PROBLEM-DRIVEN PROJECT DESIGN

IS YOUR PROJECT FACILITATING PROBLEM SOLVING?

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Traditionally, project planning has relied on making the right assumptions at the beginning, through careful planning and envisioning a clear pathway to change. But this has not always worked well. Many development initiatives have failed to reach their objectives, and often the results achieved at the end of a project cannot be sustained.

The context of development cooperation will change rapidly in future. In the face of technological innovation, changing climate and ever increasing wealth inequalities, past solutions will not lead us towards a sustainable future. The only way to navigate the canvas of uncertainty is to test, reflect, iterate and learn. To abandon the old and embrace the new. To learn continuously.
Pathways to sustainable solutions are neither simple nor obvious. Organisations and people targeted by initiatives lack power, those who can make a difference are alone, and too often political barriers hinder success. Facilitating reform requires a deep understanding of what is available, and the agility to embrace opportunities that arise.

We need leaders, heroes, convenors and brokers to facilitate change. It is their leadership, networks and new ideas that fuel innovation. Even more importantly, we need to engage distributed agents, those who implement the reform. We need them as partners in the change process from the start, rather than ‘adaptors’ of reform ideas of others. This means testing solutions to problems that matter to them.
The standard project design has six steps and includes six workshops with implementing teams. These are supported by smaller meetings or practical coaching sessions, with team members responsible for specific tasks in monitoring and learning, management and leadership and initial authorisation of the project.

The first two steps form the foundation of the design. In these preliminary steps the implementing team and direct project partners will agree a ‘motivating problem that is felt by those involved’ and then break it into causes and sub-causes.

Evidence gathered and analysed by the direct project partners supports the problem ‘construction’ and ‘deconstruction’ process.

As a result, key stakeholders involved in implementing the project, as well a project team, will have a shared understanding of the context of the problem the project is going to address, and motivation to start a first iteration.

WE ARE NOW READY TO BUILD A PROJECT STRATEGY THAT Responds TO Locally NOMINATED PROBLEMS
Steps three to six ensure the project can build and maintain an enabling environment to implement iterations: testing possible solutions to locally felt problems.

Many actors are engaged in the problem-solving process. First, the project needs multiple authorisers to manage its risks and authorise the iterations. Second, the project needs multi-agent groups with different functional responsibilities to test solutions to locally nominated problems. Third, the project needs to ensure distributed agents are on board from the start.

Ultimately, change evolves and scales through groups. Distributed agents are a wide variety of people responsible for implementing and sustaining the reform. Only when problems the project is addressing matter to them will they continue to implement and adapt the reform process.

Step seven is a joint evaluation of the results. This step is repeated several times during project implementation. While it is not part of the project design, a good project design defines a jointly agreed strategy to implement this step.

**PROBLEM-DRIVEN PROJECT DESIGN PREPARES THE PROJECT TO EMBRACE THE CHALLENGE OF FACILITATING THE REFORM PROCESS:**

- **A good monitoring, learning and evaluation strategy** can generate evidence needed to engage the authorisers and convince them to continuously authorise the action steps throughout the implementation period. It will also provide a platform for multi-agent groups to share their learning with other groups and keep the project implementation and its multiple iterations together.

- **A good project management and leadership strategy** can help define and support tasks of each team member, hold them accountable to agreed processes, and keep them motivated to move the change process, even when things are not going as expected.

- **A good communication strategy** can help engage actors beyond the immediate boundary partners of the project. This is instrumental in reaching out to distributed agents, and building state capability at scale.

- **A good exit strategy** ensures the project is a catalyst but not a driver of change. A project strategy responds to locally felt problems, its results are sustained, and it continues to evolve through distributed agents when the project’s funding finishes.
What tools do we use in problem-driven evaluation?

Ishikawa ‘cause and effect’ diagram to illustrate the results of problem construction and deconstruction, based on evidence and involving implementing teams.

Triple A change space analysis to select where to start and the type of action (choice between building an enabling environment through increasing the change space or starting a first iteration).

Stakeholder mapping to define and engage authorisers, multi-agent groups and distributed agents. Mapping and engagement of actors is continuously evolving based on results of the iterations implemented during the project.

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DEFINE: WHO WE NEED TO ENGAGE TO SEEK ANSWERS AND TEST SOLUTIONS
- Who can initiate the reform process and generate ideas to address this problem?
- Who can authorise and enable the iterations?
- Who can manage the iterations and connect to groups and implementors outside the core group?

DEFINE OUR DISTRIBUTED AGENTS AND HOW TO HAVE THEM ON BOARD AT THE OUTSET
- Who are distributed agents and is this their problem?
WE EMBRACE THEORY AND USE TOOLS FROM THE PROBLEM-DRIVEN ITERATIVE ADAPTATION (PDIA) LEARNING-BY-DOING APPROACH, DEVELOPED BY HARVARD PROFESSOR MATT ANDREWS AND HIS COLLEAGUES TO FACILITATE THE PROJECT DESIGN PROCESS. (1)

**Reference:**


Capability is a network of practitioners and researchers for problem-driven development

GOT ANY QUESTIONS?

T. +358 40 544 1561
E. capability@capability.fi
Petäjäkuja 14, 33900 Tampere, FINLAND
www.capability.fi