

Development in Brief



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The "Science of Delivery" Approach of the World Bank – What is behind it?

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The history of development economics is the history of development theories, all of which have been falsified in many specific cases. The current deficit in theory can be set against much positive and negative practical experience gained from individual projects. There is a clear gap in our knowledge when we compare practical development experience and globally accepted development theory.

For some years now, however, development research has had tools at its disposal (such as randomised control group studies and random experiments) that are able to bridge this gulf.

What is the "science of delivery"?

The key here is the "science of delivery", namely the science of how to successfully implement projects that generate development. This term was introduced by the new President of the World Bank Group Jim Yong King who, as a physician, is familiar with this approach from clinical research and hopes to implement it consistently at the World Bank: it involves the systematic gathering and analysis of positive and negative experience gained from individual projects, on the basis of which common features can be identified and recommendations derived for comparable cases – an inductive approach: from specific observations to general principles.

Core elements of the concept

The systematic analysis of experience with individual projects first requires that this knowledge is recorded and documented as objectively as possible using scientific methods. This concerns not only the experience of the World Bank itself, but the whole range of experience of partner governments and NGOs, other donors and foundations.

As this experience is gained on the ground,

the World Bank thus plans to create a network of local "knowledge hubs" - alliances of local academics from different disciplines, practitioners and political representatives.

The insights gained locally have to be structured if relevant success and differentiation factors as well as framework conditions, which have played a decisive role in the achievement of effects, are to be identified.

Equally as important as the systematic collection, analysis and organisation of relevant experience is its correct provision, dissemination and use. A particular challenge here is to not make generalisations too quickly, but to present individual experience with its relevant local framework conditions in such a way that the "planners" of new projects can themselves decide whether they regard the conditions as comparable and therefore the knowledge gained as transferrable.

Fundamental paradigm change for the World Bank

In terms of its content, the "science of delivery" approach is not so very new as it sounds. In the past too, experience gained from implementation by different players has been ascertained and analysed, through not with such systematic and consistent scientific support as is now required.

But this approach may nonetheless mean a fundamental paradigm change for the World Bank: the World Bank is transforming itself from an institution, which understood itself to be a "repository of knowledge" and disseminated general development strategies (knowledge bank) into a knowledge broker, offering a menu of solutions that have elsewhere and under comparable conditions already achieved positive effects (solution bank).

World Bank reform: A systematic orientation towards better knowledge management

Jim Yong King is clearly taking the restructuring of the World Bank extremely seriously: as part of far-reaching organisational reforms, he is systematically directing the World Bank's internal structures towards facilitating inter-regional learning and problem solving: this involves dissolving the regional departments of the World Bank, which until now have acted independently of each other, and instead introducing thematic structures, which make inter-regional, solution-oriented knowledge management possible. The "science of delivery" approach is an integral part of the reforms. The names of the World Bank's new networks and structures say it all: "Global Practices" and "Cross Cutting Solution Areas".

Conclusion: A good opportunity to boost the effectiveness of development cooperation – Outside the World Bank too

The "science of delivery" approach concerns not only the World Bank, but also all other development cooperation players: they can bring their own experience to the "knowledge hub", and benefit from the systematic organisation and provision of the existing experience of other players in the design of their own projects.

The approach encourages those developing new projects to also focus more on planning experimental components in order, by way of alternative project designs, to identify the most effective solutions under the respective local conditions before these solutions are extended more widely. "Robust" monitoring and evaluation tools are becoming ever more important in this context.

Overall, this approach offers a good opportunity for further increasing the effectiveness of international development cooperation. The success and added value of this approach will ultimately have to be measured in terms of the extent to which this opportunity is also taken up in practice. ■