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Student Name: *Rob Glew*

Email contact: *rg522@cam.ac.uk*

Title of Submission: *Risk Management in Development Aid: A Modular Approach*

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PhD in Manufacturing Engineering

Rob Glew is the Siemens iCASE doctoral researcher at the Institute for Manufacturing, University of Cambridge. His work focuses on managing humanitarian and development aid supply chains. He was involved in testing and vaccine logistics during the COVID-19 pandemic and works with partners in the humanitarian and commercial sectors. Rob teaches on the undergraduate and postgraduate education programs at the Cambridge Judge Business School. His work has won several external awards, including the Royal Academy of Engineering President's Prize.

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Email contact: *rg522@cam.ac.uk*

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Risk Management in Development Aid: A Modular Approach

Abstract

The failure to effectively manage risks in development aid is a barrier to helping the fragile states that need it most. Failures, such the case study of Afghanistan in this essay, occur when risk management fails to achieve flexibility, transparency, and efficiency. In Afghanistan, perhaps 22 million people are at risk of falling into extreme suffering now that support for resilient farming, educational equality, and child malnutrition has been withdrawn after the rise of the insurgent Taliban government. This essay examines why leading development organisations failed to adapt their risk management approaches to this new context. Building on current best practice and taking a multi-disciplinary approach, the tools of systems engineering are applied to bureaucracy. The result is a new modular approach to risk management in development aid.

1. Introduction

Prior to the rise of the Taliban insurgent government in 2021, Afghanistan was already one of the most fragile states in the world. It had one of the highest infant and child mortality rates in the world, amongst the lowest life expectancy, weak infrastructure, and chronic malnutrition (UNHCR, 2022). Many aid organisations were involved in Afghanistan, delivering programmes to address the causes of these problems. As a result, development aid made up as much as 90% of government spending and around half the country's GDP. The rise of the Taliban in 2021, resulting in the collapse of the Afghan government in August, has put decades of development gains at risk (Reuters, 2021).

The Taliban insurgency fundamentally changed the risks posed to development organisations. Security conditions across the country changed and the possible reputational risk of working with the Taliban had to be considered (Economist, 2021). By September 2021, most development organisations had pulled support from Afghanistan, unable to adapt to these new operating conditions. The cost of this will be thousands of lives and years of setbacks (Glinski, 2021).

This essay examines how and why development aid organisations failed to adapt to the operating context of Taliban-led Afghanistan. It is seen that risk management was a critical barrier, as most organisations lack the capabilities to cope with changing risks in fragile states. A new model for comparing development aid risk management approaches is developed, identifying a trade-off between efficiency, transparency, and flexibility. A detailed analysis of the Afghanistan case, including data from interviews with informants at leading aid organisations, provides evidence for the causes of this risk management failure. Finally, building on the example of the UN World Food Programme in Afghanistan, a 'modular' approach to development aid risk management is proposed.

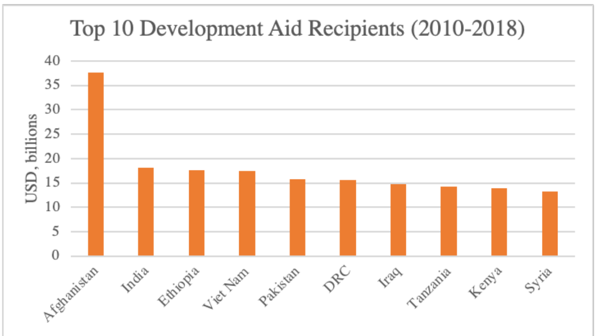
This essay makes two contributions to risk management practice in development aid. First, it identifies the limits of existing approaches in the increasingly fragile operating conditions of most aid programmes. Second, it proposes a solution to overcome these limits by applying systems engineering to the risk management process. The next section begins with a review of the purpose and history of development aid.

2. Development Aid Risks and Risk Management

Development aid programmes have changed significantly in the past 20 years, as events such as 9/11 have focused more attention on efforts that are perceived to tackle international security issues (Owusu, 2011). More aid programmes now operate in so-called 'fragile states', where national governments are weak and conflict is common (Hameiri & Scarpello, 2018). To be effective in this environment, aid organisations must be adaptable in their management of development programmes and their risks (Agrawal & Carmen Lemos, 2015). Considering this background, this section briefly introduces development aid programming and risk management, before reviewing existing approaches to risk management.

2.1 Modern Development Aid

Development aid is long-term support provided by governments and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to developing countries (OECD, 2011b). The goals of development aid are commonly economic improvement, environmental resilience, and systemic political change. This essay considers only development aid, not humanitarian aid, which is distinguished by its short-term focus on crisis relief. Development aid funding is either bilateral (directly given by one government to another) or multilateral (funded via an intermediary NGO, such as UNICEF or Oxfam). According to the OECD (2011b), around 80% of development aid funding comes from national governments, while 20% comes from private foundations, individuals, and businesses. Figure 1 shows the top recipient and donor countries of development aid between 2010 and 2018 (OECD, 2019).



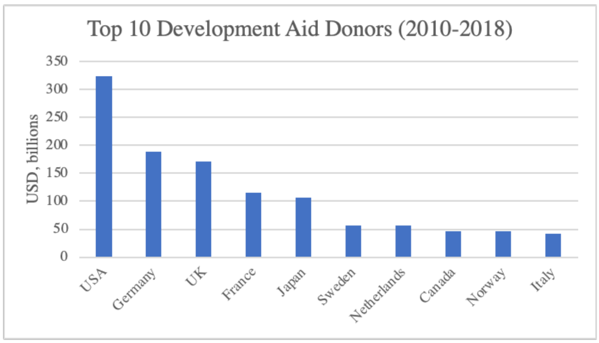


Figure 1 – Top development aid recipients and donors 2010 to 2018 (OECD, 2019)

Spanning many contexts, development aid programmes can be highly heterogeneous, for example, the UNICEF health and hygiene programme operates in over 113 countries to provide clean water and good hygiene to children. This large-scale programme spent over $200 million in Zimbabwe alone last year (UNICEF, 2021). Other programmes, such as those funded and managed by the UN World Food Programme (WFP), aim to make national food systems self-sufficient and resilient to floods and droughts, reducing the likelihood of disastrous famines.

2.2 Risk in Development Aid Programmes

When operating in fragile states, programmes are exposed to a wide variety of risks. These risks are categorised as either contextual, institutional, or programmatic (OECD, 2011a). Contextual risk refers to a broad range of risks that may emerge from operating in the fragile state context, such as political instability, natural disaster, or conflict. Institutional risk refers to the risks that the funding and implementing organisations are directly exposed to, such as staff security or financial losses. Finally, programmatic risk describes the risk that a programme does not achieve its stated development objectives, including inadvertently causing harm(OECD, 2014).

Contextual, institutional, and programmatic risks are interrelated. Contextual hazards, such as natural disasters, lead to programmatic risk if the aid programme cannot adapt to the new conditions. Equally, programmatic failure is ian institutional risk as failed programmes may cause reputational damage. The OECD considers the three risk categories interrelated according to Figure 2, known as ‘The Copenhagen Circles’.

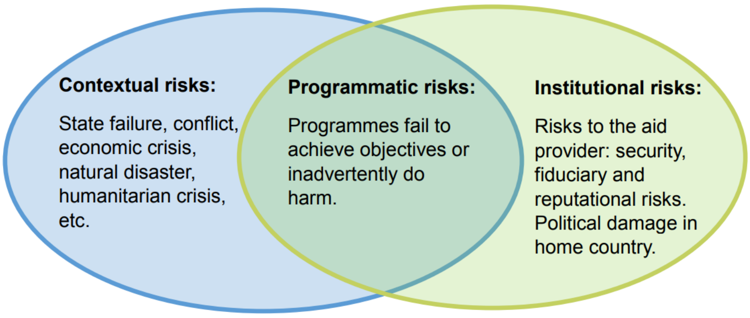


Figure 2 – The Copenhagen Circles (OECD, 2011a)

Development aid programmes often aim to deliver economic, political, and social gains in high-risk environments. Rather than avoid them, development organisations seek to manage their contextual, institutional, and programmatic risks. These sophisticated risk management and decision-making tools are introduced in the next sub-section.

2.3 Risk Management Approaches in Development Aid

Risk management describes the approaches used to identify, assess, understand, act on, and communicate risk issues in development aid (OECD, 2014). This process usually involves applying a set of tools to analyse the risks in each aid programme. Risk management seeks to either avoid, mitigate, or tolerate the risks in the categories shown in Figure 2.

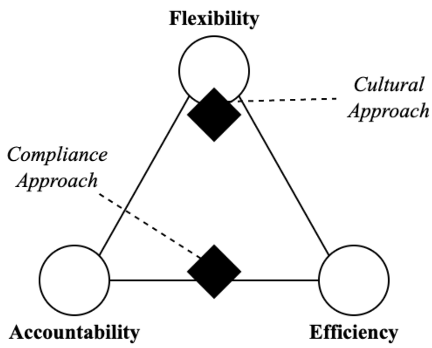


Figure 3 – Risk Management Approaches: the current paradigm (Original framework)

This essay considers risk management approaches to have three objectives: accountability, efficiency, and flexibility (Gulrajani, 2022). They must be accountable so that funding agencies can avoid reputational damage by showing logical and auditable risk management processes. They must be, efficient so that more time and money can be devoted to value adding development activity rather than risk management. Finally, they must be flexible so that programmes can adapt as their environments change and thus avoid programmatic failure. It has proved challenging for development organisations to meet these three risk management objects simultaneously. Instead, two schools of risk management appear to have emerged which make different trade-offs between the three objectives. First, and most common, is the so-called 'compliance approach', which sacrifices flexibility. Alternatively, some organisations attempt to employ a 'cultural approach', which sacrifices accountability and efficiency (Gulrajani, 2022; Seward, 2022; Sharp, 2022). Figure 3 shows how these approaches compare.

The compliance approach assumes that risks can be systematically identified, assessed, and acted upon. It uses purposefully designed, rigid tools such as risk matrices and financial impact analyses. For example, the UK's Department for International Development (DFID, now part of the FCDO) applies a probability-impact traffic light risk matrix system to all programmes. A high probability risk has more than 80% probability of occurring, a high impact risk has a financial impact exceeding £40 million.

High probability and high impact risks are ‘killer risks’ that stop programmes going ahead (DFID, 2011). The formal system employed by DFID follows four steps: (1) identify a specific risk, (2) identify a set of risk of triggers, (3) identify a list of mitigations, and (4) evaluate the probability, impact, direction of travel, and management action. Many other development organisations follow a similar compliance approach, including the US Agency for International Development (USAID), OXFAM, and the German Development Agency (GIZ).

Whilst these compliance approach tools ensure accountability and efficiency, they have been criticised for their inflexibility. One aid practitioner, who has worked with DFID and GIZ, described them as “creating a ‘computer says no’ situation in operational decisions”. As contexts change and programmes are required to adapt their delivery models and the inflexibility of their risk management approaches becomes a barrier. If adaptation would generate new sources of risk that cannot fit within the existing framework, the programme is likely to remain locked in the current operations (Saenz, 2022; Sharp, 2022).

Recognising that the compliance approach often attempts to use a one-size-fits-all process, a new paradigm has recently emerged. Pioneered by the national development agencies of the Nordic countries, particularly Sweden, this ‘cultural approach’ puts more emphasis on qualitative, individual evaluations (Gulrajani & Mills, 2019). The Swedish International Development Agency, SIDA, has built a risk management approach that places more value on flexibility and is “trust-based compared to the [compliance approach], which relies on technocratic tools and frameworks” (Gulrajani & Mills, 2019, pp. 4). This allows development organisations to have a higher tolerance for risk when the rewards of the programme justify it and to adapt programmes’ risk management approaches as operating contexts evolve (Nilsson et al. 2020).

However, SIDA has been criticised for lacking accountability in it risk management approach (Gulrajani & Mills 2019; Gulrajani, 2022). It is not clear, for example, whether risk management is consistent across projects when evaluations are qualitative and informal. Some of SIDA’s partners have criticised it for lacking suitable risk monitoring practices (Nilsson et al., 2020). Finally, ‘having a higher risk appetite’ may not translate into ‘more effective development funding’, as research has not yet compared long-term outcomes.

The shortcomings of the compliance and cultural approaches show there is a gap in development aid risk management: is there a risk management approach that is both accountable and efficient, but also flexible? In the next section, the case of development aid in Afghanistan during the political crisis of 2021 is used to demonstrate the challenges this gap creates.

3. Development Aid in Afghanistan: Failures in Risk Management

The case of development aid in Afghanistan illustrates the flaws with both the compliance and cultural approaches to risk management. The rise of the Taliban insurgent government over the course of 2021 significantly changed the operating conditions and risk profile for development programmes in Afghanistan. Most aid organisations failed to adapt to this new reality, leading to a widespread withdrawal of development programmes. However, a handful of organisations continued to provide development aid throughout this challenging period. It will be shown how these organisations take a novel approach to managing the accountability, efficiency, and flexibility trade-off.

3.1 Afghanistan Prior to September 2021

Afghanistan has long been a conflicted, fragile state (DEC, 2021). The present, so-called ‘Afghanistan War’ has gone through periods of activity and inactivity since 2001, when an American led intervention removed a militant government (DEC, 2021). The conflict has killed tens of thousands of people and led to millions being displaced.

Over the period 2000 to 2020, over $150 billion in development aid has been provided to Afghanistan (Qadam Shah, 2021). There have been many successes over this time, including increased school attendance, improved healthcare and life expectancy, the holding of democratic elections, and improving transport infrastructure (Qadam Shah, 2021). However, Afghanistan became heavily reliant on this aid for normal state functions – over 90% of state expenditure in 2020 was covered by development aid, amounting to 45% of GDP (compared with 10% for other similar low-income countries) (Qadam Shah, 2021). The major risk to development aid came from the institutional risks related to corruption, as Afghanistan consistently ranks as one of the most corrupt countries in the world (Qadam Shah, 2021).

Despite a high corruption risk, the relative stability in Afghanistan allowed development programmes to effectively manage the risks using either the cultural or compliance approach. Sweden has provided more than $1.55 billion in the past 20 years (SIDA, 2021), and the GIZ provided around $300 million per year in development aid (GIZ, 2022). DFID has run many successful development programmes, including providing access to education for around 750,000 children (Delahunty, 2021).

However, in May 2021, the USA announced a planned withdrawal of its 'peace-keeping' military operation in Afghanistan by September 2021, prompting its international coalition of allies to follow suit (BBC, 2021). The subsequent power vacuum allowed the Taliban militant insurgent group and its allies to take control of Afghanistan in stages, culminating with the taking of the capital, Kabul, on 15th August 2021 (Seir et al., 2021). The Taliban have since established a de facto government, declaring a new state as the 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan' (Seir et al. 2021). The immediate results of this conflict were a mass exodus of civilians, the collapse of the Afghan state, and the withdrawal of foreign support.

The economic and human cost of this crisis in Afghanistan have been vast and will continue to affect the fragile country. In the context of this essay, the rise of the insurgent Taliban state led to a significant change in the operating environment, and the contextual, institutional, and programmatic risks for development aid organisations. All but a few organisations failed to adapt to this modified risk environment.

3.2 Development Aid Consequences of the Taliban Insurgency

Beginning in August 2021, the mass withdrawal of aid organisations and funding led to "the carpet being pulled from under the Afghan state" (Wernersson, 2021). More than half the population, around 23 million people, are said to be at risk of starvation (Marsi, 2021). A severe drought has ruined harvests and negated years of investment in resilient farming systems (WFP, 2022). Whilst some humanitarian support continues, the long-term solutions to these problems require development aid, which has now been significantly curtailed. The World Bank estimates that $1.2Bn in development aid has been blocked due to the perceived risks of operating in the new Taliban State (Mohsin, 2021)

The withdrawal of support has united both the compliance and cultural risk management approaches. For instance, the UK reduced direct development aid to Afghanistan from £167 million in 2020, to an expected £37.5 million 2022, putting the gains from its programmes at risk (UK Parliament, 2022). In Germany, a statement from the Foreign Ministry concurred; "Germany has suspended development aid to Afghanistan after the Taliban's takeover of the country… we will not send another cent to Afghanistan"(Klingert, 2021).

The flexibility-oriented cultural risk management organisations have also withdrawn their development programmes from Afghanistan. "Under the development assistance strategy, Sweden was due to contribute almost 3.3 billion SEK [to Afghanistan] between 2021 and 2024. Following the Taliban takeover, Sweden will have to redirect this assistance" (SIDA, 2021). These withdrawals are driven by concerns about corruption, the security of staff, and reputational damage from working with an unrecognised government (SIDA, 2021).

A few development aid organisations have continued their activities throughout the Taliban insurgency (Qadam-Shah, 2021). In particular, the WFP stated that it will continue to run it development aid operations in Afghanistan including its efforts to build a resilient food system (Epstein, 2021; WFP, 2022). Rather than withdrawing from the country, the WFP has adapted its programmes and its response to the new risk environment. Even as national development agencies withdraw their direct funding, they have continued to provide multilateral funding to the WFP to continue its development programmes in Afghanistan. The WFP has a similar risk tolerance to other agencies (Saenz, 2022), but the organisation takes a unique and innovative approach to managing these risks.

3.3 World Food Programme's Risk Management in Afghanistan

To understand why the WFP was able to adapt its risk management policy when other organisations could not, data has been collected from interviews with leading figures at the WFP and a review of documents related to risk management in Afghanistan on the WFP website. The novel approach of the WFP allows it to achieve transparency, efficiency and flexibility in its risk management more effectively that other organisations.

Unlike most other agencies, the WFP does not use a tools-based approach to manage risk at a national program level. In the case of Afghanistan, the focus of risk management is on each individual project that is part of the national programme. At this granular project level, a mix of qualitative and quantitated tools are used to identify and manage risks. This enables a high level of flexibility, as individual project risk management approaches can be adapted without requiring change to the whole programme.

Transparency is combined with this flexibility, something other development aid organisations have found difficult. The key to this is how the WFP divides its risk management into many small categories. For example, DFID in the UK has two statements on its risk appetite (DFID, 2011). These statements are high-level and broad ranging, for example, "DFID has a high risk appetite to invest in research opportunities which support the creation of new evidence where these have the potential to have practical use at an operational level" (DFID, 2011, pp 18). The WFP, on the other hand, has fourteen risk appetite statements divided between four categories: strategic, operational, fiduciary, and financial. With this, the WFP can be transparent in why it is taking a given risk in each context. Such transparency explains the strong trust donors have in the WFP.

Whilst the WFP manages to balance flexibility and transparency in its risk management approaches, the efficiency of this process is weaker. The key informants interviewed for this essay noted that assessing risks on a project-by-project basis increases overhead compared to broader risk assessments. However, some efficiency improvements are being realised by creating a clear hierarchy of risk management decisions, ensuring that decisions aren't repeated. Even for the WFP, the trade-off between efficiency, transparency, and flexibility is still present.

The WFP has demonstrated strong risk management in Afghanistan that has enabled it to adapt programmes and continue to provide development aid to a fragile state, but it is still possible for it to improve. In the next section, the lessons learned from the WFP in Afghanistan are abstracted into a proposed new approach to development aid risk management.

4. Discussion

The example of the risk management approach used by the WFP in Afghanistan points towards a solution to the transparency-efficiency-flexibility trade-off. This section identifies the key elements of the WFP approach and generalises them into a novel 'modular' approach to risk management in development aid programming.

Aid organisations using the 'compliance' approach found themselves unable to be flexible when the fragile Afghan government collapsed. New corruption and security risks were incompatible with the existing risk matrices and quantitative assessments. At the same time, 'cultural' risk management organisations could not provide the transparency required when working with a potentially corrupt and untrustworthy insurgent government. Although organisations like SIDA could be flexible to the changing operational risks, the reputational risks required a level of transparency not possible within their risk management approach.

On the other hand, the WFP adapted its operations and its risk management to continue providing development aid to Afghanistan. Their granular and mixed methods approach to risk management provides flexibility and transparency, albeit at the expense of efficiency. Efficiency is necessarily lower due to the complexity of the WFP's granular assessment of risk for each individual project and its fourteen risk categories.

4.1 Modularity in Risk Management

Systems engineering and complexity theory point to a solution that allows us to generalise the WFP approach and improve its efficiency. The complexity of any system can be made manageable by designing it to be *modular*, meaning that the interdependence between its different elements is reduced (Simon, 1962; Frandsen, 2017). In product design, modularity allows product designs to be easily customised for the needs of different customers. Extending this to development aid risk management, a modular approach can be expected to provide efficient customisation of risk management to the needs of each project and risk category. On this basis, this essay proposes a new, 'modular' approach to risk management in develop aid organisations that can deliver efficiency, transparency, and flexibility (see Figure 4).

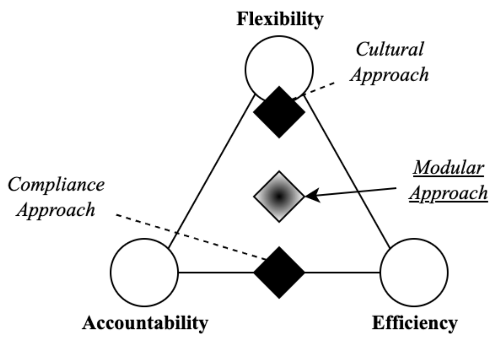


Figure 4 – Comparison of existing and modular risk management approaches

Figure 5 summarises the model. Transparency is achieved by following the WFP model of granular risk assessment along the four categories of strategic, operational, fiduciary, and financial (see the rows in Figure 5). Flexibility is achieved by assessing risks on an individual project level (or lower, if suitable, see the columns in Figure 5). However, going beyond the approach of the WFP, in modular risk assessment the interdependence between the risks in different projects are explicitly identified and reduced. This is the core of modularity and allows each project's risk to be adapted individually and is described in more detail below. Efficiency is achieved by considering each project and risk category pair a 'risk module' (see the red boxes in Figure 5). Management of these risk modules can then be assigned to a technical team specialising in, for example, fiduciary risk. This is more efficient that evaluating risks on a project-by-project basis because it recognises that there will be more similarities within the rows of Figure 5 than the columns.

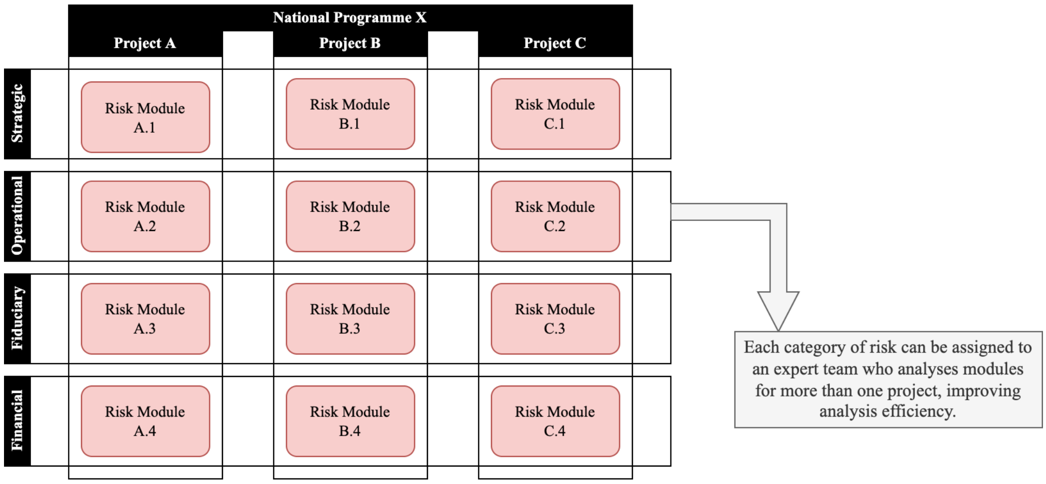


Figure 5 – A Framework for Modular Development Aid Risk Management

4.2 Modularity and Complexity in Development Aid Risk Management

Risk management in development aid is a complex issue. Projects have competing goals and funding mandates which must be carefully considered. However, the modular approach to risk management proposed in this essay provides one way for reducing some of this complexity even further than described above.

In any system, complexity can arise from interdependence between modules. For example, in designing a laptop, the casing and battery modules are interdependent: changing the size of the battery depends on the size of the casing and vice versa. The same is true for development aid project risks: reputational risks, such as fiduciary risk, are often interdependent with operational risks (as seen in the Copenhagen Circles, Figure 2). This causes complexity in risk management, because changes to the management approach for one risk may have knock on effects on the others that are interdependent with it. In Afghanistan, for example, the operational security risks of working with the Taliban are interdependent with the fiduciary and strategic risks of being seen 'supporting' an insurgent government.

Systems engineers have developed tools to visualise and manage this complexity created by interdependence in product design, such as the Design Structure Matrix (Browning, 2016).The next step in developing the modular approach to development aid risk management is to adapt these tools to be used in bureaucratic systems. Once the interdependence between the development aid project risk modules is mapped, it may be possible to reduce complexity in risk management by carefully reducing the interdependence between modules. How this would be done in practice is beyond the scope of this essay, but this is an area for further research and testing.

5. Conclusion

Development aid risk management is critical to ensuring the safety of aid workers, the effectiveness of programmes in delivering aid for those most in need, and the transparency of how public funds are spent by national development agencies. Yet, most existing agencies have failed to balance the requirements of flexibility, transparency, and efficiency in their risk management approaches. It was shown how, in the case of Afghanistan, the failure to make this trade-off will lead to increased human suffering on an enormous scale.

Building on the example set by the WFP, this essay has proposed a new model for develop aid risk management that takes a 'modular' approach. By breaking project risks down into small modules, reducing the interdependence between those modules, and then assigning each module to the most efficient risk management route for its specific needs, the three risk management requirements can be met. Yet, this approach is not without its limitations. For one, it requires change in the bureaucratic systems of large aid organisations, something that has been historically hard to achieve. It also requires inter-disciplinary collaboration between experts in different risk categories and project managers, a culture shift for many organisations that are used to an arms-length approach.

If these challenges can be overcome, the benefits of creation flexibility, transparent, and efficient development aid programmes could be far-reaching. Climate change, aging populations, and the fallout from the Covid-19 pandemic mean that many more development programmes will be operating in fragile states like Afghanistan. Risk management must be a tool for good, rather than a barrier to effective development aid.

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