

PROJECT

Using the Viable System Model (VSM) to develop an approach to strengthening the public sector at a national level

PRACTITIONER

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SITUATION AND CONTEXT

The enormous and endemic problems of trying to establish control and stability in a volatile political environment led to this World Bank sponsored project for the Columbian government. Conventional auditing had failed partly as a result of the sheer scale of the issues faced. A methodology was developed using Viable Systems Modelling (VSM) for the Columbian Contraloria to use so they could evaluate the structural and communications problems of their public sector organisations for both audit and development.

This was then developed as training programme and a handbook.

SYSTEM OF INTEREST

The project was focused on the Contraloria (equivalent to the audit commission in the UK) but needed to equip them to be able to evaluate all public sector bodies. So the real situation of interest was the whole of the public sector across the state.

APPROACH TAKEN

The team used VSM to develop an approach to '2nd Order Auditing' ie the auditing of public sector organisations ability to manage themselves. This gave the auditors from the Contraloria far greater reach and coverage. Instead of trying to detect specific instances of maladministration, they were able to move to detecting problems in the organisations' governance and advising so that they themselves could deal more effectively with problems including maladministration and the 'audit' process became one of finding out how well they were able to do that and evidence that governance processes were working effectively.

MODELS AND INSIGHTS DEVELOPED

The principle deliverable from the project was the methodology for the Contraloria to deploy and use VSM together with the training of their auditors and a handbook on the approach.

KEY INTERVENTIONS UNDERTAKEN

The work was split between phase 1: developing the approach and documenting that in a handbook and models and phase 2 which involved training around 800 auditors in the approach.

RESULTS

From a technical point of view the project and the approach developed worked well and the project design and delivery was extremely cost effective. This was a very large scale intervention executed on a relatively short timescale (around 9 months) and on a very small budget. As often happens with effective interventions in chaotic situations, there was a

political backlash, and the politicians who commissioned the work were moved sideways. Despite this loss of political air-cover for the initiative, it continued to work in parts but not all of the public sector and was still delivering results several years later.

AFTERTHOUGHTS & OTHER METHODS THAT MIGHT HAVE ASSISTED

The idea of helping a profoundly broken system to heal itself was an unusual strategy in international development and one that was significantly more effective than most conventional 'do to' approaches.

Since this project, we have developed tools that would make it very much easier to use VSM at scale for strengthening organisations.