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Project owners – Overlooked factors of uncertainty in the example of a water infrastructure improvement project?

Jusipbek Kazbekov^{*}, Kai Wegerich, Murat Yakubov, Sardorbek Musayev, Indira Akramova

International Water Management Institute, Sub-Regional Office for Central Asia, Tashkent, Uzbekistan

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ABSTRACT

Donor sponsored projects are often criticized for the tendency to impose standardized institutional and technical solutions in irrigation. Although, this might be the case, a project is based on internal actors, ‘project owners’, who influence solutions and implementation processes. Little attention has been paid to project owners, internal dynamics and how these shape aid projects. In this paper, a water user associations (WUAs) project in Central Asia is explored, which introduced flow regulating and metering devices (*hydroposts*). It is explored how change within project owners, differences in their interests and absence of a proper knowledge management system within the project influenced the alteration of project objectives, causing failure of the implementation process. The paper concludes that internal dynamics within projects are the main source of project uncertainty and risk. Some recommendations are offered how these risks can be minimized.

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1. Introduction

Efficient water use is more important with increased water scarcity and food security concerns (FAO, 2012; UN, 2012). While in the 1970s the focus on irrigation efficiency was purely a technical paradigm, in the 1990s a more human and organizational centered paradigm for increasing efficiency appeared. Due to the continuation of a disciplinary approach to water management (engineering, management and governing) the debate is flaming up periodically. The need for water metering and control in irrigation are strongly emphasized and linked to different objectives – improving operations, water saving and volumetric pricing (Dinar and Mody, 2003; Backeberg and Reinders, 2009). The need for water metering

was challenged over time. Scholars emphasized the higher costs of installation, maintenance, measuring, monitoring and billing (Moore, 1989; Sampath, 1992; Cornish et al., 2004; Molle, 2009). The above arguments highlight that technology is supposed to facilitate water management, but also requires an upgrade of the organization managing the water (Uphoff, 1986; Mollinga, 1997). While in the past, with some exceptions, this burden would have fallen to irrigation bureaucracies in large scale irrigation schemes, with Irrigation Management Transfer policies being widely promoted in developing countries from the 1980s onwards, this tasks falls mainly to Water User Associations (WUAs) today (Vermillion, 1997). WUAs are being promoted uniformly by aid organizations globally in ‘all sorts of contexts’ (Mukhtarov et al., 2014: 3). WUA programs often include infrastructure upgrade components.

^{*} Corresponding author.

E-mail address: j.kazbekov@cgiar.org (J. Kazbekov).

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Aid and developing projects are often criticized for the tendency to impose ‘institutional monocultures’ (Ostrom, 2008: 36) and top down ‘technocratic approaches’ (Bruns, 2008: 4). Within the policy diffusion the dynamics between policy prescription (‘text’) and the particular situation (‘context’) and issues of institutional “fit” are distinguished (Howlett and Rayner, 2007; Lejano and Shankar, 2013). However, there is also a realization that proposed homogenous policy models, such as IMT, were not implemented as prescribed. Consequently the focus is on the policy transfer (policy diffusion) processes by which actors adjust policy models to particular external contexts (Lejano and Shankar, 2013; McConnell, 2010; Mukhtarov et al., 2014). So far under researched in this debate is the focus on ‘project owners’ and the dynamics of internal and multiple stakeholders within long term aid projects. Although, these dynamics are identified as key risk and uncertainties, only rarely these risks are acknowledged in formal project planning tools, such as logframes (Ward and Chapman, 2008; Yamaswari et al., in press).

Within this paper, the focus is on the policy transfer at the micro level – the actors and processes within one aid project and what factors did influence outcomes. The paper presents a case of a long term, multi-partner development project with the objective of improving local water management in Central Asia. The project focused on institutional development of WUAs and complementary infrastructure upgrade (installing *hydroposts*¹) activities. The technical upgrade component had the aim, “to distribute water in equitable manner between the WUA water users and to mitigate social tension through transparency of water use information” (SDC, 2007a: 2). The paper highlights the shift of the project objectives from institution building toward pure technical implementation. The shift was triggered by changes of internal stakeholders. It should be noted that paper does not consider policy transfers at the mezo (interactions in the organization) and macro (policy travel across countries) levels. The paper contributes to project management literature, providing analysis of policy model and project mutation processes.

The paper continues with a short framework highlighting the need for technical upgrade as part of the institutional building process and the internal actors within implementation projects (Section 2). This is followed by a background section presenting the study site, WUA reforms, project information and the methodology used (Section 3). Section 4 presents the results with special attention on project actors, implementation process and outcomes of the upgrade. Section 5 discusses the findings. Section 6 summarizes and concludes the paper.

2. Conceptual framework

2.1. Policy transfer, institutional design and aid projects

Developing projects are widely criticized for their blueprint and technocratic approaches both in general (Ostrom, 2008;

Bruns, 2008) and with specific reference to policy transfer and the role of international aid (Stone, 2004). A matter of much concern here is the recognition that policy translation is non-linear (Mukhtarov, 2014). Although, in the past non-linearity of implementation or adoption was also highlighted due to policy design (May, 2003) or Lipksy’s classical “street level bureaucracy” (Hupe and Hill, 2007), the more recent studies more convincingly argue that the context matters and influences. Prince (2012: 16) argued that implementation of policy in specific location “involves the further proliferations and arrangements of materials and people to translate and realize it in a new context. This is a complex and hard to control process”. Within policy design institutional ‘contextualism’ considers institutions “as a phenomena constituted by the ongoing dialectic between text and context”, consisting of social construction driven by isomorphism and the ecological process of fitting to the local context (Lejano and Shankar, 2013: 85–86). However, also specific attention is paid to actors – transfer agents – and their interests. Mosse and Lewis (2005: 22) argued in relation to international aid projects that “practices of development actors are not governed by policy prescription, but generated by very different and diverse administrative, political or social-relational logics which are concealed by rationalizing policy”. Mukhtarov (2014: 3) highlights the important of the agent and argues at policy transfer “focuses primarily on actors and the process by which policies and practices travel, as well as on transfer agents”. In addition, Mukhtarov et al. (2014) argued that efficiency of the institutional design process depends either on the designers or implementers of the programs.

2.2. Internal stakeholders and uncertainty within aid projects

From a meta level perspective the opening paragraph of the introduction highlights the diversity of opinions which might reflect on the interests or educational discipline of the individual actors involved in a water technology upgrade project (Becher and Trowler, 2001; Pohl and Hadorn, 2007). Therefore, looking at the debate from the perspective of aid projects, one has to question who the stakeholders are and what interests they pursue. While usually local communities are the key focus when it comes to implementation projects, Ward and Chapman (2008) draw attention to the ‘project owners’. They distinguish between ‘internal’ and ‘external’ stakeholders. According to them (2008: 564) “Internal stakeholders are: project owners in the sense they have overall managerial responsibility and power, usually linked to a financial stake; and organizations, teams or individuals who have a contractual relationship with the project owner. [...] External stakeholders might include local communities, local government, potential users, regulators, environmental groups and the media”. Although, only the external environment is usually highlighted within the debate on project management, Ward and Chapman (2008: 566) argue that “the most important uncertainty management issues are usually related to objectives and relationships between the key stakeholders, particularly the internal stakeholders and especially within the ‘project owner’”. Therefore, clarification of ownership relationships is recommended.

¹ *Hydropost* is the Soviet hydraulic engineering term for the standardized device, which is designed and constructed for regulating and metering water in irrigation canals. Here is the focus on secondary and tertiary canals within WUAs.

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