Ineptitude, ignorance, or intent: The social construction of failure in development

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the social construction of failure in development policy and academic narratives. Talk of failure is commonplace in development, and this paper seeks to use that as a heuristic to understand what that it signifies beyond face value. Drawing on a wide range of primary and secondary texts to provide illustrative evidence, the paper explores how failure is constructed, and advances a three-fold typology of failures that vary in terms of their positionality, the critical variables they identify as responsible, their epistemological stance, and the importance they accord to politics.

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1. Introduction

In the looking glass world of development,[1] pessimism reigns, and things always fall apart. Dysfunctionality, collapse, disaster, poverty, famine, violence, and exploitation are not words used to signify the extraordinary, but are the normal vocabulary of everyday business. Many of the widely available texts on the subject present themselves as analytics of failure. The title of Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson's book is *Why Nations Fail.* James Scott's seminal book *Seeing Like A State* has the sub-title *How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition have Failed*". Paul Collier's *Bottom Billion* is similarly about *Why the Poorest Countries are Failing.* Dambisa Moyo's book on *Dead Aid* is about *Why Aid is not Working.* Bill Easterly's book on the *White Man's Burden* is about *Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest have done so much Ill*".

Negativity forms the everyday mood music in an environment where people are required to adopt a certain posture of mandatory outrage towards the underlying condition, as well as an air of impatience at the inadequate and flawed attempts to remedy it. In the conclusion to her monograph *The Will to Improve*, Tania Li writes of the 'profound limits' to development: 'For vast numbers of people, it falls short of the promise to make the world better than it is (Li, 2007: 283). Escobar's (1995: 5) book on development discourse presents a similar dystopia where 'instead of the kingdom of abundance promised by theorists and politicians in the

1950s, the discourse and strategy of development produced its opposite: massive underdevelopment and impoverishment, untold exploitation and oppression.'

There are however, important reasons to be circumspect about this pervasive negativity, and to understand what it signifies beyond face value. At one level, failure simply attracts disproportionate attention. Lewis (2005: 474) notes, 'the dominant emphasis has been to understand the reasons why they [development projects] fail with few studies bothering to understand why some projects succeed'. Development is famously a fluid, contested category with competing goals and metrics of success, so that every successful project can also be found to have failed by a different measure. Similarly, the existence of a variety of opposing 'stakeholders' means that what amounts to success for one group can be a costly failure for another.

However, even when the goals and beneficiaries are unambiguous, the evidence base upon which this judgment can be made is complicated and contradictory. The intense 'worm wars' debate over the randomised control trial evidence of mass de-worming in east Africa demonstrates the extent to which the most authoritative and cutting-edge forms of impact evaluation can later be viewed as flawed and misleading (Aiken, Davey, Hargreaves, & Hayes, 2015; Miguel & Kremer, 2004). The problems do not end there. Success and failure remain ephemeral and contested even when the evidence is accurate and uncontroversial. Mosley (1986) describes the macro-micro paradox: how project success at the micro level often has no commensurate impact on macro level indicators of development. Natsios (2010) explains that because evaluations are often judged on the basis of 'countable'

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[1] The idea of development as a looking-glass world is borrowed from Apthorpe's (2011) idea of 'Alice in Aidland'.

outputs, agency staff tend to promote projects that are amenable to easy measurement at the expense of more complex, developmentally transformative ones which cannot be easily enumerated. Consequently, many projects that are judged as successes at their end date are later found to have failed. Riddell (2008: 186) estimates that between 10% and 25% of projects fail to meet immediate objectives, but judged in terms of impact several years hence, it is as high as 60%.

One of the most widespread concerns about declarations of failure is that the criteria for determining success are arbitrary, based on 'before versus after' comparisons of outcomes to predetermined objectives, irrespective of whether those objectives were ever achievable.[2] Easterly (2009) for example, argues that the design of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and their unachievable targets rendered what were actually impressive successes in Africa to be categorised as demoralising failures. Similarly, Kumar and Corbridge (2002) argue that DFID's Eastern India Rainfed Farming Project (EIRFP) actually succeeded in many economic measures, but was declared a failure because it did not meet criteria that, even its planners would probably agree, were impossible to meet.

The problem of inappropriate outcome criteria is related to a broader methodological concern with attribution – that is, isolating causality. Outside of the small subset of cases where counterfactual analysis is possible, for example, through the availability of randomised treatment and control groups of adequate size, how can one distinguish whether success or failure is to be attributed to the project intervention, to the underlying conditions, or to other exogenous and incidental factors?

Finally, even beyond the illusion of countables and absent counter-factuals, success and failure can also be openly manipulated. As Parker and Allen (2014) describe at length, large donor-funded public health programmes in East Africa were continued, despite the fact that they did not work well. This occurred initially amidst a lack of knowledge and evidence – but later when evidence of weak uptake and widespread problems was collected and made available, a façade of 'success' was maintained by public health officials through strategic ignorance (Mcgoey, 2012), as well as by actively seeking to suppress and discredit contrary evidence.

What this means is that in evaluating the rhetoric of failure, it is important to bear in mind that real world development outcomes are notoriously complex to evaluate. Success or failure thus amount to much more than the accurate measurement of objective indicators, and are in many cases, the outcome of a process of negotiation and mediation. As Fejerskov (2016: 366) notes in a case study of a manifestly dysfunctional development initiative, the evaluation outcome was indeed a 'negotiated truth' such that 'the potential success of development projects does not necessarily have any connection to measurable results, but rather is found in the interpretation of events and actions'. Similarly, many external evaluators will recount with exasperation how project funders and agency staff with access to draft copies of evaluation reports vigorously challenge any negative findings with a view to influencing the interpretation of failure and minimising personal culpability in the final version.

Even in the formal and substantive evaluations of development outcomes, the verdict of failure must be actively constructed through a long chain of actions that begins with the decisions over goals, the identification of measurement indicators, the way the data is collected, collated, and analysed, and the way results are contextualised, elaborated, and interpreted. In other words, failure cannot be seen as a self-evident outcome, but amounts to a particular performance that must be enacted, or a representation that

must be generated. As Mosse (2005) describes, in his ethnography of a rural development project in western India:

> *development success is not merely a question of measures of performance; it is also about how particular interpretations are made and sustained* **socially***. It is not just about what a project does, but also how and to whom it speaks, who can be made to believe in it* (Mosse, 2005: 158).

The *constructed* nature of development failure does not mean that evaluations are all fiction, that careful measurements are impossible, or that rigorous evaluations should be cast aside. It does however, mean that there is more to failure than failure. The final judgments of effectiveness based on these evaluations often amount to much more than the sum of the parts. Indeed, unlike many other related fields, such as science and technology studies, the constructed nature of development effectiveness is less controversial, and easier to illustrate. The idea that scientific knowledge is socially constructed within the laboratory (Latour & Woolgar, 1979) is contested and even ridiculed as absurd by real world scientists. A similar accusation about development effectiveness evaluation would, however, likely encounter less resistance by a jury of peers composed of real world development professionals.

The idea that failure is *socially* constructed (Berger and Luckmann, 1966) is significant insofar as any evaluation is not an individual effort, but requires the collaboration of a community of actors to produce and consume it: a collective who frame it in that way, and to whom it belongs and speaks to. It follows then that narratives of development can often say more of the narrators themselves, and of the way that they choose to see and frame the evidence in particular ways. As Entman (1993: 52) describes, this process of framing is:

> *to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem, definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation.*

The counter-part to the production process of such narratives is its consumption, and the way that its consumers are clustered in communities that adopt particular versions of what the social psychology literature has explained as the 'confirmation bias'. As Nickerson (1998: 175) describes, this involves 'the seeking or interpreting of evidence in ways that are partial to existing beliefs, expectations, or a hypothesis in hand'.

There is an important corollary to this: the existence of different social collectives, disciplinary traditions, and moral frames of reference within the development field means that there are different constructions of failure that are possible. The same project can be seen to have failed for different reasons by different groups of people, and moreover, these reasons can be contradictory to the point that they are entirely incompatible with one another. This is the case for example with the evaluation of structural adjustment, one of the most important and controversial policy interventions in the 1980s and 1990s. Although there is widespread agreement that structural adjustment lending and conditionality-based policy reforms failed, the available diagnoses differ radically.

Failure is on the one hand, attributed in numerous World Bank documents of the 1980s to an implementation problem: that is, the failure of its borrowers (developing country governments) to implement the agreed conditionalities. In more considered accounts, this inability is explained in terms of a lack of ownership, weak capacity, poor governance, or political instability. Writing from within the World Bank, Dollar and Svensson (2000: 895) find that more than one-third of adjustment programmes fail, and that 'domestic political economy variables' such as political instability

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[2] On 'counterfeit' counterfactuals, see (Gertler, Martinez, Premand, Rawlings, & Vermeersch, 2016).