Chapter 8

Pragmatic Bureaucracy: An Antidote to Obsessive Measurement Disorder?

The need to cope with complexity and uncertainty when tackling "wicked problems" such as poverty, inequality, disease, and climate change remains as vital and urgent as ever. Therefore, we know that there are many out there who – like the main characters of our story, the *aid bureaucrats* – find themselves faced with numerous uncertainties that they feel obliged to respond to in order to do good with common resources.

As discussed in Chapter 1, thanks to previous research and practitioner experience, there is both knowledge and awareness today that excessive use of performance management and control-seeking methods to reduce uncertainty in complex settings can lead to unintended consequences and perverse, counterproductive effects for management and operations. It is therefore not surprising that, in the development aid sector, most aid organizations have officially joined the chorus of those eager to at least *talk* about other ways of governing aid (Vähämäki & Verger, 2019). But what happens in *everyday practice*? *What do aid bureaucrats in interorganizational project arrangements actually do to cope with and respond to uncertainty, while facing great demands for certainty*? Looking more closely at the field, from macro to micro, it is clearly the case that attempts to cope with uncertainty largely take the form of rationalized responses related to the abundant systems of indicators and measurement and accountability mechanisms

available in the field (Eyben, 2010; Eyben et al., 2016; Gutheil, 2020; Shutt, 2016; Vähämäki, 2017; Vähämäki & Verger, 2019), a view that is confirmed in our studies.

As discussed in Chapter 1, a central point of departure for the studies behind this volume has been the concept of "obsessive measurement disorder" (OMD), coined by Natsios (2010) who defined OMD as a counterproductive governance condition in which – faced with increasing demands to demonstrate results and to control the use of resources – decision-makers become so pre-occupied with formal control and measurements that they risk losing touch with fundamental core aspects of their mission. The theoretical purpose of our project was to search for instances of OMD in interorganizational aid projects and to attempt to explain when, how, and why OMD occurs, or not. However, as the research journey has progressed, we have come to the conclusion that these questions about OMD cannot be thoroughly answered without taking into account the broader topic of how aid bureau-crats deal with *uncertainty* more generally.

Based on the analysis of hundreds of documents and some 80 interviews with aid bureaucrats working at different levels and in different organizations, including public agencies, private com-panies, NGOs, and universities, all involved in development aid projects financed fully or in part by the Swedish taxpayer, we have examined how external demands for results, control, and efficiency affect aid bureaucrats and their organizations, and how these demands are translated and responded to in interorgani-zational aid relations by the aid bureaucrats responsible (see Methods appendix for details). Above all, we have set out to identify uncertainty responses and coping mechanisms that may help to prevent or act as an antidote to the extremes of over-regulation and OMD control frenzies and instead foster prag-matic, constructive organizing and learning that benefits those in need. Our findings thus contribute to the discussion on why performance management and measurement requirements seem on some occasions to hinder, and at other times to support the implementation of aid projects and programs. In this sense, our work builds on and aims to contribute to previous research about the conditions under which performance measurement

requirements improve or erode development policy implementation (Hoey, 2015; Hood, 2012; Natsios, 2010).

Pragmatic Bureaucracy: Balancing Bureaucracy and Pragmatism

In the preceding chapters of this volume, we have presented our findings on what aid bureaucrats do to cope with and respond to uncertainty in their day-to-day project operations. We have identified much insightful determination to not let formal control and measurements hinder good development aid. In essence, most aid bureaucrats in our study – both those employed by aid organizations and the external experts who are often procured – struggle to do good, seeking and learning to find ways forward through the often thick administrative jungle. They do so by navigating a continuum (see Fig. 6), trying their best to avoid either of its extremes: the rigid state of what we call "hyper bureaucracy" (where formal control and measurement systems take an unfortunate turn into OMD and take on a life of their own) and the *laissez-faire* state of "hyper pragmatism" (with its risks of corruption and nepotism). When referring to "hyper" here, we mean that some aid bureaucrats may become seriously or obsessively concerned, or even fanatical, about the virtues and practices of bureaucracy, or of its opposite – the extremes of pragmatism (although this latter state has not been the focus of our studies).

It is true that rational ambitions can run amok into abstract systems distanced from core operations in the local fields of practice, such as seen in the global markets for standards, certifications, and accreditation, for example (Brunsson, 2022; Gustafsson Nordin, 2022; Tamm Hallström et al., 2022). Yet, most aid bureaucrats involved at the micro and meso levels of complex, uncertain development aid projects seem to aim for a middle ground on the continuum, where they attempt to cherry-pick the best of bureaucracy and pragmatism while avoiding their downsides. We call this idealized state "pragmatic bureaucracy," which we define as *the use of judgment to identify a sweet spot between the extremes of bureaucracy and pragmatism, where bureaucracy is used rationally when possible and pragmatically when needed.* As seen in
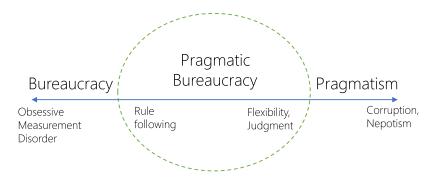
Fig. 6.   Pragmatic Bureaucracy.

Fig. 6, rule-following is key to the pragmatic bureaucrat. But rules are not followed blindly. Flexibility and professional judgment based on a rich set of experiential knowledge make the call. In order to be happy and content at their post in the long term, pragmatic bureaucrats learn how to cope within the realms of or by way of more creative approaches to rule-following and rational decision-making.

Bureaucracy – Used Rationally When Possible

As discussed in Chapter 2 and exemplified throughout the volume, aid bureaucrats have a truly demanding mission. At the Swedish development aid agency, the Swedish international development agency (Sida), for example, program officers are expected to ensure that taxpayers' funds are distributed to "proper organizations," to seek trustworthy relationships with the representatives of these organizations and to have a zero-tolerance for corruption. Program officers are also explicitly called on to be both "brave in action" and to "rely on their own judgment" (Sida, 2018a). These governance demands add up and are sometimes seen as contradictory by the aid bureaucrats, who must figure out how to approach and configure the underlying values. While some find it confusing and time-consuming to navigate these expectations, many others simply accept them, treating the many layers of steering as "belt and suspenders" for their operations. "Better safe than sorry" seems to be a common, risk-averse approach among this group, as illustrated by a quote from a senior informant at

the Kommunal union, who expressed her appreciation of the formal control systems:

> Of course it's [formally] governed. But I experience it as only positive, because I don't want taxpayers' money to be used incorrectly anywhere, or for our own membership money, almost worse, to be used incorrectly. After all, it's a trust industry we operate in. Having these control systems gives me a sense of security in my work. I don't see them as a disadvantage or a restriction of any kind for the projects. I appreciate them, it's nice to know that they're there.

Our overall impression, based on our data, is that the majority of aid bureaucrats sincerely believe that formal regulations and measurement requirements are needed and that they come with good intentions, although these may not always be fulfilled. As pragmatically explained by one of the help-desk officers at Sida, "ticking-the-box" requirements may not offer a quick fix, but they may be small, important steps in the right direction:

> I think without ticking-the-box requirements, people might not even think of some things. And I think that most people, when they start to think about these perspectives, they … something happens. Even if it's not a big change, there's some kind of change with the desk officer or the partner. Often both. Just asking the question "Did you think about that?"; something happens. So, it's not necessarily a bad thing to tick boxes.

The help-desk officer argues, in line with rationalism ideals, that following good intentions, working toward goals guided by box-ticking requirements and indicators on thematic topics may be very useful steps "in the right direction." At the same time, and not surprisingly, however, most if not all of our informants also agree that, as an aid bureaucrat, you must be sensible and should neither exaggerate the amount of measurements nor let their impact on project management take over. The following three quotes are typical for how our informants reason regarding the good intentions of bureaucracy and the simultaneous risks and realities of it all "going too far" and into a counterproductive state. The first quote comes

from a results-based management (RBM) consultant who (often on Sida's behalf) supports organizations in the aid recipient role with their RBM structures:

> I'm thinking about our ongoing mission and the one I had before with a civil-society organization in Sweden with its various country-based offices. And there – Holy Hannah! – all the requirements those field offices get, it's just crazy! It's quite fascinating. And there's really no mechanism to handle that at head office, how to *process* the information and what to *do* with it all. And it naturally places a huge burden on the field offices. And there is... it's interesting and there's an awareness at some level, that there's a power imbalance. But they can't really... And I don't really know why, because they do mean very, very well. They don't speak in terms of incompetence, absolutely not... But at the same time they act as if... the trust isn't really there. Just so much nit-picking. But I don't know, maybe it's just inexperience. That [the donor representative] hasn't really... hasn't actually worked with projects out in the field.

The quote exemplifies the tension between aid bureaucrats at the recipient organization's head office in Sweden and offices at the national and field levels. In this case, it was the aid bureaucrats at the local field offices who added a lot of additional requirements, which were then difficult to handle at the field level. This topic was discussed more at length in Chapter 3, where our observation was that most aid bureaucrats (although switching between the roles of donor and recipient in their contractual interorganizational relations), when acting in the donor role, seem to be more inclined to acting as traditional bureaucrats and less so to recognizing the need for flexibility and contextual adjustments. That is to say that no-one involved means any harm, but the requirements stack up and can end up becoming counterproductive anyway, particularly at the local field level. Unless, of course, those tendencies are somehow counteracted by brokering bureaucrats along the way, as discussed in Chapter 7.

A common narrative of our informants was that overregulation is typically something that happens or had happened to someone else, far away or in the past. This distancing narrative seems to be a way to handle the anxiety and burden associated with over-regulation. Only more seldom did informants acknowledge that OMD could also happen to them here and now. Below is one such account, where an informant from the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA) tells us how there used to be a lot of bureaucracy in the development-country field setting, but that now he experiences the same, or even worse, in Sweden:

> I'm a researcher, a leader, and I'm also involved in several projects and programs. So I work a lot with capacity-building programs and research programs abroad... I think it's 30 been years now. I usually joke with... Maybe I shouldn't say this, but I usually joke with my colleagues that... It used to be that working in developing countries was so hard because of bureaucracy and that no-one trusted each other, so much control, that the joke was that we had to take pens... Because everyone had to sign everything before anything gets done. But now we're there too, so we [in Sweden] have overtaken them [in terms of control requirements].

Similarly, in the following quote, our informant, a toxicologist from the Swedish Chemicals Agency, voices his concern about sustaining the right balance between bureaucracy and pragmatism:

> It's become much more regulated, more reporting requirements... yes, in every possible way. To begin with it felt like the annual report was mostly just a formality maybe. You wrote your report, and there wasn't necessarily any deep discussions about what it actually said and how it could improve your job... So, I mean, it's really positive that we've started to... that the reports get used, that someone reads them carefully and makes constructive comments. So that's good for everyone involved. Then there's the follow-up of the financial side of things, where... it's clear that we ... it's really important that everything is in order, but it

feels like things have gone in the direction of *wanting more and more* details about [financial] things. And even now, when we develop new projects, that [the donor] now wants to see a very, very detailed budget ... and so if you're off by more than 10%... if you have very small budget items... like if something costs 10,000 SEK more, then you may have to have coaching calls from Sida. And it might feel like you've gone a little too far in your ... yes, in your *eagerness* for all the details... I don't know if you gain that much [with that approach]. In our project today, we report more details, and the demands on the financial reporting are a bit higher maybe. And that's been good. It feels like we've moved towards a reasonable level. There was maybe a little too little detail before, and now we're at a fairly good level. But I wouldn't want to see it go any further...

These quotes demonstrate that aid bureaucrats understand the rationale of added requirements and try also to understand why overregulation happens and when. They may talk about it as a "joke", but they prefer not to be the ones affected by it or the ones passing it on to others (though, as discussed in Chapter 3, not all aid bureaucrats self-reflect about the latter). The quotes also clearly show that the informants experience uncertainty with respect to who and where the tendencies toward hyper bureaucracy come from and why.

As discussed in Chapter 2, certainty relates to our ability to know what will happen in the future. The better we are at predicting this, the more certain we feel. And, to the contrary: when we don't think we can predict the future, the more uncomfortable and unsafe we feel. From a psychological standpoint, the less certain about the future we are, the more anxious we feel and the more emotional energy we expend trying to assure the future (Rock, 2008). But, as our informants have described, and as we discussed at length in Chapter 4, in practice, well-intended attempts to create a greater certainty in development aid projects may result in confusion and, paradoxically, greater uncertainty. The quotes below are from one of our group interviews where the informants (representatives from several public agencies) discuss their recipient role vis-à-vis Sida as a donor:

Informant 1: It's like, what do you expect me to write there? What are the parameters?

Informant 2: My experience is that it's a bit of a paradox. They're trying to find clarity but it's not clear what should be applied. It's more like "yes, but this exists, you can do this, you can do that" but there's no real clarity in it...

Informant 3: And when you say that [that it isn't clear], that's not good either!

Informant 2: Yes ... And then I was thinking of applying a bit more modern model with a narrative and some anecdotal results and stuff, and didn't know ... is it approved? Can we do that...? Are we going to get a slap on the wrist and be told that we've squandered the money, or did we do something *good*?

Informant 4: I thought there were a lot of mixed messages. In the beginning, I was really frustrated about what I was supposed to do. What was good and what was bad, and what should be changed and why? It drove me nuts for a long time ... because the signals I was getting were so different and I just... No, I thought it was exhausting.

Informant 5: There were also often different people at the meetings. When we had coordination meetings with Sida... And there always *new* people saying new things that often seemed at complete odds with what someone else had said at the previous meeting.

Informant 4: Yes, no, this state of not really knowing what it is that... No, I think it makes you feel stupid because you think you've understood something, and you do it, and then it was *completely wrong.* And you don't really find out *why* it went completely wrong. I thought it was really arduous.

The cited excerpt from this group interview with the Swedish agency bureaucrats indicates uncertainty and ambivalence regarding the expectations of the donor organization, which our informants

clearly describe as having the full power to define what is required. However, the earlier citations also suggest that the donor representatives are no different; they too express ambivalence and uncertainty about the proper procedures. Seeking clarity on what donors want can therefore be frustrating for *everyone* involved.

As discussed throughout this volume, the quest for certainty about the future is not only a psychological preference for most individuals. It is an institutionally defined preference and social expectation that influences both people and organizations. As discussed in Chapter 3, most of the aid bureaucrats we interviewed switch back and forth between the donor role and the recipient role, where both roles entail an expectation that the bureaucrats conform to the respective institutionalized expectations of proper behavior. The institutionalized ideal for the donor representatives is that they not be naïve or "overtrusting" (Laroche et al., 2019) as sums of tax money are in play and independence, feedback and corruption control are essential. Due to the high external pressure on aid organizations and their professionals to ensure that money flows to the right people, along with the increasingly mediatized nature of the aid field, there is also a shared fear of media scandals (Graftström & Windell, 2019). The citations above show that bureaucrats in the recipient role are also eager to understand the donor's signals regarding proper behavior. For those recipient organizations, competing to enter into a contract, or remain recipients of aid funding, it may also be a question of survival.

In many respects, and particularly when in the donor role, the views of our informants are well-aligned with the classic bureaucratic ideals so typical of democratic public sector organizations with complex missions (Catasús, 2021; Waters & Waters, 2015; Weber, 1922/1987). The core virtue associated with bureaucratic management is the rule of law. From this follows that decision-making should ideally be grounded in a formal system of common rules and documentation in order to safeguard the values of predictability and equal and fair treatment of all. Although many aid bureaucrats have chosen to work in development for its inspiring ideals and the hope of making the world a better, fairer place, they have come to accept that their daily work often consists of rather dull, administrative practices aimed at ensuring that "funds get through the machinery" in the proper way (Cornwall et al., 2007).

Despite there having been different trends and ideas over the years about how this should be done and what the "fund machinery"

requires (see Chapters 4 and 6), the aid bureaucrat's work has always encompassed the need to coordinate and attempt to reduce uncertainty by making sure that the aid financing meets all of the formal requirements, or that these requirements are acted somehow upon. It is simply a part of their everyday work–life conditions. As discussed in Chapter 4, aid development's two management dreams – to simplify the complex and control the uncertain future – have an obvious impact on norms on how to achieve greater efficiency and quality in aid projects. These norms prescribe that it should be done through rational-bureaucratic structures and processes.

As critically argued by Easterly (2002), however, the use of bureaucracy in foreign aid is often unproductive since there are so many perverse incentives. Bureaucracy works best when there is high feedback from beneficiaries, high incentives for the bureaucrats to respond to such feedback, easily observable outcomes, a high probability that the bureaucratic effort will translate into favorable outcomes, and competitive pressure from other bureaucracies and agencies. Easterly (ibid.) argues that many of these conditions are unfavorable in foreign aid, and that the aid community responds to its difficult environment by organizing itself as a "cartel of good intentions," inhibiting critical feedback and learning from the past, suppressing competitive pressure to deliver results, and making identification of the best channel of resources for different objectives. Despite the good intentions, altruism, and genuine professional dedication of the individuals involved, according to Easterly (2002), aid operations can therefore be "foundered in a sea of bureaucracy." Weber may have had efficiency in mind when theorizing bureaucracy, and a division of labor combined with a hierarchy *may*, in theory, enable efficient action, but in real life practices, this is far from certain.[1] As concluded in the Britannica dictionary definition of bureaucracy[2]:

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[1]A classic ideal strength of a bureaucratic organization is its functional specialization, where responsibility for certain parts or aspects of the complex whole is allocated among different managers that are all situated within a hierarchy. This organization, Weber suggested, would support efficiency when tackling a complex, democratic mission (Weber, 1922/1987).

[2]www.britannica.com/topic/bureaucracy. Accessed on June 4, 2023.

> The words *bureaucracy* and *bureaucrat* are typically thought of and used pejoratively. They convey images of red tape, excessive rules and regulations, unimaginativeness, a lack of individual discretion, central control, and an absence of accountability. Far from being conceived as proficient, popular contemporary portrayals often paint bureaucracies as inefficient and lacking in adaptability.

In a field where the actors are constantly under pressure to demonstrate efficiency, it is no doubt uncomfortable to confront contemporary stereotypes that portray bureaucrats as unresponsive and lethargic cogs in the aid machinery. As seen in Chapters 4 and 5, when aid bureaucrats need to demonstrate results here and now, approximations often come in handy to save the day. But does it have to be this way? Although hard to tell at times, our impression is that only a small minority of the aid bureaucrats we interviewed actually *believe* that the rational use of bureaucracy can do the trick and fulfill the management dreams of simplifying the complex and controlling the future. Rather, they typically see a need to insert a sensible dose of pragmatism.

Weber himself described how bureaucracy may come to discourage creativity and innovation and adaptiveness to change, and how it can develop into a "soulless iron cage" where following the rules, policies, and documentation routines becomes more important than working effectively and productively for the common good (Blau, 1955; Merton, 1940; Weber, 2015). Luckily, however, we found that tendencies toward hyper bureaucracy are actively counteracted by a larger group of aid officials, found among both those employed in-house and the contracted consultants (see Chapters 6 and 7). When possible, they use bureaucracy rationally, but when needed in order to counteract tendencies toward OMD, they use it pragmatically, for, as the old saying goes: "He who wants everything, loses everything."

Bureaucracy – Used Pragmatically, When Needed

On the other end of the management and governance spectrum depicted in Fig. 6, we find pragmatism, which is typically described

as the opposite of bureaucracy. The pragmatic administrator tends to focus on real-life practices and outcomes and, as long as results are good, is willing to decentralize and to offer space for adjustments and diversity (Cavaleri, 2004). In a pragmatic system, the *what* is more important than the *how*, and there may be several *different* "hows" united by a willingness to do whatever works to reach the desired goal (see Chapter 5). Pragmatism is hence a way of dealing with problems, or in our case situations of uncertainty, that focus on solutions informed by the decision-makers' own experience and judgment of whether these solutions will work in the particular context and project practice – as opposed to general ideals captured in theory or some rule. In a case study on the Federal Reserve (the Fed), Conti-Brown and Wishnick (2021) describe an ethos of what they call "technocratic pragmatism," arguing that a pragmatic and experimentalist central banking is best suited to develop the expertise necessary to address the Fed's emergent and complex problems – as long as it *remains constrained* by norms designed to preserve its long-term legitimacy as part of the administrative state. Hence, by incorporating a bit of pragmatism, but not too much, bureaucrats and technocrats can cherry-pick or even attempt to optimize two important, but often conflicting, goals: development of the expertise needed to tackle the complex problems and the requirements associated with democratic governance. As concluded by Conti-Brown and Wishnick (Conti-Brown & Wishnick, 2021), this is an ethos that encourages experimentation but requires "significant guardrails."

Judgment and Experiential Knowledge

In Chapter 2, we discussed *sensemaking* as a core process of uncertainty reduction. When seeking answers to our research question of whether and why OMD is experienced or not in this daily toil of aid bureaucrats, we conclude that those answers are highly dependent on whether they are able to *make sense* of the formal regulations and oversight and whether they can find ways to *interact with the rules in a meaningful way.* Another key to pragmatic bureaucracy is the willingness and practical opportunity to develop not only one's professional judgment but also the courage to use it.

In his essay, Ahrne (1993) uses the metaphor of the organizational centaur (part human, part organization) to make the point that what an employee wins in access to resources and opportunities within the realm of an organization is at the same time lost in terms of individual independence. There typically remains *some* room for one's own sensemaking and professional judgment of how to act in a given role and situation (Goffman, 1968, 1972), however, and hence the metaphor of the centaur. Previous research tells us that even in highly institutionalized and highly regulated fields of operation, decision-makers can apply professional judgment and possess a broad repertoire of responses to institutional pressure, including ways to flexibly adjust or even ignore some rules and performance measurement requirements (see e.g. Alexius, 2007; Eyben, 2010; Oliver, 1991; Vähämäki, 2017). As an illustration of the "aid centaur," several of our informants talked about the situation when, in 2017, Sida adjusted its Trac system and took the decision to ease requirements and formally allow individual program officer to exercise more flexibility and judgment. We found that many program officers handled this novel freedom with caution or even hesitation, which to us indicates that, when regulations are eased, some form of compensation must occur, and not all aid bureaucrats have these professional compensating competencies.

A pragmatic bureaucrat is typically someone who is not new to this complex field of operations and been around long enough to have seen different "waves of reform" come and go and different management methods being tried out. Long enough also to have had ample opportunity to develop sound professional judgment from this rich and varied experience, and who, through this tacit experiential knowledge, *has come to the lived conclusion that one cannot fully rely on rules or formal steering if one wishes to make good things happen on the ground* in development aid projects. In fact, if one was to attempt to remove all uncertainties and handle everything by the book, very few aid projects would be up and running at all. Thus, a pragmatic bureaucrat realizes that not only does it take tacit knowledge, imagination, and improvisation to find workable and ethically defendable paths forward, it also takes courage, and yes, some degree of risk-taking, to apply those mental resources to intervene when important projects risk getting stuck in red tape. This

means that rather than placing trust only in impersonal sources of trust such as management technologies, it is also placed in individuals and context-specific conditions. To compensate for tendencies toward rule-following fundamentalism, pragmatic bureaucrats are mindful about broadening their portfolio of work approaches. And although vulnerable, when experience tells them it is necessary, they dare to be open to both unwritten and unspoken rules and to engage personally in the creative process of "rule-bending" (Jassey, 2013) in order to make the right decision.

Rule-Bending Closet Relationists

As described in Chapter 7 and in previous literature on the professional, everyday life of aid bureaucrats, brokering skills are heavily used in development aid practice (Cornwall et al., 2007; Eyben, 2010; Jassey, 2013). In an official text regarding bureaucracy at Sida, a Sida aid bureaucrat wrote about the "unspoken rules of the game" in the following way (Jassey, 2013, p. 133):

> At Sida, there is often talk about a tacit "Sida knowledge" – a knowledge that you can't gain from reading manuals or even talking to others, only through years and years of actual work. This is experiential knowledge in its finest form. And a lot of this knowledge is about how to bend the rules. Maybe more importantly, though, part of "being in the know" is to know how and when the real decisions are made. It is a knowledge that makes it possible for a Sida desk officer to create the flexibility and risk-taking that is required in development work. And, quite possibly, our whole system would come to a standstill if that knowledge didn't exist.

The cited passage exemplifies that, according to this aid bureaucrat, effective aid bureaucrats are *not* those that follow rules and procedures *to the letter* but those who acquire their *intention and meaning* and then apply this tacit "Sida knowledge," to *bend the rules responsibly* (rules stipulated in handbooks, for example). The citation also exemplifies how it takes years of actual work to

gain such knowledge and thus that it is typically the most experienced bureaucrats who possess this type of knowledge. Another text describing aid bureaucracy follows the theme of the "Beast of Bureaucracy," and the make-believe Nordic development aid organization Valhalla (Cornwall et al., 2007) tells the story of how the imaginary "Lagom" project (Swedish for "just enough") was tried to test the rules of bureaucracy. The authors of that text argue, in line with Weber's own critique of bureaucracy, that the "unwritten rules" were critical in order to maintain a balance that would enable creativity and learning:

> Lagom had worked on an assumption of uniformity and a need for formality. Yet everything we'd learnt about Valhalla told us of an organisation in which individuality was prized, in which unwritten rules accompanied the creative process of rule-bending to get around a formidable and cumbersome bureaucratic system, and in which communication (and much of what would be thought of as "organisational learning") happens through informal, often barely visible, networks and interactions.
>
> (Cornwall et al., 2007, p. 58)

This citation also exemplifies the importance of informal networks and personal relations in learning the norms and practices of rule-bending (see also Alexius, 2007, 2017). Some of this learning takes place openly as part of the routines for becoming socializing as a professional aid bureaucrat. As discussed in Chapter 3, there have been times when it has been considered fully legitimate and responsible to decouple completely from what the bureaucrat thinks are ill-fitting rules. However, in our empirical material, we have seen that, lately, with the increased fear of corruption and nepotism and skepticism of close, informal relations, it is no longer legitimate to openly ignore counterproductive rules and regulations (see Chapter 1). According to Eyben (2012), this development has put pressure on aid bureaucrats to become "closet relationists," meaning that they have now had to learn how to "hide" valuable input from informal relations behind a rhetoric that contains the proper verse on distant accountability and RBM.

In Chapter 4, we discussed the approximation practices needed to make sense of the world in which development aid operates. Pragmatic bureaucrats are aware that ascertaining exactly what aid funds lead to what results remains a "mission impossible," i.e., it is often simply not possible to explain which money from which donor led to which results. So, although proxies can never provide the real, complete picture of the world, pragmatic bureaucrats *do their best* to track down and translate results from complex realities. To do so, they rely not only on reporting opportunities and formal meetings but take every opportunity to interact with partners whenever and wherever possible, including in the field. As discussed in Chapter 7, during a field visit, an officer from the Swedish Chemical Agency realized what the impact of a project had been and used that insight to support the partner organization to also report on the impact. Similarly, an officer from the Kommunal union told us that she always tells her recipient representatives to not be afraid to be honest about what is working and what isn't since "we need to ensure that we talk about difficult things and mistakes so that it all turns out good in the end."

A pragmatic bureaucrat is one who learns and uses information from their role-switching for brokering purposes, as is also illustrated in the examples given in Chapter 5 where the Sida bureaucrat uses her experience via "double membership," i.e., experience gained from working in the private sector and experience gained when now working in the aid donor role. Needless to say, learning about the particular contexts in which the aid projects operate requires willingness and engagement. And, in practice, this often entails extensive traveling, like the bureaucrat from Kommunal who clocked 135 travel days a year, and maintaining a continuous informal dialogue with partners (see Chapter 7). In following with this finding, in all of our case studies, aid bureaucrats in the *recipient* role have noted good personal relations with aid bureaucrats who represent the organization in the donor role as a success factor for aid projects. In the highly complex and uncertain world of development cooperation, some researchers even claim that interpersonal trust is the "glue" that holds the complex relations together (see also Eyben, 2010; McGillivray et al., 2012; Pomerantz, 2004; Swedlund, 2017). But, as discussed in Chapter 4, this is clearly a sensitive issue.

In line with previous findings (Eyben, 2010), we have found a tendency, particularly among aid bureaucrats that represent the

organization in the *donor* role, to downplay or even hide (at least officially) interpersonal relations and their role in governance. When asked how they cope with uncertainty, aid bureaucrats in a donor role seldom mention key individuals as sources of trust. As mentioned above, they may even feel the need to act as "closet relationists" due to the risk of critique for acting overly pragmatic. We therefore suggest that this hesitation of those in the donor role both to mention and to actually lean on personal relations stems from *legitimacy* concerns and, more specifically, from the risk for scams such as corruption or nepotism, the dreaded extremes of pragmatism. It is true that the large distances, many parties involved, long-term investments, different cultures, and complex dependencies that characterize the field make it difficult for aid organizations to demonstrate that the funding is useful (Korsgaard et al., 2015). But there are other factors. A specific fear of corruption and nepotism, and a general fear of media scandals related to taxpayers' money being used unwisely, also present aid bureaucrats with a challenge: the need to place trust in situations where the conditions for and acceptance of interpersonal trust are poor or uncertain.

Just like bureaucracy, pragmatism has serious downsides that must be avoided. One such downside that has proven to be very sensitive for the aid officials in our study – hyper pragmatism – is an extreme that can be described as a state of *laissez-faire* or a "hands-off" approach, where people are left to do whatever they choose. As discussed in Chapter 4, openly relying on interpersonal relations is seen as a vulnerable, risky approach that blurs formal accountability and casts a shadow over the principle of equal treatment. In Alexius and Vähämäki (2020), we illustrated this with a case where a Sida manager dared, without fully trusting either the organization or its representatives, to take the risk of letting the organization develop a funding proposal. The said bureaucrat was benevolent and aware of the risk taken, and the entire cooperation could have ended in distress and no results. However, in this case, the action was successful and led to a project that is still up and running, at the time of writing. Again, this speaks to the importance of taking risks and daring to trust, despite not having full control of the outcome from the outset (see Chapter 4 and Alexius & Vähämäki, 2020).

Going the Extra Mile on the Responsibility Radius

As discussed above, a small group of aid bureaucrats care mainly about compliance with regulations for legitimacy reasons, be this their own legitimacy as aid bureaucrats or donors, or the legitimacy of the project, their organization or the entire aid system. As discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, they have learned that, in the face of great uncertainty, trust can legitimately be transferred from bureaucratic sources (such as rules and measurements, as well as general organizational structures and processes and a range of management tools and technologies such as quality standards and project management methods). By way of such legitimizing ceremonies, an aid bureaucrat in the donor role can help make an organization in the recipient role more *trustworthy* (Alexius & Vähämäki, 2020). However, as we have seen throughout the chapters of this volume, many aid bureaucrats today are preoccupied with the *how* of organizing, that is, with the setting up of proper rational and legal structures, technologies, and processes, preferably already in advance of decision-making.

Considering that interpersonal relations may indeed be essential for the achievement of development results (McGillivray et al., 2012), it is fair to ask: What happens if aid bureaucrats come, solely or mostly, to trust and care about legitimizing ceremonies and proxies? Some justify this distanced position with reference to the ancient bureaucratic ideal of *sine ira et studio* (without hatred or passion) that calls for bureaucrats to keep their professional distance and not get personally involved (du Gay, 2000, 2005). Bureaucrats that reason in this way can come across as somewhat cynical, preoccupied as they are with ticking the right boxes in order to simply do what is expected of them and their organization (see Chapter 5). However, the majority of the aid bureaucrats we have encountered are not content with this position as they think and feel in their hearts that, considering the crucial missions of development aid, ticking the right boxes does not satisfy their goal of doing good, and certainly not when they know from their own experience that the strict following of rules and procedures was not enough – or may even have been counterproductive to good results on the ground. As one of our informants self-reflexively observed:

> I realize that we've become completely occupied with
> all these proxies and indicators.... But whatever
> happened to poverty??

Pragmatic bureaucrats are hence prepared to go against the ideal of formal compliance when they find it *meaningless* with respect to their partners' well-being and project aims (Hupe, 2019) or in order to *compensate* for "damage" already done by a strict following of the rules. In this process of gaining and applying their own professional judgment in decision-making, the bureaucrats themselves may feel torn between obedience and compassion (Belabas & Gerrits, 2017) but in the end choose to act in the way that they find most meaningful and possible to justify.

As illustrated in Fig. 7, pragmatic bureaucrats often *do much more* than formally required. They are not only aware of the need but also willing to "go the extra mile" on the personal "responsibility radius" that stretches from the risk-averse, rule-praising hyper bureaucrat's position, with a minimum of personal risk-taking, to
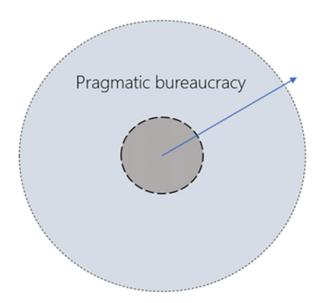

Fig. 7.   The Responsibility Radius: From Hyper Bureaucracy to
Pragmatic Bureaucracy.

positions where the bureaucrat exercises increasingly more pragmatism and personal responsibility for taking the correct decisions.

Often this requires a wider time span. In order to understand what will happen in the longer run, long after a project decision has been made and the funds have been allocated, pragmatic bureaucrats must also look back and not only to results from their own projects but also to other aid interventions from different contexts, to learn and understand what worked and what didn't. The uncertainties related to the frequent mismatch of temporalities in development aid were discussed in Chapter 4. There, we used the example of Bai Bang to illustrate that key results from an aid intervention are sometimes only visible decades after a project has formally ended. The noted example of the Dukoral vaccine shows, in addition, that results are seldom attributable only to *single* donors but are more often the result of several donors and several different types of support. Pragmatic bureaucrats are interested in both the wider set of results dating back in time and joint results achieved in the wider system, and use this insight to legitimize and make sense of contemporary actions as well as possible future results.

A pragmatic bureaucrat is also one who not only listens to and learns from key partners but who also considers different types and sources of information, research findings, etc., in an aim to better understand the aid context and to make better decisions. Often this requires that they work with and learn from practices and activities other than the ordinary project-reporting documentation and ordinary project meetings. As one of our informants stated:

> We continuously try to participate in activities they arrange even though a lot of what they do is not within our core competence and something we know anything about... We try to participate as much as possible and see what they do in reality. Not just to request reports.

Needless to say, engaging like this and caring about the project and their partners typically takes additional time. But it may also be the case that, in the long run, these practices actually free up time and capacities, thanks to the fostering of a trustful donor–recipient relationship (Alexius & Vähämäki, 2020). As described in

Chapter 7, pragmatic bureaucrats are like "spiders in the web" who, if working in aid organizations in the donor role, must deal with a "web of external experts" and colleagues to comply with their task. The pragmatic bureaucrat then has the professional judgment to determine what competencies are needed and when and knows that contracting a certain type of external expert is sometimes required to reduce uncertainty (Chapter 6). Rather than assuming that "this is the way it should be," they dare to be vulnerable. When they pose the open question "How will this land?," they are prepared to really listen to the replies. The pragmatic bureaucrat thus typically acts as a generalist and knows a little about a lot of tasks and areas of expertise (administration and procurement rules, different thematic fields, how to handle aid projects and help desks, etc.). In essence, as described by one of our informants in Chapter 6, pragmatic bureaucrats use all of this knowledge and their judgment to "make the system work for you."

Pragmatic bureaucrats can be found all over the aid net. In Chapter 7, we discussed the two different approaches of two consultancy companies (AIMS and Niras), where the first was stuck on promoting a certain technology whereas the other was foremost interested in asking "how" the approach would land and who would take responsibility for balancing the different professional interests. The latter approach required a lot of courage and embracing of uncertainty.

Beware of the Hyper Bureaucrats!

Whereas pragmatic bureaucrats work to counteract OMD and tendencies in that direction, we have also presented examples in this volume that suggest a more radical and less constructive approach. At times, aid bureaucrats who operate on the far left of Fig. 6 (hyper bureaucracy) act like fundamentalists, which can be not only unpleasant and tiresome for those around them but can also pose a serious threat to the likelihood of actually achieving good results.

The hyper bureaucrat's world is a narrow one, with clear boundaries and a short personal responsibility radius, where the main responsibility assumed is that of the hyper bureaucrat's own job tasks, with an emphasis on a strict following of the rules that does not allow for exceptions or adjustments. As a result of this

stance, the hyper bureaucrat seldom sees the bigger picture of how change actually happens, and may get stuck in suboptimizing. The hyper bureaucrat does not bend the rules but accepts them as they are, following them in a fundamentalist way, *no matter the outcome (because "I am only responsible for making the correct bureaucratic decision").* Complexity should be simplified and uncertainty removed, preferably by proper organization proxies (POPs). What is being documented is more important than what happens later, in the real world and in the local field. Needless to say, this approach can cause a lot of harm.

In settings where hyper bureaucrats gain power, their anxiety of not ticking all the correct boxes is transferred onto recipients who in turn may experience obsessiveness in both how the donor decides to handle bureaucracy and in their own responses, a vicious cycle indeed. In Chapter 3, we describe one such example involving a Sida officer who, despite both Sida's internal regulations and the director-general having made it clear that Sida should not require a partner to use a certain method or results matrix, nevertheless requested Union to Union to do precisely that. The Union to Union representative found that there was very little flexibility on the part of the donor organization and therefore *experienced* that they were not trusted and that the regulations were obsessive. The experience was aggravated by the fact that Union to Union felt that no consideration was given to the fact that their results reports and evaluations indicated that Union to Union's operations showed several positive results. Several other examples in this volume also demonstrate the importance of making sure that aid money only goes to proper organizations, implying that POPs have become the modus operandi of aid bureaucracy. Acting solely on the basis of POPs could easily be understood as a nonhuman approach, not using the human senses, which hyper bureaucrats are less prone to refer to in their work.

But POPs can be ensured in different ways. Where pragmatic bureaucrats might assist by helping to translate how something that the recipient organization is already doing could be interpreted as a POP, hyper bureaucrats might do this in harsher manner by using a language of power, such as in the example given in Chapter 6 where International Science Program (ISP) was told that it had to contract a certain RBM expert in order to be eligible for further financing.

POPs are created and used to deal with all of this, but, in the end, POPs can't do the work. Real people with an awareness of the complexity are needed to carry it through. Whereas some bureaucrats are aware that the system does not work by itself, others seem less aware. Ultimately, in the realities of a complex, uncertain setting, it is a matter of how people must walk the talk to compensate for deficiencies in governance.

Conclusions, Practitioner Advice, and Ideas for Future Research

As mentioned above, a point of departure for the cases discussed in this volume has been if, when, how, and why measurements become counterproductive or lead to OMD in the field of development aid, which, as we have seen, is an extreme case in terms of both complexity and uncertainty. Studying what aid bureaucrats in interorganizational project arrangements actually do to cope with and respond to uncertainty, while facing great demands for certainty, we have identified worrying cases where the ambitions to simplify the complex and control an uncertain future have run amok. Yet, somewhat to our surprise and definitely to our relief, we have also identified a range of uncertainty responses and coping mechanisms that we believe contribute to preventing the extremes of overregulation and control frenzies. As the title of this final chapter indicated, we suggest that what we call "pragmatic bureaucratic" approaches and practices can serve as an "antidote" to OMD and in fact also as an inoculant against OMD. Our findings contribute to the knowledge and general discussion on why performance management and measurement requirements in some cases seem to hinder but in others can clearly support the implementation of aid projects and programs. In short, and on the basis of our empirical studies, we find good reason to conclude that pragmatic bureaucratic responses to external demands for certainty in this complex field contribute to constructive learning and organizing that benefits those in need. Below, we summarize some of our main conclusions (see also Methods appendix for more details on the research process that led to them).

Main Conclusions

First of all, we conclude that **OMD is not an objectively verifiable state but an individual *experience* of *perceived* overregulation (of, e.g., a project, organization, interorganizational relationship, or larger system)**. What matters to this experience is the way in which different rules and regulations and measurement schemes are developed, communicated, and used by the parties in a relationship (e.g., in the relationship between bureaucrats who represent an organization in the donor role and bureaucrats who represent an organization in the recipient role). As discussed in the Methods appendix, and as concluded in previous research (Eyben, 2010; Vähämäki, 2017), it is important to study what happens at the micro level in aid organizations where regulations are crafted and responded to. When conducting these studies, and talking to many bureaucrats about their individual experiences of bureaucracy, more nuance emerges, allowing us to conclude that **it is not the *amount* of regulations** per se **that leads some people in the aid system to experience OMD**.

As shown in the cases in this volume and as discussed in the Methods appendix, we have identified a variation in terms of how bureaucrats and their organizations experience the *same* type and amount of regulation. This leads us to conclude that we cannot only use measurements to understand the effects of measurements; we need to look beyond the measurements to study the organizational cultures and societal institutions in which they are embedded. In contrast to the typical (and, if we may say so, rather loose-fitting) assumption that reducing control technologies and measurements will automatically lead to more trust and innovation, we have found that *more important than the amount* of these control measures is how they are introduced, communicated, and motivated. *The worst cases and highest risks of experiencing OMD are seen in situations where a bureaucrat stops caring and taking responsibility for how bureaucracy and measurements affect the parties involved.*

Another individual factor we have seen that may contribute to persons having a greater tendency to act as hyper bureaucrats is a lack of awareness that control and measurements systems can cause counterproductive effects. The root cause for this unawareness can naturally be a simple lack of experience. But often, linked to this

lack of experience, *we find fear, which can lead to tunnel vision and a fixation on measurements at the expense of more unquantifiable aspects* of performance and the need for context-specific adjustments (Smith, 1995; Vähämäki & Verger, 2019). This can be a fear of losing control or losing one's job or an unrealistic belief in the role counting and measurements play when it comes to solving development problems. Also, **some people are just more prone to becoming preoccupied and excited about the technical and logical schemes of measurements and matrices than others, and when they spend increasing amounts of time collecting data and monitoring their activities, there is a risk of** *crowding out* **core activities in the field** (see also Chambers, 2010; Forssell & Ivarsson Westerberg, 2014; Patton, 2010; Thiel & Leeuw, 2002).

Yet another identified risk factor is meaninglessness. Somewhat surprising to us, most aid bureaucrats we encountered are open to various interpretations of meaning. Bureaucracy could be introduced as a well-intended means to increase efficiency and good results, but it could also be introduced in an attempt to enhance legitimacy in the face of external criticism and suspicion, or simply as a handy proxy for the effects that have a tendency to show up long after a project is formally finished and assessed (see Chapter 4 on the mismatching of temporalities). We thus conclude that *how a particular control technology will be perceived depends on the circumstances and, not least, on whether aid bureaucrats (and other people in the system) have the knowledge, imagination, and motivation to make sense of the regulation.*

As demonstrated by psychological research and research on the human brain, sensemaking helps us cope with uncertainty as it lowers our levels of anxiety, which in turn calms the mind and allows us to think wisely and see the bigger picture (Kåver, 2004). As a comparison, people who suffer from OCD are most often aware of their obsessions (Smith & Segal, 2018). Despite this awareness, however, they often continue with their obsessive behaviors. Smith and Segal's advice therefore focuses on how people with OCD can learn to resist obsessive rituals. One tip is *to not avoid discussing and thinking about the fears that cause the obsessive ritual* (ibid.).

Along similar lines, Smith and Segal (2018) also suggest writing down or recording obsessive thoughts and worries and thereafter

setting aside times or "worry periods" during which all of these worries are exposed and discussed, preferably together with others, in support groups. If we translate this to aid bureaucrats and OMD, common fears among aid bureaucrats are that aid money may not be being spent correctly and that partner organizations or their representatives may prove to be untrustworthy. Alleviating these fears might, for example, be addressed through talking openly about them with colleagues, in support groups. Translating the same tip to development aid organizations could mean holding meetings to discuss all of their worries about recipient partners not spending aid money correctly, as well as allowing oneself, on other occasions, to speak in more hopeful terms about the unknown and to discuss signs of positive development in partners and projects that can be trusted, even with less control.

In times of worry, it usually helps to stay actively engaged, *to do something* about the uncertain situation. As discussed in Chapter 2, in Western (management) culture, taking a passive approach to great uncertainty is more the exception than *comme il faut*. Here, we can note that we did find a couple of cases of passive-aggression in our data, but the calming acceptance advised by mindfulness experts was lacking. We therefore conclude that ***actively responding to uncertainty is in itself an institutionalized expectation. However, where the active response of many aid bureaucrats means using approaches and practices of pragmatic bureaucracy, others respond actively by adding further layers of regulation.*** Several times in this volume, we have come back to the case where Sida's top management's response to external critique of overregulation was to undertake serious efforts to simplify measurements and reporting requirements and make formal regulations more flexible. We have, however, identified different responses to this de-regulation and encouraged flexibility, depending, it seems, on the individual's level of knowledge and experience. Some less-experienced individuals responded, contradictory to the original purpose, by actually adding further rules and regulations. We have explained this response reaction with what we call the "trust paradox" – the finding that trust is often transferred from rules, regulations, and measurements, which are typically described as the opposite or as hinders to trust (Alexius & Vähämäki, 2021) (see also Chapter 2). While these impersonal sources of trust can in some cases support

the trust-building process, they can also constitute a serious hinder since every added regulation and measurement creates the expectation that it should be acted upon, something that can impede real-life experiences and learning.

As also seen in the historical exposé in Chapter 6, the trust paradox helps to explain why *formal decisions for a more flexible bureaucracy is no quick fix since for some staff, such reforms can lead to the perception of added uncertainty*, and an experienced need for new strict measures (that are decided on, and added at the project level, at the individual bureaucrat's own initiative). Thus, socialization in organizations can sometimes foster newcomers into a pragmatic bureaucracy culture, but in other cases or at times of harsh external critique and crisis, we instead see socialization into more of a hyper bureaucratic culture. Needless to say, it is not easy to stand alone as a pragmatic bureaucrat in an organization with a hyper bureaucratic culture, but the opposite is also true.

A precondition for learning how to become a pragmatic bureaucrat is *continuity of the staff responsible for a project or people in the units that handle certain matters. However, since staff changes are highly frequent in development aid work, this is clearly an obstacle for fostering a learning, pragmatic bureaucracy culture.* Awareness is important but, since difficulties most often arise during implementation (Vähämäki, 2017), this is where professional judgment and experience comes in. People with experience in the field know how to handle these situations, where two of the most common pragmatic bureaucratic responses tap into the multivocal brokering skills of *decoupling* and *translating* (see Chapter 7). However, sometimes long experience is not enough. Some aid bureaucrats, specifically those who have held a narrower specialist position earlier (such as a controller or auditor), might run rabbit when they obtain a power position. Thus, hyper bureaucrats without much formal power can be counteracted by pragmatic bureaucrats, while hyper bureaucrats with more power can be disastrous: *Beware of hyper bureaucrats in power positions!*

Advice to Policymakers and Top Managers

What do these findings mean for policymakers and top managers in the field? First and foremost, we recommend that you ensure that

you maintain a growing cadre of staff with pragmatic bureaucratic competence that can help to counteract tendencies toward OMD. Pragmatic aid bureaucrats can make the most of every aid project by considering its particular context and conditions and finding ways to interact with partners that support the achievement of development goals; they know how to occasionally bend or adapt rules responsibly. Hence, we agree with the following conclusion from a human resource management blogpost[3]:

> An organization should include pragmatic and bureaucratic management from the top down. Therefore, by mixing these different ways of thinking and working, an organization will be well-balanced and ultimately capable of creating the best outputs.

For top managers of aid organizations, this means, firstly, ensuring and honoring your own pragmatic bureaucratic awareness and competence and, secondly, daring to support, justify, and foster the same in others. Here, it is important to note that it can be challenging to formalize learning that leads a more pragmatic bureaucrat since the type of *tacit* knowledge involved is traditionally shared and learned informally.

As shown in this volume, ***the multivocality that typically comes from previous experience of work in different knowledge domains is an unquestionably valuable asset for pragmatic bureaucrats***. However, one must also look for individual qualities such as courage and dedication, in line with our reasoning about a person's *responsibility radius* (Fig. 7). How willing and able is that person to go that extra mile in this uncertain context? For example, in order to safeguard empirically well-motivated variation in regulation and governance (see Chapter 5 on the risk of isomorphic conformity in the development aid field). ***As a general conclusion: rich and multifaceted knowledge of different domains among staff is crucial but so are the organizational memory and available arenas and practices for learning.***

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[3]Human Resources Management, Bureaucratic and Pragmatic Management, hrm024209.wordpress.com, maybe: 21 March 2016. Accessed on June 9, 2023.

We have seen that in the longer run, most senior aid staff become more or less socialized into the pragmatic bureaucratic approaches and practices. We have also concluded that these skills are most often learned, not in formal processes but informally in-between colleagues in everyday project interactions. It is therefore ***important to strive to retain senior staff who have already obtained and mastered these skills and to allow them the time and opportunity to share them more openly with junior staff and newcomers***.

And since juniors and newcomers are typically the most anxious, it is vital to also encourage this group to listen and learn from the more senior pragmatic bureaucrats. It is also important to acknowledge, however, that these types of processes that involve maturing and cultivating one's judgment normally take time and cannot be rushed since judgment must to some extent be based on one's own life experiences (Alexius & Sardiello, 2018). There is also a need for staff who persistently dare to talk about the purpose of measures and how different rules, regulations, and measurement schemes affect the partners and wider system, to be permitted and encouraged to take part in developing these measures.

Ideas for Future Research

As the world is becoming increasingly complex by the minute, we believe that it is both timely and relevant to learn from those who, despite all, dare to take on this compelling "mission impossible." Future research on management and governance in other complex fields (such as health care and corrections and social care) can take inspiration from the extreme case of development aid, leading the way to fruitful studies, comparisons, and discussion of the prevalence and importance of pragmatic bureaucracy in those other settings.

One of the methodological approaches in this volume has been to look at the field of development aid from a historical perspective, by presenting, in Chapter 6, three eras of Swedish development aid. Based on these eras, we concluded that the conditions for a pragmatic bureaucratic approach to development aid have differed over time. Since the professional composition of who "does" aid bureaucracy has changed, and there are more controllers and fewer program officers today, as well as more focus on "doing things

right," we can assume that there may also be fewer pragmatic bureaucrats today than there were in previous eras. Historical comparisons of bureaucratic ideals and practices thus constitute another possible avenue to pursue in further studies.

In our own upcoming research, we are also interested in finding out more about where, when, and how individuals and organizations acquire (or not) the competencies of pragmatic bureaucracy and aim to study more cases on its actual chances of counteracting OMD and tendencies toward OMD.

We also welcome studies on the different conditions for and consequences of the use of POPs (discussed in Chapter 5). In particular, we believe that the classic question of acceptance of variation versus conformity is well worth exploring, not least in relation to currently ongoing debate about the goals of Agenda 2030 and similar undertakings officially proclaimed to encourage multistakeholder collaboration.