



# Success conditions for international development capacity building projects

Lavagnon A. Ika<sup>a,\*</sup>, Jennifer Donnelly<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *Telfer School of Management, University of Ottawa, 55 Laurier Avenue East, Ottawa, Ontario K1N 6N5, Canada*

<sup>b</sup> *German Red-Cross, Haiti*

Received 4 April 2016; received in revised form 29 September 2016; accepted 3 October 2016

Available online 28 October 2016

## Abstract

Current research on success factors fails to adequately explain why development projects will achieve success in one setting yet not in others, thus making improvements to project management practice difficult. By examining the underlying conditions enabling project success, we provide additional context and practical meaning for success factors. Through a case-study and a qualitative analysis of twenty interviews with project practitioners, we look into four capacity building projects in Ghana, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Vietnam and draw out structural, institutional, and managerial success conditions, whether they are initial or emergent. We further propose a hypothesis that high levels of multi-stakeholder commitment, collaboration, alignment, and adaptation are necessary for projects to succeed. Thus, we put the ability of projects to deliver development into context and call on practitioners to harness their ability to trigger development through a better understanding of enabling success conditions or the right circumstances under which projects thrive.

© 2016 Elsevier Ltd, APM and IPMA. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Success conditions; Success factors; International development projects; Project context; Capacity building

## 1. Introduction

In 2006, PlayPump International, a development NGO, tested a delivery system to provide fresh water to sub-Saharan African villages where there are plenty of children but limited clean water sources. They conceived of a merry-go-around hooked up to a water pump that was to harness the energy of playful children. The goal of the PlayPump project was to install 4000 pumps in Africa by 2010 and to provide clean drinking water to some ten million people. The \$16-million-dollar project turned out to be a nightmare. So much so that the charity went bankrupt. Yet, as [Hobbes \(2014\)](#) noted, “...in some villages, under *the right circumstances*, they [the pumps] were fabulously helpful” (emphasis, added).

Assuredly, a good number of “common sense” international development (ID) projects – projects that are tasked with

achieving the overarching goal of economic growth or poverty reduction through not-for-profit, humanitarian, and/or socio-economic objectives – fail to deliver much needed impact for beneficiaries ([Agheneza, 2009](#); [Banerjee and Duflo, 2011](#); [Hobbes, 2014](#); [Ika, 2012, 2015](#); [Rondinelli, 1976](#)). All too often projects succeed in one location and then fail, either partially or completely, somewhere else, emphasising the power of context in ID project success (e.g. [Glewwe et al., 2009](#); [Munk, 2013](#)). Echoing the famous word of [Engwall \(2003\)](#), we suggest that context matters in ID projects and that: “No project is an island” (p. 789). “There are villages where deworming will be the most meaningful education project possible. There are others where free textbooks will. In other places, it will be new school buildings, more teachers, lower fees, better transport, tutors, uniforms. There’s probably a village out there where a Playpump would beat all these approaches combined. The point is, we don’t know what works, where or why” ([Hobbes, 2014](#)). This observation begs the following questions: why do similar ID projects work in some places and fail in others? Why do some aspects of the

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [Ika@telfer.uottawa.ca](mailto:Ika@telfer.uottawa.ca) (L.A. Ika), [jenniferdonnelly@hotmail.com](mailto:jenniferdonnelly@hotmail.com) (J. Donnelly).

projects work, whereas other aspects do not in similar settings? What could the right circumstances be?

While many reasons may explain the poor showing of ID projects, here we argue that they fail because project leaders struggle to understand not only the setting or context in which success occurs but project success conditions in particular (Gow and Morss, 1988; Ika, 2012; Ika and Hodgson, 2014; Ramalingam, 2015). These success conditions or necessary states of being are circumstances or pre-requisites that must exist for project success to occur (Turner, 2004). They include what happens “in advance of the project” and “in the wake of the project” (Hirschman, 1967, p. 146). Indeed, ID projects interact with their settings; the whole of the projects are greater than the sum of their parts; thus, solutions cannot be imposed, rather they emerge from circumstances. Success is derived not from carbon copy replication but from the testing, scaling and failing of initiatives in a variety of socio-politico-geographic contexts (e.g., Hobbes, 2014; Ramalingam, 2015; Snowden and Boone, 2007). As Hirschman (1967) suggests, “not only are projects voyages of discovery, they tend to be voyages of the true Columbus type – setting trail for one destination (perhaps an unattainable one) but arriving in the event at quite a different one (perhaps much more important than the imagined one)” (Singer, 1969, p. 23). The above remarks are particularly true for capacity building<sup>1</sup> projects that focus specifically on ownership and change on the part of project beneficiaries and, as such, require a good understanding of context, multi-stakeholder engagement and dialogue, and, in particular, building more effective and dynamic relationships between different stakeholders behaving in often unpredictable ways (Baser and Morgan, 2008; Datta et al., 2012). Thus, this paper focuses on (local government) capacity building project success conditions and now, like Hirschman (1967), we ask: what conditions enable project success?

The contribution of this paper is twofold. First, project supervisors and managers need more information about the journey, not simply the destination. It is not enough to draw out key success factors such as consultations, supervision, monitoring, communication, etc. without providing more about the context in which the factors succeeded (see for example, Diallo and Thuillier, 2005; Ika et al., 2012; Ika, 2015; Khang and Moe, 2008; Yalegama et al., 2016; Yasmin and Sim, 2016). Without this contextual knowledge, these key success factors are difficult to translate into practice. Different factors can lead to different outcomes in different contexts; and when the project does succeed in improving the context, it changes it in ways that couldn't have been expected. Consequently, project supervisors and managers should depart from the seemingly taken-for-granted idea that projects fail because they aren't

managed “by the book”. Following project management standards and guidelines will *not* automatically lead to successful projects or result in positive improvements to the lives of their beneficiaries (Hirschman, 1967; Hobbes, 2014; Ramalingam, 2015; Shenhar and Dvir, 2007).

Second, in the multi-billion dollar ID sector where academic research on project management is surprisingly limited and where little has been done to understand project success, its root causes, its key factors, or its success conditions (Ika et al., 2012; Ika, 2015), this research will add to the literature. “Much remains to be done in understanding the conditions for failure and success of projects” (Hirschman, 1967, p. 188). Yet, these words of wisdom remain unheeded. This needs to change. Success conditions, especially at the moment of project initiation, we believe, could help us understand why some projects (or aspects of thereof) thrive in some settings and others do not. Thus, we hope, project supervisors and managers can more accurately target areas of improvement for future project management practice and put the ability of projects to deliver development into context.

## **2. What are the similarities and differences between international development projects and conventional projects? Why are capacity building projects even more specific?**

### *2.1. International development projects share some characteristics and mismanagement concerns with other projects*

International development (ID) projects cover almost every project setting: infrastructure, utilities, agriculture, transportation, water, electricity, energy, sewage, mines, health, nutrition, population and urban development, education, environment, social development, reform and governance, etc. Thus, they undisputedly share some characteristics with other projects: they deliver goods and services; they are often limited, temporary, unique, and multidisciplinary undertakings; they go through a life cycle; they face time, cost, and quality constraints; and they use project management standards, tools and techniques for their delivery (Golini et al., 2015; Ika, 2012; Ika and Hodgson, 2014).

They also share a number of managerial challenges with other projects. They all too frequently fail in part because of mismanagement: imperfect project initiation, poor understanding of the project context, poor stakeholder management, “dirty” politics, delays during project execution, cost overruns, poor risk analysis, inadequate monitoring and evaluation failure, etc. (Agheneza, 2009; Gow and Morss, 1988; Ika, 2012; Ika and Hodgson, 2014; Julian, 2016; Rondinelli, 1976).

### *2.2. International development projects are de facto public sector and international projects*

ID projects are funded by agencies and donors from one or more “rich” countries and are implemented in another country rather “poor”, which poses a number of political and cultural challenges (Ika and Hodgson, 2014). Their goals, objectives, and outcomes are often intangible and even conflicting; their scope or ambitions levels are often changing, and there are

<sup>1</sup> A multidimensional concept, capacity is neither a specific ability/competency nor it is a secret ingredient as existing capacity may change, evolve, stagnate, deepen, erode, or stabilize. A multifaceted phenomenon, capacity building is not about delivering activities and outputs but fostering ownership or change through a deliberate and inherently political process focused on developing effective and dynamic relationships between different stakeholders and the system as a whole (Datta et al., 2012, pp., 2, 3, and 11).

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/4922242>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/4922242>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)