



Politically Agile Programming. Paper 1.

The logframe and the beautiful game: Project logic v football logic.

Start an idle conversation with anyone working internationally on governance projects and it won't be long before you find yourself discussing at length the problems of the logframe. There is a growing frustration amongst most people working in the field about the way donor agencies are using them to design, commission, deliver and measure governance work.

There have always been complaints about logframes, but the frustrations have become more apparent and vocal in recent years because of two trends. The first is the recognition that effective international assistance depends on the application of a more political form of programming (most ably captured by Carothers and De Gramont's recent book¹), while the second is the ever-expanding donor emphasis on the elusive search for 'impact'.

The result is two opposing discourses. Whereas project implementers tend to start by emphasising uncertainty, and thus the need for project flexibility, so that they can adapt to - and shape - the political incentives at work, donor agencies want more proof that a project is likely to work from the outset and are, quite simply, desperate for something concrete to measure.

This short note argues that the current argument is both badly framed, and unproductive. Donor agencies will continue to use logframes, especially in the absence of any alternative. Given that they hold the purse strings, it is an argument they are unlikely to lose.

But the problems of the logframe are less about inherent strengths or weaknesses, than the way they are currently being used. Logframes can describe a project logic and theory of change, but they are terrible as a measurement of progress or project effectiveness. At present, logframes are being asked to carry a load they were not designed to bear. Project implementers need to be more creative in their arguments, providing new ways of helping donor agencies to interpret logframes and providing measures of progress that combine both quantitative and qualitative indicators, so that donors do not turn to logframes as a default option simply because there is an absence of any other, more suitable means of measuring project impact.

1. Logframes: The Standard Complaints.

The standard complaints about logframes tend to revolve around three features, namely, linearity, rigidity and predictability.

- **Linearity.** The greatest criticism of the logframe is that it is based on the assumption of linear progress. That is, that one or more actions (or activities) will inevitably lead to certain outputs, contributing to certain outcomes, and ultimately the overarching goal. Although most logframes include sections on risks to be managed, or external political factors, the underlying logic of the forms is still one of continual momentum towards the goal.

Contents.

1. Logframes: The Standard Complaints	1
2. The Logic of Football, Applied to Governance Projects	2
3. The Dimensions of Project Delivery	4
4. Conclusion: More Responsibility, Less Control	6

This short paper is based on a presentation given by Greg Power to the International IDEA conference 'Democracy Assistance and Results: Debates and Constructive Reflection', June 2014.

While such an assumption works for large parts of the development assistance field, it has limited relevance for governance work. Whereas in agriculture, or construction, implementers start with a certain number of inputs (seeds, plants, bricks, tarmac) and can estimate a reasonable projection of outputs (crops, food, houses, roads), this does not apply in governance, where the inputs are often only ‘activities’. Governance assistance can aim at certain outputs and outcomes, but the enormous number of political variables at work mean that certain activities won’t work at all or not in the way that was originally envisaged. In short, progress is likely to be difficult, haphazard and messy.

- **Rigidity.** Logframes require project implementers to articulate not just an approach, but a series of activities over the project lifetime, and the outputs that will result from them. Whilst the project logic will be informed by an analysis of the problem at the centre of the project, the activities will simply reflect what looks like a logical way of tackling that problem. However, politics is never static. And political problems are constantly changing shape.

Whereas a good political analysis of root causes is likely to hold relevance over a project lifetime, the activities will need to change as politics changes. What look like logical activities at the outset of the project will look less logical a year in, and may even by that stage be counter-productive. Managing the problem of rigidity means greater flexibility in applying logframes. Project implementers will need discretion from the funding agency to change the activities, while keeping focused on the over-arching goal.

- **Predictability.** Related to the previous point, the current application of logframes assumes a remarkably high level of predictive ability on the part of the person filling it out. This undermines project delivery in at least two ways. First, as discussed above, the logframe is asked to describe an arc of political progress over a two-, three- or five-year period. While it may be possible to anticipate many of the possible variables at work, it will be impossible to get all of them, or to assess which will be the most influential over the project lifetime. To use Donald Rumsfeld’s phrase, it may be possible to identify the ‘known-knowns’, and some of the ‘known-unknowns’, but there will always be numerous ‘unknown-unknowns’.

Second, and perhaps the bigger weakness, is that once completed, the logframe becomes the principal tool for measuring project progress and success. The initial analysis in a logframe will often come from a two-week scoping mission, which is expected to capture all the relevant information and identify indicators for the project lifespan. These will be guesses. Possibly well-informed guesses, but guesses nonetheless. The problem is that the logframe asks implementers to guess at outputs, outcomes and indicators. Project success is then effectively measured on whether those initial guesses were correct.

While logframes do have certain benefits, the assumption of linearity and the rigid application of its contents runs counter to all that we know about how politics works in practice. And, in using the logframe to measure progress against indicators dreamt up at the beginning of the project, it tells donor agencies about an implementer’s prescience, but not necessarily their effectiveness.

2. The logic of football, applied to governance projects.

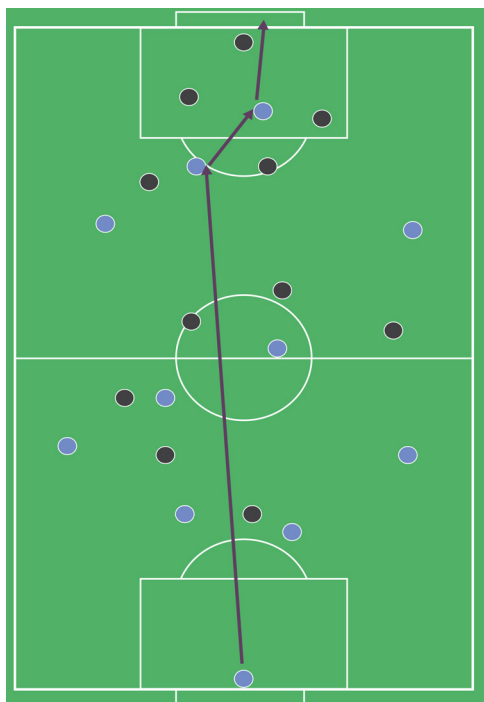
Given what look like innate problems it is perhaps not surprising that frustration is growing. However, it may be that the problems of the logframe are less to do with their inherent logic than the way in which they are being used and applied. As Bakewell and Garbutt noted in a 2005 paper for SIDA, implementing a project should not simply seek to follow a pre-determined path:

“we must look for an approach that enables the logic to remain ..., suggests ways of showing progress, but avoids becoming an unwieldy rigid instrument, which locks actors into inappropriate courses of action.”²

The logic of football offers one way to understand the limitations of the logframe in this context.

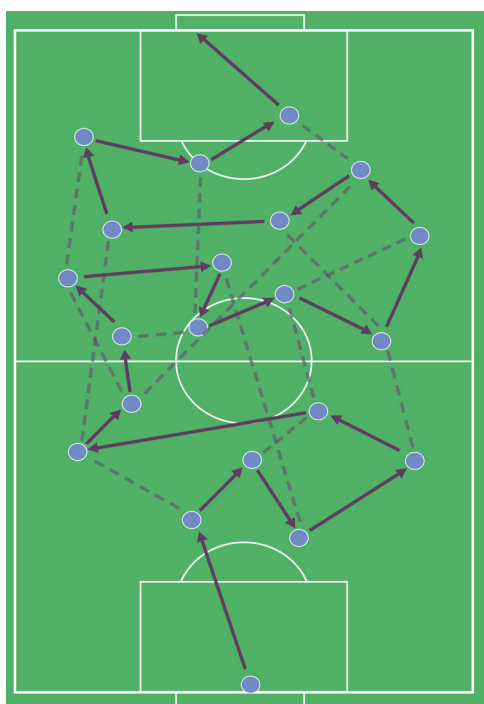
Logframe linearity assumes a ‘route-one’ style of play, or at least something similar to it, where the ball is kicked forward and forward again, and then inevitably into the net (the goal). While this style of play has been favoured by some teams (most notably, and to its detriment, the English national side), it is generally not how teams score.

Logframes as Route One.



In reality a football will go in many different directions before it ends up in the goal – if indeed it does. The ball will be passed sideways, backwards and forwards. Players will be tackled, possibly fouled, driven off their original direction and lose the ball. The ball will be kicked out of play and the flow of the game will be constantly disrupted by one intervention or another.

Forward, sideways, backwards and forward again.

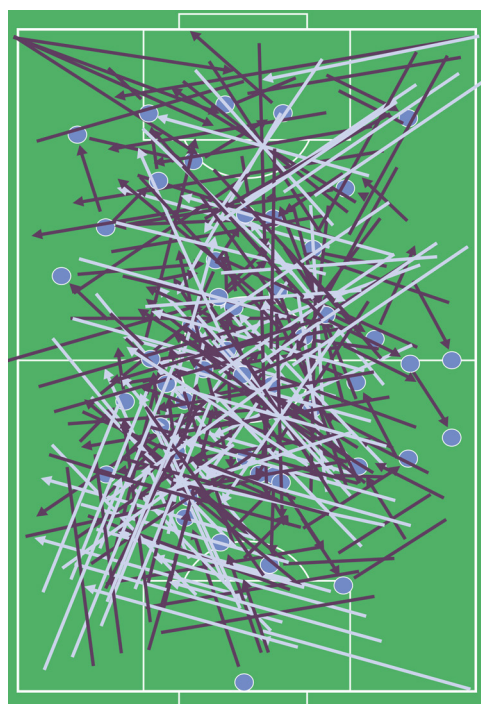


This is much closer to how a governance project will work in practice. Any project is likely to have numerous stakeholders with

a direct interest in supporting or preventing progress. As opponents start to disrupt progress, so the supporters need to change tactics and style of play, perhaps making the occasional substitution to counter the effects of the opposition. The interplay of all those actors, and the different resources and skills they have at their disposal means that progress is much more likely to resemble the passage of play in a football match rather than anything that appears in a logframe.

In football, as in politics, there will also be a huge amount of activity during a match that does not directly affect the progress towards a specific goal. Working out what activity is relevant will emerge only as the game progresses. At the start, it is impossible to identify how each of the 22 players will behave during ninety minutes. And yet, the current application of logframes means that we are essentially being asked to predict the entire passage of the match – and the actions of both supporters and opponents.

Trying to capture everything.



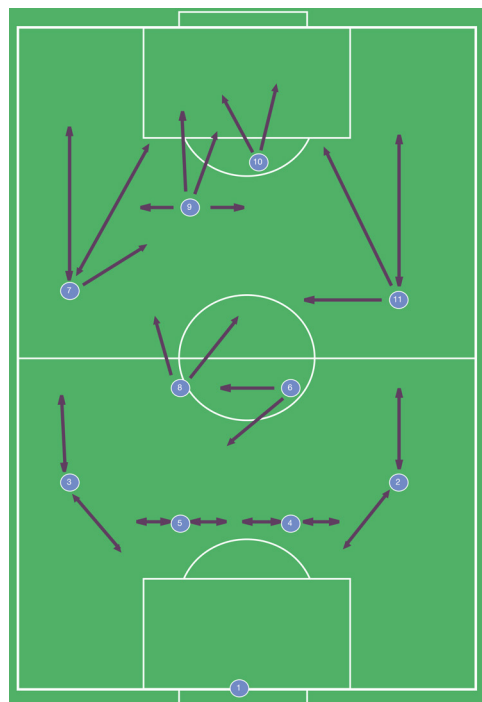
Worse than this, that guesswork is then used to create the indicators of success. Projects are measured against an ability to predict, reasonably precisely, how a goal will be scored before the match has started. Without taking into account the opposing side, the conditions or the fitness of your players.

The bigger danger is then one of simply following a preset plan, regardless. If you know you're going to be measured against the activities you said you were going to do, then you will do your damndest to make sure you stick to them, ignoring whether

they are actually working or not. In short, it makes process more important than outcomes: “Well, we didn’t score but, rest assured, we did exactly what we said we were going to do.”

It is far better to think of a logframe as a game plan. It is based on an analysis of both your team’s strengths, and that of the opposition. It seeks to understand the tactics that they might use, and counter them, as far as is possible, by playing to your strengths. At the simplest level this would mean deciding what formation to play, (1-2-3-4 ;2-3-5 ;3-3-4; or something else entirely), which player is responsible for what, and accepting that you might change that formation at some point during the game.

Logframes as gameplans.



The logframe should, in short, set out the project logic and the theory of change. These are strategic considerations. The tactics, namely, when to move from defence to attack and which players you pick (like the choice of activities) are tactical considerations that will need to change as circumstances dictate.

However, if the logframe is more suitable for understanding strategy, but less good at measuring success, what then is the alternative?

3. Three dimensions of project delivery.

GPG is working on its own methodology for delivering projects and measuring progress (under the acronyms KAPE and README),

which will be published shortly. There are three dimensions to this approach, summarised briefly below.

- It’s all about behaviour.

First, political projects need to start from the insight that making an institution more effective is more about getting people to change their behaviour than changing institutional structure. In his recent book Matt Andrews highlights that it is an institution’s culture and norms that do most to determine whether it is effective or not³.

Similarly, Geoff Mulgan, formerly a Downing Street adviser and public policy guru has noted that

“Structures are the most visible aspects of organisation – but not usually the most important for achieving results. The most common mistake made by people trying to reshape [institutions] is that they overestimate the role of structures relative to processes and cultures. It’s striking that the most effective leaders achieve as much through influence and norms as they do through formal mechanisms.”⁴

Far too many governance projects tend to be framed in terms of altering institutional structure or providing resources. While limited resources or dysfunctional organisation may be important factors limiting effectiveness, what matters more is how changing these things will subsequently shape behaviour. The purpose of such work is to help people do their jobs better, and thus improve the functioning of the institution.

What the logframe does is encourage mechanistic thinking. The focus on quantitative indicators tends to place greater emphasis on whether training seminars were delivered, additional resources provided or rules changed. To use another footballing analogy, too many projects concentrate on the training ground, buying new football boots and changing the offside rule or introducing goal-line technology, rather than concentrating on how the teams are actually playing the game.

All of these interventions may indeed shape the way the game is played, but it’s not inevitable or indeed predictable. Projects need to start by understanding the dynamics within an organisation, and what is causing people to behave in certain ways, and work out how we motivate people to behave differently. This might involve training, resources and rules change. But it’s the effect of these things on players that is more important than whether they happened or not.

Measuring behavioural change and the effectiveness of an institution then depends on both quantitative and qualitative measures.

- Measuring quality and quantity.

The desire to quantify project progress is entirely understandable, but the principal indicators in logframes tend to tell the donor agency how many, how much and how fast things were delivered. In short, whether activities were implemented or not. Not whether they were effective.

However, implementing agencies have not yet come up with a viable alternative. While many people in the governance field argue for more qualitative measures of progress, when pressed these tend to be vague, impressionistic and lacking hard evidence.

The argument of donor agencies is often also that qualitative measures are by definition subjective. In his book *The Signal and the Noise*,⁵ Silver highlights the increased use of statistics for measuring everything from baseball and football, to weather reports, economic modelling and political polling. But one of his central points is that such quantitative measures are meaningless unless interpreted by a human being. It is the human element, and the acceptance of inevitable subjectivity, that provides the most useful insights. In short, the combination of quantitative and qualitative measures offers a much better measure of, and guide to progress.

As Silver puts it:

“Pure objectivity is desirable but unattainable ... When we make a forecast, we have a choice among many different methods ... All of them introduce decisions and assumptions ... You will need to learn how to express – and quantify – the uncertainty in your predictions. You will need to update your forecast as facts and circumstances change. You will recognise that there is wisdom in seeing the world from a different viewpoint.”⁶

The KAPE approach developed by GPG works on that logic, using both quantitative and qualitative measures. The approach is that of a results chain, in which successive indicators build on one another, not only to describe what has been delivered, but also to judge whether it has had an effect and thus to identify impact more clearly. The results chain begins with simple quantitative measures describing the number and frequency of project activities as well as the reach of the project in terms of how many participants were engaged. Building

on this, a related qualitative measure uses the perceptions of stakeholders to judge whether these activities were effective. This is, by definition, a subjective judgement, but the chain does not stop there, since it can be extended by further quantitative measures which seek to identify effectiveness by measuring whether any changes have been brought about as a result of the intervention (these might be in the form of new practices adopted, or different behavioural patterns being manifested). This in turn would lead to a further qualitative measure (for example asking what effect the changes had on the institution as a whole).

- Coach, not player: The role of the project implementer.

The third dimension to this approach is the insight that implementing agencies do not implement change – that can only be achieved by local partners. The role of the project delivery team is to help others to articulate, implement and manage that process of change.

This has implications at several levels. First, it means that many indicators in a logframe become quickly redundant. ‘Local ownership’ means that the first phase of any project involves agreeing with local partners the scope of the problem, the strategy for dealing with it, and then jointly identifying indicators of progress. They need not only to own the indicators, but be clear that it is their responsibility to hit them – with the project team’s support – or funding is likely to dry up. While the contents of the logframe still provide direction, rigid application of pre-determined indicators is likely to undermine any local ownership, and thus diminish the likelihood of success.

Second, to return to football analogies again, the implementing agency should never be on the pitch. The role is one of coach, helping to establish a strategy which all the partners understand and agree to. It is then a job of helping individual players and the team as a whole, by shaping tactics, quietly advising and shouting from the sidelines if necessary. In short, the coach cannot score, but depends on the players hitting the back of the net. If you’re on the pitch (and thus directly interfering in politics) it’s a problem for local partners, for the funding agency and for the implementing agency as well.

Third, this alternative role means that – in the same way as football coaches – implementing agencies take ultimate responsibility, but exercise less direct control. Project management should be judged by an ability to get others to get

the results. In setting strategy and tactics, and coaching players, you support others to do what they need to do. You cannot directly control every action on the pitch, but ultimately you take responsibility for whether the game plan works or not.

4. Conclusion: More responsibility, less control.

In the last few years the number of conferences where donors and implementing agencies come together to discuss the challenges of politics and measuring impact has grown exponentially. Generally, there is agreement at the end of the event that the current frameworks are inadequate and that we all need to do things differently. Yet, many such events simply repeat the same old tropes, about the need for greater flexibility and understanding of political context, but fail to come up with something that actually works in practice.

This is a problem for both donors and implementers. The pressure on public finances has increased the need for agency officials to prioritise impact and value for money. Donors need indicators to measure against. But once indicators are established, all project activity is geared towards making sure you hit them. And with the wrong indicators, you end up doing the wrong things. This approach will not make governance work more effective.

The onus, though, has to be on implementing agencies to come up with an alternative. These are the people who claim expertise about how politics works on the ground, and should therefore be in a far better position to identify what needs measuring and how. There is little evidence so far that the challenge is being met.

A new approach to measuring governance work will also mean a fundamental change to the way that projects are designed, commissioned and delivered. Rather than simply pointing to the weaknesses of logframes, implementers need to come up with an alternative, and fast. Our approach, which will be published shortly, is intended to contribute to that process with a results chain approach, combining qualitative and quantitative measures, that encourages new patterns of behaviour and ultimately improves the working of political institutions.

Notes.

¹ Tom Carothers & Diane De Gramont, (2013), *Development Confronts Politics: The Almost Revolution*, CEIP

² Oliver Bakewell and Jane Garbutt (2005), *The Use and Abuse of the Logical Framework Approach*, SIDA

³ Matt Andrews, (2013), *The Limits of Institutional Reform in Development*, Cambridge University Press

⁴ Geoff Mulgan, (2014) *Rewiring the Brain: A Rough Blueprint for reforming centres of governments*, NESTA

⁵ Nate Silver, (2012), *The Signal and the Noise*, Allen Lane

⁶ Silver, *ibid*, pp 72-3

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