Michael Woolcock

Strategies for improving the quality of implementation of complex development interventions

My presentation would be on 'the general theme of development', with a particular focus on strategies for improving the quality of implementation of complex interventions. As Hirschman astutely put it in Development Projects Observed (1967, p. 35), "The term 'implementation' understates the complexity of the task of carrying out projects that are affected by a high degree of initial ignorance and uncertainty. Here 'project implementation' may often mean in fact a long voyage of discovery in the most varied domains, from technology to politics." Some 50+ years later, development practitioners are beginning to flesh out what implementation might actually look like when one embarks on "long voyages of discovery" (as opposed to merely copying global 'best practices', engaging in expensive 'capacity building' exercises or promoting fancy technological upgrades); I will explore the operational characteristics of these approaches, explain why multiple decades of critique along Hirschmanian lines has largely failed to dislodge orthodoxy, and why today's efforts might stand a better chance.