JOURNAL OF BUSINESS ANTHROPOLOGY

REVIEW ESSAY

Technocracy Encounters Praxis in a World Bank Development Effort

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Abstract

This essay is based on an ethnography by Parker Shipton (2011) of a World Bank development effort in Africa which failed spectacularly. The reason for its failure – and all similarly conceived efforts – lies in its disregard of the ecology of social practices operating at different levels of the implementation. "Ecology of practices" is Isabelle Stengers' (2010: 37) term for the complex of practices working symbiotically in a domain or locale. The program's design instead embodied an a-social conception of participants as rational, self-interested economic actors. If there is a lesson to be learned beyond the need for a solid understanding of the interdependencies, it is to examine the motivation that prompts authorities to adopt an assumption that has been shown to be misleading (see, for instance, De Soto 2003). Reading between the lines of Shipton's report, one gains the impression that there was a technocratic ideology at work behind the program's explicit aspirations, which made it contra-indicated to consider local conditions and practices. The knowledge of local practices was available and might have made the program successful. However, it was ignored in order to promote globalization, a genuinely 1960s vision, which is today coming undone.

JBA
Early View

ISSN 2245-4217

www.cbs.dk/jba

DOI:
https://doi.org/10.22439/jba.v14i2.7624

Keywords

Ecology of practices, Globalization, Program failure, Program design, World Bank, Kenya.

Introduction

In the 1960s, the World Bank launched a multi-year development program with the goal to develop the rural communities of the Southeast region of Kenya to help small farmers join the economic development of the country. World Bank experts conceived and designed the program, and the Kenyan government handled its administration through its central and regional agencies, working with the local farming cooperatives in the villages. Parker Shipton (2011) studied the effort and gave a detailed description of the program, its implementation, and its failure.

Detailed reporting on such failures is sparse. The Kenyan case is valuable, therefore, because Shipton's in-depth fieldwork gives readers the necessary insights into the ways in which such programs are designed and implemented. His work provides the ethnographic material for my further analysis in this essay.

The program targeted small landowners in a peripheral region of Kenya. The idea was to give them cash loans as well as specially designed seed packages to encourage them to grow cash crops for sale on the market. The higher yields they were supposed to sell to the government at the local farming cooperatives, where the value of the delivered crops would be deducted from their loan payments. With the profit, farmers could increase their investment, grow more, and sell more. The stated goal of the program was to initiate an upward spiral that would benefit the rural communities as well as Kenya's overall economic development.

World Bank experts predicted that the number of participants would increase steadily over a period of five years, since a similar program run by tobacco corporations in the same region had been quite successful. Yet, the program turned out to be a failure at every point. The anticipated economic development did not materialize. Few of those who received loans in the first year renewed their loan, and fewer others joined in subsequent years. The total amount of loans did not reach a tenth of the expected figure, and the repayment rates were abysmally low, even measured against the already reduced expectations of lenders in African countries.

The program designers and government officials explained the failure by the fact that the recipients did not adhere to the rules. Some recipients used the loan to address pressing needs rather than invest in the farm. Some chose to sell their produce not at the local cooperative, but elsewhere. Those that expanded their farming to grow cash crops preferred to do so outside the strictures of the program.

To the outside observer, blame attached first to the design of the program and only secondly to non-compliance. The crops on offer were only for sale, not part of the farmers' food supply. The arrival of the loan, in the form of money and seed package, was badly timed with respect to the planting season. Seed packages failed to accommodate the local conditions of soil and precipitation. Few of the loan recipients succeeded in growing the expected abundance of crops.

The loan recipients did not refuse to use the loans as intended, but neither did they feel an exclusive obligation to do so. They took advantage of opportunities and developed alternative strategies to compensate for real or perceived shortcomings of the program. Officials were unprepared for these responses and felt that their efforts had been deliberately undermined.

I read the effort as symptomatic of organizational projects and its lessons as instructive and applicable to a wide range of change efforts elsewhere. Lessons have to do with the target audience's "ecology of practices," on the one hand, and with unexamined assumptions behind policies and their implementation, on the other. I outline some of these below; the description that follows will bear me out.

Efforts of this kind are guided by over-arching economic objectives like the demand for growth, greater efficiency, or global reach. Such encompassing goals require not only that individuals modify aspects of their behavior, but that the set of interrelated practices with its immanent determination of identities and values undergo a transformation.

This requirement is seldom considered in a program's design or in the supply of resources. The reason for the neglect is that it stands in conflict with the dominant economic conception of people as independently operating, self-interested individuals. This assumption is also convenient for public authorities to adhere to, I suggest, because even though it has been shown to be wrong or at least not always to be right, it greatly reduces the complexity of planning.

The design process expresses an inherent power asymmetry, which separates those with the ideas for a program from its target audience. This is not just a matter of status, which casts the program recipients as beneficiaries without a say in the matter, but expresses also a deeper-seated incompatibility between the domain of ideas and the domain of lived practice. In contradistinction to the universe of ideas, to quote Isabelle Strengers (2010), "practices do not refer to a more general authority for whom they would be the local translation; they only refer to a here and now which they fabricate and which makes them possible" (2010: 40).

Another point in case. Many change efforts are formulated with multiple objectives, not all of which are made public. The fact that some objectives remain hidden, no matter whether they are acceptable or not, is sensed by recipients and introduces an element of suspicion. It also introduces problems down the road, since any behavior at odds with the hidden agenda, like the ruses Kenyan farmers develop to escape from the program's requirements, cannot be openly criticized.

Motivation for this Essay

My object in reviewing Shipton's careful description of the rollout of the program and the responses of participants is to try a re-interpretation of Shipton's data. While he largely abstains from theoretical assumptions and conclusions, his gentle critique fits the familiar left leaning of anthropology. My concern is a different one. I see the development program as revealing to us the dynamics of organizations on the one hand, and the separate, and I claim, counter-productive assumptions made about them on the other. I look at the development program as an effort to operate across different "ecologies of practices," and read the failure as a failure to engage them. What that means will become clear in due course.

"Ecology of practices" is the term that Stengers (2010) gives to the practices that constitute an academic discipline. It is an ecology because the different practices (for instance, of experimentation, demonstration, and proofing) mutually support and complement one another. The practices stand, as Stengers (2010) says, in "reciprocal capture." This means that they are constrained in their ability to move and change by their ties to other practices, and that they constrain the other practices in their turn.

I have found the same phenomenon in all functioning organizations, having coined the term "social ecosystem" in the past for the same idea. Here, however, I prefer Stengers' "ecology of practices" because it also reminds us of the role of embodied action in generating the local system of relations (see Darrouzet, Wild, and Wilkinson 2009).

Ecologies of practices also occupy space as physical proximity is one of the must-haves for cooperation, complementarity, and interdependence. Each ecology develops its own set of requirements and obligations – physical and social in nature – which inhere in individual practices, but share an imaginary with its own logic, justification, and ethics.

The different ecologies of practices that this essay allows me to discuss are that of the program designers at the World Bank, that of the officials in the central government of the developing country and attached peripheral offices, that at the level of the farming cooperatives which implement the program on the ground, and that of the landholders as recipients. The development program reaches into these ecologies to set up a new system of interdependencies with its own set of obligations. Functional roles can be assigned as follows: design by the World Bank, delivery by the Kenyan government, supervision by local cooperatives, and target audience being landholders of the southwest region of Kenya.

Pre-existing requirements and obligations, however, do not disappear. They form in part the backdrop and in part furnish the constituent parts of the program, with which a new system of relationships is implemented. Some aspects may enable the new dependencies, while others will obstruct or undermine them, with the new constellation suffering as a result. All these conditions enter into the new arrangement, whether they were made explicit or not, have been invited or not, were intended or not.

In this essay, I hope to make clear that the ecological view goes beyond the usual call for understanding the target audience in its complexity. Since a development program recruits practices from several ecologies, it must consider the contributions and potential threats to the success of the program of every one of them. In other words, the frame has to widen to take in also the ecologies of practices at the Word Bank and at the government level, not just those of the recipient communities, for their intentional and unintentional contributions to the program's conception and operation. In this way, a rigid separation between the rational apparatus that claims to deliver the program uncontaminated by socio-cultural side effects and the admittedly socially and culturally complex recipient communities breaks down. In the next section, I return to a more detailed description of the program.

How the Program Design Related to the Local Set of Values

The program design exemplified first and foremost the World Bank's commitment to a global economy. By borrowing under the program, recipients were expected to grow crops, which were almost exclusively for export. Despite declarations that the program would alleviate poverty in rural parts of Kenya and support small local farmers, it made no provisions to secure higher yield for local consumption. With the exception of corn, not one of the local staple food crops was among the crops offered by the program.

Shipton does not say much about the program designers, but one can speculate that this orientation was built into practices at the World Bank as a matter of its global perspective; that is, as a universally accepted truth and as the program's expected direction. One might say that it was the inevitable result of the World Bank's view onto local economies from far away. This orientation was never reflected on or questioned by the designers. It was not treated as an assumption, which might have to be checked against the assumptions of other players. It was the unacknowledged and unmarked term of engagement. One sees reflected in this a hierarchy of values that played itself out over the course of this, and other, development efforts.

Judging from the responses of the loan recipients as documented by independent observers, they neither understood nor embraced the idea of a globalized economic rationality. Their sense of being and wellbeing was not linked to a global market or to becoming rational entrepreneurs in the agricultural business. They did not even see themselves as farmers (knowing that alone should have made the program designers reconsider their plan!). Having land was important to their sense of self-worth and to their status in the community, and getting a rich harvest was a matter of pride and carried symbolic significance. But farming was just a way to ensure one's material existence and did not inspire dreams of participation in the world economy. The program design relied on a mindset that was not held by the recipients.

Further design flaws surfaced when the seed packages were put to the test. The seed packages were not optimal for some local growing conditions. Corn, the one crop that was also part of the local food supply, was offered in a new high-yielding hybrid. But it turned out to be much more sensitive to drought than the local varietal. In a year of little rain, the hybrid form produced less than the traditional type, and, instead of initiating the growth cycle, it reduced the ability of the recipients to pay back their loan.

The hybrid corn required special fertilizers during growth and pesticides during storage. Even under the best conditions, it made landholders dependent on additional products and forced them to spend more money (which makes one wonder whether the program goal to link the local to the global economy had a dark side built into it). It also depleted the soil more rapidly than the local corn varietal, while the fertilizer that came with the seed packages, aptly named "government manure," did not replenish the soil to the same degree as the cattle manure.

What Went Wrong with the Implementation

The program was administered through a chain of government agencies, from a central office at the capital to the provincial ones in the Southwest region of Kenya. The work associated with the administering of the program and its assignment to different offices were determined by the criteria and procedures of a government bureaucracy. They were beholden to departmental hierarchy and functional divisions, and to informal networks of status and power, and not especially motivated to be constrained by the requirements of agriculture.

Once a loan had been approved by the authorities, the seed package and/or money would be issued to the borrower. The plan foresaw that the loans would arrive in time for the growing season, which is the period of heavy rains after February. In reality, though, money and seed packages had to travel physically over great distances, unreliable pathways, and pass through a series of hands. This caused delays and, occasionally, the disintegration of the packages. Also, at every point of transition, when materials or money were moved and handed from one person to another, a small fee was extracted by the handler for passing it on – not an unfamiliar practice in African societies. The attrition rate could be substantial – as high as 67% (Shipton 2011: 102) – and the loan packages arrived from one to five months late and often did not arrive as a complete package, but only in parts.

The delay was the greatest problem for the landholders. Their planting season was strictly determined by the rainy season. Since many loans did not come in time, they had to borrow locally in order to take advantage of the rains. Using the loan as guarantee, they might borrow plow animals relying on an informal credit system, but those animals were not available, until their owner had done his planting first. The delay put the borrowers in the drier and riskier part of the planting season with the result that they had less chance at a good yield. As could be expected, this happened more often to the poorer recipients, namely those the program was meant to serve. This shows us how social and physical conditions interpenetrate within an ecology.

Another delivery problem arose at the return portion of the program, when landholders sold their crops at the local farming cooperative. They were not immediately compensated, and the money they were owed took a long time to reach them. As a response, they chose not to involve the cooperative at all but sold their crop to a neighbor instead. This way, they could get instantaneous payment rather than wait for it several months.

Unreliable delivery mechanisms also wreaked havoc with the integrity of the farm packages. The packages had been designed for specific crops with matching set of seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, and instructions and tailored to different growing regions: tea and coffee in the highlands and crops like corn and cotton in the lowlands. The packages often did not arrive with all parts present or present at the same time. The parts that did arrive were mostly used on existing planting and inserted into the cycle of ongoing activities, whether or not this accorded with the intentions of the program designers.

When the loan packages could not be put to their intended purpose, recipients developed a number of alternative responses that ran counter to the design of the program – a source of frustration to the officials administering it. They used the loan for school fees or to buy livestock, which government officials promptly interpreted as misuse of the funds. They sold off seed packages to neighbors or applied the materials in unorthodox ways, with sometimes disastrous results, causing some derision and despair among government officials and program officers.

The caution of the landholders in adopting the program wholesale was justified in retrospect, when the flaws of the designed seed packages became apparent. And since the problems with delivery prohibited the wholesale adoption of the program and protected the landholders from the consequences of a full implementation, the delay turned out to be a good thing for them in the end.

Having no insight into what was going on in the local communities, the government representatives blamed the lack of compliance for the complications, which focused attention away from the faulty implementation at other levels. Officials who knew better would not find it advisable to counter a satisfying explanation, especially if rejecting it might be read as a critique of their government or of the funders.

When the problems were fixed, the impetus of the initiative had gone; impressions were set, and workarounds had been worked out. The program's conditions had become fitted into the existing practices, and these were not open to further adjustments.

How Local Biases Affected Delivery

The local cooperatives functioned as the places on the ground where loans would be issued and crops bought back from the farmers at the end of the harvest. The farming cooperatives were asked to function as the point of contact between government and borrowers: to select candidates, apply for the loan, and deliver it to the recipients. The people in the cooperatives acquired thereby official status, which they interpreted as making them privileged recipients of the loans on offer.

If the plan had been to engage the local social structure in the implementation – a good idea as far as it went – its execution suffered from a lack of understanding of that very social structure. Many cooperatives did not enjoy a good reputation in their community and were seen as biased and corrupt. Putting them in a position of power provided additional motivation to bypass them and seek alternative ways for selling crops.

The local officials were themselves landholders and far from disinterested parties in administering the loans. They became the first to apply to the loan program, then offered loans to their family and friends and to people they wanted to please. The selection was based on their social network and social aspirations, not on the criteria specified in the program. Checks on who was selected proved public opinion correct: Loans were given not to the poorest, but to the wealthier farmers with larger pieces of land; that is, to people with greater social influence, whom the local official wanted to please or keep quiet. The selection was also biased in terms of place, since the local officials gave out loans much more frequently to people in their own village and only to a lesser degree to other locations. The program offered no incentives for them to go against their own and their community's interests. They were judged in terms of repayment rates only and naturally chose to go with borrowers who did not appear risky on that front. That repayment rates were very low despite this conservative strategy confirms that the program got many things seriously wrong.

The cooperative officials treated the loans as a gift from the government, which they were asked to disperse. The task was interpreted as an honor and a privilege accorded to them by the central government. It elevated their social status to the point that many officials felt that they themselves were exempt from repaying the loan; that repayment was required only from those of lower social status. The attitude communicated itself to others as well and explains in part why so much defaulting occurred. As Shipton (2011: 115) put it: "It seemed that the poorest farmers who defaulted, did so because they could not afford to repay; the richest did so, because they could afford not to repay." The group between the poor and the rich was indeed the one who repaid most often, and often did so in order to get another loan (repayment of at least 75% was a condition for renewal), but well over 50% of borrowers stopped borrowing after their first loan, presumably in reaction to the manner in which the loans were given and administered.

Interviews with program participants showed that they had correctly identified the on-the-ground criteria for getting a loan. They told interviewers that one had to be connected to whoever made the decisions. Those unlucky enough to be without such connections tried to overcome the problem by offering gifts in the form of money or livestock; sometimes they offered part of the loan itself to the local official. The funders interpreted such gifts as bribery, but, in the local society, this was acceptable as an access fee or a donation in expectation of a service to be rendered. Similar to the differentiated registers described by Jane I. Guyer (2004) in her work on Atlantic Africa, these gifts substituted for the lack of kinship and were used to create an obligation to reciprocate.

The program officers did become aware of these practices, but they made no attempt to harness them or to leverage them, where this could be useful. Neither did they attempt to counteract the conflicts and biases they created. Outside observers suggested concrete ways in which this could have been done, but nowhere had there been an acknowledgement of these forces by officials or an attempt to build an appropriate response into the program. This demonstrates their sense of being held captive by their ties to a set of practices within their own organization.

Interestingly, what blocked the view to the local conditions was an almost religious adherence to the figure of the "rational, self-interested agent," which excluded an engagement with the community and its practices and values from the outset. Government agencies adopted and defended this notion, not necessarily because they were convinced of its truth – some of them must have had an inkling that this would not fully capture the relevant conditions – but because they were bound by their own role in the program to show solidarity with the funders and with their own superiors. "To suggest that this person [the program's recipient] operated under a different logic from that of textbook economics […] was to risk being mistaken as ethnocentric, elitist, or possibly racist," as Shipton (2011: 107) noted.

Authorities ignored deviating reports from outsiders (including from Shipton). Rather than blaming the shortcomings of the package and the implementation, they accused the recipients of non-compliance and explained the lacking success with their backwardness. The vision of global economic rationality obfuscated the eminently practical intelligence at work in the communities. By the time the program designers finally acknowledged the damage and revised the package, the first positive impulse had been lost and the intelligence about the program's shortcomings had spread.

Correlating Social Status with Compliance

Farming cooperative officials, as mentioned earlier, were authorized by the central government to select the loan candidates, hand out the loans, organize the instructions, and handle the buying of the crops and the repayment of the loan. They felt that this role gave them the right to, first, receive the loan themselves, often without the obligation to repay, and second, select whomever they chose as its recipient.

Their choice was based less on the criteria specified by the program (which wanted to lend to small farms and lower-income farmers) and more on their own understanding of social status in the community. Who, in the community, "deserved" the gift from the government in virtue of their status? Who would they like to make indebted to them by offering a loan? As a consequence, as one official commented, "the people who get the loan don't need it" (Shipton 2011: 68).

The task of overseeing the local implementation of the program was to be shared between the cooperative officials and a number of field agents of lower social status. Officials and field agents were asked to collaborate on key concerns such as selecting the appropriate loan recipients. The agents' additional job was to assess a farm's conditions for suitability, check on the owner's agricultural practices, and give advice on how to deal with the seed packages as needed.

This cooperation between two groups of different social status immediately produced conflict. Officials felt insulted by the suggestion that they should cooperate and treated input from the agents as interference in their proper domain of authority. The agents, for their part, felt offended and reduced their engagement in the program. This extended to their supervisory duties as well, so that recipients did not receive advice and supervision as planned. Visits to outlying farms were, in any case, made difficult by the lack of transportation and the distances to travel. That there had been interest in receiving these visits is shown by the fact that some tried to bribe the agents to visit them.

Practices of Experimentation

Even where the recipients received the package as a whole, they did not necessarily follow the instructions and use it as suggested by the program. Instead, they began a series of experiments that combined some of the program suggestions with traditional ways. Often, they chose a middle route – planting both new and traditional crops; inter-planting new and old varietals in the same field as well as planting fields in monoculture; and using their own intuition in applying fertilizer. The departure from the instructions was especially radical when it came to fertilizers, although they were not reliably instructed on what the recommended mixtures were. Fertilizers were applied in labor-intensive ways in small doses to individual plants or mixed in with the manure in proportions based on trial and error.

What they found out through these experiments justified their cautious attitudes. Overall, the products had undesirable long-term effects. Farmers who stopped using the hybrid seed and fertilizers after a couple of planting seasons found that their yield became much poorer in the following year. The bought fertilizer only lasted for one year, while their own animal manure fertilized the soil for two years. Since the fertility of one's land was a matter of pride in the local population and charged with symbolic meaning, buying fertilizer was considered something of a loss of face, because it tacitly conceded that one's household was not fertile enough on its own.

Overall, the farmers acted smart by not adopting the whole farm package as advertised. The packages did not fit the microclimates. They did not take in the specific soil composition or the contour of the land with its differences in exposure and drainage, the amount of sun, wind, rain, and so on. Moreover, the packages did not allow for adjustments based on the differential land and soil condition. These were left to the farmers to make – one more reason why landholders did not perceive their alternative strategies as violating the rules.

If the landholder had managed to plant without the delayed loan, he used the loan for other pressing purposes when it finally arrived: to pay school fees, buy livestock, or make a debt payment for a second wife. The likelihood that the borrower would put the loan to unintended uses was greater if it came as cash. But even the seed packages could be used in unexpected ways such as being put up for sale or used in mixed plantings, fertilizer, and pesticide applied to other plants or even animals.

Some used the loan to start small enterprises of their own, most often in order to set up a business to trade corn and, thus, unwittingly using the loan to undermine the goals of the development program! When interviewed, the farmers said that it was a better investment, and they chose to use the loan in this way since they also had to think about how to repay it.

Clearly, they were acting in good faith to the extent that they understood the declared goals of the program. But the local people's ideas of what constituted a good investment or the right kind of development did not usually correspond with that of the program designers, first and foremost because they did not see themselves exclusively as farmers. Their idea of a good investment was not limited to farming. They bought livestock or paid for their children's education, so that they could get well-paid work later, both strategies to increase the family's wealth and overall standing.

In the final analysis, the design of the packages was based on Western style farming conditions and practices. To make them successful over the long run would have required substantial changes in farming practices, larger farms, and machinery to reshape the contours and cultivate the homogenized landscape. Needless to say, such changes were beyond the ken of the rural communities, even if they had agreed to them.

Practices of Repaying and Defaulting

The planners knew from prior history not to expect high repayment rates. Even programs where land had been used as collateral did not fare too well on that front. They designed the seed packages predominantly for cash crops, crops that could not become food for the household, and thought that this would induce farmers to sell their crops to the government. In that way, the lenders hoped to recoup their investments.

The design strategy worked to some extent. Higher repayment rate appeared to correlate with non-edible cash crops, which were hard to dispose of through other than the official channels. But the planners were not prepared for the many ruses farmers could devise to circumvent the strictures placed upon them.

Overall, the repayment rate stayed below similar programs in the past – below 20% – and it fell off further towards the end of the program. Possibly, later borrowers imitated the non-compliant behavior of earlier ones. The repayment rate was low not because the recipients did not understand the conditions of the loan. Local politicians tried at first to earn kudos by claiming that the loans were grants which they had secured for the region, but, after the first year, no one confused a loan with a gift or a grant. They understood that the loan was associated with a promise to repay.

Repayment hinged on selling one's crops to the local cooperatives, which was often avoided. Non-edible crops, cotton and coffee, had the best chance of being sold there. Coffee had, indeed, the highest repayment rate – around 90%. Observers put this down to the fact that coffee is a multi-year crop, which makes it harder to hide how much of it a farm produced and, hence, harder to channel some of it down alternative branches.

Cotton, on the other hand, was not planted much and the repayment rate for cottonseed packages was low as well. The reasons for that were cultural and historical ones: Cotton was associated with slavery and, thus, growing cotton carried a stigma in the community. Also, the cooperatives had a reputation for corruption. If one sold one's cotton to them, one could expect a wait from one to three months before the money arrived. Consequently, landholders grew as little cotton as possible, and many stopped growing it altogether. Instead of going to the cooperative, they often chose to sell their cotton at a lower price to a neighbor or a store in order to get paid right away.

Recipients devised ways to avoid the program's scheme for repayment. They sold their corn outside the government corn boards, either by marketing them to consumers directly or by selling them to richer neighbors for immediate payment. They called this practice "branching." The cooperative officials were the first and best-placed ones to work out such alternative routes and, accordingly, the ones most engaged in branching. "Corn finds its own market" was one of the favorite phrases used to express the conviction that government should not control the trade in corn (Shipton 2011: 120).

Confusion was rampant concerning the terms of the loan and the consequences of default, since there were different loan programs at work, and few of the recipients were able to follow the government documents or navigate the legal conditions set out within them. Most importantly, landholders were not sure whether they could lose their land as a consequence of defaulting the loan. This aspect coupled to the enormous symbolic value they placed on their land should have made for a high motivation to repay. But while all expressed a sincere wish to repay the debt to the lending agency, this obligation had no more reality or urgency than debts they had incurred elsewhere such as bride wealth payments, debts to healers, payments for funeral arrangements, or school fees.

Local lending practices, on which the recipients' expectations would be based, assigned a fixed amount of interest to a loan and an open loan period. If crops failed and the borrowers were unable to repay, the loan would usually be forgiven. That a loan would accrue more interest depending on how long one waited to repay it was a condition that was not understood locally.

Accordingly, those who did repay paid in good faith what they could: Between 30-60% of what they owed, and whenever they found that they could do so without losing social standing. They paid in installments extending over more than a year, preferably in off-farming money, since the Luo, the dominant ethnic group in the Southwest of Kenya, values livestock higher than other forms of wealth. Selling livestock would be considered "trading down" – exchanging one form of wealth for a form of lesser value – and thus associated with a drop in social status.

This reveals another source of misunderstanding between lenders and borrowers. The lenders would see the different forms of wealth as equivalent based on their monetary value, while, for the Luo farmers, livestock was the more valuable form.

Responses of the Authorities

After the program had been operating for some time, the shortcomings became obvious to all. Program officials attempted to make adjustments: They tried to improve the delivery of the loans to synchronize with the planting cycle; they shifted to more loans in kind, which were harder to divert; and they adjusted the composition of the in-kind seed packages to fit local conditions better. But the basic design stayed the same, and the basic assumptions were never re-examined.

By the time the program did get improved, the positions of all parties were well entrenched. Too many stations and bureaucratic structures intervened to distort the message and divert feedback, if and where it had been tried. At each functional level of the scheme and in each participating group appeared to live a different idea of what was supposed to happen and why. Even if the different parties felt the disconnect over time, the combined inertia was such that there was never a systematic effort to understand what the disconnect consisted in and what caused it. Nor, one suspects, could anyone marshal at this late stage the energy and resources to undo the historically entrenched practices.

The local loan recipients had adjusted their own set of practices to the shortcomings of the original program by creating compensatory workarounds, and the new improvements could not undo these habits. They had followed the program's suggestions to the extent that they could and rejected most of them as inferior to their own ways. What they learned along the way – for instance, to grow cash crops to secure an additional income – they implemented outside the loan program. None of these local changes could be credited to the program, despite the fact that there had been a substantial local interest in participating in the beginning. The chance to launch a process of organic transformation had been missed.

Why were the designers and planners of the program so little concerned with the local conditions? It is certain that knowledge of local practices and conditions would have been there for the taking. It was not just an oversight that no one took advantage of it. And with a better understanding of the local practices and values, agricultural as well as social, some of the mistakes could have been avoided. In fairness, one has to admit that the knowledge called for would not have been easily acquired by a few focus groups or a survey. The issues were too deeply built into the social, physical, and cultural setup to become easily incorporated into the programs of the World Bank. Moreover, in some cases, the knowledge to be sought would produce a conflict with the direction of development that the program indicated.

It also would not have been enough for the planners to learn about the local communities alone, although that would certainly have uncovered some obvious constraints and obstacles. They would have needed to understand the assumptions and biases at work in all the different components brought together by the program, not just the stakeholders engaged in making, implementing, and participating in the program, but also the ecologies of practices that formed their context at each organization or level. The exercise would have taken in the beliefs of the designers themselves, particularly their neoliberal economic assumptions as an expression of the cultural semantic field shared with the other practices at the World Bank. It would have required an understanding of the bureaucratic machinery of the Kenyan government, and the way it played out across the different levels from central office to intermediate and local administrations. Last, but not least, one would have to inquire into the cultural and agricultural practices of the targeted societies.

A more circumspect design would have demanded that the World Bank take seriously the values and commitments of the people in these ecologies and let these influence what the program looks like and what it can accomplish. But such modification of the program would require a departure from the established linear and top-down planning process and a break with the hierarchy of ideas, in which the World Bank possesses superior knowledge, the Kenyan government has a limited say, and the target audience has none.

Tracing the Ideology of the Self-Interested, Rational Agent

The dominant figure of discourse in the World Bank and its planners was "the 'rational' peasant – the calculating, profit-maximizing individual" (Shipton 2011: 107), who directs all actions towards maximizing profit. This figure, which is central to neoclassical economics, operated in their planning and decision-making practices as a core article of faith and didactic ideal. In theory, the laws of economics established the point of convergence for development efforts and guaranteed their success, at least in the long run. In reality, these laws were valid only if rational agency was given, a condition that had to be plausibly ascertained. It guaranteed that the economic system worked properly and had the added benefit to free designers from having to consider the context of the program components.

It would be too simple to think that the designers had never considered the potential impact of local context on their designs. After all, anthropological and sociological studies of groups, societies, communities, and cultures have been discussed for more than half a century in the West. So, theirs was a deliberate choice in adhering to the idea of homo economicus. In fact, it was a condition they could *posit*, not just assume to be given.

Social embeddedness would figure then as an obstacle that had to be removed. The program design accomplished that. Recipients were invited to act according to the figure of the rational, self-interested agent. Those who taught themselves to behave "as if" their social context no longer mattered removed their interdependencies by their own efforts and, thus, affirmed the assumption. Those who were not willing to act in this manner, on the other hand, would either not participate or could be excluded as non-compliant and, thus, could also not challenge the validity of the assumption.

The fiction of the rational, self-interested actor powerfully influenced other participants' discourse as well. Going against the assumption could constitute a loss of standing for government officials. If the Kenyan officials had a better understanding of the local culture, they had no alternative position to offer and had no way to discuss these matters with the foreign agency's representatives without seeming to undermine the effort and forfeit the powerful alliance with the World Bank. Thus, whatever they felt or thought that they knew about the local conditions, they would hold back for fear of either offending the helpers or, by defending their people's way of living, being perceived as backward themselves.

An alternative to voluntary cooperation existed and was contemplated at one point in time. The program could use the land as collateral for the loan and threaten to confiscate it in case of default. Using land as collateral for loans has been suggested as a powerful tool for economic transformation for rural communities in Latin America (de Soto 2003). Hernando De Soto (2003) proposed to transform communal land into individual property and give it to local farmers. The owner could then raise money using his land as collateral and start a profitable farming business.

The same idea had been contemplated for the Kenya program but had to be rejected. The thought that they might lose their land produced a major upheaval, close to a rebellion, in the farming communities. To them, the land was a sacred possession and closely linked to their sense of self-worth and social status, not a monetizable property that could be leveraged in a financial scheme. Clearly, the land had a value in the local ecology that was not comparable to the example from Latin America.

Understanding the Values of the Local Economy

Apparently, the key dimension of such development efforts initiated and supported by the World Bank is the economic one. But even if one excludes all other dimensions, one must differentiate the economy as understood and practiced by the local population from the way in which economists and professional planners of development view it.

The landholders in Kenya had their own ideas about how and where to invest to better their condition. The economists and planners, on the other hand, saw economic development not as the betterment of the local community. In fact, they did not want to encourage them to grow crops for local consumption. At best, community development might come about as a consequence of successful regional development.

Stephen A. Marglin (2008) summarizes the presuppositions of the economists behind this goal setting. In the introduction to his book *The Dismal Science* (2008), he speaks of the "founding myths of economics: individualism, knowledge as algorithm, the nation as the sole legitimator of community, and unlimited wants" (2008: 45). Every one of these played a role in explaining the decisions and oversights of the planners. In the final diagnosis, however, it is the neglect of the local ecology that is the basis for all the other elements: individuals removed from the community, freed from local obligations. But this stance ignores that the very efficacy of a person depends on their ties with others and consists in leveraging their own practice within the practices of others. Removing oneself from the constraints of the local ecology, from its requirements and obligations, also removes one from the context in which one can act, create change, and advance (Stengers 2010: 49).

The local idea of economic development was much more heterogeneous. It accommodated among its objectives also social values beyond the mere survival – concerns about future generations as well as ideas of distributive justice. Conservative in essence, the community read personal wealth in conjunction with social status and obligations. Sudden excessive increase in personal wealth without the concomitant rise in obligations poses a threat to the existing hierarchy and disrupts the community structure. This can explain the irruption of violence that Shipton reported from a similar program, which had selectively increased some participants' wealth.

This earlier development effort run by tobacco companies was largely successful, in that it produced better repayment rates, and some of the recipients became wealthy by growing and selling tobacco leaves. But it was disruptive for the local community as the newly wealthy farmers spent their money drinking with their peers. In some cases, the disproportionate infusion of money that was at odds with the existing social structure provoked conflicts and led to actual violence. Obviously, one cannot assume that what counts as success – the imaginary of "trading-up" – is the same in all ecologies.

While the landholders in the World Bank program had the power to resist the imposition of the economists' version by developing routes and ruses that bypassed prescribed channels, they had no way to escape the economists' perspectives completely. It carried the weight of international banking behind it and directed the money flow. It also came with the endorsement of the central government and offered an opportunity for advancement that could not be rejected out of hand. The government officials themselves could not help but support the views of the outside investors along with their goals. After all, they provided the financial backing and supplied the theoretical rationale.

So, despite its egalitarian language, the program instituted a distinct hierarchy of power with the top rank occupied by the economic elite from the World Bank and the local farmers only in a position to withhold their compliance. They had no power to adapt the design to their needs or desires. In fact, "they" were not present as a pre-existing entity in the minds of the designers. The set of program participants was constructed as part of the program, on the basis of its selection criteria, and those were themselves designed at the level of the World Bank.

Conclusion

One can blame the fact that the program design issued from a single source of power and, thus, was informed by one perspective only. But that would not be enough. Even the designers had probably little room to voice concerns. They were like everybody else locked in a position within their organization and its practices, with their range of action limited by its interdependence with other local practices (because even the World Bank has/is a locale). They were limited by the language – the vocabulary, similes, arguments, and logic – with which they must communicate their ideas to colleagues and decision makers. The hold of such "reciprocal capture" can only be broken by the creating of boundary-spanning practices across the local ecologies of practice and undergoing, time and again, the frustrating experience to expose and be exposed to one's own limitations.

The Kenya program is not unique in its composition of levels, stakeholders, and responsibilities. It is rather an exemplary case of the normal structure of development programs: Funders who operate like a business or a bank in that they expect their investment to be returned with interest, if not profit, and expect to set the terms and direction of funded projects; public institutions with administrative power over the targeted region and communities, which employ existing channels of communication and regulation to shape the behavior of their constituents; and, lastly, the local community or, better, select members of the local community as the target of the program. Certainly, this makes for a complex situation with a great potential for clashes of perspectives and interests.

The failure of such programs is not limited to the Third or Fourth World, and it is not a rarity. It is rather the exception if they succeed. There have been many regional development programs of lesser or greater scope in less and more urban locations that have foundered similarly (see, for instance, the Smart Cities examples of Urban Planning in the US (Alizadeh 2021) or Cory Booker's efforts to transform the education system of Newark (The Economist 2019)).

Failure seems to be no reason to abandon a top-down approach. This is both disturbing and interesting. If one applies the claims of anthropology and social science not just to the communities that are subjects of study or development programs, but sees the same forces at work in the executors of the study and the designers of programs, then one must agree that something more is at work than just a rationality of efficacy (and, in turn, fixing it will require more than just coming out from under a misapprehension).

I am suggesting that it is for reasons of ecology – the ecology of local practices linked in mutually supporting and mutually arresting interdependencies – that knowledge of other cultures and contexts cannot be accommodated, even in the presence of supporting evidence. Under such circumstances, planning and executing programs that span different disciplines, locations, and levels become ever more failure prone. If a global machinery cannot free itself from the requirements and obligations of its own ecology, one must narrow the geographic scope and plan in terms of regional development. At such a level, the demands of local ecologies can merge more readily, producing fewer disconnects. A program that disregards the binding nature of social context remains blind to the majority of forces that act on an individual and is destined to fail. A design that is blind to the complexities and obligations of its own production ecology will construct requirements at odds with the context of its application.

Acknowledgement

I thank Parker Shipton for the ethnographic study (Shipton 2011) that underlies this essay.

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