

BEN RAMALINGAM

aid on the edge of chaos

'Breathtaking . . . catapults development thinking into the 21st century . . . read this book and be changed.'

Andrea Zaff, Executive Director, Pop Tech and author of *Resilience: Why Things Bounce Back*

Aid on the Edge of Chaos: Rethinking International Cooperation in a Complex World

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It is widely recognised that the foreign aid system - of which every country in the world is a part - is in need of drastic overhaul. There are conflicting opinions as to what should be done. Some call for dramatic increases to achieve longstanding promises. Others bang the drum for cutting it altogether, and suggest putting the fate of poor and vulnerable people in the hands of markets or business. A few argue that what is needed is creative, innovative transformation. The arguments in Aid on the Edge of Chaos are firmly in the third of these categories.

In this ground-breaking book, Ben Ramalingam shows that the linear, mechanistic models and assumptions that foreign aid is built on are more at home in early twentieth century industry than in the dynamic, complex world we face today.

The reality is that economies and societies are less like machines and more like ecosystems. Aid on the Edge of Chaos explores how thinkers and practitioners in economics, business, and public policy have started to embrace new, ecologically literate approaches to thinking and acting, informed by the ideas of complex adaptive systems research. It showcases insights, experiences, and dramatic results of a growing network of practitioners, researchers, and policy makers who are applying a complexity-informed approach to aid challenges.

From transforming approaches to child malnutrition, to rethinking process of macroeconomic growth, from rural Vietnam to urban Columbia, Aid on the Edge of Chaos shows how embracing the ideas of complex systems thinking can help make foreign aid more relevant, more appropriate, more innovative, and more catalytic. It argues that taking on these ideas will be a vital part of the transformation of aid, from a post-WW2 mechanism of resource transfer, to a truly innovative and dynamic form of global cooperation fit for the twenty-first century.

Aid on the Edge of Chaos: Rethinking International Cooperation in a Complex World Details

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From Reader Review Aid on the Edge of Chaos: Rethinking International Cooperation in a Complex World for online ebook

Charlie Brummitt says

I'm new to aid but familiar with complex systems. This book was a useful introduction to aid and to its problems, but it has some slow sections and lots of vague statements. The "edge of chaos" concept is taken well outside of its original context, and it's applied in only a heuristic, vague way.

mellyana says

What an effort to read it through but well worth it. The book offer to see the aid "business" from the perspective of complexity thinking.

I am fully agrees with him. "Aid in the future would not be an export industry, sclerotic and rigid...Aid would resemble the world of which it is a part: fluid, dynamic, emergent." Work in this industry, I knew that while the idea is good, it will take a while to be really seen on the ground. How to balance order and chaos? The writer doesn't offer answer but he should not anyway, because he want to say there is no prescriptive, formula and actually it's a chaotic world in this industry.

I enjoy the cases he share although it can't be a hard reading.

Alun Williams says

This book deserves a very wide audience indeed: not only does author Ben Ramalingam have a gift for coining memorable phrases (and finding memorable quotations from other writers), but he has a forensic ability to analyse and articulate why things go wrong in so many organisations. Although "Aid on the Edge of Chaos" focuses on the problems facing aid and development organisations and workers, its lessons are much more widely applicable: if I could I would make this book compulsory reading for every manager, senior or junior, in every organisation and company that has any significant impact on my life. The thrust of the book is that most organisations have structures and thought patterns based on ideas that do not reflect the way the world actually works, and that a more organic, more incremental way of doing things is needed. "The edge of chaos" is not, as one might suppose, where aid is now, but perhaps the place it should be, the place from which new structures will emerge naturally.

Why do I think this book is so important? Because anyone who reads it thoughtfully is bound to learn to recognise the unconscious assumptions that shape so much of our activity, and unfortunately doom it, however well-intentioned, to being ineffective or even harmful. Although the final third of the book does offer a host of examples that may point the way to better ways to do things, a reader who comes away with the idea that these are blueprints for organisational nirvana has utterly failed to understand. In Ramalingam's lexicon, phrases like "best practice" and "silver bullet" are evidence of organisational hubris: being an expert is not about knowing the right answers, but about asking the right questions, listening to the right people. This book will perhaps cause controversy; indeed, I will be disappointed if it does not, because it deserves to be discussed widely rather than ignored; it may not be the final word on the structures appropriate to 21st

century aid institutions, but it is certainly a very useful draft manifesto.

A book as topical as this is not destined to remain current for very long, but I do hope it survives until the errors in this edition can be corrected in a second. Mostly they are minor typographical errors, but in a few places there are signs of poor editing: sentences which seem to be missing some vital clause, or references to maps that are not included. I was left with the feeling that some of the material had been taken a little too hurriedly from some article or blog. But these are minor quibbles; if I have any serious reservation about this book, it is that the author's way with words may give rise to a host of new ways of ignoring another person's thinking unjustifiably. Rather as it nowadays all too easy to damn someone's language or actions for being "inappropriate", readers of this book will learn to dismiss an opponent's thinking as "linear" and inferior to their own "non-linear" ideas. Those seeking to avoid deserved blame for incompetence may plead that they were dealing with "organised complexity" or "non-linear dynamics", their actions a necessary exploration of the "fitness landscape". This is not a book that will make the work of those dealing with others in complex situations easier, but it will enable it to be more successful.

Despite these minor criticisms, I'm giving a five star rating for this book: it has a lot to teach all of us about taking a more humble, scientific and experimental attitude in the search for ways to address successfully the problems facing us. It has introduced me to many thinkers of whom I was previously unaware, and has taught me that I have a lot to learn about these matters.

Geert Vansintjan says

not as good as it should be.

Disappoints near the end. Instead of going for the Bayesian approach, looks rather to an all encompassing hyperanalysis

Marit says

Definitely a must-read for those in the development world. Ramalingam writes from the vantage point of a well-versed researcher steeped in international development theory and practice. He fleshes out his discussion of overarching patterns or current/newer theories in development with anecdotal stories which he was either party to or one step removed. He first delves into an extensive overview of development as it has been for decades, a system that is plagued by rigidity and incapacity to adjust as needed with constantly changing contexts. He does not just bemoan this problem but explains the many sources it stems from, giving the reader a better understanding of the often well-intentioned underpinnings of inefficient, even harmful development practice. The latter half of the book is dedicated to exploring theories that Ramalingam believes can and already is shifting the face of development for the better, e.g., edge of chaos, network theory, systems approaches. All of these function toward better understanding and not just coping but working with the maddening but real complexity of our world, developed or "undeveloped."

Lots of great food for thought in this book. A tad repetitive at times such that I got lost thinking I'd already read a certain section or forgot in what chapter a particular train of thought belonged.

Nicholas says

Thoroughly enjoyed my time reading this book, from the beginning to end it's full of useful information and helps change your perspective on the Aid and Development industry.

It's helping me to further understand and define the career that I am going into.

Would highly recommend.

Wim says

Good read on discussions related to development aid approaches and effects. The author applies the basic ideas of complexity to the field of aid, resulting in a plead for more participation, listening, and flexibility.

Benjamin says

A good exploration of how concepts of complexity may apply to development. It is not systematic, and came off as a bit overly anecdotal at times. Still, the basic exploration is interesting and worthy of greater consideration when thinking about policy.
