

Project Management for Developing Countries: Back to Basics

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I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, project management has become an important part of any organization; as a result of the changing nature of managing organizations due to technological advancement, and a complex competitive global marketplace (Maylor et al., 2006). Projects are the basic building blocks of development. Without successful project identification, preparation and implementation, development plans are no more than wishes and developing nations would remain stagnant or regress. Projects, Gittinger (1972) claims, are the “cutting edge” of development. Hirschman (1967) calls them “privileged particles of the development process.” Others note the central role that project management is assuming in the public administration of developing nations. “Programs and projects are increasingly used in developing countries in the process of economic and social development,” the United Nations (1971) proclaims.

“They represent a crucial element in both the formulation and implementation of development plans. Most of the administrators are more directly concerned with program and project administration than with other, more generic aspects of public administration.” For nearly a quarter of a century, projects have also been the primary instruments for grant, credit, loan and technical aid to developing countries by international assistance agencies. The volume of lending and number of projects have increased sharply over the past decade, and aid organizations such as the World Bank, the U.S. Agency for International Development and the United Nations Development Programme are broadly diversifying the sectors in which they will make future investments.

Recent assessments of development planning and administration, and of the lending practices of assistance agencies by international evaluation commissions highlight the importance of well prepared and executed projects. As critical leverage points in the development process, projects translate plans into action. As vehicles for social and economic change, they can provide the means of mobilizing resources and allocating them to the production of new economic goods and social services. The paucity of well-conceived projects is a primary reason for the poor record of plan implementation in many developing countries. The inability to identify, formulate, prepare and execute projects continues to be a major obstacle to increasing the flow of capital into the poorest societies.

Keywords: *Project Management, Developing Countries, Management Challenges, Management Techniques*

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Projects

Project is defined as a temporary endeavour undertaken to create a unique product or service, temporary means that the project has a definite ending point, and unique means that the product or service differs in some distinguishing way from all similar products or services (PMI, 1996, as cited in Ackah, 2016). A project can be defined as an activity with a specific goal occupying a specific period of time (Wild, 2002 as cited in Asare et al, 2017). A project is a finite activity, not only in time, but also in the use of resources. Examples of projects include construction of a bridge, highway, power plant, repair and maintenance of an oil refinery or an air plane; design, development and marketing of a new product, research and development work, etc. (Asare et al, 2017). Project management is defined as an application of knowledge, skills, tools and techniques to project activities to meet project requirements (Kloppenborg, 2012). This is accomplished through the application and integration of the project management processes of initiation, planning, executing, monitoring and controlling and closing (PMI, 2004). Mintzberg (1983) cited in Soderlund (2004b) states that most of the emergent industries since world-war II are project intensive. This widespread use of projects in organisations demanded an approach that can efficiently manage these temporary endeavours which are critical to the organisations strategic objectives. This led the researchers and professionals of the field to devise an approach that can efficiently manage the projects. Initially the focus of research on projects was exclusively on the implementation of a single project (Crawford et al, 2006). Project research in general now spans a variety of level of analysis. Concept such as the management of projects and the management by projects clearly point to the current devotion of project research (Soderlund, 2004a &b).

B. Types of Projects

Projects in developing countries are of all sizes and degrees of complexity; however, each country has many medium-sized to large projects which have the potential to make a major impact on the future development of the country. These countries may have hundreds of such projects of immediate concern, with the potential of hundreds more. The types of project most common in developing countries, and which are considered to be the backbone of their developmental efforts, include but not limited to the following:

- Public Housing,
- Literacy,
- Industrial Facilities,
- Commercial Buildings,
- Power Plants.
- Dams,
- Irrigation Systems,
- Roads and Transportation,
- Water Purification Plants,
- Health and Sanitation Facilities.

Added to this list are a great number of necessary programmes in agriculture, education, law enforcement, financial management, manpower training and mobilization, rural and urban development, communications and public relations, social work, and many other areas sponsored by the government (Stuckenbruck et al 1987). These programs will certainly produce hundreds of specific projects which will need to be efficiently managed.

Small projects, for the most part, are not real problems; it is the large projects, and especially the medium-sized projects, that almost always present major problems for developing countries. For instance, Frimpong et al. (2003) identified 26 causes of project failure.

Projects are unique due to the fundamental differences that exist across projects, and that no project is similar to another (Mir & Pinnington, 2014). Due to this, the causes are often unique to certain industries and the performing countries' systems (Amid et al., 2012), geographical location (Ahsan & Gunawan, 2010), socio-cultural settings (Mukabeta et al., 2008). However, research indicates that there are common ones that run through the project management literature. These include: expertise or knowledge (Ruuska & Teigland, 2009), funding, planning (Pourrastam & Ismail, 2011), resources (Ruuska & Teigland, 2009), communication (Ochieg & Price, 2010), scope change (Kaliba et al., 2009), socio-cultural (Maumbe et al., 2008).

C. Why Project Management?

Projects create productive assets. It is only through projects resources are converted into productive assets. Since projects convert resources that lie idle into productive assets, projects act as prime movers of economic development of any country (Nagarajan, 2012). In the process of creating productive assets, projects optimize the process of resource allocation. Since projects can be successfully completed only with a focused attention on goals by the project team members, projects act as a means for consolidating the experience and expertise of the organizational members effectively, create a learning environment, encourage-team spirit and help to achieve organizational objectives. Based on these characteristics, it would seem that project management, if introduced properly, would fill a natural need in the developing countries for a better and more economical way of managing their ever growing number of projects. It has the following advantages, which would seem to be the most important for the particular needs of the developing countries in solving their critical problems (Stuckenbuck, 1981).

- It is a way of effectively identifying the most critical and urgent needs and for applying the best priorities.
- It is a way of getting people to work effectively together.
- It is a way of efficiently using scarce resources, and for effectively allocating them where they are most urgently needed. Effective utilization of scarce skilled personnel, as well as raw materials and expensive equipment, is extremely important in all developing countries.
- It is results-oriented and discourages the possibility of projects becoming a part of their bureaucratic institution.
- It is a way of obtaining results faster and more efficiently (usually cheaper).
- It is a way of increasing the probability of completing the project on time and within budget.

- It is a way of increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of government bureaucracies. It can cause some agencies to learn some lessons from the implementation of the projects, and possibly incorporate some of the techniques into their system.
- Completing the projects on time and within budget (fulfilling the promises) will give people more trust and confidence in their government, and will encourage the system to be more responsive to public needs and expectations.

D. Some General Management Challenges to Projects

- **Time, cost and quality:** The biggest challenge faced by all countries that wish to use project management is ensuring that their projects deliver the agreed objectives within time, cost and to the agreed quality. These factors must be balanced in relation to the overall scope of the project.
- **Resources:** Projects rely on the effective employment of finite resources, whether these are people, equipment or facilities – in other words anything required to complete a project activity – and these will cost money. Most developing countries faces the challenge of ensuring that they make the most of these finite resources.
- **People:** People are probably the most important resource on any project and the challenge that a country has to meet when using project management relies on the efficient utilisation of these people. It is vital that the right people are used, that they receive the correct training and that they are clear on the objectives of the project.
- **Technical:** Due to the unique nature of projects there will frequently be the need to employ new technology. The challenge will be dealing with this new technology – do we have the expertise who can use it, will they need training, does the technology we require even exist or will we have to make it ourselves?
- **Legal:** An organisation will have to deal with law and legislation when embarking on a project. Project work frequently involves working abroad and always includes the use of contracts. The organisation must therefore determine which legal system they will employ for their project, if they are working abroad. There will also be industry-specific legislation that must be followed.

E. Is Project Management a Panacea?

One cannot draw a definite conclusion as to whether project management is or is not a solution for all the kinds of problems that developing countries are facing in regard to mobilizing their resources and overcoming their administrative and management incapacities. However, as noted earlier, this approach does have the potential to help solve some of these problems, if and when it is correctly used with careful consideration of local requirements and local conditions.

F. When is project management really needed?

Project management may be applied effectively to any ad hoc undertaking. If such an undertaking is unique or unfamiliar, the need for project management is intensified. In some cases, such as that of an undertaking whose successful accomplishment involves complex and interdependent activities, a project manager can pull everything together to accomplish an organizational goal (Cleland & Ireland, 2007). Unfortunately, project management will not always be directly applicable. Small projects and those that are very simple or very repetitive will not justify the use of project management. It should therefore be used judiciously, i.e. only when the organizational climate looks likely to adapt successfully to its use, and only when its advantages are really needed.

III. RECOMMENDED GUIDELINES

The probability of project management being successfully implemented can be greatly improved by carefully choosing the organizational model, the project manager, and the personnel to be involved in the project. Stuckenbruck et al (1987) suggested some guidelines that can help developing countries to more effectively implement and use project management.

- **Start with a pilot project.** A new management tool or approach will always be on trial until it has proved itself and has achieved acceptance in the developing country. It is therefore advisable to start with a single pilot project, which must be carefully chosen with close attention to all of the following guidelines.

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- **Choose a safe first project.** The first project should be one that is not vulnerable to failure and is quite certain to be a success. It should be low-risk, noncontroversial, and one for which governmental and public support can be readily achieved. A very effective project manager and supporting personnel must be chosen. The first project manager should be a well thought of, capable manager, such as a government official or other important person who already has considerable prestige and/or authority. There will always be natural skepticism and resistance to any new management method until it has demonstrated success, then everyone gets on the 'bandwagon'. The pilot project should be used to demonstrate that project management works, and to build trust in the project management approach and in its managers. However, if the first project fails, project management will be immediately rejected as not appropriate for that developing country's needs.
- **Keep it simple.** Technologically complex projects should be avoided, particularly for the first project; and projects should be picked which use only technology reasonably consistent with the resources, knowledge, and skill levels of the country and its people. This usually necessitates the use of inexpensive, uncomplicated and easy to learn and apply procedures and equipment. When local personnel, methods, and materials are used, simple approaches will get the job done in a manner most acceptable to the people of the developing country. Complex management tools are no exception; they too must be kept as simple as possible.
- **Choose a compatible organizational form.** The best management choice would be a completely local model; however, local management approaches have often proved to be inadequate. Since project management is very flexible and can take many organizational forms, it can be tailored to achieve the necessary fit with the local environment. Important local cultural elements, such as work roles, behavioural expectations, management practices, reporting relationships, work rewards, etc. must be built into the project management organization.
- **Seek total focal commitment.** Total local commitment must be obtained to make project management work in a developing country. Commitment can only be obtained by total involvement of government officials, the bureaucracy, and the people. People will not become involved unless there is something in it for them personally. For instance, will the project significantly affect their way of life and that of future generations? As a project develops, word of its progress or success will spread by word of mouth. People will be anxious to participate: trust has been built into the project and it has become their project.
- **Avoid drastic change.** Project management should be implemented so as to avoid drastic organizational disruption and any significant threats of change. Disruptive changes, such as loss of jobs, changes in work conditions, power struggles, loss of face, or management embarrassment, which might result from project failure, must be avoided. If either the bureaucracy or the workers view the project as either a real or potential threat to their security, their resistance can destroy a project.
- **Use projects as a vehicle for change.** Recognizing that the successful implementation of developmental projects in developing countries is often hindered by local management incapacity and inefficiency, projects can be used as an effective vehicle for change. The environment of a successful project effort can constitute a wonderful training ground for future managers and skilled workers, and be an effective means of bringing about administrative reform.

IV. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This article has been on ways by which developing countries can go back to the basics of project management as a means for developmental goals. Project management has proven to be an effective and flexible management approach, which has the potential of being of great value to developing countries.

There is a need for a stronger emphasis on project implementation as a training mechanism for developing indigenous skills. Improved planning, administrative and technical capacity must be defined as project outputs. The need for highly trained development administrators, especially those with project management skills, is a recurring theme of international assistance evaluation reports. Developing countries require two types of trained project administrators: those who can plan and coordinate the entire project cycle as an integrated process and those who can manage the project as an organizational entity once it is selected and approved (Rondinelli, 1976).

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