Post-Harvest Post-Mortem[1]

"The road to Hell is paved with good intentions"
and in this instance
"Too many cooks spoiled the broth!"

Dr. Kenneth F. Smith, PMP

Preamble: In September 1970 -- *after a sabbatical at MIT* -- I resumed duty at the US Agency for International Development's (USAID) Technical Assistance Bureau (TAB) in Washington D.C. During November, I had a quick two-week temporary duty (TDY) assignment to the Dominican Republic (DR) at the request of Bill Averill, USAID's Mission Agriculture Director there. [*I had previously worked with Bill in Vietnam applying critical path, line of balance and other analytical tools to help plan & monitor rice production, land reform activities; and other ag. projects; together with his Deputy Bill Jansen and another AID/Washington Advisor, Earl Kulp*.]

But this time, Bill wanted me to evaluate and write a report on a **rice-grain silo project — *not its actual name*** **--** that had gone horribly wrong, but he had "inherited"[2] on arrival at the DR Mission.

Synopsis: Like many countries in Asia, the Dominican Republic in the Caribbean was primarily an agricultural country whose main food crop -- rice – was produced by poor farm families on very small plots. However, before being able to store for family consumption, &/or market any surplus major post-harvest losses were experienced – primarily due to poor practices for drying the harvest, as well as inadequate & inappropriate storage. Ever-ready to assist, the USAID Mission contracted an agricultural consultant from Kansas State University on a short-term basis, to formulate a solution -- or solutions -- to their problems.

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[2] NOTE: Although USAID personnel were designated 'Managers' and/or Advisors for USAID-sponsored Programs and Projects, actual day-to-day responsibility for implementation management rested with the host-country Ministry departmental staff, contractors &/or NGO-designated personnel. Our role was essentially advice, coordination, monitoring, facilitation and evaluation; as well as "Co-tars" i.e. Contract Office Technical Representatives." Other USAID personnel were responsible for funding and auditing.

Furthermore, -- *unlike contract personnel who usually stayed with a project for its duration* -- USAID Managers and Advisors were assigned to Host Country Missions for fixed tours-of-duty – *usually 2 or 4 years* -- then reassigned to other Missions; or rotated to AID/Washington. Due to lengthy project technical gestation periods and annual budget cycles -- *while supported in-country by a permanent Foreign Service National (FSN) staff* – USAID Managers and Advisors inherited extant projects from Mission predecessors; to continue planning or implement, as well as plan new ones which they – *in turn* -- passed on to their successors. Once in a while, USAID personnel also oversaw completions, or – *rarely* -- terminations of projects they had never designed, or may not even have approved had they been involved in formulation, or consulted before finalization & approval – *such as was this case*.

While I no longer have all the details in mind, nor a copy of the log-frame or my actual report to verify my comments here, -- *as best I recall from my "Monday Morning Quarterbacking" perspective then and now* -- the situation was as follows:

> A short-term contract with an agriculture consultant from Kansas State University for a technical study of the production volume in each area and the drying and storage capacity that would be required to address the situation was undertaken. He recommended multiple readily-accessible small prefabricated metal "Butler-type" grain silos -- *that could both dry and store the rice grain* – be widely dispersed as the most appropriate solution. The silos were readily available in the U.S., and could be purchased there, shipped to, and imported by, the Dominican Republic; then transported to, and erected at numerous sites in close proximity to the rice growing areas in each of two main production areas – the North-West and the North-East regions of the Republic. After erection the silo mini-complexes could be managed, maintained and operated – either by farmer cooperatives or field agencies of the government.

With the short-term consultation concluded, the contractor went back to Kansas. So far, so good!

After arrival, I took the opportunity to field-test a new log-frame evaluation approach under consideration by USAID to scope the project's "manageable interest' & "development hypothesis" to better conceptualize it; then discussed it further with Bill and his technical & FSN staff. We identified & retrofitted the essential key performance indicators and targets; then I used the log-frame indicators as a guide to collect actual performance data, as well as obtain additional information about the resultant for my assessment and to write up my report.

I immediately learned several changes were introduced before final approval; modifying the original conceptual design, procurement and implementation. After the consultant submitted his report, several different executive decision-makers second-guessed his recommendations; raising economic, financial, contractual, logistical and execution concerns. Then, with the best of intentions -- *but without further technical consultation* – they made several modifications to his recommendations in scope & substance, thereby diverting project execution from its original plan; which subsequently culminated in the classic development disaster confronting Bill on his arrival.

First, the Dominican government balked at the idea of utilizing scarce foreign exchange currency to import multiple ready-made small steel silos with associated equipment from the U.S.[3] Instead, they preferred that *concrete* silos be constructed, locally.[4]

[3] Even though, in all probability, the foreign exchange was provided by the US as either a grant, or a loan at a bargain rate of interest.

[4] At this juncture, I don't remember about the tractor-conveyor-belt and other related ancillary equipment. They probably also had to be imported, regardless, rather than being fabricated locally. Retrofitting them to the other physical structures undoubtedly added to the difficulties.

In USAID Missions the strategic Executive level 'Program Office' was responsible for deciding overall direction, scope, size and budget of the Mission's 'Country Plan' & portfolio. The tactical technical sector departments (such as Agriculture, Education & Health) then administered approved programs and projects, in concert with their host country counterparts. Program Officers were usually generalist economists, more concerned with the macro-economics of development assistance than technical micro-sector aspects and/or project-specific execution efficacy. Internally – *and eternally* -- a bureaucratic struggle between technical and program offices existed; particularly as Program Offices in the Mission decision-making & approval process were prone to act upon government suggestions while often omitting, failing to solicit, or even overriding sector specialist inputs.

Next, instead of importing dozens of prefabricated granary silo setups – or even locally-constructed concrete ones -- for dispersal throughout the countryside adjacent to the rice growing areas; **someone**[5] **--** *presumably an executive-level economist* – proposed instead of having myriad small silo facilities scattered around the two rice growing areas, two large silo complexes – *one for each area* -- would be more efficient to store the total annual (two seasons) rice production volume; with the storage capacity of each silo estimated on that basis; and managed by the Government.

I can well envisage the agriculture consultant expert's rationale for *multiple* imported prefabricated silos *was completely overlooked in favor of foreign exchange considerations, economics and efficiency;* and the USAID Program Officer acquiescing to Dominican Ministry arguments that substituting two concrete silos constructed with local currency to handle the same storage capacity would be eminently logical.[6] In any event, the Program Office indorsed the Dominican government's modifications to the technical plan, justifying in the approval documentation that it would redound with several additional benefits:

1. The silos could be constructed with local currency, and possibly at an overall reduced cost.
2. Local construction would provide temporary employment for local people
3. Subsequently, managing two large silo complexes would be easier and more economical than dozens of small mini-complexes scattered throughout the two regions.

The decision to proceed as requested was then made by the Mission Director, and a USAID

[5] I never did find out who "*Someone*" was or to which agency (US or Dominican Republic) he/she belonged, but presumably an agreement between "objective" economists in the Mission Program Office in consultation with a Dominican Ministry official, officials or politician(s). Thus, do anonymous bureaucrats all too often confound programs, and make technical decisions beyond their competence, to the frustration of technocrats.

[6] Although apparently without further consultation with -- or confirmation by -- the USAID agricultural project office, or their erstwhile technical expert agricultural extension advisor.

Assistance Project to the Dominican Government was approved. Then USAID's Contract Office -- *uninvolved in the decision-making loop for concrete silos, but merely requested to manage the local tender process* – proceeded to do their thing.

The project was tendered for a local contractor to construct two huge reinforced concrete grain elevator complexes, and indeed several *"responsible and responsive" (R&R)* bids were received. However, although the successful *"R&R"* lowest bidder had previously constructed concrete water storage silos, the contractor had had no prior experience constructing *grain* silos; which later turned out to be a criterion-oversight and another major misstep.[7]

Faced with the *fait accompli* of a contract award for two large concrete silo complexes, USAID's Ag. Department Managers and Advisors then had no option but to monitor construction of the silos in accordance with the contracts, and ultimately oversee their commissioning and utilization.

Once constructed, even before the silos were ready to be put into operation, external typical start-up problems were encountered; – i.e. intermittent electrical power, and equipment not functioning as intended *(particularly the imported weighing scales)* – as well as lack of experienced personnel. More importantly however was that basic ancillary working environmental factors -- poor road infrastructure, scattered small farms, and seasonal cropping -- all combined to frustrate delivery of an adequate regular supply of grain to the facilities so they could be operated effectively &/or efficiently. Instead of truck-loads of harvested rice being brought to the facilities for processing during a brief harvesting period, small farmers only delivered small volumes – *i.e. one or two sacks* -- in paniers (baskets) affixed on either side of their donkeys to the silos intermittently during an extended rice-growing season. Thus, instead of large volumes of rice being delivered in a relatively short period of time for drying, delivery was small, and slow throughout the entire two growing seasons. The weigh scales – *designed to weigh loaded trucks* – were also inappropriate to weigh small donkeys – *one-by-one* -- with a couple of basket-loads of grain; so were not utilized.

Because of the small load delivery each day, it was extremely uneconomical to operate the elevator drying and storage facility equipment. Also, due to inattention, grain frequently got stuck in the conveyor belt chute tracks for several days, and the grains tended to sprout when not cleaned – *which they weren't* -- especially when it rained -- *which it did; and often*. These "*hanging baskets of seedlings*" in turn jammed the machinery, impairing its functioning.

Consequently, although intended to solve existing drying and storage problem, the two huge facilities of the grain silo sub-project resolved nothing, and indeed became additional problems --

[7] I learned from the engineers that there is a significant difference between water and grain storage structures due to differences between grain *vs.* water in tension and pressure on the retaining chamber walls. Consequently, even if well-constructed, the concrete facilities would be – *and indeed were* -- subsequently overbuilt, with considerably more concrete than was necessary.

essentially expensive "White Elephants;"[8] of little use, or utility.[9] Which is when Bill Averill arrived on scene, acquired responsibility, and called on AID/Washington for an evaluation.[10]

I can only speculate – *but of course will never know* -- whether this entire sorry situation could have been avoided if a logical framework had been used as a design tool; with closer attention to the "development hypothesis" rationale, requiring adherence to the technical expert's plan with related indicators, risk analysis; and particularly the "manageable interest." At any rate, I wrote up my report and returned home to Washington in time for Thanksgiving and the rest of the Christmas & New Year holiday season!

Conclusion

The original intent and objective of the project to resolve a recurrent problem was worthy, well-defined by technical specialists for USAID, and accepted by the Ministry as something the country needed and should have. However, with the best of intentions – *also known as the Law of Unintended Consequences* – successive 'second-guessing' modifications by diverse disciplines & support specialists in their 'organizational-silo protocols' at both USAID and the Host Government Ministry precipitated this project's ultimate predicament; as illustrated below in the classic *'Before & After'* kiddie swing (i.e. *what the customer wanted* vs. *what the customer got!*)

Lessons Learned:

1. ***Don't start vast projects with half-vast plans!***
2. ***Planning is a Team Effort; don't second-guess tactical subject matter specialists, when making strategic economic decisions!***

[8] White Elephant: a possession, project, or business venture that is expensive to maintain, useless, or burdensome, yet difficult to dispose of.

[9] In log-frame terms, Project Output (Deliverable) "Successful," but Project Purpose "Not achieved" -- *nor ever likely to be.*

[10] Bill confided to me the only realistic solution to the situation he could foresee was if the anti-government rebels in the area would blow them up as an act of defiance against the government! But that did not happen.

Post-script: A couple of years later another *"Elephant"*[11] compounded the development disaster. I subsequently learned the concrete structure in Santiago was too heavy, and apparently due to poor compaction during construction, cracks appeared from uneven settling with soil subsidence. In the settling process, a number of rigidly-connected steel members within the silo complex were distorted, so the elevator was no longer used for drying or storage. Eventually, in 1974, the silo was completely taken out of operation.

About the Author

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Initially a US Civil Service Management Intern, then a management analyst & systems specialist with the US Defense Department, Ken subsequently had a career as a senior foreign service officer -- management & evaluation specialist, project manager, and in-house facilitator/trainer -- with the US State Department's Agency for International Development (USAID). Ken assisted host country governments in many countries to plan, monitor and evaluate projects in various technical sectors; working 'hands-on' with their officers as well as other USAID personnel, contractors and NGOs. Intermittently, he was also a team leader &/or team member to conduct project, program & ~~and~~ country-level portfolio analyses and evaluations.

Concurrently, Ken had an active dual career as an Air Force ready-reservist in Asia (Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Indonesia, Philippines) as well as the Washington D.C. area (DC, VA & MD); and had additional duties as an Air Force Academy Liaison Officer (ALO) and also Chairman of a Congressional Military Services Academy Advisory Board (SAAB). He retired as a 'bird' colonel, but voluntarily continued SAAB & ALO duties for another 18 years.

After retirement from USAID, Ken was a project management consultant for the World Bank, ADB, UNDP & USAID for another 40 years. Now, in 'semi-retirement', Ken continues to conduct intermittent workshops for the international Project Management Institute (PMI) Philippines Chapter, as well as write articles for the Project Management World Journal (PMWJ).

[11] A "Black Elephant": a risk of sufficient magnitude to eventually critically impair the project that could *and should* have been foreseen -- *i.e. a "known-known"* -- but was apparently ignored.

"Age is an issue of mind over matter.
If you don't mind, it doesn't matter."
Mark Twain

He earned his DPA (Doctor of Public Administration) from the George Mason University (GMU) in Virginia, his MS from Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT Systems Analysis Fellow, Center for Advanced Engineering Study), and BA & MA degrees in Government & International Relations from the University of Connecticut (UCONN). A long-time member of the Project Management Institute (PMI) and IPMA-USA, Ken is a Certified Project Management Professional (PMP®) and a member of both the PMI® Hawaii & Philippines Chapters.

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Ken has two KENBOOKS:

1. ***Project Management PRAXIS*** which includes many innovative project management tools & techniques; and describes a "Toolkit" of related templates, and

2. ***MUSINGS on Project Management*** -- a compilation of contemporary concerns in project planning, monitoring & evaluation, with some tools & techniques suggested for their solution.

Both books are available from Amazon, and their related templates are available directly from him at kenfsmith@aol.com on proof of purchase.