

The Impact of Conflict Contexts on Project Logics: A Comparison of Project Proposals from External and Embedded Organizations

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Abstract

This paper examines whether there are systematic differences in the project logics for peacebuilding projects developed by organizations within societies in conflict and organizations which are external to societies in conflict. The paper uses the distinction between holistic and analytic systems of thought, concepts originally developed in the field of cross-cultural psychology, to hypothesize that embedded organizations develop theories of change that are more holistic while external organizations develop more analytic theories of change. This hypothesis is tested by analyzing the project summaries for 235 proposals submitted to the United States Institute of Peace in 2009 and 2010. The data support the hypothesis that there is a systematic difference in the way embedded and external organizations develop their project logics. An alternative hypothesis is then tested, namely that cultural differences between western and non-western organizations explains this difference. The evidence for the alternative hypothesis is mixed and therefore cultural differences cannot be ruled out as a factor that helps account for the difference in the nature of project logics. The findings have implications for both how international organizations develop their capacity-building programs and how donors design solicitations and review proposals.

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I. Introduction

There is widespread consensus within the peacebuilding field that in order to be successful peacebuilding initiatives should have a clear project logic.¹ Donors, in particular, almost universally expect that applicants provide such logic within their proposals. Terminology varies from donor to donor, but in some form, there is the requirement within solicitations that applicants describe a logical sequence that moves from activities through near-term outcomes to the achieving of medium or longer-term goals that create an important change or address a key problem.²

There are many reasons donors ask for such a project logic. In part, it is a result of the review process. Without such a clear logic, proposals become difficult for reviewers to assess. More importantly for the purposes of this paper, without a clear project logic, it becomes very difficult to develop a solid evaluation plan. It has become almost dogma that monitoring and evaluation planning should begin at the design stage.³

From an implementer perspective, since donors are demanding clear logics, and will continue to do so into foreseeable future, it is simply pragmatic to be able to create them. Thus, for both substantive and pragmatic reasons it is important to be able to articulate clear project logics.

In my role at the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), I have reviewed thousands of peacebuilding proposals. It is clear that implementers of peacebuilding projects often find articulating a clear project logic to be difficult. This difficulty becomes particularly pronounced among implementers within countries experiencing conflict.

Many donors and NGOs want to strengthen the ability of local civil society organizations and local community-based organizations to implement projects. Since better project logics lead to better proposals, which lead to funding, this difficulty in articulating clear project logics is a

¹ For the purposes of this paper, the project logic should be seen as a core element of a more fleshed-out theory of change. The project logic is the “what”, a description of the activities, immediate outcomes, and broader goals. A fuller theory of change provides the “why”, the underlying theory which explains why the implementer thinks the activities will actually lead to the outcomes, and so on. Project logic is used in the paper because the proposal summaries reviewed do describe a project logic, but often do not provide information on the applicant’s fuller theory of change.

² None of this is unique to the peacebuilding field of course.

³ See for example, USAID, “Evaluation Learning from Experience: USAID Evaluation Policy,” (Washington DC: USAID, January 2011) 6.

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widespread concern. The diagnosis of the problem has normally been framed in term of: 1) a knowledge gap – local organizations do not understand what donors want; or 2) a capacity gap – the staff of local organizations need new or improved skills in order to be able to develop clear project logics.

Donors have responded primarily by trying to provide better guidance through improving their funding solicitations and outreach (knowledge) or by funding or implementing directly capacity-building projects on project design and proposal writing (capacity). Despite these efforts, there remains widespread frustration among donors regarding the difficulty in getting local organizations to develop and communicate a clear project logic.

An alternative critique, often coming from outside donor organizations, is that the type of project logics demanded require organizations to look at the world in an overly “western” way.⁴ According to these critics, this privileges western organizations at the expense of non-western organizations that may look at the world in fundamentally different ways.

The research here was inspired by experience in recent years working with several local civil society organizations in which capacity is not an issue. The leaders of these organizations are highly-educated, have interacted for many years with international donors, are sophisticated in their understanding of programming, and yet still have difficulty developing the types of project logics international donors are requiring.

So the question becomes, is there something more else going on than a lack of knowledge or a lack of capacity that explains this difficulty in developing project logic. As a way of exploring this question, the paper presents the hypothesis that organizations embedded in a conflict-affected area will tend to describe their projects in fundamentally different ways than external organizations.

Specifically, the paper uses the distinction between “holistic” and “analytic” systems of thought, concepts originally developed in the field of cross-cultural psychology, to hypothesize that embedded organizations develop project logics that are more holistic while external organizations develop more analytic project logics. This hypothesis is tested by analyzing the

⁴ For the purposes of this paper, “western” is defined as the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Europe, and Australia. This definition is used for the purposes of the research here because it represents the core of the “west” and therefore presents a harder test of the alternative research hypothesis than, for instance, if Eastern Europe or Latin America was included. In order to reduce distraction, the scare quotes around western will not be used from this point forward.

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project summaries for 235 proposals submitted to USIP in 2009 and 2010. The data support the hypothesis that there is a systematic difference in the way embedded and external organizations develop their theories of change.

An alternative hypothesis is then tested, namely that cultural differences between western and non-western organizations explains this difference. The evidence for the alternative hypothesis is mixed and therefore cultural differences cannot be ruled out as a factor that accounts for the differences in the project logics.

The research presented here should be considered exploratory. If future research confirms the findings, however, it will need to be acknowledged that in regard to development of their project logics, local organizations aren't doing it wrong, they are doing it differently. This has implications both for capacity-building projects and for the development of funding solicitations and guidelines. Capacity-building initiatives, for instance, would need to be redesigned to not only teach new skills, but also to teach a different way of thinking about project design. Similarly, funding solicitations would need to acknowledge this different way of thinking and allow for the articulation of project design in ways consistent with this way of thinking.

II. The Data

To build the dataset for this project, the proposal summaries for the 972 proposals submitted to the 2009 and 2010 USIP Annual Grant Competition were compiled. The proposal summaries consist of four fields: Project Context, Project Activities, Project Objectives, and Project Contribution. Each field is limited to 550 characters. Instructions are given in the proposal guidelines for each of these fields. In brief, the Project Context is the problem to be addressed; project activities and objectives are self-explanatory; project contribution is the unique contribution the project will make vis-à-vis other similar initiatives.

Based on a review of the proposal summaries, only proposals that sought to implement peacebuilding activities in a conflict-affected country were kept in the dataset. These activities could include research, advocacy, dialogue work, or other strategies. The key was the whether or not the project sought to make an impact on peace and conflict dynamics within the conflict-affected country. Because the research at this stage is exploratory, 50% of the remaining projects were randomly chosen to be coded.⁵ Then a small number of proposals were

⁵ Specifically, every other project in the spreadsheet list was coded. Since the list corresponds roughly to when the project was submitted, it was important not to code the first half of the proposals.

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eliminated because they were simply nonsensical. After applying these filters, there were 235 proposals remaining. These proposals make up the dataset for this research.

First, each of these proposals was coded as being implemented by an embedded or external organization. The decision was made on the basis of national borders. If the organization was based in a different country, it was considered an external organization.

Second, a spreadsheet was constructed that included the project title and project summary, but no identifying information.⁶ Proposal summaries were then coded using the criteria identified below as holistic or analytic.

Holistic versus Analytic

The concepts holistic and analytic are borrowed from the work of Richard Nisbett, Kaiping Peng and others working in the field of cross-cultural psychology. In their seminal 2001 paper, Nisbett et al, describe two different “systems of thought” or cognition that they label holistic and analytic.⁷

The authors working in this field developed this distinction to compare cognition across cultures, primarily American culture versus East Asian cultures.⁸ In this research, I argue that the drivers of the difference in the systems of thought are not cultural, but positional, namely whether an organization is embedded in the conflict or based outside of the conflict. This argument and the use of the analytic/holistic distinction is based in part on lived experience. Despite the fact that the distinction was developed originally as a cross-cultural research tool,

⁶ Since I worked on the Annual Grant Competition, I was familiar with some of the proposals and therefore the coding was not entirely blinded. In addition, many of the project summaries self-referenced their organization. To take the paper past the exploratory stage, the summaries would need to be anonymized and multiple coders with no knowledge of the proposals would need to be used.

⁷ Richard E. Nisbett et al, “Culture and Systems of Thought: Holistic Versus Analytic Cognition,” *Psychological Review* 108:2 (2001): 291-310. See also Julie Spencer-Rogers, Melissa J. Williams, and Kaiping Peng, “Cultural Differences in Expectations of Change and Tolerance for Contradiction,” *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 14:3 (2010): 296-312; Jinkyung Na et al, “Cultural Differences Are Not Always Reducible to Individual Differences,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science* 107:14 (2010): 6192-6197.

⁸ More recently, authors have moved away from a clear dichotomy between cultures and have used these concepts in more complex ways to look at variations across and within cultures. See Rogers, Williams, and Peng, 298.

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the description of the two different worldviews tracked closely with my experience reviewing proposals presented by international organizations and local organizations.

As will be seen from the description below, the project logics demanded by international donor organizations and other funders are more consistent with an analytic worldview.

Coding: Three Dimensions

For the purposes of this research the arguments of Nisbett et al and others working on similar issues were synthesized into three categories: Ontology, Epistemology, and Causality. Each project summary was reviewed and coded based on the questions laid out below for each of these categories.

1. **Ontology:** In regard to ontology, the key distinction between the holistic and analytic view is continuity versus discreteness.⁹ That is, is the world a collection of overlapping and intertwined things or is the world a collection of discrete objects? In addition, an holistic worldview, because it is more concerned with relationships and continuities tends to cause individuals to focus on the “field” instead of the “object”, on the lake, for instance, instead of the boat. For the purposes of coding, the project in an object, the social context is a field. Thus, during the review of the proposal summaries, the following questions were asked.

External	Embedded
Is the project described largely in isolation from its surroundings?	Is the project described largely through its interactions with the context and other social forces?
Does the summary focus more on the internal workings of the project, versus the context?	Does the summary focus more on the context versus the internal workings of the project?

2. **Causality:**

In an analytic worldview, causality is attributed to the object. To illustrate this, Nisbett et al describe the classic Aristotelian mistake of attributing a stone’s falling to an inherent

⁹ Nisbett et al, “293.

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property of the stone.¹⁰ In contrast, a holistic worldview sees causality emerging from contexts, and the interplay of forces within those contexts. In addition, those with a holistic worldview are more comfortable attributing outcomes to many factors, interacting in complex ways.¹¹ Again if we consider the project, the object, we can ask the following questions of the proposal summaries.

External	Embedded
Are outcomes described as the result of result of the project impacting other discrete actors or organizations?	Are outcomes described as a shift in contextual factors, such as culture, mindset, poverty, militancy, etc.?
Are more linear, uni-causal statements used?	Are more complex, multi-causal statements used?

3. Epistemology: The key distinction between a holistic and analytic approach is that a holistic approach relies primarily on knowledge gained from experience while an analytic approach focuses more on first principles and abstract analysis (deductive or inductive).¹² Thus, in the review of the project summaries, for each statement that makes a knowledge claim, we asked the following questions.

External	Embedded
Is a first principle stated? Is a logical process of deduction or induction described?	Does the applicant base the claim on previous experience of themselves or others actors within the context?

This rubric was developed prior to the coding process. As it turned out, there were few knowledge claims embedded within the project summaries. Thus, the summaries were coded primarily through the use of the first two dimensions – ontology and causality. The

¹⁰ Nisbett et al, 293.

¹¹ Nisbett et al, 298.

¹² Nisbett et al, 294.

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epistemology dimension may still be useful in the future for the coding of fuller project descriptions.

Ideal-type Phrases

For illustrative purposes, below are examples of ideal-type phrases from the proposals for each of the categories.

<u>Analytic</u>	<u>Holistic</u>
<p><i>Build the capacity of 100 victims in 8 municipalities . . .to defend their rights and manage their grief.</i></p>	<p><i>The project aims to improve the country's long term competitiveness by promoting good governance and strengthening collective action to reduce corruption.</i></p>
<p><i>Share peer and expert coaching techniques with leaders in the refugee rights movement. . . and encourage the use of coaching to improve leadership skills.</i></p>	<p><i>. . .to create a space for dialogue . . . vulnerable groups such as children, rape victims and other minorities will be given a platform for communicating to the rest of the world.</i></p>
<p><i>This project seeks to strengthen the capacity of teachers, by developing their resilience and capacity to manage classrooms of children affected by crime, conflict and violence;</i></p>	<p><i>To create awareness among communities of the targeted districts and raise the issue to create social pressure for human security.</i></p>
<p><i>Reduction of violent incidents between ex-combatants and community through capacity building in cultural approaches to reconciliation and trauma counseling.</i></p>	<p><i>This project seeks to create a platform for the community to contribute to the transformation of conflict through dialogue and information sharing.</i></p>

III. Results

Primary Hypothesis

The primary hypothesis of the research was that organizations based outside of a conflict area are more likely to develop project logics which evince an analytic worldview. Conversely,

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organizations based within a conflict area are more likely to develop project logics which evince a holistic worldview.

The primary hypothesis was tested using the data in Table 1 which shows the result of the external/embedded coding and the holistic/analytic coding.

Table 1: All Proposals

	Analytic	Holistic
Embedded	43	62
External	89	41

n = 235

$\chi^2 = 17.85$

p-value = .0000238

As can be seen, the p-value is quite low, so the data support the primary hypothesis. There is a significant difference between external and embedded organizations regarding the type of worldview encapsulated in their project summaries. And this difference is in the direction the hypothesis predicted.

Alternative Hypothesis

Given the current organization of the peacebuilding field, external peacebuilding organizations are more likely to be from western countries. Therefore, an alternative explanation for the above results is that the difference is culturally-determined, that organizations within western countries tend to use an analytic worldview, while organizations within non-western countries tend to have a holistic worldview. Since the concepts, analytic and holistic, were originally developed to look at distinctions between cultures this is a plausible hypothesis.

The data provide a means for testing this alternative hypothesis because there are number of non-western organizations that proposed projects to be implemented in a different country and therefore were coded as external organizations. By comparing western external organizations with non-western external organizations, we can test the alternative hypothesis. If there is no difference between these two categories along the analytic/holistic divide, then the alternative hypothesis is refuted, if there is a difference then the alternative hypothesis that the western/non-western cultural divide makes a difference is supported.

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Table 2 shows all of the proposals sorted by the region of the proposing organization.

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Table 2: All Proposals – Sorted by Region of Proposing Organization

	Analytic/External	Analytic/Embedded	Holistic/External	Holistic/Embedded
West: UK-US-CA-AUS-EUR	68	0	24	0
FSU-EE-Central Asia	7	10	8	10
Asia	0	11	0	17
Africa	6	16	1	20
MENA	7	3	8	9
Latin America	1	3	0	6
Totals	89	43	41	62

From Table 2, Table 3 was developed, which was used to test the alternative hypothesis.

Table 3: All External Proposals – Western versus Non-Western

	Analytic	Holistic
West (N.Amer., UK, Aus., Europe)	68	24
L. Am., Africa, MENA, Asia, FSU/E. Eur.	21	17

n = 130

$\chi^2 = 4.85$

p-value = .03

The p-value is just high enough to reject the null hypothesis and therefore provides weak support for the alternative hypothesis. Western organizations are slightly more pre-disposed to an analytic approach.

It is interesting, however, to look more closely at the regional breakdown in Table 4.

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Table 4: External Non-Western Proposals - sorted by Region of Proposing Organization

	Analytic/External	Holistic/External
FSU, Eastern Europe, Central Asia	7	8
Asia	0	0
Africa	6	1
MENA	7	8
Latin America	1	0

Based on these numbers, it's clear that holistic thinking is not dominant once you leave the west. Instead, we see a relatively balanced distribution between analytic and holistic thinking. Further complicating the story, Africa, which might be considered the farthest culturally from the west, was the most analytic.

Given the complexity of culture, the fact that many in the NGO sector travel to the west for their education, and the often close professional ties between western and non-western organizations, it is not surprising that the data do not tell a clean story regarding the alternative, cultural hypothesis. More research, including qualitative work with individuals within these organizations, is necessary to tease out the relative importance of culture and embeddedness on the way in which individuals and organizations conceive of their projects and their project logics.

IV. Implications

As I've noted above, this research should be considered exploratory. If further research confirms the primary hypothesis presented here that organizations embedded within conflict areas tend to use holistic systems of thought when developing their project logics, then there are implications both for how capacity-building initiatives are designed and implemented and for how funding solicitations are developed and reviewed.

This paper is not the place to go into the details of how capacity-building programs might be changed, but in general, these programs would need to move away from the blank slate model,

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which is prevalent now. As noted above, this model assumes that organizations either do not understand that donors want a clear project logic, or that organizations do not have capacity to develop a clear project logic. Assuming that in the near term, donor solicitations will not change, capacity-building programs should shift from this blank slate model to a model that acknowledges that many local organizations have a sophisticated, but different system of thinking regarding the relationship between their project and the conflict context. The goal of the capacity-building project then would be to help the organization translate their holistic thinking into the analytic frame demanded by donors.

Over the longer term the funding solicitation design and review process should acknowledge that difference in systems of thought between embedded and external organizations. For instead, instead of a project logic within a logframe, a solicitation might ask for a force-field analysis.¹³ Such an analysis is equally sophisticated, but emphasizes the interaction of forces, instead of the interaction of individual objects, and is therefore more consistent with a holistic system of thought.

V. Conclusion

In January 2011, USAID administrator Raj Shah said in a speech, "This agency is no longer satisfied with writing big checks to big contractors and calling it development." He added this would mean more, "funding to local [non-governmental organizations] and local entrepreneurs."¹⁴ Much has been written about how these types of aspirations are undermined by the rigorous compliance regimes in Washington DC.¹⁵ Less has been written on the difficulties that funding solicitations and funding review processes can create when donors seek to fund local organizations directly.

At least in regard to peacebuilding, the context in which local organizations operate, marked as they are by violence, trauma, institutional breakdown, and the other symptoms and results of conflict, are different in fundamental ways than the contexts in which external organizations exist. The research presented here indicates that these different contexts create systematic

¹³ For a good example, see <http://cadres.pepperdine.edu/ar/c11/lepori/Force%20Field.html>

¹⁴ Quoted in Walter Pincus, "New Administrator Wants to Change the Way USAID Works," 24 Jan. 2011. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/01/24/AR2011012406629.html>. Accessed 29 Oct. 2011.

¹⁵ For one example, see Andrew Natsios, "The Clash of the Counter-Bureaucracy and Development," Center for Global Development, Essay, July 2010.

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differences in the way organizations conceive of their projects and develop their project logics. These differences need to be acknowledged within the solicitations processes, review processes, and the capacity-building programs of international funders and implementers if efforts to provide more funds directly to local organizations are to be successful.

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