Don’t you enjoy reading a book which stimulates some actual new thoughts? I just finished The Black Swan¹ and it caused a minor brainstorm about the Sustainability Framework² and discussions we have had about its application and possible evolution—specifically questions about its predictive potential versus its value for planning purposes, and the relative importance of standardized versus contextual measures in assessing progress toward sustainable community health.³

I’ll share this minor brainstorm in hope in can lead to constructive discussions toward more empiricism in our efforts.

**The Black Swan (in my own words—apologies to the author)**

If you’ve read the book, skip this section. Otherwise, here’s my summary.

Taleb describes Black Swans⁴ as events that are:

- Largely unpredictable by our models;
- Carry substantial impact, actually make history, which Taleb argues “jumps, and doesn’t creep.” (Think of 9/11, the financial crash of 1929 or 2008, discovering America, or the invention of penicillin.)

Retrospectively—and here’s the catch—these events are re-explained and described as totally expected and predictable. Once reality has surprised us, again, we rush to adjust our models to prove that we really knew all along that the unpredictable would happen.⁵

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² I assume the reader will be familiar with the Sustainability Framework, but provide a summary in the second section of this paper.
³ Before I go into the interesting details, I must say that I loved the almost digressive writing style, which the author, Nassim Nicholas Taleb, used to make very solid points—it even helped me forgive him for all the French bashing along the way (French-bashing is allowed when you’re Lebanese). I might indulge just a little bit here in non-Academic writing. But I’ve tried to move most of the sidebars into footnotes, which the reader can ignore at his/her leisure.
⁴ **Why the term “Black Swan”?** For centuries Europeans experts had established the fact that all swans were white. Each new flock of swans, each new land where they were found confirmed that swans are white and thus could never be black. After centuries of confirmation, explorers stumbled upon a black swan. One single observation disproved centuries of accumulated expert wisdom. It is used by Taleb as a metaphor.
⁵ Of course, there are plenty of fields where we can very reasonably model what will happen given we have identified the right variables. Those fields belong to what Taleb calls “mediocristan” – where the likelihood of departure from the average decreases exponentially with the distance from the average. Where we struggle is
Taleb goes into interesting sidebars about the human psyche and why we try to reframe things in a way which gives us a sense of greater control over our fate than we actually have. Some of his observations are epistemological and philosophical in nature. (I’m telling you, it’s a great read.)

Along the way, Taleb dishes out some harsh comments for economists, social scientists, risk analysts, financial forecasters and statisticians who think predicting risk belongs to the same world as Bell distribution curves and the 'ludic' models of probability at the heart of our regression models.6

There is a lot of interesting material in The Black Swan about the nature of complexity, the limitations this brings to our predictive models and how we should handle ourselves through life if we really are not as good as we think at predicting the future. You’ll have to read it for yourself. But how does this relate to our use of the Sustainability Framework, a tool, which we think can help us improve the sustainability of health outcomes beyond the life of our projects in developing countries?

**Black Swans and Sustainability Planning**

I assume the reader will be familiar with the ‘Sustainability Framework’ (SF), but just in case here’s a quick summary (please skip the indented text if you’re an old-timer of the SHOUT Group)7:

> We consider three stages on a timeline (Figure 1 below). The first stage is when a project operates. At that stage, what the SF has offered is to say, "don’t just look at the results you have promised your communities (and donor) such as more children when events and variables belong to “extremistan," rare events with extreme deviation from the average, especially if we try to fit them into models belonging to mediocristan. [An easy way to picture the difference between mediocristan and extremistan is to think of two variables: human height and human wealth. Assume you have a representative sample of the world’s population in a room and you now introduce the tallest human-in-the-world into the room. As tall as this person is, he (more likely than she) will not affect the average size so much. Now imagine you bring in Oprah Winfrey into the room, what does it do to the average wealth of the group? Human height belongs to mediocristan but wealth belongs to extremistan.

6 The word “ludic” comes from the world of games – and most of our probabilities are based on games: the probability of drawing a card out of a stack, or getting a 6 on a roll of the dice. Those are fairly predictable — i.e., 1/6 for the dice with a variance we can compute and an exponentially decreasing chance of getting further away from the average (which in this case is also the norm). The law of large numbers applies to these types of probabilities and drives our regression models. Taleb makes the case that we treat many events in the same manner, not because they fit this ludic model, but because we know how to compute probabilities on a Bell curve. Since many events, however, do not happen on a Bell curve, we keep falling over ourselves with misleading predictions. Once reality has surprised us, again, we rush to invent new models to prove that we really knew all along that the unpredictable would happen.

7 For more on this tool and the research which led to it, visit [http://www.childsurvival.com/documents/CSTS/sustainability.cfm](http://www.childsurvival.com/documents/CSTS/sustainability.cfm). A recent and comprehensive user guide is available (“Taking the long view: a practical guide for sustainability planning and measurement in community-oriented health programming”).
vaccinated, breastfed and receiving appropriate pneumonia treatment, also consider what you and especially others are contributing to the soundness of the local system, notably capacity of institutions and communities, elements of viability in organizations, and societal progress.” We have spent a lot of energy developing measures of progress in all these dimensions and particularly proposing steps to involve local owners of the future in that process.

Stage 2 is immediately after the end of a project (by definition projects end). No matter how slick you have been, the end of a project (and the resources that come with it) is always going to be an event in the life of the local system (good or a bad, but it’s an event unless you achieved total irrelevancy, which I have seen happen). That’s when the rubber is going to hit the road and the capabilities and connections you’ve tried to strengthen will show their mettle, evolve or collapse; in other words, that’s when you discover whether people will actually work together toward the initially stated goal.

Stage 3 is a distant future (three, five, ten years?) after the end of a project. Figure 1 illustrates the sequence of these three stages. The challenge is that Stage 1 is when we have control over our project (or so we think), while Stage 3 is when we will really measure our success in terms of sustainability (which largely depends on what local stakeholders do during Stage 2 and thereafter). Of course, part of the art of sustainability design is to let partners operate during Stage 1 as they should during Stage 2 with a view of what they want to achieve by Stage 3. But it’s easier said than done.

Figure 1: Three Conceptual Stages in the Sustainability Framework
Naturally, talking about sustainability with such a model raised expectations about our capacity to make long-term predictions. If we “get it right” in Stage 1 and make progress in all six components of evaluation of the SF, certainly we expect that local processes in Stage 2 will be effective and that we will observe sustained impact in Stage 3. Absolutely. And we now have some data from the Concern Bangladesh experience for example, showing how this can work.\(^8\)

Aren’t we thus *predicting* that if we achieve a certain level in the six directions of evaluation, *then* we will observe sustained positive results all the way into stage 3? The answer is we *might* but we don’t know that we *will*. I don’t want to cite them here, but I’m sure there are references to be found where some of us\(^9\) wrote daring statements about our ability to predict. The expectations of our colleagues in donor agencies may have encouraged our own boldness.\(^10\)

We need however to recognize that, as the Sustainability Framework looks at it, sustainability is the work of a local system and local systems in developing countries are complex systems.

Taleb makes interesting points about complex systems and explains why financial forecasting, for example, is a fool’s game.\(^11\) I wonder whether the human, social, political and economic elements of a sustainable primary health care system are not inherently even more complex than financial markets (or billiard balls, see Text Box)—thus making the future of said system less predictable. One could argue that, given the number of unpredictable elements in and around any local system, sustainability itself might be a Black Swan.

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\(^9\) Self-sustainability note 1: Always a good idea not to take the blame alone.

\(^10\) Self-sustainability note 2: Possibly safer to share blame with colleagues rather than donors.

\(^11\) His point is that “traditional” financial forecasting is a fool’s game. He introduces concepts very useful for decision making in a context of uncertainty.
There are three main limitations to our predictive ability:

1. Limitations in the ability to predict the internal local processes (positive and negative) necessary to sustainability;
2. Limitations in the ability to predict the large external events and shocks in the local environment;
3. Excessive expectations about the level of prediction from scores on the SF, even if extraneous/unpredictable events are dismissed. [This last point has nothing to do with the Black Swan concept, so I’ll get back to it in the second annex.]

The two first points (what happens inside the local system and what happens to the local system) are subject to possible Black Swans, sometimes positive but more often than not negative in nature.

In old presentations about the framework, we presented a red lightning rod [ ] hovering over the local process (Stage 2 in Figure 1). I only wish now that I had thought of a swimming bird [ ] to represent unpredictability in the SF model, but it’s never too late to catch up with fads, so I offer to you a revised Figure 1 to introduce both internal and external Black Swans.

Revised Figure 1: Unpredictability in and out of the local system

Let’s start with the little Black Swans, inside the local system. A charismatic local leader who emerges in a health district or a community association, a few community members who get really revved up, lobby a governor’s office and force critical change, a family or

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12 The first annex is just for fun: random quotes from Taleb which I found interesting or amusing.
political conflict which shatters years of consensus building, all these things are potential Black Swans. Of course they are not always totally unpredictable. But more often than not they are simply unsurprising once they happen, even though they were beyond our ability to predict with any certainty before their occurrence. (I don’t want to fight over this and I’ll grant you a Grey Swan nomination if you prefer that.)

What makes them Swans, Black or Grey, is that they are single events impacting our long-term outcomes out of proportion with their place in our models.

Of course, the Swans are bigger and blacker in the external environment: a huge economic downturn, a deflation, a new donor in the country, political upheaval and conflict, not to mention natural catastrophes. They are at least one step removed from our local system’s environment but they change everything. One “innovation” of the SF was to place environmental factors not as mere assumptions but as a full-fledged evaluation component. There has always been some debate about the value of this component, driven by the fact that most variables in the environment are hard or impossible to influence significantly by even a district-scale project. The logic that has prevailed until now can be summed in the following Q&A:

Q: “Why do you include environmental indicators in your sustainability model? You can’t do anything about most of these!”

A: “That’s precisely the point: our little project cannot be accountable on its lonesome for sustainability—forming assurances and promises about the future requires that we spread the accountability around. In this environmental component (we’re dealing with the socio-ecological environment) there are things we can influence, and there are things that are critical and on which bigger players than us must intervene, for example governments and big donors who are so keen on asking us about sustainability. In any case, we cannot be accountable about sustainability by ignoring major determinants of sustainability.”

However, even with a broad planning and analytical framework such as the SF, there will always be major unpredictable events which can have out-of-proportion effect on the evolution of health outcomes in our local system. We can’t plan for them and we

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13 This implies a shared accountability. Any sustainable social progress is the fruit of a shared accountability between different stakeholders. A government cannot maintain civil peace without a shared responsibility by the country’s people groups for not trying to kill each other. People cannot ensure equity in the national distribution of benefits without a sensible government committed to some measure of social justice. Similarly a project cannot achieve any sustainability if donors change their minds every other year and pour millions into contradictory pursuits. (Not that this would ever happen of course.)
can only develop so many contingencies. Additionally, we would be paralyzed if we tried to foresee all of them.\(^{14}\)

Now, if we acknowledge that planning for sustainability will be subjected to a number of Black Swans, let me continue by trying to answer two questions: (1) Are all systems as susceptible to Black Swans? (2) Are we doomed if we cannot predict, and if the Sustainability Framework were proven to have low predictive capacity (a.k.a. extreme variance across time and place), is it still worth anything?

1- Are all systems equally susceptible to Black Swans?

There is a spectrum of situations possible with two extremes.

On one hand, let’s consider Western European models of Primary Health Care. The French, British or German systems—each different—all face problems of cost, or quality, or regulation but would all be considered fairly sustainable. Issues such as cost of health care and an aging population carry a predictable risk, which can be managed—providing buffers against possible future shocks—absent a true Black Swan, such as a further financial and economic collapse, war, natural disasters, or a new pandemic.

On the other hand let’s consider the development of Primary Health Care in Yemen or Mozambique—something more in line with the activities of the SHOUT Group members. We claim (based on collective experience) that improving the status of six components of the SF will improve not only the health situation of the population but also the odds that this situation will continue improving beyond the life of a project. The SF makes us consider design and implementation elements, which are often neglected. It helps us move variables from the category of factors we ignore to the category of those we try to address. But the number of possible events, which can derail the progress made over the life of a project and which we cannot anticipate (as discussed above) remains substantial and beyond the reach of our contingency planning. In that context, you wouldn’t want to bet your own money on the sustainability of positive results achieved by even a “good” project.

\(^{14}\) I remember a lecturer at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine presenting his experience of 25 years developing a rural hospital in Zambia. I can’t remember his name but he was one of these inspiring people who mark your memory. He talked of starting the work on his own in a big town, which didn’t have much of a hospital. All the work to develop clinical services, train and integrate local nurses, aids, physicians on to administrators, building management systems, logistics, improving quality of care over time, emphasizing a primary health care approach, involving the community and increasing the clientele to an increasing number of surrounding communities. It was a case study in capacity building and a lot of good public health thinking. He had never heard of the SF but was among the people whose praxis must have inspired its creation. The end of his story? The World Bank and the government of Zambia chose another town to develop as a regional center, built a paved road going through that other city and put millions of dollars in a new hospital. A few years after our lecturer had retired, his hospital closed. Maybe he should have been in Lusaka working with the central planners or working to develop a regional hospital—should have’s, could have’s, it doesn’t matter—he simply couldn’t do everything. He ran into a Black Swan.
Sustainability remains largely in the realm of the unpredictable. You do your best and then hope your partners will be smart but also be lucky. You hope key staff will stay in place long enough. You hope the next NGO coming around won’t tear everything down. You hope USAID, the World Bank or the UN won’t just pull another 180 on all the partners and change the rules of the game. You hope the government will stick to some commitments even though it has often failed to. You hope people don’t start shooting each other again.

What’s the difference between those two extremes? Is it just wealth, social capital, institutional capacity, resilience, governance?

I think it is a combination of all of the above and more than that. Of course it starts with the capacity and cohesion and ‘default status’ / the institutionalization of key practices in the system over time—all the elements the Sustainability Framework tries to address. The difference is also and importantly the relative weight of the local system compared to the external environment. The French, German and British health care systems are going to be affected by huge changes in the global environment, but they have more autonomy, independence, or power—call it what you want—in defining their own course. The naming of the next USAID Administrator, the next World Bank President, even the next US President is not going to alter so much the range of options left to a French ‘Direction Régionale des Affaires Sanitaires et Sociales.’15 Yemen and Mozambique, on the other hand, are not only poorer and with severely deficient systems, but they are also highly sensitive to decisions made in Geneva, New York, Washington, Brussels and Beijing. A new initiative of the Bank or the US president may redraw the cards considerably.

From Sana’ or Lusaka, almost everything in the world is a Black Swan.16

Similarly, for internal factors – the local processes. If a French Regional Health Director has a bad relationship with his hierarchy or the local administration, there will be consequences. But it is highly improbable that these consequences will amount to a measurable drop in health indicators over even a five year period. (Over time, the multiplication of such dysfunctions could create vulnerabilities to a negative Black Swan, but the negative effect is not immediately and directly felt.)

But go back to Yemen or Mozambique. A new District Officer experiencing conflict with either the central MOH structures or local authorities could possibly have dire

15 It is possible that even Western European models are more sensitive to Black Swans than I imagine—that’s the nature of Black Swans. Over a long enough period, if we mess things up enough through wars, ecological destruction and financial ‘maverickism,’ we may one day face a nasty surprise in our “developed” countries.

16 Here’s a great book recommendation on this. First it presents the concept of the utter importance of local freedom in decision making very cogently. Second, just dropping the book’s title at parties will make you sound very smart (especially if you make it sound like it was a little dull for you). Reference: “Complex Systems Theory and Development Practice: Understanding Non-Linear Realities” by Samir Rihani. It’s really a good book (although a little dull for me).
consequences and lead to a serious drop in performance of the local health system and the worsening of health indicators even in the timeframe of a few years.

In this extreme comparison, we see that a weak local system (where we usually work) can be highly sensitive to both external and internal Black Swans (unpredictable, high impact effects).\(^{17}\)

This leads us to the next questions.

2- Are we doomed if we cannot predict? And if so, is the Sustainability Framework still worth anything?

Taleb concludes: “We just can’t predict.”\(^{18}\) He doesn’t stop at existential detachment however, but he goes further in his thinking about the nature of our predictive limitations, and what we can do in spite of these limitations.

The first thing is, while we cannot predict precisely what will happen, we can prepare for the possibility of shocks to the system. Years ago, Robb Davis introduced me to PLA approaches in social action-research and one of the key concepts was the “acceptable level of imprecision.” It is refreshing to discover a statistician—Taleb—reintroduce the concept in his own way. In the following quote, he illustrates that, in terms of decision making, not being able to predict the scale of an effect is not the same as not being able to predict the nature of an effect.

“My colleagues and I worked with around 20 million pieces of financial data...we learned that one could not produce a precise number. But what we did know—that the distribution is scalable and fractal\(^{19}\)—was sufficient for us to operate and make decisions.”

\(^{17}\) This is probably a major reason why the practitioners who inspired the Sustainability Framework put so much value in capacity building at individual, community, organizational and system levels. One of the goals of organizations might be to reduce the impact of extreme human behaviors (which I assume to belong to extremistan) by constraining them within management structures, processes, checks and controls. This has positive effects: good organizations pretty much know who will be at work on a given day (with low variability due to sickness, death, vacation or strike, although this last one is usually announced). This has downsides too: Microsoft and the personal computer revolution were events from extremistan, and Bill Gates dropped out of the structure of College to be able to give them birth.

\(^{18}\) TBS. Page 206.

\(^{19}\) This section of the book deals with fractal distributions—a probability distribution with large extremes (unlike the normal distribution). It’s interesting in its own right, but we don’t need to go into details to understand that imprecision does not necessarily prevent decision making, in financial forecasting or social sciences. There is another discussion to be had, which is whether the probability of sustainability in developing countries’ health programs is itself fractal. It might be a little over the top, but the take-home message might be that the probability of success in sustainability planning probably does not fit a normal (Bell curve) distribution.
We find something of that tension in the SF. It has been around as a tool for about seven years, and other tools have been around for a lot longer, also looking at variables such as institutional or community capacity. Neither these older tools, nor their constant reinventions, nor the SF itself have proved extremely good at providing precise measures in some areas. But it doesn’t take precision to determine that the capacity of a health district to provide cohesion to local actors is poor and threatens long-term gains. Or that a successful mobilization of community groups into a cohesive network provides a huge opportunity for sustaining key behaviors and pushing for better quality of services.

Maybe what saves the SF as a useful tool for programming is the knowledge of its own limitations.

If the SF promised to predict, it would provide a standard list of measures and maybe some probability index for sustainability based on these measures. But it has so far avoided this. All the SF offers is to help programmers consider a set of conditions, which we commonly call components of evaluation, without assuming linear relations between those conditions. The SF says: “you should pay attention to the conditions that make it highly improbable that whatever result you achieve will be sustained beyond your presence and efforts;” and it also says: “if you try to improve this set of conditions while you make progress on health indicators with your partners, you will be increasing the likelihood of a continued positive process following your project’s withdrawal.”

In other words, improving conditions in six components of evaluation promises to (1) decrease the vulnerability to negative Black Swans and (2) create favorable conditions for a positive Black Swan.

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20 We range from very robust with health status (and proxy) measures, robust for services, to weak and very weak for some capacity measures.

21 Some measures are more objective and allow comparisons across contexts. Take for example the proportion of facilities having no stock out on essential drugs in a district. I can compare that number for a district in West Africa and one in South Asia. Contextual elements can help explain the ‘why’ of the number, but the number itself tells me something solid. Other measures are relevant in context but not comparable across contexts (without more work than we’ve put into it so far at least). If a district team gives itself a score of 30 out 100 in an area of management, I can compare that 30 to scores given in other areas of capacity, even to a score provided by “clients” of the district team or to the score given two years before, but I cannot compare that 30 in a district in West Africa with a 60 given for the same dimension even in a neighboring district, much less one in Asia. (There are ways to move toward comparability, but those would take great effort and still not reach the comparability of a percentage of stocked out facilities.)

22 Taleb also reasons that, if many impactful events are unpredictable we should “first make a distinction between positive contingencies and negative ones. Learn to distinguish between those human undertakings in which the lack of predictability can be (or has been) extremely beneficial and those where the failure to understand the future caused harm.” I think that after nearly six decades of development work, we might say that our failure to take into account what it takes to sustain progress has had a huge cost on lives we could have saved, systems we could have built, and resources we could have better used. “We” includes all of us, from national governments to international development professionals.
And this is precisely what Taleb recommends when he writes:

“Don’t look for the precise and the local. ... Do not try to predict precise Black Swans—it tends to make you more vulnerable to the ones you did not predict. Invest in preparedness, not in prediction.”

At this point, I am more and more convinced that the SF has been a very robust tool to ‘invest in preparedness’ and to improve results in terms of sustainability, but I’m much less confident in its ability to predict with any certainty.

A final thought—the difference between preparedness (planning) and predicting may need to be approached differently depending on who and where you are, specifically whether you are a manager in the field or a donor. Let’s consider this for a moment.

**How does Sustainability Planning look for a Field Manager and for a Donor?**

Differences in what we can influence—the levers of control we hold—and the nature of the information available to us necessarily influence how we approach making decisions.

1. **Sustainability planning for the field manager: seizing the opportunities**

To the field manager, sustainability might be a Black Swan due to the disproportionate role which one person, agency, or circumstance will create, but she will not get exposed to positive events if she doesn’t build along multiple necessary-though-not-sufficient dimensions of progress. That’s what the SF provides as a planning and M&E tool.

Now, the recommendation of Taleb is:

“Seize any opportunity, or anything that looks like an opportunity... Positive Black Swans have a necessary first step: you need to be exposed to them.”

**In the field, those opportunities are all going to be contextual and the astute manager will imagine contextual ways of creating exposure to these opportunities.** Sharing tea or a beer with the right partner cannot be placed on an M&E plan, but all good managers in the field know how important it is. Creating linkages between specific organizations and building specific partnership arrangements (having a little give and take) will all be part of capacity building and viability strengthening strategies, which make plenty of sense in a given context – but most likely only in that particular context.

Consequently, once a few key standard variables have been included in the project’s sustainability plan (the fundamentals of the SF), the manager will tend to value
idiosyncratic (non standard) contextual 'indicators’ to let him/her know about the future prospect for raising and maintaining health standards.

2- **Sustainability planning from the donor perspective: maximizing exposure to opportunities**

From the more remote position of a donor, local idiosyncrasies and contextual factors are simply not manageable. Donors try to select implementers who can understand those contextual factors and will have the appropriate approach to addressing them. Apart from pulling the plug on a project due to irresolvable local problems, a donor will not have intelligence about idiosyncratic factors and even less ability to make decisions based on those.23

**A donor, on the other hand, can greatly enhance exposure to opportunities** by promoting program designs which address all non-negotiable components of progress toward sustainable results. Unlike the field manager, the donor can play the odds. Given enough progress balanced across components of the sustainability framework in enough project sites, the odds of exposure to positive Black Swans will increase, the risk of negative Black Swans will be tampered and the donor will increase its probability of success (defined as sustained positive health outcomes).

**Part of the challenge is one of consistency of purpose:**24 consistency from local stakeholders and consistency of donors. If we go back to the example of the two extreme health systems we described, how would the French and British health care systems perform (in all their difference) if they were asked to alternate policies and procedures every five or ten years? Both systems may be sustainable not because they are good25 but because (in addition to benefiting from fundamental available capacity in the system) they have been around long enough for their managers and users to know how to operate them and on occasion improve them. Looking at developing countries establishing vertical programs, integrating them, decentralizing them, bundling them into new forms of centralized vertical programs26, develop plans, revise plans, adopt new indicators, revise the indicators, be introduced to new ‘new indicators,’ and reform a system which is still

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23 Lack of understanding of this inherent constraint in the role of the donor can lead to ‘back-seat’ (micro) management based on anecdotic information and can rapidly lead to disastrous results.
24 I borrow the term from Davis Balestracci, international guru of Quality Improvement, music aficionado and statistician who thinks with the two sides of his brain. [http://www.dbharmony.com/](http://www.dbharmony.com/)
25 That’s another debate, left for another time and place.
26 No names, please.
undergoing the last reform, you start to share some of the cynicism which sometimes assails the average health officer in the field.27 *Instability along with political and programmatic inconsistencies with constant change in the name of progress is antithetic to sustainability.* Sadly they are a natural consequence of aid dependency, weak leadership and capacity.28 If Taleb were writing this piece, he’d no doubt also comment on mid-level aid agency managers looking for the next job by making a name for themselves, UN agencies tangled up in unending battles about the size of their... logos, contractors promising the ‘right’ thing to please a donor even when they know it is wrong, bilateral agencies having to abide by political nonsense, not to mention petty rivalry, corruption, sloth, fads and plain incompetence. But I’m not Taleb, so I won’t go there.

It makes sense for a donor to focus on a small set of variables and thus measure them consistently through standard methods to enhance learning and accountability. 29 As long as this small set of standard measures does not preclude the definition of contextually more meaningful one, both donor and field manager can get the information they need.

If this minimum set of common issues becomes an extensive and prescriptive laundry list, then micro-management will cause more harm than good. But by looking broadly at relevant issues a donor will increase the likelihood of positive results in its portfolio. No single measure will allow making predictions about the future for any single project, but empiricism will get a chance to play out against consistent measures of progress.

This is what the SF tries to do, if we use it to learn and progress rather than predict.

The challenge for donors is to accept that they can demand accountability on exposure to opportunities (increased capacity, cohesion, quality of services, coverage, improved health indicators) without having control over (aka predicting) the long-term results.

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27 I once talked with a donor agency health specialist in Sierra Leone, who told me that child survival was a possible area of emphasis for his agency in the coming year, although other issues had had priority in the previous planning cycle. Considering Sierra Leone had at the time the highest IMR in the world, I was simply dumbfounded. If we can’t even keep our eyes on the IMR in Sierra Leone, what are we doing to the national system with our scattered efforts?

28 Recognizing this, the ‘Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness’ at least states constructive intentions.

A Last Word—opening the discussion

When we developed the SF tool as a joint CSTS and CORE Group effort with the support of USAID’s Child Survival Grants Program, we provided a framework but we stayed clear of filling all the blanks (i.e., setting indicators in stone), first of all because we simply did not know how to, but also probably because of a sense that we could not control or predict all outcomes. The tool consequently left plenty (maybe too much) room for contextual adaptation. We have only recently moved toward filling some of these blanks and providing more standardized measures for indicators which come back again and again project after project.

Let’s use the SF as a tool to increase exposure to positive Black Swans, by improving key capabilities, by helping the right people work together and take leadership, and by developing ways of learning (empiricism). Let’s use the tool as a way of decreasing the impact of negative Black Swans, by emphasizing preparedness in the local system. At a program/portfolio level, donors need to work with implementers to create more places for these positive exposures and for empiricism.

To the extent we provide standard measures for a short list of minimum conditions widely shared by projects which have a lot in common, we will advance empiricism and learn to accelerate progress. And then, when we are tempted to take one more step and develop a blueprint for sustaining health outcomes (which would take away local ownership and expose us to negative Black Swans)... let’s not. We are not going to control all the factors, and we will remain highly susceptible to Black or Grey Swans. Local field managers will continue to need measures which make sense in context and which will help local stakeholders learn from local experience.

Whether we are trying to decrease exposure to negative Black Swans or increase exposure to positive opportunities, the outcomes belong to local stakeholders and that’s the non-negotiable counterparty of local ownership.

One of the recurrent themes in Taleb’s book is the value of empiricism over expert knowledge. The main weakness of medieval medicine, which killed more patients than it saved, according to Taleb, is that it rejected the experience of “plebeian barbers and surgeons.” If the Sustainability Framework has some merit, it is because the tool is born

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30 The Child Survival Technical Support+ Project is funded by USAID to provide an array of services to USAID’s Child Survival and Health Grants Program (CSHGP) and its partners. It is operated by ICF Macro International (my employer). www.childsurvival.com
31 The CORE Group is a coalition of nongovernmental organizations. http://www.coregroup.org/
32 Now the Child Survival and Health Grants Program. See: http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/global_health/home/Funding/cs_grants/cs_index.html
33 You get the sense that modern economic science does not rate much higher than medieval medicine to Taleb. His criticism of modern financial theories is scathing. Written in 2007, his book points in footnotes to Fanny Mae and Lehman Brothers as examples of financial witch-doctors who neglect the risk of Black Swans
from the experience of field practitioners and because it has remained in constant evolution due to the leadership of people working in the field (“plebeian experts?”).

So, my parting questions are: Are we getting closer to this minimum set of standard measures, at least for some types of programs? What is the experience of our partners in taking control of the production of information to take corrective measures? Is there a way in which ‘decentralization’ can allow more learning at district levels and still involve civil society change agents? And how do we work with central governments to allow trial and error on tactics, guided by a clear and consistent focus on actual strategic achievements?

These questions can be summarized under one single heading: from here, how do we improve empiricism at local and program levels?

Eric Sarriot – 7 March, 2009

List of Annexes:

- Annex 1- No extra charge – random (but not ‘random’) quotes from The Black Swan
- Annex 2- On the predictive value of Sustainability Framework indices

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Thanks to the SHOUT Group for providing a readily available group of innocent bystanders to be subjected to this diatribe. More seriously, it is fantastic to have a group of ‘plebeian experts’ dedicated to their work and to maximizing benefits and future opportunities for our friends living in very harsh conditions in so many places. I hope this piece contributes a little to the real work done in the field.

in their delusion of knowledge and in risk assessment theories based on erroneous statistical models. Sadly 2008-2009 proved Taleb right on that one.