

'If It Doesn't Fit on the Blue Square It's Out!' An Open Letter to My Donor Friend

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Introduction

This chapter, written from the perspective of a Zimbabwean activist, uses a letter format to explore the changing dynamics and power relations between herself and a foreign aid worker, 'Christine'. The imposition of donor reporting procedures is critiqued as being based on donor, as opposed to local, needs. In this way, learning is defined by, and developed for, donors rather than for local usage. The consequence of the failure of donors to harmonize their procedures is made clear. The author argues that when development is reduced to simplifying difficult contextual realities into, for example, logical framework formats, more problems may be created than solved. While donors need certain forms of information in a format that is easy to manage, local aid workers have their own needs and requirements. The activist returns to question the individual motivations of her Western colleague. She calls on Christine to 'meet half way'. She suggests that donors listen to the language used by local activists and understand their visions and, consequently, that they adapt some of their procedures to locally defined ways of doing things.

'Dear Christine'

Dear Christine:

I have resorted to writing you a letter because I feel this may be the only way you will understand. I have tried to explain things in my annual reports, verbally and at conferences. But I do not seem to be able to get through to you.

We first met when you came to my country as a young university graduate. They called you a ‘volunteer’, coming to us to learn about ‘Africa’, and to ‘help us’ where possible. You were a lovely person then – full of enthusiasm, reading books, asking questions. You even took to eating *sadzza*, our local staple. When we went to workshops you put on long skirts and head scarves (even though I tried to tell you the latter was not necessary – I guess you wanted to behave according to your perception of a proper Zimbabwean woman?). You spent a year with us and went back to finish your Masters.

The next time we met was at the Beijing conference in 1995. You had just joined a small organization in the US as a volunteer intern. I remember you darting from workshop to workshop in Huairou, still as enthusiastic as ever: ‘Oh EJ, these women are incredible! I want to see everyone. I want to hear everything!’ you enthused breathlessly. The joys of youth.

In your next incarnation you became a donor! We met again when I came to the US for a workshop. I could have fallen off my chair as you introduced yourself thus: ‘My name is Christine. I am a gender expert, specializing in southern Africa’. This was now 1997. I wondered how in such a short time you had become ‘an expert’? As for specializing in southern Africa, eh my dear? When you lived in Zimbabwe you had gone on a Christmas jaunt to Mozambique, Botswana and Zambia, all in three weeks. Does this make one an expert on southern Africa? I have lived in this country for a good 34 years and have never acquired the gumption to call myself an expert on Zimbabwe. Maybe I should not be so surprised. You were just imitating what I have heard many people from your part of the world say. Up there it appears a requirement to puff oneself up, whereas down here we are taught to be modest. The only time I have heard people waxing lyrical on credentials is at a funeral, not while you are still walking this Earth. We joked about your introduction at tea. But I digress.

In your new incarnation, you are now responsible for the southern Africa desk in your organization. Gender is your speciality. My organization had been getting money from your foundation for two years when you came on board. We now report to you, via your office in Harare. I was happy to learn that you were at the other end of the accounting chain. At least here is someone who understands us. So we thought. Alas, our relationship has now changed. You are now Christine the big donor, not Christine my old (dare I say ‘little’?) friend. Every nine months you come down here and I cannot help but notice the new you. Gone is the enthusiastic, learning and ‘with the women’ Christine. You are the donor. You know almost everything. You no longer ask questions; you have the answers. You are critical of what we are trying to do and point out what we should have done. For example, you wondered why we did not mobilize women to go on a street march when we failed to get all the clauses passed on inheritance rights. I tried to explain to you how the groups we work with feel about mass action of that kind. I explained the need for time to work more with women until they are at a point when they feel that they can engage in such a ‘risky’ activity – by the women’s and our definition! ‘But in South Africa they demonstrate all the time. In Latin America, too!’ Your frustration was obvious and so was your verdict: we are not doing enough.

The blue square!

You recently came to show us your new proposal and reporting format – all boxes and ‘fill in the blank spaces’. Do you remember that workshop you and I attended in Nyanga when you volunteered with us? The one facilitated by a German donor for all their ‘partners’ in Zimbabwe? The donor was teaching – yes, teaching us – how the ZOPP (objective-oriented project planning, ‘*Ziel-Orientierte Projekt Planung*’,) format worked.¹ Remember how we laughed all night about the absurdity of the framework? ‘No, no, no, Everrrrzhois and Kristiinn, not like so! No, no, no! If it doesn’t fit on the blue square, I am sorry, it is out!’ Karl had exploded. We spent three days trying to fit visions, objectives, strategies and our way of seeing the world into the differently shaped blue, green and yellow cards. It was really not funny, though. It was painful. Nobody understood this method and the logic behind it. It did not make sense for many of us who are Ndebele- or Shona-speaking. In our languages we express ourselves in paragraphs, not in short phrases or sentences. We are an oral people. We don’t think in boxes either.

Now you have gone and developed your own ‘template’. Template. It reminds me of the oral learner driver’s licence test that you were made to take in Zimbabwe. After our Vehicle Inspection Department had refused your American licence, you were forced to take local tests and learn how to drive all over again. You had to take the oral test, which is done in fifteen minutes flat. Because there will be some 100 or so people, the multiple-choice test is marked using a plastic template. The marking takes another 15 minutes flat. I remember that you were so incensed. That is exactly how I feel; that is why I am giving you an example that I think you can relate to. We have to fit our visions, our way of thinking into your template. Gone are our free expression, our long paragraphs and our way of seeing and interpreting our reality. We are now forced to express ourselves in a way that you understand and want.

Words, words, words

My language has also changed. Gone are the various words I used to use to describe women’s reality in this part of the world. I now play what I call the word game. Accountability, transparency, civil society, good governance, poverty alleviation, engaging the state, critical, cutting edge, stakeholders, participation, advocacy. I could go on and on. These are the words we now use. Yes, we do believe in these concepts. We do work around them. But it is almost as though if we don’t use these words, we fail the test. Remember that report we wrote in 1999? How you sent it back with lots of questions and comments because you said you ‘couldn’t follow’ what it is we were trying to say. Well, the simple solution was to use all of the big favourite words. It worked like magic. You stopped complaining. Your foundation has consistently refused to fund one very good organization that I know. Not because they don’t do good work, but because they are not, as you put it, ‘cutting edge’. Loosely translated, that means they don’t speak your language and they don’t use the ‘flavour of the month’ expressions. I stand to be corrected on that.

Different strokes for different folks

Remember how shocked you were to realize just how much time we spent writing reports and proposals to donors? ‘Why don’t you just write one report and one proposal for everyone. When do you ever get to do any real work? This is terrible!’ So you once asked in an understandable rage. But now you have your template, and so do the other six donors we deal with. Added to this is the whole nightmare of the different languages you all use. We have to constantly try and remember what a goal, purpose, objective or output means to each one of you. We have learned painfully that all of these terms don’t mean the same to everyone. The whole thing has been reduced to a farce. We laugh in workshops when you Northerners aren’t there. ‘Is that a goal? No, maybe it’s an output!’ Depending upon whether you were trained by Canadians, Danes or Swiss, you call the same thing something else. But we have to follow procedures.

‘Procedure’: it reminds me of another game that you and I used to play. Remember how we used to go visit my friend Sofie at the Department of Foreign Affairs? Procedure required that we fill in little slips of paper before they would let us into the building. We had to fill them out, indicating who we were, who we were visiting and why. That procedure made me angry, initially, until I turned it into a game. When I realized that none of the men at the desk ever read those pieces of paper, and neither did they really care what you wrote, I decided to have some fun. I remember ‘teaching’ you – I love that word – how to play the game. So, on some days we were ‘Mrs Mugabe of State House, Harare’ or ‘Mrs Thatcher of 10 Downing Street’, coming to see the president. On other days, we were Mata Hari, Eva Braun or Mother Theresa. It was great fun. All you had to do was follow the writing procedure and they let you in. Totally inflexible. I play the same game with you. As long as I follow the template, say the right words and do what you ask, then you will ‘let me through’ – as in: through to getting funding.

For you or for us?

Instead of writing reports or documenting experiences in ways that help us to learn, we spend a great deal of time trying to please you and doing what you want. Think of any NGO that you have funded during the last five years. If you were to ask them right now to give you something that provides enough depth and critical reflection to contribute to learning, would they have it? They would certainly have their annual reports and reports written for their other donors, but not much that is deeply reflective. We have little time, energy and resources to commit to such time-consuming processes. That is why our story has often been written by Northern academics, visitors, journalists or anybody else passing through – but not by us. Your reporting ‘format’ – or shall we call it ‘template’ – is all about you and what you want to know. It is not about us and what we want to learn.

I, too, have changed. I no longer feel relaxed, sharing information with you. I now ‘report’ to you. I tell you what I think you want to hear. I focus on the projects you are funding. What else is there to talk about? I am too scared to talk

too much, just in case I say the wrong things. I withhold information that might damage my organization. I spend time trying to understand the language that you speak and how to fit my organization into the relevant templates. We have to move with the times, keep up with the latest lingo. I suppose that is why we are regarded as ‘cutting edge’? But, in truth, we are still talking about the same group of women whom you knew way back then. Little has changed, including, perhaps, the language that we use to describe their world and our interventions.

Let’s meet half way

Development is not about words and procedures. It is about changing the reality of people’s lives. We need procedures, concepts and methods, but only as tools to help us do the work that needs to be done. When development is reduced to fitting things on blue squares, then we create more problems than we claim to solve. When these tools begin to imprison and consume all of our energies, where will we get the extra energy to do real work?

We need to find ways of relating to each other that are not based on templates and inflexible procedures. Indeed, we do need to have systems that will help you get the information that you require and that are easy enough to manage. But, at the same time, we too need to do more than satisfy your requirements. All we are asking of you is to develop ways of listening to our language and our visions, and adapt some of your procedures to our way of doing things. You and I are only part of the story of development. The bigger story has probably not yet been told. That is the story of the ordinary woman and man out there, and that story certainly does not fit on a blue square.

Note

- 1 ZOPP is an early version of logical framework (logframe) analysis (see Chapter 11). It was designed and implemented by Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ), the German development agency.

