

Oct. 20, 2022

How do you codify common sense? Transcribing the less tangible aspects of successful facilitation



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All blogs

Over a decade of facilitation on the Alliances programmes has allowed us to define what we think it is, and what makes it work, in our new version of the [ALCP2 investments manual \(version 3\)](#).

We are often asked, by the many visitors who have come to see the programme over the years, for the 'secret sauce' or the simple version, the stripped back to basics checklist of why it is working. We have found it very hard to provide this.

A mission director once put it very succinctly: "A lot of what you are doing could be described as 'gut feeling', but how do you explain it?" Many others have referred to the 'art of facilitation', describing a creativity inherent within the process, which in itself implies that the process contains an element of the unique, making it doubly hard to capture. Artists are perhaps lucky in that they don't have to break down the elements of their creativity, or of what constitutes their desire to make art.

Those of us in the development world, however, have the onus to transfer anything that is working and replicable - which is what makes what we do sustainable at scale.

The word 'facilitation' has provided us with a very handy catch-all over the years to describe our role in binding the actions and tools described in this manual together. It can seem irritatingly vague when someone seeks a direct answer as to why this intervention has succeeded where another, seemingly similar in activities and

objectives, has failed, and they receive a reply basically revolving around 'facilitation'.

The explanation will also try to break it down, and may include: 'targeted market research'; operational ethos; ongoing market intelligence; adaptive management; attention to detail; precise knowledge of the target group; and iterative results measurement, to name but a few aspects that we use to explain the difference. But often a sense of frustration remains. We feel that we have somehow not been able to capture the point. The task of explaining what just feels intuitively like 'common sense' or what 'we just know or we just do' seems so difficult.

I think the trouble in explaining 'facilitation' can be encapsulated in the question: how do you codify common sense?

The good news is that progress has been made in defining what successful programmes are doing beyond the obvious activities and tools. Good examples being Hans Posthumous for SDC¹ and the BEAM Exchange from its inception in 2014, who have sought to translate these actions into codifiable advice that can be transferred to other practitioners.

But it is fiendishly difficult to do, partly because once it is distilled and set down it looks incredibly simple and prosaic and can be easily overlooked. Simple, however, does not mean simplistic. Successful implementation requires rigour, consistency and care.

The [BEAM case study on our veterinary inputs intervention](#) took ages to produce because the questions of how things were done, not just what, were so difficult to answer. But I now get the same pleasure in reading that case study as I do when I know an intervention has found the 'sweet spot'.

In publications, as in interventions, the hard work to pin down the subtlety - honing the process and result - is worth it.

It says a lot, I think, that in the first version of this manual we mostly avoided the matter of facilitation altogether. We stuck to the nuts and bolts - the steps, tools, qualification criteria, activities and operations.

In the second version we inserted several sections which did attempt to begin to codify what we had learned and what we were doing. This was inserted as 'co-investment guidance' and relegated to two annexes: 'operational guiding principles' and 'practical tips for the inclusion of WEE in MSD'.

In this new version, facilitation comes first, in chapter one - looking at what makes the difference between a successful or failed intervention - describing how we do what we do, and some of the knowledge we have picked up along the way.

Have a look at the [ALCP2 Investment manual \(version 3\)](#) - and let us know what you think.

¹ *SDC E+i Network (2019) Forming Partnerships with the Private Sector: A Summary of Lessons Learned by Market Systems Development Practitioners. Hans Posthumous Consulting.*

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Printed from <https://beamexchange.org/community/blogs/2022/10/20/transcribing-less-tangible-aspects-successful-facilitation/> on 01/10/2023 at 12:42