The blind watchmaker: meaning and method in social action

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"In complex systems, a blind watchmaker can be more effective than one who sees." ²

Since the 1940s and 1950s the ways of thinking, organizing and evaluating social action have become increasingly sophisticated. Many theories and methodological approaches have been developed for a better understanding of how social changes effectively take place. In the specific field of social project management, this movement has resulted in the development of a variety of approaches, marked by the most varied theoretical influences. One particular current gave rise to countless tools marked by a linear causal logic with a positivist bias. This approach, now dominant in the support and management of social projects, has shown limitations in more complex initiatives, such as collective actions aimed at political incidence, changes in power relations and the transformation of attitudes and behavioral patterns.

The time seems ripe to move beyond this technical-methodological apparatus built in the last 50 years, and to expand and diversify the repertoire of approaches and tools used to measure the meaning and the effects of collective action. We are being challenged to share new approaches, systematize innovative experiences, and imagine and exercise new approaches, leading us to a better understanding of how the processes of change in society occur, and how they can be supported and emphasized. Our intention with this paper is to contribute to the reflection on that challenge.³

The emergence of logic models

Since the late 1940s, we have seen a process of constant progress regarding the development and evaluation of social actions. A fundamental achievement in the 1940s and 1950s was the notion that all things "social" should be treated as autonomous (but not independent) with regard to the economy, thus overcoming the logic that social improvement would follow from what was then called economic progress. This opened new doors for thinking about concrete ways of promoting social development.

From about this time on, social actions supported by third parties began to be conceived as projects, that is, as planned and structured initiatives, with previously formulated objectives and results, based on established deadlines and resources.

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² The blind watchmaker is a metaphor used by Richard Dawkins (1986), here referred to by John Kay in "The beauty of indirect action" (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Best Seller, 2011).
³ This text had the important contribution, in its elaboration and revision, of the friends Alais Ávila, Maria Daiza Amador, Domenico Corcione, Leandro Valarelli and Luiz Kohara.
An important step since then has been the emergence of logic approaches or logic models, which advocate that social actions should be developed and monitored on the basis of a logical connection between their main elements. This logic is expressed by a chain of cause-and-effect hypotheses, the most familiar of which is the "impact chain": INPUTS – ACTIVITIES – OUTPUTS – OUTCOMES – IMPACT.

The most widely used logic model is the Logical Framework Approach (LFA), created in 1969 in the United States, which incorporates this rationale into its first column (called "intervention logic").

The Logical Framework was and remains a great success, having been adopted, in different formats, by all the main public and private institutions in the field of development cooperation. After several decades of use, we are well aware of the advantages and risks of its use.

The LFA gained wider prominence when it was incorporated into the ZOPP planning method⁴, developed by GTZ⁵ in the early 1980s.

The development of social projects

Many positive changes in the development of social initiatives have been implemented in recent years, seeking to increase the effectiveness of such actions formatted as projects. They have been proposed in a relatively progressive and complementary way, especially by the institutions that finance projects, in light of the demand for results in social action. Some of these include:

- M&E (Monitoring and Evaluation) indicators: an important development in the social field was the use of indicators to verify progress. They became fundamental to managing actions and to providing a collectively agreed standard of what would be considered "success" in a given social intervention.
- More intensive management of the initiative: in the past, optimal planning was believed to be sufficient, but, over time, it became clear that unforeseen problems and the risks to projects posed by external factors required intensive monitoring of activities in order to increase their effectiveness. Today, more organizational energy is required, dedicated to the M&E process of social actions.
- Ongoing communication between funders and social organisations: this is an element associated with the demand for more intensive management – if such management is indeed required, it would make sense for the main funders to feel the need to follow more closely the implementation process, as well as any changes in course. In some

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⁴ The ZOPP (Ziel-OrientierteProjektPlanung) method is applied to the participatory planning of projects in a wide range of areas. The name means goal-oriented project planning. It was introduced in 1981 by GTZ – Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (German Agency for Technical Cooperation) based on the participatory development of the tool known as LogFrame (Logical Framework), of American origin.

⁵ GTZ was a technical cooperation and assistance body of the German government, now incorporated into the GIZ – Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit or German Association for International Cooperation, established in January 2011.
cases, funders may participate in some reflection and/or governance forum within the supported institution.

- Involvement of the beneficiary social groups: this has become a mandatory requirement in social projects, as a way of neutralizing "cabinet projects", but especially to reduce risks and promote the effectiveness of interventions (a matter of ownership).

- Stakeholder analysis: the analysis of the main players involved, or stakeholders, brought greater analytical depth and identification of opportunities and risks to the projects, contributing to their greater effectiveness.

- Risk awareness: a complementary perspective to seeking results in social action, in order to better deal with uncertainties and give greater value to the dimension of the complexities of social actions.

- Updated context analysis: it is becoming increasingly common to expect the context analysis of projects to be updated, as well as any implications for their progress.

- Greater flexibility: this is a more recent and less widespread, yet significant, attitude in development aid relations. It serves as a corollary to all of the above – to account for the greater complexity of social interventions, flexibility is needed to accommodate changing needs throughout the interventions.

- Adaptation and/or surpassing of the LFA: since the 1980s, many development aid institutions have sought to adapt the LFA by creating their own models, or even going beyond it, by using such approaches as the "impact chain mapping" (GIZ - German Cooperation), the "Mapeo de alcances" ("Outcome Mapping"), (CIID-IRDC6), etc.

- Theory of change: this is a relatively recent development that seeks to add value to logic models/Logical Framework, by setting out a path of change for an intervention – it offers a deeper and more detailed analysis of the preconditions that are necessary (but not always explicit) for the desired changes to take place. This is another step in the right direction, favoring more flexible and complex approaches and allowing for greater analytical depth.

- Support for the institutional development of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs): some international organizations maintain or are renewing their support for strengthening CSOs, either by assisting in organizational capacity-building through development projects, or by supporting broader institutional development projects directly (Ford Foundation Build Program, for example).

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6 CIID: Centro Internacional de Investigaciones para El Desarrollo or IDRC: International Development Research Center.
Constraints of the predominant approach

Despite all these advances, there is a perception among a group of professionals in the field of CSO institutional development that the "simple linear logic" of the LFA, a useful tool for relatively simple, very concrete and easily evaluated initiatives, is now being used indiscriminately for much more complex and difficult to measure initiatives, often resulting in a simplified and superficial representation of social change processes.

This logic – essentially a linear approach of causal relations, combined with the virtually exclusive use of quantitative indicators, is here called "simple linear" because of its somewhat mechanical understanding of causal relations: A causes B; B causes C; C causes D, and so on... Or, putting it another way: "if the Activities of a project are properly carried out, they should lead to the Expected Results; if these are achieved, they should then lead to the Specific Objective and this, once achieved, will contribute to the Overall Objective."

Such an approach could be understood in the context of the origin of the LFA in the 1960s and 1970s, when the prevailing view of development was that of satisfying basic needs, whether by providing improvements and/or by addressing poverty, which was basically seen as a lack of something. In this sense, development was typically restricted to building schools, health care facilities, housing, roads, and providing literacy services, professional training, vaccination campaigns, and so on.

This notion of development, which is now perceived as linear, "mechanical" and reductionist in terms of processes of change, is at the basis of the LFA due to its hierarchy and individualization of problems, but above all as a result of the idea that a single initiative/project could solve a social problem. The LFA tool was created precisely on the basis of – and in response to – this view.

The role of CSOs and social projects in the development of society and its values and institutions, however, have evolved to a more strategic perspective. Nowadays, social projects have another meaning, especially in contexts such as Brazil, where social legislation, public policies and civil society have seen significant developments in recent decades. In such cases, projects are much more focused on strengthening the autonomous role of social organizations and their capacities, than simply on generating benefits and social services.

In the current widespread crisis that the country is going through, it is all the more necessary to prioritize advocacy initiatives that can influence the public debate, the process of forming opinions and mobilizing sufficient social momentum to generate change.

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7 It could be argued that the LFA opens up to complexity by identifying assumptions or risk factors and by assessing the scope of each level (Activities, Results, Specific Objective and Overall Objective) autonomously (with specific indicators), but this does not really solve the problem.

LFA approaches can be useful for small projects and one-off initiatives, especially for the provision of a given good or social service. But this approach is not suitable for conceiving, designing and evaluating proposals to address more complex problems, since these require more time and resources, multi-stakeholder collaboration and articulated advocacy strategies.

**Approaches and paradigms under dispute**

It is not an easy task to understand and explain how and why we have arrived at the current situation – the use of an approach considered inadequate to design and evaluate more complex social actions – and why it has been so difficult to move forward. Basically, there is a dispute, or an almost undisputed hegemony, of visions and paradigms of organization and social change. Below are some relevant factors that can explain this issue:

- We are still held hostage by positivist and functionalist paradigms of the world, which place primacy on the "objective" elements of reality, while neglecting the intrinsic interrelationship between subject and object, the intrinsically political and contradictory nature of reality and subjectivity in social relations. Everything is perceived as if reality were a set of objective elements that could be moved regardless of the broader context and the meaning that subjects attach to them.

- We live in times of technological dominance in all fields of social life. Technification takes place in all fields of knowledge – the idea that all things can be solved with a technical solution, in detriment to more humanistic, political and relational approaches. This "philosophy" today pervades everything from health care (medicines seen as a panacea) to politics (a competent businessman will solve all the problems).

- The ever-increasing primacy of 'management' over 'policy-making' is one example of the idea that human problems (political, social, economic, etc.) are better solved by the administration of resources and by management (instrumental rationality), not by debating and arguing about the meanings of what we do, about the visions and values that guide these ends and the processes that should sustain these actions and policies (substantial rationality).

- We seem to have abandoned all reflection on the theories of social action and organization from a perspective of social transformation. We are still drawing from the same theoretical sources that go back to the matrixes of collective action in the 1960s and 1970s, without any major updates. Relatively few advances have been made in relation to the theories of Marxist organization and transformation (Leninist, Maoist, Gramscian, etc.), Liberation Theology, Popular Education and the theories of administration of the 1970s and 1980s.

- Given this gap in theoretical and methodological development, more and more theories and approaches originating from the discipline of Business Administration – based on the strategy, planning, organizational change and organizational learning of business organizations – have been

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9 Leandro Valarelli has contributed significantly to this topic.
incorporated, albeit reluctantly, by the "social field" - CSOs, institutes and foundations and even social movements. The social field concerned with structural transformations in society seems to have abandoned its own reflection and the production of knowledge conducive to its political and strategic aims.

- The asymmetrical North-South power relations, which are also expressed in relations of support and financing for social actions in the South, very often end up imposing approaches and tools, thereby inducing a sort of tacit pact around an arrangement in which the organisations of the South are led to agree to such approaches without any questioning, for fear of losing funding.

- The growing pressure for short-term results exerted by both public and private, national and international funding organizations favors the excessive simplification of social processes, leads to the neglect of the necessarily procedural nature of social changes and leads to superficiality of reflection and of the learning process.

- Managers and back donors are notorious for their aversion to risk and uncertainty, which makes it difficult for them to support pioneering initiatives based on innovative and experimental approaches and methodologies. This in turn contributes to the low level of support for innovation and experimentation in the South.

- Civil society organizations are key players in social development, but most funders only support specific projects and/or core activities, at the expense of strengthening social players. This contributes to the financial fragility of CSOs, thus leaving their institutional sustainability more often than not tied to situations of dependency, thereby limiting an independent attitude and their innovative capacity.

**The challenge of complexity in social actions**

Whereas the universe projected by the positivist/functionalist bias is objective, linear, predictable and controllable, relatively harmonious and neutral, the readout of reality in a complex approach is quite different.

Stability, predictability, order, functionality and linearity exit the stage, while contradiction, paradox, disorder, chaos, multicausality, uncertainty and the whole subjective burden of the connection between subject and world take center stage.

The advances cited above seem to be tentatively moving towards a new approach, but have not yet been able to reach it. The feeling is that of clothes which no longer fit us. For a new approach to development and to the processes of social change, we need to break with the underlying positivist premise and address the challenges and uncertainties of a complex approach.

This is the great challenge: to reflect critically on the assumptions of tools with a positivist bias and to develop alternatives guided by the paradigm of complexity.
How do we move forward now?

Some possible steps are outlined below:

- Broaden and promote critical reflection on the assumptions and limitations of current project management approaches and tools;
- Further research into identifying and analyzing alternative approaches and tools, both in Latin America/Caribbean and in other continents;
- Stimulate South-South and also North-South reflections, dialogues and exchanges on the topic;
- Create the conditions for some alternative initiatives to be tested and evaluated; and
- Promote greater efforts to systematize experiences, innovation, and the creation of new approaches and methodologies in the context of transformative social action, which can generate theorizations that lead to the development of more appropriate approaches and tools, consistent with a view that is sensitive to the complexity of social players and processes.

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