Embracing the Edge of Chaos

By Tom Kirk

LONDON – I recently had the pleasure of visiting the plush ODI offices for the launch of Ben Ramalingam's new book *Aid on the Edge of Chaos*. The book offers a fierce critique of mainstream aid and development paradigms, and suggests lessons should be learned from complexity science.

Its argument is backed up by an impressive haul of case studies that cover complexity science's application to everything from global efforts to eradicate smallpox and the need to slow desertification in Zimbabwe, to the analysis of supposedly intractable conflicts and the search for positive deviance among rural Vietnamese families battling malnutrition.

These studies are dissected with the aid of an extensive vocabulary that refers to phenomena such as 'complex adaptive systems', 'feedback loops', 'emergent properties', 'critical junctures', 'organised complexity', 'wicked problems' and 'evolutionary change'.

A rallying cry?

For some, this amounts to a rallying cry to acknowledge the diversity and indeterminacy of many of the challenges faced by development practitioners, while for others it is simply old wine in new bottles, a worrying turn towards pseudo-science or, more dangerously, a badly veiled attack on the ongoing swing towards theories of change, rigorous evaluations and business cases.

Given that the vast majority of the launch's attendees, myself included, appeared to be in the first camp, one discussant commented that the event had the air of a 'love-in'. While another suggested that practitioners declining to engage complexity science yet purporting to take development seriously are doing end-users a disservice (upon which you could almost feel the mutual back patting).

Thankfully this comment also served to lay the foundations for an interesting debate on the need to un-complicate the often-bewildering vocabulary touched upon above, and to further explore the "So what?" question posed by each 'new' way of looking at development.

These observations aside, what caught my attention most was the sheer range of disciplinary backgrounds and interests among the attendees. Coupled with a quick scan of the book's extensive references, this suggests many within the development industry are taking complexity seriously and its utility potentially stretches across the gamut of problems they face. Never one to knowingly miss a good bandwagon, in what follows I try to connect this 'movement' to some of the issues being tackled by the Justice and Security Research Programme (JSRP).

Taking complexity seriously

Throughout the evening the phrase 'complex adaptive systems' was consistently used to refer to the types of problems development practitioners often seek to address. Within the book Ben argues that those who recognise complexity generally acknowledge that some problems exist within:
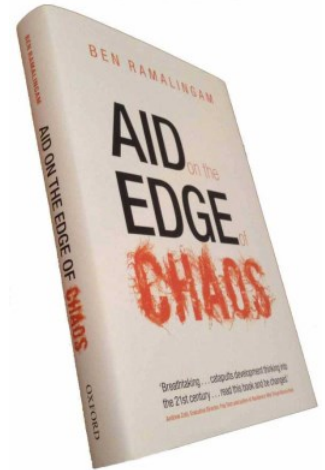
> *systems with a large number of mutually interacting parts, often open to their environment, [which] self-organize their internal structure and their dynamics with novel and sometimes surprising macroscopic ("emergent") properties (p. 141).*

The properties of such systems are argued to be interconnected and interdependent, and to be characterized by processes of feedback that shape how the system behaves overall. Depending on the perspective of the observer these properties can be deemed problems or solutions.

Yet, it was repeatedly warned, if development practitioners seek to resolve supposed problems by ignoring or compartmentalising the interconnections and interdependencies of different parts of such systems they will likely fail to get their desired result or, perhaps unwittingly, encourage perverse processes.

"Throwing bricks into liquid"

I like to picture intervening in such systems as akin to throwing a brick into tank of liquid with only an educated guess as to the dimensions of the tank, the viscosity of the liquid and what may be lurking beneath the surface.

At its core then, the recognition of complexity urges us to rethink the applicability of predictable, linear cause–effect solutions to development.

While not all development problems are embedded within complex adaptive systems, governance is emerging as a central focus for many acknowledging complexity. Indeed in recent years the failure of governance reform programmes has come under intense scrutiny, with many asking why positive evaluations do not necessarily translate into observable improvements in governance satisfaction surveys or increased public goods provision.

More worryingly, many still argue that programmes undertaken without a deep understanding of local and external contexts, including the social norms animating each society, harm the prospects of legitimate governance and the equitable provision of public goods.

Indeed, it has been suggested that such programmes may encourage recipients to build institutions which, although they mimic the forms of their Western counterparts, largely exist to keep donor funds flowing into elites' pockets. Donor funding may also become a substitute for domestic tax collection and retard the development of ruled-ruler accountability mechanisms. Furthermore, the introduction of liberal institutions, such as free markets and procedural democracy, may destabilise the balance of power among contending social groups and spark violence. Even when polities remain stable, many fear that contemporary programming may allow predatory institutions to hide behind a facade of Weberian bureaucratic efficiency.

Such pitfalls are routinely identified in conflict affected places such as Uganda, Afghanistan and Timor-Leste where money has been poured into a plethora of programmes to little avail (not discounting the very real progress on indicators such as infant mortality rates and life expectancy).

Finding interconnections

To my mind, all of this suggests that when faced with conflict affected states, or in JSRP parlance 'difficult places', governance practitioners often cannot see the interconnections and interdependencies of different parts of the system.

Indeed much of the work of the JSRP concerns exploring the relationships between things such as public goods provision (with an emphasis on security and justice), authority, legitimacy, social norms, local economies, rents, elite competition, international interveners and conflict.

At the heart of this is an interest in the role of informal and hybrid governance institutions, with a particular focus on how they emerge and adapt to changes in their context, and whether they may be sources of public goods for populations in difficult places.

Thus in our initial publications we have explored literature that deals with the diverse processes that animate these institutions. Although it is very early doors, the diversity of approaches and analytical frameworks already in use tells us that informal and hybrid governance institutions are intimately related to their wider contexts in ways that are very difficult for outsiders to grasp, let alone base predictive models of social change on.

Perhaps at best, interveners can do what Murray Gell-Mann of the Santa Fe Institute describes as taking a 'crude look at the whole' to develop a coarse-grained picture of reality.

However, not wishing to dispense with the accepted wisdom that institutions matter, 'good fit' approaches to governance already apply many of these insights. Built on an appreciation of complex adaptive systems, they encourage practitioners to take local ownership and contexts seriously by looking for innovative local solutions to developmental challenges and, where possible, support them through incremental interventions designed to promote evolutionary adaptations.

To differing degrees, commentators argue this requires abandoning the transfer of Western institutional models to difficult places and, as the title of a recent paper suggests, *bringing country ownership (and politics) back in*. The latter includes opening up the black box of local social norms, including the creation of public authority, and examining the actors and incentives driving political contests.

Emerging guidelines

Although such arguments are being developed within a diverse range of disciplines, guidelines for those working on difficult places are beginning to emerge. Two deserve particular attention for their focus on informal and hybrid institutions:

The first is developed in Andrews' book *The Limits of Institutional Reform in Development*. Andrews suggests that successful governance does not require technical solutions; it requires iterative processes of 'adaptation'. During such processes an inclusive mass of actors organise to overcome locally defined governance problems through incremental changes to institutions. When conditions are conducive to such activity, as when dominant institutions fall into disrepute or are disrupted by social, economic or political upheavals, this process may not require outside help.

Yet where these conditions are only partially met, Andrews suggests outsiders may be ideally placed to prepare the context for inclusive local institutions and introduce new norms to encourage hybridity. Central to Andrews' argument is the suggestion that the 'unseen' 'normative' and 'cultural-cognitive' content of informal institutions interact with formal institutions and shape the potential of reform programmes.

He stresses, however, that the informal is not somehow 'inferior' and that its effect on the formal is not necessarily 'bad'. Rather, the interactions between the two are a fundamental fact of the ebb and flow of the difficult places practitioners should broadly aim to understand.

The second argument has been developed by the *Africa Power and Politics Programme* (APPP) which has conducted research in many of the continents' difficult places. Similarly to Andrews, its recent programme summary frames development, and by extension governance, as a collective action problem that should be defined by local actors and tackled by citizens and governments working together.

Moreover, it cites the potential of outsiders to use experiences from other contexts to encourage processes of bricolage and create 'practical hybrids', conceived of as institutions that combine local social norms and moral economies with imported governance practices.

However, the approach somewhat differs from Andrews' in that it is much more explicit about the political determinants of such solutions. On the one hand, it calls on practitioners to abandon naive assumptions that elites and populations in developing countries have developmental orientations. On the other, it recommends examining the incentive structures and legitimation strategies open to elites claiming public authority and providing public goods at micro, meso and macro levels.

While this dual concern poses normative questions for intervenors wary of letting go of Western governance models, it may allow them to more accurately discern when hybrid institutions are likely to be given the freedom to iteratively adapt and address development problems.

In summary, these approaches represent important markers in the ongoing turn towards informal and hybrid governance institutions. While they ask practitioners to account for the full spectrum of actors, social norms, power dynamics and political contests central to governance, they acknowledge that outsiders are unlikely to fully understand the contexts within which they work. This provides a robust rationale for why wider contexts, the timing of programmes and evolutionary approaches must be re-visited.

Yet, more importantly, I would argue that the deceptively simple lesson emerging from complexity science's application to difficult places is that the biggest disservice to end-users would be not to engage them at all.

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