

## Chapter 7

# Multivocal Brokering: Translating and Decoupling for Results

Development aid work is not a classic profession as such. Despite this, for many people across the globe, the aid field is their professional arena. In this chapter, we take a closer look at some of the key competencies of professional aid bureaucrats and discuss how these competencies may help to explain whether obsessive measurement disorder (OMD) occurs or not. Our primary concern here is to examine the relatively under-researched contribution made by aid bureaucrats when they broker policies, relationships, and aid projects into tangible and meaningful actions and valuable results (see Eyben, 2012; Gulrajani, 2015; Lewis & Mosse, 2006).

As noted by Boellstorff (2003), the “broker” is a fruitful methodological entry-point for researchers concerned with translation, as an approach to understanding relationships between and within larger systems (such as that of the aid network and its wider institutional environment). In development aid literature, the term “broker” was first used by Bierschenk et al. (2002) who analyzed how a group of actors mediated between “donors” and potential “beneficiaries” in the acquisition of development funds, and how these brokers took an active role in supporting the local beneficiaries to express their needs to the structures in charge of aid to obtain financing. Bierschenk (2021, p. 420):

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Obsessive Measurement Disorder or Pragmatic Bureaucracy?, 117–136



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Development brokers thus act at the interface of institutions, policies and projects of development cooperation, on the one hand, and the people “targeted” by them, on the other. Towards the former, they present themselves as spokespersons representing the local population and formulating their “needs”. They know which funding lines exist and how they can be rhetorically harmonised with these local needs. In contrast, vis-à-vis the local arenas, they position themselves as actors who have the relevant capital (knowledge, language, contacts) to mobilize development aid.

In previous aid literature, the broker concept has primarily been used to analyze how nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) mediate between donors and local populations (Knodel, 2021; Lewis & Mosse, 2006). It has also been used to analyze how aid bureaucrats in organizations in their donor role are trained into the role of broker (Eyben, 2012; Gulrajani, 2015). When applied to a person, the term “broker,” as used by Bierschenk et al. (2002) and many others, generally suggests an independent party who acts in between two or more actors. However, following our reasoning on plural actors who switch social roles and our critique of how the concept of intermediaries is used (Chapter 3), we use the term here to describe a social role that, depending on the situation, can be played by aid bureaucrats employed by both aid organizations and externally sourced consultants (see also Bräuchler et al., 2021).

### **Multivocality: A Key to Successful Brokering**

Based on our findings, we suggest that brokering often functions as a highly valuable buffer that can counteract tendencies toward OMD. This effect is seen when the broker has the ability to shape legitimate results that make good sense to those at a distance, while at the same time honoring and protecting efficient local aid practices. We suggest that a key competence in this regard is *multivocality*. Aid organizations represent what Jancsary et al. (2017, p. 1162) describe as multivocal actors that are “positioned at the interface of two or more logics [. . .] in the sense that their evocation

offers the opportunity to leave open which logic is initiated.” This multivocal position, Jancsary et al. argue, can allow organizations and their employees more leeway to select elements from different institutional logics, rather than conforming blindly to just one logic. However, as seen below, it takes experience and training of aid bureaucrats in order to foster this competence that can help to realize this valuable opportunity.

For an aid bureaucrat in a brokering role, multivocality can refer to her/his ability both to understand and to skillfully use several “languages of aid.” Examples of such languages are the “bureaucratic language of aid,” the “market language of aid,” and the “local languages of aid” used in different societal spheres, organizational forms, and local field contexts. Included in multivocal competence is also the professional judgment to know what language to use *when* and how to *translate* back and forth between the different languages to obtain good results that make sense to as many of the stakeholders involved as possible, for example, the know-how to communicate a local result to a distant decision-maker who lacks deeper knowledge and understanding of the particular project context and its conditions, but who is “fluent” in the bureaucratic language of performance measurement and control requirements.

As an example, one of the aid bureaucrats working with results reporting for an organization in the recipient role told us that there is often a need to “go back and forth, trying to explain things to partners about changes in requirements or concepts,” thus that there is a high need to translate “in between” the formal reporting requirements and what the report *ought* to say if it were to do justice to the local practices. Similarly, when describing her work at a Swedish union in the donor role, another aid bureaucrat told us about the clashes that occur when the local organizations the union funds have to hand in their results reports and how she tries to broker the process to make the best of this situation:

The first thing I check (in the annual reports) is – does this match the application? If not, why? And then I also check and find that now they’ve forgotten this matter they talked about at the meeting. They forgot to say that they had received 25% salary increases, or

whatever it might be. Or, they got this breastfeeding agreement, that they're allowed to breastfeed during work hours in agriculture, for example. And the bit about the preschools that they've created, they've forgotten that too. Because most of the time they take some things for granted, and then they forget. . . . Because we mustn't forget either, that the people I work with aren't usually project experts, but they're trade union people. . . . So they're not report writers either, but they are experts on union activities, so these values can . . . well, the academic world and this other world can collide.

The quote illustrates feelings of frustration and confusion that are common and can derive from value conflicts embedded in requirements of what to write in a proper results report and the perceived gap and lack of justice these requirements represent for the local culture and project implementation conditions. Our union informant tells us that the local project staff often view the reporting of results as a difficult or even "incomprehensible" task since they typically don't fully understand why activities cannot just be described in a narrative that is easy for the locals to understand.

Our informant also tells us that a good way to learn about these local conditions and understandings is to try to be quiet at meetings and really listen to "ordinary talk," and in particular to listen to how the local experts talk about what they have done in the project. It is during such occasions that she often identifies unreported and unexpected positive results that she then "turns into a format that fits the reports, so that everything ends up in the right columns." In other words, our informant uses her multivocal competence to make sure that the project staff is supported and encouraged for their achievements, and that these achievements get credit, also at a distance.

Along similar lines, another informant, an external expert in results-based management (RBM), explained that local representatives can become "paralyzed" when confronted with the expected "boxing and packaging" of results:

Sometimes I use it as an icebreaker, if we come to an organization that has a hard time with the terminology, with the RBM method itself. It's like: [...] "Do you have some kind of goal that you're striving for? Do you somehow follow up that you're doing the right things? And do you allow yourself to make adjustments as you go?" Yes, then everyone does do these things and [they say] "yes, but that's what we do all the time." [And I say] "Good, then that means you're result-oriented!" [And they go] "Oh, we are?" But then the paralysis hits... later, right when they have to [...] start boxing and packaging it... on a lot of different levels... [and they complain] "Oh, but now the indicator is formulated exactly the same as my activity or my output!" and everything just becomes one big mess.

Our informant explained that "through a lot of dialogue," he tries to come closer to what he calls "the practical reality" of the aid organization he supports. And to give its representatives the courage to stand up for the particularities of their project context and to motivate relevant exceptions:

If they just have the courage to motivate why the matrix doesn't have that many indicators, most of the time it'll be just fine. But often this requires that I *give* them that courage.

In this vein, we have also found that the multivocal brokering of results requirements can, with time, make actors who start off being negative to requirements, change these opinions. One example is the International Science Program (ISP) organization, whose representatives were opposed to the requirements and criticized the Logical Framework Approach (LFA) and key performance indicators (KPIs) when they were first introduced to their reporting routines. However, over time, and with the support of local coordinators, brokering and trying to adjust reporting practices to the local needs, ISP gradually came to accept the technologies and, when we interviewed representatives from the organization,

claimed at least that they now found the reporting useful and valuable. When asked about his experience of the added monthly KPI reporting requirements, a PhD student from ISP's group of ultimate beneficiaries similarly stated that they had been valuable:

I should say that when it was introduced I was like "Oh, why the hell are we doing this?" So I felt so bad initially, but trust me, now, I'm loving it. Yes, it's giving me a push. It's . . . I'm like "Wow!" After four weeks I have to report. And . . . whenever I'm submitting the report I also have to present. And in my presentation I have to show something new, what I've been doing the previous four weeks (. . .). Otherwise there's nothing pushing you. Sometimes as a human, you may fail to come up with a result in a month, which isn't good. Yeah, but it's nice. I think it's a nice innovation and we should continue reporting monthly.

Since PhD students often conduct much of their work alone, the new reporting system offered a chance to receive external attention, and since the reporting process also included an oral presentation with feedback from peers, it increased the motivation and trust to continue the work. All of this was thanks to brokering having taken place and adjustments having been made to fit the needs of the recipients.

### **Translation Takes Time**

In line with Bierschenk et al. (2002), we have found that it takes a lot of time to acquire brokering competence, that it is learned through continuous networking and personal relations, and that it typically also requires a lot of travel. A project coordinator for the Swedish chemical agency (KEMI) in Malaysia told us about the importance of personal relations, and that aid bureaucrats do field visits to get to know the specific local context:

I think by reporting, you get a better understanding of what is happening, thus reports are definitely a

learning experience because you get a better narrative of what is happening. But for us, reporting is naturally important, but what's *more* important are the visits, like to be there physically. Reports are secondary.

Similarly, the aid bureaucrat from Kommunal (the Swedish municipal workers' union responsible at the time for supporting 13 Union to Union-funded development projects in Africa) told us that she averaged about 115 travel days a year. She also told us that it had taken her a year to familiarize herself with the job, guided by her predecessor who had long been a well-liked and trusted partner for the local organizations. During her year-long introduction to the job, our interviewee learned the "results languages" used by both the local populations and the organization in the donor role. In order to sustain the trusting relationship embodied by her colleague (who was about to retire), they both thought it was important "to be there" during all phases of the project work: during the planning phase, when the organization submitted its results report, and when the project was evaluated. And, essentially, to continuously maintain "face-to-face and hand-shaking contact" with the implementers as well as with key individuals in the project networks.

External consultants whom we have interviewed also say that their influential position of power derives in part from actually having time to meet and to get to know and learn from the recipients:

Often, I think that Sida managers [. . .] have quite a few projects in their portfolio, so even if you're in charge of a project, you don't have time to familiarize yourself with and to meet these people very often.

For many aid bureaucrats, time is indeed precious. In a survey responded to by 131 decision-makers in development policy, lack of time was the main reason why they did not engage more with the research community nor base their decisions on previous research, where 72% responded that they did not have the time to engage with research in their work (Ioannou & Vähämäki, 2020). One of the aid bureaucrats at Sida elaborated on this theme:

What we're seeing is that we have less and less time to engage in dialogues with our partners. That's the challenge I would say. Dialogue is *more* needed in complex contexts. When I left SAREC, there were 45 of us. Now I have a total, I think, if I include two in Africa and those located out at the embassies, I think we are 23 or 24 people. With the same size budget. And what I hear from our partners is: "You used to be so much more involved. We could discuss issues." And in some operations we can still be more involved than in others. And that makes a huge difference. Because when we have this dialogue... we have a lot of experience and have seen how things work in different contexts [...] But there is less and less time for that, even though we try to simplify the preparation phase to have more time for follow-up.

Unfortunately, in our empirical material, we have seen quite a bit of the negative impact of staff not having enough time to foster their multivocal brokering competence. A Sida official responsible for results management practices at the agency noted that, sadly, she didn't know what to say when some of the less experienced staff members expressed uncertainty considering whether they should spend time on building relations with recipients since they had found that "there is no box for that in the system." As commonly referred to downside to measurements, this is nothing new. As the saying (often attributed to management theorist Peter Drucker) goes: what gets measured gets managed.<sup>1</sup>

Whereas we concluded above that dialogue and networking are important aspects of brokering, a lack of dialogue can certainly increase misunderstandings. An officer in charge of a development project at the KEMI described an example where casual discussions about the project during a field trip finally helped him to understand what the project was really about:

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<sup>1</sup>This however, being a challenged "truth" in recent years. See for instance, <https://medium.com/centre-for-public-impact/what-gets-measured-gets-managed-its-wrong-and-drucker-never-said-it-fe95886d3df6>



I've been involved in situations where you're maybe on a field trip with someone, this was when I was stationed in Asia, and they'd start telling you about something that had happened in the project, which was very exciting. I don't remember the example now. [And I'd say] "But you haven't reported this." [And they'd say] "No, but we didn't know you wanted us to." And that's exactly what we do want. *That* was the impact! That's when it hit home, that we weren't really making ourselves understood.

As the officer explained to us, the reason why the exciting impact had not been reported was that the framework for reporting the project's results was too narrow. Having allowed the narrow formal results-reporting framework to guide previous communications, the donor representatives had not asked the project staff to report on major issues such as positive changes to environmental legislation that the project had contributed to. This is an example of a situation where there had not been enough dialogue in-between organizations, a situation where counterproductive measurements could easily have increased.

We thus note that a general finding of our studies is that our interviewees all report that the closer they get to the field reality, the more they value and experience a need for physical meetings, in order to create and share a joint understanding of the project's reality and to sustain trusting, long-term relations.

## **Pragmatic Responses Enabled by Multivocal Brokering**

In the following, we describe two pragmatic responses to complexity (Alexius, 2021) that we identified as particularly important when aid bureaucrats engage in multivocal brokering to handle potentially conflicting values and requirements: the pragmatic responses of translation and decoupling.

### ***Translation***

As used here, translation refers to the process where aid organizations and their aid bureaucrats neither merely "adopt"

requirements and results, nor “passively pass them on” to the next organization in the aid network but rather adjust or “edit” the requirements and communication for a better “fit” with particular situations and local conditions. In their study of how ideas “travel,” Czarniawska and Sevón (1996) formulated an influential theory on “translation of organizational change” and demonstrated that organizations do not blindly follow just any rule or requirement from their institutional environment but rather respond to the rule or requirement actively by “translating” and “editing” them to fit the interests, culture, and conditions of the organization (Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996).

As demonstrated by Erlingsdóttir (1999), the form an idea takes or how it is “packaged” also matters to its chances to travel. If an idea is packaged as a rule, i.e., a written instruction for action with a known sender, it is easier to copy, which may increase its chances of traveling fast and intact over vast distances (see also Brunsson & Jacobsson, 2000). There is, however, no guarantee that rule-following will occur as intended by the rule-setters since the rule-followers then also have the opportunity to translate and edit rules intended for them.

In line with our discussion in Chapter 3, an important part of successful brokering is the ability to change roles, to go from one logic and situation to another, and to play the game according to a variety of rules. In the translation process, aid bureaucrats can find opportunities that support the combining and aligning of different values or compensating or adjusting for values that they fear might otherwise be “lost in translation.” Bierschenk et al. (2002) argues along similar lines that a key to brokering is in-depth knowledge of the actors of the different “universa” in the aid system. This in-depth knowledge is typical of persons who have, over time, earned a “double membership” (feeling and acting at home in multiple roles and at multiple sites).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Bierschenk et al. (2002) studied “development brokers” – i.e., persons who broker in-between organizations in the donor and recipient roles in development aid. Although these development brokers were external (similar to the external experts discussed in Chapter 6 of this volume), we find his findings on key skills similar to those identified in our data.

One example of “double membership” is having knowledge or previous personal experience of another institutional domain. This type of knowledge should, at least logically, have become increasingly important in the field of development aid since contemporary aid policies commonly state that aid projects are to be solved in multistakeholder settings calling for the inclusion of the private sector, public sector agencies, the research community, and civil society. One of our interviewees, who at the time of the interview worked as an aid bureaucrat at Sida but who had previously worked in the private sector, claimed that it would not have been possible for her to set up a multistakeholder project without her previous experience of how the private sector operates:

I don't think it would have been possible for me if I hadn't had this ... experience there in between the [agency] experiences. I wouldn't have been able to understand it in-depth, I wouldn't have been able to do it without that experience. I don't think so. [I mean] understand how the business world thinks and how we think about them.

Our interviewee from the Kommunal union also spoke about the importance of balancing her presence in- and representation of the “project world” and the “donor world,” in order to do a good job:

... I also feel that I had so much [experience] ... that it was really valuable to have been a union chair before, because in that role I was constantly defending myself from influences. That is, defending [against them] *and* yielding [to them]. After all, you have to let yourself be influenced too. But I know that people try to fool me and manipulate me to get me in the direction they want. I'm a power factor in that role, so I've learned pretty well how to filter it and get to know what people want, and what the purpose is, and where things are headed. And I use that a lot in my role [...] For instance, local union reps in particular can say straight out: “But we need a car, S. Can't you get us one?” [And I just say] “No, I can't do that. But we can

work more with the women's committees that you have.”

The citation exemplifies that brokering requires a lot of experience and an awareness of what one can or can't do in a particular role and context. We find that it is often the experienced aid bureaucrats who possess this competence to “navigate by judgment” (Honig, 2018), charting a path between formal and informal ways of coordinating aid projects. Along similar lines, an aid bureaucrat at Sida told us that time spent on getting to know the local context is a definite success factor for projects:

I spent so much time on just getting them to understand one another. That is, because the more I know, the more I want it to work. So I kind of... [in those situations] I'm not acting like a traditional client, placing an order. And I think it's a really great principle [to be able to depart from the traditional role at times]. But it takes a lot of time, and a lot of engagement. If I hadn't cared about it, it wouldn't have worked out.

Thus, becoming an efficient broker-translator requires time, willingness, courage, and engagement to learn about the others and the particular contexts at hand.

### ***Decoupling***

The second pragmatic response of decoupling refers to the practice of *superficially* abiding by requirements, for example, by adopting new legitimizing structures or administrative processes (see Chapter 5), *without* necessarily implementing them in local practice as intended at the central level (Boxenbaum & Jonsson 2008; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). As discussed in the historic account in Chapter 4, Sida aid officials have often agreed to general results initiatives and management technologies in vogue at the time, without always applying them in practice.

Decoupling has been explained as a common way for organizations with complex missions to secure legitimacy from their social

environment by adopting widely acclaimed structures and processes as “myths and ceremonies” in the organization (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). And when there is no fit between these general structures and processes and the local conditions for efficient operations, a pragmatic solution is for organizations to “decouple” their legitimate façade from the local particularities of their inner order (see also Oliver, 1991). In this way, organizations can secure both legitimacy at a distance and operational efficiency, while protecting efficient local variation (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Bierschenk et al. (2002) refers to this approach as “scenographic competence” and discusses how every aid project needs a “show window” likely to “entice the potential donor, and to delight the evaluation experts” (p. 22).

In our data, we have found several examples where new results requirements have been completely decoupled from operations. One such example concerns a project implemented by KEMI and the United Nation’s Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). The project in question received the evaluation critique that it was reporting on too many achievements but not in relation to the logical framework presented in the initial project document, which the evaluators saw as a key criterion for understanding the results of the project. Responding to this critique, the organization in the recipient role chose to revise the targets. But when asked whether the revised targets had actually changed anything in the actual work “on the ground,” the respondent confessed that it had not:

No, not really, because I think we actually ... The design of the project itself was adequate and good enough to be able to contribute to the sort of outcomes that we intended to work towards anyway, so ...

This type of decoupling, obeying the rules and requirements of reporting superficially, without changing anything in actual practice, is a pragmatic response that we have noted in several cases. In an anecdote about the Swedish Association for Sexual Education’s (RFSU’s) role as a donor to local African associations, the goal was that these local associations, in the spirit of RFSU, would work toward a more open and well-informed approach to sex. It soon became apparent that the local association needed financial

contributions from many different sources to keep its activities afloat, including from local religious organizations. Although these local funders shared RFSU's desire to reduce the number of unwanted pregnancies and unsafe abortions, the local religious associations had a completely different idea of *how* this should be achieved. So, when RFSU's controller came to visit to evaluate the project, she was greeted by a large poster with the text: "Abstinence!" According to the anecdote, the experienced controller visiting from RFSU nodded discreetly toward the poster and asked for directions to the ladies' room. When she returned, the right poster was in place, the one with RFSU's message: "Always use a condom!" The controller explained that:

[As a donor], you have to understand that if an organization [in the recipient role] somewhere in Africa gets grants from us at RFSU, they maybe get grants from some local church as well. Yeah, they get grants from different places. So, when RFSU comes, the signs that promote condom use go up. And when the local priest comes around, it's abstinence that's up on the wall. But if they're unlucky, they haven't had time to take down the first poster when the other donor comes to visit. Quite a dilemma!

The RFSU story is a rather amusing one but also illustrates something important: decoupling may even be a prerequisite for survival. As the case also shows, a qualitative evaluation of goal achievements needs to take local conditions into account. And in order for this to happen, an understanding of those conditions is a prerequisite. Respect and trust in the relationship between rule-setter and rule-followers is vital, and representatives in the donor role who only consider their *own* formal requirements can raise the risk of suboptimization.

The RFSU example further indicates that attitudes toward management by objectives and results can be expected to be influenced by the bureaucrat's own social role (see also Chapter 3). When playing the part of donor (goal-setter and result-evaluator), it is easy to wish for more detailed follow-up reports and to think that that is what promotes quality and learning. When, on the other

hand, an aid bureaucrat finds her/himself in the recipient role (being targeted and evaluated), one is more likely to find governance unnecessarily detailed and controlling, and perhaps even see it as an expression of distrust.

However, important to our purposes here is the fact that a person who has been in *both* roles and places and understands the system as a whole, like the controller from RFSU, has a better chance of acting more pragmatically as a broker and laying the groundwork for an honest broker dialogue about opportunities to balance formal requirements with characteristics and conditions of the local practice. For example, in our interviews with managers and controllers at RFSU, several people in both of these positions used the metaphor of a “fruit salad” when talking about the relation between their operations and their pragmatic approach to results reporting. As one of the managers explained:

We try to keep up the good, long-term operations that we believe in. If we liken these operations to a fruit salad, it’s then often the case that donor A wishes to know all about the bananas, only the bananas, while donor B may think that kiwis and oranges are important. So, we’re pragmatic and adjust our reporting according to their interests, though we try as far as possible to keep the same fruit salad, so to speak.

And not only persons in the donor and recipient roles take on brokering. Several of the RBM consultants hired by Sida that we interviewed similarly also explained how important they thought it was, and has been over the years, to strengthen aid organizations’ understanding of what is at stake if they merely “blindly obey” and don’t speak out against “stupid rules that don’t fit.” In one of our earlier interviews from 2013, one of these consultants explains how a lack of multivocal competence, further worsened by Sida bureaucrats’ own wish to obediently comply with in their recipient role (in relation to the Ministry for Foreign Affairs), puts pressure on the whole system to conform:

My impression is that it has often taken several back-and-forths, since there is often a language barrier

between the Sida program officer and the so-called “implementer”, which is often a Swedish organization but can also be an international one. They simply don’t speak the same language and don’t understand each other. And then, we step in as translators essentially, and then you have to sit down [and talk about it]. The Sida program officer could maybe do this, but they don’t have that time. So then we [the consultants] have to sit down and talk about that this is what they [Sida] really mean, it’s not as complicated as [the recipient representatives] seem to think when they receive the matrix [. . .] As a whole, it feels like Sida has received a mandate from the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and that the Ministry for Foreign Affairs drives the results agenda and Sida falls in line and tries to come up with something that they push out to their program officers, who then push it out to the partner organizations. But the partner organizations may have a different methodology and different ideas, and there we see a tension, and this is where we [consultants] try to figure out a way. . . like we end up with this smash-up and we try to find practical ways to untangle it.

The external consultants also told us a lot about the dilemma they experience when they are contracted to validate Sida’s requirements but have gained enough local knowledge to realize that these requirements both can and should be adjusted to the local conditions. In one interview, we discussed when and how measurements become counterproductive, and one RBM consultant told us that, contrary to intuition, increased measurement frenzies often come from organizations in the recipient role, rather than from organizations in the donor role:

Often it’s the partners who want more measurements. . . or are more inflexible and think they have to do it in a certain way. And that’s where we come in and explain: “No, but you don’t have to, it’s changed [the rules], *these* are the things you need to look at.” I think that’s more



common. They *think* that Sida is a certain way when they're not. . .

It could also be the case that the demand for more measurements (than are actually necessary) stems from a lack of knowledge or interest in measurement techniques and a belief that it is simply easier to “do the right thing” and to follow the social scripts for “how you do aid” – to cover all bases by wearing both suspenders and a belt (see Chapters 3–5):

I would say that there are very few who do it because they *believe* in measurements. I would say that *no one* really does. It's more that people believe that this is how you do aid. You *need* a matrix and you have to follow up. [. . .] So quite a few times, I've heard the partner organization we're working with say: “We *have* to do this, that's what Sida says.” And then I say: “No, you don't have to.” And then I get: “Yes, that's what they say.” And then they refer to a program officer and say: “Yes, it *has* to be done.” And then what happens is I've had to participate in an annual meeting or in a dialogue meeting or something, and then I'm contracted to help out and become sort of a Dr. Phil between the two, and explain who is who and which rules apply.

This citation shows that partners often end up guessing what Sida representatives really require, often due to a lack of direct dialogue with them. In an attempt to somehow compensate for this deficiency, external consultants are called in to broker the relationship. The external expert quoted above is clearly very confident in his knowledge of the rules and regulations and of how they should be interpreted locally, at the partner organization. But external consultants in a brokering position like this can also create a dilemma, in that the consultants need to use their judgment, courage and relational capital (Bierschenk et al., 2002) to avoid creating distrust or disappointment in any of the parties. As one consultant explains:

Even if Sida is footing the bill, our primary task is to support the partner. But Sida is often inquisitive, which can sometimes lead to a dilemma. This happened to me the other day. You have a certain trust relation with the partner organization to be able to do your job properly. They need to be able to trust that we won't run to Sida and tattle on them. [...] But we can also understand that Sida shows an interest, and rightly so, after all they're the ones who are paying.

The consultants also discussed the need to stay true to their values and their belief in the need for implementing rules in a flexible manner and making adjustments for local needs and conditions. One consultant commented that trying to manage, communicate, and sustain in relation to the "main client," Sida, was indeed an art since such a flexible approach cannot be packaged neatly:

As soon as we start to get too packaged or say "this is the method we prefer," then it's no longer good. [...] I don't want to find our model tucked away in some drawer four years from now. You don't want to find a damn model. It should... you want to see that something *happened* [on the ground] ... call it what you want. And that actually takes courage, I think, to *not* just spout methods jargon, but to ask questions like: "Are we doing the right things?" It *can* be just that simple.

Decisions to increase reporting requirements are often made on an individual basis by an aid bureaucrat at the organization in the donor role. This means that there can be a decoupling also internally at the donor organization, due to the fact that the decision-making capacity is delegated to the different positions and hierarchical levels. This can go either way. If the donor organization takes a central decision to strengthen its approach to control and measurement vis-à-vis recipients, individual aid bureaucrats in the donor organization may decouple to allow for a more flexible approach. However, it can also be the case where a central decision

taken in the donor organization to ease the requirements is not followed as intended by the organization's own bureaucrats who want a stricter approach. One study on partners' experiences of their interaction with Sida stated that central decisions on increased flexibility around requirements had "not been a blessing for all partner organizations" (Gouzou et al., 2018). That study described how the lack of clarity often created confusion and more work for the partners. Several of our respondents talked about their experiences of such unclarity or confusion about whether Sida – as represented by one's particular program officer – would require a certain results technology or not. To add further nuance, one of our respondents observed that the frequent staff changes seemed to coincide with an increase rather than a decrease in measurement requirements (despite formal central decisions to the contrary):

This may have to do with the fact that when you don't have clear directives on what the expectations for follow-up are, it all depends on the individual program officer handling your project. And that officer is often replaced over the implementation period. I've also experienced that – where Sida-funded projects have started out with one set of requirements and then at the end these have changed. Sometimes they've become less strict and more flexible, but other times they've become more complex and difficult, with higher requirements. And this is a difficult situation for the implementing organization too.

This respondent also reasoned that someone new on the job, who lacked brokering competency and was hence unsure about how much leeway there was for interpreting a central policy, may prefer to take a stricter line, following the reasoning of "better safe than sorry." In such cases, measurements can increase.

When it comes to decoupling, as discussed in Chapter 5, it is also important to note that, since external evaluators often relate to "proper organization proxies" such as the logical framework and RBM practices, organizations in the recipient role often simply need to adapt to these practices, at least "in principle" and "on the surface." This institutional pressure has forced many organizations

to employ cadres of staff whose only task is to get reporting and procedures right to meet the required “proper organization” standard. Some decades ago, the professional label of “monitoring evaluation and learning” (MEL) officer did not even exist. Today, hardly any aid organization can operate without one.

## **Spiders in the Aid Web**

In this chapter, we discussed how uncertainties and value conflicts in the aid system are handled by way of brokering, i.e., in the form of either translating or decoupling of different sites and logics, and the respective performance measurement and control requirements they place on aid. Brokers can handle conflicting reporting requirements and understand the logics of different institutional and organizational settings. Brokering skills are often acquired over a long period of time after spending time in various contexts, practicing one’s listening skills and building and sustaining relational capital. We also discussed how such brokering competence is found among experienced aid bureaucrats employed by organizations in the donor and recipient role but also among external senior consultants.

Our findings indicate that brokering is important, not only to safeguard and communicate results from the bottom-up but also to counteract tendencies toward overregulation and OMD. In this sense, no matter where they are situated, individuals with this precious brokering know-how could be likened to “spiders in the aid web” constantly spinning and tirelessly weaving their threads of communication to bridge the gaps and enable results to be captured and stick.