

SUMMARY

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

Lessons from Afghanistan

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Motivation

Aid programming so often fails to live up to its potential, particularly in ‘difficult places’ (fragile, conflict-affected places with frequent or long-running crisis). Frequently, this is because interventions just don’t work in the context. And yet it has so often been said that more attention is needed to context.

How come we are still not getting it right?

Purpose

The paper identifies 10 traps that are often repeated in aid investments that lead to context being ignored. Hopefully, if decision-makers are forewarned about these traps, they may be able to guard against them – and to work in ways that take context *seriously*.

Approach and methods

The study arose from studies made to inform current (2023) policy-making on aid to support rural livelihoods in Afghanistan. An analysis was made of the experiences of aid interventions in the ‘reconstruction of Afghanistan’ from 2002 to 2021 across several policy areas: local governance, markets, agriculture, credit, differentiation in rural livelihoods.

Findings

In every domain studied, the same mistakes had been made, leading to interventions being designed and managed in ways that did not fit the context – with serious consequences on their impact. The mistakes were not made because of lack of information or because context was deliberately ignored. Deeply embedded ways of thinking and working in the aid sector led people to fall into the same traps that resulted in inappropriate interventions and inappropriate management. Ten traps relating to aid design and management have been identified. These were common to all the policy areas and which are also evident in aid programming globally.

Conclusions

Contextual analyses (including studies containing gender analysis, conflict analysis, market analysis, etc.) are ever-present in the aid sector, but their ability to guide decision-making will remain seriously compromised, because of more structural problems in aid decision-making. These failings need to be recognised and addressed, if the traps are to be avoided that prevent context analysis from being useful. Contextual analysis needs to move out of the introduction and be a theme running through documents – including a contextual analysis of proposed solutions as well as of problems.

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