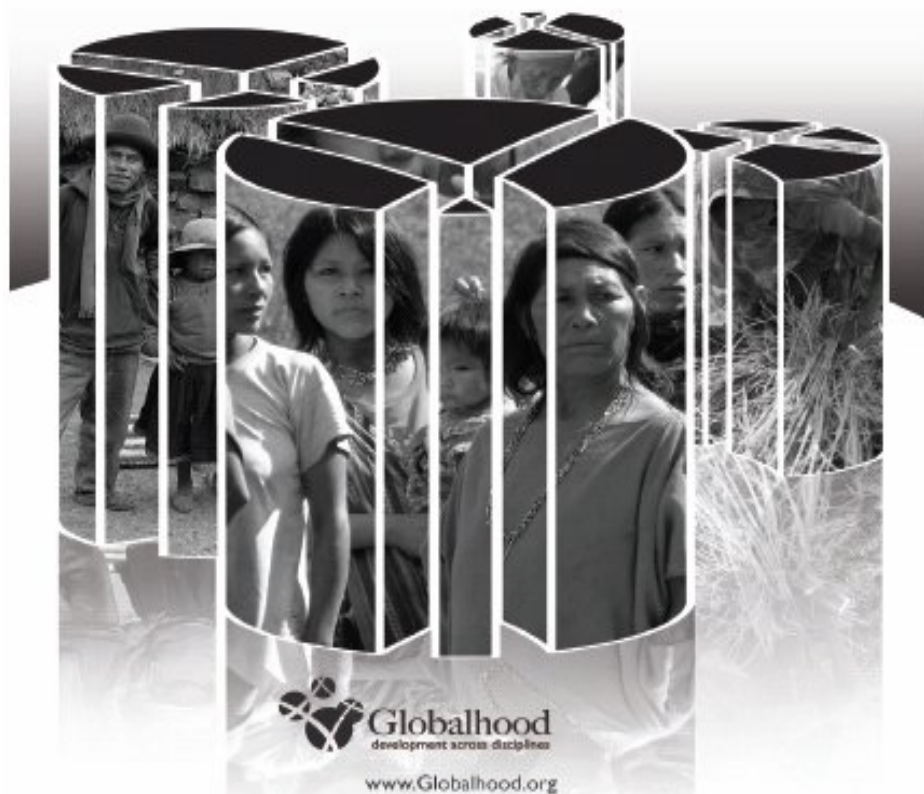


Development Projects **That Didn't Work:** **The Perils of Narrow Approaches** **to Complex Situations**



Globalhood Research Paper
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Introduction

International development has slowly evolved from a historically bigoted civilizing mission, to a singular policy, to a profession to an industry with all of the bruises and limitations of its bumpy evolutionary path. The fact that the industry, comprised of thousands of professionals, organizations, departments, consultants, contractors and donors, remains cohesive as an entity is a sign of the industry's survival instincts rather than a reflection of the world's 'development.' In fact, an astute observer may notice that while the industry has grown and maintained its introspective nature, development projects and policies have made relatively little impact over the last sixty years. One development academic writes, that "this is the tragedy in which the West spent \$2.3 trillion on foreign aid over the last five decades and still had not managed to get twelve-cent medicines to children to prevent malaria deaths."¹

One could make a very long list of reasons why development initiatives have done so little after all this time and money spent. However, such a task is not in the scope of this research. As Globalhood promotes a multidisciplinary approach to development, the focus of this research is to answer this important question about the failure of development efforts: **How is the failure of development projects related to a lack of collaboration across disciplines and sectors?**

The research for this paper was conducted over a three month period, using various development discourse, academic and media sources. Over fifty historical and contemporary cases of unsustainable development projects have been reviewed and analyzed. The cases presented here each provide an example of how the lack of collaborations across disciplines and sectors has led to

- I) a shallow understanding or complete disregard for the broad and often complex contexts in which projects exist;
- II) un-holistic, un-strategic plans that are either too sectarian, over generalized or superficial; or
- III) a cultural paradigm that perpetuates unsustainable development based on narrow-mindedness, uneven power dynamics, exclusion, rigidity and a lack of feedback and accountability.²

Globalhood is aware that there is no panacea to solve the problems and flaws of the development industry. Collaborating across disciplines is just one aspect of reform the industry needs to start producing real, lasting change.

¹ Easterly, William. *The White Man's Burden*. New York: Penguin Books, 2006. pg. 4

² See *Table of Failed Projects*

How is the failure of development projects related to the lack of collaboration across disciplines and sectors?

I. The lack of collaboration across disciplines and sectors often contributes to insufficient due diligence or a lack of knowledge of the broad and complex contexts in which development projects exists.

A classic flaw of development projects and perspectives (this can often be traced to a lack of collaboration across disciplines and sectors) is the ignorance of project planners of the historical, political, social, economic and environmental contexts of a given community, country or region. Here are a few examples of how a lack of multidisciplinary collaboration can lead to contextual ignorance, and ultimately, unsuccessful development projects. The first case involves an anthological analysis of how contexts are routinely de-politicized by the development industry. Case #2 demonstrates that development projects or funds can intentionally or unintentionally contribute to corruption, escalating violence or general political unrest. The critique of Jeffrey Sachs in Case #3 shows that history is another important aspect of context that can be ignored by even the most mainstream development perspectives. Projects are especially prone to impact the context negatively if they are designed and implemented without any multidisciplinary research, assessment and ground work as shown in Cases #4, and #5 respectively. Furthermore the basic functionality of any given project is dependent on an understanding of reality on the ground. Case #6 demonstrates the unsuccessful results when the context and function of a project don't match. Case #7 depicts instances of projects that are socially incompatible with their contexts while Case #8 demonstrates the consequences of ignoring advice about a given context beyond one's own expertise and/or familiarity.

Case #1: Creating a Parallel Reality

In 1994 James Ferguson used his less-than-endearing nick-name for the development industry and discourse as the title of his most notable book, *The Anti-Politics Machine*. He used the term due to what he found to be an intentionally de-politicized perspective within the industry, reflected in its publications and projects. Although Ferguson's work involved a particular case, a World Bank agricultural project in Lesotho in the 1970's and 1980's, and was based largely on a particular document, a World Bank report written in 1975, his observations and analysis remain relevant to this day – primarily due to the fact that the industry doesn't seem to have learned much from its mistakes. Ferguson writes:

In the “development” discourse, Lesotho appears as an aboriginal economy, “virtually untouched,” as the World Bank Report claimed, “by modern economic development.” The claim is not always so extreme, but there is always a tendency to explain the poverty of the Basotho by positing a backward,

primordial, unpenetrated economy, which is ‘less developed’ because it has not yet been brought into the modern world economy. The economy is “subsistence”- although almost nobody is in fact able to “subsist” on what they grow – and is contrasted to a “modern, cash economy.” It is imagined that the country has remained somehow cut off from the cash economy, and it is sometimes even suggested, as in the World Bank Report, that livestock constitute “everyday currency” – as if Lesotho were some sort of pre-monetary economy and livestock a kind of primitive money... In the “development” version of things, “less developed” means historically retarded, and poverty appears as a result of not yet having been introduced to the modern world.³

After dissecting the development discourse on Lesotho, Ferguson consults a more academic reference and reads that Lesotho, far from being a pre-modern subsistence agrarian economy, is first and foremost a labor reserve for the South African mining industry. The academic reference, a common Encyclopedia, gives a much more in-depth description of the social, political and historical context in Lesotho than the World Bank Report, which was written by experts. Ferguson concludes that “an academic analysis is of no use to a “development” agency unless it provides a place for the agency to plug itself in, unless it provides a charter for the sort of intervention that the agency is set up to do.”⁴ This is a self-imposed limitation of many development projects – planners create a parallel reality in order to simplify the complex context in which their designed project will function. Of course the problem is that because projects exist within real contexts, and not merely in the imaginations of planners, this limited perspective of reality is debilitating.

Case #2: Fanning Flames

“...A problem with the apolitical approach is that it is not apolitical.”⁵

In addition to including an academic perspective to appreciate context, it is also important to include political perspectives to avoid unintentionally or indirectly causing harm in a situation. Any astute observer may wonder, ‘if development projects without multidisciplinary collaborations, as they are most often designed and implemented, have not produced positive results then is it possible that the good intentions have produced negative results?’

There are countless ways in which external interventions can thwart the internal development of a community or a nation and in some cases, fuel violence and corruption and contribute to the degradation of existing structures and systems.

³ Ferguson, James. *The Anti-Political Machine*, 1994, pg.56

⁴ Ferguson, 68

⁵Easterly, 147

Examples abound. The World Bank and IMF granted a second bundle of debt relief to Burkina Faso in 2002 based on its “satisfactory completion of a participatory PRSP” (Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper), despite the fact that the country was still being ruled by the same leader since 1987 who is known to have supported rebel bloodshed in Angola, Liberia and Sierra Leone.⁶ Other, even more notable, oppressive regimes have received debt relief and/or millions of aid dollars from International Financial Institutions (IFIs), bilateral foreign aid agencies, and multilateral organizations such as the UN: Mobutu in Zaire, the Duvalier family reign in Haiti, the still-standing dictator, Paul Biya of Cameroon, and the list goes on. In an extreme example of development aid doing more harm than good is under the Hutu government of Rwanda. Peter Uvin, an aid worker there at the time, wrote:

The development aid system knew of the disintegration of Rwandese society; saw the many Tutsis working for aid agencies or partner NGOs being harassed, threatened or killed; discussed these matters and surely regretted them; but seemingly felt it was outside its mandate or capacity to intervene, that all it could do was to continue business as usual. Thus aid continued to muddle through, trying to make its usual projects work with a faltering government, until the day the genocide began.⁷

While planners pursue neutrality in vain, they need to realize that their work does not exist within a vacuum. Pretending such is limiting and potentially harmful.

Case #3: Ignoring History

Popular economist Jeffrey Sachs and the UN initiative he has championed, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), have been an energizing breadth of fresh air through the development industry and discourse in recent years. While the intention and multidisciplinary tenants of the MDGs are agreed upon for the most part, there is still much criticism of Sachs’ perspective on poverty and the ambitiousness of his plans.

Sachs makes it clear in his book, *The End of Poverty*, that he perceives poverty as a condition to be climbed or pulled out of. This view forms the basis of his ‘ladder model’ of development, a hierarchy in which underdeveloped countries, bogged down by tropical diseases and other environmental disadvantages, need help being pulled up by the developed nations of the global North. In his book Sachs claims that “the combination of Africa’s adverse geography and its extreme poverty creates the worst poverty trap in the world.”⁸

⁶ Easterly, 144

⁷ Uvin, Peter. *Aiding Violence: The Development Enterprise in Rwanda*. West Hartford, Connecticut: Kumarian Press, 1998. pg. 65

⁸ Sachs, Jeffrey. *The End of Poverty: Economic Possibilities of Our Time*. London: Penguin Books, 2005, pg. 208

However, this diagnosis is inherently flawed. The most glaring error is the simplified emphasis on geography and total exclusion of major historical events, such as slavery and colonialism as factors contributing to underdevelopment and poverty. The fact that such monumental historical movements of people and resources from ‘rest’ to ‘West’ can be so easily overlooked in an understanding of global poverty and development both reflects and perpetuates the apolitical, non-contextual vision of the development industry and discourse. Sachs’ view of poverty as some kind of “original sin” is critiqued by many, including environmental activist Vandana Shiva:

...there is a problem with Sachs' how-to-end poverty prescriptions. He simply doesn't understand where poverty comes from. He seems to view it as the original sin. "A few generations ago, almost everybody was poor," he writes, then adding: "The Industrial Revolution led to new riches, but much of the world was left far behind."...This is a totally false history of poverty. The poor are not those who have been "left behind"; they are the ones who have been robbed. The wealth accumulated by Europe and North America are largely based on riches taken from Asia, Africa and Latin America. Without the destruction of India's rich textile industry, without the takeover of the spice trade, without the genocide of the Native American tribes, without African slavery, the Industrial Revolution would not have resulted in new riches for Europe or North America. It was this violent takeover of Third World resources and markets that created wealth in the North and poverty in the South.⁹

It is crucial to begin, at the very least, with a comprehensive, holistic understanding of poverty and its roots (i.e context). Extreme poverty is a complex system of oppression created by a multidisciplinary variety of factors (environmental, historical, political, ideological...etc.); it is a burden to be lifted, a challenge to overcome, not a naturally occurring disease to be eradicated. This is just one of countless lessons history has to teach the development industry.

Case #4: Skipping Multidisciplinary Preliminary Assessments

Yet another way in which context can be ignored or inadvertently disregarded is if project planners fail to conduct multidisciplinary preliminary assessments before planning and implementation. In 2006 the human and environmental rights organization, Global Witness, issued a report of an investigation it conducted on the World Bank Forest Concession Management and Control Pilot Project (FCM CPP) in Cambodia¹⁰. Launched in 2000, the pilot project sought to prove that the historical system of concession contracts granted by the government to illegal loggers could be formalized and brought up to legal standards. In order to prove this, in 2004 the World Bank encouraged the

⁹ Shiva, Vandana. “Two Myths that Keep the World Poor,” *Ode Magazine*, Issue 28, found at <http://www.odemagazine.com/article.php?aID=4192>

¹⁰ “Background Briefing on the Inspection Panel Investigation in Cambodia” *Global Witness*. June 15, 2006

Cambodian government to grant forest concessions to six contractors with known records of corrupt and illegal logging activity. Although the World Bank has its own policies about protecting forests with high ecological value and the rights and livelihoods of Indigenous peoples, it did not conduct adequate preliminary assessments on the forest and social context and potential impacts of the FCMCPP on the area and instead relied on the ‘good judgment’ of the six concessionaries.

Global Witness found several serious flaws in the design and management of the project. First of all, the concessionary companies were put in charge of consulting the poor communities whose natural resources they were exploiting. Given the history of illegal logging and exploitation in Cambodia in the 1990s, this shows very poor judgment on the part of the World Bank. Preserving areas of high ecological and cultural value was also not on the Bank’s list of priorities since it misclassified many parts of the forest, giving the loggers free reign in these areas, and left it to them to discern spiritual spaces within their cutting zones. Although the Bank’s policies state that when projects affect Indigenous populations Indigenous Peoples Development Plans should be prepared, this was never done for the FCMCPP. Had the initial assessments and plans been done as required, with a multidisciplinary analysis of the context including ecological and cultural values, much of the damage could have been prevented. Overall, the endorsement of the loggers’ substandard management and the lack of environmental and social assessment of the context seriously debilitated the project and ultimately did not support the initial theory of the World Bank - the concessionary system was not brought to higher standards at all.

Case #5: On-the-Ground Ignorance

In 2000 the Madhya Pradesh state government in India designed a very innovative e-government ICT development project in the rural Dhar district.¹¹ The project consisted of installing a series of computer/Internet kiosks in the district in order to provide better government services and access to important information, such as welfare schemes, public grievances, land ownership documents, expertise, market prices, village publications...etc.

While the idea and intentions of the project were to meet the needs of poor local populations by bringing services and information to them, decreasing travel time and costs, the design lacked a practical consideration of the context in which the kiosks were installed. Many of the kiosk locations suffered from a lack of reliable infrastructure. Without a relatively regular flow of electricity installing an all-purpose kiosk is futile.

¹¹ Sanjay, Alok Kumar & Gupta, Vivek. “Gyandoot: Trying to Improve Government Services for Rural Citizens in India,” *eGovernment for Development, eTransparency Case Study #11*, 2000.
www.egov4dev.org.

The project was largely managed by local government; therefore leadership was constantly in flux, causing inconsistencies and periods of project abandonment. Another flaw of the approach was that, while the project focused on bringing information and services to the poor, it did not address the quality of information/service provided by the government. Much of the information provided on the kiosk home page was outdated (such as the market prices provided for farmers), often causing economic losses for the people making decisions based on it.

At the outset of the project in 2000, Gyandoot received several awards and recognition for the innovativeness of the design. However, by 2002, much of this fanfare had died down in the face of the largely unsuccessful results. According to an *eGovernment for Development* case study on the Gyandoot project,

A number of kiosks lie idle for significant periods of time: around one-third appear to be permanently closed; many others are closed for hours or days at a time. Lack of electricity is one cause, as are ongoing telecommunications problems. Limited income and, related, the commitment of kiosk operators is another cause of closure. When kiosks are open, service response times are often poor because hardware capacity is limited, and because several kiosks may attempt to access services at the same time when the electricity comes on.¹²

In some cases, the unreliability of the kiosks and infrequent usage led kiosk managers to lose confidence in their supposed source of livelihood and resort to demanding bribes for the kiosk services and information, in essence adding yet another intermediary layer of corruption to the already hard lives of poor citizens.

Although the initial Gyandoot idea was very creative and involved the integration of several key issues (government services, ICT development, education...etc), still not enough factors/issues were integrated into the design. An understanding of the broad context of poverty and its affects on infrastructure, economic sustainability, and good governance would have made the design more practical and holistic. A more bottom-up structured approach to the initial design, implementation and evaluation processes would increase sustainability and overall success of the project. This project failure is just one example of what happens when visionary projects are designed and implemented without real on-the-ground local knowledge and experience.

Case #6: Matching Context and Function

A Vancouver-based NGO, the Institute for Media Policy and Civil Society (IMPACS), recently designed a project to train Afghani women in journalism and law.¹³ Some of the

¹² Sanjay & Gupta

¹³ Bailey, Sue. "Flawed Aid Program Funded Newspaper that most Afghans couldn't read: Audit," *Canadian Press*: Ottawa, March 6, 2007. www.ca.news.yahoo.com

more specific targets of the project included establishing six or more radio stations in rural areas to be run by women, creating a monthly media law bulletin, providing training for media coverage of elections, and to facilitate exchanges between media resources in South Asia and Afghani women. The project began in 2003 and has since expended approximately \$3million.

While the initial idea and intentions of IMPACS seem sound, the actual design and implementation of the media project suffered from some very basic flaws. It seems the project's managerial staff was shipped to Afghanistan from Canada with little previous international experience and an inadequate understanding of the socio-economic context on the ground. Some important aspects of the project were not covered by the staff during implementation, resulting in little results and wasted funds. In 2004 the project launched a publication (now defunct) written and published by Afghani women writing to and female Afghani audience. The publication was launched without questioning the sustainability of such a project when the UN estimates that 80% of Afghani women and girls are illiterate.

It is clear that this project lacked key elements in its design and implementation. Because of the low literacy rates among women in Afghanistan, the project would have benefited from integrating an educational, perhaps adult literary, element. This would have made the publication a more relevant initiative. In terms of implementation, project officers working on the ground, especially in extreme situations like current Afghanistan, should have some overseas experience and background information before arriving. A successful project/organization is flexible and able to adapt to various contexts and still maintain its basic functions (financial records, monitoring and evaluations). Monitoring and evaluation of project progress through indicators is always necessary, especially in a context where national institutions cannot be relied on. Similarly, alternative methods of keeping track of finances needed to be developed in the context of a cash-only local economy.

Ultimately the project was so bogged down in the logistical details required to function let alone reach its overambitious goals that it had to be terminated.

Case #7: Social Incompatibility

Many anthropologists have bemoaned what they find to be the most obvious flaw of development projects over the years: social incompatibility. It is already bad enough to have outsiders interfere in the affairs of communities and states, but to do so without first attempting to understand and respect the existing context and be guided by local knowledge is both arrogant and absurd. In his role as anthropologist consultant to the World Bank, Phillip Conrad Kottak analyzed sixty-eight completed rural development projects from the 1960s and 1970s in order to assess the affects of the absence of socio-

cultural expertise in project planning and implementation.¹⁴ One clear example of social incompatibility was an irrigation and settlement project in East Africa.

The project overinnovated. Its major fallacy was to attempt to convert nomadic pastoralists into sedentary cultivators. Traditional land rights were ignored. The herders' territory was to be used for new commercial farms, and the pastoralists converted into small farmers. This project was designed to benefit not the herders, but wealthy commercial farmers. Despite obstacles that would have been obvious to any anthropologist, the pastoralists were expected to give up a generations-old way of life in order to work three times harder growing rice and picking cotton for bosses.¹⁵

Other examples came from South Asia, the Middle East and Latin America; agricultural and irrigation projects that promoted new cash crops, watering, and cultivation systems. However, they ultimately failed because the implanted crops and new plans conflicted too heavily with established subsistence crop cycles, which were rightly prioritized by local farmers. While all of these projects involved attempts to facilitate economic development through agricultural or irrigation schemes, they inevitably impacted and were impacted by social norms and cultural practices. Had these values been understood and respected, they could have been integrated into the design and contributed to the success and sustainability of the projects. Kottak explains that “an economist might assert that these problems stemmed from faulty economic analysis, rather than from lack of a cultural perspective. However, this assertion arises from a non-anthropological view of the economy, as a separate sphere, rather than part of a local cultural system.”¹⁶

Case #8: Rejecting Good Advice

We've established that not collaborating with other fields, sectors and disciplines in some shape or form contributes to the failure of some projects because without a broad and diverse pool of knowledge, it is hard to really appreciate a complex social, cultural, political, environmental context. It is one thing to fail to reach out to seek this diverse pool of knowledge, but quite another to reject knowledge that is offered freely; such is the case in instances when planners purposefully ignore good advice. The rejected advice may present itself in many forms: dissident opinions from experts, local protest, demonstrations, international campaigns, independent assessments conducted by other organizations, and even the good work of one's own team. Surprisingly enough, the latter was the case in an African cattle project reviewed by Kottak:

¹⁴ Kottak, Phillip Conrad. “Culture and ‘Economic Development.’” *The American Anthropologist*, New Series, Vol. 92, No. 3 (Sept. 1990).

¹⁵ Kottak, 725

¹⁶ Kottak, 725

Project designers disregarded the preparation team's advice against establishing ranches in the project area because ranching would conflict with existing land-use patterns. Planners also ignored basic and easily available information about the project area (e.g., presumably nonexistent villages shown clearly on maps). During implementation a few thousand previously unnoticed local people tore down fences, burned pasture, and rustled project cattle. Local people continued guerrilla action against the alien ranches on their ancestral lands, and project problems diminished only after expatriate management was replaced with nationals, who used traditional pacts (blood brotherhood) between villages to end the rustling.¹⁷

Though there are clearly several flawed aspects of this project and the others described thus far, two points stand firm: 1) a multidisciplinary collaboration of resources, knowledge and/or people is necessary to gain a sound understanding of the complex contexts of development projects, and 2) a real understanding and respect for the context in which the project will exist is necessary for designing a successful and sustainable development venture.

Recommendations:

Apply the lessons of these cases to your own development initiatives in order to start on a better foot:

- Research, consulting academic sources rather than relying on your own assumptions about a given context.
- Learn the specific and regional history of the area in which the project will exist and try to learn and keep in mind the residual effects of this history and how they will impact and be impacted by the project.
- Due diligence applies to the development industry. Do not skip preliminary assessments or take them lightly. Insure that they cover various aspects of the context (i.e. social, environmental...)
- Make sure you have visited the area and take advantage of the wealth of local knowledge and experience when designing the project.
- Try to get feedback and advice on the context from other sectors and disciplines in order to learn from their various perspectives and ensure the project's compatibility with its social, political, environmental, economic context.
- Try not to ignore any advice – even if it doesn't fit into your seemingly perfect plan. A protest outside your office window is surely a sign that your plan is far from perfect.

¹⁷ Kottak, 726

II. The lack of multidisciplinary collaboration leads to development projects and policies that fall short of being holistic or strategic – even when these may be the stated objectives of project planners.

The ideal development project is one that is both holistic and strategic. Holistic, meaning projects based on a broad, multidisciplinary definition of development, seeking positive change in the economic, environmental, social, political, physical, psychological and spiritual realms. Although it may be overambitious to achieve all of this in one project, an ideally strategic design places interventions precisely where they are most needed and will have the greatest impact in all of these realms, within a given context. Unfortunately, development projects often fall short of this ideal. Too often project planners, so caught up in their own ideas and out of touch with the real world, gravitate towards large-scale, utopian plans instead of strategic interventions. This section provides a few examples of projects that have failed to be strategic and holistic and, ultimately, failed to produce positive results. The first case depicts the allure and ultimate failure of big economic plans through the example of the International Monetary Fund's policies in Indonesia. Other projects, such as the voting registration drive in Uganda presented in Case #2, focus on solely technical solutions to complex, multidisciplinary problems. Case #3 demonstrates the negative impacts of policies that are based on a categorized view of the context, ignoring the fact that the real world is quite fluid and not divided into sectors. Finally, Case #4 depicts how overarching plans become blueprints used to apply to various situations, no matter how diverse they are.

Case #1: The Ugly Fate of Big and Solely Economic Plans

The history of the development industry has been dominated by large-scale economic plans for national development. From Shock Treatments in post-soviet Europe, to Structural Adjustment in the "Third World," these big economic plans have proven, time and time again, to do more harm than good. The scale of these projects is already a reflection of planners' attempts to control everything rather than be strategic. Furthermore, the focus on economic development rather than a holistic approach to development, as a multidisciplinary process, ends up negatively impacting other important realms of development.

In a recent lecture,¹⁸ notable economist, Joseph Stiglitz used the case of International Monetary Fund (IMF) policies in Indonesia during the Asian Economic Crisis as an example of poorly thought-out national economic schemes. During Indonesia's economic crisis of the 1990s the IMF thought it best to focus on financial recovery by increasing interest rates and taxes and cutting government social welfare programs, such as food

¹⁸ Stiglitz, Joseph. "Building Bridges in International Development," The Columbia Club, New York, April 11, 2007.

subsidies. The goal was to stabilize the economy by lowering inflation rates and attracting investments.

Unfortunately, the IMF had not done its homework. Clearly this plan did not take Indonesia's history of ethnic backlashes in the 1960s into account, nor did it represent the interests of the country's large population of people living in poverty. Predictably the harsh economic conditions led to conflict between economic classes, along ethnic lines. In the end, all of the IMF's financial 'solutions' only further depressed the Indonesian economy, making it even less attractive to potential investors. Stiglitz noted that "a greater appreciation of the social and political context would have led to better policies" and that if one doesn't "use aid to support existing institutions then aid will help to undermine these existing institutions." Again, an appreciation for history and overall context is important, but successful projects also combine a multidisciplinary view of development and, therefore, implement more strategic and holistic interventions.

Case #2: High Tech Band-Aids

Voting fraud and other illegal voting election schemes are common occurrences in most countries. In the case of Uganda, the government designed a project to try to prevent people from being able to misrepresent themselves and vote more than once on Election Day.¹⁹ Before Uganda's 2001 elections, the Interim Electoral Commission launched a citizen service project to photograph citizens with digital cameras during voting registration. The digital photos taken were supposed to be loaded onto an online database, managed by district electoral bodies, to accurately identify voters on Election Day. Approximately \$22 million was spent on equipment, consultancies and operations.

Not only did the project face technical difficulties with the digital cameras and the online database in the context of poor infrastructure and poverty, the most glaring gap in the design is the fact that the issue of transparency among the voting registration operators was not addressed. Thus, the new technology added to an old system only politicized things further and incited accusations and reactionary government behavior towards the political opposition. The 2001 elections were only considered successful logistically due to the pre-existing system, and nonviolent due to the force of the military.

A more holistic approach to improving the transparency of the voter registration system would focus less on the technology used and more on the structure of the system itself. While it is important to have mechanisms that prevent citizens from voting illegally, it is equally important that there be mechanisms to ensure accountability among operators within the system. Therefore a successful project would require capacity building, a good

¹⁹ "Failed Electronic Voter Registration in Uganda," eGovernment for Development, eTransparency Case Study #22, 2001. www.egov4dev.org

governance element, and political education for the citizens. Perhaps if the project planners had included a political analysis of the context before implementing the project, the unlikely success of the venture would have been predicted. The infatuation with high-tech solutions implemented on a grand scale is one development organizations and governments cannot afford at such high costs and low results.

Case #3: Sectarian Policies

While the World Bank verbally recognizes the fundamental fact that gender equality is a cross-cutting, fluid issue, its strategy in 2002 to promote gender equality in Bangladesh focused primarily on areas that are traditionally viewed to be relevant to women, such as health and education.²⁰ Meanwhile the blue print macroeconomic policies of the Bank promoted privatization of state-owned enterprises and the closure of many public utilities. These economic policies have led to large scale unemployment of both men and women.

The result of such inconsistent, sectarian gender and economic strategies is any progress made in the traditionally gendered areas (health and education) was undermined by the negative effects of the Bank's macroeconomic policies. One clear example of this is the fact that violence against women actually increased as a result of unemployment because of the increased importance of dowries as capital and the inability of many women and households to provide a dowry.

Case #4: The Fallacy of Under-differentiation

The *fallacy of under-differentiation* refers to planners' tendency to see LDC's (less developed countries) as an undifferentiated group. (The term LDC implies such a lumping; Brazil is not Botswana, but both are classified as LDC's.) This fallacy is apparent when an international development agency ignores cultural diversity and adopts the same approach with very different types of "beneficiaries."²¹

The World Bank's approach to improving education in Brazil during the structural adjustment era of the 1990s is a classic example of blue-print policies, applied globally and without differentiation, within specific contexts. In the 1990s, as today, both the Brazilian economy and society were highly stratified. In 1995 Brazil ranked (by GNP) as the eighth largest economy in the world while simultaneously ranking thirty fourth according to per capita income due to the high percentage of Brazilians living in

²⁰ Khundker, Nasreen. "A Gentle Touch? – Gender and the World Bank – A Critical Assessment," *GenderAction*, January 13, 2004. www.genderaction.org.

²¹ Kottak, 726

poverty.²² The World Bank's solution to the high level of illiteracy and crumbling educational facilities was not a tailor-made plan, fitted to the specific context. Instead it was a structural adjustment-era, market-oriented scheme that encouraged competition in the education sector, supporting private institutions while leaving public schools behind in the dust. More specifically, the World Bank promoted basic education, which undermined the already substandard public and private institutions of higher education in Brazil, which in 1994 had only a 1.94% enrollment rate compared to 38.9% in Argentina.²³ Traditionally the public universities were of slightly better quality than their private counterparts. However, the Bank's stringent policies, discouraging government spending in the social sectors, reversed this trend.

Private institutions have grown rapidly because of the precipitous fall in government investment in Brazil's public universities. This situation has brought about a distortion of educational politics where private universities now house 72.2% of the places for higher education in the wealthier Southeast region and 42.9% in the poorer Northwest. The gap between private and public institutions is increasing while public universities have become the "wreckage of this changed investment policy"²⁴

The problem with the World Bank's approach is the fact that the agency failed to actually analyze the context and think about the possible impacts of such a policy before applying this overarching blanket solution. Ultimately, the 'solution,' obtuse as it was, only deepened the disparities between rich and poor Brazilians. The Bank's generalized perspective supports the claim that "the dominant countries and agencies perceive all developing countries to be merely slight cultural variations of the same problem."²⁵ This 'fallacy of underdifferentiation' could be prevented if only planners would expose themselves to different fields and perspectives. Again, the anthropologist's view is valuable here. Kottak observes:

Projects can avoid the fallacy of underdifferentiation by paying attention to cultural diversity and the specific resources available in particular countries. Social and economic benefits follow when projects are culturally compatible, when they harness existing resources and traditional organizations, when they address locally perceived goals for change, and when they have proper (and flexible) social designs for implementation.²⁶

Recommendations:

²² Kempner, Ken and Jurema, Ana Loureiro. "The Global Politics of Education: Brazil and the World Bank, Higher Education," Vol. 43, No. 3, Globally, Nationally, and Locally Patterned Changes in Higher Education. (Apr., 2002). pg. 337

²³ Kempner and Jurema, 340

²⁴ Kempner and Jurema, 340

²⁵ Kempner and Jurema, 331

²⁶ Kottak, 726

Follow these guidelines for designing projects that are more holistic and strategic:

- Take a moment to map out the situation and its context, in all of its broad complexity. Acknowledge all of the interconnected factors and try to pinpoint a feasible, strategic point in the web that could be changed to improve the situation and have a positive ripple affect. From there figure out how this change can be produced.
- Expose your perspective, ideas, and plans to others in different disciplines to get their thoughts and advice.
- Strategic does not mean easy and superficial. When mapping out the situation, recognize what the deeper, more challenging problem is and address that in your project from as many different angles as possible, using a multidisciplinary pool of knowledge, actors and resources.
- Partner with other relevant entities within the development industry and across other disciplines and sectors.
- Borrow models, strategies and best practices from other disciplines, industries and sectors.
- Use toolkits from a variety of sources and frameworks.

III. The insularity of the development industry has led to a development culture and mentality which limits the positive results of its projects and often contributes to negative impacts.

Association with the same international organizations and functions creates a subculture that to some extent overrides national, ethnic, and individual differences between planners. Furthermore, any single development organization, such as the World Bank, is a multilevel sociocultural system with its own traditional organizational goals, communications networks, information flows, authority lines, territorial imperatives, rewards, punishments, associations, conflicts, rituals, habits, and decision-making procedures. This cultural dimension of development -- the culture of planners -- has hitherto been accorded too little importance.²⁷

As the excerpt implies, the culture of development planners is a very important factor in the outcome of development initiatives. Certain aspects of the development planner's culture are extremely limiting, if not self-defeating, as conveyed in Case #1. Case #2 portrays the common top-down structure of development projects and shows how this model is inherently flawed. Another common attribute within the planner culture is the tendency to want control over the general direction of a given project, which, as depicted in Case #3, is not always for the best. The fourth case, a largely unsuccessful mill project in Mali, demonstrates how development plans and the agents implementing them are often extremely rigid in the face of the unexpected or a changing contexts. The last case is an example of the industry's lack of feedback mechanisms and overall accountability in the face of project failure.

Case #1: The Planners' Culture

In his book, *The White Man's Burden*, noted economist, William Easterly, sets up a dichotomy between two types of actors: Planners and Searchers. He argues that the actors and culture that most dominate the development industry are Planners and a Planner's paradigm of overarching 'Big Plans' that impose grand, utopian ideas on contexts without acknowledging the complexity or diversity within given situations. The Planner is characterized as a good-hearted, but isolated bureaucrat who, rather than go out and work with others, seeking solutions wherever they might be, resigns himself to reformulating problems so that they seem to fit the solutions he has devised. On the other hand, the Searcher is depicted as adventurous and bold, and most importantly, in tune with reality, its whims, resources, demands and many competing interests on the ground. Easterly compares the two:

²⁷ Kottak, 729

In foreign aid, Planners announce good intentions but don't motivate anyone to carry them out; searchers find things that work and get some reward. Planners raise expectations but take no responsibility for meeting them; Searchers accept responsibility for their actions. Planners determine what to supply; Searchers find out what is in demand. Planners apply global blueprints; Searchers adapt to local conditions. Planners at the top lack knowledge of the bottom; Searchers find out what the reality is at the bottom. Planners never hear whether the planned got what it needed: Searchers find out if the customer is satisfied.²⁸

The reference to customer service implies a business perspective in the Searcher's wealth of resources to be used for finding feasible, efficient solutions to development challenges. This willingness to think beyond the tools of the development industry is in itself, a characteristic of the Searcher, and an advantage over the Planner approach. Unfortunately, actors within the development industry have traditionally been Planners; their self-imposed isolation acts only to further entrench the Planner culture and methods, which seem to be far less productive than that of the Searchers. Easterly uses the following comparison to make his point:

In a single day, on July 16 2005, the American and British economies delivered nine million copies of the sixth volume of the Harry Potter children's book series to eager fans...The was no Marshall Plan for Harry Potter, no International Financing Facility for books about underage wizards. It is heartbreaking that global society has evolved a highly efficient way to get entertainment to rich adults and children, while it can't get twelve-cent medicine to dying poor children."²⁹

There are many aspects of the Planner mentality that act as obstacles to getting things done. One such trait is the unrealistic desire to change the world overnight. As mentioned previously Planners seem to gravitate towards big utopian goals and plans, such as the often-proclaimed mission to 'eradicate poverty.' While surely this is what everyone desires in the end, it is often more productive to tackle smaller, more feasible issues piece by piece rather than be overwhelmed with the task of doing it all at once. Easterly admits that it is easy to fall into a Planner's way of posing self-defeating questions and unrealistic objectives. He writes,

I am among the many who have tried hard to find the answer to the question of what the end of poverty requires of foreign aid. I realized only belatedly that I was asking the question backward; I was captive to a planning mentality. Searchers ask the question the right way around: What can foreign aid do for poor people?³⁰

²⁸ Easterly, 5

²⁹ Easterly, 4

³⁰ Easterly, 11

In addition to often not thinking in a realistic scale, Planners also have a hard time thinking of solutions outside of the traditional development industry prescriptions. Searcher thinking requires access and exposure to other perspectives, disciplines, professions, and traditions. Sometimes the solution needed might be something academic, political or religious. Too often development planners shut their eyes to these other possibilities. James Ferguson gives an example from Lesotho during the period of his research:

One “developer” asked my advice on what his country could do “to help these people.” When I suggested that his government might contemplate sanctions against *apartheid*, he replied, with predictable irritation, “No, no! I mean *development!*” The only “advice” that is in question here is advice about how to “do development” better.³¹

While this narrow-minded Planner’s paradigm works to keep the development industry in business, it does not meet the real development needs of the world. In fact, by providing a façade of aid over the years, it may be doing more harm than good.

Case #2: Top-Down Planning

Turkana, a very poor remote province in northwestern Kenya, is very underdeveloped and vulnerable to the whims of drought. The Turkana people are semi-nomadic cattle herders who lose their livelihoods when herds die during dry spells. However, nearby Lake Turkana is teeming with fish, which are hardly used as a source of food or income by the population in the region. The development agency of Norway decided that exploiting the resources of Lake Turkana would be a good development initiative for the region, increasing incomes, employment, and stability in the face of weather patterns and climate change.³²

With these intentions, a fish-processing factory was constructed in the area during the 1980s and the herders were trained and hired as fishers and factory workers. The longstanding traditions and nomadic culture of the population were overlooked by the decision-makers at the top and the project was largely implemented without first consulting with the community.

The factory proved to be an unsustainable business due to its geographical remoteness, the nomadic culture of the workers needed to keep it up and running, and the cultural perspective on fishing in a society where owning cattle is a sign of wealth. The factory is now largely unused and has not contributed to the growth or development of the region as intended.

³¹ Ferguson, 282

³² Cocks, Tim. “Kenya’s Turkana learn from Failed Fish Project,” *International Business Times*, April 2, 2006. www.ibtimes.com

This project seems to have been doomed from its initial conception because it was not based on the demands and leadership of the community. What a Norwegian development worker considers a viable livelihood and way of living cannot be simply planted, like a hybrid seed, into a new environment and be expected to take root. A better design for a project would be based on some kind of expressed need or demand from a population and would work in harmony, not against, the everyday flow and rhythm of life in that community.

Case #3: Tendency to Take Over & Exclude

Part of the development planner's culture is to want control of the project and its general direction. This is usually accomplished by working alone or surrounded by a group of like-minded planner peers, with only slight variations in expertise, if any. While this attribute has given way to more participatory methods over time as a result of criticism, Planners still have a hard time figuring out how to help without dominating and who to include, when and how they should be included.

One example of this uncertainty on the part of development planners is in a community anti-flooding and water and sanitation project in the peri-urban outskirts of Buenos Aires.³³ The project titled, "Limpiezas de los arroyos," was initiated by a small local organization, Comité de Cuencas, comprised of a group of economists, engineers, doctors, lawyers, geographers and teachers from a middle class community in the area. The twelve members of the NGO, all educated professionals, appealed to the Municipal Government on behalf of other, less empowered, communities in the area in order to decrease floods and increase clean water and sanitation facilities.

Ultimately, the project fell through due to the passive role played by the communities. Though the organization did seek the demands of other community members before taking their collective problems to local officials, the community itself was not an active part of the solution. According to an assessment of the project,

...the NGO has historically played a mediating role between the community's needs, demands and the State's intervention. However, this role of managing community needs, articulated as practical demands, neither empowers the local community nor encourages people's participation.³⁴

The assessment demonstrates that the organization's participatory community meetings predominantly targeted the more privileged communities of the area, rather than the ones with the greatest needs. Additionally, many project decisions were made without consulting the communities. Ultimately the project itself could not sustain without the

³³ Escudero, Ghigliani & Stravato. "From Mediation to Mobilization: Lessons from an Unsuccessful Experience," IRC, 2005. found at <http://www.irc.nl/page/25071>

³⁴ Escudero, Ghigliani & Stravato, pg. 3

community's input of effort and resources. Some of the NGO members admitted failure in the end:

In this project the existing social and environmental conditions were reproduced because the organisation focused its activities mainly on the most privileged area without empowering the communities or encouraging participation or lobbying the State.

While this case has several particularities, certain aspects are common to many development projects: insufficient community participation and ownership and perpetuating pre-existing power dynamics by allowing the more privileged participants more say. Ironically, the group that planned this project consisted of a very multidisciplinary team of professionals, yet they still did not include or represent everyone. The key is to achieve a balance of diverse knowledge (i.e. multidisciplinary team) and diverse stakeholders (i.e. the poor people whose needs are being represented). It is important also to recognize that there are bound to be various, and sometimes competing, interests even among groups so homogeneously classified as 'the poor,' 'the community,' or 'the people.'

"The people" are not an undifferentiated mass. Rich and poor, women and men, city dwellers and villagers, workers and dependants, old and young; all confront different problems and devise different strategies for dealing with them. There is not one question – "what is to be done" – but hundreds: what should the mineworkers do, what should the abandoned old women do, what should the unemployed do, and on and on. It seems, at the least, presumptuous to offer prescriptions here. The toiling miners and the abandoned old women know the tactics proper to their situations far better than any expert does.³⁵

Another, more humbling, lesson to be extracted from this case is the realization that perhaps the best help is the bare minimum. Perhaps constantly intervening, planning, representing, mobilizing is not 'empowering' at all. Perhaps the most effective aid is quite specific and only given when requested. Ferguson suggests the same, writing:

It remains conceivable that at various points in these struggles, in various organizational locations, there may in fact be demands for specific kinds of advice or expertise. But, if there is advice to be given, it will not be dictating the general political strategy or giving a general answer to the question "what is to be done"...but answering specific, localized tactical questions.³⁶ ...We must entertain the strong possibility that there will be no need for what we do among such actors [in the developing world]. There is no guarantee that our knowledge and skills will be relevant. We must recognize that it is possible, too, that different kinds of knowledge and skills will be required, that the nature of our

³⁵ Ferguson, 281

³⁶ Ferguson, 282

intellectual activity itself will have to be transformed in order to participate this way.³⁷

Case #4: Rigidity in the Face of Change and the Unexpected

In 1987 an aid organization with religious backing (ORB) designed a project for installing mills in rural communities in Mali.³⁸ The women of the community were overtaxed, spending their days traveling to gather firewood and water, farming in the wet season, spinning cotton in the dry season, pounding grain and making coco butter. The purpose of the project was to work through women and local churches to operate and maintain the mill, which would relieve some of the work burden of the local community, especially the women.

In order to implement the mill project the ORB sent a young American worker named Pierre to the project sites in Mali with strict instructions and conditions for the management of the mills. The mills, their equipment and finances, were to be managed only by the women's associations of the communities, in affiliation with local churches. A second condition was that the president and treasurer of the women's association/mill management team had to be Christian women and the vice president and secretary, Muslim women, in order to facilitate 'collaboration across religions.' The third condition was that, in spite of the low income of the community, the mill's operation would be dependent on the payments of the population and ten percent of the profits would go to a local church as tithe.

The most stringent aspect of the ORB conditions was its inflexibility in the face of unexpected factors and unanticipated social incompatibility. Upon Pierre's arrival in the rural setting of Kafinare, Mali, where he was directed to install the ORB mills project, he was surprised to discover that the community already had a locally run mill. The mill, though only two years old and still very functional, was barely making ends meet due to the competition of another mill in the next town over (15k away) and the seasonality of mill usage by the community women. In spite of the fragile situation Pierre found himself in, he went along with the rigid ORB plan which caused a rift of loyalties within the community from the outset of the project. Furthermore the inflexible conditions for the management of the mill were not relevant to the context of Kafinare. The women were not organized into an association, and were not pleased with being asked to take on the full responsibility of physically maintaining and managing the finances of the mill, activities usually delegated to men. The women, directed to create their formal association, ended up electing the officials based on a mélange of the ORB requirements and their own common sense (contradicting the ORB requirements). While Pierre had

³⁷ Ferguson, 287

³⁸ Carlson, Joyce. "The Stranger's Eyes," *Notes on Anthropology and Intercultural Community Work*, 20:34-38, Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1995. www.sil.org

enthusiastically boasted that the project would be up and running in three months and men and women of the community invested time and money into building it, the mills did not start working until a full year later.

Two weeks after the grand opening Pierre left Mali. By then three out of the four mills he had installed in the region were already broken. A week later the Kafinare mill stopped working. Pierre, having thought ahead that this might occur since, after all, the mill stones were made for grinding coffee beans and not grain, had arranged for a local textile company to perform all repairs of the nearby mills. However, having no written contract signed, and Pierre and the ORB long gone, the community had not means of holding the company to their agreement.

This case is riddled with obvious mistakes. The first puzzling decision on the part of Pierre and the ORB was to go ahead with the project at a location that already had a functional, locally-run mill. This and the rigid conditions for the ORB mill's management demonstrate a decisive top-down approach in which the actual needs and demands of the community are not really considered. Also, while 'empowering women' is a good objective of a project, this should be done by allowing women to express their own needs and participate in the planning process; not by having them carry the burden of operating an ill-designed project. Even when focusing on women, it is essential to include men in the process in order for the project and the hoped-for gender equality to be sustainable. Capacity building was another essential element of the project that was missing; instead of depending on an unreliable partner for repairs, the ORB should have invested in training community members how to build, maintain, and perhaps even improve the mills. The ORB project would have been more successful if managed by someone more familiar with the local culture and context of Kafinare and someone who would not simply go home without follow-up after the opening of the mills.

Case #5: Lack of Accountability and Feedback

“Planners with no feedback and accountability cannot impose a system of feedback and accountability!”³⁹

Often projects created to solve water scarcity address the issue by installing cheap hardware, such as water pumps, without investing in training the local population to maintain the equipment. An article on the WaterAid website narrates the story of Aliseni Kimo, an aged maize farmer in northern Mozambique, suffering during four days of diarrhea after drinking unsafe water from a nearby swamp.⁴⁰ Even though Kimo's village does have a pump, it is not functioning- hasn't been for years, according to the residents. This is a common story. Water pumps are cheap, easy hardware carelessly installed by

³⁹ Easterly, 116

⁴⁰ Caroll, Rory. “Broken Pumps, Dashed Dreams,” *WaterAid Mozambique: Kwilazia*, www.wateraid.org.

aid organizations and development projects rushing to move on to the next town or the next initiative. Though the pumps are said to last up to 14 years, in some cases they have stopped working after only a few days. The community is then left ill-equipped and unprepared to buy new parts and perform technical repairs to make the hardware sustainable.

Although technology and cheap hardware are necessary to provide people with water, they must be accompanied by the necessary 'software' to make the project sustainable and include the benefiting community. The term software includes more social science-related practices like capacity building, qualitative assessments, health and education programs, and the creation of management/maintenance schemes according to social structures, dynamics and demands. It is also important for the community to be actively involved in decision-making from the very beginning of the project. One recommendation made in the article is to provide communities with information about their various hardware options (pump or well) and allow them to decide which to install according to their needs and maintenance capacities.

But the common example of broken water pumps holds another lesson, perhaps one deeper than a need for accompanying programs. The development industry must ask itself, “Who and/or what holds me accountable?” True, Aliseni Kimo, the old farmer in Mozambique, and others like him, do sometimes manage to expose the fact that development projects fail. But once this fact is admitted, does any agency rush back to insure the problem is addressed correctly?

This all-too-common lack of accountability and feedback from the “beneficiaries” of development projects is a trait of the industry. Perhaps looking beyond the industry’s own solutions to the paradigms and models of other disciplines is necessary to find an out-of-the-box solution. The business world, for example, has a very successful accountability and feedback model within the customer service framework. Merging aspects of other disciplines into the industry’s culture and practice could work wonders, or at the very least, get some water pumps running.

Recommendations:

Follow these steps in order to break the bonds of the Planner’s culture

- Read material from other disciplines (academia, business, consultants...)
- Base projects on a demand, not on an idea you want to see realized. Conduct market research to determine what is in demand.
- Community participation is essential – try to include the broadest range of knowledge, experience, demographics, expertise, and demands as possible.
- Realize and accept when there is no demand for what you have to offer or when you are not able to adequately address the demand.

- Be flexible to the unexpected or changing aspects of the context. Keep the original intention, to help or provide a service, in mind while remaining open to changing your methods.
- Incorporate feedback and accountability mechanisms in projects, borrowing concepts and practices from other disciplines.

Conclusion:

While we have not tried to argue that multidisciplinary collaborations are the key to radically changing the development industry, the cases presented do demonstrate that the lack of multidisciplinary collaborations does have a negative impact and does contribute to the failure of many development projects. More specifically, we have found that without consulting people, information and/or other resources from other sectors:

- I. Planners fail to fully understand the complexity of contexts;
- II. Planners gravitate towards grandiose, general, sectarian and superficial solutions rather than holistic and strategic ones;
- III. Planners, in their development bubble, merely reinforce attitudes and habits of the industry that lead to unsustainable projects.

This research should help development planners recognize the value of collaborating with other disciplines, sectors and industries. This realization will increase the effectiveness of the development industry as a whole and ultimately produce more positive results.