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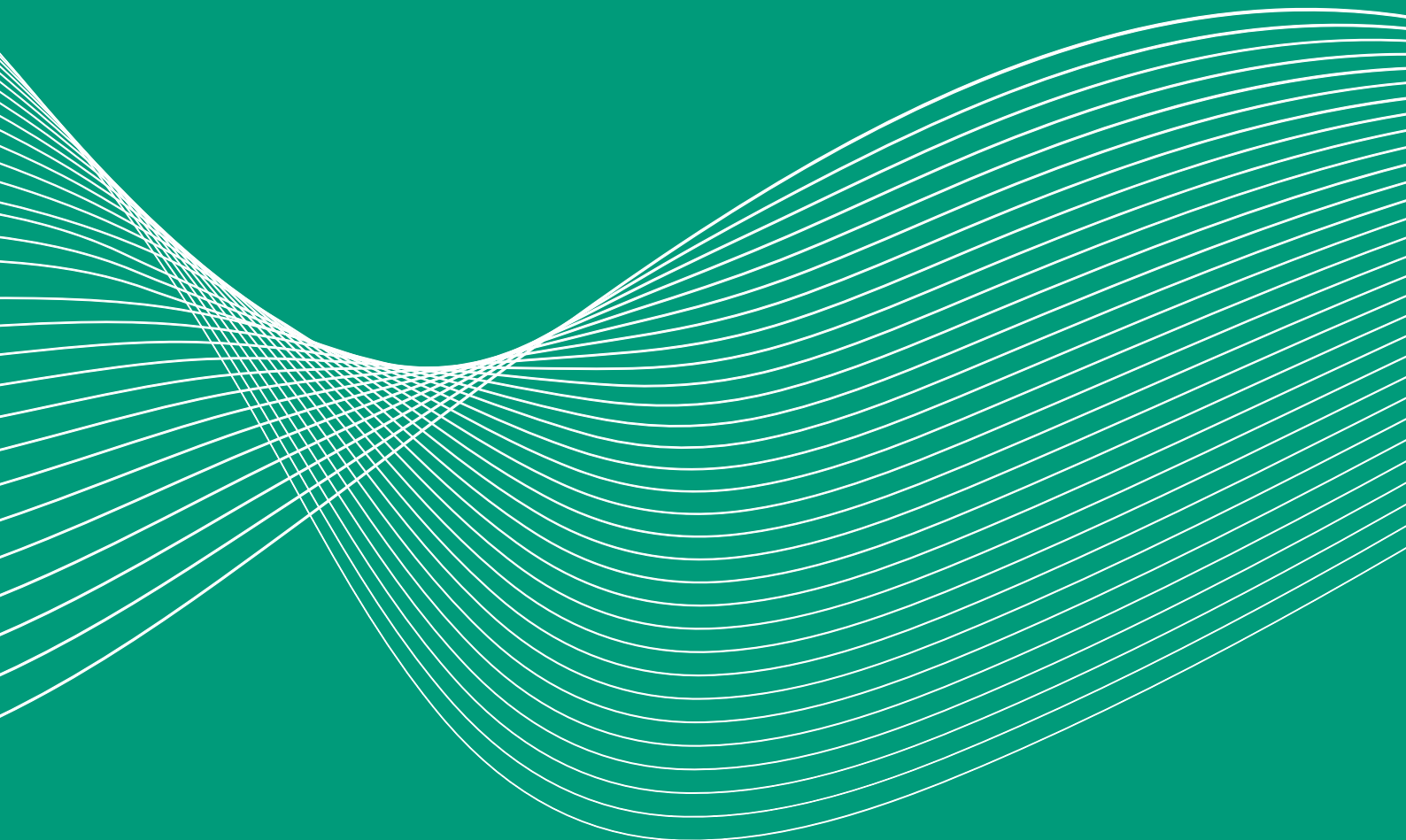
Supporting Pastoralism
and Agriculture in Recurrent
and Protracted Crises

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TEN TRAPS TO AVOID IF AID PROGRAMMING IS SERIOUS ABOUT ENGAGING WITH CONTEXT

Lessons from Afghanistan

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About SPARC

Climate change, armed conflict, environmental fragility and weak governance and the impact these have on natural-resource-based livelihoods are among the key drivers of both crisis and poverty for communities in some of the world's most vulnerable and conflict-affected countries.

SPARC aims to generate evidence and address knowledge gaps to build the resilience of millions of pastoralists, agro-pastoralists and farmers in these communities in sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East.

We strive to create impact by using research and evidence to develop knowledge that improves how the FCDO, donors, non-governmental organisations, local and national governments, and civil society can empower these communities in the context of climate change.

About this series

This report arose from an analysis of five briefing notes written for FCDO, versions of which are being published with FCDO's permission. They were written to help decision makers to integrate a better understanding of Afghanistan into their work, and covered community development councils, markets, informal credit, rural differentiation and post-harvest storage and processing.

Writing these five papers forced us to ask ourselves why information already known about the context in Afghanistan was so often ignored – a characteristic that is also common in the aid sector in many other countries. The 10 traps identified here are the result of that analysis: they were identified in Afghanistan but are of much wider relevance.

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INTRODUCTION

Following the overthrow of the first Taliban regime in Afghanistan in 2001, investments amounting to billions of dollars were made by international donors over the next 20 years in an almost unparalleled effort to transform the country. Studies of the impacts of these investments have broadly concluded that the results were very disappointing, despite gains in health and education outcomes (Zürcher, 2020). Little was achieved in terms of reducing levels of poverty and food insecurity.

With the return of the Taliban government in 2021, the United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) remained concerned to address food insecurity and to support agriculture and rural livelihoods in ways that assisted women and facilitated their economic empowerment. FCDO commissioned the Supporting Pastoralism and Agriculture in Recurrent and Protracted Crises (SPARC) research programme to draw lessons from aid programming in Afghanistan up to 2021 in relation to these goals.¹

The failure of previous development efforts is hardly a surprise, given the incoherence of the aid environment in Afghanistan and the country's high dependence on it (Sopko, 2022). In summarising our learning from the experience, we were struck by the similarity of the failings in aid approaches across the various topics that we studied. The failures of past interventions were in large part a failure to understand or address context. This criticism has been repeatedly made of aid efforts across the world, and it struck us too that Afghanistan is a blatant example of the *normal*, rather than a particular failure.

But if the criticism is so well known, why do aid efforts continue to fail in engaging with their contexts?

Clearly, efforts *are* regularly put into understanding context. The UK Department for International Development (DFID, now FCDO) in 2006 specifically commissioned a study called 'Understanding Afghanistan' to inform its programming (Barakat, 2008). In Afghanistan and globally, most programme documents include some analysis of context – gender analysis, conflict analysis, political analysis, etc. This suggests that no-one sets out to neglect context. The problem is rather that many struggle to move beyond these descriptive reports of context, and to engage critically with the ways in which context should be central to programming.

Across the different domains that we studied, we found that aid actors have *repeatedly fallen into the same traps* in problem definition, context analysis, and in managing and monitoring interventions. These traps have not been driven by lack of information.² They have been created by ways of thinking and ways of working that are systemic in the aid sector. (The aid sector, of course, contains wonderful examples of people and organisations that work in ways that are quite the opposite of those illustrated here.) Simply providing more contextual information, or even a manual called 'How to do context analysis', would be of limited help as long as people remain trapped in these ways of thinking.

1 SPARC was asked to develop a set of briefing papers on key topics, reviewing lessons from past interventions. The topics were: markets, informal credit, post-harvest processing, community development councils and rural diversity. These papers are being published alongside the present paper.

2 The analysis in the accompanying papers is based entirely on what was already known and documented about Afghanistan.

This paper explains 10 traps that must be avoided if aid is to engage thoughtfully with its context. Some are more foundational in that they relate to the basic design of policies and strategies, while others relate more to programme implementation and monitoring. But they are all inter-linked and mutually reinforcing. We draw on examples from Afghanistan, because the traps – and the implications of falling into them – could so easily be identified there. However, these same failings have been identified in the aid system globally, even beyond the fragile and conflict-affected places that are the particular concern of this paper.

It is our hope that identifying the traps will help people to avoid them, and that the lessons that we have drawn from Afghanistan are useful to people wherever they are working.

10 COMMON TRAPS IN DEALING WITH CONTEXT IN FRAGILE AND CONFLICT-AFFECTED PLACES

1. Designing perfect solutions³

Afghanistan is a particularly stark example of imposed, idealised solutions and the hubris of development actors about what can be achieved and how. Many of the proposed solutions were borrowed from western countries – be it with respect to a constitutional model of democracy or gender equality. But policy-makers ignored the fact that these ‘solutions’ were the outcomes of state-building processes in particular contexts; they were not how such states were built. The slightest knowledge of Afghan society should have made it obvious that western democratic and gender equal institutions were not the right template: they could not easily be introduced or made to work in the ways that they worked in quite different contexts. Instead of asking how existing local governance (or gendered norms) could be improved or made a bit more democratic, a ‘perfect’ solution of representative democracy was simply imposed. Or rather, an imposition was *attempted*, because unsurprisingly the attempted graft did not take. (Idealised solutions are often made possible by falling into trap #2, *avoiding social theory*.)

Because donor investment in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021 was an overt state-building enterprise, this mistake was particularly egregious at that level, exacerbated by the way that the delivery of aid undermined the role and function of the Afghan state. But it was also common in smaller ways – interventions that set out to create what they thought was right, rather than to improve what they felt was wrong. Context was ignored almost deliberately, because there was an implicit promise that the context would simply be replaced by a better one. (Spoiler alert: it can’t be – see trap #7, *Forgetting the context always bites back*.)

This trap often leads to behaviours that should serve as a warning that the trap has been stepped into:

- a. giving more attention to form than to function
- b. assuming that western ideals are shared by everyone, e.g., that everyone will find an impersonal bureaucracy better than socially embedded relationships
- c. ignoring what is required to maintain the structures created, including costs, skilled personnel and supporting institutions.

3 This trap is described in more detail by Pritchett and Woolcock (2004). They call it ‘skipping to Weber’ when development interventions try to skip straight to the ideal solution drawn from a western bureaucratic model. Here, ‘Weber’ refers to the ideal western European bureaucracy, described and analysed by one of the founders of modern sociology, Max Weber.

More localised versions of this failing are frequently seen elsewhere in attempts to improve local development planning. Projects that set up local committees for development, resilience or disaster management planning, and which then try to graft this community participation onto local government planning have probably fallen into this trap. Projects are rare that show that they are based on a firm sense of how local government works, what its constraints are and why it currently functions as it does.

HOW TO AVOID THE TRAP

Look to understand how the *functions* take place that you are interested in, rather than basing your analysis on particular institutions. The functions may be spread across several institutions, including informal and even some unexpected ones. Learn everything you can about the institutions that you are trying to reform and how they work. Unless you understand why they have emerged in the way they have and the role that they play, you are not in a position to try to change them, let alone replace them! Assume that any proposed solution will have to be adapted by people to make it work for them (see trap #8, Prescription over discretion). Look for incremental improvements and expect imperfection.

2. Avoiding social theory

'Social theory' here simply means thinking about how people might behave in different situations. Social theory ought to sit at the core of a theory of change, but such theories of change are usually reduced to simple graphics of assumed causal connections, without explaining the assumptions or concepts that underpin these connections. Any mention of context or social theory (i.e., how change will happen) is usually avoided in programme design, even though it is *always* underpinned by assumptions of how behavioural change happens.

If programme discussions present problems and solutions as a technical issue that does not require social theory, then they have fallen into this trap. Even people who are scared of the term 'social theories' *can't* avoid them, they only *think* they can. If they try to avoid thinking about them, then default social theories will fill the vacuum where social understanding of the society should go. We found examples of this trap in every sector that we studied.

Development experts believed that rural entrepreneurship in Afghanistan was being constrained by lack of access to formal credit. This was treated as an economic theory, but really, it's a *social* theory about how people will behave if there is more access to formal credit. Aid programmers assumed that the rural poor were looking to optimise their income, and that they would use credit to invest in ways to make that happen. Those assumptions were false. The rural poor cannot afford to maximise their income. They must minimise their risks, sacrificing future benefit for the sake of immediate survival. Credit plays a critical role in maintaining the social connections they need for survival, and the poor often borrow money so they can lend it, in order to respond to social obligations which can be more important than a risky business venture.⁴

4 A good social theory is important everywhere, not only in conflict-affected or poor places. A study in Finland also showed that making more credit available didn't unlock entrepreneurship: '...capital constraints have only a minor effect on new business starts ... intergenerational links in self-employment and psychological factors play a much larger role' (Uusitalo, 2001: 1631).

Other development programming relied on hidden theories that had no relation to how things worked in practice in Afghanistan. Market development interventions assumed that prices are set simply by supply and demand. This is not true (even if they play some role). Merchants often offer credit to lock producers into a dependent relationship, so they are required to sell their produce to their credit provider, even if a better price is available elsewhere – and to someone else.

Community Development Councils (CDCs) appeared to be a technical solution for creating accountability in Afghan villages, but they relied on hidden social theory, assumptions about how people choose leaders, what kinds of leaders they want and what kinds of accountability they want. Very often, people are not powerful because they are elected as leaders: they are elected as leaders because they are powerful. Leaders cannot always be exchanged if they fail to be responsive: a village may need leaders who have the required political connections outside the village to ensure its safety, to attract in resources, etc. Ignoring this in the design of a governance institution makes no sense.

This mistake is rarely the result of a lack of available knowledge, or an unmet need for new sociological research. The understanding is usually available, if it is looked for. It is a trap because people are seduced into believing that they don't need to look.

HOW TO AVOID THE TRAP

Can you see your social theory? If not, you are using an implicit theory and have fallen into this trap. Does your theory of change really explain how change will happen? Does it say how different people are likely to behave as a result of an intervention? Does it explain why different people may behave differently? Is that based on what we know about that population group? If not, you are deep in the trap. To make your hidden theories explicit, think of everything that has to be true for your project to work. Try assuming that your proposed intervention will fail. Look for weaknesses in the links in the causal chain from project to impact, and the circumstances where people might not behave as predicted. Is there enough evidence about how the specific population groups behave to support the project's predictions?

3. Seeing the problem through the eyes of the solution

The attempt to skip to the ideal (trap #1) and the neglect of social theory (trap #2) help to create a further trap. Context comes to be characterised by problem definitions, and problems come to be defined by the solutions offered to them. Problems are often framed in terms of deficits or gaps (such as the absence of formal credit systems or the lack of democratic practices in village governance). These shape how context is then described. The rather generic descriptions of context which often result mean that problem definitions are rarely challenged by contextual analysis, because the contextual analysis was designed to confirm the problem definition – and the proposed solution.

Solutions should obviously *follow* problem diagnosis. However, problem diagnosis becomes infected by solutionism when it is carried out by people who are experts in applying solutions, rather than experts in understanding problems. This means that problems are identified and described in ways that are shaped by the presence of solutions-in-waiting, as the following examples illustrate.

From the beginning in Afghanistan, the plan to achieve economic transformation through revitalising the agricultural sector was based on the belief that there was a huge unmet demand for micro-credit. In 2007, the World Bank wrote about ‘the opportunity [in 2002] to establish a model microfinance industry *in this virgin territory* – doing things right, from day one’ (emphasis added).⁵ A journalist in 2010 quoted the head of one international micro-finance institution (MFI) as saying ‘we need to establish a credit culture [in Afghanistan]’ (Nichols, 2010). Framing such a problem had clearly ignored previous studies (including by the same World Bank) which had described a flourishing local system of borrowing, transfers and deposit taking – far from ‘virgin territory’. The solutions analysis looked straight through these informal credit systems without seeing them, because institutions of informal credit didn’t look like those of formal MFIs – and formal credit had already been assumed to be what the solution should look like. This is a combination of cognitive blindness and cultural superiority, a belief that western style (‘formal’) institutions are inherently superior to non-Western, ‘informal’ ones.⁶ (The failure to see informal local institutions is perhaps the most ubiquitous of all the failings described in this paper.)

This trap reinforces other traps, particularly the solutionist traps #1 and #4.

HOW TO AVOID THE TRAP

This should be the simplest trap to avoid. Have your discussions started thinking about possible solutions very early? Are discussions on intervention design dominated by people who are experts in solutions because they have applied them in other contexts? If so, you are almost certainly caught in the trap. Focus on trying to understand how certain functions take place in society (e.g., how people borrow, where people get ideas, who they sell to and why) rather than looking for institutions of a certain kind. Make sure these are well analysed without using any words associated with possible solutions. Ruthlessly challenge any sentence that talks about a ‘lack of...’, unless it is clear that it isn’t defining the problem by a solution. See also ways to avoid trap #4.

5 *Building a Microfinance Industry from Scratch* December 18, 2007. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2007/12/18/building-a-microfinance-industry-from-scratch>

6 This attitude is common but rarely expressed so overtly as it was in Afghanistan. The described hierarchy of informal credit started with bribery. In-kind exchange, regarded as the most benign form of informal credit, was mystifyingly described as ‘more or less legal’ (Zia et al., 2005).

4. Using the same solutions everywhere, or institutional monocropping

It is always cheaper to buy clothes 'off the peg' (i.e., mass-made to a set size) than to have them tailor made according to individual measurements. This works when buying clothes because a set of standard sizes fits most people well enough. Projects are also cheaper and easier to copy from context to context, rather than to have to design a new intervention from scratch for every new context. It is also much quicker to copy solutions from other contexts, and many projects have to be designed to short deadlines. So, the practice continues, even though we know that the underlying assumption – that the same size fits most contexts – simply does not hold.

Across many countries, we see a standard design model for interventions varying from social safety nets, agricultural extension, micro-credit and community-led development. The same models are used everywhere, even in areas of life that are deeply grounded in social relations (which vary everywhere). For example, the same formal institution of land administration and titling are seen as the solution everywhere, even when they bear no relation to people's needs and capacities, the ways they use land or indeed to the problems that land administration is meant to address.

In discussing the previous trap, we criticised the assumption that a supply of credit would unleash nascent entrepreneurship in rural Afghanistan. But even if this were true, it was still unwise to assume that the need could be met through creating a national network of identical MFIs offering formal credit on the same standard terms as used in every other country. People do not use credit in the same way in different societies. They then have to adapt things to their lives in their own ways, for example, by having to borrow from informal credit structures in order to pay back formal loans. The rigid model for CDCs was not even a rigid adherence to an *Afghan* blueprint, but one that was copied from Indonesia. And sadly, it cannot even be assumed that only successful models are copied (King, 2013).

This trap is in some ways rooted more deeply in systemic problems in aid institutions. It goes beyond a failure to realise or to appreciate context, reflecting a culture of aid organisations that prefer not to deal with local contexts. Indeed, standard programme models have sometimes been imposed even after a sophisticated context analysis has pointed in a completely different direction.

An example from outside Afghanistan illustrates clearly how this occurs. A detailed background study by an organisation had identified that unemployment was high among internally displaced persons (IDPs) in a particular country because the job market revolved not around skills and qualifications, but social connections, which IDPs lacked.⁷ The organisation then went on to support IDPs by providing technical training, despite having the knowledge that this off-the-peg solution would be irrelevant. The trap worked when the specific analysis of the problem was rephrased in generic or abstract terms that made it look the same as everywhere else. In this example, the problem was described generically as unemployment, rather than specifically as the IDPs lacking the ability to get jobs through connections. Rural Afghans face a wide range of barriers in accessing different kinds of credit, and there can be much that is exploitative in the workings of informal credit, but it is hard to address any of this if the problem analysis is rewritten as a generic 'lack of access to credit'.

⁷ We refrain from giving the reference or details about the country here, to avoid finger-pointing at any particular agency. This is just an example of a common failure.

This trap is not only the most deep rooted in the working culture of aid agencies, but it also has the widest influence on other traps, being linked to the traps of forgetting objectives (trap #5), ignoring diversity (trap #6) and, in different ways, traps #1 (idealised solutions) and #7 (forgetting context bites back). And it is only possible where there is wilful blindness to seeing how societies actually work (trap #2, ignoring social theory).

HOW TO AVOID THE TRAP

This trap is hard to avoid because it is driven by deeply engrained incentives in the aid system. People may need to challenge it at agency level, rather than trying to avoid it on an individual programme level.

On one side, the trap is often driven by time constraints. If you have to design a project quickly and don't have time to analyse the issues thoroughly, you are highly likely to fall into this trap. If, during the design process of an intervention, you find yourself thinking about a solution that you have read about – or, more dangerously, worked on – in a different place, then stop: you are probably walking into the trap. Lessons from other places are important, but their place is later in the process.

On another side, if you try to avoid this trap, you may find internal pressure pushing you back into it. Large aid agencies have to maintain the primacy of universal technical solutions over context-specific interventions; it is needed to justify rewarding international experts (who are experts in solutions that they have used elsewhere) more than people (often national staff) who are experts at understanding the problems in a local context, and who know how to make things work in that specific place.

To dismantle this trap, we must change ways of working. This is largely beyond the scope of a short paper to analyse in full. At the very least, a wider range of voices is needed at the table to diagnose problems and design solutions. 'Stakeholder consultations' are not the answer. At the first conference to launch the reconstruction programme for Afghanistan in Islamabad in 2001, it was repeatedly said that 'Afghans are in the driving seat'.⁸ In reality, as one observer said to us, they weren't even in the car.

If this trap can be tackled, then it becomes possible to think that the others can too.

8 That Afghans were 'in the driving seat' became a common, if unfounded, cliché in the development and reconstruction efforts from 2001. A web search reveals too many instances to cite here.

5. Forgetting objectives when designing the means

Development actors correctly identified some of the serious problems facing the poor and powerless in Afghanistan. To take two examples, their food security was precarious (and remains so), and most people had little voice in how their lives were governed. Technical solutions were then identified to meet these challenges: increased food production for the first, and more democratic grassroots institutions of governance for the second. But, paradoxically, as soon as attention moved from the problem to the proposed technocratic solution, the context, *indeed the problem itself*, became forgotten! This is seen clearly in a couple of examples.

Food production can be increased by improving irrigation, providing inputs and offering higher-yield varieties. These are technical solutions offered to counter food insecurity. But if those who are food insecure are also mainly landless or near-landless, these solutions are unlikely to help them much. In Afghanistan, it was also known that food prices were unlikely to fall substantially as a result of any increase in domestic food production.

Democratic village-level institutions, the CDCs, were brought in across the country, but the actual objectives of fairer local governance or greater voice for all was forgotten. Attention focused on having functioning committees of the same design, including stipulation of the size of constituencies. As a result, governance in some villages was split across two CDCs, whilst other villages had to share governance under a single committee. Focus on the solution, the form of the committees, reduced the ability of these village-level institutions to help foster better local governance.

When presented so starkly, this mistake seems absurd, but it slips in so frequently because of two other traps. One is the tendency to copy solutions from other contexts (trap #4). The second is that once a solution has been chosen, objectives play no further role in project management. This too sounds absurd, but it is a reality. Project management often has no mechanisms for considering objectives, because they have no place in monitoring (see trap #9), which often fails to consider whether project processes and outputs are doing the job they were designed to do.

HOW TO AVOID THE TRAP

Reinventing wheels is rarely time wasted: design your intervention to meet its objectives in the given context. Be rigorous in testing the link between your project's outputs and the outcomes you want to see for people. Identify all the hidden assumptions and check which ones are plausible. Make sure they are all written down and regularly checked. See also trap #9 below: make sure you set up monitoring systems that measure what you are interested in (e.g., the income of farmers) and not just the project outputs (total tonnage of crops produced or number of hectares irrigated).

6. Not engaging with heterogeneity

In Afghanistan, enormous heterogeneity could be identified at three levels. On a geographic scale, highlands and lowlands shaped the development of very different village societies. Apart from having a different climate, and thus technical differences in their agriculture, villages in high- and lowlands tend to have different power imbalances, institutions, moral economies, as well as different formal economies. It seems obvious that such different contexts within Afghanistan would demand very different designs for development interventions. However, the desire to engage in state building often led to the same programmes being replicated everywhere.

Within each geography, social differentiation is stark. Yet support to agricultural production was seen as a blanket solution for poverty in Afghanistan's rural economy, ignoring the fact that the majority of the poorest had little or no land. No single economic blueprint can be expected to help everyone when there is such diversity of food systems, possibilities and constraints.

Differentiation also exists at intra-family level. As in many societies supported by international development actors, there was no simple economic unit in Afghanistan within which there were only shared interests. Members of an extended family were expected to play different roles with mutual responsibilities and obligations. But differences are not just by sex, they are also cross-generational.

Very few project documents analysed or even identified these levels of diversity, much less indicated how a specific intervention was targeted at one or other section of the population. Had they done so, many of the most poorly functioning programmes would never have started.

HOW TO AVOID THE TRAP

Do not assume that rural people make their living by farming. In many places, the sources of livelihood of rural people will already be well documented.

The analysis of diversity (including, for example, gender analysis) cannot remain abstract and it cannot remain only in the problem description. It must be a thread running from the objective setting (defining specific challenges faced by a defined population group) and through the theory of change, explaining how the intervention will affect this population group, as distinct from its impact on others.

Diversity may present a challenge for interventions, especially where there are power imbalances, but it is also an opportunity. Elite capture can be mitigated if interventions only bring benefits to a particular population. Look for evidence that disaggregates geography not just into technical agricultural or livelihood zones, but also by contrasting social hierarchies and moral economies. For most of the traps we have argued that existing literature will often be enough to answer questions of context, but it may be necessary to invest in gathering information on heterogeneity at a non-technical level.

Data that only give mean averages are probably hiding the very thing that you need to understand. Never base an analysis only on such data. Always look for an explanation of who sits away from the mean and why.

7. Forgetting that context always bites back

Democratic institutions and functioning civil bureaucracies all look different in countries where they (imperfectly) exist, because they have evolved over time from whatever institutions existed before. In trying to skip straight to their idealised solutions (see trap #1), state-building efforts in Afghanistan behaved as if there was no history and a *tabula rasa*, a virgin field, was waiting for solutions. This reflected either a belief that context doesn't exist (which is nonsense) or an implicit assumption that context is going to sit back and watch while it is ignored and replaced (which doesn't fare much better as an assumption). Context always fights back, and history tells us that it's an unequal fight. Context usually wins.

The introduction of CDCs in Afghanistan illustrates well how context behaves. They were set up because previously existing institutions of local governance were seen to have power imbalances and accountability deficits. But, if that were so, why would anyone assume that those with power were going to allow that imbalance to be replaced by equitable governance? (This is also a good example of trap #2, ignoring social theory, in this case how power works.) Attempts to create 'free' market institutions were undermined in a similar way because they ignored the fact that Afghanistan had existing market structures that heavily regulated market access. Much had already been written about how power in the Afghan market determined profit from trade, through the ability to make a claim on someone for a trading relationship or the ability to set prices (for example, Paterson, 2006 and Lister and Pain, 2004). In its benign form, farmers cultivate relationships with traders to guarantee that someone will buy from them. In its malign form, power is exercised as a mafia-style ability to evade taxes and customs duty that constrain competitors – or even to set a tax and customs regime so that it will constrain rivals.⁹ Unsurprisingly, efforts to create free markets in Afghanistan did not displace the powerful.

Change *can* happen or things can be improved, but that demands a plan for how that change is going to play out. Consultants could be used more constructively if, instead of being asked to conduct a political economy of problems, they were hired to make a political economy analysis of proposed solutions.

9 The use of power of different sorts to make profit in the market is common everywhere. Mosel and Henderson (2015) describe how a few elite traders with access to foreign exchange at privileged rates made huge profits from importing food into South Sudan even if they didn't benefit from any mark-up, because the trade was only a vehicle for monetising that privileged access to forex. See also Heller (1961) for the example of Milo Minderbinder, who bought eggs for 7 cents, sold them for 5 cents – and still made a profit.

HOW TO AVOID THE TRAP

This is largely about a theory of change. Do you have one? If it can be summarised in a diagram, then you don't.

Check that the problem you are trying to solve is not a contra-indication for your solution, e.g., a conflict resolution programme that relies on people being able to sit down to talk through grievances honestly and openly with each other. (If they could, there probably wouldn't be a conflict to solve.)

Always assume that context will bite back: try to work out how, how you will know if it does and what can be done to mitigate that. Think of your proposed intervention as throwing something in an arena of struggle. What are you throwing into the context, and how will different actors seek to use or thwart it?

Do you understand how existing institutions work? Have you assumed that if you consider an institution informal then it will automatically be superseded by one that you call formal? Again, look for where social functions come from, e.g., understanding how people buy things when they don't have money rather than looking for credit institutions.

Do you have a monitoring system that simply incorporates all your project assumptions about how things will play out, or has it been properly designed to help you know which ones are not working out as hoped?

8. Hanging on to what you can control

In unfamiliar and diverse contexts, and where the rules of the game(s) are rarely clear, it is a psychological inevitability that people and organisations will attempt to control the only things that they can. These are almost invariably the wrong things to try to control.

For example, Afghanistan's National Solidarity Programme (NSP) rolled out its fixed CDC design across the country, whether or not it matched how villages actually worked (or where they were). The same processes had to be followed everywhere. Of course, they weren't followed, because staff locally often knew that it was sensible to allow a certain level of discretion. However, compliance procedures meant that staff had to *pretend* that rules had been followed. Had discretion been allowed, everyone would have learned how best to adapt whilst maintaining the objectives of greater responsiveness and accountability.

Discretion is disallowed because of a belief that deviation from a plan is necessarily a *distortion*. Impartiality is guaranteed by perfect system design, i.e., only the wisdom and impartiality of the system designer can be trusted. But few, if any, contexts are simple, uniform and controllable, which are the preconditions for allowing strict preset rules to be applied without allowing discretion. Insisting on following strict rules is not simply to ignore context, but it is to actively forbid anyone from considering it.

This is one of the more common traps across the world and across sectors. It is seen in the insistence that micro-finance groups must always have a set number of people and must all have the same repayment schedule; that farmers in extension programmes must plant in straight lines, rather than worrying about plant density; that targeting must be based on the inflexible statistical treatment of predetermined indicators (even when mistrust is sown because no one in the community can understand it); that funds are released by triggers set automatically by pre-set thresholds of pre-set parameters (and ideally using satellite data).

This trap is underpinned by a development model based on idealised solutions (trap #3), which can be painted directly onto a blank canvas (trap #7).

HOW TO AVOID THE TRAP

Of all the traps, this one offers a genuine difficulty, even when we are aware of the trap. There's an inevitable tension between the need to allow discretion whilst maintaining standards (and avoiding corruption), and the need to permit people to use judgement whilst avoiding politicisation. There is always a trade-off between allowing discretion and insisting on following the rules, avoiding politicisation. The system procedures need to look for the optimal trade-off point, rather than imposing only one side. This can only happen if discretion is documented and justified, rather than forcing it to be hidden.

Problems with discretion can be mitigated where monitoring does not only look at processes and compliance, but also focuses on outcomes – and especially the social distribution of outcomes (i.e., who is benefiting and who is not).

9. Monitoring processes, not outcomes

The criticism that monitoring focuses almost entirely on processes and outputs rather than on outcomes has been made frequently and for many years. There is little more to say on it, beyond the fact that it continues. Agricultural development projects in Afghanistan dutifully reported on the tonnes of various crops that were grown with project assistance (or, as is also common, they cherry-picked success stories) but they told us nothing about who was (and who was not) growing the crops successfully, how many people grew a little or a lot, whether this improved anyone's incomes or what farmers thought about it all. A recent review of the evidence of impacts from aid interventions to support livelihoods in conflicts across nearly a dozen countries concludes that very little is known about what has brought successful outcomes, despite many billions of dollars having been invested, because evidence about impact had never been looked for or documented (Wiggins et al., 2021). What is most remarkable is that this isn't a surprise.

HOW TO AVOID THE TRAP

Monitoring information should obviously be disaggregated, but not simply along obvious lines such as sex/gender that are assumed to be the critical variable. Many different kinds of heterogeneity were described in rural Afghanistan (see traps #5 and #6): if information is to generate understanding of context, its disaggregation has to match the patterns of diversity.

Monitoring should also help illuminate how change processes are happening, e.g., so that everyone is aware how context is fighting back (see trap #7). This requires monitoring the assumptions behind the social theories implicit or explicit in the intervention design. But this is obviously more difficult where there has been an attempt to avoid thinking about social theory at all (see trap #2).

Think too about who gets the information from monitoring and how it is used. Does it sit in the same department or unit as the people managing the intervention? Or has it been set up only for accountability to donors, with little regard for the need of the managers to know what is going on? Are the people managing implementation able to set what is monitored and how? If monitoring is not designed to serve implementation, then this trap has claimed another victim.

10. Excluding context from monitoring and evaluation

Most monitoring and evaluation (M&E) in Afghanistan did not just miss engaging with context: it was designed so that context could not get in its way. This is particularly true of the approach followed by the NSP programme in Afghanistan, which used what is still sometimes taken to be the gold standard of evaluation, randomised control trials (RCTs). These are designed to remove context from consideration so that treatment effects can be seen more clearly. This exclusion of context is possible where context and theories of change are fully understood (as in much medical research). Programme implementers are not responsible for context and so information is collected that strips away contextual variability in order to see the project functioning 'more clearly' – but that, of course, means seeing the project in an entirely artificial, context-free, parallel world.

Projects often collect data on pre-identified indicators that are from global standard sets in order to facilitate global comparisons. They will often lack contextual appropriateness. This is probably worse than not collecting any data, since the data may not tell us what we read off from them. For example, does 'the percentage of formal loanees who are women' tell us anything about gender equity or whether or not a credit programme has advanced women's economic empowerment? The number of women members on local councils may be highly misleading as an indicator of women's voice in different contexts. What needs to be understood is the quality and nature of their participation and influence on key decisions.

HOW TO AVOID THE TRAP

If this trap can be avoided, other traps will be weakened, because they should be exposed. Sensibly disaggregated data would *show* us that the same project plays out differently in highlands and lowlands; or, for example, that the landless are not benefiting from some agricultural investments; or that formal credit is not being used for small business investment. However, there is somewhat of a chicken-and-egg situation related to this trap. It is hard to create a sensible monitoring framework that illuminates context, if context has never been considered in programme design. How will we know what to look for if social theory has been ruthlessly banished, heterogeneity has been missed and existing institutions have been ignored? This is perhaps best used as a test. If we don't know what contextual features to monitor, then we almost certainly haven't paid enough attention to the context in programme design.

Any detailed prescription on what a sensible monitoring framework might look like would, though, mean that we ourselves had fallen into a solutionist trap (trap #3).

GIVING CONTEXT THE LAST WORD

Context always matters, not just in poorer countries or in conflict-affected and fragile places. But it matters *more* that we understand context in these environments, and the costs of ignoring it are *higher*. Fragile countries are those where power is contested, where normative frameworks face stark competition. Where there is conflict, formal rules often come second to *de facto* rules. This makes it impossible to understand the context fully (e.g., how society and the economy work) because things are based more on discretion than rules and things are always changing. But these are also places where the rules and formal structures do not provide people with personal security. Instead, people have to find this in diverse ways, by exploiting opportunities that may be central in their world, but which a project-centric perspective relegates to 'context' – informal institutions, the moral economies, patron-client relationships, activities that are seen to be illegal, etc. This makes it profoundly problematic to try to ignore context in places like Afghanistan.

This paper has not offered any blueprints for undertaking any of the forms of social analysis common in the aid sector, such as gender analysis, conflict analysis or political economy analysis. We believe, though, that the investments which are already made in such analysis could be much more useful if one simple change were made. Current common practice is to put the context analysis as an introduction, at the *beginning* of a project document. Although this has a disadvantage for the consultant hired to undertake the analysis (they have an impossibly large canvas to address – e.g., explaining everything about gender relations in Afghanistan), it has an advantage for the proposal writers, because context can then conveniently be forgotten.

We propose that context analysis should be given the last word.¹⁰ An introductory contextual analysis is important, but another contextual analysis is needed *after* the project description. This gives the analysis a clear focus – the proposed intervention – which makes it both more manageable and more useful. And different kinds of analysis are needed. Power, or political economy, analysis would be used to analyse how power interests might attempt to thwart an intervention or to capture its benefits, and how such elite capture could be mitigated. Gender analysis would think through how and why the intervention is likely to change gender relations in the society, and on how gender norms in the society would affect likely outcomes for men and women, etc. Conflict analysis would look at the likely impact of insecurity on the implementation of activities, on how different conflict actors might view the intervention and how they might attempt to capture its resources – i.e., it would look at both the impact of conflict on the intervention and the impact of the intervention on the conflict. Instead of a logframe where the project assumptions are that problems *won't* happen, social theory would do the opposite: it would be used to expose why project activities might *not* lead to the desired outcomes, and what could realistically be done to mitigate that.

10 Of course, understanding of context should be a thread running throughout any programme documents. Context should be explained at the outset, it should be clear in every section how it relates to context, and then there should be a final section reappraising the context from the perspective of the proposed intervention. In theory, this analysis should be the basis of a logframe, but anyone who has ever written or read a logframe knows that this is not what they are.

Ultimately, there are no simple recipes. The need to understand context is widely understood. The traps which prevent us from doing so are not laid by the context or by intellectual difficulties: they are traps that we set ourselves. They are political and institutional. If we think of the traps as a minefield, the traps need to be removed, rather than expecting each individual to find their way around them. The traps exist too in a context, that of the politics and system incentives of aid and state investments. We can therefore offer no technical solutions to solve the problems of the traps, only ways of grappling with this context. That there are no simple answers is the one most important lesson that context teaches us.

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