
18. Managing aid personnel

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INTRODUCTION

In perhaps the first ever study of development project delivery, economist Albert O. Hirschman introduced what he called the “hiding hand” (Hirschman 1967). The hiding hand at first appears to crush our hopes; Hirschman illustrates that in development project planning and implementation, we are almost always bound to underestimate the enormous difficulties we will face. Indeed, Hirschman argues, were we aware at the outset of all the implementation challenges ahead, few projects would commence. But just as our incomplete understanding leads to unanticipated obstacles, the same hiding hand allows unanticipated means to overcome those obstacles. This ability to respond to the unexpected, to adapt, is what “rescue[s] project[s]”; what makes them “particularly valuable” (Hirschman 1967).

We commonly talk as if development projects have the capacity to adapt. But what we really mean is that *people* involved with the project adapt. The same imperfect beings who are incapable of anticipating everything that can and does occur in the messy world of international development are also capable of responding to the unanticipated with creative and effective solutions. Just as projects are quite likely to face initially unforeseen challenges, they also will quite likely encounter opportunities for unanticipated positive impacts.

The actions and characteristics of individuals who work in aid agencies matter for development outcomes (Andrews 2013; Campbell 2018; Honig 2018; Sidel and Faustino 2019). These agents in the agencies are much of the story when considering what does (and does not) get done in development interventions.

If the buck stops with staff, how can agency managers be sure to get the most out of them? What are the organizational structures and working conditions that maximize their ability to make positive contributions (which are for many the motivation for serving in the roles they do) in the “long voyage of discovery” (Hirschman 1967) on which they set out? Evaluation departments of some major agencies are actively engaging these questions (Independent Commission on Aid Impact 2014; World Bank IEG 2014, 2015, 2022), but they are for the most part still neglected by the broader community of practitioners and scholars focused on foreign aid. Fortunately, they have been deeply theorized elsewhere.

A broad literature in psychology and management finds that management practice influences the behavior and orientation of workers (e.g., Esteve and Schuster 2019; Honig 2021; Moynihan and Pandey 2007; Ryan and Deci 2000). We borrow ideas from these fields and link them to personnel management considerations many agencies face. In doing so, we provide a framework for thinking about how the organizational contexts and management practices of aid agencies impact the identity and actions of the agents on whom good aid performance critically depends.

In Part I, we explore four components of organizational structure – intra-organizational allocation of authority, spatial distribution of personnel, use of international vs. local hires, and within-unit diversity. We highlight the organizational choices at hand, theoretical costs and

benefits associated with each, and task and environment-related conditions that may influence which strategies are most likely to maximize performance.²

In Part II, we discuss common organizational constraints and how they may influence management strategies. Given the interests of the stakeholders on which aid agencies depend for a variety of resources, some organizational structures and personnel management strategies may be politically unfeasible under certain conditions. Management strategies that optimize for one outcome might complicate efforts to achieve another. Constraints on both managerial bandwidth and human rationality can also limit agency managers' efforts to understand what kinds of organizational reforms best align with their agency's objectives. We close by discussing how recent trends in the aid industry are likely to push toward particular managerial approaches – for better or worse.

PART I: FOUR KEY DIMENSIONS OF PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT FOR DEVELOPMENT AID ORGANIZATIONS

In this section we focus on four personnel management decisions within the remit of agency leaders, and regarding which there is variation amongst aid organizations: intra-organizational allocation of authority, spatial distribution of personnel, use of international vs. local hires, and team diversity. We see each of these organizational choices as influencing critical elements of organizational functioning long-established in the literature – e.g., information flows (Argote 2013; Cohen and Levinthal 1990), agent discretion (Aghion and Tirole 1997; Carpenter 2001; Hawkins et al. 2006), and organizational ability to cope with uncertainty (Blau 1970; Perrow 1967; Pfeffer and Salancik 1978; Thompson 1967).

Our primary focus in this chapter is on the management of aid agency staff, and not on the formal structures of agencies' relationships with the many other stakeholders (e.g., non- and for-profit implementers) involved with aid project design and implementation. That said, many of the dynamics below will apply to these organizations as well, and the contracting relationship between sources of funds (e.g., bilateral and multilateral aid agencies) and those they contract to implement projects on their behalf.

Local vs. International Staff

Development agencies typically have field offices in recipient countries with which they work. When staffing field offices, agency management must decide how much they will make use of local hires as opposed to staffing these units with “internationals,” often (but by no means always) hailing from or educated in developed countries and/or nationals of the donor country.³ Such decisions can greatly influence the extent to which information flows into country offices, as well as the nature of that information, with substantial implications for organizational learning and performance (Argote 2013; Cohen and Levinthal 1990).

Locals and internationals carry distinct advantages.⁴ The clearest upside to local staff is their familiarity with local contexts. A very large body of scholarship has demonstrated that acquiring and using local knowledge is essential for designing and implementing successful development projects (e.g., Chambers 1983; Scott 1999). Owing to their experience living in the area, social networks, cultural fluency, and language skills, locals will be more knowledgeable about the contextual dimensions of aid projects from the outset. They will also be

more capable of efficiently acquiring this information if they do not already hold it. Local staff are also likely to be better at building bridges with local stakeholders – including served and affected communities, government officials, and others – on whose collaboration and cooperation project success depends.⁵

Internationals offer different assets, including knowledge-based ones. Agency managers and project team leaders often report that internationals possess stronger technical skills (World Bank IEG 2022, p. 16). In most cases, this is likely because it is easier to find technical talent via a global search or in (relatively wealthy) donors' own domestic labor markets, rather than in aid recipient countries, which tend to lack as many high-quality universities. In addition, because they are more likely to have worked on projects in a number of different countries, internationals can carry the benefit of a larger perspective, capable of bringing lessons learned from these various experiences to bear in ways that local hires cannot.⁶ Similarly, a higher share of internationals yields more benefits from global knowledge networks. To the extent that an international has spent time working in headquarters and/or a variety of countries, she will likely have developed a large number of personal connections with staff across the agency. These contacts will possess a diversity of skills, which she can draw on for ideas or advice. Finally, because they have comparatively fewer local ties and loyalties, internationals may be less susceptible to “capture” by local interests.⁷

We believe these distinct advantages imply that different local-international shares of field office workforces will be optimal under different conditions. One factor may be the degree of adaptation and iteration required in project implementation, which is likely to be contingent on the nature of the task (Honig 2018; Honig and Gulrajani 2018; Lawrence and Lorsch 1969). Success in institution building often requires greater familiarity with local norms and informal institutions, as well as more experimentation (Andrews et al. 2013). Because local staff are more capable of navigating these “soft” features of context and maintaining high-quality dialogue with relevant stakeholders, a higher share of local staff may lead to better performance in places where an agency is mostly focused on domestic institution building.

Environmental predictability – the degree to which conditions with implications for project design and implementation strategy are difficult to see from the outset – is likely another important differentiating factor. All organizations face forms of uncertainty, and how they address this is a critical determinant of their performance (Perrow 1967; Pfeffer and Salancik 1978; Thompson 1967). In development aid, the list of things that one cannot reliably predict is long. These include political uncertainty (*how long will this administration be in power?*), institutional uncertainty (*can we expect this ministry to provide the same service each time, on time?*), or other types – all which can vary widely across countries (think Haiti vs. Kenya). We would expect local staff to differentially benefit project performance in less predictable contexts. Equipped with the contextual fluency needed to quickly assess changing conditions and recalibrate agreements with local stakeholders, local staff are more likely to be essential where environments are constantly shifting.

Distribution of Authority

Another key personnel decision all development agencies must make concerns intra-agency distribution of authority. Who will call the shots on major project design and implementation decisions? Those operating at more central, cross-cutting levels (e.g., global practice managers and country directors) or those closer to individual projects (project team leaders and/or their

subordinates)? Here, we use the term “devolution” to refer to delegation of decision-making authority and “project-adjacent agents” to refer to individuals whose work centers on the project level.⁸

The extent to which “agents” operate with incentives that differ from the “principals” for whom they work, and the appropriate level of formal control that principals should exert over agents, has been the debate of long traditions of scholarship spanning political science, organization theory, and public administration (Aghion and Tirole 1997; Carpenter 2001; Hawkins et al. 2006). Drawing ideas from this literature, we argue that many agencies may see substantial benefits from greater devolution of authority. We highlight three in particular.

The first has to do with context-specific knowledge. Staff whose work centers on the project level will have more intimate knowledge of the project in question, the environment in which it is taking place, and the stakeholders involved, than will more centrally focused personnel, who tend to possess more decision-making power. Yet project-adjacent personnel require some level of decision rights to take advantage of their higher-quality information and use it to productively shape or reshape project plans and implementing strategies. Furthermore, some devolution may be necessary for encouraging project-adjacent agents to collect the information they are uniquely positioned to collect, in the first place (Honig 2019, p. 175). Why would they spend time collecting data they cannot use?

For field staff, this cost-benefit calculation might involve deciding how much time to spend interacting with local stakeholders, such as government officials, civil society organizations, and populations to be served or possibly negatively affected by the project in question. While taking such local voices into account is fundamental for designing and implementing projects likely to generate substantial benefits, project-adjacent agents who feel they lack the power to integrate these perspectives may neglect this part of the process.

Devolution can also positively impact motivation, unleashing important cascading effects. Granting project-adjacent agents more decision-making power increases the possibility that an agent will see direct links between her own initiative and positive outcomes, while reducing feelings of “being a cog in a giant bureaucratic machine” (Pollitt 2007, p. 381). Consistent with psychology’s self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci 2000), increasing employees’ sense of autonomy and personal impact can kindle work motivation and job satisfaction (Honig 2021, 2022; Moynihan and Pandey 2007; Tummers 2012; World Bank 2018). The same practices can also influence who works for the agency by altering who chooses to exit the agency, as well as who applies. More autonomy and sense of impact is associated with lower turnover and greater retention of intrinsically motivated staff (Honig 2021, 2022; Moynihan and Pandey 2007; Piza et al. 2020; Vogel and Willems 2020).

Finally, devolution may lessen the negative side effects of tools that development agencies often use to exercise control over project-adjacent agents: long lists of indicators and check-boxes. In most cases, such indicators represent only educated guesses as to the inputs and medium-term outputs that will facilitate true, long-term positive impact. They are literally premised on “theories” of change (Gugerty and Karlan 2018). Yet unless these agents’ principals are willing and able to modify indicator systems as changing conditions render initial project plans unhelpful (or teams realize key assumptions underpinning strategies were flawed), project-adjacent agents who lack authority will hold to useless targets instead of adjusting (Wilson 1989).

Some level of principal control is beneficial, of course, and necessary in many scenarios. Staff holding more decision-making power will be more likely to adjust their focus away

from an agency's overall mission, in service of private interests or the clients they are serving. Agency managers cannot ignore such tensions. In addition, most aid activities, if not at all, involve some procedures that need to be closely followed for legal reasons and/or are almost certainly the most likely route to certain aspects of project success.

When it comes to determining optimal allocations of authority, we again posit that both project-related and environment-related uncertainty should figure centrally. In relatively predictable contexts and for projects involving quite certain links between inputs and desired outcomes (e.g., a construction blueprint for a large highway), more centralization of authority is likely to be useful. But when project environments or ultimate goals require deviation from initial plans, too much principal control is likely to get in the way.⁹

Distribution of Personnel

Agency managers cannot pack up for the day once they have decided what share of locals to hire and how to distribute authority in their organizations. They must also decide how many staff to keep in “the field.” The World Bank, for instance, has been grappling this question since at least 1997, when it began a relocation and local hiring process that resulted in approximately 45 percent of World Bank professional staff being located outside of the US by 2013 (World Bank IEG 2020).¹⁰ The UNHCR recently underwent a notable deconcentration as well, creating more than 100 country-based technical positions (Executive Committee of the High Commissioner’s Program 2019). Following a long tradition, we refer to this type of organizational restructuring, which physically transfers staff but does not necessarily devolve authority, as “deconcentration” (Francis and James 2003; Manor 2011).

Keeping more agency personnel in the field can yield a number of benefits. First, when posted in the field, agents will be more capable of absorbing important contextual information. Second, they will be able to better monitor the performance of implementing organizations (often government agencies, NGOs, and/or private contractors) and help them trouble-shoot when necessary. The former is particularly important given the extent to which aid agencies rely on other organizations for implementation. Third and perhaps most critical may be implications for relationships between agency staff and the governments and citizens they are serving. High quality communication is critical for relationship building and cementing trust (Diallo and Thuillier 2005) – both critical ingredients, we would venture, in the complex and value-laden business of development. Field-based agency staff will have greater capacity for communication, both in quantity and quality.

A substantial strand of development discourse currently favors increasing deconcentration. A recent IFAD Annual Report notes that its increased field presence “is helping [the agency] to do more in terms of partnerships and policy engagement, and it is helping [it] to translate [its] global engagement activities into action at the local level. This is ever-more important as [it] prepare[s] for the United Nations Food Systems Summit in 2021” (IFAD 2021, p. 7). In its 2011 Decentralization Roadmap, the African Development Bank states that deconcentration has led to “improved portfolio quality, better project design and supervision, faster implementation and procurement and enhanced dialogue, and knowledge to deepen analytical work and advisory services” (African Development Bank Group 2011).

However, agency managers must balance the benefits of keeping more staff in the field with challenges related to organizational fragmentation, personal hardship, security concerns, and the increased difficulties of remotely monitoring personnel. At the same time that it promotes

an agency's ability to absorb local information, deconcentration may harm intra-organizational knowledge transfer.¹¹ In a highly deconcentrated organization, rather than a walk down the hall, colleagues that one relies on for advice or technical expertise may only be accessible through virtual means, possibly many zones away.¹² To the extent that strong field presence is achieved by transferring people previously working in headquarters or recruiting staff for jobs based outside of their home countries, deconcentration may take a toll on individuals. Rare is the development aid worker who does not struggle to adapt her personal life, and those of her family, to new countries. Such life difficulties may lead to high turnover rates in country offices, with potential consequences for institutional knowledge and relationships with local stakeholders. The World Bank experienced the former 20 years ago. During its most intense period of deconcentration, the agency saw an “unprecedented 33 percent turnover of … staff” (World Bank IEG 2020, p. 2).

Maintaining a strong field presence can be particularly challenging in places with security risk. For instance, an internal World Bank review of the agency’s operations in Somalia highlighted the high cost of “any movement” in Somalia due to security risk (World Bank 2022, p. 26). It also noted that staff turnover for other agencies¹³ in the country tends to be high, making it “difficult to attract and retain experienced staff” there. This stands in contrast to the Bank’s Nairobi hub, which is more attractive for staff, and from which access to Somalia is relatively easy. For these reasons, the review argues that “whereas having on-the-ground staff is preferable in many [fragile and conflict-affected situations], the Bank’s Nairobi hub model is ‘optimal.’”

With real potential benefits at hand, but potentially unavoidable costs, we believe aid agencies will fare best by pursuing deconcentration strategies that are place-specific, and where “hardship postings” are voluntary, temporary, and accompanied by significant assistance.

Team Diversity

We highlight one final personnel management issue – perhaps the most neglected in the small literature on personnel management in aid agencies and public administration scholarship more broadly: the collective skills and experience of organizational units or teams. We discuss one component of organization diversity salient in the international aid context above – the relative benefits of international versus local staff. But one could imagine many other dimensions of “difference,” such as technical or socioeconomic background, to be relevant as well.

The effect of diversity on team performance is among the most studied topics in organizational psychology (Mathieu et al. 2017), with one class of this research stressing the ways in which diversity can enhance information and decision-making dynamics. More diverse teams, researchers point out, are likely to possess a greater range of “non-redundant … task-relevant knowledge, skills and abilities” (van Knippenberg et al. 2004, p. 1009). This means more tools to draw from, as well as a higher likelihood of productive disagreements that dispense with poor ideas and enhance creativity. More diverse teams may also be more capable of learning (Cohen and Levinthal 1990). When an organization has some baseline understanding of a technical area, it can more easily “file away” new information in that area, owing to its familiarity with relevant categories. Some baseline understanding can also act as a filter, enabling the organization to identify privileged information that is novel and useful. Cohen and Levinthal refer to this diversity-based learning potential as “absorptive capacity.”

We believe the lack of well-defined maps for achieving most development outcomes renders all of these potential gains from diversity – informational resources, productive disagreement, creativity, and ability to learn – essential. In many development programs with potential for meaningful impact, attention to questions of finance, economics, and engineering is critical. So is attention to questions of politics, sociology, culture, and other disciplinary areas in which each individual has a comparative advantage. To our knowledge, no researchers have undertaken a detailed accounting of the characteristics of development agency staff and their sub-units, making it difficult to know whether agencies have prioritized diversity of background or academic specialization, and what the substantive effects of increased diversity may be. These uncertainties are critical areas for future research.

Organizational Levers in Sum

Aid agencies might reap substantial performance gains from being more strategic with their use of international vs. local staff, how they distribute authority internally, the share of staff they keep in country offices vs. headquarters, and various aspects of diversity. Why? Because all of these decisions are relevant to how well agents are able to put their unique skills to use, how motivated they are, and whether their distinct perspectives productively recombine or obstruct progress.

No single strategy will work for all agencies in all settings, given the diversity of environments and tasks with which all development agencies work and the tradeoffs that all strategies entail. The managerial approach which will most benefit performance is contingent, depending on the demand for adaptation in a given task and environment; the degree of need for context-specific knowledge; and the motivational makeup of personnel. Agency managers must recognize where particular types of knowledge are required, and when – and then find the right people and relationships of authority suited to obtaining and exploiting it. They must recognize that there are tradeoffs between control and effectiveness. And they need to consider when well-intentioned management strategies may be compromising the well-being of their workforce or prioritizing a well-functioning headquarters in ways that risk damaging client relationships.

In discussing these and other managerial tradeoffs we have thus far assumed that if agency leaders chose to do so, they would be able to weigh the costs and benefits of the organizational strategies we outline above and restructure their organizations in line with their focal tasks and operating environments. Anyone who has ever worked for or with an aid agency knows this is not the case, of course; agencies operate within externally imposed constraints. Meaningfully changing agency management practices thus requires understanding the forces that shape them. Those making personnel management decisions within development agencies operate under constraints related to political authorizing environments' need for information (Honig 2018) as well as more quotidian non-political concerns such as scarce time and attention. Part II describes these constraints and how they relate to several trends in the development aid industry.

PART II: PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT IN A CHANGING WORLD

Personnel management represents a complex optimization problem in a number of ways. First, it is simply difficult to think about multiple aspects of personnel management and organization structure together – analyzing how a strategic choice on one dimension may frustrate implementation of another. Second, although Part I suggests that a single agency could in theory benefit from managing its various field offices in different ways, maintaining multiple operational models may generate too much confusion to be worth it. Third, agency executives who are likely already over-burdened with political matters concerning their member countries and the need to steward their organizations' high-level objectives are unlikely to have the bandwidth to think through the nuances of personnel management. Instead, they are likely to “satisfice” (Simon 1947) on such matters, settling on personnel management strategies that seem acceptable, rather than optimal. They will substitute heuristics for careful analysis. Fourth, social pressure may play a role. Elites' concern about their status in their peer group of aid professionals can drive donor norm conformity and lead to knock-on processes of interorganizational learning and norm diffusion (Honig and Weaver 2019).

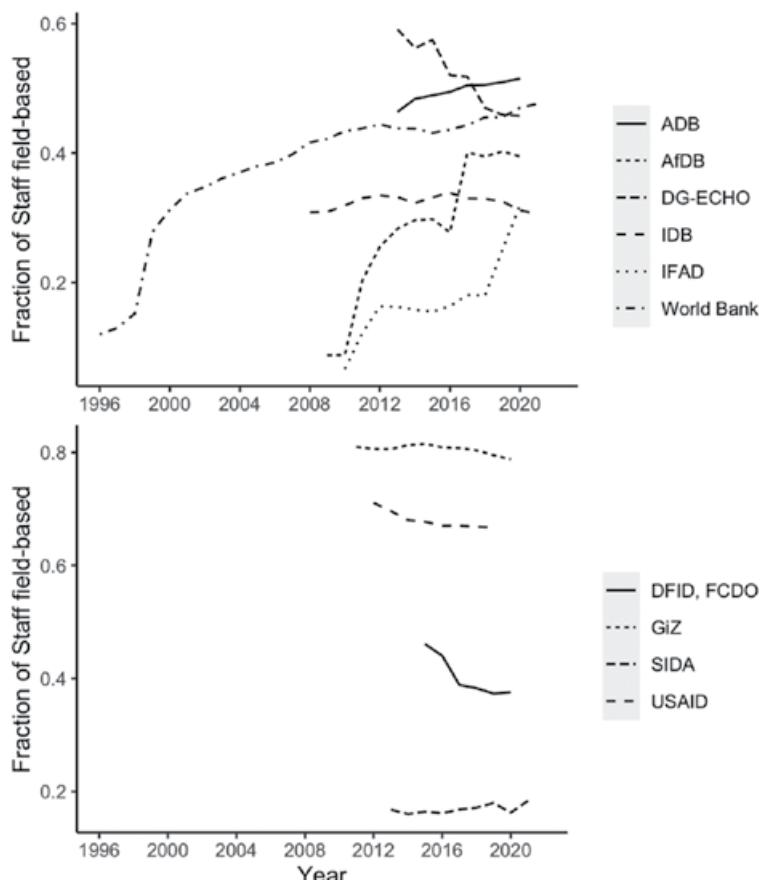
Even more decisive constraints to optimal personnel management are likely to come from agencies' political authorizing environments: stakeholders on which agencies depend (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978). Resource dependency theorists argue that much of an organization's behavior derives from a quest to buffer itself against uncertainty in the flow of resources it needs to operate. Such resources can include financial contributions, knowledge, and reputational currency, such as prestige and political support. One way in which aid agencies seek to maintain this support is by aligning their policies or programs with the preferences of the most powerful actors in their authorizing environments, which can vary by issue and according to competitive pressures an agency is facing (Greenstein 2022; Lipsey 2017; Morse and Keohane 2014).

Personnel management strategy is one tool with which aid agencies create this congruence. For instance, managers sometimes seek to align agency operations with the preferences of resource providers, such as member countries and NGOs, through tight controls on personnel (Honig 2019). Depending on how secure or insecure resource flows have been in the past, the degree of interest that resource providers take in agency operations, and the number of organizations from which an aid agency can obtain a given resource, agency executives may pursue personnel management strategies that are at odds with the considerations we outline above.

Shocks to the Industry

Due to shifting authorizing environments, among other reasons, much of the development aid industry over the past couple of decades has undergone a number of “shocks” which have likely influenced how agency managers have structured their organizations and managed their personnel. We describe three of these shocks: an increasing instrumentalization of aid, increasing demands for “results” and reportable performance data, and fragmentation of the development aid landscape. We then theorize how each shock has affected organizational structure and personnel management, leaving it to future researchers to examine the validity of these predictions.

Increasing instrumentalization of aid



Source: Authors' tabulation based on agency annual reports, information obtained via Freedom of Information requests, and World Bank IEG (2022). Specific data sources are outlined in Appendix Table 18A.1.

Figure 18.1 Deconcentration levels in multilateral aid agencies (top panel) vs. bilateral aid agencies (bottom panel)

In the past 20 years, the world has seen an increase in the use of aid as a strategic tool. This plays out most explicitly in the merger of semi-autonomous aid agencies with departments of foreign affairs, as took place in Norway (2004), New Zealand (2009), Canada (2013), Australia (2014), Iceland (2016), and the UK (2020). In many cases, political executives justify mergers with a rationale of bureaucratic efficiency. However, evidence on the cost impacts of mergers is mixed (Gulrajani 2018), and more often than not, strategic rationales appear more important. For instance, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, under whom the recent UK merger took place, has not been reticent about his desire to see the UK's aid budget

spent in the UK's "political and commercial interests."¹⁴ Former Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott announced the merger of AusAid as a means of enabling "the aid and diplomatic arms of Australia's international policy agenda to be more closely aligned."¹⁵

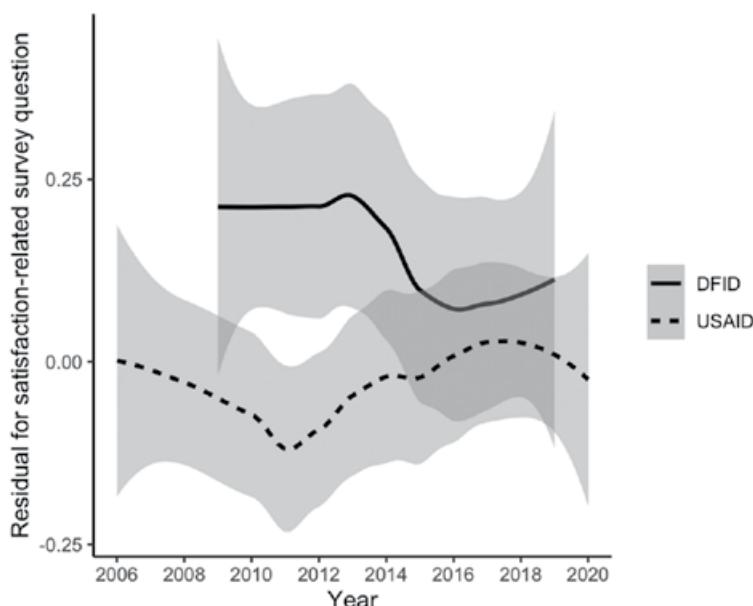
If increasing instrumentalization of aid is largely about securing control of an aid bureaucracy in the interests of donor governments, we expect this trend to affect an agency's own management style in at least two important ways with respect to the dynamics discussed in Part I: less intra-organization devolution of authority and deconcentration of personnel, as agency executives seek tighter control to ensure effort is expended towards more narrowly defined goals. This could also impact worker satisfaction, due to the negative effects that reductions in staff autonomy can have on staff happiness. Such effects are likely to be substantially stronger in bilateral agencies, relative to multilaterals, since clearer strategic interests are more likely to manifest in agencies governed by single sovereign powers.

Figure 18.1 shows trends in ten aid agencies' deconcentration levels in the past couple of decades. As described in Part I, deconcentration appears to be "in vogue" development practice. Yet while a strong trend toward greater deconcentration is clear for multilateral aid agencies (four of six agencies for which we could find data show a clear trend), bilateral aid agencies appear if anything to be moving in the opposite direction. This may reflect the increasing instrumentalization of aid (which we expect to be stronger in single-power bilaterals) and centralization of control in some bilateral aid agencies.

Demand for "results" and reportable performance data

The past couple of decades have also seen marked increases in demands for "results" and reportable performance data in some agencies, often in the form of numbers and check-boxes. There are likely several causes of this wave of quantification. One is almost certainly elevated pressure from political executives to more closely align development activities with national interest, as described just above. Increasing academic and practitioner interest in newer models of development assistance and private charity, such as results-based aid and the effective altruism movement (which prioritizes interventions that can be easily quantified), has likely also played a role. While there are multiple potential causes, the strength of the trend is most clear (Eyben et al. 2015). Many in the development industry are now familiar with the term "obsessive measurement disorder" (Natsios 2010; Pasanen 2019). In a 2013 survey run by the Big Push Forward project, which fielded responses from 153 individuals working in different types of organizations and roles in the development sector, 74 percent of respondents reported that "the sharpening focus on the results agenda" had affected their work on a day-to-day basis (Whitty 2015).

Figure 18.2 illustrates satisfaction levels of USAID employees relative to other US government agencies alongside satisfaction levels of DFID employees relative to other UK government agencies. To make this plot, we first identified similar satisfaction-related survey questions included in US Federal Employment Viewpoint Surveys and UK Civil Service People Surveys administered in the past couple of decades. We then regressed respondent scores (higher numbers mean higher satisfaction) on country-by-year fixed effects, controlling for any factors that affect all agencies equally in each country in each year. The plot shows the resulting residuals (with lowess smoothing) for DFID and USAID – effectively, measures of how happy employees of each agency were relative to other agencies in their respective countries in each year, where zero equals average satisfaction.



Source: Authors' tabulation based on data from US FEVS surveys and UK Civil Service Peoples' Surveys.

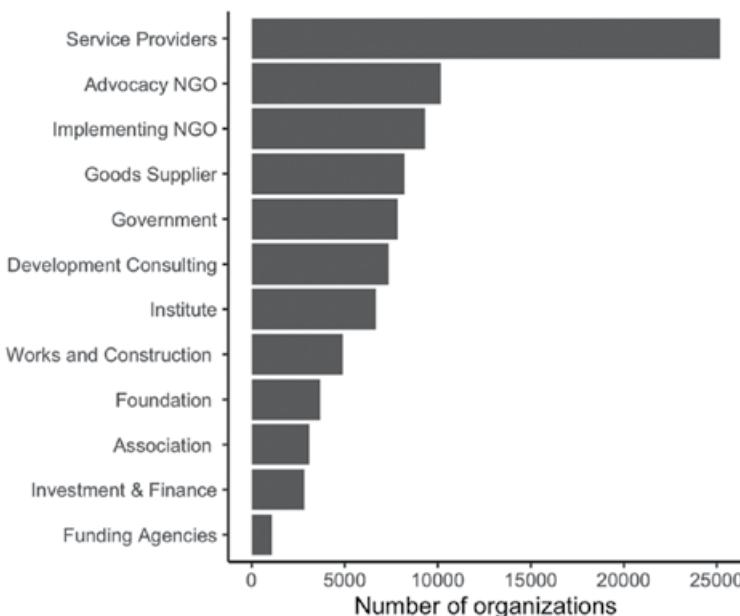
Figure 18.2 Satisfaction levels of USAID employees and DFID employees, relative to other government agencies in their respective countries, over time

The figure shows declines for DFID from a high level starting in 2013 and generally low levels for USAID, though with notable improvement since 2011. This is largely consistent with our expectation that dominance of geostrategic interests over agency management practices and increased demand for results and reportable performance data will lead to declining satisfaction among employees. DFID staff reported increasing focus on results and loss of autonomy in the mid-2010s (Honig 2018), culminating with DFID's merger with the UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office in 2020. USAID staff have long complained of onerous reporting requirements (Natsios 2010; Snook 1999).

An increasingly diverse range of development providers and pathways¹⁶

While many governments have been prioritizing their strategic interests and opting for more metric-driven management, the development aid landscape has been fragmenting. Fifty years ago, the aid "industry" was essentially comprised of the Bretton Woods institutions and bilateral aid agencies. Today, countless actors – ranging from the former, to contractors, NGOs, foundations, and social enterprises – would consider themselves part of the industry (Wilks 2010). The membership database of DevEx, for example, contains more than 75,000 organizations (Figure 18.3).

Fragmentation has changed, and will continue to change, the labor market for those seeking to work in international development. What does this mean for the composition, quality, and management of personnel in multilateral and bilateral aid agencies? First and foremost, to the extent that aid agencies want to be able to recruit and retain the types of staff they desire,



Source: Data obtained directly from the following on February 17, 2022: <https://www.devex.com/organizations/search>. All member organizations except for those categorized as “independent/other” are displayed in Figure 18.3.

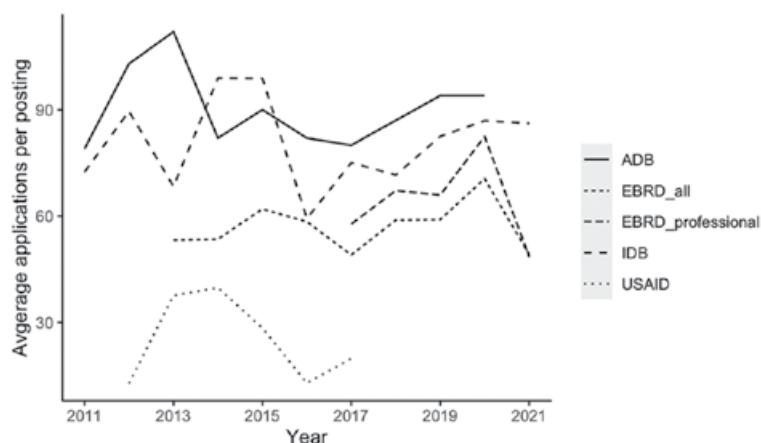
Figure 18.3 Number of organizations by type in the DevEx membership database

agencies will need to become increasingly attractive places to work. If anything, the opposite seems to be the case. Anecdotally, many aid agency personnel (particularly where aid agencies have recently become less independent, e.g., Australia and the UK) report increasingly difficult working environments. As mentioned above, USAID personnel have long felt stifled by a reporting regime that often seems to preclude independent action, so much so that a former head of USAID, Andrew Natsios, was prompted to publish an essay decrying this “counter-bureaucracy” (Natsios 2010).

As the number of development-related organizations increases, any candidate or staff member is likely going to be less tolerant of a workplace that does not cater to their needs – especially the most talented among them, since these individuals in theory have the greatest number of outside options to choose from. Indeed, this is precisely what happened after Australia’s aid program merged with Foreign Affairs; “1000 years of expertise left shortly after integration,” according to a 2019 review, “and another 1000 years has departed since” (Moore 2019).

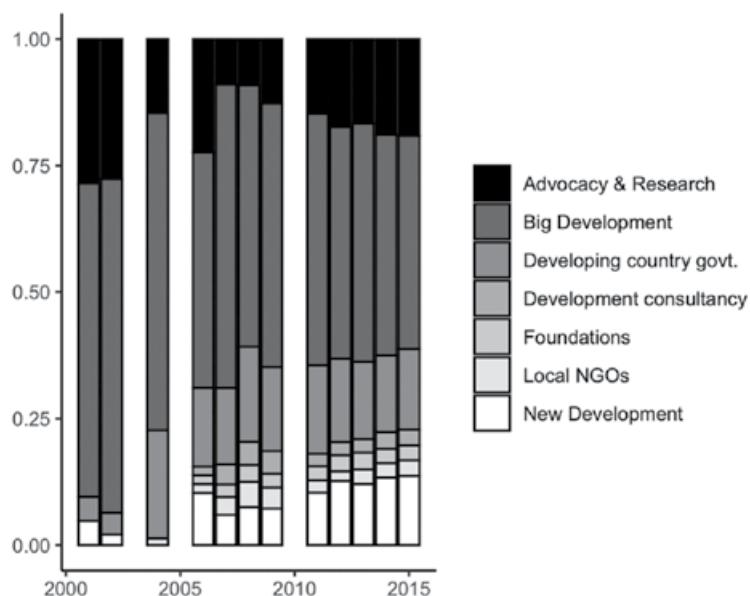
Figure 18.4 is consistent with this prediction. For the six years for which we were able to obtain data,¹⁷ USAID – a particularly low autonomy workplace (Honig 2018) – received substantially fewer applications per advertised position than did all other agencies for which we could obtain data.

Furthermore, alumni occupations data from the Harvard Kennedy School’s Masters in Public Administration/International Development (HKS MPA/ID) program suggest that



Source: Authors' tabulation based on data received via Freedom of Information requests.

Figure 18.4 Average number of applications received per advertised position for the Asian Development Bank, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (all employees and professional employees shown separately), Inter-American Development Bank, and USAID

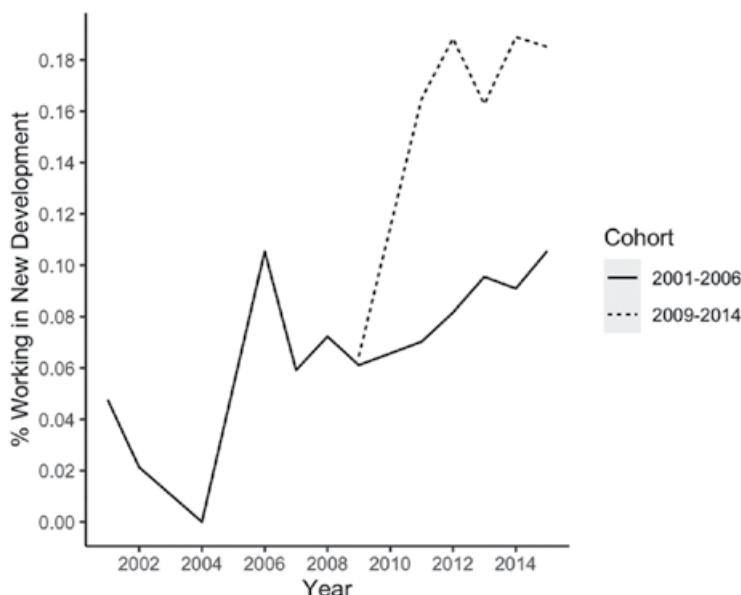


Note: “Big Development” and “New Development” categories are described in the text.

Source: Honig et al. (2018).

Figure 18.5 Share of graduates of the Harvard Kennedy School’s MPA/International Development program working in select sectors

an expanded choice set is indeed precipitating a shift away from the “traditional” multilateral and bilateral aid agencies, at least for relatively elite talent pools. In Figure 18.5, “Big Development” represents the bilateral aid providers, international financial institutions, international NGOs, and the UN. “New Development” refers to impact investment firms, social enterprises, development-related start-ups, microfinance organizations, organizations running development-related randomized control trials, and corporate social responsibility. While roughly 63 percent of HKS MPA/ID graduates working in the development industry were employed in “Big Development” in 2004, that number steadily declined to roughly 42 percent by 2015.



Source: Honig et al. (2018).

Figure 18.6 Percentage of graduates of the Harvard Kennedy School’s MPA/International Development program working in “New Development,” for those employed in the development sector (cohorts graduating between 2001–2006 and 2009–2014 shown separately)

Figure 18.6 suggests that strong cohort effects are likely to further drive down the proportion of talented graduates seeking employment with traditional bilateral and multilateral aid agencies. Cohorts graduating between 2009 and 2014 were substantially more likely to be employed in “New Development” than cohorts graduating between 2001 and 2006, and the much sharper increase in “New Development” jobs for the more recent cohorts over the 2009–2015 period suggests that the rate of transition away from “Big Development” in this elite talent pool is set to get even stronger in the future. Those who begin a career in a traditional bilateral or multilateral (“Big Development”) donor agency may stay there; but those at career transition points with outside options may increasingly frequently choose another path, these data suggest.

More options for those who wish to contribute to development is great news for new entrants to the sector, but potentially bad news for traditional aid agencies. As more and more alternatives proliferate, high-quality, highly motivated new entrants may grow increasingly less likely to apply to agencies that do not have good workplace reputations, and more likely to exit organizations they do not enjoy working for. Agencies will therefore need to pay ever-more attention to mitigating negative side effects on workers that can result from a couple of the personnel management strategies discussed above.

Specifically, agencies will need to be careful about the degree to which and means through which they centralize authority. A growing body of research suggests that limiting employee discretion can make staff significantly more likely to exit an organization, or not apply in the first place (Honig 2021; Moynihan and Pandey 2007; Perry 2020). As the above discussion suggests, this may be particularly difficult for agencies controlled by governments interested in using their aid dollars as political and economic tools, and for agencies that have strong forces compelling them to emphasize “results” and reportable performance data. Second, to the extent that agencies seek to increase their global “footprints” through deconcentration, they will need to stay tuned to the personal hardships that can come with deployment to (more difficult) country offices. Those seeking careers in which they are likely to feel they are having an impact have an increasing number of options. Development agencies must therefore do all they can in that competition for scarce talent.

CONCLUSION

The success of development interventions depends in large part on the people who plan, manage, and execute development projects. It is thus essential to understand how to match the right people with the right challenges, what kinds of management techniques support individual effectiveness, how to build productive teams, and how to attract and retain talent.

Scholars have a significant role to play in the discovery and implementation of better ways of attracting and managing agency workforces. To do so, they might focus on taking more ideas from disciplines that have long studied relationships between organization structure, management practice, and performance, and applying them to the aid sector. Greater analysis of the practical tradeoffs between different managerial strategies might be particularly fruitful, contributing to global knowledge in ways that can also assist agency managers with the practical work of implementing aid projects.

More collaboration between researchers and aid agencies is essential for this type of inquiry to reach its potential. Partnerships between researchers and government agencies are becoming increasingly frequent (Buntaine et al. 2021; Hauser et al. 2017), benefiting both agency performance and larger bodies of knowledge. But partnerships between researchers and aid organizations tend to focus on program design, not agencies’ internal management systems. Such collaborations require mutual trust, and perhaps a greater orientation towards practical problem-solving (rather than e.g., maximizing journal publications) on the part of researchers. Greater openness to sharing (carefully protected) internal data by agencies could also facilitate academic-practitioner collaborations.

For many agencies, it may be fruitful to examine whether current balances between internationally recruited and locally hired staff as well as between headquarters-based and country-based staff, are best serving the agency. Managers might also consider how authority

is distributed within their agencies and the diversity of skillsets and individual backgrounds found in different agency units. What is best in any particular context is likely to depend on the conditions under which a specific organizational unit is operating and the nature of its focal tasks. Here, it will be important to consider the predictability of the environment in which an agency unit is based, the extent to which the projects it pursues can be effectively designed and managed through carefully specified engineering-like blueprints, the need for local information in successful execution, and the strength of the unit's ties with local stakeholders.

Agencies may also benefit from reflection on the ways in which larger forces, such as national strategic interests, trends in development practice, and a fragmenting aid landscape may be pushing their organizations toward less effective models of management or rendering existing strategies less useful. The analysis presented here suggests that such forces are raising the stakes of careful attention to management practice in aid agencies. Increasing instrumentalization of aid and a strong industry interest in quantification of "results" and reportable performance data appear to be negatively affecting worker experience in some agencies. And it is clear that agencies now compete with a large and fast-growing set of newer types of development organizations, to which relatively elite talent pools are gravitating. Agency leaders could bring these observations, and their reflections on them, into frank conversations with their political authorizers, underscoring how externally imposed constraints risk compromising the quality of aid delivered.

The people who are attracted to work in development agencies tend to do so because they have what Hirschman called a "bias for hope"; the belief that attempts to support development can lead to better lives for some of the world's poorest citizens, even if previous attempts have failed (Hirschman 1971). Aid agency staff and other readers of this chapter will likely share a bias for hope regarding international development. That hope will be more often realized, we believe, when personnel management takes into consideration the different informational needs and context of the intervention, as well as the broader labor market. Development projects depend ultimately on the actions of individuals; as such, development interventions will be most successful when the most appropriate teams comprised of the best possible personnel are put in the best possible position to succeed.

NOTES

1. We thank Raj Desai, Shanta Devarajan, Axel Dreher, Scott Morris, Brad Parks, Allison Schnable, Danny Sriskandarajah, and Jennifer Tobin for helpful comments. We also thank Greg Larson and Michael Woolcock for allowing data from an unpublished paper by Honig, Larson, and Woolcock to be used in this paper; Susannah Horton for her research assistance in analyzing those data; and Carol Finney and the Harvard MPA/ID program for providing some of the data employed.
2. Official Development Assistance comes from multilateral aid agencies and many types of single-government agencies. For instance, more than 20 US agencies manage US foreign aid (McBride 2018). In this chapter, we focus only on multilateral aid agencies and individual countries' primary aid agencies.
3. Nationality restrictions of course tend to be more the case for bilateral donors – that is, donor agencies of national governments – rather than multilateral agencies.
4. It is important to note that the discussion in this section pertains to the differences between locally recruited staff (whom we refer to as "locals") and internationally recruited staff based

in recipient country offices (whom we refer to as “internationals”), to focus on tradeoffs in how agencies may design the composition of their field offices specifically. As such, we are setting aside a third category of staff: internationally recruited staff who are not based in client countries.

5. Consistent with the argument that local experience matters, Heinzel (2022b) finds a positive association between World Bank Task Team Leaders’ country-specific experience and the performance of the World Bank in projects it supports, while Heinzel and Liese (2021) find positive links between World Bank Task Team Leaders’ country-specific experience and recipient performance. Analysis samples for both of these studies included both international and local TTLs. In a study of more than 50,000 procurement decisions made by World Bank Task Team Leaders based both inside and outside of their home countries, Heinzel (2022a, p. 1183) finds that “national IO staff use their country-specific knowledge to increase the development effectiveness of procurement in line with the mandate of the World Bank.”
6. Scholars have cautioned against over-valuing this sort of “global knowledge,” however. Blindly privileging global knowledge – often associated with “best practices” – may lead project teams to focus too much on “solutions,” which may not be appropriate for the context in question, over careful focus on the problem at hand. See, for instance, Pritchett and Woolcock (2004).
7. Using an original survey covering 22 UN system bodies, Eckhard and Parizek (2022) find evidence that UN staff themselves view local staff as having comparative advantages in “the alignment of … activities with the local environment, seamless interaction with locals, and in gaining the trust of the host country.” Respondents viewed international staff as having the advantage of “impartiality towards local actors.”
8. The type of authority devolution we are describing here is often referred to as decentralization. However, organizational decentralization can entail a different sort of restructuring – the physical shift of personnel to more peripheral organizational units, or “deconcentration.” We discuss the latter below.
9. An emerging empirical literature has largely supported the notion that devolution can increase organizational performance (Bandiera et al. 2021; Rasul and Rogger 2018). Honig (2018, 2019) is particularly relevant here, finding evidence – spanning over 9,000 development projects administered by nine agencies – that higher levels of project-adjacent agent autonomy differentially benefits aid project performance in more uncertain environments and for projects involving less certainty between inputs and ultimate outcomes.
10. The agency has plans to increase this to 55 percent by the mid-2020s (World Bank IEG 2020).
11. Organizational researchers have found that in-person contact is a particularly effective means of knowledge transfer, particularly when it comes to knowledge that is not easily codified, tacit, and/or “based on shared understandings” and not explicitly documented (Kane and Rink 2020).
12. The World Bank has recognized costs to intra-organizational knowledge transfer as a significant drawback to its deconcentration efforts. A 2009 assessment (World Bank 2009) “concluded that decentralization had reached its limits” partly because of the way in which it had created “regional silos,” which were fragmenting technical expertise (World Bank IEG 2020, p. 2).
13. The World Bank has rarely had full-time staff based in Somalia (Personal communication with author of World Bank 2022).
14. *The Independent*, February 11, 2019, “Multibillion foreign aid budget should be spent to advance Britain’s ‘political and commercial interests’, Boris Johnson says.”
15. *DevPolicyBlog*, September 18, 2013, “AusAid no more? Abbott announces aid agency to be integrated into DFAT.”

16. This section borrows from Honig, Larson, and Woolcock's (2018) "Understanding the fragmenting aid landscape." Used with permission (and thanks).
17. We only show pre-2018 data for USAID here due to irregularities in application and posting data related to the 2017 USAID hiring freeze.

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APPENDIX

Table 18A.1 Sources for and details on data underlying Figures 18.1 and 18.4

Agency	Source for application figures	Source for deconcentration figures	Employee types included
African Development Bank	NA	Annual reports	Professional only; excludes “general service staff”
Asian Development Bank	FOI request	FOI request	“International Staff and Board Staff” and “National Staff”; Excludes “Administrative Staff”
EU Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations	NA	Annual reports	All
EU Directorate-General for International Partnerships	NA	Annual reports	All
European Bank for Reconstruction and Development	FOI request	NA	“Professional-only” and “All” displayed separately
Germany Agency for International Cooperation	NA	Annual reports	All
Inter-American Development Bank	FOI request	FOI request	Did not specify
International Fund for Agricultural Development	NA	Annual reports	All
Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency	NA	Non-FOI request	Professional only
United Kingdom Department for International Development	NA	FOI request	Professional only
United States Agency for International Development	FOI request	FOI request	All with the exception of contract workers
World Bank	NA	World Bank IEG (forthcoming). Appendix A	“Professional staff in operations, grade level GE+”