How Feedback Loops Can Improve Aid (and Maybe Governance)

Description

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Center for Global Development Essay (available as pdf)
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Abstract
â??If private markets can produce the iPhone, why canâ??t aid organizations create and implement development initiatives that are equally innovative and sought after by people around the world? The key difference is feedback loops. Well-functioning private markets excel at providing consumers with a constantly improving stream of high-quality products and services. Why? Because consumers give companies constant feedback on what they like and what they donâ??t. Companies that listen to their consumers by modifying existing products and launching new ones have a chance of increasing their revenues and profits; companies that donâ??t are at risk of going out of business. Is it possible to create analogous mechanisms that require aid organizations to listen to what regular citizens wantâ??and then act on what they hear?
This essay provides a set of principles that aid practitioners can use to design feedback loops with a higher probability of success.â?•

Rick Davies comment: A few quotes that interested me, within a paper that was interesting as a whole:

- â??Anyone who has managed aid projects realizes that there is a huge number of design and implementation parametersâ??and that it is maddeningly difficult to know which of these makes the difference between success and failure. In the preparation phase, we tend to give a lot of weight to the salience of certain factors, such as eligibility criteria, prices, technical features, and so on. But during implementation, we realize that a thousand different factors affect outcomesâ??the personality of the project director, internal dynamics within the project team, political changes in the local administration, how well the project is explained to local people, and even bad weather can have major effects. â?• This presents major challenges to any efforts to successfully transfer the findings of an impact evaluation to other contexts â?? aka the problem of limited external valdity
- â??The good news is that recent technological breakthroughs are enabling us to dramatically increase our ability to find out what people like the Indonesian rubber farmer really wantâ?? and whether they are getting it. â?• Ground Hog Day? I suspect the same optimistic thoughts went through the minds of early developers and users of PRA (participatory rural appraisal) in the 1980s and early 1990s :-) The same themes of experts versus the people but this time with more of a focus on technology rather than participatory processes.
- The paper ends with a list of five useful research questions, at least four of which would have been well posed to, and probably by, PRA practicioners decades ago.
    - How do we provide incentives for broad-based feedback?
    - How do we know that feedback is representative of the entire population?

- How do we combine the wisdom of the crowds with the broad perspective and experience of experts?
- How do we ensure there are strong incentives for aid providers, governments, and implementing agencies to adopt and act on feedback mechanisms?
- What is the relationship between effective feedback loops in aid and democratic governance?

- It would be good if the author could include some reflection on how these recent developments improve on what was done in the past with participatory methods. Otherwise I will be inclined to feel the article actually reflects our lack of progress over the past decades.

Category

1. Uncategorized

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