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SYSTEMS APPROACHES TO PEACE OPERATIONS

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CMC Finland Working Papers analyse civilian contributions to peace operations and include recommendations for developing practical capabilities and improving effectiveness.




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Introduction

The challenge which this paper sets out to resolve is how to frame context analysis across a broad range of interventions into strategic intent. We focus on the design of such a framework with the aim to understand societies which are the parties of the underlying conflict. This paper is designed to contribute to strengthening synergies between military and civilian crisis management, development cooperation and humanitarian activities.[1]

Contemporary peace operations have been portrayed as a holistic activity, where military and civilian crisis management are complemented by humanitarian aid, development cooperation and peace building. Yet, the strategy encompassing all these areas is either deficient or its implementation is partial, and this undermines the benefits of integration. All of the aforementioned activities have their own objectives and operational logic, and professionals from those fields tend to think in terms of their own competence and mandate without considering the situation within a conflict-affected area as a whole (de Coning 2018; 2020; Nguya & Siddiqui 2020; Ricigliano 2012).

Achieving the goals set for peace operations usually requires systemic changes within a society. These complex environments, where actions are known to cause unpredictable consequences and where there are no linear cause-and-effect relationships, make achieving sustainable impact very difficult. Succeeding in such environments requires new methods of operation.

As an answer to these related challenges, recent peacebuilding research has sought new approaches grounded in complexity theory, which emphasises contextual analysis and knowledge, local ownership and the adaptability of operations as prerequisites for success. The contextual analysis and indeed talk of complex systems is not completely new. The literature provides several examples where these have been brought into discussion. What is more novel, however, is that systems analysis provides a pragmatic tool for designing activities in complex systems. Furthermore, it also provides a framework that has been used to deepen the understanding of key features of societies such as resilience and non-linear relationships.[2] Achieving long-lasting change in peacebuilding is related to the ability to jointly articulate the change potential of complex systems, and within that to enhance the change potential of local actors (Nguya & Siddiqui 2020; Zamore 2019).

There is a growing demand for such a common framework that could help define the impact in ways that respect the specific features of a society undergoing change and recognise the significance of relations between actors in different levels of that society. Positive peace is relative to culture and subject to change, thus, local ownership is the key to sustainable and positive peace (Day, 2022; de Coning, 2020; Galtung, 1969).

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1 We are extremely grateful for comments on this paper by Jyrki Ruohomäki, Anisa Doty, Erkki Pekonen and Tapio Koskimies.

2 See, for example, Adam Day's (2022, pp. 136-160) analysis on systems of governance in South Sudan and Congo and guidelines for using a systems approach to peacebuilding and rule of law by Leroux-Martin and O'Connor (2017)

To master the complexity inherent in societies engaged in conflicts, it is imperative to better understand effects situated outside a single actor's strategic objectives or status within a society. When analysing and building the capacities of populations to better respond to crisis, it is the connections between actors and the way those connections aggregate to patterns that matter (Day, 2022). This stronger contextual understanding will also allow innovators to leverage activities that positively contribute to the solutions pathways which are designed and chosen by local actors (Stroh, 2015; Schirch, 2013).

From copying good practices to adaptive operations

Despite military, diplomatic, and economic efforts, international actors have not been especially successful in building lasting peace (Day, 2022; Pain, 2021; Ricigliano, 2012; Richmond, 2016). According to de Coning (2020; 2018), at the heart of these failures is our inability to recognise what is required to successfully operate in complex systems and to underestimate the lack of interplay between context and operation. When we try to manage a crisis and build lasting peace, we address or support a complex system, a society, and work alongside it towards sustainable changes. In fact, as Day (2022, p. 132) points out in his analysis of the UN's state-building efforts in Congo, we should consider operations as part of the systems, rather than external actors. Too often, we rely on generic actions that are believed to be effective or on actions that have, in previous conflicts, led to desired development. The unique context of the conflict setting is disregarded.

The conflict context should be one of the decisive points of reference when designing peace operations. David Snowden's renowned Cynefin framework depicts features of four different types of contexts or systems and suggests how to successfully navigate within them (see Figure 1). When operating in complex (let alone chaotic) systems, implementing good practices tested and developed elsewhere does not work (Snowden & Boone, 2007). The failures of foreign powers in Afghanistan and Iraq tell the same story. These operations have shown that external powers cannot control or own the peace process by implementing ready-made solutions which have been found to be viable in western democracies. Rather, the change must come from within the local society (de Coning 2020; Richmond 2016; Wilkens 2016).

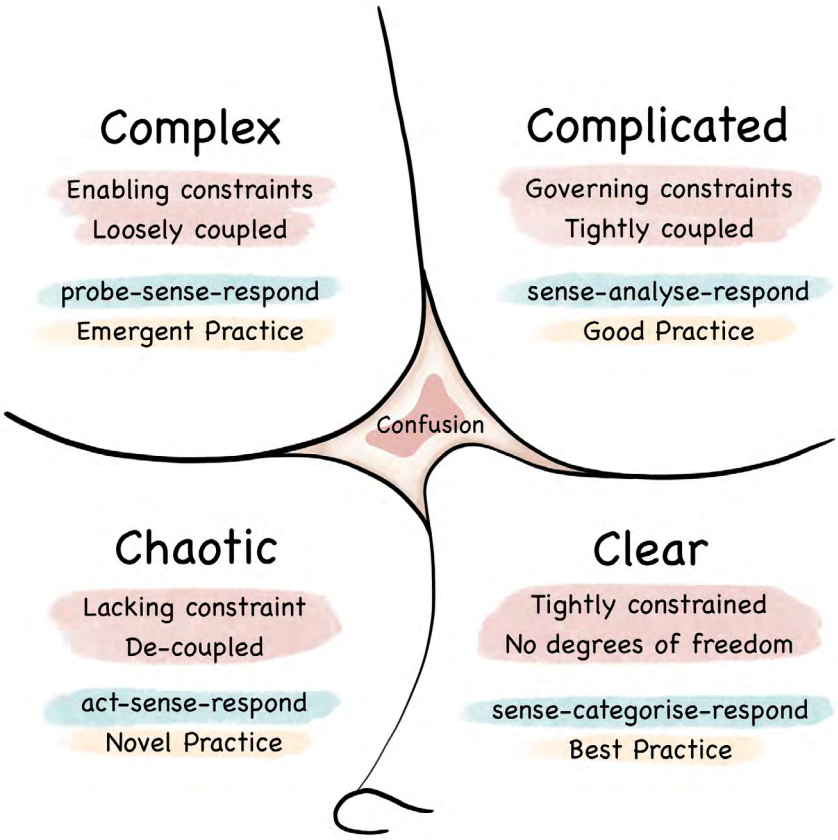

Figure 1. The Cynefin framework. Four types of systems. Source: Tom@thomasbcox.com, CC BY-SA 4.0 https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0, via Wikimedia Commons

Although it may be useful to study best practices and gather lessons learned from earlier or similar conflict settings, every activity needs to be planned, executed and then evaluated from the perspective of the conflict at hand. Instead of copying good practices, we have to advance via "probe, sense and respond" -tactics, as illustrated in Figure 1.

One of the analytical challenges of any peace operation professional is to be aware of the context of past and present activities yet still understand the particularity of the relevant conflict dynamics (Brusset et al. 2016; Cilliers 1998). Enduring unpredictability, giving space to emergence and relying on self-organising may be painful, especially for professionals coming from organisations with a top-down decision-making culture (de Coning 2018; 2020). Critics of aforementioned operations argue that that peace operations have become loaded with western-centric values of democracy, rights, (liberal) insti-

tutions, and the rule of law, which do not necessarily reflect a contextual understanding of such values or other local norms, principles or customs (Öjendal et al., 2021).

Instead of imposing ready-made solutions tailored to a linear (perhaps non-existent) world, we should learn to operate via adaptive processes grounded in complexity theory. De Coning (2018; 2020) describes an adaptive peace building model which examines conflict societies as unique, complex social systems. It is based on local ownership of the peace process, contextual adaptation and building of institutions designed to maintain peace. Institutions that prevent violent conflicts in society cannot be maintained by external pressure. Nor can they be built first with the instructions of an outsider and then transfer their ownership to local people. Experiences and challenges gained in building these institutions are very valuable learning experiences. In order to create more impact in the form of long-lasting change, handing responsibility over to local communities is key. (de Coning, 2020; Donais 2012; Forti, 2022.)

Why is it so difficult to change complex systems?

Before exploring what should be done differently and how to design and execute operations with more impact, it is important to understand in more detail *why* we should change our modus operandi. Complex systems have properties that can be described with such terms as resilience, nonlinearity, self-organising and emergence, and all these characteristics challenge our customary ways of operating. Complexity theory is indeed rapidly building momentum in the peace operations literature, for example, in Brusset, de Coning and Hughes (2016). The theory explains the structure and functioning of complex social systems such as communities or societies. For example, a traditional rural village can be viewed as a complex system. The village consists of actors and factors; families, social hierarchies, ways of distributing justice and land ownership, etc., all of which are interconnected in various ways. Furthermore, villages within the same area are linked and each village and villager, in turn, is bound by regional and/or national legislation.

Influencing complex systems is difficult because systems are *adaptive and resilient at the same time.* Systems tend to adapt to external pressures and changing conditions to maintain their existing state of equilibrium and status quo. Resilience of a system can turn against itself, for also systems, which produce worsening tensions and violence can be resilient and thus be very difficult to steer towards new balance. (Day, 2022; Meadows, 2008; Stroh, 2015). Systems' capacity to respond to shocks and stress points to the importance of recognising conflict drivers (shocks and stressors, but also positive changes) and attractors, which direct the system back to its state – whether positive or negative (Day, 2022). Conflict drivers and attractors provide a verifiable source of evidence.

It is generally recognised that analysing resilience is methodologically challenging for several reasons. First, resilience is multi-dimensional and cannot be quantified directly, requiring proxy indicators (e.g., resilience capacities) and analysing elements related to

resilience (e.g., exposure to shocks, or even better the response of specific capacities to shocks as they occur). Second, resilience is characterised by nested hierarchies of multi-scale dynamics. Resilience is similarly scale-dependent, meaning it can be observed at several levels simultaneously, and that resilience at one level (for example, the household) is not necessarily related to resilience at another (for example, the community) (Béné, 2018; Constas et al., 2014; Brusset et al., 2022). This means that influencing and analysing resilience at multiple scales within the same context may show different results.[3]

Interrelationships between resilience capacities at different levels of society can similarly influence overall outcomes horizontally (between individuals and groups) and vertically (between populations and institutions of the state). A resilience perspective thus offers an operational strategy for being more assertive about supporting peace through transformative processes, not only responding to fragility, while at the same time offering a methodology relying on levels of analysis for different kinds of indicators (Simpson et al., 2016).

However, the paradox of resilience is that it is difficult to measure response strategies independently of conflict risks and related drivers (i.e., conflict shocks or stressors). While there may be capacities identified in what can be seen as initial conditions (positive predictors), it is only when responding in the face of conflict risks and related drivers that relevant capacity enablers are actualised and demonstratively manifest. In other words, enablers of a response to conflict must be understood in relation to the drivers of conflict as well as local systems of capacities. For example, communities of herders and cultivators may live side by side uneasily in a time of stability but will pool their resources and security when threatened by a new arrival. Similarly, displaced persons may have limited trust in the authorities of their host area but will call on their health services when experiencing a shock such as a pandemic.

Complex systems do not respond to linear logic. Instead, systems dynamics are formed by hard-to-perceive and often counterintuitive interdependencies between parts of the system. There rarely is any linear cause-and-effect relationships: one cannot be certain that activities x and y will ensure that more children graduate from secondary school or that negative peace is sustainable (Cilliers, 2002; Snowden & Boone, 2007). Thus, traditional impact chain thinking or following intervention logic are therefore not the right tools for operating in complex systems, even though lots of resources have been used to develop and implement linear tools for designing peace operations and assessing their impact (Forti, 2022).

"Linear minds in a Nonlinear world." Donella Meadows (2008, p. 108)

3 This also suggests that different rates of change can be expected at different scales, with similarly different frequencies of data collection required to track changes.

What further undermines our ability to predict outcomes of our actions is a *system's ability to organise and re-organise itself*, an ability which renders it adaptive and resilient. The constant process of self-organising produces seemingly emergent outcomes, trends and events that we are unable to predict (Ricigliano, 2012; Snowden & Boone, 2007). No wonder that de Coning describes peace consolidation as a "home-grown, bottom-up and context-specific process" (2020, p. 4).

To sum up, complexity theory challenges the idea that there are models that can be generalised from historical examples or copied from peaceful societies, the implementation of which in the target area would inevitably lead to stronger, peace-maintaining institutions (Brusset et al., 2016; Eriksen, 2009). Finding and maintaining an improved state of balance requires the ability to strengthen the systems' own potential for change.

Each system has potential to change

Systems approaches often go hand in hand with complexity theory. With the help of a systems approach, it is possible to operationalise the principles and considerations of complexity theory. Systems approaches teach us to think in systems and also to transform them (e.g., Meadows, 2008; Stroh, 2015). The approach offers tools for finding new states of equilibrium that strive towards stability.

Systems approaches can be divided into two parts, systems thinking and systems doing (or systems transformation). Systems thinking tools are used to analyse, describe and identify the different layers and underlying structures of systems as well as the leverage points, which enable systems to take a different course and change their internal dynamics (Meadows, 2008). Often, systems thinking begins with the question: 'Why did we fail despite all of our good intentions?' Systems thinking is useful when analysing operations and learning lessons, while systems doing is more geared towards creating change in the target society.

When analysing systems, the idea is to reveal and visualise the types of dynamics that are in play within the system and seek to understand what kind of behaviour the system produces. An iceberg metaphor is often used. The metaphor describes the four layers of an iceberg and their interconnections, namely events, trends, systems structure, and mental models. On the top, visible above the surface are *events*, such as suicide attacks, human rights violations and crimes. Behind them there are longer-term developments, *trends*, for example, the strengthening of rebel groups, concentration of political power or lowering income rates. Typically, the news narrative focuses on events, for they are the most easily detectable part of the system; they also captivate our attention and generate emotional response. A bit more analysis is needed to detect and understand trends that generate the events. When faced with events and trends, the systems thinker asks 'why do we see this happening?' (Meadows, 2008; Stroh, 2015).

When we move further down the iceberg, we find the system *structure*. To illustrate the nature and significance of systems structure, one of the mothers of systems thinking, Donella Meadows, uses a very simple example of a coil that bounces. What makes the coil bounce is not the fact that it was released but rather it is the fact that it is *structured* as a coil. A system's structure is formed by three elements:

- The parts of the system, namely stakeholders and factors.
- The interconnections of those parts
- The purpose of the system (Meadows, 2008, pp. 27-29)

The structure of the system is typically described by systems maps, which are composed of feedback loops and/or stock-and-flow diagrams (see an example from Figure 2). The idea is to reveal and visualise the types of dynamics that are in play within the system and seek to understand what kind of behaviour the system produces. Understanding and modelling a system's structure is a difficult task and it is necessarily an incomplete one, for any diagram portraying a complex system is a proxy for reality. In addition, the form a system map takes varies depending on the perspective and the level in which the system is described (Leroux-Martin & O'Connor, 2017; Meadows, 2008). Finally, the motives and beliefs of central actors form the deepest layer, *mental models*. Mental models, such as the importance of ethnicity, honour, tribal loyalty, religion or superstition, are one of the factors that render the system resilient (Day, 2022; Stroh, 2015).

Figure 2 below gives an example of systems structure and mental models. It is worth noting that the example is a simplification of a systems map describing dynamics that were in play in an operation in Afghanistan. The point is to illustrate why we might miss the underlying dynamics of a system, the structure that produces instability in the long run and that undermines the good short-term results.

When a peace operation reacts to acts of violence targeted at its staff, such as improvised explosive device attacks, by making arrests and toughening policies, it may be successful in the short-term in preventing further attacks. This creates a balancing cycle (marked with B) into the system. However, in the longer-term, the raids, arrests and other acts of force potentially increase the support of insurgency groups, who seek to fuel fear and protests against international troops. The reinforcing cycle of violence (marked with R) is driven by the fact that tough policies further alienate local people from the international peace operation, which is seen as a foreign occupier.

Peace operations personnel responsible for stability and security do not necessarily know the operating context as illustrated in the R loop. To use Meadows' coil analogy, the reaction to tough policies is a linear reaction – looking at the release of the coil. Understanding and focusing on R-type loops reveal the system structure and helps to address non-linear relationships – the structure of the coil. Furthermore, temporal delays (marked with =) are also important: the system may take time before it reveals itself at the level of events. To focus on linear relationships is like explaining the Arab Spring in all countries by appealing to events in Tunisia, whereas, in fact, each country had its own systems and power balance issues that produced different (or similar) events.

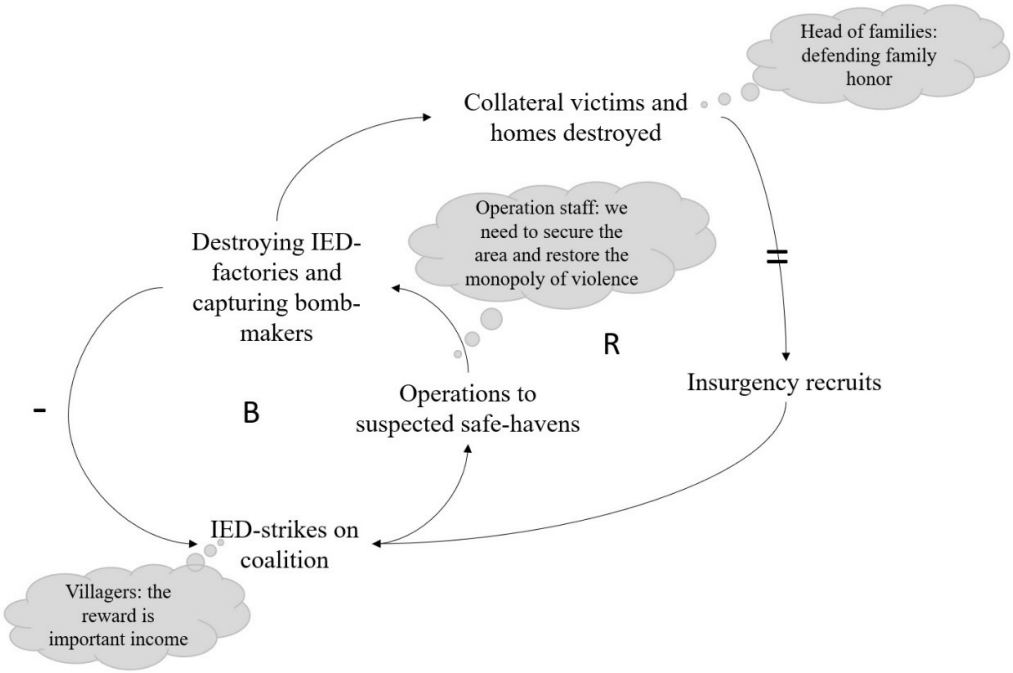

Figure 2. System structure and mental models.

There are undoubtedly already methods and real-life cases within the peace operations field which highlight exploring and understanding the values and beliefs of local stakeholders. In systems thinking, however, it is the role of mental models that matters the most: the patterns of thinking and beliefs are analysed as parts of systems structure (Day, 2022; Stroh, 2015). According to Meadows (2008), we could break a system down to individual pieces, but if we let the actors with their mental models be as they are, they would most likely re-organise as a system, producing exactly the same results as the former system did.

These pressure points, which enable setting whole systems onto new pathways, are called leverage points. The leverage points do not necessarily boil down to key individuals or groups. Instead they should be seen as capacities that must be understood at the individual, household, community or systems levels. They may require analysis and intervention in systems that are connected to the one we need to change. Parallel activities are often required around the system, but the system analysis could help coordinate them. Unfortunately, there are frequent examples in conflict analysis literature where insurgency groups have been more successful in making use of these system dynamics and mental models than international actors. These groups often have the advantage precisely because they understand the system better than outsiders.[4]

4 see for example Jackson (2021) on relations between civilians and Taliban.

Analysing the system also helps us design better metrics. We tend to rely on data on events and trends, even though we should focus on systems structure and concrete changes within it.[5] By directly intervening in events, it is possible to reduce them in the short term. However, the structure of the system which produces trends and events will remain intact. In the worst case, the structure will be cemented even more tightly, and similar events and trends will be faced again (Meadows, 2008). Cutting off the tip of an iceberg does not make the iceberg disappear, but the body under the surface keeps on pushing new tops above the water.

To sum up, the goal of systems analysis is to understand the structure of the system in order to find genuine means of influence on capacities that enable resilience. To identify such capacities, we must turn our attention to what enables and maintains specific events and trends, such as IED attacks or the strengthening of rebel groups. As shown in Figure 2, we are not assuming that linear relationships between events. Rather, the added value of system analysis is that it invites us to analyse these as systems that have relationships. Often, as Stroh (2015) points out, the connections are not obvious, yet by analysing them, we will find genuine entry points for working with the system. We get deeper into the structure of the system by looking for answers to the questions: How are the identified development processes connected, what kind of common factors and actors are behind them, and how do these factors affect each other?

Finally, as we are dealing with complex systems that adapt to changing circumstances, our analysis often runs behind the impact pathways of specific shocks, stresses or interventions. In other words, as systems do not operate within the framework of linear causal models, we cannot always precisely predict how an initiative affects the system as a whole, and over time. Analysis needs to be repeated during the operation to ensure that an intervention is still relevant and effective.

Systems analysis and practice

Operating in complex systems forces us to tolerate uncertainty, because the complexity and dynamism of the system makes it unpredictable. Accurately predicting long-term trends is impossible because human understanding of complex systems is always incomplete (de Coning 2020; Snowden & Boone, 2007).

As we have shown above, the system analysis provides a new angle from which to examine peace operations. The added value of systems thinking comes via two concepts. One is non-linearity: practitioners have noticed that peace operations often do not follow linear chains of activities. For instance, Leroux-Martin and O'Connor (2017) point out that mechanical thinking often stops progress and they also push for non-linear analysis. Methods and tools that system analysis offer provide us with ways of dealing

5 Promising steps has been taken by UN's CPAS system, which grounds the metrics it uses on context-mappings (Forti, 2022). See also Brusset et al. (2022).

with non-linearity. The second added value comes from the resilience. It is not a novel observation that communities and individuals are resilient to change but as we discussed above, resilience is a multi-dimensional concept, and it can be seen as a property of the system, a property that in some cases causes systems to get caught up in reinforcing vicious cycles. Systems are resilient because they preserve themselves and what seems like an obvious lever for change may turn out to be an ineffective one.

As we promised at the beginning of this paper, we have offered a frame for context analysis when designing peace operations. The frame is based on system analysis, and it draws on complexity theory as its fundamental assumption. Embracing the system analysis in practice entails that we also must adopt non-linear ways of looking at the causes and effects of our actions. This point also applies to what was referred to as effects that are outside a single agent's strategic objectives. As a consequence, we must also accept a certain amount of incompleteness in our analysis. In practice, diving into complexity and adaptive operations may feel like a daunting task. The interplay between capacities in context and operations begins with the setting of goals, continuous learning and the sense-making processes that enables learning and improvement (Leroux-Martin & O'Connor, 2017; Forti, 2022; Ricigliano, 2012; Stroh,2015).

Luckily some thorough and practice-based guidebooks to systemic approaches in peace operations have been produced. System analysis is also finding its way into impact assessments and models of this are now in the piloting phase, such as CPAS as adapted by UN, the work of Interpeace,[6] the World Food Programme's peace contribution measurement, as well as the Swiss Development Cooperation performance analysis currently being developed in Somalia.[7] Hence, the system analysis in peace operations is growing as is the scholarly and pragmatic discussion around different analyses and models as can be seen in the literature section of this article.

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6 See InterPeace, 'Peace responsiveness', Sep. 2021, <https://www.interpeace.org/peace-responsiveness/>. UNDP (2022)

7 One of the promising practical initiatives is the UN's CPAS system for the planning, monitoring and impact assessment of comprehensive crisis operations. It is a systemic, context-specific and adaptive tool, which should be used for both mission planning and performance monitoring to ensure and assess that the intended impact is created. CPAS has been rolled out to all UN peace-keeping missions and it had its first independent evaluation published recently (Forti, 2022).

The key insights of CPAS is that it is designed for complex environments, and it encourages continuous assessment of the context and impact-led adaptation of activities. Although context analysis involving locals is not a new idea, larger-scale performance systems which aim to systemise the interplay between contextual knowledge and comprehensive operation planning and implementation have yet to emerge.

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