

Foreword by Robert Chambers

Much development and humanitarian thinking and practice is still trapped in a paradigm of predictable, linear causality and maintained by mindsets that seek accountability through top-down command and control. Recent years have seen more emphasis on the mechanistic approaches of this paradigm and the kinds of procedures which are increasingly questioned by successful private sector organisations.

This has widened the gap between actual aid practices and the rhetoric of the many initiatives which aim to improve them – including aid effectiveness, institutional reform, participation, local ownership and empowerment.

In the meantime and in parallel, complexity science has explored and articulated a contrasting world of understanding, helping to explain complex dynamic phenomena in a widely diverse range of settings using insights and concepts like non-linearity, edge of chaos, self-organisation, emergence and co-evolution.

This Working Paper is, to my knowledge, the first comprehensive and substantial work to be published that attempts, systematically and thoroughly, to bridge these two worlds, explaining and then relating the ideas of contemporary complexity theory to current development and humanitarian thinking and practice. The ten concepts of complexity science – organised into the three domains of *complexity and systems*, *complexity and change*, and *complexity and agency* – provide us with lenses through which to examine, and see differently, the realities with which we grapple in international aid work.

Ben Ramalingam and his colleagues describe and interpret a world of messy and unpredictable change which corresponds with much experience in the aid sector. They challenge dominant ideas and practices of development and change, locked in as these are to linear thinking and to procedures and requirements such as the logical framework and impact assessments. With scholarly authority and illustration, they explore the implications for how we see and think about development and humanitarian work. In doing so, they help to make clearer why so much aid is so problematic, in both conception and execution.

Exploring the Science of Complexity should provoke and inspire changes in aid thinking and practice that will lead to greater realism. Realism means more modesty and more honesty, which will not be easy. The authors suggest that political, professional, institutional and personal changes are necessary. Such changes require transformations of power relations, procedures, mindsets, behaviours, and professional education and training. More than anything, these changes demand the exercise of agency by individuals with the vision, commitment and courage to learn from and champion new and challenging approaches.

Let me hope that the ideas and orientations explored here will be understood and internalised by policy-makers and others with power, as well as by researchers, analysts and managers; that this will lead to norms, actions and relationships that will make development and humanitarian practice more attuned to reality, more sensitive to context, more adaptive, less reductionist and less simplistic; and that this will in turn generate and enable changes that enhance social justice and are more effectively pro-poor.

The potential is there. The need is there. We have in this Working Paper new analysis and insights to inform, inspire and underpin the radical changes in mindsets and practice required. It is now up to readers to read, reflect, debate, internalise and use these insights to find new and creative ways to bring about a better world.

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