



Seminar series

Complexity in health, development,
evaluation and research

Institute of Tropical Medicine, Antwerp



Report

Complex systems thinking in international aid and health development

30th September 2016

Institute of Tropical Medicine, Antwerp



UCL
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Belgian Platform for
International Health

Report written by Ariadna Nebot and Bruno Marchal, ITM, 15 October 2016

The seminar series is organised by the Department of Public Health, Institute of Tropical Medicine (ITM), in collaboration with the Health Department of the Belgian Development Agency (BTC), the Institut de recherche santé et société (Université Catholique de Louvain) and Be-cause Health

Introduction

This report provides an overview of the presentations and discussions of the seminar *Complex systems thinking in international aid and health development*, organised on 30th September 2016 at the Institute of Tropical Medicine, Antwerp.

This was the first seminar of the seminar series *Complexity in health, development, evaluation and research*, organised by the Department of Public Health, Institute of Tropical Medicine (ITM), with support of the Health Department of the Belgian Development Agency (BTC), the Institut de recherche santé et société (Université Catholique de Louvain), and Be-cause Health.

Background

Since a few years, *complexity* is rising on the agenda. The interest for new or better methods to deal with programmes that intervene in complex situations is growing in circles of health, international aid and development, as well as in the field of health policy and systems research. However, the uptake of complex systems thinking in actual practice has been slow. Sound applications of complex systems thinking to development and health remain scarce, both in the fields of planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluation of international aid programmes and in the field of research.

This slow uptake is arguably due to two reasons. First, there is still some conceptual confusion regarding the definition of ‘complexity’ and its key elements - for instance, what makes a problem or an intervention complex? Similar problems affect discussions on what constitutes good designs for evaluation or research of interventions in complex systems. Second, complexity theories present a major challenge to the linear paradigms (and the related preference for a sense of control and prediction) that are still dominant in medicine, public health and development.

Objectives

With this series of seminars on complexity, we aim at contributing to the debate on how to better take on board complex systems thinking and to help shift the paradigm in the field of research and evaluation in health and development.

The starting point of this first seminar was the publication of the book [*Development cooperation as learning in progress*](#), edited by Paul Bossyns and Paul Verl  of the Belgian Development Agency BTC. Our objective was to bring together policymakers and experts in the field of complex systems in development and evaluation, with a particular attention for the health sector. We aimed to identify the challenges of complexity and the existing strategies for complex systems thinking in international aid and health development by creating opportunities for presentation, exchange and discussion.

To this end, the seminar was organised in two sessions: ‘the paradigm shift’ and ‘complexity-sensitive planning and management’.

Programme

30 th September 2016		
9h00	Registration Main entrance of ITM Campus Rochus, Rochusstraat 43, Antwerp	
09h30-09h45	Welcome & Opening <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bruno Gryseels (Director ITM): Opening of workshop • Bruno Marchal (ITM): Introduction, objectives and programme 	
09h45-11h15	Session 1 – The paradigm shift <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paul Verlé (Belgian Development Agency BTC) • Cornelius Eupen (GIZ - European Commission) • Geert Laporte (European Centre for Development Policy and Management - ECDPM) • Discussion with Guy Kegels (Prof. em. ITM) 	Moderator: Bruno Marchal
10h45-11h15	Break	Karibu
11h15-13h00	Session 2 – Complexity-sensitive planning and management <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paul Bossyns (Belgian Development Agency BTC) • Jaap Bijl (Institutional development consultant, Stichting Nedworc) • Discussion with Dag Boutsen (Dean, Faculty of Architecture, KU Leuven) 	Moderator: Karel Gyselinck
13h00-14h00	Lunch	Karibu

Participants

More than 140 participants were present, including staff of BTC, staff and students of academic institutions (UCL, ULB and ITM), Be-cause Health members, and NGOs (see annex). There was a large diversity in terms of in 'complexity-awareness' and knowledge among the audience.

Summary of the presentations and discussions

Opening and introduction

The seminar was opened by the Prof. Bruno Gryseels, the director of ITM. He emphasised the importance of working on complexity and how it can apply to health systems. “We need”, he said, “to expand our interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary work”. He encouraged the public to not only look at the complexity from a theoretical point of view, but also use this approach in practice while working with communities.

Prof. Bruno Marchal, head of the Health Services Organisation Unit welcomed everybody in the room and presented the background and the general aim of organizing a seminar series in complexity.

First session – The paradigm shift

The first session aimed at addressing the shift from linear, top-down and results-based management to complexity-sensitive planning and management that is taking place in the world of international aid and development.

Paul Verlé (Belgian Development Agency BTC and co-editor of the book [*Development cooperation as learning in progress*](#)) opened the session. He framed the Paris Declaration (2005) as a declaration of intentions of international aid that resulted in a shift of donors’ attitudes. Nevertheless, today, the Paris Declaration principles are not achieved and development aid suffers from several issues such as: limited strategic tools (logical framework, the only tool used for more than 30 years), indicators as objectives, the disbursement pressure and search for quick results. Although a few positive steps have been noted in the development field, such as switching from ‘attribution of results’ to ‘contribution to results’, there is still lot of work to do. There is a need to think and work politically and to expand the managerial and strategic tools (incl. theory of change and the realist approach). He ended by saying: “If you want to achieve fast results, start loosing time”.

Geert Laporte (deputy director at the European Centre for Development Policy and Management, ECDPM) started from two field experiences to defend and confirm the political angle that is needed to work and think when you are working in development. Development aid can trigger internal development processes but the way we are still doing and understanding development is ‘outmoded’. He presented some recommendations to think and work politically: 1) to look systematically for the political process beyond the ‘formal’ or ‘visible’ part of the context where we intervene, 2) to work much more closely with ‘domestic’ stakeholders (inclusiveness, stakeholders approach), 3) to fundamentally change our methods of working (allow for iterative processes and flexibility so as to adapt programmes), and 4) to have ‘courage’, meaning that the donors have to think about how they are working and to confront this with the development countries’ agendas.

Cornelius Eupen (GIZ-European Commission) expressed the need to work in a less ‘military’ way in development. The principle of *accountability*, as an example of a complex issue, requires a ‘more flexible’ way to work and act. He considered the ‘deadlines’ as an enemy of quality implementation and he described technical assistance as a comprehensive tool, including national capacities, technical assistance methods, south-south networks and triangular support.

Guy Kegels (Prof. em. ITM) structured and visualised the ‘paradigm shift’ and the need to accept and embrace complexity as a fact, as a reality. He identified uncertainty and unpredictability as core concepts of complexity. Randomness, agency and structure interact around these two main concepts, whereby our ‘bounded rationality’ limits how we can deal with these issues. Indeed, there are many interactions that cannot be seen through a rational approach. The ‘paradigm shift’ can help us to identify under which “assumptions” does one intervention works.

Second session – Complexity-sensitive planning and management

This session, moderated by Karel Gyselinck (BTC), aimed to introduce practical complexity-sensitive approaches to development and aid with examples from practice.

Paul Bossyns (Belgian Development Agency and co-editor of the book [*Development cooperation as learning in progress*](#)) said: 'We need to embrace the complexity'. He presented 'development' as an endogenous process and 'cooperation' as inevitably facing complexity all the time. There is a need to have a 'sustainable approach' to every development intervention and to look at and confront the system from different angles and perspectives in order to improve it. A development programme has to be coherent as a whole, have explicit synergies and one-common objective: to reinforce the 'sub-sector' of a system.

Jaap Bijl (institutional development consultant at Stichting Nedworc) said we need to be 'complexity aware' and also to be practical: to see the results as an intention, to analyse the willingness and ability of the settings where we intervene, to look at planning as an instrument, to be sure that all partners involved in an intervention know what it is all about. His last recommendation: we need to have a generalist point of view.

Dag Bouts (Dean of Faculty of Architecture, KU Leuven) expanded on creativity as a key tool to improve and adapt current methods to deal with complexity.

Q&A and debate

Although time was short, the following comments were made:

- There are tensions between the reality and the ideas, the reality and the real constraints.
- In how far can and do we allow errors happen and to let results emerge that we can't predict?
- Even if results are only in a very small part 'predictable', it is a useful concept. There is nothing against aiming for a goal but the problem is about the time to achieve it, the fact that deadlines are all too often too short.
- There is a need to understand the 'interfaces' between relevant sub-systems, and to develop strategies to work together through strategies that are political in nature.
- Creativity can indeed be a tool to deal with complexity, but how to transfer this tool to policy-makers?

Closing remarks

A word of thanks was given by Bruno Marchal to the speakers, moderators, to the audience and to the funders of this seminar (DGD, Be-cause Health and the ITM).

Annex - List of participants

Abdoulaye	AG ZAKARIA	MPH student at ITM
Kimbong	Agyinga	Student ULB
Komivi Mawusi	AHO	MPH student at ITM
Akadjé Richard	ALLOUKOU	MPH student at ITM
Tolotra Andriambelomiandra	ANDRIAMPARANY	MPH student at ITM
Ella	Baert	ITM
Emmanuel	BELIMAIRE	MPH student at ITM
Souliyatou Atchakè	BELLO épse SANNI	MPH student at ITM
Rachel	Bertrand	Student ULB
Jaap	Bijl	
Jean Claude	BIZIMANA	MPH student at ITM
Piet	Boedt	
Jan	Boeynaems	ITM
Marleen	Bosmans	BTC
Samuel	BOSONGO ITIGAINO	MPH student at ITM
Paul	Bossyns	BTC
Dag	Boutsen	KU Leuven
Metogni Christelle	BOYI épse. HOUNSOU	MPH student at ITM
Anne	Buvé	ITM
Soriba	CAMARA	MPH student at ITM
Thomas	Chattaway	Independant Consultant
Aimé	CIKOMOLA	MPH student at ITM
Fodé	CISSE	MPH student at ITM
Kristien	Cloots	
Cécile	cortina	ITM
Céline Muriel	COSTE SALZMANN	MPH student at ITM
Bart	CRIEL	MPH student at ITM
Christian	Darras	None
Renée	de Jong	Wemos
John	De Maesschalck	Actieplatform Gezondheid & Solidariteit / Student
Pol	De Vos	ITM
Hedwig	Deconinck	UCL
Kristof	Decoster	ITM
Katrien	Dejongh Audenaert	Flanders Department of Foreign Affairs
Thérèse	Delvaux	ITM
Ahmadou	DIALLO	MPH student at ITM
Amadou	Dieng	Student UCL
Jean Paul	Dossou	PhD student ITM
Abdias Ogobara	DOUGNON	MPH student at ITM
Loveness	Dube	UCLouvain (PhD Student)
Peter	Eerens	Living Health Systems
Marlon	GARCIA LOPEZ	ITM
Mieke	Govaerts	
Sandy	Groeninck	LUMOS - UZ Leuven
Karel	Gyselinck	BTC
Camille	Houetohossou	Student UCL
Jean Pierre	Imanishimwe	Student ULB
Raquel	Inocencio da Luz	ITM
Sal Ha	ISSOUFOU	MPH student at ITM
Thomas	Istasse	ANMC-LCM
Jonken	Itallini	

Roeland	Janssen	ITM
Eugene Alain	Jeffrey	Student UCL
Marie Stéphanie	JEROME	MPH student at ITM
Jeff	Kabinda	Ecole Régionale de Santé Publique Bukavu & programme RIPSEC
Souro	KAMANO	MPH student at ITM
Seydou	KANTE	MPH student at ITM
Nick Thérèse	KAYILA NIANGA	MPH student at ITM
Guy	Kegels	
Jan	Kennis	ITM
Jean-Pierre	KIJANA MANIMININI	MPH student at ITM
Yves	Kluyskens	Memisa AZV
Patricia	Komouni	Student UCL
Aboubakar	Kona	Student UCL
Anne	Kongi	
Jules	Kongo	Student ULB
Dotou Marcel	KOUNNOU	MPH student at ITM
Wendpouire Joseph	KYELEM	MPH student at ITM
Aline	Labat	
Mieke	Lemmens	
Richard	Lingh	Student UCL
Hervé	Lisoir	King Baudouin Foundation
Eric	Manirakizo	Student UCL
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Patrick	Mitashi	Programme RIPSEC Centre de connaissance en santé du Congo
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Sani	SAYADI	MPH student at ITM
Sylvain	SEBE EPOME	MPH student at ITM
Julie	Seynaeve	Fracarita Belgium
Freddy	Shukuru	Student UCL
Awouswere Assetina Koumbon	SINGO epse. TOKOFAI	MPH student at ITM
Werner	Soors	ITM
Peter & Annemie	Standaert-Andries	
Jorgen	Stassijns	ITM
Lies	Steurs	Ghent University
Houssynatou	Sy	ITM
Nathalie	Symens	
Adalbert	TCHETCHIA	MPH student at ITM
Larissa	TENE NGOUMKAM	MPH student at ITM
Fondacaro	TETO MAMONA	MPH student at ITM
Maxime	Tindong	Student ULB
Marie Eugenie	Toledo	
Gbamon Georges	TONAMOU	MPH student at ITM
Conrad T	Tonoukouen	PhD student ITM
Taga	Ukiga	
Elies	Van Belle	Memisa
Wim	Van Damme	ITM
Remco	van de Pas	ITM
Karen	Van der veken	ITM
Govert	Van Heusden	ITM
Samuel	Van Steirteghem	Raad van Bestuur Artsen zonder Vakantie
Pieter	Van Wolvelaer	Landsbond der christelijke mutualiteiten
Veerle	Vanlerberghe	ITM
Jozef	Vercruysse	Universiteit Gent
Katrien	Verle	Instituut voor Landbouw- en Visserijonderzoek (ILVO)
Paul	Verle	BTC
Sophie	Waterkeyn	Belgian Development Agency
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Mapoh	Yari	Student ULB
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