[87] Copestake and Williams, "Political Economy Analysis"; and Yanguas and Hulme, "Barriers to Political Analysis in Aid Bureaucracies."

[88] Behn, "Why Measure Performance?", 588.

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