

## Introduction

### Lucy in the field with briefings

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This publication risks being defined by what it is not – it is not guidance, best practice, a competency framework, a review, nor a topic guide. However it is very clearly an exploration of issues of governance and institutions, and as such it delves into debates that are at best highly contested. There is no party line involved: the papers aim to provide practitioners with a stimulus to their own thinking, and on the contested issues, readers will need to make up their own minds. As a result the approach is informal, and intentionally non-definitive – there is no simple right or wrong answer.

But while being intentionally informal, perhaps even self-critical, this book does not underestimate the importance of governance work, nor the difficulties facing governance practitioners within aid agencies. As a result the various papers that make up this volume often point to external critiques of the role of official aid agencies – recognising that as a sector openness to debate and criticism is important. They are also cognisant of the fact that the challenges facing counterparts in government ministries, NGOs and other bodies are usually far greater than those facing those who work for providers of development assistance.

But any one publication can only do so much. This volume therefore has a specific scope, it brings together a collection of specially written notes to help those who work as governance practitioners within aid and development agencies. For this reason we introduce “Lucy” as the central character of our story. Lucy, because institutions go back to the dawn of time and Lucy was around then, or so we understand from Richard Leakey. Lucy is in only her third year of service with the Department for Foreign Affairs and International Development (DFAID). She joined DFAID straight from studying economics in her home country before winning a scholarship to study international development at a prestigious European institution.

Lucy graduated near the top of her class and is completely *au fait* with the big name development authors, writers and thinkers (Douglass North, Francis

Fukuyama, Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson – she knows them all). While she has not yet had the privilege of a long-term overseas posting, she has however spent time volunteering and teaching English overseas. More importantly Lucy has already gone through the process of understanding that what seems very simple about development is horribly complex.

She may have followed the same learning curve as one of the editors who, as a spotty young development worker in early 1990s post-conflict Cambodia, watched in horror as a child died in a health clinic for lack of a basic drug. With time came the realisation that getting that basic drug to a clinic on a reliable basis involved a series of cogs to fall into place, the workings of which were nightmarishly difficult, and involved a machinery called governance.

For Lucy the horrible complexity of human resources systems, procurement, finance, etc, can be daunting, no matter how committed the partner. Hopefully this book will help to stimulate her thinking, illustrating that the vibrant debate on institutions and effective governance reflects the reality that much has been and can be achieved. More effective systems never look quite the way the governance practitioner and the partner envisaged, perhaps not all the programme and policy objective boxes have been ticked, but don't let that obscure the change that can occur. Arguably Cambodia has underachieved on bringing down the rate of its child mortality – yet even so, the rate is less than half that of the early 1990s.<sup>1</sup>

The papers included in this book offer ideas, thoughts and experiences on how to support institutions as they try to make strides forward in their performance. Lucy offers way of encapsulating the challenges facing the practitioners in development agencies who struggle with the issues – but hopefully not at the cost of over-simplification.

The specific challenge facing Lucy is that she is being sent to a country at risk of conflict for two weeks to establish the broad parameters of a governance programme. The donor, DFAID, is internationally respected despite being ranked as “middle-sized” when measured by its ratio of official development assistance to gross national income. DFAID is keen to put in place a new strategic partnership, based on mutual respect, mutual accountability, aid and trade with the country concerned.

For Lucy we have pulled together some papers and advice that might be useful drawing on a wealth of expertise. In keeping with the style of the papers, the various publications mentioned are summarised predominantly as author/title, enough to identify through a quick web search. However some fuller reading lists are included at key points. To maintain the flow we have also broken the cardinal rule and used far too many abbreviations – governance people are addicted to abbreviations. Wherever possible we have tried to spell abbreviations out at least for their first use, but a list of

abbreviations is also included. In striking the balance between the jargon of our practitioner audience and writing entirely for the lay person we have had to recognise that jargon does sometimes serve a purpose (and as you will see sometimes needs to be queried) – apologies to the lay people.

**Note**

1. Figures taken from UNICEF's Cambodia country page, UNICEF website, [www.unicef.org/infobycountry/cambodia\\_2190.html](http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/cambodia_2190.html).