

Address from Andrew Benfield on Development Effectiveness Study

Good afternoon from Myanmar and my apologies that I am unable to join you in person in Brussels today.

Last year the European Commission asked me to lead a study for them looking at development effectiveness and how it's worked out - whether it's been successful over the past 15 years or so.

You would think that the term development effectiveness, or aid effectiveness as it was previously known, would refer to anything that made our development efforts cost less and deliver more. But in fact it's come to have a narrower meaning than that. This is due to a meeting that took place in Paris in 2005 where the international community agreed that development efforts could work a lot better, and said that to do so they should follow a number of key principles, such as ownership, partnership, transparency and accountability. Development effectiveness has become since that meeting in 2005 synonymous with these principles, known as the Paris Commitments, and these have been reiterated several times over the years.

EC wanted to know if these principles are fit for purpose. We trawled through several hundred studies, evaluations, and reports from around the world to see what we could find. Certainly we came up with a lot of instances where applying the principles seemed to have made a difference and had been key to making things work better. And we've got plenty of examples in the study.

OK, so given that, what's not to like? Well, we concluded overall that the principles can work but they don't always work. And that's because they're so broad that they can be interpreted in many different ways. Crucially, we're not learning lessons very well about which ways of applying them work and which ways don't.

I think there are two reasons why we're not learning well enough what works and what doesn't.

The first is that when something goes wrong it too often gets buried. There is still too much reluctance to acknowledge failures and a tendency to only flag and spread the positive stuff. Development reporting tends to be too much of a public relations exercise that aims to show off to those providing the cash just what a good job we have done. Instead, we need to be much better I think at learning to fail, acknowledging that failure is actually an inherent part of innovation. Therefore, we need a far more frank admission of when things don't work out.

Crucially, having acknowledged these failures, we need to pin down what was learned as a result and the changes, which are often just small but vital tweaks that are needed. Therefore, we need to learn how to fail. To accept that failure does not mean incompetence but can actually be one of the most useful things we do if we spot it early, adjust accordingly, and tell people about it. Therefore, we should actually be rewarding it, not punishing it.

Secondly, many of the lessons that are learnt, whether positive or negative, stay locked up in lengthy programme reports and evaluations which almost no one reads. And I'm not exaggerating here. The World Bank bravely did a study and found out that, of all the policy documents and evaluations on their website, 30 percent had not been downloaded even a single time they had never been read. So the lessons these lengthy documents contain are often simply not passed on and the mistakes they highlight are therefore repeated again and again. So, no problem with making the mistake, but a big problem with not learning.

This was flagged in a study I looked at for the study that we wrote which examined a bunch of education evaluations over the years and found they kept repeating the same lessons learned. So basically the people designing the successive programmes weren't going and reading these previous evaluations. And that's because this information is not that easy to find. It is time consuming and it is buried in a huge amount of very long reports.

The issue is not that we don't know what to do. We don't need another EUR 100 000 evaluation of what we should be doing. The issue is that the

findings aren't being effectively disseminated. That is something I think that does deserve punishment.

So how do we change this? How do we unlock this existing knowledge? Well if we look at the legal industry, we find that technology is already being used to solve this kind of problem in a way I think we could easily emulate in development. So lawyers face a similar issue to development practitioners. But instead of needing to learn from lots of past evaluations, when they're preparing a brief, they need to go through a lot of past cases and rulings. Now they used to do this by, as one lawyer put it, throwing interns at large piles of paper. But this still took a lot of time and undoubtedly still missed a lot of things. Now instead they're using machine learning and artificial intelligence to scan through their vast collection of past cases and find out which ones are the most relevant to the present case and to flag the applicable lessons.

So why aren't we doing a similar thing in development to get at all that relevant knowledge that's already there in hundreds of past evaluations and studies? To get it out there and use it when we're preparing new initiatives. And to get it out there in a friendly format. I'm not talking about just loading lots of studies onto a web page, this doesn't help much either, I'm talking about a way of going through thousands of pages of documentation and retrieving what is valuable in them for what we're doing at the moment.

Doing something like that would have made our own study much more effective. You know there is a limit to how many papers two people can get through in a couple of months.

So we need to learn how to learn.

Learning from failures and learning how to learn is not the only way to make things better. I think we also need to solve that problem of development actors facing no sanction if they do not deliver, if they are not effective. They don't get kicked out of office and they don't go bankrupt. Therefore, we need to have some kind of incentive so that they auto correct.

Here again I think we could do well to learn from new ways of doing business in other industries. As a consumer these days when you choose a service provider, a hotel, a restaurant, whatever, you use apps and websites that rank and rate what's available and that's revolutionised a whole range of industries and made them far more customer responsive.

It is starting to happen in development, but I think we need a lot more of it. We need to learn from examples like the UK's DFID who already rank UN agencies and other multilaterals to decide who to give their money to, and other organisations do the same for charities. And we need more comparisons and rankings of in-country donors by partner country governments, like they do in Rwanda. And I think this has the potential to provide the kind of incentive structure we need to drive good performance from donors and other providers. So again, the practice does already exist but we need to do better at telling people about this.

Finally, another great way to learn what's needed is to simply go and ask partner country governments, and I do a lot of that. Very quickly you'll find two things that they say could really make development more effective, and you know these aren't principles or buzzwords, this is practical, easy to measure stuff. They are making sure the development actor has a local presence in the country, otherwise ownership, partnerships, transparency, accountability, all those nice concepts, will suffer. Secondly, speeding up delivery of development assistance, which is often terribly slow and unpredictable, which leads to all kinds of problems. While the first, the local presence, is not really an issue for the EU, the second, the speed, absolutely is.

In conclusion, yes, these principles are a good basis for making development more effective, but the focus should not be now on repeating the need to follow them, as we have done at countless international forums. Rather it should be on communicating effectively what this means in practice, putting in place mechanisms to incentivise effective behaviour, and hitting some really simple stuff hard, like local presence and speeding up delivery.

Many thanks for your time. Of course, the full study is available on demand as is a two-pager that I prepared for a high level UN meeting in New York.

You have my e-mail address on the screen and please do feel free to reach out at any time. Thank you very much.