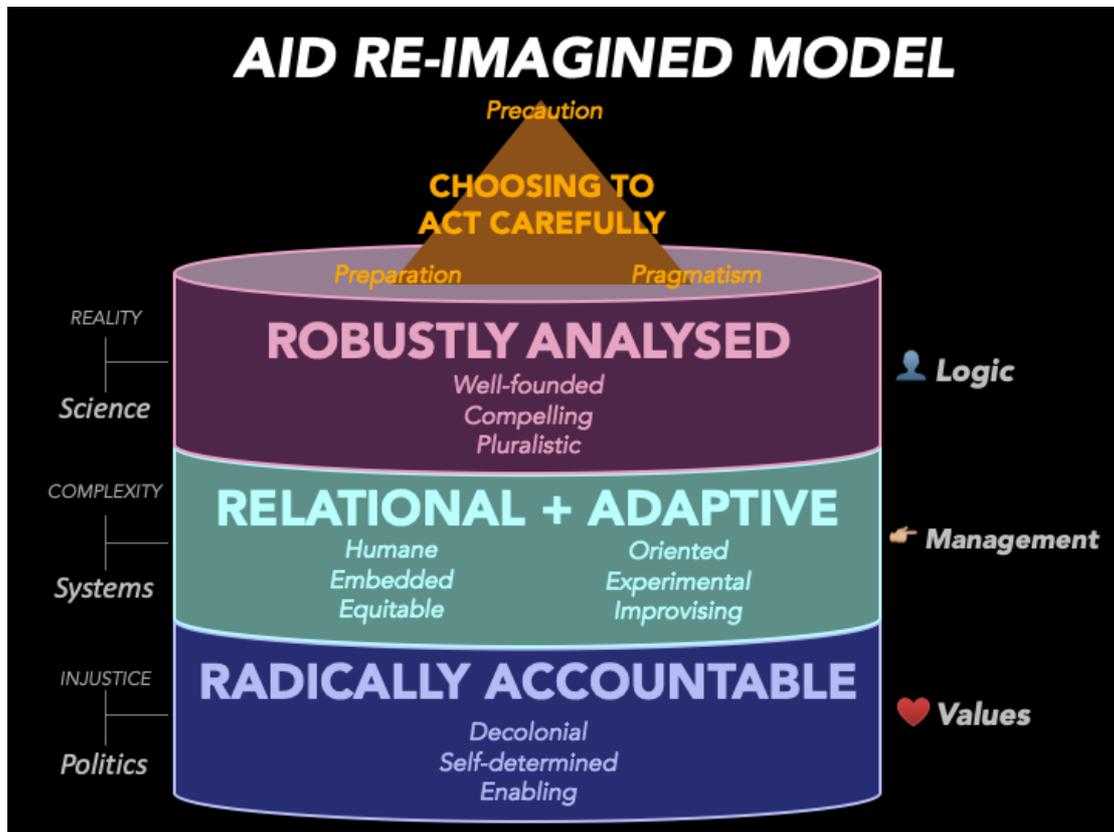


## The Aid Re-imagined model

**Working paper – October 2020**

We welcome any comments/feedback on this working paper, and we would be interested to hear about in any case studies/stories which might be relevant to the Aid Re-imagined model. Please get in touch with Arbie Baguios [arbie@aidreimagined.com](mailto:arbie@aidreimagined.com)



*The “balanced cake” of aid*

We live within a reality characterised by complexity and mired with injustice – from poverty and inequality, to people needlessly dying and suffering from disaster or conflict.

Aid programmes – typically understood to be altruistic endeavours (which may be a single project or a series of projects) primarily stemming from the Global North to the Global South – are one of many efforts that attempt to tackle such injustices. But in

many instances, these aid programmes fail because of a flawed logic based on unquestioned or unevidenced assumptions; or mismanagement especially when such efforts fail to adapt to their everchanging and unpredictable contexts; or espousing values that are not transformative and merely reproduce the conditions that have led to such injustices in the first place.

Fortunately there are now multiple fronts in the development and humanitarian aid sector that attempt to change the way we implement such programmes, including those which demand more effectiveness through robust and rigorous designs<sup>1</sup>; believe that we need to change<sup>2</sup> the rigid, linear ways in which we currently implement these programmes; and attempt to give more attention to the political root causes of problems<sup>3</sup>.

But these aid frontiers do not seem to provide a holistic view on their own: many of those focused on effectiveness have largely ignored power dynamics<sup>4</sup>; many who recognise power dynamics can sometimes be resistant<sup>5</sup> to effective designs and methodologies; and many who call for adaptiveness in the face of complexity acknowledge that even adaptation can go the “wrong”<sup>6</sup> way. Aid programmes must therefore be able to address all these issues at once. After all, one would not prefer for their local community’s hospital to only provide either effective treatment, quality care, or efficient management; a good hospital must provide all three or else the community’s wellbeing suffers.

A *Aid Re-imagined* model advocates for aid programmes that are robustly analysed, relational & adaptive, and radically accountable. Like baking a cake which requires the *right mix* of the *right ingredients*, these three components are all essential, but the right balance must be struck to suit the aid programme’s specific purpose and context.

“All models are wrong,” goes the phrase attributed to the statistician George Box, “but some models are useful.” After all, models are merely simplifications and interpretations of our infinitely complex world. The goal of the Aid Re-imagined model, then, is to be useful in shifting the way we think about aid programmes towards a more holistic view that accounts for, and urges the right balance between, a programme’s logic, management and values.

This model is particularly aimed at those in the Global North who typically play a key role in designing and implementing aid programmes in the Global South. And its ultimate aim is to change the way we currently implement aid towards effectiveness and justice.

## Choosing to act carefully

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the Effective Altruism movement, which advocates for a more rigorous assessment of impact in charitable giving (see: [https://www.effectivealtruism.org/?gclid=CjwKCAiA44LzBRB-EiwA-jJipPD9A6o52WH-VncdZxU3oebMhgHCGeEwJRX96mSaQDjLun99nZY-BoCaL8QAvD\\_BwE](https://www.effectivealtruism.org/?gclid=CjwKCAiA44LzBRB-EiwA-jJipPD9A6o52WH-VncdZxU3oebMhgHCGeEwJRX96mSaQDjLun99nZY-BoCaL8QAvD_BwE)); or the *randomistas* movement who see the rigorous randomised control trials as gold standard for evaluating aid programmes (see: <https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/should-randomistas-continue-rule-revised-jan-2019.pdf>)

<sup>2</sup> Perhaps best exemplified by Doing Development Differently (see: <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/11199.pdf>)

<sup>3</sup> For example, the call to put ‘politics’ back in aid (see: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2015/sep/25/aid-is-political-extract-from-nononsense-international-development>); or the move to ‘decolonise development’ (for a quick overview, see: <http://blog.gdi.manchester.ac.uk/decolonising-development/>).

<sup>4</sup> For a summary of pros and cons of empirical methods such as RCTs, see: <https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/2019/12/11/20938915/nobel-prize-economics-banerjee-dufflo-kremer-rcts>

<sup>5</sup> For example, in this article particularly critical of RCTs including its ethical dimensions, it dismisses social scientific methods (like those in economics) as relying on “blind faith.” See: <https://africasacountry.com/2019/10/the-poverty-of-poor-economics>

<sup>6</sup> Ramalingam, 2013. Aid in the Edge of Chaos.

Altruism is as old as humankind. We are social animals with a predisposition to help one another. Regardless of our internal motivations or external environment that shapes our thoughts and behaviours, altruism will exist within society. The Aid Re-imagined model accepts this and aims to make people's altruism – particularly of the cosmopolitan variety, often from North to South – more effective and just.

But acting altruistically faces risks and uncertainties, which could result in doing harm. That is because we live in a complex world, where there are known unknowns (risks) and unknown unknowns (uncertainties) that govern our actions. In the case of aid, implementers may have incomplete or imperfect knowledge that prevents them from foreseeing their action's unintended consequences (which can be positive and/or negative). Given this, it is unsurprising to find that on the question of whether aid across history has done more good or bad, the evidence is mixed<sup>7</sup>.

How then should aid implementers proceed when they want to act altruistically but have incomplete or imperfect knowledge? This situation demands an appropriate procedural<sup>8</sup> framework that is commensurate to aid's potential impact. It is only right that, in deciding whether to take an action which could significantly affect people's lives and communities' futures, one must undertake a serious and careful consideration.

In the Aid Re-imagined model, this procedural framework is called '**Choosing to act carefully.**' And this entails three sequential steps: first, applying the precautionary principle (precaution); second, undertaking an ethical minimax (preparation); and third, exercising pragmatism.

### ***Precaution: precautionary principle***

There is mixed evidence on aid: sometimes it does good, sometimes it causes harm. Meanwhile the degree of aid's impact on people and communities may vary, including whether one looks at it from a micro or macro perspective, and in the short-versus long-term: for example, a household receiving a one-off NFI (non-food item) package may be considered a small impact; but a state incentivised to shirk its responsibility to take care of its citizens because aid agencies are willing to distribute goods can be seen as a significant impact. Implementing aid, therefore, may have a high cost against its expected benefit. In the case of aid programmes, deciding to act by analysing costs versus benefit is made more complicated by the fact that aid is often implemented by an external intervener. That means aid implementers are not trying to make a change in their own communities (within which they have a more legitimate stake), but in the communities of other people – where sometimes it is unclear whether or not their help is solicited (e.g., if aid agencies intervene out of their own accord). If aid implementers wish not to harm other people's communities, then the first consideration must be to "restrain ourselves"<sup>9</sup>. In other words, aid implementers must first apply the precautionary principle<sup>10</sup>.

### ***Preparation: ethical minimax***

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<sup>7</sup> Nunn, 2020. Restraining Ourselves: Helping by not hurting. <https://econfip.org/policy-brief/restraining-ourselves-helping-by-not-hurting/>

<sup>8</sup> This is akin to the concept of procedural justice – usually applied in law – which provides an assurance that there has been due diligence taken when making a decision

<sup>9</sup> Nunn, 2020. Restraining Ourselves: Helping by not hurting. <https://econfip.org/policy-brief/restraining-ourselves-helping-by-not-hurting/>

<sup>10</sup> This is a concept that has its roots in philosophy, which means in situations where someone has to make a public policy decision and scientific knowledge is lacking, policy-makers have the responsibility to be cautious.

In considering whether or not to take action, and knowing that aid programmes may result in unintended negative consequences, aid implementers must then be prepared to minimise the harm and maximise the care. While aid implementers have imperfect or incomplete knowledge, that does not mean they cannot improve it, nor mitigate an imperfect/incomplete knowledge's effect. In the context of aid programmes, minimising harm and maximising care, prior to taking action, might mean: waiting until there is sufficient evidence base for the proposed intervention; piloting an intervention first to improve knowledge on it; or putting in place safeguards against harms (e.g., ensuring one's organisation recruits aid workers to a high standard). In philosophy *minimax* means minimising the harm in the worst-case scenario. Drawing inspiration from this term, the Aid Re-imagined model calls minimising harm and maximising care "ethical minimax." Therefore, prior to taking action, and after applying precaution, the second consideration is to prepare for undertaking ethical minimax.

### ***Pragmatism***

However, the process of minimising harm and maximising care itself has costs, chief of which are time and resources. Waiting until there is sufficient evidence base for an intervention might take a long time; applying safeguards may cost human and financial resources. And in the context of aid, time is often short and resources are limited, but the needs may be significant or urgent (particularly in humanitarian emergencies). Those wanting to act altruistically must not be paralysed by indecision. Aid implementers must recognise that complete and perfect knowledge is impossible to attain; and that their decisions are not philosophical thought experiments, but rather choices made in real life. Given this, after exercising precaution, and preparing to minimise harm and maximise care as best as one can, the third consideration must be pragmatism.

### ***Choosing carefully, not perfectly***

Choosing to act carefully is distinct from the traditional aid concept of "do no harm." "Do no harm" implies that one has already decided to act; and that one has the necessary knowledge and control of their aid programmes to guarantee that harm will not be done. The Aid Re-imagined model takes a more careful approach by offering a procedural framework even prior to making a decision; and at the same time recognises that – because of risks and uncertainties under complexity – doing no harm is never guaranteed.

The point of this procedural framework is not to encourage deferring to inaction, or cause analysis paralysis until it is too late. The point is to recognise that, as aid implementers, our actions may have significant consequences, and so due diligence is necessary. There is also no assumption that there is a "right" or "correct" choice: each of us have our own subjective ideals and moral compasses, and so we will be led to different decisions anyway. Thus, the Aid Re-imagined model advocates not for choosing to act *perfectly*, but instead choosing to act *carefully*.

### **Baking the aid cake: a checklist, and a balancing act**

If an aid implementer has made the careful choice to act, then the Aid Re-imagined model prescribes three components that make such actions effective and just: robust analysis, relationality and adaptiveness, and radical accountability. Like in a cake, each of these are essential, but the right balance must be struck for the aid

programme's purpose and context. And when it comes to baking, one needs both a list of ingredients and a recipe. This is what the Aid Re-imagined model provides: first, a checklist; and second, a guide to striking the right balance.

There are two industries where checklists have been life-saving: in aviation and in medicine. Prior to the introduction of checklists for pilots in the 1980s, many aviation accidents are shown to have stemmed from avoidable errors<sup>11</sup>. Meanwhile in hospitals, consider this: in 2007<sup>12</sup> there have been over 129,000 reported accidents in surgeries, which has led to approximately 1,000 patients suffering severe harm, and 271 patients dying. But after mandating pilots and doctors to go through a simple checklist, deaths have been cut – in the case of surgeries, by an astonishing 40 per cent. In this regard one might think of the Aid Re-imagined model as a checklist that helps think about **what is missing** and what should be in place to help achieve the best possible outcome for an aid programme (even if such an outcome is not guaranteed – after all, despite pilots' or doctors' checklists, accidents still happen).

The Aid Re-imagined model also recognises that it is difficult to achieve the ideal aid programme: trade-offs might be necessary, not least because of constraints on time and resources; and there might also be tensions even among the model's prescribed characteristics (for example, how does an aid programme gain perfectly compelling evidence using rigorous methodologies while at the same time being perfectly embedded in a local community where, for instance, there might not be a local staff with the requisite training on rigorous scientific methods?). Aid is also typically implemented by people or organisations with a particular bias for one of the components (e.g., champions of evidence-based policymaking are biased towards robust analyses; aid agencies that are part of the Shift the Power movement focus on accountability). Understanding aid programmes as a balancing act can help identify **what is lacking**. For example, could an aid programme that is robustly designed become more transformative with increased accountability? Or could an organisation that have radical values be more effective if they were also adaptive? Just like baking a cake where the baker hopes to achieve a balance among their ingredients (too much sugar might make the cake too sweet or lose its structure; too little might make it unpalatable), an aid implementer must strike the right balance between the different components to suit their context (although not all components are weighted evenly, with more priority given to radical accountability – this will be discussed later).

Once ready for the checklist to be ticked and the balance to be struck, it's time to bake the cake.

## The balanced cake of aid

### ***Robustly analysed***

We live within a social **reality**<sup>13</sup> that is comprised of objective, subjective, visible and invisible components. That is, we live in a world where there are objective phenomena (like unemployment rate or experience of discrimination); subjective perspectives (like difference in preferences); and visible structures (e.g., governments, policies) as well as invisible ones (e.g., power dynamics; norms).

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<sup>11</sup> <https://blog.safetyculture.com/checklist-best-practices/lessons-we-can-learn-from-aviation-checklists>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2009/jan/14/health>

<sup>13</sup> This is based on a specific conception of reality, which is rooted from empirics, but is enriched by an understanding of systems thinking. For more, see: Seelos, C. (2019). *Changing Systems? Welcome to the Slow Movement*. <https://pacscenter.stanford.edu/publication/changing-systems-welcome-to-the-slow-movement/>

These objective, subjective, visible and invisible components of reality can be systematically observed, measured and analysed. For example, through undertaking a baseline of food consumption of a target population; surveying to ask whether people think an intervention has been effective; or conducting a focused group discussion to identify the power relations and norms within a community. A systematic observation, measurement and analysis of reality can be called **science**.

But there is, crudely put, bad science and good science – exact characterisations for which are being vibrantly debated in many academic as well as non-academic corners. To simply illustrate: a building that is constructed using a poor-quality design, without following regulation standards, and does not take into account the local context is more likely to fall apart and endanger people’s lives. That is bad construction using bad science. Aid programmes can be more effective if it is constructed – that is, designed and implemented – using good science.

At the same time, in systematically observing, measuring and analysing reality, it must be acknowledged that there is more than one valid way to “do” science<sup>14</sup>, and more than one knowledge system used to interpret facts. For example, a scientific approach can also – and ideally, should – utilise knowledge systems and practices of indigenous populations or local communities. With the variety of scientific approaches not just within Global North knowledge systems, but also the diverse knowledge systems in the world, one must exercise care in determining the appropriateness, as well as the validity (i.e., epistemic standard<sup>15</sup>), of such approaches.

Whether or not an aid programme uses good science is manifest through its **logic** – that is, its design, primarily based on its underlying evidence-base or theory of change<sup>16</sup>. For an aid programme to be effective and just, its logic must be **robustly analysed**:

- **Well-founded** – Is it based on existing reliable evidence and/or could it generate the necessary evidence through a well-constructed theory of change? Are the evidence and/or theory of change grounded in what works<sup>17</sup>/what could work in the specific context?
  - **Compelling** – Will the aid programme be able to demonstrate its effect using a balance of appropriate methods, ideally including both rigorous/empirical<sup>18</sup> and non-rigorous/qualitative methods? Will it be able to account for not just intended/easily demonstrable outcomes, but also unintended/hard to measure outcomes?
- Pluralistic** – Is the science used able to accommodate for different knowledge systems, such as local or indigenous knowledge? Is the science

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<sup>14</sup> There spans an extensive philosophical debate around this, and for a good summary, as well as argument for the pluralism of knowledge systems, see Isaiah Berlin’s (1997) *The Proper Study of Mankind*.

<sup>15</sup> For the concept of epistemic standards, see: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/contextualism-epistemology/>; for the dilemmas surrounding epistemic standards and decision-making under uncertainty, see John, (2019). *The Politics of Certainty: The Precautionary Principle, Inductive Risk and Procedural Fairness*; and for the implications of this in the aid sector, see Eyben et al. (2015), *The Politics of Evidence and Results in International Development*.

<sup>16</sup> For more on Theory of Change, see Valter, 2015: <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/9835.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> This argument is made in *Poor Economics* (Banerjee and Duflo, 2011), which states that aid policies are often “captured in simple formulas,” and that we have to “abandon the habit of reducing the poor to cartoon characters and take the time to really understand their lives, in all their complexity and richness.”

<sup>18</sup> One way of demonstrating a compelling impact is through Effective Altruism’s model of importance, tractability and neglectedness. See: <https://concepts.effectivealtruism.org/concepts/importance-neglectedness-tractability/>

used able to accommodate for different scientific practices, including local or indigenous<sup>19</sup> practices?

## ***Relational & adaptive***

Many times aid programmes have a robustly analysed design but still fail to achieve positive effects because they do not take into account the complexity of the operational context or of the programmes themselves. Such aid programmes are often implemented in a rigid, linear way: isolate the situation; identify the problem; implement a solution; and expect success.

But in many cases, even if the aid programme's design is robustly analysed, and even if the aid implementer adheres to their rigid plans, the positive impact is not achieved. That is why, for instance, when aid implementers saw there was a lack of like classrooms, books, teachers and a curriculum, their well-designed programme to provide these outputs did not automatically result into their desired outcome of learning<sup>20</sup>. Implementers must not only pay attention to an aid programme's design, but also to its **management** – that is, the way it is implemented.

Most aid programmes – including the stakeholders they involve and the problems they wish to solve – are situated amid **complexity**. That is because aid programmes do not operate in isolation with controllable and predictable elements. An aid programme's resources, organisation, staff, target population, and the wider society dynamically interact with each other in many ways, multiple times, producing something greater than just the sum of all its parts (hence, why classrooms, books, teachers and a curriculum do not necessarily lead to learning).

In operating amid complexity, a useful way to think about aid programmes is through **systems**. A system<sup>21</sup> is broadly defined as “a set of things – people, cells, molecules, or whatever – interconnected in such a way that they produce their own pattern of behaviour over time.” Systems can also be embedded in other systems: an aid programme is a system; a community benefitting from an aid programme is a system as well; and the country in which the community belongs is yet another system.

The way in which systems produce their own behaviour is called the feedback process. *Elements* of a system, governed by the system's *rules or interconnections*, either balance or reinforce each other to fulfil the system's *purpose*. Think of a thermostat which seeks to balance warmth and cold to keep a room's temperature at a desired state (balancing feedback loop); or the evolution of a species of predator, which optimises their best features and skills over generations to more easily kill their prey (reinforcing feedback loop). However, if the feedback loops lead to an undesirable outcome, it can be said that the system has evolved in the “wrong” way.

Looking at aid programmes through the lens of systems – i.e., systems thinking – is useful because it allows aid implementers to realise that 1) their aid programme is always itself a system that is part of another system; which means 2) they should move away from a less effective linear approach to programmes (typically focussing on elements), and into a more effective holistic approach that takes into account complexity (putting a spotlight on a system's rules/interconnections and purpose).

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<sup>19</sup> Movements like ‘decolonising science’ calls for the expansion of science to accommodate other knowledge systems like indigenous knowledge. For a brief overview, see: <https://medium.com/@chanda/decolonising-science-reading-list-339fb773d51f>

<sup>20</sup> See World Development Report (2018) on complexity of learning: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/wdr2018>

<sup>21</sup> See: Meadows (2008), *Thinking in Systems: A Primer*

Systems thinking more easily facilitates asking the right questions: books, classrooms and teachers (elements) increase school attendance - but under what configuration (rules/interconnections) will they lead not just to increased school attendance, but also to learning (purpose)?

### **Relational**

One important element of the aid system are the humans within it: people and their communities; members of the wider society; and an organisation's staff. The effectiveness of aid programmes heavily depends on its human stakeholders; as such, aid programmes are *social*<sup>22</sup> programmes (aiming to tackle *social* problems). But in pursuit of aid effectiveness, there has historically been a disproportionate focus on processes and regulations: for example, in the sometimes cruel bureaucracy of refugee registration; or the endless (and expensive) reports and audits required in administering a grant. This has led to an undesirable reinforcing feedback loop often called NGO-ization<sup>23</sup>. Aid programmes must therefore be **relational** – that is, putting more emphasis on its human stakeholders and their relationship with each other. This requires the management of aid programmes to be:

- **Humane** – Does it not dehumanise its stakeholders (including its staff, and the people and communities that it intends to benefit) through, for example, lack of empathy or over-bureaucratization? Does it not instrumentalise its stakeholders and instead accommodate their whole selves?
- **Embedded**<sup>24</sup> - Do those who implement it have and maintain a close and strong relationship with the community it intends to benefit? Do they have the tacit knowledge required, which can only be obtained through a deep familiarity and connection with the local context?
- **Equitable**<sup>25</sup> – Does it respect, promote and cater to the full diversity of its stakeholders – including the diversity of desires and needs of the community it intends to benefit, particularly those of the excluded, marginalised, and most vulnerable?

### **Adaptive**

An aid programme is a system<sup>26</sup> with multiple dynamically interacting elements. And an aid programme itself is an element of a larger system, which means it also dynamically interacts with the wider society. This often means that aid programmes rarely go as planned, or may have unintended consequences. For an aid programme to be better suited to achieve positive outcomes, it must be managed **adaptively**. This entails being:

- **Oriented**<sup>27</sup> - Is the programme focused on a well-defined true outcome (purpose), which offers a degree of flexibility on outputs (elements)? Does it provide the right incentives and enabling environment (rules/interconnections) to pursue the outcome?

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<sup>22</sup> This is aligned with the concept of *Thinking and Working Politically*, which sees local political economy as crucial to a programme's success. See: <https://twpcommunity.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Thinking-and-working-politically-reviewing-the-evidence.pdf>

<sup>23</sup> For more on the concept of 'NGO-ization', see Sonia E. Alvarez, "Advocating feminism: The Latin American Feminist NGO 'Boom'", in *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 1:2, 1999, p.182.; for a brief example, see <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/crp/2020/02/20/international-frameworks-force-civil-society-mimic-western-ngos/>

<sup>24</sup> This is based on Dan Honig's (2018) concept of *navigation by judgment*, in which he argues aid programmes in complex environments are more effective if decision-making is delegated to locally embedded staff

<sup>25</sup> For a good summary of the concept of equity, specifically in partnerships, see The Equity Index: <https://theequityindex.org/>

<sup>26</sup> Owen Barder (2012) provides a compelling example of how development is the product of complex adaptive systems. See: [https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/archive/doc/multimedia/Development\\_and\\_Complexity\\_Slides.pdf](https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/archive/doc/multimedia/Development_and_Complexity_Slides.pdf)

<sup>27</sup> A clear illustration of orientedness is in Ang's (2016) concept of *directed improvisation* from her book *How China Escaped the Poverty Trap*.

- **Experimental** – Does it test different ways of achieving its outcome in order to identify the best-performing one? Once an effective way is identified, does it then continually test its performance amidst a changing context?
- **Improvising** – Are those implementing it able to use their contextually-bound knowledge, as well as have the freedom to quickly innovate or course-correct, towards achieving the outcome? Does it learn from failures/successes, and use that learning to optimise effectiveness?

## **Radically accountable**

Most aid programmes are designed to solve problems like a community's high poverty incidence or a person's lack of access to education and healthcare. These problems arise from asymmetries in resources and capabilities: there might not be enough job opportunities within a community, which leads to its population's low income; a person who has a disability may not be able to easily go to school or get hospital treatment.

Asymmetry in capability and resources results into, and reinforces, asymmetry in power. Power<sup>28</sup> may be understood as the ability to pursue what one desires (whether that's pursuing one's interest through *power to*, *power over*, *power with*, or *power within*<sup>29</sup>; or through powers in different levels, spaces and forms<sup>30</sup>). There are many factors that affect the distribution of capability and resources – and thus, the distribution of power – within and/or between societies, including historical, cultural, social and economic factors (e.g., gender, wealth, race, colonial histories, etc).

It can be said that when some people in a society (e.g., the poor; the disabled) do not have the same opportunities as others to pursue similar outcomes (e.g., have a job; access education or health), then there is **injustice**<sup>31</sup>. If problems, which are characterised by an uneven distribution of capabilities and resources (i.e., power), then such problems are rooted in the inequality of opportunities. Therefore, problems such as poverty or vulnerability to crises, stemming from uneven distribution of power, may be conceived as injustices.

If aid programmes were to tackle these problems, the solution lies in the redistribution of power. However, aid programmes, which are typically implemented by those from the Global North, carry the risk of reproducing power asymmetries – especially when the people and communities whom the aid programme intends to benefit are disenfranchised in the process of coming up with a solution to their own problems. This diminishes an aid programme's potential to remedy injustice.

**Politics** can be understood as how power is manifest in society. Therefore, aid programmes are inherently political<sup>32</sup>. An aid programme's political dimension (for instance, whether it entrenches or upends unequal power relations; and to what extent is it informed by the perspectives of peoples and communities it intends to benefit) can be discerned by examining its **values** – that is, the means and ends which it finds desirable and/or the behaviours and outcomes it manifests.

<sup>28</sup> For an overview of the concept of power, see Parsons (1963): <https://www.istor.org/stable/985582?seq=1>

<sup>29</sup> See Rowland's (1997) 4 types of power – power over, power to, power with, and power within. See Rowland (1997), Questioning Empowerment: Working with Women in Honduras.

<sup>30</sup> See Gaventa's (2006) concept of power cube: [https://www.powercube.net/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/finding\\_spaces\\_for\\_change.pdf](https://www.powercube.net/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/finding_spaces_for_change.pdf)

<sup>31</sup> For the theoretical conception of justice, see Rawls (1971) *A Theory of Justice*, and Sen (2009) *The Idea of Justice*

<sup>32</sup> A good theoretical resource on this is James Ferguson's (1990) *The Anti Politics Machine*.

If aid were to not only be effective but also just, then it must be **radically accountable**:

- **Decolonial** – Does it not give undue privilege to knowledge and cultures of the Global North (including ideas, thoughts, norms, behaviours, etc)? Does it not perpetuate social, political, economic and cultural inequality against the Global South?
- **Self-determined** – Is it borne out of the idea or practice of the people/community it intends to benefit? Are the people it intends to benefit fully involved in the design and implementation?
- **Enabling**<sup>33</sup> – Does it decrease the inequality of power among the people/community it intends to benefit? Does it increase the capability<sup>34</sup> of the people/community to pursue their interests (however they define their own interests)?

Injustice is the root cause of social problems. Without tackling injustice, aid programmes risk merely putting a band aid over the deep wounds of our social reality. At the same time, the solutions to injustices are often found within people and communities themselves; therefore, the support they need is in building an enabling environment where they can realise their own solutions. This is what the Aid Re-imagined model means when it says aid programmes aim to “tackle injustices”: it must aim to shift power to people and communities to enable them to solve their own problems. That is why radical accountability must hold more weight than the other components in the balancing act – and must be the foundation – of the Aid Re-imagined model.

## How aid can be re-imagined

The prescriptions of the Aid Re-imagined model are not new: as previously said, there are now multiple fronts within the aid sector that calls for important reforms, such as such as promoting a robust design; thinking in systems; and improving accountability. But there does not seem to be widespread recognition that all of these components are, in fact, essential; and that what’s needed is striking the right balance. And there is also a lack of a coherent framework that integrates all of these together.

The Aid Re-imagined model strives to fill this gap. It does so by inviting us to see the world from a particular philosophical perspective – that is, within a reality characterised by complexity and mired with injustice; offering an updated procedural framework for choosing to act carefully (enriching the concept of “do no harm” – which assumes that the choice to act has already been made, and that doing no harm can be guaranteed); and then providing aid implementers a guidance on how to balance the different layers of the aid cake.

The call, then, is threefold. First, cultivate an appreciation for the philosophical context of a complex, unjust reality. Second, choose to act carefully. And third, ensure the cake layers are addressed, and then strike a balance. Organisationally, this might mean explicitly incorporating such philosophical foundations within strategies (e.g., recognition of the politics of injustice, instead of seeing them as only technocratic problems to be solved); or having a more stringent due diligence process prior to responding to a crisis and launching an appeal. Individually, aid implementers can start by using the Aid Re-imagined model as a checklist, and then

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<sup>33</sup> This terminology is inspired by the liberation movements such as the women’s liberation and LGBT liberation movement; the AR model categorically rejects any interpretation that this term promotes white savior mentality.

<sup>34</sup> This is rooted in Amartya Sen’s (1999) *capability approach* from his book *Freedom as Development*.

asking questions such as “What is missing? What is lacking?”, for example, in one’s next team meeting, or when looking at proposals or reading evaluations.

Altruism is as old as humankind; but for aid to do the most good for people and communities, it has to evolve for the better. By choosing to act carefully and striking the right balance between a robustly analysed logic, relational and adaptive management, and – most importantly – radically accountable values, then aid can be re-imagined.