OPENING THE 'BLACK BOX' OF INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS: METHODS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR EXPLORING PROJECT PRACTICES

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STRUCTURE

- Conceptualising development projects and their black boxes

- Why would we want to open these boxes?

- Possibilities for opening them inside and outside the academy

- Case study: utilising a practice based approach (PBA)

- Opportunities and challenges for PBA in MEL

- Next steps: questions and discussion

PROJECTS AS COMPLEX SOCIAL ARENAS

Development projects are 'social arenas made up of different social actors and intersecting ideologies, relationships, interests and resources'

(Evans and Lambert, 2008, p.469).

WHAT IS THE 'BLACK BOX'

The frequently unexplored gap between project intentions/inputs and effects/outcomes (Mosse, 2013; Ika, 2015)

- What causes these gaps to arise?

- Are these gaps identified?

- Key factors: actors and intersecting ideologies, relationships, interests and resources

Theory of change / inputs

Evaluation / outcomes

QUESTION

Can you think of examples where you have encountered black boxes in your work?

This could be when expectations have not matched reality or where it has not been entirely clear how inputs lead to outcomes.

WHY WOULD WE WANT TO OPEN THE BLACK BOX

Normative:

Identifying the factors at play in the black box and the interactions between them is critical to understanding how project intentions become social realities that reshape the lives of project recipients (Roberts, 2020)

Instrumental:

Billions is spent on development projects; we should aim to have the best understandings of how that money is spent and the outcomes it is producing.

CURRENT MEL CAN PERPETUATE THE BLACK BOX

Traditional monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) methods typically rely on logical frameworks to report on pre-defined project outcomes.

These methods perpetuate the black boxes in several ways (Li, 2011; Eyben et al., 2015)

- By espousing narratives of success

- By homogenizing project recipients

- By failing to document outcomes beyond those that were 'expected'

- By not appraising actions and decisions taken further up the implementation chain by project designers and managers

METHODS OF OPENING THE BOX

Applying development anthropology and practice theory:

- The 'new ethnography of development' shifts the focus from the outcomes and 'objects' of development projects to their processes and proprietors (Mosse, 2005)

- Provides understandings sensitive to the heterogeneity of actors and socio-political environments, and which seek to question the common construction of projects as coherent entities (Lewis *et al.*, 2003; Mosse, 2004)

- Practice based approach (PBA) seeks to do 'justice to the complexities and contingencies of social life' and to escape 'forms of reductionism and causality' in forest policy analysis (Arts *et al*, 2014, p.4)

PRACTICE BASED APPROACH: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

Aims to move beyond singular understandings of human interactions towards assessment of practices as 'arrays of human activity' (Schatzki, Cetina and Von Savigny, 2001, p.11; Arts *et al*, 2014)

Three key elements of practice *(what)*
- **Meaning**: ideas and discourses
- **Competence**: knowledges, standards, and procedures
- **Materiality**: technologies, resources, objects, infrastructures

Three sensitising concepts *(how/why)*
- **Logic of practice**: practices are historically contingent
- **Situated agency**: actors' behaviour is shaped by the structures they exist in
- **Performativity of knowledge**: knowledge shapes practice

CASE STUDY: MY PHD WORK

Looking at methods of opening/exploring the black box in a case study Producer Organisation Project (POP) and how these could be developed and applied:

- **Practice based approach applied across the entire implementation chain.**

- Assessment of how coherence is created across diverse practices.

- Insights into key brokers that work across practices.

INTRODUCING POP

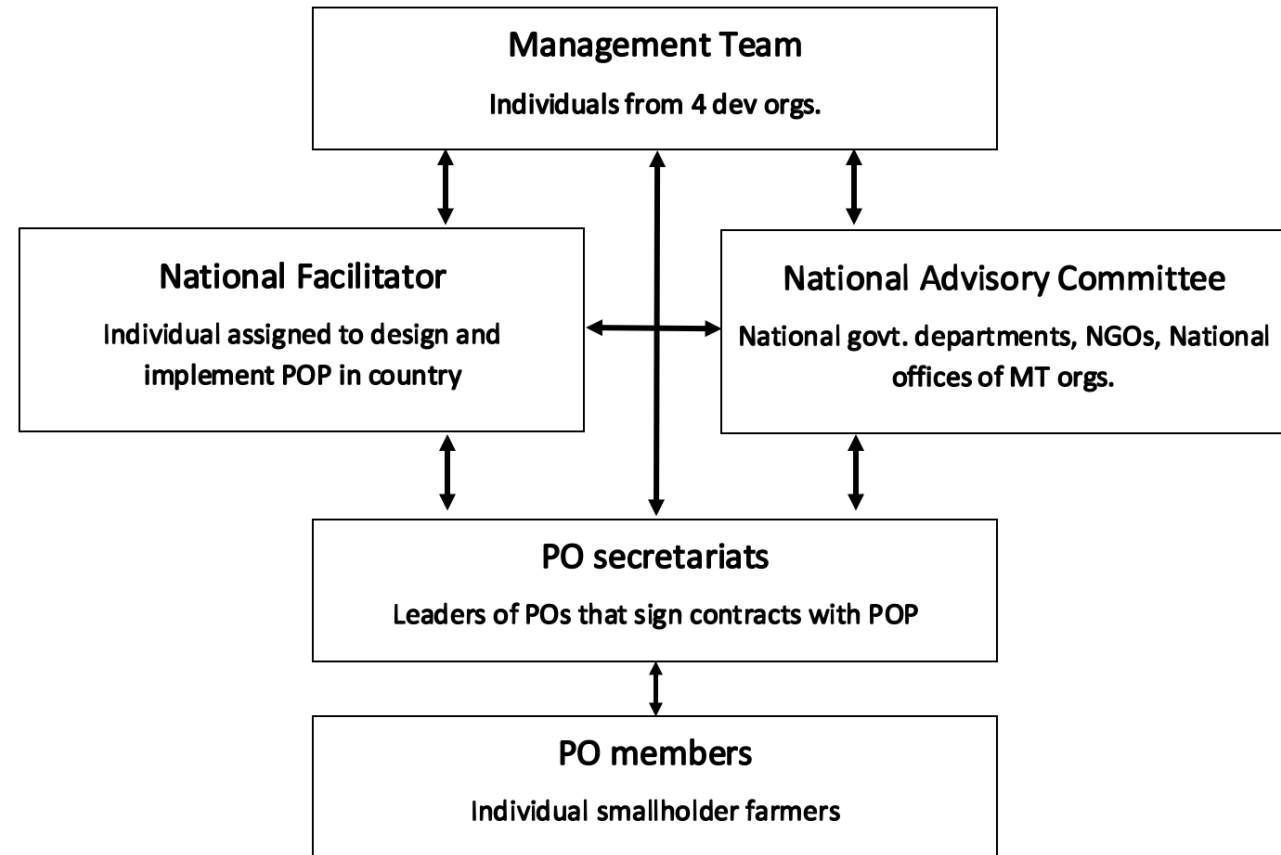POs / social organisation viewed as the key to delivering sustainable development.

Aims to work in a PO-led manner

Supports producer organisations in nine countries in four key areas:

- Governance and policy;

- Business activities;

- Climate change mitigation, adaptation, and resilience;

- Provision of social services

Five key actor groups

I focus on POP implementation in Ghana

Management Team
Individuals from 4 dev orgs.

National Facilitator
Individual assigned to design and implement POP in country

National Advisory Committee
National govt. departments, NGOs, National offices of MT orgs.

PO secretariats
Leaders of POs that sign contracts with POP

PO members
Individual smallholder farmers

KEY FINDINGS: MEANING

MT and facilitator meanings of POP are rooted in CBNRM discourses

In-country meanings show congruence in rhetoric but divergence in practice

Individual as well as collective meanings are present along the implementation chain

Diverse meanings are incorporated under broad but performative definitions

IN-COUNTRY MEANINGS SHOW CONGRUENCE IN RHETORIC BUT DIVERGENCE IN PRACTICE

- On paper, the value attributed to social organisation is consistent across MT, facilitator, secretariat, and members.

- However, POP/social-organisation is understood through a **logic of practice** developed with previous projects. Secretariats and members cautious of collective action and attribute value to access to material resources - expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of inputs available as compared to other through other funders.

- Desire to attract resources results in members 'performing' social organisation, hosting meeting when a new project partners with the PO to access resources.

- Implications for what POP may be able to achieve with the PO.

PBA allows insight into where these divergences in meaning exist, why they might exist, and the material implications they may have for practices and outcomes.

DIVERSE MEANINGS INCORPORATED UNDER BROAD BUT PERFORMATIVE DEFINITIONS

- POs are diverse organisations.

- One way in which the MT try to accommodate diverse meanings/POs within POP is by using a diffuse definition for what constitutes a PO.

'This (PO) is a non-existent acronym, nobody else in the world uses it, nobody knows what it means, our own country facilitators don't know what it means, but the institutional culture is that everybody used it as a word that is synonymous with just about everything you could possibly imagine. POs are farmers, POs are businesses, POs are cooperatives, associations, organisations, territories, they are all POs. But it does get to the point of once that was invented people started using it, people started aligning, people started adopting it. They took the signals and the incentives they were getting to say gobbledygook' (MT-2-16)

- The MT definition of POs has led to the PO secretariat changing aspects of their organisation to seek alignment, it is **performative**.

KEY FINDINGS: COMPETENCES

Standards and procedures are interpreted differently by different actors

Meaning shapes how actors understand and implement competences

Experiential knowledge is highly valued in POP

STANDARDS AND PROCEDURES ARE INTERPRETED DIFFERENTLY BY DIFFERENT ACTORS

- POP works through individual contracts with each PO.

- These contracts are products of a top-down paradigm that contradicts the bottom-up and flexible approach envisioned for POP by MT and facilitator.

- Working through contracts creates **situated agency**.

- MT and facilitators work informally to create flexibility within contracts, allowing POP to align with their bottom-up meaning.

Such informal actions are often 'invisible' and thus not picked up or interrogated by traditional MEL tools. A PBA approach makes the challenges posed by contracts visible.

STANDARDS AND PROCEDURES ARE INTERPRETED DIFFERENTLY BY DIFFERENT ACTORS

- Secretariat's **logic of practice** means they view contracts differently to MT - they like the rigidity.

- '*The contract is good, because when someone is supporting you, you want to put checks and balances that this is what I am going to use to support you and to make sure to know how we are going to use it… all these things are spelled out*' (S-1-187)

- Contradictory meanings attached to contracts meant it took time for POs to feel confident in being flexible in their implementation of the POP contract as desired by the MT and facilitator.

Traditional MEL approaches are concerned with the terms and outcomes of contracts but do not typically consider the socially contingent ways in which actors relate to them, which I have shown is key to their implementation of project activities.

MEANING SHAPES HOW ACTORS UNDERSTAND AND IMPLEMENT COMPETENCES

- Perception in literature that theories of change are rigidly followed as 'law'.

- Normative meanings in MT mean that '*If it is the right thing to do we have to figure out how to do it, even if we have to allocate some money without an indicator*' (MT-1-95)

- Despite this desire to be flexible, MT and facilitator actors also recognise that their agency is situated as the ToC restricts possibilities for POP.

- *Several of us were pushing back quite hard (against a landscape focus), saying "no, if you go down the landscape route then your object is environmental landscapes and your organisations (POs) are one of a number of parties who affect those environmental landscapes, so you have taken your eye of the organisational strengthening and you put it on the environment" and we were unhappy with that*' (MT-5-12)

PBA could provide a structured/formalised way of identifying performative expectations and addressing them.

KEY FINDINGS: MATERIALITY

Unequal access to material resources shapes practice

Material experiences shape meaning ascribed to POP

UNEQUAL ACCESS TO MATERIAL RESOURCES SHAPES PRACTICE

- MT, NAC, and facilitator have far more resources than PO secretariats and members.

- Secretariats' lack of material resources hinder POP work, creating **situated agency**.

- Consequently, they a) recycle resources from previous project partnerships with other organisations and b) implementing POP with communities close to them.

  - a) creates material entanglement between POP and the **logics of practice** built by previous development projects, which influence **meaning**.

  - b) may limit distribution of benefits from POP activities.

Understanding these material concerns of both PO secretariats is key to understanding their day-to-day practice of POP.

MATERIAL EXPERIENCES SHAPE MEANING ASCRIBED TO POP

- All actors reflected on the importance of face to face interactions in shaping their practice e.g. the value of 'seeing'.

- In particular, physical visits to meet other project actors have been highly influential on the development of **meaning** and **competences** as they allow trust to build, strategies to be explained, and work to be seen.

PBA offers an opportunity to showcase the wider importance of material interactions, the future of which is uncertain in a post-pandemic world.

GENERAL FINDINGS OF PBA APPLICATION TO POP

- Confirmation that projects are diverse social arenas.

- Each aspect of PBA can add insight to MEL.

- Practices and their elements are relational.

- PBA provides structure for conversations already happening informally.

VALUE OF PBA FOR MEL

Aspect of PBA	Value for MEL
Meaning	To understand the beyond rational collective and individual understandings that are fundamental to shaping practice.
Competence	To recognise the diversity of knowledges and the variety of ways in which uniform standards and procedures are interpreted.
Materiality	Foregrounds how access to material resources and embodied experiences shape practice.
Logic of practice	To understand how project practice is situated within broader historical and social contexts at all levels of the implementation chain.
Situated agency	To understand how and why actors choices are limited before making judgement on their actions.
Performativity of knowledge	To recognise that knowledge products shape and are shaped by practice and therefore may lead to unexpected outcomes.

PRACTICES AND THEIR ELEMENTS ARE RELATIONAL

Practices of different actor groups are interdependent

- E.g. the understandings of POs put forward by the MT have performative impacts on the practices of PO secretariats, which mask differences in meaning.

Emphasises the need to go beyond 'end of chain' MEL

The elements of practice cannot be separated

- E.g. implementation of standards and procedures cannot be disentangled from meaning, which is influenced by material circumstance.

Elements of practice, which would typically be divided across indicators, must be considered together in order to be understood.

BUT DO 'WE' ALREADY KNOW THIS?

Not suggesting that POP actors are not aware of some of the PBA findings.

Actors often reflect on these findings, but often doing so in an informal or 'off the record' way, which poses challenges:

- Informal discussions often happen in 'free'/unbudgeted time so rely on commitment of staff

- They rarely occur across actor groups

- They do not appear in formalised project learning products, meaning that other actors from POP or the development sector more generally cannot learn from them

- Prevents formal challenging of problematic/unsuitable aspects of practice e.g. contracts

PBA offers a structured way of assessing these dynamics and adding insight to MEL. If formalised it would also mean time was dedicated to it, reducing the requirement for this to happen as 'free' work.

CHALLENGES OF PBA IN MEL

Normative:

- Formalising the informal poses risk of de facto surveillance and loss of spaces of discretion/flexibility

Instrumental:

- The degree to which PBA could be used to fulfil (current) donor requirements for project achievements and evaluation is less certain.

- Would have to be matched by a shift in donor expectations in terms of project MEL and increasing acceptance of social complexity as a defining feature of development projects over simplifying narratives of success.

Methodological:

- PBA has significant time and resource requirements. Therefore, integration of PBA into MEL would require wider support from donors and organisations and/or innovative methodologies.

COLLECTIVE REFLECTION FOR PBA INTEGRATION IN MEL?

Aspect of PBA	Example reflective questions
Meaning	How and why do we relate to aspects of the project in the ways that we do?
Competence	What knowledges do we bring to and foreground in this project? What impact do our procedures have on our work?
Materiality	What resources are available to us and other actors and how does this shape our decisions?
Logic of practice	What pre-existing behaviours and assumptions are being carried into this work?
Situated agency	What factors limit our decision-making?
Performativity of knowledge	How do/are we influence(d) by the standards, procedures, and competences that we engage with and others provide to us.

Helps attain Arts et al's (2014) defining features of good interventions: Recognise and provide space for situated agency; take existing logics of practice into account; be sensitive to the performativity of knowledge

NEXT STEPS

Further research/trial co-produced between academics and practitioners

Questions for discussion:

- Have you seen 'black boxes' in your own work? What impacts (good and bad) do you perceive them to have had?

- What benefits and challenges do you see in opening these black boxes?

- Thoughts on PBA and its integration with MEL?

- How else could/should we look to use the idea of 'practice' in MEL?