

Travelling models and their contexts

Seminar - IEDES and EADI France, Thursday March 31st 2022

In his latest book *La revanche des contextes*¹, Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, professor of anthropology at the EHESS of Marseille, puts under scrutiny one of the reasons explaining the failure of development projects and public policies. He sheds light on the standardisation of interventions, crafted and applied by international experts who lack empirical knowledge of the contexts in which they implement these. These “travelling models” are duplicated from one country to another, without predicting political, administrative, economical and sociological customs, routines, norms and specificities that could prevent the model to fit its contexts of implementation. These “implementation gaps” between the abstract model and the reality generally form a blind spot in program management that could be addressed by greater implication of local actors and better usage of social sciences to provide practitioners with a reflexive approach to their work.

The roundtable focused on the 248 issue of the *Revue internationale des études du développement* published in March 2022 on: Travelling models: social engineering in development². Authors who contributed to this issue were invited at Agence française de développement (AFD) headquarters to present their work and exchange views and case studies on the mechanisms behind the “fabrication” of travelling models, their confrontation with contexts, and further reflect on possible topics of research and solutions to create alternate paths for international aid.

Travelling models: an hegemonic form of intervention

Prof. Olivier de Sardan provided a definition of travelling models, an expression borrowed from German anthropologist Richard Rottenburg. They describe “any standardized and bland institutional intervention, public policy, program, reform, project [...], with a view of producing some kind of social change, and which relies on some devices or mechanisms which are supposed to have intrinsic properties independently of the various contexts where they are implemented”. He pointed out that travelling models now represent the vast majority of development programs and public policies in the global South, and most specifically on the African continent. They are almost always publicised following the same pattern.

¹ Olivier de Sardan, J.-P. (2021). *La revanche des contextes. Des mésaventures de l'ingénierie sociale, en Afrique et au-delà*. Karthala.

² Olivier de Sardan, J.-P. & Vari-Lavoisier, I. (Eds.). (2022). Les modèles voyageurs : une ingénierie sociale du développement. *Revue internationale des études du développement*, 1(248). <https://doi.org/10.4000/ried.276>.

Their diffusion is first justified by an example where the model is deemed to have been successful. This success story serves as a proof of the inherent efficiency of the mechanism, without any regard to the specificity of the context it was applied to. Sometimes, the success story has never happened and decades of failed implementations do not prevent further promotion. Marc Raffinot gave the case of Result-Based Budgetization (RBB), a model applied since the 1980s in developed economies that was proved to be counterproductive but was still imposed by donor pressure in developing countries.

Then, the model is supported by a series of conferences, seminars and publications, upholding its merits. It forms a fixed narrative that allows only praise and rejects any form of criticism. Elisabeth Paul shared her experience of publishing a critical article of Performance-Based Financing (PBF), a typical travelling model, that showed that despite its large diffusion worldwide, this mechanism lacked proof of efficiency and of any kind of theoretical justification. Her work with Valéry Ridde and 24 other researchers has suffered heavy backlash from PBF upholders, organized in a Community of Practice. She took a moment to backtrack on those criticisms based on vague examples and generalities and exposing their lack of scientific methodology. She suffered numerous ad hominem criticisms and the sane debate she and her colleagues were expecting after the publication could never happen. She noted what she calls the “*cognitive dissonance*” of PBF advocates as it was impossible to question the dominant narrative. PBF failures could only be attributed to a failure of implementation, but it couldn’t be linked in any case to an inherent deficiency of the model. PBF was a “matter of fact”, not a “matter of concern”.

Her personal observations can be related to the one Erhard Friedberg made on Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan’s book “La Revanche des Contextes” during the meeting. He emphasized on the importance of this publication as it is a work on “the relation between technocrats and the real world”. He made a parallel between New Public Management in the North and development projects and policies in the South, where technicization and central planning detach thinking elites from reality. There is an abstraction to their thought that they endlessly refine away from reality, giving them the sensation of designing perfect mechanisms. According to his long work experience, international experts are reluctant to implement local realities in their thinking patterns. “The context is conservative” to them, and should adapt to the model, never the other way around.

These “technocrats” sometimes originate from the country models are applied to, but, having received an international education, they replicate this frame of thought when returning to their home country to assume governmental positions. Such was the case exposed by Marc Raffinot of Mali’s Minister of Finance that called for implementation of

RBB in his country even though it had proved inefficient after decades of implementation in other contexts.

The test of travelling models in the face of contextualisation

As mentioned before, travelling models share this specificity of being copy-pasted from one context to another. According to Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, travelling models can be described as social engineering models that are sometimes confused with technical engineering in their implementation, in that they are supposed to have intrinsic properties applicable in any situation.

But social reality leads to an “implementation gap” as explained by Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, a gap between the model and the reality it’s applied to. To go further in this analysis, Francois Enten has shown in his recent research that “implementation gaps” could be described through different factors, like institutional ones. He studied the application of Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) in Madagascar after the 2020 droughts. It’s a travelling model described as involving and adaptative, paradoxically relying on local participation to be efficient. However, the malagasy government excluded local field experiences and actors in the decision making and production of data, which resulted in disappointing results.

There were also technical factors explaining this failure. IPC projections were based on “forecasting exercises that ignore the feedback or diffused signals from the field”, such as food delivery delays. Even the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic were not taken into account. Many important indicators about local context were revealed outside of the IPC protocol and were not considered: the high rate of adult mortality, malnutrition or the high dispersion of habitats. It led to a reality where “the IPC is authoritative and not the field information”.

Other researchers have tried to show during this round-table that when a travelling model was successfully applied, it was because the context was favourable for its implementation, and not because the model was intrinsically efficient. Such was the case during the Tunisian revolution of 2011, on which Déborah Perez and Quentin Deforge have focused their research on. They described the appropriation of the Parliament Monitoring Organization (PMO) model by the revolution, and its implication in the constitutional process. PMOs act as parliamentary watchdogs. At the time of the revolution, NGOs were holding many seminars about this model. It intertwined perfectly with the current need for transparency of parliamentary debates of Tunisian revolutionaries. When some former members of Ben Ali’s opposition understood that they could never be elected, they saw PMO as a way to

play a role in the constitution process. Despite being able to become MPs, they created a body of experts in the form of a PMO that became the core of parliamentary activity.

Overall, in front of this very contrasting situation, researchers have during this round-table, suggested paths for improvement. For François Enten, media and even social media may have a role in transforming and adapting the travelling model into the right way, by alerting on their malfunctions and on field reality.

On the other hand, Ilka Vari-Lavoisier thinks that implementation gaps should be carefully anticipated when translating models. Here, interdisciplinary work and social sciences play an important role in helping to better understand implementation contexts and thus improve the quality of international interventions. The work of the RIED could be capitalised to publish such interdisciplinary works.

To conclude, Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan suggested a more general way to train internal innovators in development agencies, but also in African governments. He spoke about the need to rehabilitate the civil service in Africa, where executives are punctured towards international organizations, consulting firms and NGOs, which will then come to provide their services to their countries. It shows in particular the importance of field workers, who must be involved in decision-making processes. His current work in Niger in the field of health aims to encourage the ministry recognize the role of its agents, who very often propose modest, but really essential innovations for the proper functioning of operations in the field. This argument joins the one exposed by Erhard Friedberg, according to which general management tools should not replace reality in the field.

Eight academics participated in this round table:

Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan

Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan is an anthropologist, professor of anthropology at the École des hautes études en sciences sociales (EHESS). He is also director of research emeritus at the National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS) in France, and associate professor at Abdou-Moumouni University (Niger). His research focuses on West Africa and its research methodology is widely recognized in academia.

Ilka Vari-Lavoisier

Ilka Vari-Lavoisier is the principal researcher on an interdisciplinary project led by the Centre for European Studies and Comparative Politics (CEE, Sciences Po) and the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS, University of Oxford). Her research focuses

on the link between cognition and migration with a focus on social transfers and forecasting.

Erhard Friedberg

Erhard Friedberg is an emeritus researcher at the CNRS and a professor at Sciences Po. He is one of the most important figures of the French school of organisational sociology.

François Enten

François Enten is a researcher at the GRET since 2014 and a former Head of Mission at Médecins Sans Frontières. He has led significant research on the 2021 food crisis in Madagascar.

Quentin Deforge

Quentin Deforge is a postdoctoral researcher at the EHESS. His current work focuses on open government and transparency transnational networks and policies. He has conducted several research projects in collaboration with Déborah Perez.

Déborah Perez

Déborah Perez is an assistant professor at the Mohammed 6 University (Rabat, Morocco) and an associate professor at the Centre Maurice Halbwachs. She has done some significant research related to the regime change in Tunisia.

Elisabeth Paul

Elisabeth Paul is an associate professor at the École de santé publique, Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB), a lecturer at the University of Liège and an independent consultant. She combines an academic and field career in development aid and global health, with a focus on West Africa. Her recent research, led with Valéry Ridde (Institut de recherche pour le développement, IRD), focuses on performance-based financing (PBF).

Marc Raffinot

Marc Raffinot is an emeritus professor at the Paris-Dauphine University, he has carried out numerous consultancy works, mainly in West Africa. His work focuses on international development with a specialisation in international debt.

Sami Khalil
Abdessamad Plouvier
IEDES – université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne