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PACA and complexity – reflections on Burundi

In the light of recent discussions within Mesopartner on the use of complexity thinking in Local and Regional Economic Development (LRED), this article looks back at the Participatory Appraisal of Competitive Advantage (PACA) exercise in the community of Gisozi in Burundi in May–June 2013.⁵

⁵ Hindson D (2014). LED and Complex Systems: Applying PACA and The Logical Framework in Burundi, April 2014, discussion paper for Mesopartner.

We suggest that the PACA approach anticipates aspects of complexity thinking in LRED. Some of the prescriptions to promote change in complex systems are already present within PACA. PACA's effectiveness could be enhanced by taking this further.

In the last 12 years, Burundi has been struggling to recover from a protracted civil war. Following peace negotiations, development support focused first on emergency aid and then on food security. Now donors are turning to enterprise and market development. This is where the PACA exercise sought to contribute.



An article in this annual review entitled “Complexity – what’s all the fuss?” explains the Cynefin framework. This framework is a “sense-making device”. It promotes “descriptive self-awareness” among stakeholders rather than expert advice. Here we focus on complex adaptive systems (CASs), where individual and collective action results in “self-organisation”, producing “emergent trends” at the system level, an idea akin to that of “organic LED” in the PACA approach.

Drawing on this thinking, Jenal and Cunningham (2013) provide the following guidelines:

1. Open up interactive discussion and dissent.
2. Manage starting conditions and monitor for emergence using probes.
3. Promote self-regulation.

How well did the PACA exercise match up? How can PACA be further strengthened?



At its core, PACA is a bottom-up, participatory approach. That is how it was conducted in Burundi. Great care was taken to identify a host, champion and team that met most PACA criteria. The terms “personne lumière” (one who lights the way) and “personne ferment” (one who ferments change) were used in place of “champion”. These are indigenous terms, free of the “winner-takes-all” connotation. The team was large (eighteen) and its sector representation wide, which helped to foster intense interaction and deep deliberation, but at the expense of fuller fieldwork coverage. Working with a large team may be an option for future PACAs.

In the complexity approach, facilitators are advised not to “interfere” in data interpretation. Experience with PACA shows that the best way to do this is to generate the data from the process itself, and not to gather it all beforehand. In Gisozi, Porter’s Diamond, the Five Forces, Value Chain mapping and other tools were used. This facilitated deep discussion.

The primacy given to rivalry within Porter's Diamond and the Five Forces was questioned. Conscious of the devastating effects of conflict, the participants insisted on the primacy of cooperative relations. The holy cow of competition needs reconsideration in these settings, and perhaps in others too.

Self-awareness on the part of facilitators may be as important as stakeholder "descriptive self-awareness". Facilitators bring not only process tools, but also attitudes, theories and previous experience that may or may not be helpful. These are all carefully scrutinised by the stakeholders.

In hindsight, the fieldwork revealed a number of "emergent" trends, some positive, some negative, for example market-focused household production and bureaucratic interference. However, emergence in these contexts cannot be said to be "free of a central power" – the way Dave Snowden defines it. Even fragile states intervene. Donors intervene too. PACA should be re-oriented towards emergent trends, but thought must be given to the meaning of "emergence" in LRED. No locality is entirely free from all central power for very long.

The term "probe" is absent from the PACA lexicon, but "quick wins" are close to the small-scale, safe-to-fail probes envisaged. The team was reluctant to accept the quick-win logic: expectations were high that PACA would bring large-scale donor support. Playing into the process but not buying into the logic, the team agreed to apply the three criteria, but gave 25 projects the maximum score of 27 each! Further thought is needed on how to apply the quick-win logic

in post-conflict situations. Potentially, quick wins can build trust and capabilities while acting as probes, but expectations need to be better taken into account. The term "self-regulation" does not appear in the PACA manuals, but the structure set up in Gisozi was a self-regulation mechanism by another name. A day-and-a-half was devoted to setting it up, double the time usually allocated. Using complexity language, we could say that PACA's short-cycle M&E enables rapid adjustment to emergent trends. It helps to create the upward spiral which is the shared aim of PACA and the complexity approach.

There are signs that Gisozi is moving along this path. It may need further complexity-sensitive support to keep the momentum going.

Douglas Hindson
(dh@mesopartner.com)

