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Blocked learning in development aid? Reporting success rather than failure in Andhra Pradesh, India

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This article aims to understand why development organizations tend to report project success rather than failure which blocks learning from project problems. Drawing on the case of a World Bank forestry project in Andhra Pradesh, India, the article analyses different interlinked sites of project learning activities facilitated by monitoring & evaluation, and investigates the way in which project information is used for project reporting. The results point to multi-layered blockages to project learning from problems. These include formats of indicators and project visits; the criteria used for project fund disbursement and staff career promotion within recipient governments and development organizations; and asymmetrical power relations, collusion and collaboration among project actors. The article calls for a critical need to restructure the existing organizational incentive structures within recipient governments and development organizations to cultivate a culture of learning from problems.

Keywords: development aid; monitoring and evaluation; knowledge management; organizational learning; development projects; World Bank; India

Introduction

In development aid, project learning is typically facilitated by monitoring and evaluation (M&E) where information about project progress and effects on the target population and resources is collected to evaluate its performance against its stated objectives. A key objective of M&E is to find out what works and what does not and the reasons why to better achieve development objectives (World Bank 2007, Young 2012). Following this logic, project learning must entail identification and correction of project errors. Existing studies, however, have argued that project learning is rather selective, mainly drawing on 'what works' whereas the information of 'what does not work' are rarely incorporated for project learning (Hulme 1987; Edwards, 1997; Berg, 2000). Hulme (1987) refers to this kind of learning practice as

'selective learning'. Here, development organizations tend to incorporate the kind of knowledge that indicates success while ignoring or omitting the kind of knowledge that points to failure. Success, in these cases, takes the form of tangible progress and achievements in accordance with project objectives. Failure on the other hand, takes the form of incompliance of stated objectives and organizational principles.

Edwards (1997) cautions that selective learning may invoke a significant risk of repeating same mistakes or even exacerbating the extent and magnitude of problems. Such risk can be a matter of a grave concern not only for local populations who may be adversely affected by projects but also for development organizations. For the unreported or uncorrected problems can eventually result in project breakdown, which damages organizational reputation. For instance, Wade (2011)'s study on the World Bank funded Sardar Sarover project in India showed that local and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) came to organize worldwide large-scale campaigns and demonstrations against the project due to its increasingly visible destructive effects. As a consequence, the Bank was forced to withdraw its funding from the project.

Despite such risks with selective learning, this type of organizational practice to focus on success rather on failures seems to perpetuate and persist. In order to find out why this may be the case, this article conducts an in-depth study of M&E activities of a World Bank forestry project in Andhra Pradesh, India.

From organizational to network analyses

Existing literature within development studies offer some insights into why development organizations tend to report success over failures and thereby do not learn from failures. Broadly, these insights relate to 1) M&E performance indicators, 2) organizational pressures, and 3) the role of project actors and their relations, as detailed in the following.

Firstly, some analysts attribute the reason to organizational factors such as the way information is acquired through M&E. M&E activities entail development of *quantifiable performance indicators* against which projects evaluate the achievements against stated objectives. For example, these indicators may include the number of project beneficiaries and the number of roads built by a project. Baviskar (2005) and Schreckenberg (2010) argue, however, that quantifiable indicators tend to conceal social and political project effects which are not easily measurable. For instance, the number of project beneficiaries does not provide information of who among these beneficiaries are active/inactive in executing the project, and more qualitative approaches as an alternative or supplement to such quantifiable indicators are disadvantaged by being considered weak and subjective by its critics (Pasgaard 2013). Moreover, since M&E mainly captures a project's impacts on 'targeted population and resources', project impacts on population and resources that fall outside the target tend to remain invisible (Saito-Jensen and Jensen, 2010). Baviskar (2005) and Chambers (2006)

further highlight the tendency for project teams to visit relatively successful project sites, close to the road and interview beneficiaries who are willing to showcase project successes rather than project failures (ibid). Due to this, the project information that development organizations acquire through their project visits is often limited to what supports the project rationale.

Secondly, other analysts point to different organizational factors for explaining the reporting of project success over failure. Wade's (2011) study highlights a development organization's defensive attitude, which leads to the refusal to officially acknowledge criticisms of its project that may lead to a delay or cancellation of projects. Such defensive attitude may be created due to *organizational pressure* to ensure the project continuity and the flow of funding (Baviskar 2005, Li 2007). In his study of the World Bank's learning, Goldman (2005) argues that such pressure operates even at the individual level. He noted that the Bank's internal promotion structure (where career advancement depends on the number of the 'successful' projects that they manage) created a strong incentive for individual staff to manage as many projects as possible and to claim success for them. In consequence, little time were given for in-depth learning from project experiences, and any findings that seriously question the credibility of their projects were overlooked or suppressed. In a similar vein, Milne and Adams (2012) explain how complicated struggles over resources within communities can simply be ignored by the conservation project staff, and ironically, this often serves to reinforce the stereotyped romantic images of communities the very same institutions may wish to challenge (Leach and Mearns, 1996) These organizational explanations provide valuable insights into why development organizations tend not to learn from project practice by reporting success over failure. Yet, they do not fully explain why selective learning perpetuates and persists.

Thus, thirdly, as Mosse (2005) argues, project learning (M&E) involves not only development organizations, but also other *project actors* such as villagers, NGOs, recipient governments and consultants. These actors also play an important role in facilitating learning practice and outcomes. There is thus a need to go beyond organizational analyses that focus on internal structure of development organizations and their practices in isolation from other project actors.

Drawing on Latour's theory of translation, Mosse (2005) argues that studies of development practice should attend to specific relations (networks) constituted among project actors that shape a particular knowledge about a project such as its 'success' and 'failure'. According to Latour (1986), there are human and non-human actors (such as indicators, criteria, and reporting formats) both of which possess the capacity to share how information is *translated*. For instance, quantifiable indicators automatically may limit a project's social and political impacts from being reported. Some project actors may pass on, ignore or modify project information for further reporting. As a consequence of translations, each time project

information moves from one place to another, the nature of project information (knowledge) is likely to transform. But Latour (1986) adds that the certain knowledge claim becomes more powerful than others only when many actors are enrolled in 'networks' where heterogeneous actors are associated in support of the claim. Conversely, the consequence of failure to assure such support is that knowledge claims are weakened or become irrelevant or illegitimate.

In his study of a project of the UK Department for International Development (DFID) in India, Mosse (2005) documented that project activities led to the formation of a particular network of actors who collectively engaged in translation of project knowledge effectively manufacturing the image of project success. These translational activities necessitated strategic and purposeful collaboration and compromise of various actors including villagers, NGOs, government officers and consultants. Mosse's study has illuminated the important role of network in shaping particular outcomes of project learning which cuts across different sites.

Analytical framework and methods

Drawing on the analytical concept of translation and an empirical case of a World Bank forestry project in Andhra Pradesh state of India, this article aims to unpack the processes and results of project learning, i.e., how information about project progress and effects on the target population and resources is collected at different sites of project learning. In the case of the World Bank project, these sites include (1) project sites where field officers of recipient government collect village level information, (2) recipient governments where village level information is aggregated for reporting, and (3) World Bank where project team learns from project experiences.

At each site, the article examines (1) what kinds of actors (e.g. project implementers, local villagers, M&E performance indicators and organizational factors) interact in collecting information to report on project progress and effects (2) what kinds of networked relations these interactions give rise to, and (3) how the network shapes what kind of information is enrolled or removed for project reporting. For the analysis, particular attention is paid to the collection and transformation of project information, to the manufacturing of project success, and finally, to how this image of a successful project crystalizes within the World Bank.

The case analyses draws on two kinds of experiences in analysing the project. One is the first authors' own experience of a one week official mission to investigate the case study project in May, 2005 where she participated as a World Bank officer accompanied by a high-ranking forest department officer to visit several villages pre-selected by him. The other kind of experience is her longer-term five-month independent research experience conducted as a part of a PhD research on the same project during the period between May 2005- January 2008 in Andhra Pradesh. This research was supplemented by follow-up interviews conducted in

October 2007 and November 2008 with the World Bank staff who are engaged in project reporting and management.

Within Andhra Pradesh, the five villages were selected for a case study. Two of these villages (referred to as K1 and K2) are located in a remote area, the forest-dense Khammam District. Both villages are small-sized tribal villages around 40 households each. The other three, M1, M2 and M3 are located in the forest-scarce Medak District close to the state capital city. These three villages are large-sized (ranging from 150 to 400 households) and composed of mixed social groups. All villages except for M3 constituted forest protection committees after 1996. M3 was simply not included in the project because not enough forest was available due to the forest scarcity in Medak.

For data collection, the first author conducted semi-structured and open-ended interviews with a total of 133 villagers and questionnaire surveys with 561 villagers. Informants were asked questions related to subjects such as their main reason for joining the project, kinds of project activities they participate in, and their perceptions of benefits and losses accrued from the project, and of changes in forest conditions. Additionally, the first author conducted semi-structured interviews with 10 forest department staff at different levels, beat, section, ranger, district and state levels and 8 local NGO staff members.

In the following, the background of the case study is briefly outlined, followed by empirical findings from the field research conducted by the first author. These findings are further discussed as framed earlier, in terms of project reporting facilitated by M&E performance indicators, organisational pressures and the role of project actors, with the aim to understand why and how development organization tend to report project success over failures, which in turn blocks the learning from project problems.

The case study: World Bank Forest Management Project, Andhra Pradesh

Prior to 1990s, the government with the right over forests and rural forest dependent people without the rights have had frequent conflicts over the forest utilization, which often resulted in further degradation of forests. In 1990, the government of India introduced Joint Forest Management (JFM) partly to resolve the historical conflicts but mainly to better achieve effective forest protection and conservation. JFM recognizes forest dependent people as co-managers of forests through creating a partnership between forest protection committees consisting of forest dependent villagers and the forest department for forest management and protection (GOI, 1990). Under JFM, these villagers are officially granted with the right to use some forest products at least for subsistence use.

In Andhra Pradesh, the World Bank funded forestry project was implemented in two phases (the first from 1994 to 2000 and the second from 2002 to 2010) with the forest department as recipient government. The second project was introduced as a follow-up to the first but shifted the project's main objective from forest conservation and protection towards promoting the participation and livelihood improvement of forest dependent communities. This was in consequence of the lessons from the first project suggesting that the realization of livelihood needs from forests is a crucial developmental goal and but also an important means to assure better forest protection and conservation (World Bank, 2002). The following analysis refers mainly to the objectives, activities and effects of the second project as it is more recent.

To achieve the project objectives, the second project developed 'creating an enabling environment', 'forest management', and 'community development' as integral project components (ibid.). The project also developed *performance indicators* for M&E. These include the size of forests treated and the size of plantation established (to assess impacts on *forest management*), and the number of forest protection committee members enrolled and trained in forest management operations, the number of micro plans prepared, the frequency of forest protection committee meetings, increase in NTFP derived incomes (*to assess impacts on community participation and their livelihood improvement*) (ibid.).

Mixed project effects on policies

Since 1994, the project brought about numerous policy changes through the issuance of administrative orders to make the project run according to its objectives. According to the order issued in 2004 (GoAP, 2004), forest protection committees should take a primary responsibility for preparing a micro plan to design and implement forest management and protection activities. Committees should carry out forest protection activities and would be rewarded 50% of fines if they apprehend offenders to the forest department. Members would also receive daily wages for forest management activities and rights to a share of various forest resources for subsistence and sale. Grassroots NGOs became mediators between the forest department and committees in supporting the JFM implementation. By the time the project was completed in 2010, 5,153 forest protection committees had been established under the project (World Bank 2010). The above policy changes were all in accordance with project objectives. However, these policies were implemented in variable ways as shown in the five case villages.

Variable degrees of participation of forest protection committees in project activities

In Khammam, empirical findings from the case study show that forest department field officers dominated the project activities, which hindered the meaningful participation of both villages (K1 and K2). The officers devised micro plans for forest management works, and facilitated these works where villagers participated as a wage labour. According to interviews with informants, the officers never paid the stipulated 50 per cent of fines as a reward when villagers apprehended illegal loggers to the forest department. Similarly, in Medak, officers

played a dominant role in micro plan making, and both villages participated in forest management works only as a wage labour. Yet, both villages played a significant role in forest protection by devising their own rules for forest use and employing forest guards to protect forests from other villagers. They captured and collected fines from other villagers who illegally harvested forest products from their territories assigned under the project.

Diverse effects on forest protection and improvement

Results from interviews and surveys indicated that in Khammam, both villages completely stopped forest protection activities due to lack of the support (reward) from forest department. This resulted in continuous degradation of their forests. In Medak, rigorous forest protection activities led to regeneration of the forests only in M1 as indicated by the survey results. In the case of M2, its committee collapsed due to the internal conflicts over benefit distribution, this resulted in rapid degradation of their forests.

Mixed results on livelihood improvement of forest dependent people

In Khammam, the case study shows that the project had limited impacts on livelihood improvement. Interviews with villagers revealed how they received small daily payments of Rs40 for forest management works, far below the official rates ranging from Rs50 to 90. According to the villagers, this happened because officers had deducted portions of the payments to fill in their pockets. Due to limited benefits, most village informants viewed the project as merely a government sponsored off-season employment project**.** In Medak, empirical findings show that the project's impacts on the villagers' livelihoods were mixed. M1 has come to enjoy increased amounts of forest products because of forest regeneration and revenues generated from fees and fines, whereas M2 completely lost such gains due to the breakdown of the committee. Yet, a far more damaging effect was observed within non-project villages, such as M3 which were excluded from the project. Since the project inception, the villagers in M3 have lost access to nearby forests that was allocated to other villages for management and have been punished with large amounts of fines when they harvest products from forests managed by project villages.

Even though these brief observations may not provide a complete picture of the project and its effects, it is obvious that actual impacts of the project are diverse where some were in accordance with its objectives but others ran counter to them. From the next section, the article examines what information actually gets enrolled, ignored or modified by project actors for project reporting.

At project sites: beginning transformation of project knowledge

At project sites, field officers collect project information, for example from villagers, grassroots NGOs and project documents. In Khammam, villagers and NGOs showed strong hesitation to address project flaws and problems. It took some time before the villagers began to express their views of the project and officers. One villager said to the first author:

> *If you promise not to tell the forest department what I say: they have harassed us for a long time… Even though their harassment reduced after JFM, they still broke a number of promises. They never paid us our share of fines from the illegal loggers we handed over to the forest department. So, we are very angry…. This is why many of us boycotted meetings organized by the officers…*

This villager clearly fears that officers would use this information against them. His remark also indicates that despite the project rhetoric of a *partnership*, officers' authoritative attitude remained. And so did villagers' fear for the officers, who had long punished them as forest offenders or encroachers before the project initiation. Similar to villagers, grassroots NGO staff were concerned that the author's research findings on what they consider 'politically sensitive' subjects such as illicit revenue generated for the forest department would harm their *collaboration* with the forest department, which provided funding to them for the project facilitation.

In contrast, in Medak, the case study findings show that villagers and NGOs expressed little fear in addressing problems with officers. The M1 committee even openly accused the officers of the misuse of the project fund and managed to claim their fair shares. The M3 non-project village reported numerous times to the district forest officer about the damage caused by the project and pledged him to provide solutions. They could do so because the villagers in Medak, being significantly more educated than the ones in Khammam, were well aware of their rights and came to claim their rights with the officers as a large-sized collective group rather than individuals. And importantly, a grassroots NGO in Medak assisted the villagers in these efforts. It is worth noting that this NGO was financially independent, hence, without the pressing need to maintain a collaborative relationship with the forest department.

These examples indicate that villagers' and NGOs' motivations to report problems were shaped largely by their relations with officers. Some deliberately refrained from taking action for fear of punishment or due to the interest to collude with officers to retain project benefits. Others, relatively free from such fear or interest, showed less hesitation in addressing problems for solutions. However, even in the latter case, the officers rarely acknowledge and respond to these problems. The next section examines the kinds of information actually used for M&E and the underlining reasons for why the project information on project problems were left aside.

Within recipient government: manufacturing project knowledge of success

For M&E, field officers collect information about each project village to report to higher-ranking officers. Such information is collected from micro plans for forest management and other related activities, account books on project related income and expenditures, meeting

minutes, work attendance records on types and daily wage rates of forest management activities and official records on forest management works such as size of forests treated and plantation established. These documents and records are generally under the control of, or monitored regularly by, the field officers.

The kinds of project information that these officers registered for project reporting were ones that aligned well with the project objectives. These indicate a high degree of *community participation, tangible forest improvement*, and *livelihood improvement of project villagers.* For example, according to the micro plans of K1 and K2 in Khammam, villagers, the officers, and an NGO *participated* in making the plans. According to their meeting minutes, meetings were held regularly and attended by a majority of members. According to their forest work records, a significant size of forest areas were treated and planted. According to their work attendance records, committees received 'official' wage rates ranging from Rs50 to 88 for their forest management works. Meanwhile, the kinds of information that did not routinely enter into project reporting were ones that contradicted the project objectives. For instance, the above information contained no reference to the fact that officers in Khammam did not support forest protection activities conducted by committees. Nor did the reports contain the information of actual low wages Rs40 paid to committees. The information also concealed the fact that the actual participation of villagers in Khammam was quite limited. The information about forest work also does not show the actual condition of forests where some treated or plantation areas were under recovery or re-growth while treatment of other areas failed. Finally, the information that addresses any side effects on non-project villages such as M3 village in Medak is simply not used.

These information are aggregated for reporting to the project manager at the forest department, among the highest ranking within the organizational hierarchy. By the time project knowledge reaches him, an image of a successful project is further emphasized. An implementation report, prepared by the forest department in 2007, solely remarks on project progress and achievements (Andhra Pradesh Forest Department 2007). According to these reports, the project successfully promoted the participation of forest protection committees; the project had positive impact on forests (by noting that 343,256 ha of forest areas were treated, exceeding the original target 315,800 ha); and the project improved the livelihood of the forest dependent (by noting that 23.8 million man-days of employment had been generated during 2005-06). In addition, the forest department issued a project brochure entitled: 'light at the end of the tunnel: sparks of success' (Andhra Pradesh Forest Department, 2005), showcasing a number of successful stories from project sites with pictures of smiling villagers.

The above results of M&E clearly point to recipient government's strong interest to showcase project success. Here, individual officers' motivations and agency to address problems were also supressed as exemplified by the following quote from a group of interviewed field officers.

> *We [the field officers] think that JFM is a 99% failure. But even though we address problems with JFM implementation to higher-ranking officers, they do not listen to us…. They just order us to do our jobs, as they say.*

In sum, the project knowledge that built on the project's achievements was constructed whereas the project information that contradicted the project rationale was ignored, removed, or modified to fit the project objectives. Additionally, negative side effects on the surrounding population of the project area were simply not captured by indicators that focused solely on the effects within the project areas. One of the reasons relates to the particular pressure created by the criteria for project fund disbursements. Since the continuation of its funding depends on the demonstration of tangible progress such as the numbers of activities conducted under the project against the stated targets, officers across all levels are under pressure to actively seek the information on project achievements. In addition, since the promotion of officers depends on work performances including successful implementation of the project, individuals are discouraged to search for and take responsibilities for project problems for the fear of criticism or punishment in the forms of demotion or losing jobs.

Within the Bank: crystalizing the image of a successful project

Within the Bank, a project team utilizes the information provided by recipient government as well as conducts project visits in order to learn directly about project experiences for project learning. This section examines whether the project visits conducted by the team simply support the project knowledge that were already constructed by the recipient government or serve to supplement, modify or challenge it.

Project visits take place once or twice a year for one to two weeks. According to an interviewed project team leader, due to the limited time and budget allocated for project visits, a team tends to choose relatively accessible villages which usually receive more project support than remote villages. And because visits are generally organized by recipient government (with vested interests in demonstrating success), the project team is likely to be taken to model villages and to talk with beneficiaries who are willing to showcase success. The presence of a high-ranking officer is also likely to discourage informants from sharing project information which contradicts the project objectives.

When recipient government organizes project visits, this frames where the Bank investigates project effects and limits whom the Bank can talk with. The evaluations drawn from such type of visits are likely to crystallize the image of success as shown in the following two examples. One is the authors' own evaluation drawn as a result of her one-week official project visit to several villages pre-selected by the forest department officer. At the project site, field officers, NGOs and villagers together showcased the project's numerous positive impacts on forest conservation and livelihood improvement. As a result of the visit, the author wrote the project evaluation report that was unequivocally positive about project impacts with no references to

its failures or unintended side effects. A similar type of evaluation was made by a project team leader who conducted a number of visits to the same project. During an interview, he highlighted a full ownership of villagers in their project activities in making micro plans, managing their forests and generating significant income under the project.

Such crystallized image of success can also be found in the implementation completion report of the first project that the project team submitted to the board of the Bank in 2010 (World Bank, 2010). The report remarks 'the project has substantially alleviated poverty… while it successfully increased forest cover through mobilizing communities' (p15, ibid.). As such, the Bank's project team rates the overall outcome of the project as 'satisfactory'. It is however worth noting that there were no statements of problems that the project gave a rise to. Also, the above numbers need scrutiny since they were produced as a result of aggregating village level data as illustrated in the previous section. If most of data are manufactured through selective use of data as observed in this article, the full trustworthiness of the data can be questioned.

One may conclude that it is mainly due to the recipient government's strong interest to showcase success as well as a variety of practical constraints associated with project visits that the Bank project team learns mainly from project success, i.e., rarely learns about project problems. But such interest can be detected in the response of the project team leader to the author's research findings on adverse and unintended project effects:

> *I am aware that among 5,000 forest protection committees under the project, around 1,000 have demonstrated a number of remarkable achievements…. The committees you studied may belong to the rest of 4,000…If we devote our resources equally to all 5,000 committees, it is difficult to lift all up to a higher level. In this case, the project's overall achievement would be quite limited…... But by concentrating our resources on these 1,000 committees, we can demonstrate successful examples which we hope spill over to other villages….*

According to him, due to the challenge to ensure success in all 5,000 committees, his strategy is to focus on 1,000 well-performing committees and to evaluate the project performance based on them. But such a strategy also renders the adverse effects which arise outside these committees of little concern to the Bank project team. More importantly, his theory of *spill-over* may not hold true in practice. Examples of the case study villages demonstrated that the success in one village does not automatically replicate itself in other villages since the villages implement the project activities in variable ways depending on their political and social contexts. Hence, unless the project learns about what may constitute obstacles for these villages to meet the objectives, presumed spill-over effects are likely to be limited.

His comments can be understood as part of an organizational context where project team is under pressure to actively seek the information on project achievements to make sure the timely disbursement of funds. Also, at the Bank, staff's promotion is closely tied to the quantity of projects that they manage and their project performance. This encourages staff to manage as many projects as possible, leaving little time for in-depth learning about each project, and making them rely on brief project visits organized by recipient government. Also, few want to seek out project problems since they don't want to be identified as managers of failed projects.

Why are development projects not permitted to learn from their problems?

Drawing on the case study, this article aimed to understand the reasons why development organizations focus on project success rather than on failures, and thereby tend not to learn from project problems. To do so, the article analysed three interlinked sites of project learning activities facilitated by M&E. At each site, the article examined how different actors interacted in the collection and transformation of project information to manufacture project success, and how this image of a successful project crystalized as a result of the interactions. Particular attention was paid to the role of project actors and their relations, and how organizational factors, such as project indicators, project evaluation criteria, and promotion systems of the recipient government and the World Bank shaped particular networks as well as kinds of information that can be included for project reporting.

At the project site, some NGOs and villagers made the strategic choice not to raise critical viewpoints on the project for fear of punishment by officers, or their interests to collude with the officers to maintain their working relations or to access to project benefits. Even when villagers and NGOs pointed to problems, their remarks were simply dismissed by officers and thus did not enter project reporting documents through M&E.

At the recipient government, officers responsible of M&E reporting, selectively enrolled the information that pointed to project achievements in accordance with stated objectives but did not enrol the information that contradicted the project rationale.

At the World Bank, the image of a successful project was further crystalized with no references to project failures. This type of selective learning took place partly due to the limited budget and time allocated for project visits which hindered the project team from conducting an in-depth and long-term investigation of project impacts on both project and non-project areas. Instead, the project team had to rely on a brief visit organized by recipient government to accessible showcase villages. These villages generally receive more project support than remote villages and are willing to affirm project success. But major reasons for the selective learning are the criteria used for project fund disbursement as well as for internal

promotion systems. The continuation of its project disbursement depends on the demonstration of tangible progress and the promotion of officers and Bank staff depends on work performances including successful implementation of the project. These criteria led to the formation of a collective interest among recipient government officers and Bank staff to translate project information to highlight project success while leaving contradictory project impacts unreported. Such interest was seen in the way that these two parties selectively used M&E performance indicators to emphasize project achievements but to mask its adverse and unintended consequences. It was also seen in that the project team presented little interest to question or alter the way project visit was organized by the recipient government and the way the overall performance of the project was evaluated.

Overall, one network (characterized by asymmetrical power relations, collusion and collaboration) was formed at a project site to disregard the information that contradicted the project rationale. Another network was formed within recipient government and the Bank to demonstrate successes but to leave problems unreported. These two networks were aligned nicely together to engineer the image of a successful project but to constitute multi-layered blockages to learning from problems.

On 29 October 2009, at the World Bank, the first author presented the findings on project learning practice and flagged the importance of learning from the project failures. Around 25 Bank staff participated, including those with prior experiences of managing Bank's projects. It is worth noting that the author's presentation on mixed project effects and blocked learning was followed by another presentation by a Bank staff on the project achievements to *balance* the views of the project. Yet, nobody opposed to the findings made by the author. On the contrary, several participants shared their own experiences facing the obstacles in addressing project problems. For instance, one former project team member of Malawi's social fund project, frequently featured as a best practice project within the Bank, shared her story to the audience: she was accused for being a 'liar' by the project team when she pointed out problems with the project.

These participants' responses indicate that the case is not an isolated one. But they also indicate that there are people at the Bank who are committed to detecting and correcting adverse and unintended effects. There are also some villagers, NGOs, officers, and development organizational staff who have personal motivation to report on problems. However, such individual motivation is not institutionally cultivated or encouraged. This raises a question of what are effective ways to facilitate project learning from problems both at individual and organizational levels.

The article highlights the critical need to restructure the existing organizational incentives within recipient governments and development organizations to cultivate a culture of learning of problems. First, there is a need to modify criteria used for project fund disbursement as

well as for internal promotion systems. For instance, a project performance document could include assessments of both recipient government and project team of problems that the project encountered in project implementation and of how they dealt with the identified problems. Specifically, such assessments should supplement the existing quantitative performance indicators with indicators of a more qualitative and political character (Schreckenberg 2010) and any problems encountered should be actively followed up and re-assessed. Likewise, the criteria to evaluate staff performance (that affects their future career advancement) should take into due consideration their capacity to learn from and solve the problems encountered, instead of exclusively considering tangible project progress as shown in the case study. Based on the project assessments, rewards can be offered to all project actors who point out and correct problems for example, in the form of official acknowledgement of their pro-activeness, promotion of staff and more funds to the project instead of punishment, demotion and losing jobs. In addition, a culture of in-depth learning should be instituted instead of a culture of quick learning. For this to happen, this paper points to several specific potentials to be realized. Development organizations should (1) allocate more funds for supervision to allow for a longer project visit to both project and out-side project areas, instead of brief visits to selected showcase villages, (2) use broader sets of indicators as mentioned to capture more qualitative, social and political aspects of project effects that are not easily quantified and to monitor unintended project effects on surrounding populations, and (3) encourage and expand collaboration across development organizations and academic institutions to be able to draw findings from independent evaluations conducted by a third parties to the mutual benefit of development organizations, researchers/students, and intended project beneficiaries.

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