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Welcome to Aidland

Sampson, Steven

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LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

WELCOME TO AIDLAND

Steven Sampson

You may think that development assistance takes place in certain poor, third world countries. But it doesn't. It takes place in a special place, an archipelago scattered around the world. A place called Aidland. Aidland is in some ways a place that some donor decides to "go into" or "pull out of". The roads of Aidland have humanitarian crises or capacity development programs. Aidland has white jeeps of the development NGOs, the brown jeeps of the peacekeepers, the new Mercedes of the government, and the stolen SUVs of the bandits. Aidland is full of "missions": aid missions, peacekeeping missions, assessment missions, evaluation missions. Aidland has field representatives, incoming consultants, local staff, counterpart NGOs, capacity building programs and of course, trainers, trainers, trainers. Aidland has its own special language, not English, but what Aidlandish. When you speak Aidlandish, you talk about special kinds of activities called "projects".

Aidlanders have their its own social status, marked by the various plastic ID cards we carry around our necks. And it has its power hierarchy marked out by who can keep whom waiting for a meeting. Aidland has its own fetishes and symbolic markers: the Logical Framework Matrix, a device intended for strategic planning which is always filled out and brought out at meetings... and then never consulted. Aidland has its sacred words: "partnership" is one, replacing 'solidarity'. "Conditionality", replacing commitment, is another. And other Aidlandish words like externality, impact, value added, relevance, effectiveness, sustainability, and exit strategy.

Aidland can be dangerous. You can get stress and depression, but also more exotic diseases like "mission creep" or "donor fatigue".

Enclaves of Aidland exist everywhere. First in the aid offices in Washington, Brussels, London, New York or Paris, in the aid offices of NGOs and consulting firms. In these offices dwell the people of aidland, the Aidlanders. For hours they discuss "budget support" and "good governance", "institutional capacity building" and strange acronyms like DAC or PRSP. The talk is always about what's hot and what's not. Is "poverty alleviation" being replaced by "good governance"? Is "good governance" giving way to "private sector support"? Is "private sector support" being transformed to "climate change"? Which priority is becoming a budget line? These are the passions of Aidlanders.

From the enclaves of Aidland the magic "resources" move southward to the so-called "partners". Here opens a mystical world of "conditionalities" and "externalities", with constant talk of "coordination". Coordination is always in short supply in Aidland. There is never enough of it. And lack of coordination is always the other persons' fault.

How do we know Aidlanders when we see them? Of course there are the usual laptops, i-phones and briefcases, and the hurrying walk from one meeting to the next, but the real sign of an Aidlander is the plastic card around the neck. The plastic card gets them "access". Access to meetings. The everyday life of Aidlanders is going to meetings, or "taking a meeting" as it's now called. The status of Aidlanders is who can take a meeting with whom. And who has to wait. The money of Aidlanders is time... waiting time. Aidlanders have others who help make them effective: the program assistants, local coordinators, drivers and translators.

Aidlanders are happy when they get their program approved or certified. The program has to “meet needs”. There has to be one or more “vulnerable groups”, and they have to get the government or other key people “on board”. In between are meetings for future projects and bids, and the constant calls and emails to the home office.

After the project document is signed or the evaluation completed, the Aidlander returns home from the “mission”. They leave Aidland. Sometimes they get home and start talking to their families about “accountability” or “ownership” or an “LFA matrix,” They get blank looks. Oops, they forget that they were speaking Aidlandish.

The UN has 192 member countries. But the most important country has no flag or delegation. Long live Aidland!