Crossing the river by feeling each stone

Learning and scaling what works in an uncertain world

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“The piecemeal engineer knows, like Socrates, how little he knows. He knows that we can learn only from our mistakes.

Accordingly, he will make his way, step by step, carefully comparing the results expected with the results achieved, and always on the look-out for the unavoidable unwanted consequences of reform”
An accidental example of piecemeal engineering

What happened after the UN Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) gave Liberia $15 million?
Why do men fight, riot, commit crimes, and rebel?

What’s a process for answering this question and designing appropriate programs
How to prevent and respond to violence

Early warning systems, dispute resolution, ethnic conflict reconciliation, mob justice
The path to 12 pilot projects

- Joint donor/government steering committee
- Cursory diagnostic
- Open call within a few broad strategic priorities
- Made learning and evaluation a criterion
- Received dozens of proposals
- Selected 12 on merit and fit with aims
- Attracted significant monitoring and evaluation funds
One example: Reintegrating high risk young men

Ex-combatants and other men in “hotspots”, engaged in illicit gold mining, rubber extraction, etc.
4-month program of agricultural training and capital

With some variation in whether people received capital
We learned a good deal by just piloting and monitoring

- Learned how hotspots operated
  - What the highest risk men wanted
  - How to engage them peacefully
  - What incentives coaxed squatters off land

- High risk men were almost all interested in agriculture
  - Even relatively senior commanders
  - This was the opposite of the received wisdom

- Developed and fine-tuned a curriculum for uneducated men

- “Socialization” seemed as important as skills training
We also learned from a randomized evaluation!

Agricultural earnings and activity by about 20%
People shifted out of illicit activities, but did not exit them.
Reduced mercenary recruitment in Côte d’Ivoire 20%

Expectations of future transfers were better at deterring mercenary recruitment than past completed programs.
Moved quickly to a new pilot with high risk urban men

Tested cash transfers and a more focused, intensive approach to “socialization”
8-week program of group cognitive behavior therapy

A year later: Dramatic reductions in crime, violence, and drug use
Other PBF pilots: Dispute resolution programs

Successful models for property rights resolution, paralegal assistance, and land titling

All evaluated
Leveraged the evaluation data to pilot early warning

Simple prediction algorithms based on 2008-10 data predicted 88% of major violence/crime outbreaks in 2012
The common denominator: experimentation

- Not in the narrow sense of randomized control trials
- In the broader sense of trying many things, learning by doing, and subsidizing new ideas
- Powerful when married with selective impact evaluation

- In principle, this is a process for learning and scaling what works
Scale up: Less successful

Moderate successes

- New campuses open for ex-combatant reintegration program
- Behavioral curriculum now being adopted and evaluated at larger scale by World Bank/government

Failures

- Many programs still “reinventing the wheel” on job/reintegration programs
- Little traction on scaling successful dispute resolution interventions
- Low take-up by other NGOs, government
- Next tranche of peacebuilding funds were not used for scaling up successes
Why too little scaling and traction?

- Not a lack of funding
- Lack of continuity in senior leadership in government and donors
  - Ministers and senior UN personnel typically in place <2 years
- Program manuals still tend to be written afresh in New York and Washington
- Untenured academics do not have a lot of time, incentives, or expertise at politicking and advertising
- Future funds hijacked by large-scale development programmes with no pilot or experimentation
“The piecemeal engineer… will avoid undertaking reforms of a complexity and scope which make it impossible for him to disentangle causes and effects, and to know what he is really doing.

“Such 'piecemeal tinkering' does not agree with the political temperament of many 'activists'.”
What did end up going to scale (before Ebola)

A copy of a Uganda program: $400/person grants to groups of youth
Most start and sustain vocational enterprises. Earnings increased 40%. Work hours increased 17%.
Why did the Uganda pilot, not the Liberia pilots, get traction in Liberia?

Answer: One guy
Missing link: More than people and connections

- Who had incentives and ability scale locally-proven programs?

- NGOs: Not clear they were interested in a program for 100,000 rather than 1,000

- Ministries: Not clear they had the capacity or credibility

- World Bank: Strong incentive to scale, but preferred pet programs rather than indigenous successes
  - Though, in this instance, they at least had evidence from elsewhere