



FIXES THAT FAIL

The Danger of Approaching Cloud Problems like Clock Problems

Below are several real-life examples of “fixes that failed”—in other words, examples of straightforward, linear, clock-like solutions to complex, dynamic, cloud-like problems. For each of the examples below, take some time to consider:

- What broader *contextual factors* did the problem-solvers fail to consider when they designed their solutions?
- What other kinds of strategies may have worked more effectively to *sustainably* change the situation that gave rise to the problem? Why do you think these would work?
- What might some *unintended consequences* be for your proposed strategies?

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- A small island nation faced a problem with overfishing. In order to reduce the locals’ reliance on fishing for their livelihoods, the government subsidized the production of coconuts to encourage locals to shift their source of income to a more sustainable practice. However, this led to a massive increase in fishing—it turns out locals loved fishing for fun, and with more free time and income, they could fish more and they could afford more sophisticated gear.
- An international aid agency sought to address the fact that over five million people in Malawi lacked access to fresh water. To do this, they invested heavily in building wells across the country. However, within just a few years, more than 40% of the wells weren’t working anymore.
- In a city school district in the U.S., the superintendent sought to reduce violence in the schools. He did so by doubling the number of police officers in schools, implementing zero-tolerance suspension policies, and threatening to reduce funding for schools that failed to bring the number of incidents down. While at first this approach seemed to reduce incidents, it soon became clear that administrators were underreporting problems, and incidents in some schools began to *increase*.
- When international aid agencies offer food aid to impoverished nations, it often weakens local economies by changing the balance of supply and demand—thereby driving down prices, production, and jobs.
- A women’s empowerment initiative that encouraged microfinance projects among village women led to increases in domestic violence. The project, led by non-locals, subverted traditional gender norms and cultural expectations, and husbands felt their roles and positions threatened.



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REFLECT

- Does learning more about “fixes that failed” change how you think about approaching problems? How?
- Can you think of other examples of “fixes that failed” in your own experience or in your own communities?

