



The Tyranny of Performance Or the luxury of time...

Anne-Sophie Gindroz, May 2014

Did you know that 30 percent of the World Bank's (WB) Policy Reports are NEVER downloaded? Another 40 percent of their reports had been downloaded fewer than 100 times and only 13 percent have seen more than 250 downloads in their lifetimes (1). What about your organization? What about my organization? What about you and me? Do you also have this file on your computer where you save "interesting", "reference" or "important" documents, but you rarely have the time to consult them? Do you also have this "to read" folder on your desk, which you open only to add another printed copy you swear you are going to read? What kind of documents are these usually? Political reports, studies or research papers, critical views or in-depth analysis, sources of information meant to help us better understand the complexity of this world and, hopefully, help us do the right thing. Important, isn't it? So why don't we find the time to read more, and perhaps more importantly, to listen more? Maybe it is because we simply do not have the time. Or maybe it is because we are not encouraged to spend time this way.

No time to think

Reading interesting articles, listening to knowledgeable people (and with this I do not mean "the experts", but just everyday people who know their own environment best), interacting humanely (outside of formal time-bound and agenda-based meetings) and just taking the time for critical reflection are not activities that are really valued in development cooperation. Nor is the ability to comprehend complex reality highly rated in staff appraisals. This is because we need to be productive, we need to deliver, and we need to perform. We are expected to manage our time accordingly and professionally – especially if working in an institution that requires every hour to be registered against a quantified outcome and allocated to a cost centre. Drawn into deadlines and reporting, squeezed between the urgency to spend money and prepare the next budget, put under pressure to demonstrate tangible results and required to juggle an increasing number of forms, templates and indicators, we are expected to manage our time in a "balanced" way by making priorities. Did you ever tried to argue that "to better understand the political situation" is a priority justifying the delay in submitting your financial report?

Back to money

While wondering how many of these urgencies constitute real priorities, I am more concerned in this context of growing competition, about the "tangible results" requirement measured with "value for money" and "cost-benefit". What I mean is, when you need to achieve the most for the maximum of the beneficiaries, in the shortest period of time, while investing a minimum of resources. This is shaping the way we work: only looking at the structured part of reality, only considering what can be expressed in figures, and only focusing on what works and those most likely to make it work.

We are deaf to voices of civil society actors not fitting our criteria (and we do not hesitate to create our own CSO that suits our projects), we are blind to the non-monetized economy (which is not only highly relevant for the majority of 'disadvantaged' people, but also constitutes the base of the formal economy), and we are mute to environmental, cultural and spiritual values which do not generate any income. While justice and human rights might be referred to in agreements' preambles, there are normally no further mechanisms in place to turn these into action. Our logframes do not measure solidarity, well-being and happiness. We have no time to see what is not immediately visible. We have no means to account for what does not translate into figures. We have no tools to capture what cannot be quantified. And we only are accountable for what can be addressed with money.

Doing the right thing

We are more concerned with doing things right – respecting deadlines, applying procedures, keeping afloat of urgencies – than by doing the right thing, we cannot afford the time to read interesting reports and better understand the broader picture. It is upsetting that the World Bank reports not being read, if not for any other reason, then that: *“a huge amount of money (our taxes, don't forget) goes into these reports and it is worrying that so few seem to be getting download even once! With all these resources at its disposal, and given its platform, the World Bank surely should, and could, be doing more to ensure their use”* (2).

One suggestion is “to write fewer reports“. I am tempted to add more suggestions... But no, let's keep it short, because there is no value for money in reading this article and I feel bad for wasting more of your time.

References

- (1) Doerte Doemeland, James Trevino (2014). Which World Bank Reports Are Widely Read? Policy Research Working Paper 6851, the World Bank, May 2014. http://www-wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/2014/05/01/000158349_20140501153249/Rendered/PDF/WPS6851.pdf
- (2) Lawrence Haddad (2014). Over 30% of World Bank Policy Reports are NEVER downloaded. What about your own organisation? Development Horizons, May 20, 2014. <http://www.developmenthorizons.com/2014/05/over-30-of-world-bank-policy-reports.html>