



POLICY BRIEF

Past and future of Project Cycle Management (PCM)

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Development projects have to be managed professionally, but decades of experience has highlighted the challenges of project cycle management (PCM). Development organizations have increasingly searched for alternatives to one of the PCM standards, the logframe. The plethora of PCM instruments has overwhelmed many development practitioners. This brief questions the trend of alternative approaches to PCM, including the logframe. It argues that the crux of good PCM lies in how the instruments are used, rather than the instruments themselves. Focus should not be on further multiplying instruments, but investing more in transferable skills of practitioners such as thinking in an interdisciplinary way and acting adaptively, enabling them to use any instruments in a given context.

Criticizing standard PCM instruments and developing alternatives

PCM instruments—broadly defined as the methods, tools, procedures and systems that shape project or program management—are a fact of daily life in development cooperation. Unfortunately, many practitioners find standard PCM instruments

to be donor-driven, bureaucratic and static. Particularly problematic is the use of the logical framework (logframe) to design and manage projects, due to its linear and simplistic character (Backwell and Garbutt 2005). However, the dissatisfaction is less about the logframe itself and more about the general challenges of PCM, which attempts to manage the increasing complexity of

development contexts, accountability and quality requirements in a single approach (Teskey and Tyrrel 2021). The logframe has become the scapegoat for many frustrated and overwhelmed project managers.

Against this background, the development field has in recent years experienced an increasing trend—not to say hype—of designing new instruments related to PCM that claim to make practitioners' daily PCM work simpler and more effective (Eyben 2013; FASID 2010; Hummelbrunner and Jones 2013). Various perceived alternatives to the logframe have been proposed including results chain modelling, the theory of change approach, the Reflection on Peace Practice (RPP), Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA), Design Thinking, IDRC's Outcome Mapping, the DCED standard for private sector results measurement and GIZ's Capacity WORKS. As an improvement over the older approach, the proposed instruments are trying to shift PCM away from linear and planned, donor-driven, Eurocentric and top-down approaches towards models that foster co-creation, local leadership and which engage with emergent and complex systems.

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Beyond new instruments, other changes in approaches to development are also impacting PCM. Supported by research, the 'effectiveness debate' has shifted to the 'impact debate' pushing to use evidence and show attribution. Due to increased donor requirements, but also in connection to intrinsic learning incentives, development organizations have started to invest in their global performance assessment systems, including digitalization; this implies a shift away from anecdotal narratives to more systematic data collection, analysis and reporting. By adding to the ever-growing diversity of instruments and challenging organizations handling lengthy change processes, these new approaches are making PCM more difficult.

Pros and cons of alternatives

Certain PCM alternatives are widely acknowledged to have contributed to improving the quality of development practice. For instance, generating and utilizing evidence through robust impact evaluations helps design effective interventions. Complexity-aware instruments such as Outcome Mapping or theories of change have spurred systemic designing to take a holistic view on the context when planning and managing projects. Results-orientation combined with innovative digital solutions have spurred many development organizations to more systematically

assess performance and have reduced monitoring and evaluation costs at project, program and institutional levels.

However, many alternative PCM instruments seem overrated, offering little more than visual effects and sparkling terminology. Most PCM alternatives suffer from the same shortcoming as existing instruments, which is their inability to provide a “one-size-fits-all” solution. Every alternative offers only a partial solution to an already existing problem (e.g. complexity), while often creating a new problem at the same time. For example, project logic models render the interdependencies between sought changes and actors explicit, but they underestimate the importance of working through indicators. This relativizes the strength of logic models, because they need monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems in order to be operationalized, and indicators are integral to solid M&E systems.

The costs of institutionalizing the growing plethora of PCM instruments often appear to outweigh the benefits they provide. This has a lot to do with the fact that many practitioners confound PCM instruments with one another during their day-to-day business:

- Practitioners often do not differentiate between PCM manuals and PCM tools. Manuals like Outcome Mapping or Capacity WORKS provide methodological guidance in managing projects from design to evaluation. Tools like theories of change, M&E frameworks or key performance indicators, by contrast, are sub-elements meant to be applied during PCM.
- Tools themselves are often not differentiated. A prominent example is the logframe: the logframe approach (LFA) is an analytical planning process, whereas the logframe matrix is one of the products of it. This confusion between process and matrix often leads to the assumption the logframe is rigid (i.e. a lock-frame), whereas in fact it can be perfectly adaptive to intervention and context.
- Another misconception is that PCM manuals and tools are the same as an organization's internal decision-making processes. PCM instruments and decision-making are linked, but not identical. Challenges faced by practitioners while applying PCM instruments (e.g. writing a project document including a logframe matrix) are often related to cumbersome internal processes like project approval or funding.

Practitioners expect PCM instruments to ease their daily tasks and improve results. When practitioners realize that this does not easily hold, many feel discouraged and resort to sticking to those few instruments with which they feel most comfortable. This hampers learning and exchange among staff about how PCM instruments overlap and differ, which in turn undermines an organization's ability to effectively institutionalize PCM instruments.

Recommendation I: From competition to complement

There is an ironic side to the trend of more and more PCM instruments. While many practitioners feel that standard PCM instruments are no longer appropriate, they find it increasingly difficult to comprehend the alternatives, let alone effectively apply them. Hence, rather than helping practitioners effectively manage projects in complex and dynamic contexts, the competing proliferation of PCM alternatives actually fosters the opposite.

The bottom line is that there is no shortcut in PCM, and no magic alternative to the standard logframe. The minimum requirement for “good” PCM lies in the ability to combine instruments. This means that practitioners need to approach the logframe with an open mind. They need to recognize the pros and cons of the logframe, understand how its strengths overlap with the strengths of other instruments and make the best use of them individually or in combination during PCM according to project and context. Following are a few examples of how to handle the diversity of instruments:

- Project designs are all based on theories of change that reflect logical progression from inputs/activities to results. Given the minimal difference between most types of theories of change, there is no point in arguing about terminology. Instead, we should focus on logic models fulfilling the basic requirements including expected results, pathways of contribution, assumptions and strategies. Depending on the situation, indicators and boundary partners (key stakeholders) can also be added.
- Projects are based on context analyses, including actors and their relationships, problems and strengths, all further linked to a number of steps and deliverables. Practitioners should not argue over the myriad of available context assessment tools, since they all have pros and cons. What matters is the quality of context analyses, and that findings inform project design.
- Internal decision-making processes should become more flexible in terms of approving, funding, implementing and amending projects through shorter plan-do-reflect iteration cycles. In order to be operationalized, project logic models need for instance monitoring systems including indicators, and they need budgets. Both indicators and budgets are by definition partly “rigid”, which can render project implementation and adaptation in complex contexts cumbersome. This challenge can only be addressed if practitioners are in a position to plan, implement and amend projects in an adaptive manner.
- Approval stage should be more inclusive, appreciating all shapes of project designs, ranging from a business plan including a Unique Selling Point (USP) to a project document (ProDoc) including a results chain and/or logframe matrix, as long as they are relevant, logical, plausible and evidence-informed.

Recommendation II: Skills to combine instruments for future PCM

Development practice should focus less on producing more alternative PCM instruments to the logframe and instead invest more in capable people who are knowledgeable and pragmatic—able and willing to take the best out of the context and instruments at their disposal.

For practitioners to find their way through this increasing PCM jumble, the ability to combine PCM instruments depending on context and organization is crucial. This requires, among other things, transferable skills such as thinking in an interdisciplinary way and acting adaptively. A common way for practitioners to acquire these skills is through professional education programs.

To better prepare practitioners to navigate PCM, professional education programs should introduce course participants to a variety of PCM instruments and consider the following issues:

- Instruments should conceptually be combined with each other. For example, elements from RPP (e.g. conflict analysis and power-interest matrix), design thinking (e.g. co-creation of ideas), theory of change (e.g. impact pathways), and Outcome Mapping (e.g. boundary partners and progress markers) can all feed into a logframe approach.
- The strengths and weaknesses of PCM instruments should be tested by applying them in different contexts and interventions. For instance, nothing speaks against using the RPP approach in projects where peace is not the main issue, or using the DCED standard in projects with no market orientation. Likewise, the logframe matrix can be used in projects in complex and fragile contexts.
- PCM instruments should be taught in light of organizations’ internal decision-making processes. This helps understand why sometimes the contextually appropriate use of instruments by implementing organizations is difficult not because of the instruments per se, but because of donor organizations’ project approval and funding committees. Many of them tend to have very rigid expectations about the instruments to be used for project development and implementation (mainly the logframe matrix). This not only discourages implementers from combining PCM instruments, but also results in lengthy and top-down exchange processes between donor and implementer, and makes proposal development, submission and implementation cumbersome.

This didactical approach equips practitioners with the necessary knowledge on various PCM tools, promotes their ability to apply them in practice and fosters better decision-making on combining them or not depending on the situation.

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